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## WORKING PAPER SERIES

# Emotion words in group interaction: A discursive analysis of the emotions generated from being a mother .

Maria Viou

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Ινστιτούτο Εκπαίδευσης και Έρευνας στη Συστημική Ψυχοθεραπεία

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study discusses the function of emotion words within a group interaction about motherhood. It uses discursive analysis to identify how the use of the emotion words function in the conversation to establish interpretative repertoires, subject positions and present ideological dilemmas. The first interpretative repertoire identified is simple and based on the positive feelings of the experience while the second one is more complicated and based on difficult feelings and negative everyday experiences. Emotions are also used to establish three subject positions related to the mother identity, the feminine identity and the employee identity. Contradictive feelings posed an ideological dilemma of how to keep the balance between the mothers' and the children's' needs. Analysis of the emotion discourse showed further function of emotion words such as negotiating accountability and rationalizing behaviors. These findings are seen to be situated in the specific group discussion and in the Greek cultural and historical context.

**Key words:** emotions, emotion discourse, motherhood, interpretative repertoires, subject positions, emotion function

## **INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

Discursive psychology represents a turning point in social science towards discourse and language and challenges the cognitive social psychology's focus on internal cognitive processes. The roots of discursive psychology can be traced back to the work of Potter and Wetherell (Edwards and Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996; Wetherell, 1998; Potter and Wetherell, 1987). There were three main epistemological influences that had an impact on the discursive psychological approach: linguistics, poststructuralism and ethnomethodology. Austin (1962) developed a general theory of 'speech act' and claimed that language has a performative and functional use and can be seen as a form of social action. Words are about what is happening in the world but they also form the world while representing it. Also, poststructuralism (Shapiro, 1988) questioned the truths of the cultural representations that we take for granted and concentrated on finding how social reality is constituted in discourse that is historically situated in both time and place. Finally, ethnomethodology focused on how social order is produced in and through everyday social practices (Garfinkel, 1967) and influenced the development of discursive psychology. In that sense, discursive psychology deals with the constitutive aspect of

language rather than treating it as a simple reflection of reality. It is an approach that concentrates on the use of discourse in the construction of accounts and identities (Wetherell et al, 2012).

Discourse analysis is a theoretical and methodological approach that deals with naturally occurring talk and texts, including interview transcripts. It is concerned with the content of talk and with its social rather than linguistic organization. One of the central features of discourse analysis is its concern with the rhetorical and argumentative use of everyday language. Rather than seeing the study of discourse as a pathway to individuals' inner life, discourse analysis sees psychological issues as constructed and deployed in discourse itself (Edwards and Potter, 1992). The key analytic concepts that discourse analysis applies to discourse data are interpretative repertoires, subject positions and ideological dilemmas. The term interpretative repertoires can be attributed to Gilbert and Mulkay (1984) who first used it to describe the contradictory ways that laboratory scientists explained the process of building scientific knowledge. Potter and Wetherell (1987) applied it to the topic of social psychology referring to the ways people talk about the social world that can be contradictory. They involve metaphors, cultural ideas, terms and common knowledge that can be utilized in everyday social interaction and they are the building blocks upon which we construct accounts (Wetherell, 1998). The subject positions refer to the culturally available categories that define the identities of a person. The term "ideological dilemmas" was coined by Billig et al (1988) who suggested that since cultural discourses are contradictory they are also dilemmatic.

Traditionally, research on emotions has mostly focused on the physiological and cognitive aspects of affect such as the subjective feeling of emotion, the physiological responses and the facial expressions rather on the emotion words that are used in dialogues and conversations. Other researchers focused on the biological and inherited part of the emotional experiences (Ekman, 2003) while others emphasized cognitive factors (Schachter and Singer, 1962). William Reddy (Wetherell, 2012) was especially interested in emotional expressions and the relationship between affect and discourse. He argued that emotional expression is organised through emotives that are first-person speech acts (e.g. I feel angry) and are seen as the hinge between the psychological and the social. Drawing on Austin's speech act theory, Reddy claims that an emotive has both a performative and constative feature. For instance, 'I feel angry' appears to describe a

subjective state but also is an utterance that can act and change social worlds e.g. a conversation. Reddy has been criticized for being too simplistic as people do not perform affect through first and second person speech acts only (Wetherell, 2012).

Derek Edwards (1999) focused on the discursive analysis of emotions and on how 'emotion words shape social reality'. Edwards pored over the role of emotions in social life and treated emotions not as a psychological phenomenon that needs to be classified but as a theoretical resource arranged for conversational purposes. He used materials from counseling sessions and newspaper texts to study the use of emotion words. Through a discursive analysis, the researcher showed that emotion descriptions used in narrative accounts can both build and undermine the sensibility of a person's actions. They can also be used to justify actions otherwise seen as irrational and to negotiate accountability, responsibility, blame, action and reaction. Furthermore, Edwards and Locke's (2003) analysis of President Clinton's description of his relationship with Monica Lewinsky supported the aforementioned findings displaying the use of emotion words in the construction of normativity and in the negotiation of accountability and blame. The different function of emotion words was also depicted in Edward's (2005) analysis of indirect complaints in everyday domestic telephone conversations. Hence, emotional words that are used in a conversation directly or indirectly serve to display a feeling but also at the same time are parts of the act of the interaction. Romano et al (2013) have also shown that emotion words create bonds between the speaker and the listener. Finally Gee (1999) supported that emotion talk give accounts of emotions that might be contradictory and partial as they are customized for specific contexts, goals and purposes. In that sense, the meaning of the emotion words might be situated in the context of the conversation based on prior experience.

It is evident that most of the research done on the specific field of emotion discourse has deployed talk-in interactions or transcripts of one to one discussions in natural contexts. This creates questions about how emotion words can function in larger group discussions. Does the use of emotions shape the reality of a group interaction in relevant ways as Edwards had identified in one-to-one conversations or texts?

In order to further analyze this use of emotions in group discussions, I decided to shed light to a specific social psychological topic that is motherhood and specifically see how emotion words can function in a conversation to establish interpretative repertoires,

subject positions and ideological dilemmas. Motherhood is considered a gendered behavior that is created and performed in everyday discourse (Badinter, 1980; Gergen, 1985). According to Woollett and Phoenix (1991) dominant discourses of motherhood exist with the wider society and are used by women to construct their own ideas and experiences. There is diversity in women's experiences of motherhood; some discourses are based on the positive feelings of motherhood and others on more complex talks and emotions (Choi et al, 2005, Miller, 2005; Miller and Brown, 2005). Research on the field using discourse analysis has identified three main discursive positions (Elvin-Nowak and Thomson, 2001). The first position deals with the mother-child relationship and with concepts where the mother understands that the wellbeing of her child depends on their accessibility and closeness. The second position takes into consideration the female identity while being a mother whereas the last position examines motherhood in relation to employment. These discourses sometimes are contradictory and competitive and also influenced by extra-discursive factors, such as the family's income, causing ideological dilemmas (Sims-Schouten et al, 2001). Also, these positions have been related to a patriarchal or to a more liberal feminist discourse (McGannon and Schinke, 2012).

The specific research tries to identify how emotion concepts are used as part of the common and contradictory ways people talk about their experience of motherhood. Furthermore, it also focuses on the use of the emotion words and on how they establish the interpretative repertoires, the ideological dilemmas and the subject positions related to motherhood. It also attempts to see how emotion words are used to negotiate individual meanings towards a shared understanding in order to construct and reconstruct the reality of the group discussion. Hence, the specific research question of this project is: How do emotion words function and construct reality in a group discussion about motherhood?

## **METHOD**

The corpus of discourse used for this study comes from a group discussion about the experiences and emotions generated from motherhood. The participants that took part in the conversation were 3 adult women aged between 28 and 38 years who are mothers and their children aged between 10 and 26 months. The participants were indirect contacts of the researcher's social network. The discussion was conducted in Greek and lasted one hour.



The materials used in the discussion were a digital recorder, an interview guide, two copies of consent form, a watch, a notepad, a pen and images of mothers/children and families used in the warm up exercise.

The interview took place at the researcher's personal consulting office in the centre of Athens and was designed as an informal discussion between the participants aiming to explore the different experiences and feelings that are central to motherhood.

I began the discussion by asking the participants to sort through a range of 6 different images that depicted mothers with babies deciding the order of preference between them. I asked them to talk through their thoughts with each other. The images were showing different aspects of motherhood e.g. a mother playing with babies, a mother working while her children played alone, a mother hugging both her husband and child etc. This exercise stimulated further talk between the participants and I explicitly asked them to talk about their experiences and their emotions regarding motherhood.

During the conversation I picked up elements that seemed important, asked them to elaborate more and tried to involve the whole group in the process. Since some members were more talkative than others, I tried to keep balance and encourage all members to participate. I also did very few open questions i.e. I asked them to talk about their support groups during pregnancy, their emotions regarding the change of their body after birth and some thoughts regarding the future.

Before conducting the interview, I informed the participants individually about the stages and aims of the project as part of my Open University studies. However, I did not explicitly say to them that I was going to study emotion words because that might have influenced their responses and the words they might have used but I gave them a general overview of my study on emotions and experiences generated from motherhood. I also made clear that I would use pseudonyms, and that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the discussion at any point, in which case their data would be destroyed. Then the participants signed individually an informed consent. Before starting the conversation, I repeated in the group the basic ethical issues and I raised the issue of confidentiality between the members of the group. At the end of the discussion, participants were debriefed about the nature of the research and were asked whether they felt any kind of discomfort.

I tape recorded the discussion and the tapes were transcribed verbatim. Discourse analysis was used and line by line analysis of the discussion revealed the complexity of the discourse. The emphasis of the analysis was on the emotion words and metaphors that were used in the conversation and on the ways they functioned to build the interpretative repertoires and establish the dilemmas and the subject positions of the participants. Furthermore, as I analysed the data it became apparent how different emotion words serve different functions.

## **ANALYSIS**

### **Interpretative Repertoires**

One of the most pervasive patterns in our corpus was the presence of two competing interpretative repertoires or accounts of motherhood. As we already mentioned, an interpretative repertoire is a distinctive but contradictory way of talking about things and events in the world. Such repertoires become evident through repetition across a discussion. One of the two contrasting interpretative repertoires evident in this corpus can be seen in Extracts 1 and 2.

#### **Extract 1**

43 Nena: He is 10 months and now he has started to show affection nearly a month  
44 but now he does it intentionally he hugs me he rubs my neck  
45 we hug and we are on this phase and it **is so beautiful** I feel he expresses himself  
46 and the other one is with mummy and daddy because we hug often the three  
47 of us and daddy holds us and he likes it very much and **it's wonderful**  
48 **we like it** and he is happy to see us kissing and he smiles as if he enjoys it

#### **Extract 2**

65 Kate: Now he seeks shelter in my arms and it is **a wonderful feeling** like if  
66 he starts to depend on you and he understands you are helping him and  
67 he wants you near him all the time and everywhere I go he follows me  
68 we don't need to chase him around we know wherever we go he  
69 will follow he is not independent

### Extract 3

- 138 Martha: But when she says **I love you so much** or  
139 mummy please read me a book or talks to you about every detail  
140 you cannot even imagine what an **amazing feeling** that is

This motherhood repertoire is frequently presented in the discussion and is very straightforward as it is simple and is based on the joy of raising a child and on the wonderful and happy feelings this creates for the mother.

The second very pervasive interpretative repertoire evident in the discussion differed from the first simple one in a number of important respects. First, it tended to be a much more complex construction composed from a much larger set of recurrent themes. This repertoire is rich and complicated involving negative feelings, details of the change in appearance and everyday difficulties of motherhood.

### Extract 4

- 108 Interviewer: And how was that experience?  
109 Nena: It was **a drama a drama** there were moments I thought  
110 I would **go crazy** and went out and I was saying I can't I just cant  
111 live with that thing I just don't don't don't want it  
112 Kate: Eh yes

### Extract 5

- 90 Martha: That made me **tired** caused me tendonitis from hugging  
91 **exhausted** me so it was not an easy phase  
92 Nena: The first three months we cried all day  
93 Kate: The baby?  
94 Nena: Yes yes from morning till night he did not sleep at all

It is clear from the aforementioned extracts that the women in the group used two different ways to talk about their experiences of motherhood. These ways of talking about the experiences of motherhood were based on the feelings that these experiences

generated to the participants. In the first repertoire, its simple nature is based on the 'wonderful feelings' caused by hugging and growing up a child. Also, the 'bad feelings' of the everyday difficulties and embodiment such as 'exhaustion', 'tiredness' - words that were used to express another repertoire of motherhood. Hence, we can see that emotion words were used as the basis of arguments between the participants about the true nature of motherhood. It was the emotion discourse that was used to build these two distinct ways of talking about motherhood.

Furthermore, both these repertoires worked principally through the overt subject position constructed for motherhood that we will see in the following analysis of the conversation.

### **Subject Positions**

The first interpretative repertoire is closely related to the first subject position that the participants took when they talked about their experiences of motherhood. The first subject position deals with the child-mother relationship and involves concepts indicating that the child's development and psychological well-being are dependent on the mother's accessibility. In the first position, motherhood is seen as the most gender-oriented female activity, the 'mother' identity is relatively strong and the child stands constantly at the center of the mother's life.

### **Extract 6**

548 Interviewer: When you go out, is your mind on Nikoleta?

549 Martha: Yes I **don't feel pleasant** for the first 20 minutes in order to adjust

550 because I feel that since Nikoleta is so **attached** to me and needs me

551 and needs to be close to me I am also **connected** to her and even more

### **Extract 7**

481 Kate: Could not leave him alone I felt so **guilty** that I left my child

482 at the beginning I felt **remorse** that I left him and he might need me

Again, it is obvious from the above extracts that strong emotions are used to position the participants in a child-centered identity that is powerful. However, further subject positions were also identified. Another subject position is related to the woman's identity and to the

idea that the child's well-being is constructed not only through the mother's accessibility but also through the mother's well-being and the relationship with her husband. Expressing the difficulty of trying to keep a sexual relationship with her husband, Nena positions herself to the woman identity.

### **Extract 8**

- 660 Nena: But also **sexually** we tried to keep the relationship with my husband  
661 at first it was **very difficult**  
662 Interviewer: You tried to keep the relationship  
663 Nena: Yes we tried not to ignore that part though it was difficult

Finally, another subject position refers to the identity as a working mother. We can see below the feeling of worry Martha expressed when she talked about being able to keep the active part of her personality in the professional field.

### **Extract 9**

- 714 Kate: **My worry** is to find the balance in the professional field  
715 because I was an active person and that is what I would like to remain  
716 but in relation to my child and not take things away from him

Employment is constructed within a discursive position that to a certain extent excludes the woman as a mother. These conflicting discourses create an ideological dilemma regarding motherhood.

### **Ideological dilemmas**

The basic ideological dilemma is the negotiation between accessibility to a child and the attention to its needs and the personal needs of a woman both as a mother and as a working person.

### **Extract 10**

- 703 Nena: I also have needs and if I ignore them that would be bad for me  
704 but also for him and my relationship with my husband I want to find the balance

705 between my needs and his needs that is what I want

706 and that is what makes me **worried** (,,,) basically except that I see the future **stress-free**

Nena's quotation clearly shows the ambivalence that women in our group express when they talk about their needs and wishes in relation to their children. On one hand, these women construct their understanding of themselves as mothers on the basis of a discourse of motherhood but on the other hand they are also women who have their own interests and activities outside the family. Again, emotional words i.e. 'worried' vs. 'stress-free' are being used to express this discourse and construct the negotiation between different needs.

### **Further use and function of emotion words**

Up to now we have seen that a major use of the emotional words in the dialogue was to construct and reconstruct the ways women talked about their experience of motherhood and also to position themselves and express the contradictions they face in their lives. Emotion words, however, also function in further ways. As we have already mentioned, the specific conversation is a social action itself and the emotion words have argumentative and interactive functionality.

### **Bonding between participants**

From the very beginning of the conversation, we can see that participants use emotional words in the dialogue to create bonds between one another.

15 Interviewer: Martha would you like to start?

16 Martha: Aah wait because I **want to cry (Laughs)**

### **Extract 11**

27 Martha: And I say oh Jesus how it is even possible that this little creature has

28 grown up and we have exactly the same pictures with these here

29 with the baby **these are very very beautiful feelings (Laughs)**

## **Attributing traits**

Another function of the emotion words is the attribution of traits. When Martha views the image of a mother hugging her baby she feels touched and tears come to her eyes. Kate uses the word sentimental to identify an enduring characteristic inside Martha that accounts for the fact of the tears, while Martha herself attributes the fact to her pregnancy and not to the fact that she 'is sentimental' or irrational.

### **Extract 12**

- 14 Interviewer: Would you like to start?  
15 Martha: Oh wait because I am about to cry (Laughs)  
16 Kate: You are **the emotional one** in our group  
17 Martha: **I am because** of the pregnancy  
18 Kate: I can see it love (laughs)

### **Extract 13**

- 352 Martha: because I am a **very nervous person** I don't sleep easily  
353 so I could not sleep and everyone told me to sleep when the baby was sleeping but no  
354 Nena: Yes yes

Again, in extract 13, Martha uses the word 'nervous person' to show that being nervous is an attribute of her personality and not something caused by the environment or other circumstances outside her character.

## **Accountability of action**

### **Extract 14**

- 315 Kate: Huhh in the meanwhile I have to tell you that for me exercising  
316 gives me also **happiness it improves my mood** it is not only

317 physical so I started with sit-ups of course knowing my body

318 I did not go too far I would not suggest it to anyone

In this extract, Kate uses emotional words to justify her action to start working out earlier than what the doctor had suggested. She says that it is not only a need of the body but something that makes her happy and 'improves her mood'. It is the improvement of emotions that accounts for her action.

## **DISCUSSION**

The analysis of the group discussion has shown that emotion words function in different and sometimes contradictory ways in shaping the dialogue and constructing the reality about motherhood within a group discussion. Different ways of talking about the experience of motherhood have been identified. The first one is simple and positive based on the affection between a mother and a child. The positive emotional words such as 'beautiful feeling' and 'wonderful experience' were used to support this interpretive repertoire. The second repertoire is more complex and is based on negative feelings such as 'I am tired' and 'exhausted' and on the difficulties of motherhood.

Also, as Elvin-Nowak and Thomsson (2001) have indicated, three subject positions were identified. The first one was based on the availability of the mother where the child is central in the mother's world; the second was related to the female identity while the third one to the identity of a working mother. Emotion words constructed and reconstructed the concept of motherhood through these three positions as the participants situated themselves using the feelings out of every position (Edwards, 1995). The contradiction raised from the dialogue revealed an ideological dilemma that was reflected through the contradictory feelings that women had about their experiences negotiating their positions between their own and their children's needs. As Reynolds and Wetherell (2003) point out, the acknowledgment of the contradictions and the dilemmas found in discourses helps to develop a reflexive account of the dilemmas and not to adopt each side as pragmatic realities. In our analysis, we saw that the same woman can have contradictory feelings about motherhood causing dilemmas, which if acknowledged and talked about in a reflexive way give a coherent and reflexive account of her experience. As Edwards (1999)



supports, the emotional inconsistencies might threaten the cognitive model of emotions but are helpful for the rhetoric of alternative descriptions.

Furthermore, other employments of the emotion words were identified. Supporting Edwards and Locke's (2003) findings, some emotion words were used to make actions accountable and justify choices e.g. happy feelings justified why Kate worked out while her doctor did not allow it. Also, in other cases participants discourses showed that emotional words can be used to attribute a characteristic to a person e.g. when Martha used the phrase "I am a nervous person" to explain a behavior. Additionally, emotion words were used to bring the team together allowing the participants to feel they had common experiences and emotions. Hence, contradictory accounts of emotions might serve to express different and sometimes conflicting purposes.

At this point, I should acknowledge the relative and situated character of this study. Not only it is situated in the specific historical and social context but also reflects my personal interests, values and even emotions about motherhood. I am not a mother and I also use specific words to talk about motherhood based mostly on Greek cultural beliefs and stories I have heard from my environment. My own beliefs might have affected the way I shaped the research questions. For instance, the indirect environment is important to me for the upbringing of a child; an idea rooted in the Greek culture (Kataki,1998). This idea was captured in my question whether the participants had support from their environment. In that way, I was not only a facilitator of the conversation but I actively constructed the dialogue through my questions.

Also, every analysis is a description that sheds light to a specific part of the dialogue. Focusing on the emotions led me to privilege some features of the conversation in the expense of others focusing on specific methodologies and using existing knowledge. For example, the focus on the emotion words has not permitted the studying of the specific experience of emotions and their expression in non-verbal ways. According to Parkinson (2005), some non-verbal expressions and movements perform a relational function and suggest social signals and in that sense are also constructive of meanings in conversations. However, even if these nonverbal communications are not symptoms of separable emotions but have relational function in dialogues, that does not mean we should not see it in emotional terms. The interaction of verbal-linguistic and nonverbal presentations made in connection with emotion discourse will be the topic of a future

study. Also, further research is needed to establish the use of emotion words in conversations regarding other socio-psychological topics and make comparisons to see whether both the context and the topic of discussion influence the use of emotion words or not.

Moreover, I believe emotion discourse is a topic especially useful in group psychotherapy. Research in emotion discourse in a therapeutic context, could provide information about how emotion words function in the group discussion with therapeutic intention and hence yield important challenges for therapists. Billig (1997) has also suggested using emotions as a source to bring together discursive psychology and psychoanalysis and Avdi and Georgaca (2007) suggest adding discourse analysis to the study of systemic family approach. Instead of understanding and exploring the use of emotions as reflection or not of the clients' inner state, therapists' could focus on their use and function on the 'here and now' in group discussion. In group therapy, emotion words can also be used to create bonds between group members, position themselves in relation to others, account for blame and responsibility, attribute causes and have relational and alignment functions between the members. Therapists' focus on these during the group session enables a deeper understanding of the function of emotions in the clients' broader relational context and meaning making.

Summing up, the discursive analysis of the emotion words showed that emotion terms are flexible and can be deployed for a variety of rhetorical purposes in group discussions such as to establish interpretative repertoires, create bonds and construct the conversation. It also showed that the conceptual repertoire of emotions provides for flexibility in how actions and motives can be accumulated in human narratives. The observations of the current study about the rhetorical and argumentative uses of emotion categories are in opposition towards the prevailing emphasis on verbal categories of reflections of how people make sense of the world. The challenge of discursive psychology is to analyze the emotion categories that are found in the empirical understanding of how people talk within different cultural and relational context.

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