Constructing the attached mother in the “world’s most feminist country”

Sunna Símonardóttir

University of Iceland, Sæmundargötu 1, 101 Reykjavík, Iceland

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SYNOPSIS

This paper explores the construction of the Icelandic mother within the discourse of attachment, on Icelandic websites offering expert advice on pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding, and care. The paper examines whether attachment theory discourse in Iceland differs from the more traditional discourse of attachment theory and specifically, if the ideas of attachment and bonding have been modernized or recycled to be more inclusive of fathers and to the promotion of equality and shared parental responsibilities. The paper argues that the maternal body is constructed as a site of production and the maternal mind as (possibly) problematic, unnatural, and pathological. The discourse of attachment present on the Icelandic parenting websites incorporates classic ideas about the primacy of the mother and the intensification of motherhood, and little effort has been made to incorporate fathers into the discourse or to include them as meaningful agents when it comes to attachment and bonding.

Introduction

Iceland is the most gender-equal society in the world according to the 2014 Gender Gap Index (Hausmann, Tyson, Bekhouche, & Zahidi, 2014), and several international media outlets have portrayed it as being a model for gender equality and feminism, with the Guardian even describing it as “the world’s most feminist country” (Bindel, n.d.). The parental leave system in Iceland has been internationally recognized as being progressive when it comes to fathers, where 3 months are exclusively earmarked to the father and cannot be transferred to the mother. Affordable quality day care for young children is also on offer and 78% of women work outside the home (Centre for Gender Equality Iceland, 2012; Statistics Iceland, 2014). Despite this, parenting practices and the dominant discourses on parenting in Iceland is a vastly under researched area where most research on Icelandic mothers and mothering has been exclusive to the fields of the health sciences.

Parenting practices in Western countries have undergone a shift toward a strong rhetoric of “the natural,” which is best exemplified in the rise of attachment parenting and intensive mothering (Badinter, 2012; Crossley, 2009; Hays, 1998a; Maher & Saugeres, 2007), but the theories on attachment that underpin those practices have been widely criticized on a range of methodological and conceptual grounds (Hays, 1998b). Despite the criticisms, attachment theory has nonetheless greatly shaped and influenced current parenting practices (Buchanan, 2013; Hays, 1998b).

Pregnancy, childbirth, and the arrival of a child produce parents in need of advice and guidance. This paper provides a discursive analysis of how such advice is given within the discourse of attachment theory and bonding. This paper explores the construction of the Icelandic mother within the discourse of attachment, on Icelandic websites offering expert advice on pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding, and care. The paper examines how the discourse of attachment has been incorporated into the specific scientific discourses of nursing and midwifery presented on those particular websites. The paper also explores whether attachment theory discourse in Iceland differs from the more traditional discourse of attachment and specifically, if the ideas of
attachment and bonding have been modernized or recycled to be more inclusive of fathers and to the promotion of equality and shared parental responsibilities.

This study engages with Foucauldian theories of bio-power as an important factor in the control of bodies, as well as Foucault’s understanding of discourses as “the manifold relations of power which permeate, characterise, and constitute the social body” (Foucault, 1980, p. 93). The Foucauldian subject that ideas are constituted and objectified by power has been important for feminist research because it removed the need for an essentialist “authentic” body (Bartky, 1995; Butler, 1989). What was achieved by feminist engagement with the work of Foucault was “a way of integrating the cultural studies focus on the dialectic between structure and agency with the ‘body politics’ of feminism” (Thornham, 2001, p. 166), while challenging traditional understandings of the relationship between knowledge, power, and politics. It is within this Foucauldian framework of power and knowledge that the analysis takes place while also situated within a critical and feminist understanding of the discourses surrounding mothering practices.

The paper argues that the maternal body is constructed as a site of production and the maternal mind as (possibly) problematic, unnatural, and pathological. Drawing on Foucauldian approaches to discourse analysis, feminist theories, and the concept of mothering as a social construction, the study explores expert advice to parents as a gendered practice of power, following Foucault (1977) in the effort of exposing how ideas and practices become “regimes of truth.” The websites chosen for analysis are well known to Icelandic parents, as they are directed by health care professionals to use and trust those particular websites. The content on the websites is written by health care professionals, nurses, and midwives, and the content can be identified as scientific discourse or “institutional truths.”

The paper starts by giving a brief overview of the parenting framework in Iceland, followed by a discussion of the literatures concerning attachment theory and bonding, and in particular, the impact those theories have had on motherhood and parenting culture. A description of the methods and methodology used in this study is then given. The following three sections present the results and discussions, exploring how the maternal body and mind is constructed within this discursive space as well as examining the discursive limitations fathers have to contend with in attachment theory discourse.

Parenting framework in Iceland: a brief overview

Family policies in Iceland, including paid parental leave for both parents and affordable quality day care for children have had the effect that most Icelandic women combine paid employment with family life. The day care provisions are run by the local government and most children attend day care, 94% of all 2-year-olds and 97% of all 4-year-olds (Statistics Iceland, 2014). Women’s participation in the labor market has always been at a high level in Iceland, one of the highest among the OECD countries (OECD Better Life Index, n.d.). When Icelandic women started entering the labor market at an increased rate in the 1960s and 1970s provisions such as childcare and parental leave were introduced (Centre for Gender Equality Iceland, 2012). It is nonetheless important to keep in mind that in 2014 only 66% of working women had a full time job, while 87% of employed men worked full time, which has been attributed to the fact that women are still responsible for a larger share of the housework and caretaking, specifically when it comes to bridging the gap between the parental leave and day care (Eydal & Gíslason, 2014; Statistics Iceland, 2014). The parental leave system in Iceland has been internationally recognized with Iceland subsequently being viewed as a positive model with regard to parental leave provisions, especially for fathers (Eydal & Gíslason, 2008). The leave currently provides parents with 9 months of paid parental leave, 3 months for fathers, three for mothers, and 3 months which the parents can divide as they see fit. The 3 months earmarked for each parent are not transferable and the political aim of this is “to ensure a child’s access to both her/his parents” and to “enable both women and men to reconcile work and family life” (Act on Maternity/Paternity Leave and Parental Leave, n.d., p. 1).

Research has shown that this has had the desired effects as fathers are building up closer relationships with their children while women and men are more equal in the labor market and share their domestic duties more equally (Arnalds, Eydal, & Gíslason, 2013). Despite this positive turn of events, it is quite rare for fathers to take the 3 months that are jointly allocated to the couple. Similarly, research indicates that mothers, who do not utilize the full 6-month maximum amount of parental leave, receive negative feedback from society (Gíslason, 2005). Femininity is still strongly defined through motherhood in Iceland and marked by the imagery of the person who attends to everyone’s needs before her own (Rúdólfsdóttir, 2000).

In the Nordic countries, including Iceland, there has been an upward trend toward higher breastfeeding rates and duration (Thome, Alder, & Ramel, 2006). The World Health Organization recommends exclusive breastfeeding for the first 6 months of life, with continued breastfeeding up to 2 years of age or beyond (“WHO | Breastfeeding,” n.d.) This policy has been adopted in Iceland, but a “baby friendly initiative” has not yet been implemented in maternity wards. Breastfeeding rates for children in Iceland born in 2004–2008 demonstrate that 98% of children were breastfed when they were 1 week old and 86% exclusively breastfed at that age. Breastfeeding rates in Iceland remain at a high level as 86% of 3-month-old children were breastfed and 67% exclusively breastfed. The breastfeeding rate for children who were 6 months old was 74%, and for 1-year-old children, the rate was 27% (The Directorate of Health, 2012).

Most research on Icelandic mothers and mothering has been largely uninterested in the highly gendered and social construction of mothering and has instead been somewhat policy oriented and exclusive to the fields of health sciences, nursing, and public health. This has also been demonstrated to be the case elsewhere (Crossley, 2009; Esterick, 1989). Even though relatively few Icelandic parents may consider their parenting style as attachment parenting, the discourse of attachment has permeated both the vocabulary of experts and the collective vocabularies of parents. Research on the social construction and representation of motherhood in Iceland is quite limited and a thorough examination of parenting culture in general and the discursive constraints parents face when negotiating their experiences is much needed.
Attachment theory and bonding: impact on motherhood

The theory of attachment was originally developed by British psychologist, psychiatrist, and psychoanalyst John Bowlby. The main tenet of the theory is that an intense and constant emotional and physical attachment between mother and child is needed for the healthy development of the child (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980). Bowlby drew primarily on research involving children raised in institutional settings, juvenile delinquents, and animals, and his findings have been instrumental in shaping discourses around parenting ever since (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980). Bowlby developed the “maternal deprivation” concept, arguing that the bond between mother and child is required to be unconditionally available to their children (Eyer, 1993).

Attachment theory has been widely criticized on a range of methodological and conceptual grounds and feminists in particular have taken issue with it (Buchanan, 2013; Hays, 1998b). Kanieski (2010) has pointed out how the discourse on attachment theory has in turn led to the objectification and pathologization of women and presented women with the need to monitor themselves when it comes to their behavior toward their children (Kanieski, 2010). By ignoring the social and economic circumstances of mothering, attachment theory supports and promotes essentialist thinking about motherhood by incorporating the three grand narratives of positivism, psychoanalysis, and evolution (Franzblau, 1999a). The conceptual error involved in reducing a full range of potential causes for a child’s psychological or emotional problems to a single cause that is “maternal deprivation” has also been highlighted (Hays, 1998b) as well as the apparent need to provide scientific grounding for the cultural assumption that women, rather than men, are naturally better suited for the role of primary caregiver (Eyer, 1993).

However, the question remains: Why has the discourse on attachment and bonding been so alluring and instrumental despite widespread criticisms? And what does it mean that this particular theory is so well received within contemporary expert literature? According to Hays (Hays, 1998b), the answer lies in the way the theory fits so neatly with our pre-existing cultural beliefs about the appropriate role of the mother and “operates so effectively as a means to keep women in their place” (p. 784). Attachment theory “makes sense” for us as it taps into pre-existing ideas about the essential nature of men and women as well as the biological and evolutionary purpose of women’s reproductive abilities, where the relationship between mother and child is made to seem biologically determined but not socially constructed and historically specific (Birns, 1999; Franzblau, 1999b). Additionally, it is important to acknowledge how middle-class, hetero-normative, and Anglo-centric norms of child rearing are assumed within the discourse of attachment theory, making it impossible for certain groups of women to discursively position themselves within the narrative of “good mothering” (Buchanan, 2013; Contratto, 2002). The reassessment and continued critique of attachment theory and its legacy in contemporary parenting culture is therefore an important and necessary site for resistance and re-evaluation.

The rise of intensive mothering and attachment parenting

Recent international research on mothering within the social sciences has focused on how the role of the mother is discursively constructed and defined and how mothers in turn view and construct their own mothering experiences. This research has discovered a shift toward a strong rhetoric of “the natural” surrounding childbirth and child-rearing practices in general, which is best exemplified in the rise of “intensive mothering” and “attachment parenting” practices in which the superiority of breastfeeding is paramount and women are required to be unconditionally available to their children (Badinter, 2012; Crossley, 2009; Maher & Saugeres, 2007). In
Websites chosen for analysis. 

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Websites</th>
<th>Content on websites</th>
<th>Number of texts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brjostagjof.is (breastfeeding.is)</td>
<td>Information about breastfeeding. Written by a nurse and International Board Certified Lactation Consultant (IBCLC).</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ljosmodir.is (midwife.is)</td>
<td>Information about pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding, and care. The website is run by the Association of Icelandic midwives.</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heilsugaeslan.is (Primary Health Care of the Capital Area)</td>
<td>Information on a range of topics including pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding, and care. Written by health care professionals</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total:</strong> 47</td>
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In order to explore how the Icelandic mother was constructed within attachment theory discourse, I needed to identify and analyze that particular discourse within the context of Icelandic parenting culture. I decided to look for data in the realm of scientific and expert-led discourse that parents are encouraged to seek out and trust. Since the health clinics offering maternity services have mostly stopped handing out brochures or leaflets to pregnant women and parents, the educational materials are now mostly found online, and mothers/parents are often instructed to trust the information on certain websites while being sceptical of others. I deliberately chose materials that are considered “mainstream” and not marginal in the context of Icelandic parenting culture. Websites that focus mainly on attachment were not chosen, as the goal was to look at content that was widely accessible to all parents, not just those who have a particular interest in attachment theory or attachment parenting practices.

The materials chosen comprised of content from the three leading Icelandic websites that provide information about pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding, and care. The website’s in question are ljósmodir.is (midwife.is), brjostagjof.is (breastfeeding.is), and heilsugaeslan.is (website for the Primary Health Care of the Capital Area). These websites are run by health care professionals, the content is written by health care professionals and pregnant women and mothers are encouraged by their maternity service providers to look for information on those particular websites. The information presented on the websites is accounted for in terms of medical discourse where information is presented as facts and the websites selected for this study reflect the current childcare materials in Iceland that are available online for Icelandic parents today. I gathered data on the websites in April 2014 and November 2014 by using the query terms “attachment,” “bonding,” “closeness,” and “separation.” My final sample of data included a total number of 47 texts, ranging in length from a few sentences to a 12-page brochure. See Table 1.

The websites chosen for analysis vary when it comes to the amount of content on each website and the number of texts found on each website correlate to the overall amount of content on that particular website. The website for the Primary Health Care of the Capital Area differs from the other websites as the content on that particular website is mostly in the form of brochures, so even though there was only one text that fit the search criteria on that website, it was in the form of a scientific discourse that seemed so “common sense” and taken for granted by my interviewees. I wanted to explore further how this particular discourse was constructed in educational materials and how the mother, in particular, was constructed within it.

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substantial brochure. All content that was analyzed was in
Icelandic and the quotes presented in this paper have
consequently been translated into English by the author.

After several thorough readings of the data, they were
coded and thematized accordingly. I used ATLAS.ti, a qualitative
data analysis programme, to organize, process, and identify
patterns.

It is important to keep in mind that the notion of the "good"
attaching mother should not be seen as a neutral depiction of
reality but rather as a social construction, shaped by power
relations that normalize certain behaviors and feelings. There-
fore, I approached the data asking what was being said and
assumed about mothering within the discourse of attachment. I
was interested in identifying instances where mothers were
told how to act and what to feel and what kind of discursive
contradictions were present in the texts. I also examined the
discursive space awarded to fathers within attachment theory
discourse as that provides a useful mirror which can reflect
similarities and discrepancies. In order to do this, I used
discourse analysis to “locate and analyse the mechanisms by
which meaning is produced, fixed, contested, and subverted”
(Howarth, Torfing, & Howart, 2005, p. 341). I acknowledge the
discursive strategies that normalize and moralize the mother in
the texts, by examining not only what is said in discursive
constructions but also what is not said, what remains “natural,”
“common sense,” and given, as well as the “collections of ideas
[that] are produced and work in practise” (Kvale & Brinkmann,
2008, p. 226). I am interested in the narrative of good
mothering as it unfolds in the texts as it represents the
common assumptions about the proper role of women, their
responsibilities, and their reproductive lives, while refusing a
sharp distinction between “reality” and “representation,” as
they are both discursively shaped.

Constructing the maternal body

Maternal body as a site of production

Your baby needs you, it needs you most of all. It wants your
milk, to be in your arms and hear your heartbeat, hear you
and smell you. You are the source of the child’s mental and
physical nourishment; from you it receives warmth, comfort and security. One day the baby will stand on its
own two feet and do great things, but until then, you are its
whole world (brjostagjof.is).

The notion that the mother should constantly be with her
baby is a reoccurring theme in the texts. The concept of
“bonding” as explained by Klaus and Kennel (1977) is a taken
for granted scientifically sanctioned practise. Following birth
the child should be “placed on her mother’s stomach or
between her breasts to establish the important skin to skin
contact” (ljosmodir.is), and this particular contact helps mother
and child to form the proper attachment to each other. Skin-to-
skin contact is presented as an important precursor for future
attachment and bonding, which should be avoided only for
sound medical reasons. When it comes to “normal” circum-
stances “you shouldn’t separate mother and child for any more
than a couple of minutes during the first few days, most women
wouldn’t want to, anyway” (ljosmodir.is).

Even though the greatest emphasis is placed on the
moments following the birth, the need for mother and child
to be together later on is also evident. The mother should be a
“constant presence,” and mothers are warned that they should
not leave their babies for long as they might risk an
inflammation of the breasts. The mother should “allow the
child to sleep with [her]” (brjostagjof.is) both to help establish
breastfeeding and for the comfort of the child, but also to give
herself a better chance of sleep. The child’s needs are portrayed
as being quite simple and are focused on togetherness with the
mother. The needs of the mother are on the other hand not
discussed or made to seem wholly compatible with the needs
of the child, blurring any opposing needs.

Women all over the world have both now and in the past
done their work with their children in slings of some sort or
wrapped to them tightly in shawls. You should try this old
trick. It allows you to have both your hands free so you can
use them for example to care for other children, prepare,
and cook dinner (brjostagjof.is).

This extract clearly demonstrates the highly gendered view
on parenting and the conservative gender role prescription that
has been deeply embedded in attachment theory discourses.
Here the mother uses her body to carry the child while carrying
out her gender specific chores. This image of the mother
positions her as one of many women all over the world,
connecting her to a collective shared femininity that exists
worldwide and has done so through the centuries. Related to
this strand of looking to the past for parenting inspiration is an
apparent distrust of the modern world:

In this alienating modern world, women have intentionally
or unintentionally started to avoid touching their children,
especially when they are naked. At the first available
opportunity children are dressed in clothes. Is this done to
keep them warm or to avoid touching them? (ljosmodir.is).

This extract references the modern world as an unfriendly
place for children, where mothers have become so disaffected
that they avoid touching their children. Other similar
texts describe the modern world as societies of “speed”
(ljosmodir.is) in which too much “stress” and “stimuli”
(ljosmodir.is) can interfere when it comes to bonding and
breastfeeding. Instead nature should be left to lead the way:

It has been a surprise to many mothers how big a deal
having a baby is. It is a big change and is supposed to be this
way, nature dictates this if she has the peace to do so
(brjostagjof.is)

This particular discourse can be identified as a longing for
an imaginary past where the pace of life was slower and
more natural. This past does of course not exist but reveals
nevertheless certain concerns in the texts about the modern day
world.

The idea about the importance of skin-to-skin contact is not
wholly focused on bonding, but also on the body of the mother
as a site of production. This maternal body, which has carried
the child to term and consequently birthed it, continues to play
a vital role when it comes to caring for the child. Following
Foucault, we can identify this image of the body as a natural
site of production as a discipline that is directed against the maternal body seeking to regulate its functions and operations. The mother’s body provides heat and is considered the best place to keep a healthy new-born warm (ljosmodir.is), as well as being capable of adjusting its body temperature to accommodate the needs of the child:

Once a child is born it is placed on the mother’s breast or on her skin whilst monitoring the child’s temperature. The mother’s temperature goes up 2 degrees to keep the child warm (ljosmodir.is).

This image of the body as a natural site of production not only focuses on the mother’s skin and warmth, but also on the production of breast milk which feeds the child.

Breastfeeding: a pillar of successful bonding

Breastfeeding is one of the greatest gifts we have been given and a unique way for mother and child to communicate. When the small child puts its head towards the breast of its mother and her milk warms it on the inside, it is introduced to a unique closeness with its mother. This provides the child with a solid foundation for life. This close attachment provides mother and child with a unique opportunity to learn about each other and themselves together. Making it easier for them to bond (ljosmodir.is).

Women are told, that through their bodies they possess the “remarkable gift of producing enough milk that contains all the nutrients that [their] child needs” (heilsugaeslan.is), and it is through continued breastfeeding that the other beneficial bodily functions of skin-to-skin contact and warmth can be sustained:

Behavioural research findings show that mothers who breastfeed are more likely to touch their child during feedings. They engage in more eye contact with their child during breastfeeding as well as being more conscious of the child’s needs. These findings indicate that breastfeeding promotes successful bonding between mother and child (brjostagjof.is).

Despite the frequent use of scientific rationale to back the importance of breastfeeding on the websites, within the discourse of attachment, breastfeeding continues to be portrayed as “so much more that nourishment” (brjostagjof.is). Breast milk is an “incredible tool” (brjostagjof.is) and a way for mothers to “protect their children” (brjostagjof.is). Exclusive breastfeeding is constructed as a pillar of successful bonding and attachment and absolutely paramount when it comes to promoting the close primary relationship between mother and child. It should also be noted that the emphasis placed on exclusive breastfeeding for the first 6 months and ideas about shared parenting are contradictory, as fathers are biologically incapable of breastfeeding.

However, breastfeeding in itself is not enough; mothers should want to do it and enjoy it and in practical terms breastfeeding also “ensures that the mother holds the children for the most part of the day” (brjostagjof.is). By focusing on the need for mothers to enjoy breastfeeding power relations that normalize certain maternal feelings are sustained.

Breastfeeding is considered “easy and enjoyable for most mothers” (heilsugaeslan.is) and doesn’t have to be a “hindrance for going out and having a good time” (heilsugaeslan.is), presumably with the child in tow.

Breastfeeding carries with it extensive and intimate touching. Many mothers try to make each feed as short as possible and look at it like a victory if they are able to reduce feeding to a couple of minutes... The child is desperately trying to be close to its mother and receive the nourishment that its body needs (ljosmodir.is).

This extract is a good example of the moralizing tone often associated with breastfeeding advice. As Faircloth has pointed out, “among all the elements of mothering, infant feeding has been one that is most conspicuously moralized” (Faircloth, 2009, p. 15), and this is confirmed in the texts. Breastfeeding is presented as “lovely and relaxing” (brjostagjof.is), and mothers who breastfeed are said to enjoy a more intimate bond with their newborns, even resulting in a “spiritual relationship” between the two (brjostagjof.is).

Breastfeeding is constructed simultaneously as a learned skill where the mother “need[s] to adopt from the beginning certain techniques” (ljosmodir.is) that “requires training” (heilsugaeslan.is) and also, as a completely natural process:

It is interesting to look at the research done by Suzanne Colson how babies intrinsically know how to feed from the breast and how the inner nature of the mother presents itself when she feeds her child and together, child and mother begin breastfeeding. Something which is long embedded in their nature through the centuries and is revealed following the natural act of giving birth (brjostagjof.is).

Breastfeeding “requires a lot of work and dedication from the mother” (heilsugaeslan.is), but at the same time, it is not considered work and rarely discussed in those terms. Texts point out how breastfeeding “saves 8–10 hours a week” (brjostagjof.is) in buying, mixing, and handling bottles and formula, but the time that the mother spends breastfeeding her child is not considered work and not measured in hours or minutes, even though women should be prepared for the fact that “It is considered naturally quite normal for children to feed very frequently. Even once or twice, every hour” (ljosmodir.is).

Within the discourse of attachment on the Icelandic websites, the decision to breastfeed is completely taken for granted, so much so that there is no discussion or mention of a “decision,” per se. Mothers are expected to breastfeed and “it is important that the midwife supports the decision of the mother to breastfeed” (ljosmodir.is). There is no mention of support for women who cannot breastfeed or decide not to breastfeed or indeed mothers who feed their children a combination of formula and breast milk, as they are discursively excluded from this image of the attached breastfeeding mother.

Constructing the maternal mind

Keep calm and mother

Mothers who have had their babies with them and been allowed to bond with them from birth feel like they are rewarded greatly through this relationship. Caring for
The body of the mother is discursively situated as a “natural” object that is always able to perform as nature has intended but her emotional and mental status is also significant. The texts place an enormous emphasis on the mother feeling happy, confident, and being patient. She is instructed to “keep calm” (brjostagjof.is) and “be confident in her capabilities” (ljosmodir.is). Confidence is mostly discussed in relation to breastfeeding and infant care where the mother has to believe in her natural abilities:

It is good to be well prepared, educated and full of confidence. Breastfeeding for women is such a mental thing and they need to really believe that they not only can do this, but that they will do it easily (ljosmodir.is).

This discursive theme correlates well with the prevailing image of the content and capable “good mother” who experiences happiness primarily through her children and family. It has been noted that most Western women are familiar with the discourse or narrative of “good mothering” even though they may respond differently to it (Sevón, 2012). The markers of “good” and “bad” mothers regulate women’s choices and actions and in turn promote a reductive understanding of mothering whereby scientific discourse is used to discipline women into a preconceived mould of the good and self-sacrificing mother (Knaak, 2010). Following Thornton, we can see how “[a]attachment is a project of authenticity that requires women shape themselves into mothers who genuinely enjoy the early experiences with their infants” (2011, p. 12). The mood of the mother is directly linked to the emotional state of the child as “a mother’s depression can influence the bond with the child” (ljosmodir.is) and “when mothers are unhappy; it influences their child, so it will also become unhappy” (brjostagjof.is). An unhappy mother is therefore not presented as a problem in itself; instead, the focus is entirely on the effects of that unhappiness on the child. Similarly, excessive worrying is not problematic unless it affects the bonding process with the child. The assumption that the mother should understand the needs of her child better than anyone else and possess motherly instincts is a common thread in the texts:

Most mothers soon find out with a new baby that they are able to understand their needs better than anyone else. This is very normal as they are with their baby 24 hours a day and the unique bond between mother and child has formed. Therefore, they can trust their instincts (ljosmodir.is).

The mother should trust her instincts and trust the unique bond that she has with her child. This idea of motherly instincts is of course not new, but implicit in all essentialist thinking about the reproductive roles of women. As Bartky has pointed out, “Discipline can provide the individual upon whom it is imposed with a sense of mastery as well as a secure sense of identity” (1995, p. 39), but it does however seem contradictory to place such an emphasis on natural innate ability within this scientific and expert-led domain that parenting currently is.

Happy mums, happy babies?

Mothers are also advised to show patience and give themselves the time they need, if they experience negative feelings they should try to look past them. Mothers are reassured that they are the experts when it comes to caring for their child, as the following extract demonstrates:

At times you might even think that the child is crying because you are a bad mother. It is best to discard such thoughts. You alone are the child’s mother, the best there is, an expert when it comes to your child (brjostagjof.is).

The work that goes into taking care of an infant is trivialized and the joy of motherhood is reaffirmed. The idea that if mum is “happy, your baby will be happy” (brjostagjof.is) is only applicable if the happiness derives from this constant togetherness with the child. A mother who might enjoy some time to herself or away from her child is a discursive impossibility and never mentioned in the texts. Foucault’s argument that one of the important functions of discourse is to render certain courses of action reasonable and to make alternatives seem inappropriate is important when we examine how those discourses surrounding the happy, calm, and content mother are made to seem reasonable, rendering other conflicting discourses inappropriate or even pathological:

Worrying up to a certain degree is normal during pregnancy but when worrying interrupts bonding between you and your child, then I think it is time to seek professional help (ljosmodir.is).

Mothers should therefore self-regulate their behavior and feelings to discipline themselves in order to reach required standards, failure to do so could result in the need for “professional help.”

The issue of women’s mental health has historically been a significant part of the pathologization of the female body, which in turn, goes all the way to the heart of modern science and medicine where the patient was feminized and the physician always masculine (Jacobus, Keller, & Shuttleworth, 1989). Medicalization works by labelling certain behaviors as unhealthy and threatening to the social norm, with the aid of scientific or medical discourses and can therefore become another means by which women are positioned in the place of the Other, justifying their continued subjugation (Ussher, 1992). It is interesting to look at the way in which a range of seemingly normal emotions, for example, unhappiness, boredom, worrying, and nervousness, perhaps emotions that are quite common among new mothers, are portrayed as unnatural and pathological within this discourse of attachment. It does however make perfect sense if you acknowledge how the discourse of attachment constructs motherhood as unproblematic, natural, and biologically determined, then opposing discourses must surely be problematic, unnatural, and pathological. In this way, both problem and solution are dependent on attachment and bonding practices, as defined by this discourse. If a mother fails to bond adequately with her child, she will struggle emotionally, which in turn can only be corrected through bonding and establishing a secure attachment.
Role of the father

Now that I have expanded on the themes relating to mothers in the texts, I turn my attention to the fathers. Even though the focus of this paper is to examine the construction of motherhood in the texts, I feel that it is important to look at the role of the father as well, as it provides a useful mirror on which we can reflect similarities and discrepancies. It is also important to examine if attachment theory discourse in Iceland differs in any way from the more traditional discourse of attachment theories with regard to fathers and if the ideas of attachment and bonding have somehow been modernized with the aim of including fathers more and enabling them to play a larger role when it comes to attachment and bonding.

Although most of the articles simply address mothers directly, some effort has been made to introduce a more inclusive, gender-neutral language of “caregivers” or “parents” but more often than not, the language reverts back into “mother” language. The following extract demonstrates how muddled this effort can seem:

Bonding between mother and child is a feeling that flows from parent to child (one-way) and usually happens as soon as the child is placed in its mother’s arms following the birth (ljosmodir.is, my italics).

The idea of splitting parental responsibilities equally – the father being at home and mother at work, or father as a single parent – is never mentioned. Even though the father is acknowledged as an important person in the child’s life, he is not expected to be with the child constantly but instead provide support for the mother so that she can fulfill her natural role. The father can enjoy a close relationship with the baby, “hold it, talk to it and cradle it, help it to burp and change nappies” (heilsugaeslan.is) and “many fathers who are absent all day want to see their children and tend to them in the evenings” (ljosmodir.is). The body of the father is not constructed as a vital site of comfort, heat, or nourishment for the child and even though the body of the father might be “comfortable on daddy’s hairy chest” (ljosmodir.is), its entire emotional and physical well-being is not placed on his hairy shoulders. His job is to make sure that “everything goes well” (heilsugaeslan.is). At the same time he is “forming a bond with the child and taking on responsibility for the family” (heilsugaeslan.is). His role seems to be that of a “project manager,” making sure that family life runs smoothly, and references of him coming home “from work” (ljosmodir.is) clearly demonstrate that the categories of “male provider” and “female caregiver” are alive and well.

The only possible entry for the father into this discourse of attachment and bonding is as a substitute for the mother. If the mother is not available for some reason, usually after a caesarean, the father is depicted as being an important substitute:

The father is important when it comes to skin to skin, for example if the mother had a caesarean section or if she cannot take the baby for any reason (ljosmodir.is).

His job is to step in and provide the child with skin-to-skin contact but his body is never the first, nor the best choice.

Fathers benefit from not having to contend with discourses that limit their individuality or freedom. They are not expected to fully inhabit the role of caregiver in the same way mothers are and their bodies, thoughts, and actions are not scrutinized or pathologized to the same degree. This frees them from the enormous responsibility that mothers have to contend with in this social and discursive context, in which mothers are responsible for early child care – the ideal and natural parent – and men are valuable assistants. Nevertheless, for fathers, this is not entirely positive, and it is fair to say that their discursive position is also a position that oppresses them as they are excluded from participation in this primary relationship between mother and child and discursively excluded from meaningful parenthood.

Conclusion

It is evident that many of the key components of attachment theory have become a part of the landscape of contemporary childcare advice and knowledge in Iceland. This is true even though attachment theories and attachment parenting would seem at odds with the parenting framework in Iceland as it stands, where the focus has been to promote gender equality within the workplace and the home.

When older structures of oppression start to disintegrate, new structures develop and become “regimes of truth.” Within the discourse of attachment certain “truths” become scientifically sanctioned and reasonable, while conflicting discourses are made to seem inappropriate or even unnatural. Within the discourse of attachment and bonding, the ideal Icelandic mother is constructed as being constantly present, happy, and content with her role, happily breastfeeding and fully understanding of her child’s needs. Her body is not her own but shared with her infant, even after birth, for heat, nourishment, and comfort. This paper highlights the ways in which mothers are instructed to direct all their physical and emotional capacities at their children and how the maternal body and mind is subject to disciplinary practices. It is important to acknowledge that the disciplinary powers that inscribe the maternal body/mind are not derived from a single source but are in fact “everywhere and … nowhere; the disciplinar is everyone and yet no one in particular” (Bartky, 1995, p. 36). Looking at the maternal body as a site of production is an attempt to understand how the feminine body is produced and reproduced within the discourse of attachment theory and how, through bodily practices mothers are taught to embody the ideal, “natural” and useful body that belongs not only to themselves, but also to their children. The body of the mother is discursively situated as a “natural” object that is always able to perform as nature has intended but the mother’s emotional and mental status is also up for debate. By labelling certain maternal emotions as unnatural or damaging while portraying other discourses surrounding the happy, calm, and content mother as natural, mothers find themselves in the position of having to self-regulate their emotional lives to reach the required standard. In this way, both attachment and bonding (or lack thereof) are constructed simultaneously as the problem, as well as the solution for mothers. If a mother fails to bond adequately with her child, according to the cultural script of attachment theory, she will struggle emotionally, which in turn can only be
rectified through proper bonding and by establishing a secure attachment.

Fathers on the other hand do not possess the same useful body and are discursively sidelined and constructed as valuable assistants who can and should show support for the mother–child dyad. Their entry into this discourse of attachment can only be achieved if they act as short-term substitutes for the mother, if she is unavailable due to illness or recovering from childbirth.

The discourse of attachment presented on the Icelandic parenting websites incorporates classic ideas about the primacy of the mother and the intensification of motherhood. The texts promote the scientifically sanctioned ideas of Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980), Ainsworth (1967) and Klaus and Kennel (1977), without any critical examination of their merit or usefulness for modern day parents. Little effort has been made to incorporate fathers into the discourse or to include them as meaningful agents when it comes to attachment and bonding and more often than not the texts refer exclusively to mothers.

The worldview presented on the websites is that of heteronormativity where family consist of mother, father, and child, and it is noteworthy how little attention is awarded to the role or experiences of older siblings. The texts uphold dominant discourses on the family where gender role prescriptions assume the most typical dichotomies of “male provider” and “female caregiver.” In the context of Iceland, this is particularly interesting as one would assume that the increased focus on gender equality and shared parental responsibilities and even the equal rights of LGBTQ people to adoption and IVF would influence parenting advice and the dominant discourses around parenting.

This study adds to the understanding and critical examination of attachment discourse within contemporary pregnancy and childcare advice worldwide. Parenting culture is a vastly under researched area in Iceland and this paper contributes a gendered analysis of the assumptions and discursive constructions that parents need to negotiate in their everyday lives. It is important to acknowledge the possible implications of attachment theory for mothers, parents, and those interested in a more equal distribution of care work.

The findings presented in this paper reveal a small window into a particular domain of scientific discourse that has gained momentum and become “common sense” and scientifically sanctioned by certain health care discourses. Feminist theorists can and should therefore continue to engage with this discourse by offering their insights into the complex issues surrounding the ways in which women as mothers are discursively constructed and the ways in which we are all “allowed” to parent.

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