Title:

Sharenting: Pride, affect and the day to day politics of digital mothering

Abstract:

The coming together of parenting and routine posting on social networking sites has become a visible and recognisable theme and the term 'sharenting' has found a place in everyday talk to describe some forms of parental digital sharing practices. However, while social media has undoubtedly provided a space for parents to share experiences and receive support around parenting, sharenting remains a contestable issue. Thus, one reading of sharenting would be as a display of good parenting as mothers 'show off' their children as a marker of success. However, the term also can be used pejoratively to describe parental oversharing of child-focused images and content. In this paper we explore the practice of sharenting in terms of pride, affect, and the politics of digital mothering in a neoliberal context to conclude that sharenting can be best understood as a complex affective and intersectional accomplishment that produces motherhood and family as communicative activities within digital social practices.

Introduction

The coming together of parenting and routine posting on social networking sites (SNS), such as Facebook and Instagram, has become a visible and recognisable theme in contemporary culture. Corollary to this, the term 'sharenting' has found a place in everyday talk to describe some forms of parental digital sharing practices. Indeed in 2016, the term earned a place in the Collins online dictionary where it is defined as "the habitual use of social media to share news, images, etc. of one's children" (Sharenting, 2016). Sharenting occurs alongside specific contemporary parenting cultures, in particular those involving 'intensive parenting' (Hays, 1996; Faircloth, 2014), thereby encompassing those tensions inherent in existing parenting discourses. These discourses suggest that mothers need to be self-sacrificial and child-centred. However, while social media has undoubtedly provided a space for parents to share experiences and receive support around parenting (Brosch, 2016), sharenting remains a contestable issue. Thus, one reading of sharenting would be as a display of good parenting as mothers 'show off' their children as a marker of success (c.f. Goffman, 1959 on presentation of self), placing it also within a wider frame of parenting in a culture that regards being pregnancy and parenting as holding a kind of 'celebrity' status (c.f. Gross & Pattison,2007) . The framing of the practice as 'habitual' in the dictionary definition, for instance, hints at the pejorative function of the term to describe parental oversharing of child-focused images and content. Not to mention the issues it raises around questions of rights, ethics and privacy. A case in point, foster parents are routinely prevented from sharing photos of the children in their care on social media with the concomitant implications for how the family is displayed and the attendant claims to authenticity. In this paper we explore the practice of sharenting in terms of pride, affect, and the politics of mothering in a neoliberal context.

Mothering in a Digital Age

The portmanteau 'sharenting' appears to imply gender neutrality. This is, however, contested by the small, but growing, body of interdisciplinary work mapping parental engagement with social media platforms. While some studies suggest that both mothers and fathers share child-related content online, it appears that mothers post information about their children, particularly family photos, with greater frequency than fathers (Ammari, Kumar, Lampe & Schoenebeck, 2015; Duggan, Lenhart, Lampe & Ellison, 2015). This parallels generic social networking usage patterns with women reportedly using SNS with greater frequency than men (Duggen and Brenner, 2012) as well as participating more often in SNS photo sharing practices (e.g. Dhir, Pallesent, Torsheimd & Andreassend, 2016).

Gendered patterns around the display and distribution of family photos and updates, however, are certainly not new. Rose (2010), for instance, in her study of family photography, suggests that mothers, more so than fathers, will take primary responsibility for the curation of paper albums, managing the display of photos within the home and the sharing of photos with others both offline and in more circumscribed digital communications such as family emails or WhatsApp groups. This parallels findings around offline familial relationship maintenance which suggest that women engage more frequently than men in the ongoing support of family connections across households through, for example, communicating family updates (e.g. Hess Brown and DeRycke, 2010). This appears to remain the case, despite increased expectations around the adoption of caring masculinities for fathers and their involvement in family life and child care (Hunter, Riggs and Augoustinos, 2017).

Notably, traditional and typical patterns in family photography offline tend to carry over into online interactions, for example, increasing with the imminent arrival of a baby. Similarly, pregnancy and post child-birth have been found to be periods of concentrated

family photography, in both contexts, and are similarly intensified in the case of first time parents (Kumar & Schoenebeck, 2015).

Studies of offline family photography (Harding, 2016) suggest that the content of images include those of everyday life as well as of significant moments such as generic 'first' milestones in children's, as well as parent's, lives. As Rose (2010) notes, the similarity in representations across family albums has led to understandings of this subgenre of personal photography as banal and repetitive in both scholarly and popular arenas. As these images have moved online, these characterisations resonate with the ways in which sharenting has been described in various media commentaries where the mundanity and frequency of these image uploads on SNS have been described as irritating and annoying for the viewing audience (e.g. Martindale, 2014; Telegraph 2016).

It is not just the mundanity and frequency of posts, however, which have been branded as problematic. Censure has also extended to the ways in which sharenting manifests itself as 'humblebragging' (Steinberg, 2017). The humblebrag has been defined in the online Oxford English Dictionary (online, nd) as:

> "An ostensibly modest or self-deprecating statement whose actual purpose is to draw attention to something of which one is proud".

This definition is coupled with the following example:

> 'social media status updates are basically selfies, humblebrags, and rants'

Whilst not specific to sharenting, this practice has also been heavily criticised in the popular press - as a simple Google search will evidence. However, the association between the humblebrag and pride is of particular note for parental sharing of child and family focused content because this particular affectivity has long been associated with 'good' parenting. More specifically, expressions of parental pride are implicated in the moral development of children and in good developmental outcomes (Williams, 2009). In her

popular undergraduate textbook, Berk (2013) mentions pride explicitly as an indicator of emotionally supportive parenting. The expression of parental pride is thus mundanely tied to the importance of the quality of parenting on which childhood outcomes depend. Associations between pride, sharenting and humblebragging point to the parameters of social acceptabilities for parents online.

Given the gendered patterns around family photography mentioned earlier, it is less than surprising that it is mothers who are the primary focus of sharenting disapproval and judgement and are thus, as Gross and Pattison (2007) would argue, "under surveillance". This gendering of sharenting is probably to be expected given that, although there has been a partial reduction in the gap between men and women's participation in contemporary domestic life, it is still the case that many women either stay at home full-time or tend to work part-time. Even when working full-time, women are doing much of the unpaid labour in the household, including child-care, particularly in those early years when family photography is most commonplace (Biggart & O'Brien, 2010; Lyonette, 2015; Park, Bryson, Clery, Curtice & Phillips, 2013).

Scholarly work on mothers' digital sharing of family and child focused content online is in its infancy. To date, a small body of work has explored the impact of parental sharing with respect to children's online safety (Marasli, Suhendan, Yilmazturk & Cok, 2016). This resonates with the constitution of mothers as background, with children occupying the foreground, in the psychological study of development (Athan & Reel, 2015). In contrast, the present paper is grounded in a focus on how digital parenting practices are performed and take shape in the context of women's own identity projects on social networking sites. In this sense, maternal subjectivities are here rendered highly visible and foregrounded.

A small number of articles have begun to investigate the ways in which digital technologies become interwoven in everyday mothering practice (e.g. Moravec, 2011;

Frizzo-Barker & Chow-White, 2012; Johnson, 2014, 2015; Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017; Chalken & Anderson, 2017). For example, specific apps act as tools to embody 'good' mothering ideals (such as using apps that allow child development tracking) as well as providing a means to delegate some responsibilities (vaccine timers, notifications, scheduling). In this way, we would argue, the digital expression of maternal subjectivities in general, and sharenting in particular, function as technologies of the self (Foucault, 1988).

To elaborate briefly, Foucault identifies four types of technologies: technologies of production, technologies of sign systems, technologies of power, and technologies of the self. For Foucault technologies of the self are those which

> permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (Foucault, 1988: 18).

The notion of technologies of the self has thus been usefully taken up by a number of social media researchers and theorists, often around the construction of 'authentic' narratives. While the ways in which gender becomes inscribed in sharenting may work to reify certain (gendered) identities, they may also offer a site for continual and fluid negotiations of those identities. As Gill & Orgad (2015: 326) have argued, the notion of technologies of self, can be "valuable because it offers a way to think about the relation between culture and subjectivity in a way that is not reductive, deterministic or conspiratorial, but nevertheless insists on holding together work on the self with a wider appreciation of power".

In line with these Foucauldian notions, we suggest that technologies of the maternal self are self-transformations directed at achieving, for example, particular moral goals, happiness and pleasures. This lens enables an unpacking of dominant frames that shape contemporary motherhood and the ways in which these can be variously enacted, displayed, negotiated and resisted at the interface of on and offline life in a neoliberal context.

Pride and SNS in a Neoliberal context

Neoliberal mandates around individual responsibility become increasingly complex when one becomes a parent. As Johnson (2014) notes, individual responsibility is transformed by gendered patterns for maternal subjects; mothers as primary care givers become responsible for self and their children. As such, individual responsibility becomes transformed into a "responsibilisation of the self-for-others" (Johnson, 2014, p. 332). Expressions of parental pride speak to this form of responsibilisation because both are intimately tied to the current normativities mentioned earlier in this paper around the production of 'good' developmental outcomes. Specifically, pride as an affective expression of parentally endorsed goal attainment for children temporarily manifests the achievement of responsibilisation for mothers. Moreover, this form of responsibilisation is an easy fit with intensive mothering imperatives. These amplify social expectations that mothers devote a disproportionate amount of time and labour (emotional, practical and financial) to not only guarantee that their children thrive, but also to enhance their performance in relation to their peers (Huisman & Joy, 2014). Taken together, these aspects of contemporary parenting in neoliberal contexts chime with Foucauldian ideas of neoliberal investment in children as human capital (Burchell, Davidson & Foucault, 2008). Investments in the self, health, nutrition, education and training of our own children, for example, are not only understood as making calculable increases in individual well-being, but also in enhancing individual success in life.

In this way, family and child focused uploads by mothers to SNS can be understood in some instances, as an enactment of responsibilisation of self-for-others i.e. the investment in children. The upload of children's milestone moments, for example, communicate the mother's role in the event even if she is not visibly in the frame. This ties in with

Christopher's (2012) notion of 'extensive parenting' wherein even full-time working mothers are able to enact responsibility and care, whilst not always there. There is a trace of the mother's investment through the very act of upload to her digital space and concomitantly a trace of parental care.

We must recognise, and set this discussion within an awareness that the possibility for successful investment is also predicated on existing intersectional nuanced practices. As we know from the wider literature, good parenting discourses tend to neglect intersectional concerns and focus on white, middle class normativities (Okolosie, 2014). An intersectional focus that acknowledges rather than erases these differences is important – it is not just about the differing experiences of gender, but also of the multiplicity of gender, class, age, (dis) ability and other intersections. The way that women experience motherhood is not as a homogenous group, but is nuanced and complex in respect to their subjective positionings. With Shields' (2008) we understand intersectionality to involve 'social identities which serve as organising features of social relations, [that] mutually constitute, reinforce, and naturalise one another' (p. 302). These intersections produce both advantages and disadvantages, and show how identities, such as gender, are embedded in particular positions of power. In neoliberal culture, women navigate complex classed, raced, and gendered constructions of mothering that enable ways of 'doing' mothering that can be read either as successful or as failed.

In relation to characterisations of the mother-child relationship in developmental psychology, drawing on the work of Burman (1994), Athan and Reel (2015), argue that, "mothers are the functional agents of their children. Simply put, the child's success hinges on the success of the mother. As a result, historically and for future generations to come, our empathic thrust resides squarely with the child" (p. 312). What is particularly of note here is that social media allows for mothering identities to be correspondingly foregrounded (it is the

mother who posts the images on her own social media account) which contrasts with the historical backgrounding of mothers in popular and scholarly arenas. Online practices of expressing pride manifest the intertwinement of the child and mother in which the pattern of success that Athan and Reel point to is fluid and perceptible – the success of the mother hinges on the child's success, their 'successes' are inextricably interwoven. 'Mother pride' then can be seen as temporarily manifesting self-for-others parental achievement which serves to render the women not only as 'good' mothers but also as 'good' neoliberal subjects.

Based within political economic practices emphasising free markets, free trade and privatisation, neoliberalism advances a view of individual well-being as enhanced and progressed through an ethos of competitive individualism, entrepreneurship, freedoms and skills (e.g. Baerg, 2009). As Gill and Scharff (2013) suggest, neoliberalism can be understood as a "mobile, calculated technology for governing subjects as self-managing, autonomous and enterprising" (p.5). Within neoliberal cultures, individuals are "obliged to be free" (Rose, 1996, p. 153). This translates into imperatives around individual responsibility for the 'free' choices made, and the courses of action selected for "understanding and improving ourselves in relation to that which is true, permitted and desirable" (Rose, 1996, p. 153). The emphasis on self-improvement, self-fulfilment and growth imply individual achievement and an unfaltering incremental movement in pursuit of these broad goals.

The link between pride and achievement appears particularly pertinent in the exploration of this. More specifically, pride, to a greater or lesser extent, in its everyday use, represents a socially sanctioned feeling of doing well in and achieving with respect to some norm or standard that one cares about. Pride as an individual expression of affective evaluation of achievement goals dovetails with neoliberal imperatives in contemporary western culture. As research reminds us (e.g. Locke, 2011; Lutz, 1990; Shields, 2002), the emotional lexicon is not gender neutral. Bringing this together with parenting displays, which

themselves are highly gendered, marks the study of the affective nature of 'sharenting' as a key area of interest.

Dominant psychological theorisations of pride retain the conceptualisation of emotion as an inner property of the individual (for instance see Cheng, Tracey and Henrich, 2010; Miceli, Castelfranchi and Pocobello, 2017). When pride is treated as emotion, psychology has identified two facets, the authentic and the hubristic (Tracey & Robins, 2007). Authentic pride is achievement-oriented. It is associated with feelings of self-worth and self-esteem. Hubristic pride, however, is associated with self-enhancement and narcissism. From a discursive psychological perspective, these can be seen as dominant understandings of pride that can be used to make sense of experiences of sharenting.

Family uploads and affect

To date, the concept of pride has not been extensively examined in the context of digital cultures. Indeed, in psychological studies on the use of social media, pride has, in the main, been studied indirectly through examinations of the relationship between psychological constructs such as self-esteem within digital engagements (Zhang & Leung, 2015). Work in cultural and media studies, however, has drawn attention to the smartphone as enmeshed in affectivity, including consideration of digital technologies as mediators as well as repositories of online affect (Karatzogianni & Kuntsman, 2012). Posting, reposting and sharing on SNS draws attention to the emotion work done as posts circulate and, importantly, highlights the ways in which these become relevant to the expression of power and politics (Kuntsman, 2012). This circulation presents opportunities to consider the shaping and reshaping of affectivity through the digital, allowing us to explore the currency of affect, through attention to how and when affective regimes persist or change (Clough, 2012). In reflecting on social practices, recent research by Choi & Lewallen (2018) discuss parental social media use –

more specifically, the use of hashtags – in curating groups and belonging. The hashtags that are used in the captions of shared photos are signifiers not just of family life, but also create in-groups, and engage with a community of other families sharing their lives. For example, as of January 2019, a search for the hashtags #children and #family on Instagram brought up 23.6 million and 301 million results respectively. Sharable markers, such as hashtags, allow for a community to be built around the images, in essence, a curation of family in digital space, as defined further through the use of such hashtags. These conceptualisations of affect in digital space resonate with some psychological work which has highlighted how embodied intensities of affect become "enrolled in culturally-normative patterns of intention, performance, relationality and ethics" (Cromby, 2012, p. 150). Patterns such as these have been theorised as forming social practices that are reworked in relation to changing contexts (Wetherell, 2012).

Discursive and rhetorical psychology has long established the ways in which emotion talk is used to accomplish a range of social actions including, for example, justifying or disputing a position, managing accountability and performing (and ascribing) identity work (Edwards, 1997, 1999; Locke & Edwards, 2003). Given that pride is constituted as an important affectivity in 'good' parenting discourses (Williams, 2009), it is perhaps not surprising that this is the emotional referent used either explicitly or implicitly in mothers' posts about their families and children. The visual-textual display of pride functions to justify such posts as well as to perform identity work around 'good' mothering (Lazard, 2017).

Byford (forthcoming) reminds us that alongside questions of how emotional lexicons can be used to perform particular actions and negotiate social acceptabilities around identity work, it is also important to ask why particular emotions become relevant to specific social, cultural and historical contexts. Parental pride undoubtedly has a long history in parenting discourses and certainly predates the recent explosion of social media use. However, it seems

pertinent to question how it is constituted as particularly relevant to online parental engagements with social media.

What are family uploads doing?

As mentioned earlier, family photography has become a fairly common genre on SNS. These comprise of family occasions, milestone moments, mother-child and family selfies and everyday events (e.g. Rinkel Morris, 2014). Again, as previously noted, these uploads appear similar in many respects to family photography done offline. As Rose (2010) suggests in her studies of mother's accounts and experiences of print photography and paper albums, the picturing of 'togetherness' appeared to be central to family photography and, indeed, family life in western cultures. Similarly, Finch (2007) has argued for the relevance of the concept of display for doing family in that this serves as a confirmatory act for these relationships.

Rose points to the ways in which family photos do not simply or straightforwardly represent familial togetherness; family photography as a practice is central to the constitution of those connections. Those connections are further elaborated and situated in practices such as the distribution of family photos to other relatives and in the management of photo display in the home. Similarly, the display and distribution of family photos on social media constitute connections between family members online not only in the picturing of family in the photo but also as mediums for pictorially sharing family news. In this sense they do relational work between the self and the family with other relatives and those in the mother's social network.

This production of closeness has most recently been enhanced through digital photo technology. That uploads are often now taken with built-in smartphone cameras highlights how the mother, child and family become configured to meet the demands of the device. As Hess (2015) notes in relation to selfies, smartphone photo technologies require particular

orientations of our bodies to take a 'good' selfie. This is true of family selfies in which the forward facing function of smartphones require bodily closeness, more so than when a third person takes the photo, in order to make sure all members are captured in frame. The physical act of taking smartphone family photos can be seen as constituting and constitutive of familial intimacy and togetherness.

In line with the constitution of familial togetherness, mothers' postings tend to be of happy and positive family moments (Kumar & Schoenebeck, 2015). Family photography, as Rose (2010) suggests has long been criticised for presenting a highly selective vision of the happy family ideal thereby obscuring the labour and difficulties of family life, particularly for women. As such it is highly likely that representations of familial happiness may "erase other articulations for subject positions and relations" (Rose, 2010, p. 131). In Lazard's (2017) study of mothers' accounts of posting online, participants discussed how their uploaded photos were a partial view of family life in which the trials and tribulations of mothering were often hidden from sight. However, this versioning of family on social media was complexly interwoven with how the difficulties associated with motherhood were framed and understood. For example, the constitution of family togetherness, happiness and 'good' mothering identities in and through posting, appears in some instances to offer some relief to everyday struggles and to the expectations placed on mothers during the process of raising children. However, the relief appeared to stem from the opportunity to position oneself, albeit temporarily, in line with normative 'happy', family ideals; something the mother can take pride in.

Summary

In this paper we have endeavoured to explore the gendered practice of sharenting in relation to neoliberal conceptualisations of pride, online expressions of affect, and the day-to-

day politics of mothering.   Family photography, both on and offline, historically and currently, has been managed primarily by women and particularly by mothers. This locates the practice within a set of gendered pressures and specificities that can be seen to limit what it might be possible to say, reducing the practice to one that can only be made sense of as achievement-oriented or narcissistic within a traditional psychological framework. This pride, always tentatively perched between claims of 'good mothering', and critiques of 'humblebragging', we have argued, can be better understood as a complex affective and intersectional accomplishment that produces motherhood and family as communicative activities within digital social practices.

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