

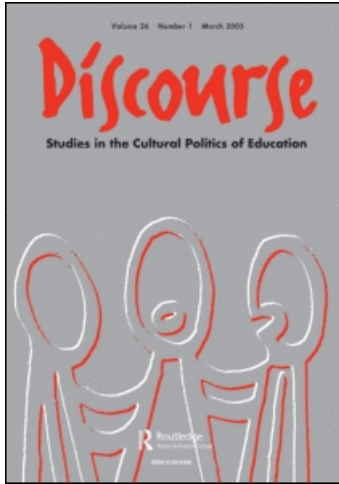
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### School choice, consumerism and the ethical strand in talk

Andrew Wilkins<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Education, Roehampton University, London, UK

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## School choice, consumerism and the ethical strand in talk

Andrew Wilkins\*

*School of Education, Roehampton University, London, UK*

Research on school choice highlights the extent to which a communitarian impulse informs the way some parents engage with their role as chooser. This suggests that the responsibilities of parents as consumers are often negotiated in collective as well as individualizing terms. Drawing on data from a group of mothers of diverse social class and racial backgrounds, this paper builds on some of these perspectives through deploying elements of a critical discursive analytic approach. Its aim is to explore how some mothers engage with the meaning and practice of school choice. Focusing on the emotional labouring that often underpins mothers' rationalizations of choice, this paper examines the discursive role of emotion in these contexts as a form of social action geared towards achieving certain ends. In turn I discuss the implications of this for thinking through choice as a framing, function and discourse inhabited and performed by mothers.

**Keywords:** school choice; marketization; consumerism; emotion; rationality; discursive analysis

### Introduction

At the heart of governmental discourses and rationalities around school choice in Britain is a narrow economic assumption that considers individuals to be agents sharing the capacity and willingness to maximize the utility of their decisions through a calculating framework of choosing. While it is unclear exactly when parents begin thinking about a secondary school for their child, there is an explicit, formal process of choosing that parents are required to enter into as part of their responsibility and obligation as choosers. This includes filling in secondary school transfer forms, attending school open days, comparing school information, and, where necessary, lodging appeals against the outcome of their application. In this way, parents are 'hailed' or guided into adjusting their behaviour on the basis of certain rationalities, strategies and techniques, which have at their centre a conception of the parent as consumer. In this paper I explore the ways in which some mothers resist or rework such injunctions around behaviour and elucidate the importance of emotion as a framing for locating and accounting for such refusals.

A key feature of policy reform and political development in Britain since the 1980s has been the idea that public services are more responsive, flexible and better managed when citizens engage with them as discriminating users or consumers (Giddens, 1998; Le Grand, 2007). At the centre of government attempts to implement user choice in education services (Department of Education and Science,

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\*Email: [drandrewwilkins@googlemail.com](mailto:drandrewwilkins@googlemail.com)

1991; Department for Education and Employment, 2001; Department for Education and Skills, 2004, 2005), as well as other public services including health (Department of Health, 2000), social care (Department of Health, 2005) and housing (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2008), has been a focus on reorganising the balance between citizenship rights, obligations and entitlements (Deacon, 1994; Dwyer, 1998), with a view to transforming citizens from so-called passive recipients of public services into active, self-regulating subjects. Since the introduction of the 1980 and 1986 Education Acts, and later the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA), education policy in Britain has been guided a market imperative to incite parents into inhabiting and performing the role of the consumer, though the mode of appropriation is always unstable and unpredictable (Reay, 1996). Concomitant shifts to school budget levels tied to student intake (Jones, 2003) has also led to a managerial focus on education, with its emphasis on market concepts of supply and demand, value for money and accountability (Apple, 2001; Ball, 2004). As a corollary, parents and schools are located through the exchange and intersection of consumers and producers, in effect fostering an intense climate of competition and self-interest in the field of education and educational choice (Oria et al., 2007). School choice as a policy and political device therefore reflects the expansion of the scope and reach of market mechanisms in public-sector organisation and the commodification and economization of the relationship between welfare users and welfare providers more generally (Ball, 2008). Subsequently, the kinds of positions and practices authorised through governmental discourses around choice tend to be emotion free, with its emphasis on 'autonomous, empowered and asocial rationality' (David, Davies, Edwards, Reay, & Standing, 1997, p. 401).

In this view the policy and practice of school choice can be characterised as neo-liberal (Harvey, 2005) or elements in liberal modes of governing (Rose, 1999), given that it is configured around a conception of citizens as bearers of consumer rights (Pollitt, 1994) and engenders a view of the superiority of markets over welfarist or 'statist' models of public provision, which are generally held to be intrusive and oppressive (Clarke, 2004). Such an approach to policy reform therefore represents an unmistakable shift in British government rhetoric, namely a move away from Keynesian conceptions of the social democratic welfare state, defined by a commitment to state-coordinated attempts to manage the distribution of welfare goods, and a move towards a preference for the promotion of a political and policy agenda favouring the unfettered operation of markets as equality-producing mechanisms in the realm of welfare (Ball, 2008; Clarke & Newman, 2006).

Researchers in Argentina (Narodowski, 2008), Tanzania (Phillips & Stambach, 2008), India (Srivastava, 2008), and Japan (Dierkes, 2008), have made similar observations concerning the emergence of choice as a central policy trend in government attempts to restructure education services around market imperatives. Specifically, the introduction of user choice in public services reflects government attempts to guide citizens into creating for themselves a model of agency that fits with the market principles and political rationalities of a neo-liberal framing of citizenship (Johansson & Hvinden, 2005). This suggests that citizenship cannot be viewed as absolute since rights can now be understood to bear the mark of consumerism in that they are configured around a view of citizens of bearers of consumer rights (Pollitt, 1994). This particular model of citizenship is discernible through *The Citizen's Charter* (1991) where there is in evidence a dynamic change to

the balance between rights and obligations and responsibilities. Here the fulfilment of obligations tends to be defined as a condition for receiving particular rewards, with the intention of inducing the active enlistment of individuals into becoming consumers of public services (Clarke, 2005).

A central focus of New Labour policy rhetoric was concerned with activating or 'empowering' parents as choosers for example, but also with producing local authorities that enable 'parents to exercise choice and to become informed consumers of available services to support them and their children' (Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), 2008, p. 6). Choice is often viewed as the preserve of the well-off and well-informed however. Reay and Ball (1997) consider versions of 'good' parental choice to be invariably constructed in terms of an implicit middle-class norm for example, reflecting the middle-class bias implicit in government texts around education (Reay et al., 2008). Similarly, Gewirtz (2001) argues that a market system in education privileges 'particular kinds of middle-class orientations, values and modes of behaviour' (p. 365) since it is middle-class parents who are more adept at positioning themselves as consumers compared to their working-class counterparts (Reay, 1998). For Reay, Ball, and Gewirtz, then, the meaning and practice of school choice reflects and upholds a middle-class framing of agency, responsibility and motivation in the realm of welfare. In this view school choice is not entered into freely, spontaneously or impulsively, but rather emerges as a function of a set of injunctions and guidelines around behaviour and orientations. Such performances can also be traced in the school appeal process, where there is a principled focus around encouraging parents to calibrate their behaviour on the basis of a programmatic and scripted performance, as the following extract outlines:

I find it surprising that very few parents seek professional help and guidance in the preparation of their [school] appeal. I doubt very much whether you would conduct your own defence in a court of law, or not use a solicitor when buying a property, so why gamble with your child's education. (Matt Richards, founder and senior partner of School Appeals Service)

In the use of the phrase 'so why gamble with your child's education', Richards articulates the idea that school places can be won on the condition that the 'correct' steps are taken to mitigate any potential risk, but also builds on the notion that choice is structured through a set of injunctions around 'reasonable' and 'responsible' behaviour. In a similar vein, Rooney (2007) encourages parents to 'stick to the facts' and use logical arguments and sound evidence to strengthen their case and back up their claims during the appeal process. As Ball (2004) observes, parenting is thus sometimes experienced in response to policy and economic changes as 'risky' business – it involves parents adopting and utilizing risk-avoidance strategies and hedging their bets around an appeal to a calculated, logical reasoning. Hence, the concept and practice of choice can be characterized as a composite of performances and cultural imperatives, as combinations of behaviours that are implicated simultaneously in the designation, assembling and privileging of a consumerist orientation to education services and a neo-liberal framing of active citizenship.

As a result, parents are guided into displacing or overriding any vocabulary that might undermine the consumerist orientation towards school choice. Christopher

Woodhead, ex-chief inspector of schools, advises parents to avoid using ‘vague emotional arguments’ in formulating an appeal for example (cited in Blinkhorn & Griffiths, 2008; see also Rooney, 2007). Parents in effect are encouraged to do away with emotion as a framing for their school choice, precisely because it is framed as speaking to a set of identifications and positions that run counter to or undermine the projection of the self as ‘rational’, logical and, above all, deserving. A corollary of this is that some mothers find themselves struggling to appropriate an ethical position in relation to choice given that the dominant discourse of choice appears to undermine the sense of duty and obligation emotion carries – the desire to preserve an image of the self as compassionate and thoughtful. In what follows I explore how some mothers negotiate this difficult ideological terrain with a focus on how mothers experience themselves as subjects when activated in a field of choice, pointing to the incomplete character of the dominant discourse of choice to fully determine the mother as a consumer.

### **The research**

It is against this policy and political terrain that my research was conducted. My study explored diverse sources and types of evidence in order to map the field through which mothers are invited to manage and understand themselves as consumers of education services, with the aim of making transparent the power relations that guide mothers into adjusting to preferred framings of agency and responsibility. The mothers who feature in this article were interviewed at a time when they were being summoned to navigate a field of choice as consumers and to engage with the forms of work/practice that has come to characterize the role of the active citizen in neo-liberal governance. This article focuses therefore on the interpretations and understandings these mothers bring to their role as choosers and considers how their engagements with choice are socially inflected through a set of ethical vocabularies, meanings and preferences.

This article draws on evidence from in-depth interviews I conducted with 11 mothers of different social class and racial backgrounds living in an area of north London (Camden). This area of London was chosen as a site for the study primarily because of its cultural diversity and because it is considered to be a ‘borough of contrasts, with areas of affluence and relative poverty’ (Marshall, 2006, p. 51), making it economically and socially mixed. The method used to recruit interviewees involved writing to and later telephoning headteachers at local primary schools, with the aim of opening up a discussion around the possibility of providing access for the project. In order to capture some of the emotional strain experienced by parents in their role as choosers, I wrote to parents with children in the last year of primary school (year 6). Typically it is around this time that parents are summoned to take on the role of the consumer through choosing a secondary school for their child. It is often recognized that it is ‘principally mothers who hold responsibility for linking and coordinating children’s and other family members’ needs with services’ and agencies’ provisions and requirements’ (David, West, & Ribbens, 1994, p. 399; also see Reay, 1995). This may in part explain why all the respondents for this study were mothers, although there might be lots of reasons why mothers and not fathers responded. A further important characteristic is that most of the mothers

interviewed in this study drew on a discourse of emotion of as a strategy for coping with the anxiety, difficulty and strain opened up through choice.

The general view held by ‘experts’ on school choice is that emotion as a framing for choice is undesirable given that it is not congruent with the projection of a confident, rational and deserving subject (Blinkhorn & Griffiths, 2008; Rooney, 2007). Similarly, other researchers observe how governmental discourses around choice engender meanings and practices that are ‘emotion free’ (David et al., 1997, p. 401; and see Reay & Lucey, 2004), with its emphasis on a narrow rational, utilitarian conception of the individual. However, little consideration has been given to what emotion is doing in these contexts – as a form of investment, for example (Edwards, 1999). Too often emotion is conflated with ‘irrationality in choice-making processes’ (Reay & Lucey, 2004, p. 38), as existing outside and in contradistinction to the normative rationality presupposed by the dominant discourse of choice. In this framing emotion is characterized as ephemeral and unstable to the extent that it skews and bypasses the ‘reasoning process’ resulting in irrational action or ‘bad’ choice.

In what follows I explore how the desire among some mothers to be taken seriously as an ethical subject – compassionate, thoughtful and caring – can be traced to a need to preserve an image of the child as special and inimitable. Importantly, I examine how meanings and vocabularies that register a discourse of emotion are taken up in these contexts as discursive resources for mobilizing and sustaining such motivations and aspirations. This leads to a consideration of what is being accomplished in these contexts, but also what is being suppressed or unsupported as a result of this positioning. At the centre of my analysis of the data will therefore be a focus on the functionality and pragmatics of language as social action (Wetherell, 2003), which has at its centre a conception of subjectivity and identity as the ‘personal enactment of communal methods of self-accounting, vocabularies of motive, culturally recognizable emotional performances and available stories for making sense’ (Wetherell & Edley, 1999, p. 338). Such an approach is crucial to explaining how elements of identity and agency are performatively re-inscribed through cultural practices (Wetherell, 2003). More importantly, it emphasizes the context creating activity of social actors (Wetherell, 2005) and thus affirms the possibility of agency and resistance. This enables me to move beyond any approach that might homogenize the voices of mothers as carriers or bearers of particular classifications and instead capture how mothers try to manage the contradictions resulting from their movement between discourses. To do this, I examine how mothers make use of particular symbolic orders and signifying practices as powerful devices for making themselves recognizable to others and accountable as ethical subjects.

### **Resisting and reworking the consumer orientation**

It was common for the mothers in this study to engage with claims over what it means, or should mean, to be ‘active’ and ‘responsible’ when asked about their interpretations and understandings of the concept and practice of school choice. This has consequences for thinking about mothering as subject to, and negotiated through, different frameworks of ethical values and preferences. In the context of choosing a secondary school, these frameworks were subject to contrary pushes and

pulls resulting from the desire among some mothers to be taken seriously as an 'informed consumer' (DCSF, 2008, p. 6) and 'active citizen' (Ministers of State, 2004, p. 3.4.3). Equally, there was a strong desire among some mothers to undermine the abstract and generic character of a calculating framework of choosing, with its emphasis on the 'sovereign' role of the consumer. Nonetheless, choice is sometimes continuously negotiated through and against a consumerist orientation, as Caroline, a single mother with two boys, demonstrates:

Caroline: Well it [choosing a school] was an equal balance if you like between being quite cold and clinical and looking at the Ofsted reports, that was the research end of it, and there was the values end of it and actually how the children behaved, how they valued each other, the sort of values that they were given and whether there was a spiritual dimension to their teaching and their learning, which wasn't trying to drill some kind of faith into them necessarily.

For Caroline, choosing a secondary school for her youngest son involved moving between two apparently conflicting and contrasting approaches; one based on putting into service a consumerist orientation, and the other stemming from a desire to match the values and beliefs of the individual to the school. The former approach echoes and redeems a set of sensibilities and practices framed by a mechanistic, acquisitive impulse – a commodified relation to public services (Hauptmann, 1996). Centrally, it articulates and mobilizes a view of the parent as a 'maximizer': someone 'who always seeks the biggest possible benefits and the least costs in their decisions' (Dunleavy, 1991, p. 3). The 'research end of it', as Caroline describes it, prioritises 'cold knowledge' (Ball & Vincent, 1998, p. 330) as criteria for choosing a school – the 'key information that parents need to know', insist the government (Department for Education and Skills, 2005, p. 3.8). Against this position, Caroline offers a different set of motivations and desires for choosing: to find a school that fits to the individual rather than the other way round. Implicit in this approach is a valuing for the moral voice sometimes ascribed to the imaginary of community (Etzioni, 2003) and the relations and associations sustained and practised through it. Caroline therefore negotiates a balanced approach that attempts to articulate and combine seemingly contradictory impulses: self-interested and communitarian. Her acceptance of a 'cold and clinical' approach to choice registers an adjustment to or re-enactment of the usual, preferred construction of the parent as 'informed consumer' (DCSF, 2008, p. 6), while the alternative approach points to more complicated expressions of a communitarian impulse defined by an ethical concern for the projected values of the school. This forces a reconsideration of the analytic value of political distinctions between consumer and citizen, individual and collective, self-regarding and community-regarding as framings for understanding the motivations and fantasies shaping mothers' school choices (see Reay et al., 2008; Wilkins, 2010).

In this view the role of the consumer is sometimes not straightforwardly rejected by some mothers (Reay, 1996) but instead is sometimes negotiated and reworked through alternative sets of ethical vocabularies and values. For some mothers, however, a calculating framework of choosing is far less desirable, as Pauline, a mother of three, outlines:

Pauline: No. I find them [league tables] useful as in you could figure out the top sort of 10 per cent the next... My husband's a mathematician. Statistically the significance of

one kid having a cold on one day in the top 100 schools can knock you ten places. It gave me an idea of where they sit in the world but it didn't really do much. I wouldn't change my child for five places or anything.

Andrew: What didn't the brochures, websites, league tables tell you? Was there anything missing from this information in your opinion?

Pauline: The nature of the school, the ethos, what kind of children go there 'cause what we figured out was the older two schools seemed to recruit the kind of children and put personalities and certain personalities fit in best and I was actually looking for a match that would suit my son's work personality. A school that has a lot of very aggressive children wouldn't work. A school that had a lot of children who were conformist wouldn't work because he's a bit quirky.

Compared to Caroline, Pauline is increasingly disparaging of the perfunctory and superficial way mothers are guided into utilizing formal school information (e.g. raw performance data) as a framing for choice. This is captured through her truculent account of the statistical and systematic character of this process; in particular, the way in which an instrumentalizing impulse to choice sometimes occludes an image of the child as unique and individuated. Pauline therefore deploys a vocabulary that aims to undermine the calculating framework of choosing as impassive and impersonal. Pauline frequently uses highly individuating terms to describe her son in order to achieve this. She remarks on his quirkiness, for instance. In a similar vein, Caroline draws on a vocabulary that (aims to) individualize and personalize the child – 'very free thinker', 'really intelligent child', 'razor sharp mentality', 'very lateral' and 'bright but not in the right kind of way'. In both accounts, there is a strong desire to reclaim the importance of the child in the decision-making process and to undermine the abstract character of the role of the consumer in this process. Pauline, for instance, draws on the adjective 'conformist' – a person who conforms to social convention and distinction, accepted behaviour or established practice – to specify the type of person her son is not. Crucially, she sets up an image of her son as an incomparable and unique subject; as someone who does not fit easily into a system of equivalence or sameness. Read in another way, both Caroline and Pauline reproduce certain 'middle class narratives of secondary school choice' where there is an 'implicit, and sometimes explicit, sense of their own child's specialness' (Reay & Lucey, 2004, p. 44).

Nonetheless, Pauline articulates understandings and interpretations that work to achieve some orderliness in the conversation and to defuse some of contradictions and tensions flowing from her refusal of the calculating framework of choosing. Through the reference to her husband, Pauline articulates how conversant she is with the dialogical capacities that spring out of the consumer, someone who is basically clinical and whose reasoning is marked with an instrumental logic. This is captured through the way in which she produces descriptions and evaluations that register elements of a cost–benefit analysis: 'Statistically the significance of one kid having a cold on one day in the top 100 schools can knock you ten places'. Therefore, similar to Caroline, Pauline works with and against a calculating framework of choice, revealing the cultural logic (even compulsion) attached to a consumerist orientation to choice – the appearance of someone who is able to convey their choice in the form of judgements, reasons and evaluations as the outcome of some kind of instrumental calculation and who can translate and account for their choice in a way that 'makes sense'. This might be because these mothers do not want to run the risk of appearing



‘unable or unwilling to engage in the process’ (DCSF, 2006, p. 2), with the expectation of being positioned as passive and undeserving subjects (Clarke, Newman, Smith, Vidler, & Westmarland, 2007).

The figure of the child therefore emerges quite powerfully in these accounts of school choice. The following extract, taken from an interview with Kate, a mother with one son, illustrates the tendency among some mothers to resist putting into practice a purely economic rationality as a basis for their decision-making. The extract shows Kate describing bullying among children as a potential problem all schools must confront:

I mean it happens everywhere but if they can deal with it then that will be the important thing to deal with and have it dealt with. I’m not really that fussed about league tables because I don’t think they actually tell you what it’s like for a child. So, for example, Sandsdown [her son’s primary school], which is always way down the league tables, but actually he is doing really well there. So it is more about him than it is about the school. But it does need to have a good academic, you know. I wouldn’t consider Finchley if it was just all about sport. It’s got to have the academic side, has to be strong as well.

Kate undermines the importance of league tables as criteria for her school choice. For Kate, league tables fail to capture how the school is lived and experienced by the child; but more crucially, how the same school might be experienced differently and with varying degrees of success by children with particular wants, desires or needs. Kate articulates how her son’s primary school appears low on the league tables, yet her son flourishes there. Such reasoning, which is typical among many of the mothers interviewed in this study, leads Kate to conclude that it is the child who is central to the process of choosing. Kate’s account illustrates how league tables and the school itself are sometimes peripheral to what is a crucial element in the decision-making process, namely the centrality of the figure of the child and his or her wants and needs. What emerges from Kate’s account, then, is an appeal to the child as distinctive and unique; a common view which is also discernible through the speech of Caroline and Pauline. In some extreme cases, the calculating framework of choosing gives rise to suspicion, mistrust and unease, as Camilla, a mother with one son, illustrates:

Andrew: And how do you think a school sustains its reputation?

Camilla: From all that I’ve seen, for example, the league tables. I don’t really follow those.

Andrew: Do you think those are indicative of a school’s reputation?

Camilla: No, I don’t. I really don’t. And I think even the higher the more suspicious I am. The higher the results and the better the results is, the more suspicious I am because even to the secondary school, open days that I went to . . . I met a really good person and she said, you know, ‘this school is about maintaining its reputation’, and yes they may help children who perhaps have some difficulty learning, but that’s not their emphasis. So that was quite truthful of her to say that and it made me think twice because it’s all well and good getting your son into the best school, but not if it’s not meeting his needs.

Camilla’s ‘suspicious’ attitude towards league tables relates in part to how she positions schools differently, as either geared towards the needs of the child or centred on containing aspects of reputation. Like Caroline, Pauline and Kate, Camilla is dubious about the usefulness of league tables as criteria for matching the

child to the school, namely because it addresses a different set of concerns and valuations. She deplores the way some schools prize reputation above meeting children's needs, for example. For Camilla, information relating to the reputation of the school or its ranking in the league tables precludes any engagement with questions around whether the school is actually fit to meet the child's needs or wants. However, Caroline reminds us of the seduction of the calculating framework of choosing for the way it reflects back on mothers in positive ways:

Andrew: May I ask who you spoke to [about your school choice]: friends, family?

Caroline: Well my family wouldn't know anything about this because they were dead keen that they should go to a Catholic comprehensive school, not because they wish to drum Catholicism in, but because my father particularly had done a bit of research on this school in Kensington and he knew that it was a red hot school. If you could get your child in there they were in a good school. You had done really well provided that the school suited them.

Contained in this statement are conflicting and contrasting views of the consumer, reflecting the cultural imperative attached to this performance. The figure of the active and deserving citizen is lodged in narratives around the parent as an 'informed consumer' (DCSF, 2008, p. 6) – discriminating, discerning, autonomous and self-maximizing. Hence, the role of the consumer is significant in the context of school choice for the way it deflects associations of an undeserving or passive subject. Caroline, though, has a son with learning difficulties and is therefore unable to 'fit' potentially into any school. As a result, Caroline is unable to 'maximize' her position in a way that allows her to exercise dominant and privileged forms of agency in the realm of education. In the use of the phrase 'You had done really well provided the school suited them', Caroline makes explicit how aware she is of the role of the consumer as a preferred form of user engagement in this context. Caroline's motivation for choosing is guided her son's educational needs however, which explains in part why she moves between different frameworks of choosing, and the different sets of positions and meanings invoked through them.

### **Emotion as counter-discourse**

Across the interviews there was a tendency among the mothers to deploy a vocabulary that worked to individualize their child as a distinctive subject. For Pauline and Caroline, both of whom have children with difficulties in learning, using such vocabulary works as a powerful mechanism in transforming the calculating framework of choosing into something which appears devoid of feeling or sensation and therefore removed from the realm of the authentic, the real and the personal. A discourse of emotion enables the speaker to bracket the child as beyond calculation, estimation or quantification, as highly particular and incomparable subjects, and strengthens a view of the activity or process of economic rationality as imitable, impersonal, detached and replicable. The child is presented as only knowable through the mother and therefore cannot be reduced to the abstractions and divisions posited through a rational calculus approach. Hence, the 'clinical and cold' approach is understood relationally to be superficial and detached as it fails to capture the 'personal' in the child. The allure of emotion in these contexts is that it offers a counter-logic or counter-narrative against which a consumerist approach can

be judged and deplored. In other ways, too, it might be argued that the discourse of emotion, with its emphasis on the child, is inflected through powerful gendered rationalities. As Pauline makes clear:

My husband is very much the academic. That's the job. I am more on whether are they [the children] happy, are they are healthy, are they growing up to be reasonable people. I think if they can do that then the academics come anyway. That's my philosophy.

Here, Pauline draws on gender as a discursive framing for constructing and delineating the respective roles of mothers and fathers in the decision-making process. Pauline's role, as she perceives it, involves caring for and nurturing the child's well-being. This is contrasted with the role she assigns to her husband who is positioned outside and against the relations and capacities elicited through this caring and compassionate role. The repertoires 'happy', 'healthy' and 'reasonable', for example, work to project an image of Pauline as an ethical, thoughtful and caring subject. Importantly, it points to the ways in which notions of 'active' and 'responsible' parenting are negotiated through gendered rationalities and discourses. However, I do not wish to make essentialist claims to emotion as elements of a dialogical capacity that is particular to mothers and not fathers, nor do I want to deny the possibility that a discourse of emotion might be a gendered position and rationality taken up primarily by mothers over fathers. Walkerdine, for instance, insists that values of emotionality, caring and introspection are part of a 'psychology and interiority usually ascribed to women' (2003, p. 242). Since I interviewed mothers in this study only, no comparative analysis can be made of the importance of emotion in male and female responses to the choice process. What is clear however is that a discourse of emotion played a crucial role in how these mothers articulated, accounted for and legitimated alternative claims to be what it means, or should mean, to be 'responsible' and 'reasonable'.

In a similar vein to Edwards, who is interested in analysing emotion as a 'way of talking' (1999, p. 278), I have explored the ways in which the articulation of emotion can be understood as a form of 'social action' (Wetherell, 2003) and a discursive resource that (aims to) give socio-cultural intelligibility to certain representations and embodiments of 'active' and 'responsible' parenting. Caroline's distinction between a 'cold and clinical' approach and the 'values end of it' invoke a discourse of emotion and feeling, making her motivations and reasons for choosing appear intangible, unspecified and distinctively subjective. This approach is therefore favoured by some mothers on the grounds that it constructs the child as an inimitable and highly individualized subject, and indexes the child as experiencing emotions, ways of behaving and predilections unique to them. To reduce emotion to a kind of subjective or ephemeral sense-making is to undermine the interactional business that emotion can perform in these contexts (Edwards, 1999). Such a view of emotion as performative, as something which is built up descriptively in interaction as a response to social and material practices (Moir, 2005), has implications for how emotion is viewed in the context of school choice. Here, emotion can be understood as an expression of refusal and resistance and a deliberate and powerful counter-hegemonic undertaking.

What emerges from the voices of the mothers featured in this article is the centrality of child in this process. These mothers wish to reclaim the child as central

to the framing of their choice. This explains why concepts and practices that register a discourse of emotion feature so predominantly in the way mothers narrate their experiences of choice. These mothers judge the cold and clinical approach to be far removed from the realm of sensation and feeling, of the personal and the needs of the child. Hence, emotion performs a double role: it produces an index of strain and is one of the ways of being ethical in these contexts. In this way emotion is not a simple 'expression' but instead emerges as a powerful discursive resource put to service in 'the situated rhetoric of description and counter-description, narrative and counter-narrative' (Edwards, 1999, p. 271). In other words, emotion is something which appears to be deliberately constructed in talk, socially constituted and culturally fashioned through a particular set of concerns, valuations and preferences.

### **Conclusion**

In this article I have traced the tendency among some mothers to produce a simultaneous denial and re-enactment of the consumer position, thereby complicating the notion that mothers reject any construction of themselves as consumers (Reay, 1996). Rather, this article points to the way resistance is often performed within forms of co-operation and accommodation. The ethical imperative among some mothers to maintain a view of the self as compassionate, caring and thoughtful points to the way in which some mothers rework dominant images of the chooser as a utility-maximizing subject (*homo economicus*). The elaboration of norms around what constitutes 'active' and 'responsible' parenting is sometimes negotiated around the active subordination of consumerist logics to an ethical strand of talk for example, with its appeal to the figure of the child as beyond the calculation and estimation posited through an economic rationality. We might therefore be circumspect about the general applicability of grand claims about the productive power of governmental discourses and rationalities to determine subjects, as is sometimes implied by 'functionalist narratives of neo-liberalization' (Barnett, Clarke, Cloke, & Malpass, 2008, p. 628). It would be a mistake, however, to consider these moments of active and creative resistance and subversion as 'transcending' the forms of normalization flowing from governmental discourses around choice.

The emotional labouring that some mothers perform in relation to their school choice underscores a central tendency in the literature around school choice (David et al., 1994; Reay, 1998). Similar to Reay et al. (2008) who acknowledge the dynamic interplay of logic and emotion in the way some middle-class parents formulate their school choices, this paper highlights the discursive work of emotion as integral to some mothers' decision-making practices. Furthermore, through highlighting the pragmatics of language as a form of social action (Wetherell, 2003) this paper provides a richer and complicated reading of emotion as a rhetorical device aimed at achieving certain ends, namely undermining a consumerist orientation to choice. The veneration of consumer logic in government policy discourse tends to ignore or undervalue the emotional labour framing some mothers' engagements with choice. It is precisely because emotion or the ethical side of caring is thrust beyond the limits of rationalization that some mothers find the 'sovereign' role of the consumer difficult to resist. The role of the consumer carries a popular cultural currency and a set of dialogical, anticipatory and ideological usages (Billig et al., 1988) which enable speakers to register their conversance with authorized and legitimated constructions

of the 'good' parent. The struggles against a consumerist orientation captured in this article therefore signify both the limits of normalization, and therefore the capacity of individuals to exercise agency in relation to discourses, and at the same time points to the potentially constitutive forces of discourses.

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