Identity projects are characterized by conflicts and contradictions. This paper examines women’s experiences of identity conflicts and contradictions at the intersection between the culturally pervasive discourse of self-management and women’s identity framing projects as new mothers. We focus on the different strategies which women devise to allow them to negotiate the transition into new motherhood and integrate the variety of potentially conflicting possible selves in order to become relative experts at mothering. Drawing on three women’s cases we identify how women variously consume discourses around mothering by either resisting the discourses; reconciling the discourses; or disengaging from the discourses.

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Becoming a Mother: Negotiating Discourses Within the Life-Framing Identity Project of Motherhood

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction
We explore women’s experiences of identity conflicts and contradictions (Arnould and Thompson 2005) within the context of the consumption of discourses around motherhood. We particularly examine the intersection between the culturally pervasive discourse of self-management (Fischer et al. 2007) and more locally-bound discourses around women’s identity framing projects as new mothers. We focus on the strategies women devise to allow them to negotiate the transition into new motherhood and integrate a variety of potentially conflicting possible selves in order to become relative experts. Drawing on three women’s cases we identify how women variously reconcile themselves to discourses around good mothering, or resist or disengage from these discourses while developing viable mothering identities.

Identity projects, identity transitions and discourses
Motherhood requires the integration of different possible mothering selves which are informed by discourses that frame understandings of what it means to be a mother and reflect the conflicts, contradictions and ambivalence encountered. Discourses have been classified into two types: life-project framing and culturally pervasive (Fischer et al. 2007). “Life-project framing discourses are those that animate goals in a particular context” (Fischer et al. 2007:426). Miller (2007) argues that life-project framing discourses can leave women with unrealistic expectations of motherhood, partly through emphasizing mothers as natural and instinctive but also through failing to take account of women’s diverse experiences and the relevance of individual differences. Culturally pervasive discourses are those that are less germane to particular goals in a given context but that nonetheless inform consumers’ thoughts and actions in particular contexts (Fischer et al. 2007:426). The main culturally pervasive discourse that affects women’s identity projects as new mothers relates to self-management (Fischer et al. 2007:433) and encourages individuals to develop their own understandings and knowledge in response to the diversity of expert (e.g., medical) discourses. Negotiating their way between culturally pervasive and life-framing discourses means new mothers have to reconcile their personal experiences and values with broader discourses. We examine identity work undertaken at the intersection between discourses by exploring the transition women make from pregnancy to new motherhood and the development of relative expertise. We therefore seek to understand how women respond to commonly held expectations of motherhood, which Miller (2007) argues are socially embedded and emphasized via prevailing discourses.

Research design
Our study focuses on three stories from a sample of first time mothers. Our depth interviews were loosely structured and informed by themes around mothering from earlier studies. We began with an over arching question: “tell me about your experiences of motherhood so far”. Data analysis was ongoing throughout the data collection.

Findings
Drawing on three women’s cases we identify how women respond to the discourses around mothering using three self-management strategies: resisting the discourses; reconciling the discourses; or disengaging from the discourses. These strategies are used by women to make sense of their early mothering experiences and ultimately allow them to define their own version of the ‘ideal’ mothering self as they become more experienced and confident mothers. We reveal how women adopt these strategies within the context of prevailing (and often localized) discourses of ideal motherhood, to redefine their expectations of motherhood and to emerge in various ways, as becoming relative experts or ‘good enough’ mothers.

First, Olga’s story revolves around resisting discourses of ideal motherhood. Olga’s story reveals how some women resist what they perceive as normative discourses associated with mothering, such as the expectation to breastfeed, to have a particular physical appearance, and to purchase particular branded goods. Although at first women may struggle with resistance, over time expectations are reframed in the light of early mothering experiences, and women become more confident in their resistance and develop reframed expectations of the ‘good enough’ mothering self.

Second, Grace’s story tells how she sought to reconcile potentially conflicting discourses. In her transition to motherhood, Grace struggles with, but eventually manages to reconcile, her initial expectations of her new mothering self versus the reality of her lived experience of new motherhood. Reconciliation involves a re-evaluation of initial possible selves and recognition of (prioritizing) what is important and feasible within the new mothering context.

Third, Nina’s story exemplifies disengagement from ideal motherhood discourses. Nina chooses to ignore the discourses associated with ‘pregnancy as (identity) project’ (Brewis and Warren, 2001), which involves the assumption that women will inform themselves, attend classes, and make particular consumption decisions as part of the motherhood project. Although aware of these ‘expert’ discourses, some women prefer to ignore them, instead preferring to find their own way, through trial and error, developing an emerging confidence, expertise and belief in themselves as ‘good enough mothers.’

Discussion
Arnould and Thompson argue that the marketplace provides a structuring influence and “produces certain kinds of consumer positions that consumers can choose to inhabit” (2005:871). However, consumers are faced with conflicts, contradictions and ambivalence which “frequently engender the use of myriad coping strategies, compensatory mechanisms, and juxtapositions of seemingly antithetical meanings and ideals” (2005:871). Our findings suggest that while these cultural scripts are prevalent and influential, some women do not feel able to align their identities with particular positions and others will consciously and purposefully resist elements that do not fit with their own understanding and experiences.
In addition to identifying the self-management strategies that women adopt in response to discourses about motherhood, our research also reveals that the process of transition involved in becoming a (good) mother is somewhat more prolonged than might first be assumed. By interviewing women at different stages of new motherhood we have explored some of the ways in which women gradually accumulate the experience necessary to become a relative expert (Miller 2007). Despite pregnancy in itself representing a period of liminality, our findings suggest liminality continues after birth, as women develop “their own ways of knowing” (Miller 2007:351), which involves negotiating their path through a variety of life project framing discourses and the development of effective self-management strategies (Fischer et al. 2007) in order to cope with the often "seemingly antithetical meanings and ideals" (Arnould and Thompson 2005:871).

References


