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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

#### **Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:**

Elliott, H., O'Connell, R., & Squire, C. (2017). Narratives of normativity and permissible transgression: mothers' blogs about mothering, family and food in resource-constrained times. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 18(1). <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-18.1.2775>

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## **Narratives of Normativity and Permissible Transgression: Mothers' Blogs About Mothering, Family and Food in Resource-Constrained Times**

*Heather Elliott, Corinne Squire & Rebecca O'Connell*

**Key words:** blogs;  
narrative; mothers;  
families; food

**Abstract:** We consider the characteristics of one form of digital narrative—the blog—and what they may offer to personal narratives about mothering, families, and food and other resources. We draw on narrative analysis of six months of posts from two blogs about feeding families, written by mothers in the context of constrained economic, time, socioemotional, and environmental resources, to make a second-order analysis of the features of blogs that operate to support or transgress normative narratives. We focus on how, on the "About Me" pages of these blogs, the relations between the written and visual narratives, and the semantic multiplicities and contradictions, the styles and the cross-platform genres of the written stories, generate both normative and transgressive narratives around mothering and family, the bloggers' own involvements with the blog, and resource issues. In conclusion, we discuss the limitations of our analysis, and how and to what extent the features of blogs on which we have focused may work to generate narratives of political positioning and action.

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## **1. Introduction**

In this article, we explore how women bloggers narrate everyday practices of mothering, feeding families, and related aspects of family life. The blogs were written within the current UK context of limited economic and temporal resources and declining environmental resources. The bloggers narrate these resource constraints in dialogue with normative and transgressive stories of, for example, intensive mothering (HAYS, 1996), the "self" as a project (ROSE, 1999), "family" as a universal ideal (BERNARDES, 1985), nutrition and "health" as personal

responsibilities and global assets (LUPTON, 2013; WRIGHT & HARWOOD, 2009), and neoliberal "austerity" policies that promulgate fully marketized economic, social, cultural and emotional worlds (KLEIN, 2015). In this article, we look at how specific characteristics of digital narratives, exemplified by blogs, enable such narratives both to replicate normative, dominant, idealized narratives (PHOENIX, 2010), and to transgress normative narratives, challenging them in direct, permissible ways. We suggest that blogs' complicated, contradictory storytelling, characterized by multiplicity, condensation and juxtaposition (DAVIS, 2013; DEAN, 2010; MITTELL, 2006; RYAN, 2004), and concatenating different media (JENKINS, 2008), genres, styles, tropes, and sub-plots, enables these doubled performances. [1]

The article is based on a small scale-methodological study of mothers' food blogs, undertaken from October 2012 to January 2014 as part of the program [NOVELLA](#) (Narratives of Varied Everyday Lives and Linked Approaches) led by Professor Ann PHOENIX and funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council. For more on the overall study, and the place of this sub-study within it, please see DOMINGO et al. (2014). The section of the study reported on here involved a narrative analysis of blogs written by two UK mothers and addressed the following questions.

- What are some of the stories in UK based mothers' food blogs, and how are they told?
- What are those blogs' narrative possibilities and constraints? [2]

Narratives are patterns of symbols that through their movement generate human meaning (SQUIRE, 2013). They are often understood as offering routes—sometimes progressive, sometimes regressive—towards understanding self and history, making sense of the everyday worlds around us, taking action, and envisaging futures (ANDREWS, 2014; MACINTYRE, 1984; PLUMMER, 2001; RIESSMAN, 2008). ROSE (2012) has argued that the current proliferation of online materials undermines people's capacities to understand valuable "traditional narrative forms." In contrast, in this article we argue that the complexities of digital narratives both offer continuities with other narrative forms and provide expanded possibilities for narratives' place in our lives. To make this argument, we undertake a second-order analysis of the stories to examine how the specific features of blogs offer particular narratives possibilities and limits. [3]

We chose to consider blogs rather than other digital forms because blogs are prevalent, relatively long-standing varieties of internet stories that are largely personally narrated. Identity is a major thematic organizer of contemporary western personal narratives generally (RIESSMAN, 2008) and many blogs exemplify this focus. Blogs also have wide socioeconomic, cross-gender, generational, and transnational reach. Blogs, therefore, are a newly powerful form of life document (PLUMMER, 2001). Although other digital media provide some of the same possibilities of narrating personal, "everyday" lives, blogs, with their

usually explicit authoring and dating, and their trusted individuality of style and content (JOHNSON & KAYE, 2009) operate as especially strong examples. [4]

Personal blogs' largely autobiographical and chronological framing reproduces the diary genre (HOOKWAY, 2008). Indeed one of the blogs we analyze here is entitled "The Diary of a Frugal Family." But these are insistently outward-facing diaries (ibid.), tied into public debates and historical as well as personal time. Again, like diaries, most blogs narrate selves of an "everyday" kind. Yet while they seem to narrate mundanity, what drives their stories are exceptional, often-overlooked aspects of lives, which fracture naturalized discourses of "everydayness" (DE CERTEAU, 1984). Our second blogger's title and strapline, "Thinly spread—stretched but not snapped," instantiate everyday instabilities by conjuring a subjectivity spread across different fields, held together with some difficulty. [5]

Blog narratives are more extensive than many internet stories—on message boards or social media, for instance. However, blogs are, like other web pages, bounded by the screens on which they appear. Often, they are optimized not just for desktop or laptop but for tablet and smartphone display. This tends to make their stories relatively brief and condensed compared to other life narratives. Again, like other web texts, blogs tend towards scrapbook-like heterogeneity (HOOKWAY, 2008). Different stories or parts of the same story may be related by juxtaposition rather than clause-by-clause argument, promoting multiplicities and contradictions. Frequent headers—important for search engines as much as argument—may break up content. Idiosyncrasies of style are not ironed out; they are indeed positive signs of blogs' authenticity (JOHNSON & KAYE, 2009). [6]

Many blogs contain not just written stories but features that have grown with platform and author sophistication—sound, still, and moving image narratives. Again, these media may not all tell the same story. Layout, font and color contribute to the diverse personal narrative. The central text is bracketed by the narrative possibilities of menu and banner links at the top, comments and replies at the bottom. Blog edges offer up other narrative potentials via brand icons. The links within blogs—used particularly by women (PAGE, 2011)—initiate narratives radiating to other pages. Despite this narrative complexity, many blogs have a relatively traditional diaristic emphasis on written text (COOPER, 1987; HOOKWAY, 2008), as well as or instead of images, which does not characterize later-originating diaristic web platforms like Facebook, Tumblr and Instagram. [7]

Like many contemporary narrative forms, blogs combine new and older modalities. These combinations give blogs an interesting liminality in relation to genres (KRESS & VAN LEEUWEN, 2006). They invoke not just other web genres such as web pages and email, but external genre precedents like diaries, letters, scrapbooks, family albums, and—in the case of food blogs—recipe books; and also nineteenth century "commonplace books" (books into which extracts from other works are copied for personal use), the advice genres of UK 1940s "frugality," late twentieth-century self-improvement guides and modes of auto/biographical expression from conventional written autobiographies and self-

portraits, to opinion columns and the "selfie" (PAGE, 2011; STANLEY, 1995). Some of the blogs' genre sources are also closely associated with contemporary trends in maternal self-writing. Blog invocations of the diverse lifestyle magazine format relate strongly to "having-it-all" discourses of motherhood. Blog resonate also with much confessional maternal writing (see for example, QUINEY, 2007). Blogs, particularly blogs written by mothers (WHITEHEAD, 2014) are also now highly marketized genres, brands within a story-economy powerfully connected to the broader economies of companies, charities and NGOs. [8]

How effective and available might the new resources of confession and community offered by mothers' blogs be? In the case of contemporary maternal writing generally, PARKER (1995, pp.43-44) argues that although it claims to reveal intimate truths, it usually neutralizes mothering's difficulties: "diffus(ing) the threatening representation of maternal rage ... Silly old Mum does not disturb the maternal ideal: she is more hopeless than hateful or hateful." Only permissible transgressions are confessed. JENSEN (2013, p.130 ) describes how contributors to [Mumsnet](#), the popular UK networking site for parents, position their parenting at a tangent to ideal motherhood, switching between parenting as a life project, and it's inevitable but containable failures. Even this position is not available to all mothers. Subverting normalized mothering is precarious for mothers who are poor, for example (TYLER, 2008), who attract more social and political scrutiny (ARENDELL, 2000). Mothers' blogs may, therefore, offer new but limited resources, that are most useful for those most enabled to produce and consume them. [9]

Why focus on blogs about mothering and resource shortages? Blogs provide not just temperature-taking snapshots of mothers' concerns, but also—despite posts' length limits—sustained, often cross-post, developments of those concerns, made persuasive by particularity and emotionality (MACINTYRE, 1984). Mothers' blogs are cited by UK politicians, policymakers, and media in relation to recession and service cuts. The impact of the blog [A Girl Called Jack](#) about the writer's struggles to feed herself and her child healthily and pleasurably during unemployment is an example of the effects such blogs can have. Such blogs are salient because mothers' accounts of food and other resource constraint emblemize more general conflicts between political "austerity" discourses, and lived realities of work and care. Pervasive policy and cultural accounts of mothering in the UK have since the second half of the 20th century emphasized unstinting mother love and work, irreducible to the paid economy. Yet research about everyday mothering (THOMSON, KEHILY, HADFIELD & SHARPE, 2011) highlights practices of resource rationing and time juggling. This "juggling" is also a feature of the maternal memoirs, lifestyle journalism and novels proliferating in the first decades of this century (QUINEY, 2007) and feed into mothers' blog styles and contents. [10]

These accounts show tensions between paid work and the work involved in raising children, particularly among middle-class Western women. The rise in popularity of "mummyblogging" has coincided with an intensified socio-political focus on both mothering and work, creating almost unbearable tensions

(BARAITSER & SPIGEL, 2009; THOMSON et al., 2011). QUINEY (2007, p.31) argues that "intensive mothering," which requires that women spend vast financial and time resources on raising children (HAYS, 1996), is "barely compatible" with expectations of the neoliberal worker and consumer. This contradiction appears in contemporary accounts of "the struggles of individual women to conceptualise themselves as mothers and subjects" (QUINEY, 2007, p.32). We might expect such contradictory accounts to include mothers' blogs. [11]

We made food the focus of this project because it is a key site of conflicts between austerity discourses, which rely on markets to deliver food security, and everyday lives, increasingly beset by food insecurity or food poverty when paid work within the market economy fails and/or welfare benefits are cut. In addition, mothers' legitimacy has historically been bound up with feeding children (DE BRUN, McCARTHY, McKENZIE & McGLOIN, 2012; LUPTON, 1996), in times of hardship and plenty. What children eat is, moreover, a highly moralized arena, with mothers blamed for poor nutrition, regardless of their economic capacities and despite that children exert a good deal of control over their own and their families' food intake, as the food industry has not been slow to recognize (O'CONNELL & BRANNEN, 2014, 2016). Consequently, food resource constraints and resistance to them are often strongly articulated in mothers' own narratives, including blogs like [A Girl Called Jack](#). Blog narratives' complexities may, then, yield particular, if once again limited, value for articulating "permissibly" transgressive (ELLIOTT, 2015) discourses and practices, this time around food and mothering. [12]

In what follows we describe briefly our method, ethical approach and analytic frame. We then analyze aspects of narrative media, style, content and context that both reinforce and subvert normative stories of mothering, families and food, within the "About Me" stories in the blogs. Finally we draw conclusions about what is valuable about such narratives, especially in relation to our particular research concerns. [13]

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1 Sample**

The two blogs we focus on here are [Diary of a Frugal Family](#) and [Thinly Spread](#). The blogs were purposively selected from a larger sample for narrative analysis because they differed in the media they deployed—predominantly writing in the first case, images and writing in the second (see DOMINGO et al., 2014, for a discussion of the sampling strategy and methodology for the wider project within which this analysis is nested). Both blogs are by mothers with young children, although the "Thinly Spread" blogger also has older teenagers. Both started in 2009, both partly in response to economic recession. [14]

## 2.2 Analysis

We conducted a thematic narrative analysis of each blog for six months, between September 2012 and February 2013. We treated visual materials as narratives, consistently with how we treated written materials, though acknowledging the specific features associated with each medium (JEWITT & OYAMA, 2001; RIESSMAN, 2008; SQUIRE, 2013). We identified thematic progressions around self, family and mothering, food and health, and economic, time and other resources (DOMINGO et al., 2014). [15]

In this article, we concentrate on stories on the "About Me" pages, which contain the most direct framings of bloggers' mothering and other identities. These stories might be expected to relate closely to other narratives within the blogs, to which they serve as introductions. As significant, highly edited, homogeneous posts, they might also operate as a case of blog narratives' characteristic heterogeneities and contradictions. [16]

We conducted a second-order analysis of three particular aspects of blogs as digital narratives that may open up possibilities of transgressing as well as retelling normative stories. These aspects were

1. the relations between visual and written narratives;
2. multiplicities and contradictions in content, and idiosyncratic stylistic features, within the written narratives;
3. explicit content divergences within blog narratives. These features are grouped heuristically, as they appeared within the three types of About Me story that we analyzed:
  - a. stories of mothering and family,
  - b. stories about the blog itself, and
  - c. stories of resources—money, time, family, and food. [17]

Occasionally, we refer to these features' operations in stories produced more widely in the blog. However, we do not give an exhaustive exemplification of blog narratives' distinctive features. Nor do we address all possible narrative intersections around mothering, family, food and "austerity." Instead, we analyze distinguishing features of blogs that seemed, in these specific About Me stories, to allow for permissible, limited transgressions of normative stories. [18]

## 2.3 Ethics

The Association of Internet Researchers' (AOIR) "Recommendations on Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research" (AOIR, 2012) note the absence of standardized guidance regarding internet research ethics at any national or international level and advocates a practice and case based approach. AOIR argues that internet research's heterogeneous, dynamic field generates an almost endless range of specific situations which means that it is impossible to

universalize experience or indeed specify in advance when research practice might be harmful. Although blogs are in the public domain, AOIR suggests that since individual and cultural definitions and expectations of privacy are ambiguous and changing, it is impossible to rule definitively on whether blogs are private or public documents. Consequently, again, it advocates a case by case approach. It posits that what is significant is the appropriate flow of information, and the contexts in which it appears. We have therefore worked sensitively with authors' material, taking account of research "flows" and contexts. [19]

We analyzed the bloggers' online identities, as described in the About Me sections of their blogs, without addressing off-line identities. In practice, the distinction is slippery and the two are strongly related. Moreover, MILLER (2013) has argued that research into online selves points up how *all* identities are shifting, relational and culturally and contextually contingent. Our focus, however, is on how blog narratives perform motherhood, food and other resources, rather than on their "off-line" correspondences. [20]

We chose blogs that were well-read and frequently referred to and that generated benefits in kind and income. These features indicated that the bloggers were practiced at managing their on-line presence contexts and so were unlikely to belong to the category of "vulnerable" web-subjects. [21]

Although the bloggers were not study participants and we did not require consent for the project, we wrote to them, explaining the research analysis and requesting archiving agreement, which they gave. One of the bloggers (Thinly Spread) highlights this archiving among her blogging achievements. Mindful of the potential ethical risks of analyzing contributions from people beyond the declared scope of the study, we committed to not discussing material around children or family members and to analyzing comments on posts in general terms only. [22]

We arranged for the [British Library](#) to archive the blogs in their "Society and Culture" web section, thus stabilizing the data against possible storage issues and blog host or author changes. Both blogs have indeed undergone considerable layout and content changes since our sampling. [23]

Analysis encompassed only posts written prior to contacting the bloggers, so we could not assess whether research and archiving shaped blogging practices. [24]



### 3. Analyzing About Me Blog Narratives

#### 3.1 The same, but different: How written and image narratives open up blogs' storytelling



Illustration 1: Image and strapline of Diary of a Frugal Family [25]

The Diary of a Frugal Family blog seems, even on the About Me page, predominantly writing-driven. Writing and image tell similar stories, but also some different ones. Both the title and the strapline, for instance, reference living through scarcity of economic resources ("frugal," the "credit crunch"), as does one of the "why I blog" stories on the page, which describes saving money and trying to clear debt in order to be able to work fewer hours and spend more time with family. Many of the blog posts also describe "credit crunch" strategies for

economizing on costs, especially food costs—strategies that belong to the large body of family food practices invisibly shaped by mothers (DEVAULT, 1991; KAN, SULLIVAN & GERSHUNY, 2011). [26]

The About Me family image, though, does not clearly connote such strategies. Rather, it tells an important counteracting narrative: this is a frugal family that looks like any "normal" family. It tells us that recession and cuts can impact and require effective but caring action from anyone. [27]

There is greater convergence between the overall "family story" told by image and the written stories about "we" as a family on the page. The "family diary" title, the strapline: "*follow our journey to living a more frugal lifestyle*" (our emphasis), and the other written stories emphasize that this is a blog about the whole family's trajectory, "our journey," not just that of the blogger, the mother. Other blog posts reiterate the whole-family tale, including all family members in both written and visual accounts. The About Me photograph also tells this story. The entire family is included, even the dog, all bundled up together on the sofa, looking outwards at the readers. The photograph is relatively small, at the top of the page; a kind of Labovian abstract of the written story to follow (LABOV, 1972; PATTERSON, 2013). [28]

On this page, then, the visual image tells two stories, one similar, one rather different, to those in the written narratives. First, the image particularizes the written narrative of the unified family. Second, and working against the page's verbal narrations of frugality, the "everydayness" of the image tells us that the effects of the credit crunch are felt by everyone, not just the "undeserving poor" and that a frugal and family-affirming response is available to all. [29]

The counteracting element of this story, is, however, subtle. It would be easy to read the family story without attending to its generalization of the "credit crunch." The possibility of such transgressive narrative readings does not guarantee their effects.



Illustration 2: Image and strapline of Thinly Spread

"I am an over stretched, thinly spread mother of 4 writing, teaching, tutoring and parenting in Somerset. My family gets first call on my time, writing is a close second, teaching brings in a bit of useful money and the housework gets neglected with glee" (Thinly Spread, About Me). [30]

The writing on the Thinly Spread About Me page speaks directly to the popular multi-tasking, time-poor narratives of contemporary mothering also referenced on the Diary of a Frugal Family About Me page. There are several demands on Thinly Spread's attention—she knows where they each "fit." The family takes up most of her time but is not what it is "all about," as it is for the Diary of a Frugal Family blogger. [31]

Although this introductory written narrative is about juggling and prioritizing, the blog is not hectic. The writing style is highly coherent. There is also a sense of calmness in the composed photograph which again tells a slightly different story from the written words: the image reformulates the written story of "juggling" as balance. [32]

In the image, we see the blogger with her youngest child on a window seat, between the family home and the outside world. She has both arms round him.

He is looking into the room, seemingly happy. She looks downwards, in a different direction; she appears absorbed in her thoughts. Neither mother nor child is looking at the camera or engaging with the reader or viewer as the characters in the Diary of a Frugal Family image are. There is also a background of foliage, perhaps a garden. This green haven against which both figures are positioned signals a different story, a more balanced and also a more diverse one than the story of "escape" to nature in the writing. Nature is figured here as foundation, as well as compensation. This is a distinct departure from the normative mothering story alluded to in the writing, in which mothers are expected to snatch fleeting moments "for themselves" within larger hegemonic stories of pursuing family welfare: "I feel like I am still being a good Mum while I'm planting seeds and pulling weeds accompanied by various small children digging holes, making fairy houses, climbing trees and holding tea parties." [33]

There are also strong convergences between the written and imaged stories, however, and another counteracting story emerges across both spaces. As with the written story of a mother who is "writing, teaching, tutoring and" (last in the list) "parenting," we see in the image that there could be maternal stories other than the whole-family story that dominates Diary of a Frugal Family. The figures do not look at each other, or at us, the writing is not addressed to a singular or plural "you," as in The Diary of Frugal Family. The counteracting story here is that mothers may have different, non-maternal or non-familial interests and emotions. [34]

The image on the Thinly Spread page is large, with a depth and saturation of color that distinguishes it from the grey-on-white of the text section. The black-on-white text of Diary of a Frugal Family works in concert with its less intensely colored, smaller image. The Thinly Spread image is sized, colored and composed to tell a story, rather than illustrate one. In Thinly Spread, the About Me stories are therefore more image-centered. As a result, the image's stories of mothering "balance" and familial difference are more prominent in relation to the written stories of "juggling" and "escape." [35]

The convergences and divergences between written and visual stories in these blogs show how stories online can be visually driven, not necessarily word-centered or simply exemplified by images. Written blog stories may be modified, paralleled, or over-written, rather than just illustrated, by images. Counteracting as well as normative stories may get told by images or writing, or across both media. [36]

### 3.2 Normative and transgressive styles and content in About Me stories of the blogs

We turn now to the contents and styles of the stories about the blogs themselves that are constitutive parts of the About Me pages. Here, we look at how some largely implicit thematic transgressions of conventional mothering narratives, and idiosyncrasies of writing style, affect the blog stories.

"Lots of people ask me why I write this blog and I always say the same thing—I write because I want to make sure that we don't forget a single one of the memories that we make as a *family*. It's really important to me as both my mam and my brother died of Cancer a few years ago which really brought it home to me that we should make the most of every moment that we have together. All I have of them now are my memories and a some (sic) photographs and I'm determined that if anything every happens to me, my children will have as many memories and photos as possible to remember me by" (Diary of a Frugal Family, About Me). [37]

In the quotation above, the Diary of a Frugal Family blogger tells the story of "why I write this blog." The story, about a mother memorializing everyday family life, reiterates earlier imbrications of photographic memorialization with motherhood (ROSE, 2010), as well as contemporary digital maternal responsibility, for instance for managing photos, disclosure, partner involvement, and posting on Facebook (AMMARI, KUMAR, LAMPE & SCHOENEBECK, 2015). However, this About Me story also spells out emotional difficulties that studies of maternal memorialization often omit. The story proceeds through familial loss—the early deaths of the blogger's brother and mother—to an imagined future for the blogger's children. It affirms the importance of the whole family, noted above, in the context of bereavements that fracture it. For this blogger, the family story encompasses a historically "extended" family, reaching into the future and including those who have died. In other posts, the blogger similarly extends family narratives, mentioning her mother and grandmother in posts about traditional family occasions like Christmas and Mothers' Day and about specific meals. [38]

This About Me story indicates at its end that the blog will be a positive account of family life, narrating "happy times." Other research has highlighted similar tendencies for mothers to share photos online about happy times or developmental milestones (PAUELS, 2008, cited in AMMARI et al., 2015, n.p.). [39]

However, as in this story's disclosure about bereavements, and in the later "reason I blog" sub-plot on the page, about pursuing frugality and clearing debt, the blog's positivity is qualified. The blogger also posts elsewhere about difficult experiences: for example, her upset about another mother telling her children off, and about dilemmas over secondary school selection. [40]

Such narratives of difficulty complexify normative "happy families" stories. Some superficially constraining characteristics of blogs explain why this can happen. "Difficult" blog stories must unfurl, like happier ones, on a small screen; they cannot be long or developed within one post. Contradictions between stories

must therefore be permitted; the blog form does not require their further address or resolution. Blogs are therefore constitutively close to the scrapbook genre, as exemplified by *Diary of a Frugal Family*. This characteristic allows for the registering of transgressive elements of content, within the apparently normative narrative of "happy families." [41]

Yet the counteracting potential of "transgressive" blog content is also undercut by the way that blog credibility and marketability rests on difficult disclosures (WHITEHEAD, 2014). Such disclosures guarantee bloggers' authorship and establish common ground with audiences—blog readers and bloggers, but also brands, and the actual and potential consumers of brands. Idiosyncratic difficulty in blog narratives is part of their market value, related to the gifts, sponsorship and advertising that they can attract from companies and other organizations. Such particularity can work against blog readers' often negative attitudes to commercialization (COLLIANDER & ERLANDSSON, 2015). [42]

Thus it is possible for blog narratives of personal difficulty to run counter to normative family stories, in the service of the market, and, perhaps, also in a third way. CAVARERO (2000) develops the notion of a narratable self, which, she suggests, is produced relationally, through the urge to listen to one's story within an interdependent relationship. We could understand the informalities and the difficult disclosures in this blog as a way of reaching out to someone to listen with to one's story (MORRISON, 2011). However, in distinction to CAVARERO, we might also think about such narrative outreach as supporting, as BUTLER (2006) has suggested, collectivity, not just interdependency. Both *Diary of a Frugal Family* and *Thinly Spread* display in their comments sections many exchanges between authors, other bloggers and readers across which narrators develop a pluralized "we" voice with collective interests. Loss of the kind *Diary of a Frugal Family* discloses "has made a tenuous "we" of us all" BUTLER suggests (p.20), opening up extended if precarious possibilities of identification. [43]

*Diary of a Frugal Family's* About Me memorialization story leads into a slightly different subplot about memorializing through *materializing* family:

"My plan is to get the blog made into a book for the children when they are older so they remember all the happy times we had while they were growing up (by make into a book, I don't mean I have aspirations of being a real life writer, I just mean I'll print it out, punch holes in it and stick it in a pretty folder)" (*Diary of a Frugal Family, About Me*). [44]

This part of the story suggests that past, present and future family connections cannot be taken for granted, but must be materialized. Blogging is a way of recording aspects of family life that might otherwise be lost. This blog's informality and incompleteness enable such materialization by permitting imperfections. The printed and bound blog posts, countering the ephemerality of digital forms, will also be off-the-cuff and fragmented. The story's small stylistic errors, like "a some photographs," the page's scrap-book aesthetic, with the spontaneous image "pasted in" at the top, and its explicit foregrounding of a "tips for friends" bricolage

to come ("As you've probably guessed, my blog is a bit of a mish mash of family fun, money saving tips and foodie ideas with lots of cupcakes and smiley faces thrown in too"), and its casual signing off ("Thanks for reading xx Cass"<sup>1</sup>) lend authenticity but also do-ability to this story. They draw the reader into an intimate, informal relationship, positioning the foreshadowed family scrapbook as something anyone could make. The blogger is not about to become a "real life writer." Rather, this story opens up to everyone the possibility of making a family history that both exists and matters. [45]

This positioning glosses over the blog's public profile, which turns its account of "do-it-yourself" memorialization into a marketable life strategy. So once more, this "materialization" story is working in two directions: that of marketization, as well as democratization. It may, again, be a story that makes a third address to the "interdependent" blogging community, affirming the blogger's relations with them as well as with the market. [46]

The Thinly Spread blogger's About Me story of her blog similarly displays heterogeneities in content, and in specific aspects of style, that generate transgressive possibilities. The written story features a section, already part-quoted, about the garden in the background of the image:

"We spend a lot of time outside growing stuff and the garden has been my escape since they were tinies ... So I will be posting things about gardening with kids (and without), too." [47]

The garden is the blogger's "escape"; the story does not specify what is being escaped from, perhaps relying on shared audience understanding of family and work pressures for mothers with small children. At the same time, this implicitness foreshadows how, throughout the blog, there is some personal disclosure, but posts revealing conflict or trouble are rare. Powerful cultural ideas about what "good mothers" do are, rather, played with. Domestic labor, for example, can be "neglected with glee." "Good mothering" is also repositioned in an environmentalist frame, as we saw before: "I am still being a good Mum while I'm planting seeds and pulling weeds." [48]

The implicit transgression enacted in this About Me page, and the blog's other posts, is less against the simplistic "happy families" narratives that *Diary of a Frugal Family* problematizes, more against normative stories of women "having it all." Thinly Spread troubles that story both by its titular indication of the difficulty of that "all"—"writing, teaching, tutoring and parenting"—and by reframing the "all," as, most fundamentally, the environment. [49]

Thinly Spread's gardening story draws on a narrative of mothering as in tune with the natural world, foreshadowing the blog's consistent ecological concerns. The environment is one of the Thinly Spread's resources referenced in the blog's title. This narrative of mothering as "doing ecology," and the contradictory narrative of

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1 Cass is the name of the *Diary of the Frugal* family blogger, "xx" signify kisses.

"escaping" motherhood in nature, are brought together in the image and the written gardening story, and by a metaphor within that story of children, as fledglings. The About Me page declares the blog will tell "the story of all those little letting-gos as my lovely husband and I encourage our birds to spread their wings and fly." [50]

This metaphorization recalls the Frugal Family blogger's awareness on her About Me page of family life's impermanence. However, Thinly Spread's story of children growing up moves towards future potential, rather than reminiscence. [51]

Once more, co-option is a possibility in these refigurings of normative narratives. The registering of other identities alongside motherhood presents them as part of a menu of marketizable opportunities, as well as transgressions of hegemonic mothering discourses. The honed writing of Thinly Spread's About Me story, as in the "birds" metaphor; and the blog's generous thematic reach, including "Cooking, Family Fun, Gardening, Get Crafty, Travel, Children's Development, Photography," proffer it as delectable market product. Even the story's move towards "environmental" resolution mentions post possibilities that could function as consumable fixes—"veggie recipes," and "stuff about gardening with kids." The story's play with normative mothering could thus be read not as directly troubling it, but as defusing its constraints. Its transgressions are subtle, permissible ones. As PARKER describes, "[t]he tensions and ambivalences of contemporary motherhood are rendered bearable ... via irony and a light touch" (1995, p.5). [52]

Here too, though, as with *Diary of a Frugal Family*, the blog valuably writes both normative and transgressive narratives onto the same page, rather than providing just one or the other. Additionally, this About Me again constructs blogosphere community interdependency, albeit in a different style and with a specific, environmentally-framed principle of connection. The story ends with an invitation to dialogue, if not the closer connection of *Diary of a Frugal Family*: "I hope you enjoy sharing bits of my life with me and that you will post a comment so I know you are out there!" [53]

Thus both blogs manage, through their multiple stories and their stylistic features, to articulate normative family narratives but also to show that family stories are negative as well as positive, and that the time a family has together can pass one by without conscious effort to "make the most of every moment" (*Diary of a Frugal Family*) or notice the "all those little letting gos" involved in raising children (*Thinly Spread*). In the *Thinly Spread* story, the natural world provides a context and a future for these narrative movements. [54]



### 3.3 Contradicting and importing: Counteracting and reformulating blog narratives of resources

In this section, we describe some characteristics of the About Me blog narratives that work more explicitly against normative narratives, here, about resources—in particular, their articulation of direct though not argued opposition to some dominant narratives; and their deployment of specific genres associated with other platforms that can, within the blogs, have reformulating effects.

"The second reason (for the blog) is kind of linked to the first. In the spirit of making the most of every moment, I was very aware that working full time meant that I wasn't spending as much quality time as I wanted with my children" (Diary of a Frugal Family, About Me). [55]

This story on the About Me page of Diary of a Frugal Family speaks to the common concern with work-life balance prominent in UK parenting and mothering narratives more directly than do the blogs' addresses to mothering narratives considered in prior sections. As in the part of the story about the blogger's deceased mother and brother, this work-life story element is underpinned by the idea that time is limited. Here, however, time is also expensive—it is part of a marketized story of resources. The blogger is committed to a "frugality" that will maximize both time and money. Still, frugality is only the "second" reason for the blog. It merely supports the narrative's primary drive towards enabling family time. [56]

Moreover, food and other practices in Diary of a Frugal Family are not always about money or even time, but simply fun. Later in About Me, the blogger distances her "frugality" from deprivation:

"I'm not hardcore frugal! I'm not comfortable with having a cold house to save money or taking moneysaving to the extreme" (Diary of a Frugal Family, About Me). [57]

Diary of a Frugal Family stories may endorse market shibboleths such as "laziness" and "extravagance," especially in times of family exhaustion or illness, which may occasion fast foods and ready-prepared food, in order to save family time. The stories may be about delicious food that pleases the family, independent of cost, as the About Me topic list of "family fun, money saving tips and foodie ideas with lots of cupcakes and smiley faces thrown in too," suggests. Such stories of pleasure flout cost-benefit calculation narratives rather directly. The blog is able to perform this resistance without working it through into logical coherence, since within the blog format, stories that work by assertion are frequent and effective and do not need to make an explicit, coherent or "political" argument. The stories move, rather, towards the implicit politics of a loosely defined family "fun." [58]

At the same time, this About Me resource story makes another, tangential move. "Frugality" is a word that evokes wartime and post-war discourses more than current austerity discourses. Its historicity fits with this blog's concerns with the

family's past. However, when frugality is called upon now, historical examples of it are usually cited as guide to contemporary cost-cutting. In *Diary of a Frugal Family*, these antecedents are drawn on differently: as moral precedents for reducing waste and taking care. Frugality is decoupled from cost-benefit resource calculations. The husbanding of resources becomes an end in itself, paralleling *Thinly Spread's* environmental concerns. *Frugal Family's* frugality narrative centers on family comfort and enjoyment, rather than on goods and money, the resources it dismisses as "hardcore frugal." Again, these are transgressive, even transformative narrative moves, particularly in contexts where the minute monitoring of economic resources within everyday lives is presented as the overwhelming priority within policy discourse. [59]

Blogs' characteristics operate very differently within the *Thinly Spread About Me* resource narrative, which focuses almost entirely on temporal resource limits:

"I will be posting some of our favorite veggie family recipes, most of which can be cooked in 30 minutes or less with a toddler sitting on the work surface, an older child moaning about a grumbling stomach another one asking for homework help and yet another needing to be picked up from an after school club" (*Thinly Spread, About Me*). [60]

Blogs' characteristic juxtapositions, highlighted in this story by the list trope, here signify resource-stretching across the list. The blogger's narrative of family resources consequently resonates, as we saw in an earlier section, with the familiar, over-stretched, "busy" mothering genre. It gives us a mother juggling competing tasks, with family mealtimes as a point where demands intensify. Phrases about disparate activities, separated by commas and then abandoning commas entirely, generate a long, complex sentence. The story is stylized and recognizable. "Veggie" food, rather than "vegetarian," fits the informal, busy kitchen scene the blogger paints and makes the meat-free recipes to come seem more accessible. [61]

This blogger's commitment to financial thrift shows up little in food posts, although vegetarianism might connote it at times. The posts' stories of protecting and enjoying family time, of living "simply" at home or in local countryside, are, though, positioned against higher-expenditure activities—for instance, buying expensive, commercialized Halloween foods. More often, the stories focus on claiming time, in a way that exceeds the normative "juggling" narrative. The *Thinly Spread* blogger does not bargain for time. Rather, she just takes it. As in the *Diary of a Frugal Family* blog, then, *Thinly Spread's About Me* story opposes normative resource-economy stories directly, in this case by taking the blogger's own time out of zero-sum calculations and simply "escaping" to it. [62]

In addition, the blog story performs a reframing of resources that wraps them all together. It does this by importing something like the contemporary print and TV "lifestyle" genre into the blog. The *About Me* story pieces together many aspects of the blogger's life: parenting, writing, teaching, cleaning, politics ("the odd rant"), being in a relationship, cooking, gardening, editing, photography: a trajectory

reflected in the varied post menu, quite different from *Diary of a Frugal Family's* highly family-centered array. Here, the use of the "lifestyle" genre grounds a refusal to separate out resources, much less to pit them against each other—particularly since the natural world is consistently figured as their foundation. This holism reformulates the About Me resource story away from markets, towards an uncalibrated account of resources as what the blogger simply calls "the things I like to do." [63]

In both blogs, then, About Me stories present some fairly direct opposition to normative cost-benefit narratives of resources. They deploy blogs' juxtapositional style to enable those oppositions. In addition, their importation of historically or culturally distinct genres allows them to reformulate transgression not just as opposition but as other ways of narrating resources. [64]

#### **4. Conclusions**

In the preceding analyses, we have paid attention to the multiple stories coexisting on blogs' About Me pages. This multiplicity, which does not, within blog conventions, require full exposition or coherence, supports contradictions and layers of meaning, rather than simple reiterations of normative narratives of mothering, families and food. [65]

First, the overlapping yet also relatively autonomous stories of images and verbal texts on the About Me pages display this duality strongly in relation to mothering and family stories. *Diary of a Frugal Family's* cross-media narrative of a whole-family "journey" is supplemented by the image's "ordinary" family story that questions normative "blame" narratives of those suffering from the "credit crunch." *Thinly Spread's* narrative of motherhood as "juggling" is, in both text and image, a story of different identities in families that presents mothers as subjects, against normative stories of mothers as "just" mothers. In addition, the *Thinly Spread* image articulates a distinct story of motherhood and family as integrated into the natural world. [66]

Secondly, we have seen how About Me pages reproduce but also transgress hegemonic narratives through their stories about the blogs themselves. Here, blogs' characteristic semantic condensation and fragmentation allow conflict to be voiced without requiring comment or resolution. Blog styles, both informal and composed, also work to enable transgressions of normative stories. In the *Diary of a Frugal Family*, family memorialization is undercut by loss. The story of materializing family history via the blog does not just assure that "my children will have as many memories and photos as possible," but also asserts, in a public forum, the historical significance of all families. In *Thinly Spread*, a narrative of diverse interests resists more conventional stories of mothers "juggling" and "having it all." At the same time, the "all" gets displaced, including by metaphor, into another space. [67]

Thirdly, we have explored how About Me stories of resources, including food, voice opposition to normative marketized stories of resource constraint. These

stories once again rely on blogs' ease with contradiction, as well as on the translation into the blogs of other genres. *Diary of a Frugal Family* opposes pleasure to cost-benefit analysis, and reinvents "frugality" as contemporary care for family and resources. *Thinly Spread* takes family time out of normative cost-benefit equations and then moves towards holism that equates "resources" with everything meaningful to the blogger. [68]

This article is an indicative attempt to map some distinctive and sometimes transgressive features of blog narratives. The features we have focused on—transmediation, internal content complexities, styles, and genre hybridity—are all found on other internet platforms. However, thinking about digital narratives overall can be over-homogenizing (MILLER, 2013). [69]

Some blog features considered here may merit further consideration. We have understood narratives as playing out across still images (BARTHES, 1978; ESIN & SQUIRE, 2013; MULVEY, 2006) in ways that may parallel written narratives; what of the wider possibility of narrative traveling between images and texts and between, for instance, internet posts, comments, links, sites and platforms. We have also seen blogs' developing generic features, and "imported" genres within them, working to transgress dominant narratives. However, genres are perpetually hybridizing and giving rise to new genres. Can genre translations remain transgressive, will current digital narrative features retain their transgressive potentials, or become normative themselves? Blogs may offer instructive fora for answering such questions. [70]

The complex, often transgressive workings of blogs' specific features within stories constitute a rebuttal of ROSE's (2012) dismissal of internet narratives as simplifying and banalizing. We have suggested that blog stories' semantic closeness to normative narratives, as well as the frequent saleability of their stylistic authenticity, qualifies but does not erase their counteracting operations, which are subtle and consistent. In addition, blog narratives' "authenticity" is rarely only a market tactic. Often, it signals those narratives reaching out to constitute relationships between writers and readers that themselves enable blog narratives' transgressions. [71]

Perhaps such moves indicate, more broadly, that narrative transgressions cannot be pursued simply through focusing on specific kinds of representation. Asking "what" blog narratives are, or what they are doing (CAVARERO, 2000)—is not sufficient. We learn more through questions about whose narratives, with whom and for whom they are being performed. These are questions about ownership, coalitions and solidarities. Blog narratives may work through generating the human relationships that CAVARERO describes. But the stories also operate politically, by crafting, via the features of this specific kind of personal narrative, many co-existing collectivities (BUTLER 2006): bloggers, blog-readers, mothers, women, people who work, the economically constrained, people who write, the time-poor, the bereaved, environmentalists. The condensed, multiple, unresolved, "scrapbook" structure of blog stories enables such fragile but hopeful collectivities. The last lines of *Thinly Spread's* and *Diary of a Frugal Family's*

About Me pages, like those of many other such pages, convey, between them, an intertextual invitation to collectivity, coming at the end of complex narrative elements that have already reiterated, transgressed and reformulated normative stories of mothering, family, food and other resources: "I hope you enjoy sharing bits of my life with me and that you will post a comment so I know you are out there! ... Thanks for reading xx." [72]

## Acknowledgments

This work was supported by grants from the Economic and Social Research Council under grant: ES/I025936/1 and IOE/UCL Strategic Partnership Research Development Fund.

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## Citation

Elliott, Heather; Squire, Corinne & O'Connell, Rebecca (2017). Narratives of Normativity and Permissible Transgression: Mothers' Blogs About Mothering, Family and Food in Resource-Constrained Times [72 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 18(1), Art. 7, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs170178>.