

CHALLENGING AND REPRODUCING THE DISCOURSE OF “INTENSIVE MOTHERING” IN FAMILY MAGAZINE “MANS MAZAIS” (2018–2022)

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ABSTRACT

The dominant discourse of motherhood in Western civilization is of “intensive mothering”, coined by Hays in 1996, which views the mother as the primary caregiver with absolute responsibility over the child’s physical and psychological needs, promoting unrealistic standards, pressure on the mother, not to mention discrediting the benefits of a more present, engaged father, who is constructed mainly as a “bread winner” and assistant-parent. As recommended by Jansone-Ratinika (2013), the media should focus on egalitarian forms of family, thus, in doing so, gradually transforming hegemonic stereotypes in society. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to explore the various discourses of motherhood in the 21st century over a period of 5 years (2018–2022) in the family magazine “Mans Mazais” (*My Little One*). A critical discourse analysis has been conducted, illustrating the reproduction and challenge to the dominant discourse. The study provides insight into a variety of motherhood discourses (re)produced in the 36 issues of the family magazine “Mans Mazais” from 2018 to 2022, providing a spectrum of experiences and motherhood ideologies from “intensive mothering” to alternatives. However, the dominance of “intensive mothering” discourse is overbearing, displaying a portrait of an ideal family – a married Latvian heterosexual couple with happy children, who are cared after by the parents without any constraint in financial, emotional, physical resources, treating any challenge as a passing inconvenience.

Keywords: *motherhood, intensive mothering, intensive parenting, Mans Mazais, critical discourse analysis*

Introduction

Even though the dominant discourse of motherhood in Western civilization has been of “intensive mothering” (Hays, 1996), due to ongoing transformation of society towards more liberal and egalitarian values, the balance of different motherhood discourses is also undergoing change. The hegemonic discourse of “intensive mothering” focuses on traditional gender roles and views the mother as the primary caregiver with absolute responsibility over the child’s physical, psychological, and other needs, whereas the father

is seen as mainly a “bread winner” and assistant-parent (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2017; Feasey, 2017). “Correct” mothering within the dominant discourse implies satisfaction with the role as a mother (Orton-Johnson, 2017), positive attitude and loving affections towards the child, and classifying struggles with motherhood and such emotions as sadness, fear or anger, as inappropriate (Murray & Finn, 2012, p. 56). It also implies a “pro-natalist” position and medicalisation of motherhood experience (Tiidenberg & Baym, 2017).

As the “intensive mothering” discourse does not capture the subjectivity and diversity of parenthood and motherhood, numerous scholars have critiqued it as promoting unrealistic standards, pressure on the mother, not to mention discrediting the benefits of a more present, engaged father or, in the context of gender equality, endangering women’s mental health (Das, 2019; van Belle, 2016; Auðardóttir, 2022) due to the weight of child-care responsibilities. Social norms are conveyed through media and social media images and rhetoric; thus, the communication of an “ideal family” or “ideal mother”, the “visible and easily accessible nature of media” provides a platform for mothers to compare themselves against (Forbes et al., 2020, p. 64.). As recommended by Jansone-Ratinika in her dissertation on the father’s pedagogical competences (2013), media should focus on egalitarian forms of family, and, in doing so, gradually transform the hegemonic stereotypes in society. However, even though the representation of parenthood and motherhood in media plays an important role in the formation of public opinion and discourses, the media do not always represent the full spectrum of different motherhood discourses. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to explore the various discourses of motherhood in the 21st century, their prevalence and inter-balance over a period of 5 years (2018–2022) in the family magazine “Mans Mazais” (*My Little One*). The research questions are:

1. Which motherhood discourses are represented in the family magazine “Mans Mazais” (2018–2022)?
2. Through which main discursive themes is the dominant discourse of “intensive mothering” challenged in in the family magazine “Mans Mazais” (2018–2022)?

Discourses of motherhood

To begin with, it is essential to distinguish between terms “intensive parenting” and “intensive mothering”. Some researchers consider them to be equal, although Hays (1996) speaks of “intensive mothering”, while Rizzo, Schiffrin and Liss define “three tenets of this parenting ideology, which are the belief that mothers are inherently better parents (essentialism), the belief that mothering should be child centered, and that children should be considered sacred, delightful, and fulfilling to parents”, also stressing that “the intensity required to parent well, parenting can be quite challenging and require wide-ranging skills and expertise” (2013, p. 615). Some aspects of “intensive parenting” – “stimulation”, “fulfilment” from childcare and “child-centered” attitudes – are in regard to both parents, while “intensive mothering” refers strictly to mothers (Rizzo et al., 2013). Therefore, as, for instance, Forbes calls for further research to differentiate between parenting and mothering attitudes (Forbes et al., 2020, p. 70), in this paper, the term “intensive mothering” is used, as the research mainly focuses on the mother’s role.

In contemporary society “normative good mothering” is considered to be following the guidelines of “intensive mothering” ideology (Chae, 2022; Hays, 1996). It implies parents to be responsible “not only for their children’s physical, cognitive, and intellectual development, but also for their social and emotional wellbeing and for their overall success in life” (Mainland et al., 2016, p. 86), “investing vast amounts of emotional labour and energy into raising their children [...] above and beyond the perhaps obvious strength of emotions” (Das, 2019, p. 499), often neglecting their own needs and desires. This ideology urges parents to nurture their children for future gain, as well as taking upon risks, thus, parents become “risk-managers” (Mainland et al., 2016). “Intensive mothering” also supports traditional gender roles – an idealized heteronormative married couple with the mother devoting her time to childcare and father overseeing the family’s financial stability (Das, 2019, Schoppe-Sullivan, et al., 2017). Lastly, as “intensive mothering” is anchored in the context of neoliberalism, it also maintains that a “right” choice needs to be made and “individuals are to encompass feelings such as positivity, joy and resilience at all times” (Auðardóttir, 2022, p. 2), causing anxiety, stress, and even threats to mental well-being (Forbes et al., 2020, pp. 65–70) especially to those mothers, who face challenges with their journey into motherhood.

As the “real face” of motherhood and the average family profile differs from the “intensive mothering” rigid norms, several mothering discourses are distinguished in other research, which are illustrated by the author with in Figure 1 (Discourses of motherhood). These either “companion” or “conflicting” discourses (Sunderland, 2000, p. 249) challenge or suggest an alternative to the hegemonic discourse of “intensive mothering”, regarding 1) mother’s identity and social roles, 2) behaviour and actions, and 3) emotions. “Challenging” and “alternative” motherhood discourses lift the veil from otherwise shrouded other forms of normality, permitting the woman to have her own voice and agency.

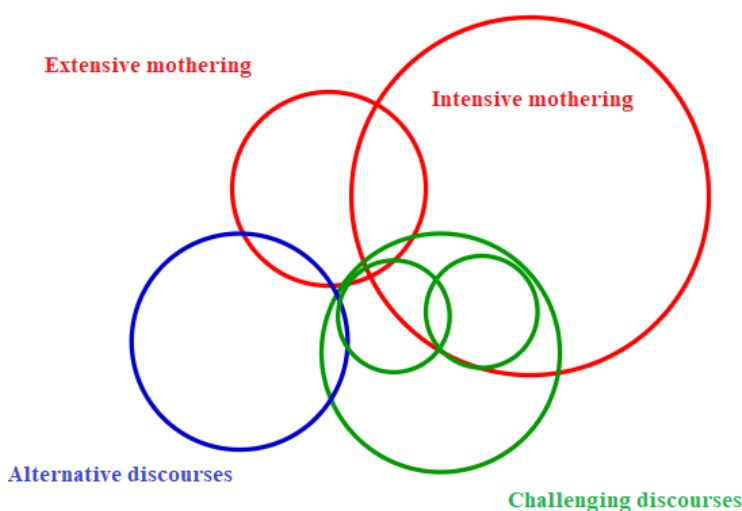


Figure 1 Discourses of motherhood

As illustrated in Figure 1, the dominant discourse of “intensive mothering” has a prominent position with “extensive mothering” as a complimentary discourse by its side, differing only in the fact that “extensive mothering” allows the mother to be employed and, thus, to become a “manager” of the household, delegating different tasks of child-care to others, while maintaining the strict “intensive mothering” guidelines, absolute responsibility and sacrifice of mother’s needs over the interests of the child (Orton-Johnson, 2017; Meng, 2020). Within the “intensive” and “extensive” mothering discourses, mothers adjust their expectations, depending on work status: stay-at-home mothers emphasize “accessibility”; part-time working mothers emphasize “quality interactions”, and full-time working mothers emphasize “empowering children and providing financial resources to support their children’s activities” as central to their ideal mothering, justifying their status as beneficial to children (Liss et al., 2013, p. 623)

While “challenging” discourses accept the prevailing norms of “intensive” and “extensive” mothering discourses, they try to cause a disruption. The scene of these “counter-narratives” is fragmented, as they contrast and interact with one another and the hegemonic discourse as well (Micalizzi, 2020). Tiidenberg and Baum (2017), and Malatzky (2017) speak of “yummy mummies” who challenge “intensive mothering” by accenting their sexuality and femininity in contrast to the “saint-like” predisposition of a mother in the dominant discourse, whereas Orton-Johnson (2017) reveals a “slummy mummy” discourse that rejects superficial beauty and endless beauty-routines and focus on the “average” woman and need for rest, alone-time and casual appearance (illustrated by two smaller circles as part of the “challenging” discourses). However, the disruption of “intensive mothering” discourse is relative, as “challenging” discourses acknowledge the dominance of the hegemonic discourse.

Lastly, “alternative” mothering discourses include discursive themes otherwise invisible to the “dominant” discourse, trying to detach from norms and values of the neoliberal, patriarchal society, and more aggressively pursuing the individual voice and agency of the mother. “Alternative” discourses include mothers with different social roles, identities or choices, for instance, younger or older than average mothers (Snickers & Rommes, 2020; Shea et al. 2016; Yläne, 2016), mothers with physical or psychological challenges (Cummins & Brannon 2022), as well as mothers from marginalized communities due to ethnicity or sexuality (Tiidenberg & Baum, 2017; Ray, 2017), as well as relationship status (single or solo-mothers, divorced mothers, or stepmothers, etc.), income and social status (Mackenzie & Zhao, 2021; Elliott et al., 2017; Roper & Capdevila, 2020; Jovanovski & Cook, 2019; Lazard, 2022), etc. For instance, solo-mothers are often perceived as a “risk” as they do not provide a “traditional” family model and opportunity to explore one’s genetic origin, thus, earning the title of being “selfish” (Graham, 2017). As “intensive mothering” discourse also regulates normative and “correct” behaviour as well as feelings and emotions, “alternative” discourses open up space for discussion about otherwise “taboo” topics – domestic violence, reproductive challenges, death of child, maternal ambivalence and regret (Moore & Abetz, 2019), etc. Mothers, represented in “alternative” discourses often face and acknowledge stigmatization as they supposedly pose a “risk” to

the child's wellbeing and development, according to prevailing social norms, even though not complying to social norms is not always an individual choice.

Methodology

This research employs critical discourse analysis (CDA), focusing on the main interviews with mothers and the overall thematic structure of each issue, illustrating the reproduction and challenge to the “intensive mothering” discourse. Discourse in this paper is defined as

“a group of statements in so far as they belong to the same discursive formation; it does not form a rhetorical or formal unity, endlessly repeatable, whose appearance or use in history might be indicated (and, if necessary, explained); it is made up of a limited number of statements for which a group of conditions of existence can be defined. Discourse in this sense is not an ideal, timeless form that also possesses a history.” (Foucault, 1972, p. 117)

Discourses do not only reflect the world, the social entities and relations, they “construct” them (Fairclough, 1992, p. 3.), therefore, the grammatical and lexical choices that have been made, as well as what has and has not been mentioned, may show what is “assumed” about the world (Sunderland, 2000, pp. 254–256.). Sunderland also stresses, that texts can be seen as “specifically shaping practices surrounding fatherhood and motherhood, and accordingly constituting both gender identities and gender relations” (2000, pp. 253–254).

According to Jørgensen and Phillips, CDA engages in concrete, linguistic textual analysis of language use in social interaction, focusing on the linguistic features of the text, discursive practice and social practice (2002, p. 61.). CDA deals with micro-analysis of linguistic forms that participate in macro-level discursive constructs (Coffey-Glover, 2020, p. 10046). The analysis, following the steps of Auðardóttir (2022), focuses on publicly displayed discourses of mothers, mediated through journalists, as “more so than in blogs or on social media, written words in print media are curated to fit a wide audience and rely on common understanding and assumptions so that the reader can understand and relate to the topic at hand” (p. 3.).

At first (*Figure 2. Research design*), a pilot study was conducted, focusing on 6 issues of the magazine “Mans Mazais”, to distinguish linguistic items from different semantic fields that tend to repeat and patterns of how the interviews had been structured, as well as to recognize discursive themes and to form categories which to measure quantitatively.

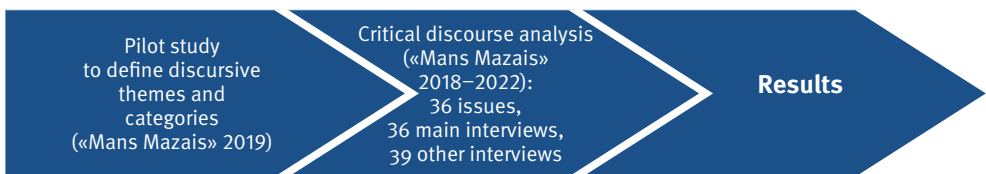


Figure 2 Research design

Next, a total of 30 categories were defined for the quantitative part of the analysis of the main interviews, concentrating on discursive themes of family status, pregnancy, birth, emotions, gender roles, and intellectual stimulation (education), to determine the compliance of each main interview with three of the types of overarching motherhood discourses (“intensive”, “challenging” or “alternative”). A separate category for main theme of the issue was also created, along with descriptive information about the particular issue. Then, a separate table was created to describe the “other” (not main) interviews with mothers and families. As other interviews were significantly shorter, a more basic approach was used, focusing on only the main theme of the particular interview.

The magazine “Mans Mazais”, which is the only printed commercial magazine in Latvia dedicated to parental themes from pregnancy to early childhood, according to the media agency “Inspired”, has been steadily losing its popularity, as in 2018 the print was 9200 issues, whereas in 2023 it is only 4360 issues (Ingūna Folberga, February 22nd, 2023). The magazine has also shrunk in size as in 2018 it has had 84 pages, whereas from the third issue in 2020 it has 68 pages. Lastly, the number of issues per year has also decreased from 12 issues in 2018 to 6 issues from 2019 to 2022.

Each issue has a similar structure – a main theme with several pages dedicated to it and articles and opinion pieces formed in a certain pattern. The main themes during the period from 2018 to 2022 have mainly been connected with the child’s wellbeing (care, upbringing, nourishment, etc.) – 22 of 36 issues are dedicated to this theme; for 7 issues the main focus was the woman (wellbeing, physical and mental health, career etc.), for 5 issues the main theme was couple relationships. Only 1 issue was dedicated to the father’s role and 1 – to relationship with grand-parents. Each issue has a main interview with a celebrity family in the front of the magazine, at least one interview with a family at the back. All of the issues from 2018 to 2022 have had a “father’s diary” and a “pregnancy diary” – on average 2 pages long, as well as interviews with experts about various themes regarding child rearing, birth, pregnancy etc. The CDA was conducted on a sample of 36 issues, covering 5 years of the magazine “Mans Mazais”, analysing 36 main interviews and 39 other interviews with mothers and families. The sample did not include interviews with experts, interviews shorter than 1 page, or diaries by mothers or fathers.

Results

Main interviews

From 2018 to 2022, from 36 main interviews, published in “Mans Mazais”, 21 interviews were conducted with both the mother and father, while 15 interviews were with only the mother’s side of the story. All of the main interviews featured a Latvian celebrity family. Of these 36 different couples, the absolute majority – 33 couples – were married and 1 was in a civil partnership; in 2 interviews the relationship status was not clarified. The majority of couples had only 1 child (16 couples); however, the proportion of families with more than 3 children was high (*Figure 3*).

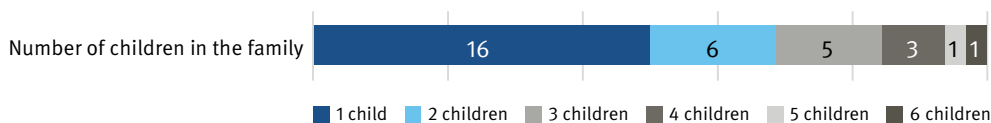


Figure 3 Number of children in the family

When speaking about the **pregnancy**, the main discursive theme, that comes across strongly, is trying to enjoy or enjoying the special experience with either no or only minor complications (25 of 36 interviews). Elīna Šimkus reveals: “The pregnancy went by in harmony, labour experience was wonderful, perhaps that is why Bernard is such a calm and cheerful baby.” (Klapere, 2018b, p. 15). Even when problems arise, they are rarely grave. For instance, Aivis Ceriņš, on the difficulties on getting pregnant, reveals that the doctor urges to “clear one’s mind” first, even though father acknowledges, it is an urgent matter to many couples (Bērziņa, 2020e, p. 12).

Labour also is a harmonic, “natural” and transformative experience, according to the majority of interviews. Of these 36 couples, 23 experienced physiological birth – and in 7 cases the woman gave birth at home; in 6 interviews there is mention of epidural analgesia and in 8 cases there was a caesarean section (in 5 cases the form of birth was not specified). The descriptions regarding birth spread out into a spectrum from more esoteric views, for instance, Jānis Šipkvēvics characterising it as the moment when “the mother’s instinct blossoms and then shines on as the sun every day” (Meiere, 2019b, p. 20), to a more pragmatic approach. Views on father’s participation in birth also differ, as some see birth as a “intimate woman’s thing”, where the presence of man is unnecessary (Bērziņa, 2018b, p. 14), but more than half of the couples see it as a “team effort”.

Mention of **medical procedures** and the caesarean operation comes through guilt or a self-defensive attitude, focusing on the benefits and wonders of modern medicine in saving the lives of women and children. For instance, Dināra mentions: “I felt very guilty about having a caesarean section, for not birthing myself” (Andersone, 2019, p. 18), but goes on how the doctor had debunked her notions on the operation. Whereas, in another interview, where the mother reveals she has had a planned operation, the journalist asks: “Don’t you regret not trying to give birth by yourself?” (Strūberga, 2019a). The dominant discursive theme of giving birth “naturally” and without medical assistance, is strong and acknowledged. “The emotions you come with [to give birth] are the emotions you receive”, says Dana, regarding the experience of birth in a hospital (Bērziņa, 2022d, p 11). Furthermore, in almost 1/3 of the interviews, there is mention of “**mother’s instinct**”, guiding the woman through pregnancy, birth and childrearing; there is no mention of father’s instinct.

While the dominance of physiological, “as natural as possible” birth is evident, the struggles with **breastfeeding** come across more freely. In 14 of 36 interviews there is no mention of complaints or complications with breastfeeding, but in 9 interviews the couple share their problems. Some women feel the struggles are their fault. For instance, Kārlis mentions that his wife Anna blames problems with baby’s sleep or

appetite on herself (Bērziņa, 2021b, p. 13). Other challenges, strong, negative **emotions** and even postpartum depression also is mentioned in 15 interviews, but in most cases – in passing, as the main discursive theme is contentment with the parent's role. A more frequent discursive theme is **weariness** (mentioned in 23 of 36 interviews). For instance, Ieva says: “Knowing how hard it is, I doubt I would plan such a small gap of years in between babies again” (Bērziņa, 2018e, p. 18), although the title of the interview is “All struggles will be forgotten”. Struggles and problems are acknowledged but presented as “worth it” and even through laughter. Māra Upmane-Holšteine cites her husband “I hope this nightmare ends! (*Laughs*). So that the time when children are small, ends faster!” (Bērziņa, 2020a, p. 14).

Most of the interviews mention the woman's **career** (27 of 36), but the narratives mostly focus on the child and how the career is managed around the family or put on pause. Almost half of the interviews speak of the **mother's guilt**, but none speak of father's guilt. Mothers speak of feeling guilty when leaving the baby to return to work or associate it with choices that do not comply with the dominant narrative. For instance, Marta Selecka speaks of pausing breastfeeding during a working trip, and, even though everything, to her mind, was “ok”, she acknowledges that “from the way others reacted, I should have felt guilty” (Strūberga, 2019a, p. 14). Despite that, the majority of interviews (23 of 36) acknowledge the need and urge others to seek **support** from the extended family, relatives or a nanny to find time for the couple or individuals. Support and sense of preparedness comes also from books and parenting **courses** as 2/3 of interviews mention attending parenting classes during pregnancy, reading books etc.

When speaking about **fathers**, the major discursive theme is **support** for the mother, as in 32 of 36 interviews mothers speak of how their husband helps with the children. Some women express gratitude, for instance, Iveta says “I am thankful to Armands for finding time to watch the kids so I can do something for myself” (Bērziņa, 2018c, pp. 17–18), whereas Inese, mother of four, says that she has “a lot of energy” and that her husband “simply doesn't allow to spoil myself with weakness” and does not allow her to “emotionally be other than my best self” (Bērziņa, 2019a, p. 19). However, in more than half of the interviews it is mentioned that the father works a lot to support the family and, thus, is away from home. Evelīna Strazdiņa says “He is frequently and for long periods of time away abroad, therefore, our meetings are pure festivities and fireworks” (Meiere, 2018a, p. 16), while Egons Reiters acknowledges that his wife would like him to spend more time at home, but “it is what it is” (Bērziņa, 2022e, p. 11). The fathers more or less acknowledge the importance of participating in household tasks, for instance, Raimonds Celms even mentions that he supports fathers taking parental leave (Bērziņa, 2022a, p. 12) but the leading role of managing the house falls onto the woman's shoulders.

Lastly, as these interviews are mediated through a journalist, the interviewer's presence in the stories is visible, and often even obvious, provoking or steering the conversation in a particular way. As Auðardóttir stresses, the “media's portrayal of the ideal motherhood thus becomes a tool for social class reproduction in society” (2022, p. 3). The journalist has the power to place emphasis on specific themes or choose not disclose others, and,

in doing so, reproducing a particular discourse. For instance, Meiere asks the mother “Are the children born at home different, than the ones that are born in hospital?” (2018a, p. 14), while Meluškāne comments “I actually know women who have said that they do not want children and later have regretted their choice” (2018b, p. 13). Bērziņa wonders “Are you still sure that one child is enough?” (2021b, p. 17), while in another interview she asks: “Doesn’t having a child motivate you to get married?” (Bērziņa, 2021b, p. 17). The loaded questions are frequent, but subtle, often regarding reading up on pregnancy or attending parental courses, pain regarding medicalized labour (stimulation or caesarean section), jealousy of siblings or women finding time for attending the marital relationship.

To conclude, the main interviews are with Latvian celebrity families, who are well situated, heterosexual, mostly married couples with small children that have mainly experienced “natural” childbirth and have or are breastfeeding. Figure 4 illustrates the discourses that each interview would be classified among, according to their characteristics, and the overall scene.

Although “challenging” discourses are visible, the dominance of “intensive mothering” is still prominent and only one interview could be classified as belonging to the “alternative” motherhood discourses – the interview with Liene Sebre which mainly focused on her career as a children’s TV-series star, but also faintly spoke about having a child at an early age in life and raising the child on one’s own while completing education. “Challenging” discourses still acknowledge the value system of “intensive mothering” while simultaneously shedding light on the woman’s careers, wants, needs, as well as a more egalitarian distribution of housework and childcare. However, the dominance of “intensive mothering”, advertising essentialism (traditional gender roles), child-centred attitudes (need for stimulation, preparation with aid of experts), and positioning childcare as a very demanding, but ultimately rewarding task, is visible – prominently positioned at the beginning of each issue, 5 to 7 pages long.

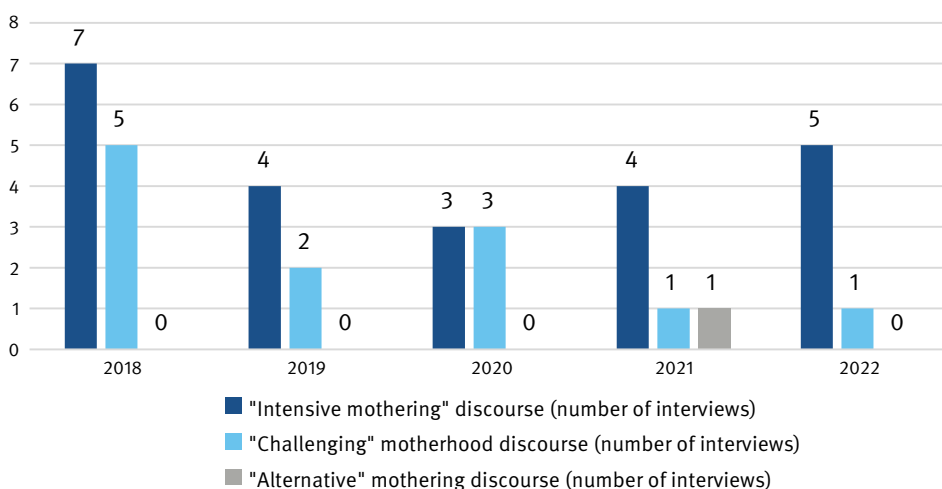


Figure 4 Motherhood discourses in main interviews

Other interviews

There are 39 other interviews, published in “Mans Mazais” from 2018 to 2022, that were included in the sample. Most of these interviews were situated at the back of the magazine in such columns as “Family”, “Waiting for the baby”, “For a happy mum” and were only 2 to 3 pages long. Almost all of these interviews did not include the journalist’s questions but rather followed a monologue or paraphrased a narrative with few citations.

Of these 39 interviews, 12 could be classified as belonging to the “intensive mothering” discourse (see Figure 5. Motherhood discourses in other interviews). 6 interviews featured joyful and positive stories about Latvian heterosexual, well situated families with 3 and more children, others focused either on travel experiences, etc. The interviewed families complied to the “intensive mothering” discourse in confirming that the child’s interests are the centre of parent’s attention, conforming to traditional gender roles and displaying idealistic domestic life. Only 3 interviews could be classified as complying to the “challenging” motherhood discourse – 1 interview stressed that although the family adheres to a more egalitarian model, the mother works from home (and coincidentally invests more time into menial household and childcare tasks), while in another interview a mother of 3 spoke about her career as a pilot and guilt for choosing to pursue her career over a “normal” desk-job. The third interview features a family, whose father comes from Africa and has a darker skin colour; thus, the interview displays how the couple is “typical” in almost every aspect, except cultural background.

Most interviews (24 of 39) could be classified as outside the “intensive mothering” discourse and more in compliance to “alternative” motherhood discourses. 7 of 24 interviews speak of a “traditional” family overcoming an obstacle – an illness or complication in life, for example, the loss of a child, premature birth, complications due to genetics, as well as complications during birth. All these stories, however tragic, focus on resilience and perseverance despite challenges. 5 stories share different “alternative” birthing experiences (hypno-birth, homebirth, unassisted homebirth), resisting the medicalisation of labour and stressing the empowerment of woman. 3 interviews share different

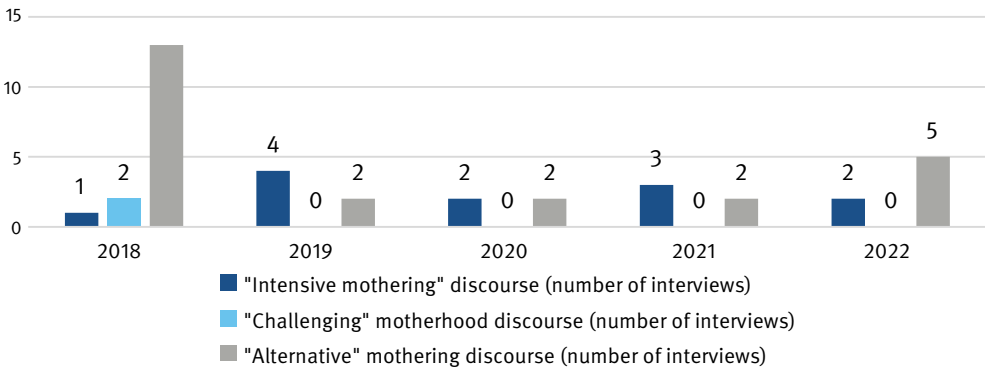


Figure 5 Motherhood discourses in other interviews

lifestyle approaches, for instance, travelling for a long period of time with small children or leaving home to work abroad and taking the child with them. Therefore, while these interviews could be classified primarily belonging to “alternative” mothering discourse, they also in a sense overlap with the “intensive mothering” discourse in essentialism and child-centred views by parents. These interviewees have either faced or chosen a different path than mainstream families and, thus, provide an “alternative”.

Only 4 of these 24 interviews share insights of an alternative family model. Two of the stories (one of which – anonymous) shared the experience of a member of the LGBT community, one anonymous interview is with a mother, raising a child from a married man, alone, and one account is from a father who has lost his wife to cancer and is raising children on his own. 3 interviews shared an adoption story, and only 2 interviews explicitly shared the mother’s point of view when choosing to fulfil her dream: one interview with was the former minister of health Anda Čakša, who’s narrative stressed the importance of woman’s career and also shared experience of woman in power and pregnant after 40; the other interview shared a story of a woman going on the journey of Santiago, while her children stayed behind.

To conclude, although the other interviews in a sense balance the dominance of the “intensive mothering” discourse in main interviews and colorize the spectrum of motherhood discourses, the narratives are 1) at the back of the magazine, 2) much shorter than the main interviews, 3) more focused on outer factors leading to this “alternative” path and less on the individual choices. Therefore, for almost half of these interviews their presence in the “alternative” space of motherhood is rather a serendipity than a mindful action to follow a different path.

Discussion

Although the magazine “Mans Mazais” provides different narratives and a variety of motherhood discourses, the dominance of the “intensive mothering” discourse in interviews from 2018 to 2022, is overwhelming, thus, the magazine is presenting mainly the glamorous side of parenting and motherhood, displaying mostly traditional family patterns and stressing the importance of child-centred attitudes.

According to the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia (CSB), 36.6% of children in Latvia are born outside of marriage (2022), while almost all main interviews were with married, heterosexual and well-situated Latvian families. The most common type of family in Latvia in 2021 was a single parent with underage child or children (CSB 2021), and this type of family is represented by a single main interview and 3 smaller other interviews in the sample. Moreover, according to the Health Statistic Database of Latvia, in 2021 from 17 206 total births only 242 were planned, assisted births at home (or 1.4%); whereas epidural analgesia to ease the pain was applied to 21.9% (of total births) (The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023), while the magazine stresses the importance of “natural” birth, resisting medicalization. “Intensive mothering” also stresses the responsibility of parents, especially mothers, over their children. Chae associates the “3Cs of

contemporary motherhood” with “comparison, competition, and consumption” and in a neoliberal educational context links the “responsibilization” of mothers with being more engaged in children’s education, investing in education as a “means to reproduce social status or to achieve upward mobility, and thus it is like “purchasing hope”” (Chae, 2022, pp. 550–561), and this aspect is also visible in the main interviews as the need to educate and prepare oneself via courses and literature is mentioned in the majority of interviews. Furthermore, the issue of weariness from childcare and household tasks does appear in main interviews, however, it is mainly presented as an inconvenience or through jokes, although according to Trapežņikova, women in Latvia are burdened with the majority of unpaid housework (Trapežņikova et al., 2019, pp. 47–51, p. 68).

Although the dominance of “intensive mothering” is confronted with “challenging” and “alternative” discourses, the hegemonic ideology still prevails as counter-narratives are presented less frequently, through laughter and focusing on perseverance despite outer challenges. As Auðardóttir notes, “boundary setting between appropriate and inappropriate motherhood has taken place through the medium where the ideal middle-class motherhood is publicly portrayed and the inappropriate motherhood of the racialised or classed other is removed from the readers’ gaze”, and, thus, the “perceived perfect, middle-class values of motherhood and childrearing become the benchmarks for others” (2022, p. 3). Consequently, if this ideal, represented in the media, is not achieved, the comparison takes a toll on the mother (Forbes et al., 2020, p. 64). Such darker and more grim themes as violence in the family, divorce settlements, the spouse refusing to pay childcare etc. are completely absent from main interviews and only vaguely appear in other interviews.

The study has limitations as it covers only a period of 5 years and concentrates on the main themes of issues and interviews with parents. The sample could be broadened by including analysis of interviews and features of experts, as well as individual diaries by mothers and fathers. For instance, from 2018 to 2019, several issues were published with excerpts from a book by child psychologist Vita Kalniņa which, in one interview was characterized by mother Māra as “fantastic”, but too idealistic for real life – “everything written in the book should be divided by two” (Bērziņa, 2020a, p. 17), whereas for 6 issues in 2021 the diary of a parent was written by a single mother with twins. Lastly, the time period could also be extended, thus, analysing the patterns of themes and changes over the years.

Conclusion

There is a variety of motherhood discourses (re)produced in the 36 issues of the family magazine “Mans Mazais” from 2018 to 2022, providing a spectrum of experiences and motherhood ideologies from “intensive mothering” to alternatives. However, the dominance of “intensive mothering” discourse is overbearing, displaying a portrait of an ideal family – a married Latvian heterosexual couple with happy children, who are cared after by the parents without any constraint in financial, emotional, physical resources,

treating any challenge as a passing inconvenience. The main characteristics of “intensive mothering” – essentialism, child-centred attitudes, and view of childcare as a demanding, but ultimately rewarding task – is prevalent in most interviews. There is evidence of challenging discourses, which acknowledge the value system of “intensive mothering” but try to challenge its dominance through suggesting more egalitarian family models, providing counter narratives of respecting, for instance, woman’s career path and desires, as well as stressing a more equal division of household tasks. There is also evidence of “alternative” motherhood discourses which share mainly narratives of everyday people with “different” family models (single parents, divorced parents, members of LGBT, adoption) or different lifestyle choices (travelling, working abroad) or individual choices (unassisted homebirth etc.). However, examples of “alternative” discourses appear mainly in interviews at the back of the magazine and a large share of them express stories of unforeseen and unfortunate circumstances (loss of a child, genetic illness, premature birth, loosing of a spouse), and, thus, these stories mostly concentrate of the perseverance of the human spirit and fighting against all odds, not illustrating a contrasting and mindful approach to motherhood or parenthood. Therefore, in light of Jansone-Ratinika’s recommendations in her dissertation on the father’s pedagogical competences (2013), there are noticeable strides to illustrate the subjectivity and diversity of motherhood, however, there is room for improvement to stimulate the gradual transformation of hegemonic stereotypes regarding motherhood in society.

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