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The "Do-It-All Mother" – Discursive Strategies and Post-Feminist Alliances in Parenting Magazines

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Abstract: This article analyses discursive strategies in current German parenting magazines and argues that "motherhood" is connected to conservative gender roles and, at the same time, aligned with an individualistic post-feminist discourse. The analysed texts reshape conservative models of motherhood and gender, especially concerning the mother-child relationship, the question of the "compatibility" of unpaid and paid work, and gendered parental positions. As a result of the discursive strategies and alliances, the political and structural dimensions concerning care-work, gender equality, and intersectionality are buried under an individualistic framework. We bring this depoliticisation to light and make space for new feminist perspectives on motherhood.

Keywords: Motherhood, Gender Roles, Post-Feminism, Discourse, Individualisation

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The "Do-It-All Mother" – Discursive Strategies and Post-Feminist Alliances in Parenting Magazines

Recent research in Germany shows that although forms of living as a family and of motherhood are becoming more diverse and images of motherhood more fluid, the classic bourgeois concept of family remains predominant: the father as the main "breadwinner" and the mother as primarily occupied with so-called "maternal" work (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend 2017, 87). Compared internationally, women in Germany are less likely to be in paid employment, less likely to be mothers, and even less likely to be both than women in other Western countries (Scheuer/Dittmann 2007). At the same time, parental and family structures have changed as a result of social and reproductive developments. In addition to adoption, patchwork constellations and co-maternity, the techniques of reproductive medicine offer new paths to maternity.

More people have the intention of sharing reproductive work equally. Yet, the reality after the birth of a child shows a backlash of traditionalisation instead (Maierhofer/Strasser 2016; Kortendiek 2010). This same contradiction exists in relation to the phenomenon of the "new fathers", which is a highly valued concept that, however, does not result in a shift in fathers' behaviours (Nave-Herz 2007; Sabla 2012). In both Germany (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend 2012, 2017) and the US (Maume 2008), men are less likely than women to adapt their work efforts to the demands of parenting. It seems that recent concepts such as the 'new father' can co-exist with conservative or traditional gender roles in parenting (Kerschgens 2009).

This paper aims to show how seemingly conflicting concepts fit together in popular discourse concerning motherhood as found in recent parenting magazines. Trending topics connected to motherhood discourse in the public media range from the role of the "new father" and family policies to working mothers and their career opportunities (Berner 2018; Wall/Arnold 2007). For Angela McRobbie (2015), the figure of the middle-class working mother embodies a shift from liberal to neoliberal feminism in the UK. Likewise, in Germany, the "career mum discourse" (Berner 2018, 50) and the image of the "top mum" (Malich 2014) represent this discursive trend. However, parenting guidebooks still rely heavily on heterosexist constructions of motherhood (Höher/Millschützke 2013, 254; Rinken 2012; Sabla 2012).

Analyses of special-interest magazines for parenting and parenting sections in newspapers from the US and Canada confirm this result and, furthermore, show how through the representation of parental responsibility and hegemonic masculinity, the mother is constructed as the primary carer and the father as the "helping hand" (Wall/Arnold 2007; Sunderland 2006). These discourses are historically informed by the concept of the nuclear family, childhood and the "myth of mother love" that was produced in bourgeois circles around the time of industrialisation (Badinter 1985). Constructions of motherhood, combined with conceptions of a specific femininity, remain, therefore, strongly normatively charged to this day.

The role of the mother, however, has undergone changes throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, including through trending concepts such as "intensive mothering" (Hays 1996) and a new form of "naturalisation" of mothers and breastfeeding (Freudenschuß 2012; Badinter 2010; Thiessen/Villa 2009). Thus, it seems that ambivalences between trends of modernisation and traditionalisation exist concurrently. Trends of modernisation include postfeminist perspectives (McRobbie 2009) and the implementation of the "language of consumerism" (Salecl 2010) in the discourses of motherhood. However, the studies that include a perspective on the individualised liberal discourse focus on daily or weekly newspapers (Salecl 2010; McRobbie 2015; Orgad/De Benedictis 2015), which are not primarily directed at women as mothers. Parenting guidebooks and parenting magazines, on the other hand, specifically address women as mothers and, therefore, include an in-depth construction of mothering and mothers. Up until now, there have been no analyses of current German parenting magazines, although they are positioned at the intersection of public mass media and, as special-interest magazines, the specific topics of motherhood and parenting. We want to close this research gap and analyse how these magazines, through the combination of different discourses, reshape the figure of the mother.

Analysing Parental Magazines: Methods and Data

Guidebooks and magazines represent an archive through which explicit and implicit knowledge, discourses and norms can be reconstructed. Knowledge, following Michel Foucault, is historically situated and connected to power structures (Foucault 1977, 1973). To make visible such knowledge and its rules, the material of this study was analysed with the help of analytical instruments derived from Critical Discourse Analysis (Jäger 1993; Jäger 2008).

This version of Critical Discourse Analysis is focused, in particular, on ideological assumptions and discourse strategies, as well as the collective symbols

and stereotypes relevant to the category of gender. Our data consisted of 91 articles from three different German parenting magazines ("Nido", "Baby und Familie", and "Eltern") in the years 2010–2017. The three magazines address parents, mainly mothers, as their audience. "Nido" addresses higher-income middle-class families (0.24 million; AWA 2017), the magazine "Eltern" has existed since 1966 and specifically addresses mothers in their editorial (1.07 million; AWA 2018), and "Baby und Familie", being a free pharmacy magazine, has the highest circulation (1.77 million; AWA 2018). The specific research design was oriented along the research interests of the REVERSE[1] research project.

REVERSE investigates, in various fields of practice, how anti-feminist movements and discourses have developed in Germany, which target groups they address, and whether this has led to a (de-)thematisation of social questions. The sub-project "Motherhood and Gender Relations" expands the focus to include debates on the mother-child relationship and the compatibility of paid and family work.

In line with these research interests, we focused on three discourse strands in the parental magazines. First, the mother-child relationship and the construction of "maternal" behaviour. Second, gendered parental positions – including responsibilities, activities, traits, etc. – and the contrast between mother and father roles. Finally, third, the reconciliation of paid and family work.

If discourse strands are understood as correlating to trends and topics in the magazines, then the first two discourse strands do not represent single or explicit strands but are, rather, reconstructed from various topics and strands.

It is interesting to note that while the reconciliation of "paid work" and "family work" and the topic of the "new father" (which is included in second strand) are popular and explicit discourse strands in the magazines, the role of the mother is rarely discussed as such but, rather, forms a kind of self-evident base of most discourse strands. The articles from which we extracted the first and second discourse strands mainly address topics concerning child-rearing and child development, household themes, health issues, pregnancy, and becoming a parent. In general, the analysed articles regularly use the gender-neutral word "parents" to address the readers, while the given descriptions and images mostly depict mothers. Moreover, arbitrary switches from "parents" to "mother" occur regularly. Hence, the gender-neutral, seemingly modern language used here tends to conceal the heterosexist setting.

1 "Crisis of gender relations? Antifeminism as a threat to social integration" (REVERSE), funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Science and conducted at the Centre for Gender Studies of Philipps-Universität, Marburg (Germany).

With regard to all three strands of our discourse analysis, it can be said that heteronormative, gendered attributions determine the construction of the mother and father roles. Conservative and traditional attributions are obscured by a neoliberal discourse that draws on individualisation and a motive of doability. Individualisation includes the topos of free choice: "How does it work? By thinking carefully about when to become a mother" (Baby und Familie 2.2013)[2] The motive of doability is shown through the focus on the advice that is given in the magazines and, additionally, through claims such as "It's hard, but mothers and fathers still get it done because they want it" (Eltern 4.2015).[3]

The Mother-Child Relationship and the Construction of Maternal Behaviour

All articles analysed were based on a biologistic concept of motherhood. This concept rests on three central premises: First, the relationship between mother and child and the mother's behaviour towards the child are biologised through a constant reference to the mother's body as an actor rather than to the mother as a person. This, second, establishes and reinforces the hormone discourse. Hormones are considered to be "actors" in the mother's body that evoke relationship and attachment. This way, maternity is represented as an automatism. Third, "nature" is personalised and presented as a mystical force that acts deterministically. Mystification also shows through numerous references to magic, gifts, invisibility, infinity, and so forth.

The biologisation of relationships and maternity implies that the relationship to the child is determined by the gender of the parent. The mother, as the one who is under the influence of hormones, appears as the primary and unique bonding figure. Hormones are presented as the protagonists and "secret directors" (Baby und Familie 4.2013) of the mother's body. The active behaviour of the mother is reduced to biology. A widely used image, for example, is that of hormones "flooding" the mother's body. In one case, it is stated that "a major attack is launched by hormones before birth. They flood the female body to prepare it for the role of the mother" (Nido 7/8.2012).[4]

Gendered attributions of responsibilities are usually made implicitly via a supposed biological or natural correlation of femininity and motherhood.

2 "Wie das klappt? Indem man sich gut überlegt, wann man Mutter wird" (Baby und Familie 2.2013). All translations of quotes from the magazines are by the authors.
3 "Es ist schwer, aber Mütter und Väter kriegen es trotzdem hin, weil sie es wollen" (Eltern 4.2015).
4 "Einen Großangriff starten die Hormone vor der Geburt. Sie fluten den weiblichen Körper, um ihn auf die Mutterrolle vorzubereiten." (Nido 7/8.2012).

"Motherly love" is still constructed as bound to biology and being natural, female, and unique. The psychological concept of bonding is mainly connected to the female parent, which creates a boundary between the mother-child bond and the "outside". Although it is often claimed that bonding is also important for fathers, it is rarely mentioned when the role of the father is discussed.

Another argumentation strategy uses the child's well-being as the rationale for the parent's behaviour. Behind this well-being seems to lie the child's performance, as well as a functionalisation of the mother. This "child well-being discourse" (Berner 2018, 48; translated by the authors), as shown in claims such as "love makes the child healthy, social, stress-resistant, and smart" (Baby und Familie 12.2011), entails the functionalisation of the relationship between parent and child and the tying of the child's development to success in various domains.

Gendered Parental Positions

The second discourse strand refers to the gendered parental positions constructed in the magazines. Given the popularity of arguments aiming at the equality and free choice of father and mother and the presence of the topic of the "new father" – who is not only responsible for the family income but also cares for the child – the magazines seem, at first sight, to have incorporated feminist claims.

The "new father" is advertised and idealised as the modern model of fatherhood, and the contradiction between the popularity of the "new fathers" and the lack of such fathers in real life is discussed. Discussions of fatherhood seem to try to promote fathers' engagement in "family life" and mainly cover positive aspects of fatherhood. The father is constructed as the playful parent who can discover the child in himself. Influenced by psychoanalytic theories from the 20th century, the father's role is constructed as freeing the child from the symbiotic mother-child bond and introducing the outside world to the child. Fathers' lack of commitment is explained by their lack of role models.

Fathers can, as implied by the magazines, model themselves on their own fathers, but apparently not on their mothers or on a "motherliness" as a gender-neutral skill. This lack of role models constructs fathers as victims of society and modernity. They still have to learn and adapt, so mothers are told to be patient and to help them. This has problematic consequences: The mother is, once again, made responsible for the father's behaviour, and the father is infantilised and victimised. Although the magazines state that fathers should care for their children – for example, change diapers or bathe them – these activities do not appear as parts of fatherhood when it is discussed. It is often proclaimed that

even if a father fulfils the same tasks as a mother, he will do so "differently". Fatherhood is thus strongly connected to traditional models of masculinity, which limit the activities prescribed to fatherhood.

On a latent level, motherliness and tasks connected to femininity are presented as threats to the father's masculinity that, therefore, have to be repelled. In a nutshell, the complementarity of the mother and father figures repeats the heterosexist construction of masculinity and femininity. The mother is given the role of loving, caring, nursing, feeding and consoling – all bodily and emotional tasks – as well as doing the housework. It is rarely stated explicitly that mothers are obliged to fulfil these tasks. Instead, mothers are simply described as doing them constantly anyway.

Maternal activities are constructed via a norm of naturalness. The mother should – in accordance with the biologising and personification of nature – listen to her gut feeling or instincts, her intuition and natural love for the child. In relation to the father, the mother is held responsible for his engagement in both child-rearing and housework. It is often proclaimed that mothers have to "learn to hand over" (tasks) to fathers (Eltern 08.2017).[5] This deferral of the father's responsibility to the mother goes hand-in-hand with individualisation on the one hand and the idea of "free choice" on the other. As women today can control reproduction, their criticism and suffering is downplayed by the argument that they "have chosen it that way". Hence, they are told, "Ladies, take it easy" (Nido 9.2010).[6]

The Reconciliation of Paid and Family Work

The problem of the (in)compatibility of paid work with household and family work (*Vereinbarkeitsproblem*) is the third discourse strand from our analysis. The difficulties concerning this "(in)compatibility" are regularly discussed in the parental magazines. There are different basic characteristics of the discourse that determine the topic of "(in)compatibility".

First, this discourse is embedded in a view that relies on individualisation and free choice. Questions that have structural-political dimensions are constructed as questions about individual living conditions and private decisions. This is reinforced by the motive of doability, which entails encouraging statements and tips for mothers about how they can improve their chances on the labour market. Through the lens of individualisation, the question of "(in)compatibility" is negotiated as a question of individual "work-life balance" (Knapp 2012). The same shift from structural and political problems to individual choices can be

5 "Mütter müssen lernen abzugeben. Zum Beispiel an die Väter." (Eltern 08.2017).
6 "Meine Damen, machen Sie sich locker." (Nido 9.2010).

found concerning the distribution of house and family work. The unequal distribution of house and family work at the expense of mothers is a problem that is often mentioned but then obscured by a shift from these equality issues to relationship problems. The "(in)compatibility" of paid work with household and family work is enforced on a symbolic level through the construction of these two spheres as substantially different and mutually exclusive.

This exclusion also results in contradictory expectations placed on mothers. On the one hand, it is expected that mothers take part in the labour market to prove their success as modern and autonomous women. On the other hand, motherly activities are constructed as unlimited, which means that paid work, or any time spend without the child, is seen as a decrease in motherly activities. Therefore, the gender of the parent determines the starting point for the *Vereinbarkeitsproblem*.

The father's role is constructed with a focus on income. Therefore, the main question for him is how he can spend time with his family on top of his paid work. A small effort in the family realm – e.g., ten minutes of reading a book each night – is conceptualised as sufficient proof of being a dedicated father. The mother's starting point, on the contrary, is that she is the primary carer for the child, rendering the question of whether she goes on parental leave obsolete. The main question for the mother, therefore, is how she can perform paid work in addition to her maternal activities (i.e., organise her re-entry into the job market). Hence, the paid work of the mother is conceptualised as a surplus. This surplus has to be "worth it", because it is understood as subtracted from the time she could spend with the child.

Symbolically, these two subject positions – mother and working woman – are positioned as mutually exclusive, which results in contradictions when women have to satisfy both. This is one reason behind the often-cited "bad conscience" of working mothers. Additionally, house and family work, which is still mostly undertaken by women, is being dismissed as uninteresting and unqualified. Since unpaid work in the family is not named as work but constructed as a "break" or "time-out", it is not only made invisible but also devalued. Wage labour is presented as an upgrading of the mother, as a form of recognition, a path to more self-esteem and self-actualisation. It is proclaimed that "maternity talk is not enough for me" (Eltern 12.2015).[7] Going back to work is presented as "redemption", "thinking again" or "having experiences of success". By contrast, not doing so is presented as "sitting around at home and twirling your thumbs" (Nido 6.2010).[8]

7 "Müttergespräche reichen mir nicht" (Eltern 12.2015).
8 "Erlösung", "wieder nachdenken", "Erfolgserlebnisse haben", "zu Hause rumsitzen und Däumchen drehen" (Nido 6.2010).

The extensive catalogue of tasks for which the mother is held responsible, although described as time-consuming and strenuous, is nevertheless bound to love and femininity. The devaluation of family and household work corresponds to the devaluation and precariousness of feminine-coded work on a broader level. The "Care Crisis" (Thiessen 2017; Fraser 2013) also manifests itself in the outsourcing of care and household work – primarily mentioned by "working mothers" in the magazines – to minoritised women working in precarious jobs. This is described in the concept of "extensive mothering" (Christopher 2012), in which the working mother remains responsible for the household and the upbringing of children through the delegation of work to others. The term contrasts with "intensive mothering" (Hays 1996), in which the mother fulfils all these tasks herself. Both these "solutions" for the compatibility problem are sides of the same coin that tie the responsibility for children and household to women.

In addition to the implicit devaluation of family work, there is an explicit devaluation in the form of ridicule, devaluation and diminution of mothers not in paid employment, so-called "housewives". These mothers are often portrayed as naïve and irrational. In this respect, obstacles to compatibility are often attributed to the individual mother and her behaviour. In line with this portrayal of obstacles as the results of mothers' attitudes, the presented coping strategies for the *Vereinbarkeitsproblem* are adaptation and lowering one's expectations.

Adaptation is often constructed as a creative force. The child is conceived as part of the mother's professional life that initiates ruptures in the mother's career, which is itself interpreted as a chance for change. This pattern corresponds to the concept of empowerment and individualisation whereby structural disadvantages are presented as opportunities or failures based on the individual's coping strategies. Another influential discourse at work here is the "mindfulness" discourse – represented in the magazines by the figure of the "relaxed" or "mindful" parent – which increases individualisation even more. "Mindfulness" as an individual coping strategy masks socio-cultural structures and shifts responsibility for overwhelming life circumstances to individuals' behaviours and thoughts. Individualisation and "mindfulness" promise success to those who adapt to adverse circumstances as well as possible. Furthermore, individualisation makes individuals' satisfaction the benchmark of justice. However, the fact that adaptation to unjust living conditions is necessary for the individual or family from a pragmatic point of view does not mean justice is done through these adaptations.

We conclude that the discourses in the parenting magazines make use of neoliberal tropes, such as individualism, empowerment and choice, and, at the

same time, advertise conservative gender roles and family structures through biologising arguments. By proclaiming gender equality and free choice in a highly individualistic manner, political perspectives on questions concerning the division of labour in the family – and gender equality in parenting in general – become disarticulated. This creates a gap that the mother – in the guise of the "do-it-all mother" – has to fill.

The "Do-It-All Mother" – A Post-Feminist Myth

The construction of the mother as responsible for the familiy's flourishing combines individualisation with conservative stances on motherhood. This results in the image of the "ideal mother" as a successful woman who manages the endeavour of caring for her family and household, re-entering the labour market at the expected time while also advocating mindfulness and thus keeping her good mood and looks. Since she has to "do it all" (McRobbie 2009, 80) we propose the term "do-it-all mother" for this ideal.

To compose this ideal, parenting magazines combine the idealisation of motherhood on the one hand with post-feminist tropes of individualism, free choice and doability on the other. The inherent contradictions within this ideal cannot be resolved individually, and, therefore, every mother is doomed to fail. Furthermore, the orientation of the ideal mother toward the "white, married, middle-class mother" (Akass 2012; McRobbie 2015) further excludes other family structures, which are rarely represented to begin with. Single mothers, lesbian or gay parents, parents who do not a form a couple, and other social groups, such as parents of colour and parents from poorer backgrounds, are rarely represented in the parenting magazines, and when they are represented, then only with a paradoxical reference to their status as "different but normal".

The attributions to mothers explained above form the normative background for *all* mothers, including those who are unable to meet these norms' requirements. As already shown by research from the UK (McRobbie 2015; Akass 2012; Orgad/De Benedictis 2015), the post-feminist mother becomes a seemingly strong figure who lives her motherhood in a self-determined and responsible way, based on free choice. Our analysis of German parenting magazines reproduce these findings and show that, as a result, overburdening, stress, and anxiety are interpreted in terms of personal failure or poor decision-making. Criticism, complaints, and confessions of suffering by mothers are then presented as "whining". Social and political solutions for problems that mothers face today are thus pushed aside by individual "solutions" such as "self-care".

"Self-care" is a trope that is used in line with the "mindfulness" discourse and

is – as a preventive measure against overstraining – ascribed to the mother. By means of the rhetoric of individualisation, choice and responsibility, the distinction between the unattainable status of the "good mother" and the failure of the "bad mother" is maintained (McRobbie 2009, 19).

In this environment, childcare becomes a private affair and a question of "work-life balance". Structural problems, such as the labour division inside the home or the devaluation of care work, become disarticulated and remain unchallenged (McRobbie 2009, 43, 81; Krüger-Kirn 2018). This is reinforced by the reproduction of heterosexist gender roles and the biologisation of motherhood (Eldén 2012; Adkins 2002). We argue that this "entanglement" (McRobbie 2009) of both liberal and conservative stances results in a disarticulation and depoliticisation that can best be described as post-feminist.

Rather than being a simple backlash, this entanglement has to be understood in a more complex way, because feminist elements such as empowerment and choice are already incorporated in it, but through the individualism of neoliberal subjectivity and a political culture that leads to "undoing feminism" (McRobbie 2009, 9). Post-feminist concepts of neoliberal subjectivity and governmentality (Rose 1999, 2007) are brought together with a claim towards feminist politics (Gill 2007; McRobbie 2004; Scharff 2016). In general, the claim that women are already autonomous, agentic and empowered subjects (Rutherford 2018; McRobbie 2009) is accompanied by an affective politics (Gill 2016; Rutherford 2018) that is designated by the regulation of feelings, thoughts and "work on the self". These affective politics engage with individualisation and tend to replace political perspectives.

Rosalind Gill (2006, 2007) elaborates on the characteristics of "post-feminist sensibility" as an object of analysis. All aspects of this sensibility were relevant in our analysis. First, the notion "that femininity is a bodily property" (Gill 2007, 147), which can be found especially in relation to the biologisation of the mother and her body as well as mothering activities. Second, the "emphasis upon self surveillance, monitoring and self-discipline, a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment" (ibid.), which characterises the discourse on the "(in)compatibility" of paid work and family work, as well as the overall depiction of the mother figure. A third aspect defined by Gill is the "resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference" (ibid.). In our analysis, we found both post-feminism as a cultural landscape – which forms the base for the discourses used in the magazines – and specific markers that make post-feminism detectable as an empirical phenomenon. As in former analyses of post-feminism, the female subject is understood as being the subject of post-feminism (Gill 2007; Rutherford 2018; McRobbie 2009). Hence, women are required to work on the self and prove their

self-determination to a greater extent. In the analysed parenting magazines, the characteristics of individualisation and affective politics are mainly used in relation to female parents. Not only is it the mother who is mainly addressed in these cases, but the infantilisation and helplessness of the father – which is paradoxically used to guard his masculinity from the feminine-coded work connected to mothering – allows him a space in the realm of the family where he can evade responsibility. The mother has no room for herself, and the "can do it all" position instead implies a "must do it all" imperative throughout the discourse.

The rhetoric of choice conceals the normative placement of the mother as the centre of reproduction – a structure through which the responsibility for the realm of reproduction is ascribed to women. Post-feminism is, therefore, not only focused on girls and young women but has moved on to these girls and young women as (soon-to-be) mothers (McRobbie 2015; Orgad/De Benedictis 2015). Interestingly, in the German parenting magazines we analysed, this post-feminist discourse is attached to the collective stereotype of the idealisation and naturalisation of motherhood and the mother-child bond. Taken together with the depoliticisation induced by the individualised rhetoric and discourses of choice, the heteronormative family and the ascribed roles therein do not appear as coercion but as a result of personal free choice. Hence, as millennial girls are becoming mothers, the "do-it-all mother" brings together traditional images of motherhood with a post-feminist discourse.

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