

INTRODUCTION

Starbucks, 14th arrondissement, Paris: I have arranged to meet a woman called Caroline. I am hoping she might be able to offer a few pointers on my proposed study of infant feeding practices, comparing rates of breastfeeding and formula feeding in London and Paris. She is a 'breastfeeding counsellor' with whom I have been put in touch by a woman in my language class, who described her as '*the* person you need to see in Paris – she knows everything there is to know about breastfeeding'. Naively, I do not approach the meeting as 'fieldwork'. Rather, I see Caroline as a potential gatekeeper (to the gatekeepers) to potential participants in my research.

A tall, slim, well-groomed woman walks into the café. She is talking to a child in school uniform. I recognise her voice, with its American accent, from our phone call, but since she had mentioned she would be bringing her (breastfeeding) son with her, I hesitate – I had been waiting for a woman with a baby. I approach them as they are in the queue, discussing whether the child can have a chocolate doughnut (his preference) or a bran muffin (hers). I introduce myself, relieved to have found the right person, and we take a seat upstairs.

In the course of the next hour, Caroline bombards me with statistics. 'Did you know that 67 per cent of women in France have epidurals with their first baby? And 47 per cent with their second? Or that there is an 80 per cent episiotomy rate, and 30 per cent C-section rate? They are very into medicalised birthing here. They laugh at you if you say you want a natural birth. You're lucky in England.'

Once I explain my proposal, the conversation moves towards feeding. Caroline agrees that it's an important topic: France has one of the lowest breastfeeding rates in the world, she tells me. 'Seventy-five per cent of women say they wanted to breastfeed, but by the third day only 52 per cent are doing it. That's why La Leche's role is so crucial here. The health professionals know nothing about it, and the government doesn't care because they make so much money out of the formula manufacturers.' 'What was the group you mentioned?' I ask: 'La Leche League, like the one in the UK?'

‘Yes, that’s the breastfeeding support group I work with’,¹ she says. ‘No wonder the world is in such a state, with women so out of touch with their bodies. They’re given the line about “breast is best”, but given bottles in the hospital as soon as it gets tough. The bottle is so normalised that it’s the global symbol for motherhood, even on toilet doors. So women don’t get the support they really need. And then they get all resentful about people who promote breastfeeding, because of this chip on their shoulders saying that we are militant lactivists or whatever. I don’t care if I’m militant! I almost didn’t get help until it was too late with Louis. People need to know this stuff from the word go!’

Before I manage to ask more, she continues: ‘It’s the same with how long women go on feeding. We think that children should be weaned when it suits the mother. But it’s only at 6 years old – 6 – that a child’s need for breastmilk is finished. Only then that their immune system becomes independent. Which is why I still feed Louis.’

As if on cue, Louis lifts up her top and pulls at her bra. The man sipping his latte next to us looks surprised, to say the least. ‘All right, darling’, she says, ‘don’t hurt me, it’s coming.’ I do my best impression of nonchalance.

Looking back at my field notes a year later, I am amused by my shock.

This book profiles research with women in London and Paris who are members of La Leche League (LLL), an international breastfeeding support organisation founded in 1956 in the United States to support ‘mothering through breastfeeding’. The text focuses on the accounts of a small but significant population of mothers within LLL who practise ‘attachment mothering’. Attachment parenting – now a global movement with roots in the UK and the US – endorses parent-child proximity and typically involves long-term, on-cue breastfeeding, baby ‘wearing’ (Figure 0.1), and co-sleeping.

The endorsement of ‘full-term’ breastfeeding (up to eight years in the examples here, though typically for around three to four years) provides a case study by which to explore the recent ‘intensification’ of mothering. This trend is identified by a range of scholars writing about mothering in both the UK and the US (Arendell 2000; Avashai 2007; Bell 2004; Douglas and Michaels 2004; Duncan et al. 2003; Hays 1996; Lee 2007a, 2007b; Lee and Bristow 2009; Mather and Saugeres 2007; Milkie et al. 2004; Pugh 2005; Riggs 2005; Shaw 2008; Tronto 2009; Warner 2006), as well as beyond (Faircloth, Hoffman and Layne, forthcoming).

According to these scholars, the social role of mothering has expanded in recent years to encompass a range of tasks beyond the



FIGURE 0.1. A mother wearing her baby in a sling at a 'nurse-in', Paris, October 2006, author's photo

straightforward rearing of children. Parents do much more than simply feed, clothe and shelter their children today, and it is this 'more' that is of interest here (Hays 1996: 5). The argument is that this new framework of 'intensive mothering' has meant that mothering is now understood to be a vehicle to personal fulfilment for women. This book therefore builds on and goes beyond traditional

approaches to kinship in anthropology by looking at how relatedness is understood in conjunction with constructions of the self: for some women in this sample, being an (attachment) mother is akin to a vocation, and their primary nexus of what I refer to (after Goffman 1959) as 'identity work'.

Breasts (and milk) are sites of multiple meaning, both as objects and as extensions of agency. Within anthropology and sociology, however, breastfeeding is generally explored either as a question of kinship (does it make us related?) or as a policy problem (why don't more women breastfeed?). The approach here is novel to the extent that breastfeeding is understood as an index of intensive mothering and a critical aspect of women's identity work. Of course feeding has long been central to the maternal identity, yet today, I argue, it is a particularly moralised affair. A strong orthodoxy (at the level of policy, at least) dictates that 'breast is best' – an injunction that affects women whether they breastfeed or not (Knaak 2005). To a very real extent, infant feeding is an embodied measure of motherhood (Sachs 2006), which has repercussions for virtually every other aspect of infant care (where the baby sleeps, who can care for it, etc.). In an era of 'informed choice', breastfeeding therefore operates as a highly moralised signifier dividing women into different camps along purported axes of child-centred or mother-centred forms of care.

Specifically, then, the book sets out to answer the questions of why and how infant feeding has become so tied to maternal identity work. Certainly, individual choices are both visible and justified with reference to wider social patterns, but at the same time, infant feeding remains an acutely personal and accountable issue within mothering. Failure to breastfeed, amongst certain circles of women, can bring about a 'moral collapse' incomparable with 'failure' in other aspects of parenting (Lee 2008; see also Crossley 2009 for an auto-ethnographic perspective).

In taking their 'successful' (Avishai 2007, 2010) mothering practices to an extreme with full-term breastfeeding, the women here invite critical engagement with their 'accountability strategies' (literally, how they explain why they do what they do). Narratives are understood to be central to the construction of the self (see Miller 2005): in explaining their non-normative behaviour, these women provide commentary from the margins that prompts reflection on wider norms of maternal identity work and feeding. Whilst these women practice a form of infant feeding that is validated by wider policy directives emphasising the risks associated with formula milk

use, their identity work is not as straightforward as may be expected. Indeed, women sit at a juncture between affirmation and opprobrium, highlighting a significant dissonance between statistical, ideological and cultural norms.

The accountability strategies women draw on (various forms of the natural, represented by evolution, science or instinct) already carry considerable cultural authority but are magnified by this group of mothers. The methodology used here, exploring both the stated rationales that women offer and observing the behaviour they display, dovetails into a discussion of ‘accountability’ (Strathern 2000). Throughout their narratives women both give their explicit rationalisations for full-term breastfeeding (their wish to ensure the health and well-being of their child) and reveal implicit intentions (tying this maternal duty to personal identity formation).

To explore the link between maternal identity work and infant feeding, I conducted long-term, in-depth fieldwork with women in LLL groups in London and Paris (both French-speaking and anglophone).² This fieldwork, conducted over the course of twelve months in 2006–07, provided the opportunity to follow women’s experiences over an extended period of time, often from the early months of their child’s life to well into the first year. This, in turn, allowed me to trace the evolution of particular women’s attitudes towards infant feeding, which in some cases moved from moderate interest in establishing breastfeeding to passionate advocacy of full-term feeding. For the most part, the book focuses on the accounts of mothers; forthcoming research incorporates the accounts of fathers to ‘triangulate’ the parenting experience in the context of competing accountabilities in family life.

The term intensive mothering is used to refer to the general climate in which mothers (in the UK) currently raise their children (the argument later is that this climate is far less evident in France). Women in LLL may or may not internalise the injunction to mother intensively; where they do, they generally do so according to the ‘attachment parenting’ style, which is but one of many styles by which mothers care for their children intensively. Yet the attachment mothers focused upon here should not be taken as typical members of LLL – many women in the organisation do not show interest in the attachment parenting style of care or long-term breastfeeding. Those women I have classified as attachment mothers tend to be those who are most vocal, or ‘militant’ (as they sometimes put it) about the benefits of long-term breastfeeding, and it is their accounts that presented themselves most evidently for analysis.

A note on the title is therefore in order. Rather than being a statement about these mothers being ‘militant lactivists’, it is intended as a question seeking to understand why, how and with what implications such a label is used. As one attachment mother indicated, when it is used, ‘it’s fun because it’s ironic. When others use it, it’s not funny at all. It’s insulting, because it ascribes a aggressive, combative, maliciousness to our behavior that doesn’t exist.’

My own biography, of course, also plays a part in this account. One of the most frequent questions I am asked about the research is why I was interested in this subject at all, particularly as a woman without children. Much of my interest is shaped by my own mother, who happily describes herself – around the time that she gave birth to me, at least – as a ‘clog-and-dungaree wearing hippy’. I was born at home, on a farm, and breastfed for nearly a year, which in 1982 was even more unusual than it might be now. My mother was a National Childbirth Trust educator, we used homeopathy to treat ailments in childhood, and many of my ‘routine’ vaccinations were delayed or avoided all together. Attachment parenting (and the associated values and practices) comes easily to me as I imagine how my own mothering might look.

Writing about the research has therefore inevitably been an exercise in writing about the self. Readers will no doubt recognise the tension inherent in anthropology, which sees researchers both participating in and objectifying social life. The process of reflection and analysis could sometimes be painful – I was forced to question things that had for so long seemed so straightforward (and that retain an ‘affective’ hold over me, even now). Issues faced by feminists, and feminism, became salient; Bobel’s phrase ‘bounded liberation’ (2001) went some way towards describing the intersections of breastfeeding and ‘empowerment’ but also, as I discuss in the penultimate chapter, felt quite one-dimensional and problematic.

Doing Anthropology ‘at Home’

Dangers attend anthropological research done in a familiar culture, as Richards’s preface to Strathern’s (1981) *Kinship at the Core* makes evident: cultural know-how can close down the potential for seeing the subtle differences which enlighten our accounts. In later work, Strathern complicates the bases of such concerns by differentiating the ‘at-homeness’ of anthropologist and informant. More than anything else, she says:

What one must know is whether or not investigator/investigated are equally at home, as it were, with the kinds of premises about social life which inform anthropological enquiry. One suspects that whilst Travellers and Malay villagers [her examples of other sorts of anthropology done 'at home'] are not so at home, in their talk about 'community', 'socialization', or 'class', for example, Elmdoners are [referring to her work in an Essex village]. ... The personal credentials of the anthropologist do not tell us whether he/she is at home in this sense. But what he/she in the end writes, does: whether there is cultural continuity between the products of his/her labours and what people in the society being studied produce by way of accounts of themselves. (Strathern 1987: 17)

In doing anthropology at home, one does not simply hope to reproduce a script identical to those of one's informants. Indeed, the 'anthropological processing' (Strathern 1987: 17) that goes on means that our informants' accounts become 'data' that we overlay with analysis. There is therefore 'always a discontinuity between indigenous understandings and the analytical concepts which frame the ethnography itself' (Strathern 1987: 18). Mosse therefore calls ethnographic writing 'necessarily anti-social' (2006: 935) in that the inevitable split between field and desk (a distinction ever more muddied) leaves writing itself as the primary exit strategy from 'the field'.

So whilst anthropology at home involves a continuity between informants' cultural constructs and one's own, 'versions can always be challenged. ... People may object to the value put on what they supply' (Strathern 1987: 26). This was certainly the case with my informants, who were unimpressed with an early conference presentation I made (which was posted on the organisers' website). The paper was an 'anthropological account' exploring the evolutionary claims around attachment parenting (an early version of Chapter 6 here). It differed from the anthropological accounts my informants had perhaps expected – that is, those that advocate parenting according to 'primitive' styles (e.g., biological anthropology or ethnographies of hunter-gatherer groups). My position as ethnographer was quite complex, then, in that I elicited accounts from my informants on the basis of expertise they assumed would validate their practices (despite no promises on this front); furthermore, my own sense of these assumptions as problematic was progressive.

Indicative of the global nature of the attachment parenting network, along with emails from LLL members and the chair of the LLL council in the UK, I received numerous emails from attachment parenting advocates in the United States (emphasis added):

Hello Ms. Faircloth,

... I live in the Los Angeles area, CA, USA. I am an active member of LLL. I practice attachment parenting. I still breast feed my four-and-a-half-year-old daughter, and we also co-sleep. I plan on doing both those things until she is ready to stop. I was reading one of my favorite websites, www.thecowgoddess.com when I came across a link to your study. That website is run by a mother who is a fervent supporter of anything attachment of [sic] natural parenting, and she draws/writes comics on those topics. Her latest topic is your study, which someone sent to her. Needless to say, the cow goddess, Hathor, is greatly insulted by your study, as am I. It is very patronizing, to say the least. *But, I do not have the energy to engage in an argument with you over what I know in my heart, and is backed up by science, is doing the right thing for my child.* I have however attached a link to an article from the July 2003 issue of Mothering Magazine, which supports natural family living [discussed in Chapter 7]. I often refer new moms, who are looking for a way to validate their parenting philosophies on [sic] their husbands or other family or friends, to this article. Read it and take from it what you will.

sincerely,
[Name]

'Hathor'³ is the creation of an artist, Heather Cushman-Dowdee, of Los Angeles, California. As she writes on the site, the cow goddess is 'a superhero who wants to save humanity through the combination of nurture, sustainability and bonding inherent in the practice of attachment parenting. Her movement is called the Evolution Revolution, her breasts are her superpower and her sidekick is her baby, always carried in a sling and prominently (politically) suckling at her exposed breast ... Hathor is a mother who stays with her children yet works as a woman of and ruling the world.' The website carried a cartoon (Figure 0.2) of the 'Cow Goddess' reading out loud from my presentation (which actually cites the work of Hausman 2003).

These emails – and many emails since – held a suggestion that my work has disappointed LLL and the attachment parenting community by not advocating their practices more strongly (if at all).⁴ In fact, what irritated many commentators most was being unable to work out whether it was 'for or against breastfeeding'. More than one person suggested that as the author, I was 'anti-breastfeeding', either because I did not have children or because I did and felt guilty for not breastfeeding them. It could not be acknowledged that my approach seeks to describe the conditions that make an intensive

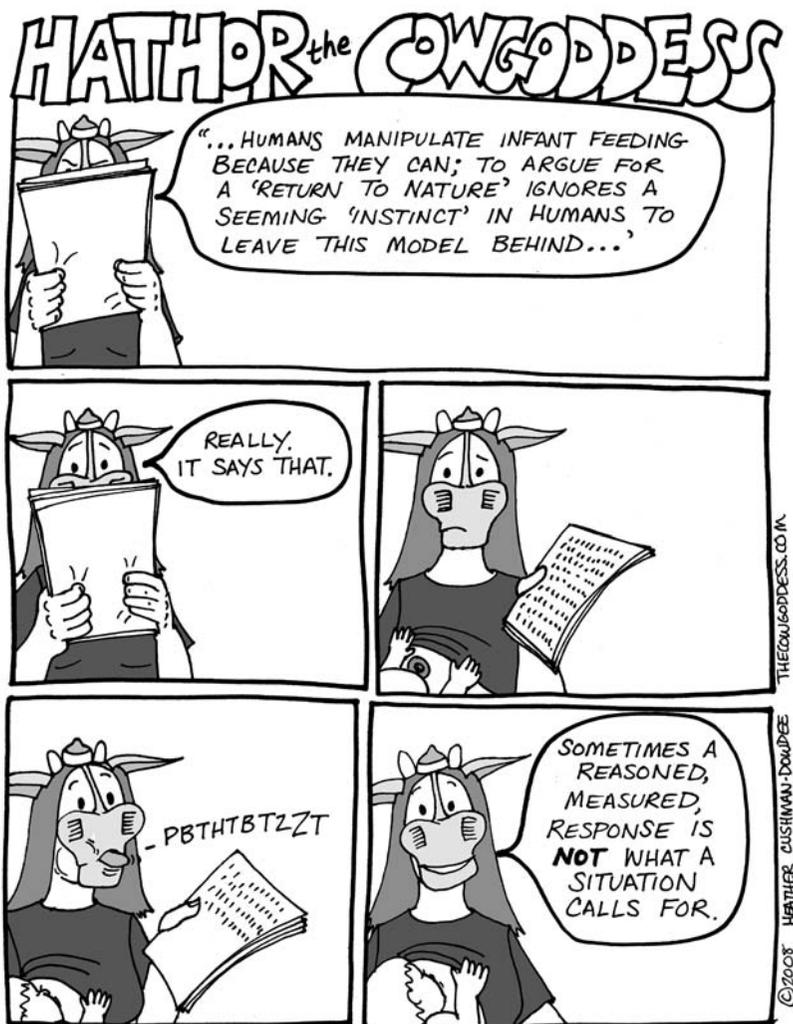


FIGURE 0.2. *Hathor the Cow Goddess*, reproduced with permission of the artist

commitment to one's child salient: there was no possibility but to be on one 'side' or the other. There was, to use Mosse's expression, a moral critique of my ethnographic exit (Mosse 2006: 946).

Doing the research therefore showed me that infant feeding is a peculiarly sensitive issue, given the way it relates to questions of maternal accountability and identity work. It is also one that has been deeply politicised. As one reader of an early draft of this text

observed, a tension inheres in the personal practices of the women I worked with – who are individuals, doing what they want to do – and the role occupied by the organisations or networks to which they belong. In an advisory role to the government, LLL, for example, is actively engaged in shaping the maternity care women can expect to receive in the UK (and elsewhere). Whilst the women I worked with form an interesting anthropological study, the issue at the organisational level became more politically charged than I had ever anticipated. Due engagement with the particular knowledge claims presented in the name of breastfeeding advocacy therefore became increasingly pressing.

The cow goddess example helpfully reiterates that the accounts here are from women who are largely enthusiastic advocates of long-term breastfeeding. For many women, values and practices do not intersect in the same way as those of the women focused upon here: for countless mothers, long-term breastfeeding is just an intimate, pragmatic aspect of the mothering relationship, not a vehicle for public identity work mediated by politicised institutions such as LLL. For others, continuing to breastfeed is not a reflexive choice *per se*, but something they want to stop, yet feel unable to (for the sake of their child or otherwise). These jostling, entangled, emotional commitments are frequently screened out of the glossy narratives presented by advocates who are defensive about their long-term breastfeeding. Nevertheless, it is recognised that they are rarely far from the surface, and that they form the backdrop to women's accountability and identity work.

Summary

Chapter 1 of this volume provides a genealogy of intensive motherhood in the UK and explains the concept of identity work. The second chapter more closely explores the relationship between infant feeding and intensive motherhood, and intersections with government policy. Whilst many women claim to be 'marginal' with respect to their breastfeeding philosophies, this chapter shows that many attachment ideas are in fact quite mainstream and are increasingly being cemented in policy. Chapter 3 – to which readers largely interested in primary data analysis may wish to proceed directly – outlines the methodological approach taken and profiles the experiences of women who breastfeed to full term, highlighting the

difficulty women can face in peer interactions when they continue to breastfeed their children for extended periods of time. For some women, LLL offers a haven from social criticism and isolation. The fourth and fifth chapters therefore outline the history and philosophy of LLL and attachment parenting more broadly, looking at how shared values create and sustain a sense of community.

Chapters 6, 7 and 8 look specifically at the accountability strategies women employ when rationalising their long-term breastfeeding (as evolutionarily natural, scientifically best and what feels right in their hearts). None of these strategies functions alone; rather, they work symbiotically to sustain women's identity work. Indeed, they serve as discursive threads that women weave together in the course of their narrativisation, operating both before and after the fact. In projecting these strategies into wider society, women edify group boundaries and validate their own choices in the creation of 'converts'. These chapters explore the slippage between description and prescription as a means of destabilising the authority of claims for the naturalness of full-term breastfeeding.

The final chapter – based on fieldwork in Paris – provides a contrast to illuminate the UK data. The argument is that in France as a whole, at the time of research, breastfeeding was not (yet) a public health issue, and there was not (yet) a culture of intensive parenting with a plethora of parenting 'options', nor (yet) a widespread validation of emotionally absorbing or 'natural' parenting practices, except amongst fringe groups that were accordingly more marginal. Mothering as an intensive activity and source of social identity was not validated to the same extent – indeed, *not* being too absorbed in one's child was considered desirable. This is denoted by a widely used vocabulary of '*esclavage*' (enslavement) to refer to breastfeeding, coupled with a caution against becoming a '*mère fusionnelle*' (fused or over-attached mother). Such language is largely absent in the UK, at least in the early months of a baby's life.

This book's narrow focus on a nonconventional network of mothers provides opportunities for reflection on a wide range of anthropological topics, from kinship, identity and gender to accountability and knowledge claims. Women frequently cite anthropological studies of 'primitive' styles of breastfeeding as part of their rationalisations. Contextualising 'natural' grounds for behaviour has long been a disciplinary speciality, but in this case anthropology itself becomes anthropological object, forcing us to confront our own theoretical heritage.

Notes

1. Caroline was not speaking as a representative of LLL at this stage, though she was happy for me to use notes from our meeting in my research.
2. Fieldwork was approved by the Faculty Board of the Department of Social Anthropology in Cambridge, which subjected it to a full ethical review in line with the Association of Social Anthropologists' guidelines for ethical practice, retrieved from <http://www.theasa.org/ethics.shtml> Retrieved 22 November 2012 from ASA website. A Criminal Records Bureau check was also completed prior to the commencement of research.
3. Retrieved 14 March 2011 from <http://www.thecowgoddess.com/rea-soned-and-measured/> Page no longer exists, but available via: <http://www.heathercushmandowdee.com/>
4. Certainly not all mothers I met at LLL would align themselves with the label 'Evolution Revolution' – though there is a small population (within that population) who might. Meanwhile, it was interesting that in the twenty-nine comments left on the Cow Goddess website, several women mentioned their LLL groups (generally in the US). LLL itself would not condone Hator, but neither would it object to her stance: her approach is too close to many of members' own.