

# **The Impossibility of “Natural Parenting” for Modern Mothers**

## ***On Social Structure And The Formation Of Habit***

Becoming a mother in contemporary western society is often to find oneself deciding upon a plethora of competing childrearing techniques. Caring for a baby is always an act of culture but in modern societies, it is to experts that we turn for guidance and advice (see for example, DeLoache and Gottlieb, 2000). Broadly speaking, in the modern west, baby and childcare has been split between a rational-efficiency model (for example, four hourly feeds, the rise of domestic hygiene, bottle feeding, developmental psychology and so on) and a romantic model which seeks to dissolve authority and efficiency in favour of a “natural,” more bonded style of care (for example, long-term unregulated breast feeding, the family bed, permissive parenting and so on). This article will explore the renewed emphasis by our “baby-experts” on the second, more romantic model of care, or, what the well known pediatrician William Sears aptly terms, “immersion mothering” (1982: 181), in the latter part of the twentieth century. I will first address the paradoxes that emerge when experts call this style of caregiving “natural” or “traditional” before I move into some of the dilemmas that result for late-modern women when they attempt to enact “immersion mothering.” My contention is that the high personal sacrifice, isolation, and immobility required by such intensive caregiving is antithetical to successful participation in a modern differentiated society.

The ascendancy of childrearing practices which stress primary maternal availability and care, therefore, sit in awkward relation to the (often opposing) bodily experiences and self-identities of most western people, including, of course, new mothers. Indeed, Sharon Hays suggest that “intensive mothering” is in “cultural contradiction” with the dominant ethos of self-interest in modernised market societies. (Hays, 1996) In broad agreement with this statement, this article will explore further how and why contemporary mothers

find it so difficult to meet the expectations of intensive nurture by drawing on contemporary sociological accounts of late modern subjectivity. It is hoped this will contribute to the growing body of research which seeks to provide an account for what is otherwise called maternal “failure” and so often experienced by mothers as a debilitating sense of guilt.

Numerous histories of “the family” show us that intensive, romanticized caregiving carried out by biological mothers in the private sphere is an “invention” of modern economic and political arrangements (Aries, 1962; Shorter, 1975; Stone, 1977; Welter 1979; Badinter, 1981; Dally, 1982). It was only with the division of public and private and the shift from a domestic to an industrial economy, that mothers were cordoned off to a special occupation called “Motherhood.” Prior to this, women mothered with a community of men, women, and children and did so in and around a myriad of other subsistence oriented tasks. However, with the social changes brought about by the creation of a public sphere (populated by *male* citizens) together with industrialization and a free-market economy, women in western societies were no longer welcome to participate in economic and social life; instead they were sequestered to the private sphere as glorified mothers or lowly paid domestic servants. This process elevated motherhood to the status of a divine occupation, imbuing women as (potential and actual) mothers with the high moral ground. (Badinter 1981; Welter, 1979) This pedestal was a dubious and double-edged position generating a situation of profound, albeit romanticized, exclusion.

However, there was, by the late nineteenth century, a rise in bureaucratic administration or what is often termed “instrumental rationality.” This led to the increasing administration of both personal and public life and the submission of human endeavor to the cult of efficiency. (Weber, 1946) The creation of mass society, therefore, initiated a corresponding need to quantify, regulate, and rationalize. After 150 years of extreme romanticization in their roles as mothers, women were then subject to endless expert “advice” on how to rationally administer their homes and the people within it (Ehrenreich and English, 1978; Reiger 1985). Kerreen Reiger refers to this process in the Australian context as the “disenchantment of the home.” Mothers were thus modernized (or de-romanticized) as central consumers of domestic products and as the individuals who *rationally* produced, cared for, and managed the private lives of public individuals. In keeping with the western oscillation between rationalism and romanticism, this belief in scientific rationalism largely lost its popular appeal after World War II. It then came under further critical scrutiny with the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s. As Diane Eyre writes in *Mother-Infant Bonding: A Scientific Fiction*,

The infant of the 1920s and 1930s was known to be in need of discipline. He should not be picked up every time he cried or he would become spoiled and would not learn the important habits of living

according to a strict and efficient schedule. Such advice reflected the great respect adults had for the efficiency of science and industry, although there was little research evidence to corroborate this belief. In the 1940s and 1950s the infant was known to be in need of constant gratification. He should be picked up every time he cried or he would become frustrated and develop a neurotic personality.... In the 1970s, this idealized dyad [of mother and child] was threatened with dissolution.... Bonding was a kind of social medication for these problems at the same time that it seemed a means to humanize birth. It was eagerly purchased by parent consumers who wished to preserve at least some remnant of power of the early maternal relationship as a kind of insurance against the unknown. (Eyer, 1992: 9-10)

The emphasis on maternal nurture as an antithesis to the dominant values of rational efficiency and liberal individualism, therefore, provides an invisible subtext of romantic opposition to western modernity. In other words, contained within this radical critique is a thinly veiled conservatism concerning the "natural" place of women, or more specifically, the natural place of *mothers*. As with earlier historical periods of modernizing social change, mothers thus come to represent the "old" within the "new" or the "traditional" within the "modern." (Vogel, 1986: 17-47; Felski, 1995: 37-8) The caregiving of mothers provides a potent contrast to an otherwise individualistic and self-interested society yet, paradoxically, it is the experts who tell mothers how to be "natural."

As with all of the popular romantically oriented childcare books emerging since the 1950s, there is a clear foundation in the psychoanalytically based theories of "attachment" (Bowlby 1958, 1969, 1973; Ainsworth 1967, 1978) and "bonding" (Klaus and Kennell, 1976).<sup>1</sup> This research, which appeared in a climate of women's increasing civil participation, promulgates the absolute need for biological mothers to remain in constant physical proximity with their infants and small children. Anything less is deemed "bad" mothering and likely to result in psychopathic children. While the popular books depart from the clinical focus of attachment theory, they nevertheless foster and uphold its central tenets.

Most of my readers who are mothers will be familiar with these texts. Most of us have turned to them for knowledge and guidance when we first became mothers and feel overwhelmed by the enormity of caring for a helpless infant. I will take three representative authors and briefly survey their account of "natural," "traditional," or "age-old" mothering, before returning to our central problem of how mothers fare when attempting to enact these demanding styles of caregiving. While the obvious choices might be Penelope Leach with her hugely successful *Baby and Child* or Benjamin Spock's even more successful *Dr. Spock's Baby and Child Care*, I have decided to focus on three slightly lesser known but still widely "consumed" texts: William Sears' *Creative Parenting*, Tine Thevenin's *The Family Bed: An Age Old Concept in Child Rearing*, and Jean

Liedloff's *The Continuum Concept*. These guides advocate an extremely attentive and exclusive style of mothering (a.k.a. "parenting"). For example, all three advocate the "wearing" of infants in slings, infant-led weaning usually generating a breast-feeding relationship lasting between two and four years, and co-sleeping irrespective of parents' day-time responsibilities. The palpable demands of this style of caregiving are clearly felt by the mother much more than the father, though this is presented as a biological inevitability unworthy of further investigation.

In a sensationalist section entitled "Where's My Mummy?" Sears attempts a "balanced" response to the issue of mothers engaging in *any* activity other than mothering. He asks:

Can you carry this attachment too far? Isn't separation a normal maturing process for the baby? Is my [sic] immersion mothering fostering an unhealthy dependence? ... The question is not so much one of dependency but one of trust. Your baby cannot trust you too much.... Most babies ... do have some unexpected need periods and stress periods each day. Being away from him during these times deprives him of his most valuable support resources...: Children are spontaneous, and parenting [sic] means being available when children's spontaneous activities occur. An alternative to part-time mothering is immersion mothering, of being consistently available and attuned to the needs of your baby. (Sears, 1982: 181-3)

Sears is specifically opposed to mother's working outside the home and encourages 24-hour embodied care, alongside a disciplinary technique he calls, "loving guidance" (13). Together they amount to an utterly exhausting regime of caregiving and patience for the mother. Her role as isolated caregiver precludes her participation in both paid work and socializing but we are assured this is a "natural" and "traditional" state of affairs. One wonders how such a blatant ignorance of history could go unnoticed by both Sears and his readers, but we have only to remember the emotional power of the word "mother." In the name of this word, Sears manages to reconstruct the past and foreclose much of the future for new mothers.

Like Sears, Tine Thevenin grounds her ideas in attachment theory (1987: 6). She draws on an eclectic mix of Bowlby's scientific research, anecdotal evidence, and personal experience, to argue the case that parents (read: mothers) should sleep with their children, lest they become pathologically insecure. Thevenin sets up an opposition in her text between mothers who are "natural" and good (and can therefore sustain repeated night waking) and those that we have to conclude are "bad," or at least unnatural, because they cannot manage it. She exploits maternal guilt by drawing overdetermined and unnuanced comparisons between non-western cultures and western ones. After illustrating a typical "family bed" scenario of an infant waking for the breast followed

by a toddler waking and clasping "Mama's ... hand" while "Papa's dreams were not even interrupted," (1987: 7) Thevenin writes,

Whether it be on a Japanese "futon," or under an arctic caribou skin, on the bare African ground, in a large four-poster bed, or in a double-twin sized bed, whether they be poor or rich, large or small, families all over the world sleep together, and have done so since the beginning of mankind. (1987: 7)

Jean Liedloff's extremely popular *The Continuum Concept* also espouses a return to "nature," this time via her own would-be anthropological account of living with a stone-age tribe. Liedloff spent two years living with the Yequana Indians in the Venezuelan jungles, and from this experience she derived a set of "natural" principles for becoming effectively and happily human which she termed the "Continuum Concept." Liedloff postulates an infancy of extreme dependence as the universal human condition, which, when fulfilled, leads to a highly independent, productive, and self-confident individual. Not unlike Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* (subsequently refuted for its extreme idealization of a complex society (Freeman, 1983)), Liedloff depicts the Yequana as devoid of aggression and unhappiness. She attributes this to their more attached nurturing styles in infancy and early childhood. Based on her observations she suggests a long "in-arms" period where the infant is never away from human contact, sleeping with infants and children, long-term unregulated breastfeeding into early childhood, and the allocation of important social tasks to children. She steps right into the shoes of '60s resistance in her rejection of rationalist models of childcare (which often amounts to a repudiation of maternal independence), particularly those which seek to "train" the infant into obedience. She writes,

Babies have, indeed, become a sort of enemy to be vanquished by the mother. Crying must be ignored so as to show the baby who is boss and a basic premise in the relationship is that every effort should be made to force the baby to conform to the mother's wishes. Displeasure, disapproval, or some other sign of a withdrawal of love, is shown when the baby's behaviour causes "work," "wastes" time, or is otherwise deemed inconvenient. This notion is that catering to the desires of a baby will "spoil" him and going counter to them will serve to tame, or socialize him. In reality, the opposite effect is obtained in either case. (1975: 32)

Thevenin and Liedloff seem blissfully unaware of the social differences between a hunter-gatherer society and a modern one other than to deem the former "good" and the latter "bad." The corollary to this crude formulation is that western mothers have become too "civilized" to care and that this

socialization must be expurgated in favour of a “natural” way of life. As Marianna Togovnick points out, the “primitive” is constructed as an “empty category” in this kind of formulation; a site of redemption upon which westerners can project their own anxieties and fantasies. (Togovnick, 1990) A close reading suggests, moreover, that advocates of “natural” parenting in fact select childcare practices that correspond to current western anxieties,<sup>2</sup> for example, the “breakdown” of the family, or the changing role of women. And so, women are encouraged to mother with the embodied devotion simplistically attributed to “primitives.” Conversely, practices which lack meaning for the west (and may indeed be viewed in less savoury terms) such as the twice daily enemas administered to African infants (see DeLoache and Gottlieb, 2000: 69) or the tight swaddling of infants in medieval society (see Badinter, 1981), are conveniently overlooked. It is rather naively assumed that the stability or harmony lacking in *us* can be found elsewhere and then simply appropriated, as if culture were as simple as stitching a patchwork quilt. Again this is classic romantic nostalgia for the “noble savage” arising in conditions of destabilizing social change. It depends on the glorification of social practice in non-industrialised societies, and the demonization of practices in industrialised ones.

Like most books in this intriguing genre, these three advocate “natural” or “age-old” styles of child care from within entirely modern paradigms. That is, they *assume* special access to some unadulterated, traditional wisdom and then proceed to demonstrate (and defend) this through the process of scientific study. It kills two birds with the one stone so to speak, by defending the natural or instinctual (which, in this instance, doubles for caring, softer) approach with the indisputable rigour of science. No matter what ideological ends the research serves (conservative family values or romantic resistance to the rational-efficiency model), it does so under the powerful rubric of science. This carries with it its own specific set of dilemmas, yet these experts have been spectacularly successful in disseminating their ideas popularly as a *challenge* to scientific-rationalism. It is a perplexing, infuriating, and humorous style captured in an exemplary quote by Sears: “Yes, [he says] we are finally proving what the common sense of species survival has known all along.” (1982: 181) Thevenin, too, commits herself to this absurd logic. She writes, “Before this natural behavior will again become accepted, its importance and benefits ... will have to be proven scientifically.” (1987: 6) Under the emotional power of “instinct,” in other words, the experts have managed to obscure their own status as scientists rationally procuring more and more knowledge on the categories of motherhood, infancy, and childhood. This is classic enlightenment thinking: the improvement of the human condition through the use of scientific reason, yet it has managed, cleverly indeed, to fashion itself as a powerful critique of that very paradigm.

It is clear, then, that these authors engage in *rhetorical strategy* to present their own partial and loaded (that is, “natural”) account of what is “best for baby.” An account that *can only ever be modern* because it is ensconced within

a public debate of competing truth claims; because it is conveyed through the abstract mediums of science and writing; and because it is read by individuals largely divested of their "traditions." Both the rational and the romantic models of "baby and child care" are therefore established tropes which operate on a contrived antithesis in the face of a much deeper unity: the modern drive for specialist knowledge and the associated competition that arises from such pluralism. Thus, even the so-called "natural" position currently in favour, functions as one *among many* voices competing for the allegiance of new mothers. As such, this expert discourse is itself emblematic of the shift from predetermined tradition (the organic and unquestioned transmission of social custom) to a constantly revised present (the modern reflexive world order where multiple discourses compete for truth status). As Eric Hobsbawm has pointed out, such a construction of the past is a fiction of the modern imagination—an "invented tradition"—always already implicated in the modern world view (1983: 1-2).

This returns us, then, to our central problem: how and at what cost mothers function in a modern differentiated society *as* a "secure base." While it is customary to challenge this as a "scientific fiction" if one wants to defend the rights of women, I would like to pursue a different angle here. I would like to suggest that infancy and early childhood *are* periods of high emotional and physical dependency and, moreover, that this is not a pure invention of patriarchal science. Perhaps to state the case more clearly, and lend it the weight of my own mothering experience, I believe infants *do* require a long period of intensive, embodied nurture. *The problem is not the fact of this requirement but rather that meeting this need has come to rest exclusively, and in isolation, on the shoulders of biological mothers.* This historically novel situation is precisely what is left unsaid and therefore unproblematized in popular accounts of "natural" parenting.

Again, if we look at social histories of private life we can see that isolated caregiving is a product of the modern gendered split between public and private spheres. *There is nothing "traditional" about this.* Therefore, while mothering as a practice has intensified through the post-enlightenment emphasis on "good mothering," this has also taken place in a context of diminishing support with the loss of the traditional, coherent community or "gemeinschaft" (Tönnies, 1957 [1887]). Mothers are thus attempting to carry out rigorous schedules of attached mothering in an increasingly fragmented and unsupportive social context. And while *some aspects* of the attachment style may be derived from non-industrialized cultures, the fact that this style of care is first encountered through the purchase and consumption of books themselves written by experts and then carried out by privatized mothers in isolated nuclear families, means "natural" or "attachment" parenting cannot claim in any truthful sense to be outside of modern practice. This presents us with a double bind, for mothers are urged to carry out (invented) traditional practices in a modern context that is neither structurally nor socially amenable to a feudal way of life. The

expectation for “traditional” styles of care in a context that lacks traditional systems of integration and social support is thus to force a “cultural contradiction” on women; it is to force them to be against the social structuration of *their own* culture.

Advocates of “natural parenting” assume that conventional Western childcare techniques are little more than bad habits to be modified.<sup>3</sup> However, habits like pushing a pram or sleeping separately from our children are not so easily ‘unlearned’ once internalised (as much by our own experience of nurture as the social values around us). John Dewey, for example, reminds us that so-called “bad habits” override our conscious intentions and impel us toward certain forms of behaviour. (Dewey, 1922) While more recent sociological theorists Pierre Bourdieu (1977) and Paul Connerton (1989) argue that habits are so powerful precisely because they embody cultural knowledge and history. Bourdieu has coined the term “bodily hexis” in reference to the process whereby “political mythology ... [is] embodied [and] turned into a permanent disposition, a durable manner of standing, speaking and thereby of feeling and thinking.” (1977: 93) In other words, the formation of habit is a social process that occurs below the level of awareness. It is the physical expression of socialization, not easily ‘undone’ by the simple reading of a book. Mothers who attempt to carry out practices lifted out of one cultural context and inserted in another, without due recognition of the complex interplay between practice, history, and place, are bound to feel inept and out-of-sorts. As Susan Maushart passionately points out in relation to demand breastfeeding (advocated by all those who espouse “natural” parenting),

Breastfeeding ties a woman to her child in a way that is much easier to sentimentalize than to operationalize. Indeed, in many ways, the lifestyle demands of [demand] breastfeeding could not be more alien to the expectations of everyday, adult life that today’s women increasingly share with men. Breastfeeding is essentially a vestige of a hunter-gatherer way of life. The wonder is not that it grafts so poorly onto industrialized minds and bodies, but that we persist in trying to graft it at all. To my way of thinking, women who succeed at breastfeeding demonstrate a heroic capacity to defer gratification, and to survive *repeated violations of deeply held cultural assumptions about the proper regulation of time and space...* In a world in which human beings prefer to maintain both physical and emotional autonomy, where “getting things done” is a measure of personal worth, where time is compartmentalized into neat, observable divisions, where families are nuclear and scattered, *breastfeeding is nothing less than a culturally subversive activity.* (Maushart, 1997: 227-8 [Emphasis mine])

We see that mothering in an attached way, requires a home base, however, this “home base” is often a no-man’s land (literally there are very few men here)



on the social periphery. In a socially differentiated world, then, attached mothering means moving to a geographic and social place of invisibility and irrelevance. It means "one" (now necessarily two) cannot move in and out of the fragmented space with the taken-for-granted level of mobility or autonomy. This is a central theme emerging in the research on post-natal depression. Women are terribly lonely and isolated as new mothers and have a sense of becoming worthless and of losing control. (Rosenberg, 1987: 181-196) And this is in addition to the physical exhaustion of meeting the extremely high demands of an infant *on their own*.

To add to this already problematic set of circumstances, numerous sociologists have addressed in recent years the process of globalisation in late-modern societies. Two notable examples are David Harvey (1990) and Anthony Giddens (1990; 1991). Both suggest that space has "contracted" and "emptied" with the advent of information technologies, such that locality is no longer of prime importance. One may, in fact, have more dealings with someone on the other side of the world, via new communications technologies, than with one's own neighbour. This lack of geographic priority in late-modernity generates a fragmentation of space where multiple centres of power and knowledge operate simultaneously (Laclau, 1990). This means of course that the local context becomes divested of its priority in our lives. As most of us know, local "community" in modern societies involves a great deal of anonymity and flux. These globalizing processes exacerbate the dislocations already brought about by industrialization. It means, moreover, that local community loses both its centrality and its cohesion. For women *who necessarily mother in their local milieu*, this means a corresponding lack of contextualization and a substantial increase in isolation *within* the already isolated private sphere; one cannot depend on the predictability or the traditional support of the local community. Mothering intensively, then, must be set against this impoverished social landscape.

Sociologist Rose Coser, further, suggests that in a modern differentiated society individuals acquire a "multiplicit identity" which comes to fruition or "actualization" in the context of participation in several distinct spheres. We "self-actualize," in other words, by participating in more than one activity system where we can adopt more than one persona and thereby sharpen our sense of who we are. In any one day a modern individual (who is not a mother) might go to work, then the gym, then out to dinner, then on to a friend's house before coming home to retire in the evening. In each specialized context, he or she would elicit specific personality traits and behaviours different from those used in another context. This is what is meant by a "multiplicit identity." However, given that the specialization of spheres required for such multiplicity depends on the sequestration of moral concerns (Giddens, 1991: 196) and domestic labour, mothers cannot cultivate multiplicity. Because mothers *belong* to the category of moral concerns and domestic labour, they are necessarily "bracketed out" to use Giddens' apt though rather disturbing phrase. This

means that mothers are obstructed from developing modern identity formations by their status as *attached* caregivers. This very close attachment, promulgated as the only acceptable form of mothering, in effect “brackets” women “out” of their own society. Coser puts this more directly: “The fact that women are supposed to give the priority of their attention to the family of procreation *puts them in a premodern role*—that is, in which they do not share the pattern of role differentiation that is customary for modern men” (1991: 113). Mothering is premodern precisely because it is unified and restricted, because it lacks the segmentation that permeates almost all other modern occupations, and because it takes place in one time-space locale. Thus while modern mothers live in a highly differentiated society, the expectation (and often the desire) to remain in perpetual contact with a small child runs counter to the structural requirement of unfettered participation in multiple spheres.

When we reflect on what Coser terms the “cultural mandate” (1991: 113) of “attachment parenting,” we arrive at a mothering profile that creates an irresolvable inter-subjective antithesis between the mother and her child, despite the pretensions of “bonding.” For “immersion mothering” is synonymous, in the end, with social exile. Following the prescribed parenting practice creates for mothers an ontological and physical condition that cannot be readily accommodated in the structures of modern society. The result is either social exclusion or the exhaustion of trying to combine normative opposites (home and work, public and private, childcare and leisure). This is a contradiction at the heart of modern culture that cannot be ameliorated by spurious returns to nature or by appeals to an already invented tradition. In the context of a globalizing, fragmenting society, women cannot meet the demands of “immersion mothering” without breakdown pathologies (including depression, guilt, suicide, despair, and infanticide) because no one can comfortably—let alone happily—live outside the dominant values and social structure of the society they were born into. By making this contradiction clear, however, it is possible for mothers to see the problem as one located in social structure and not in their parenting practices or time management. A broader realization of the nature of this contradiction would force us to collectively revise our assumptions about what constitutes “good mothering.”

<sup>1</sup>Drs. Klaus and Kennell have interestingly re-titled their classic text starting *with Maternal-Infant Bonding* (1976) moving to *Parent-Infant Bonding* (1982) and most recently adopting the simple *Bonding* (1995).

<sup>2</sup>I thank Sarah Hewat for this idea. Private conversation. Elwood, Oct. 2000.

<sup>3</sup>I thank Sarah Hewat for drawing my attention to the usefulness of Dewey, Bourdieu and Connerton for a way of understanding the “cultural contradiction” induced by “natural parenting” for modern mothers. She skillfully applied these ideas to the theme and graciously allowed me to include her material in this paper.

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