Resisting, But Not Too Much: Interrogating the Paradox of Natural Mothering

Chris Bobel

Available at: http://works.bepress.com/chris_bobel/12/
Resisting, But Not Too Much

Interrogating the Paradox of Natural Mothering

CHRIS BOBEK

Recently, I invited a local breastfeeding advocate and La Leche League leader named Mary Beth to my "Gender and the Body" class. She framed her talk around "the many obstacles to making breastfeeding work in contemporary western society." Mary Beth promoted constant mother-baby togetherness and the rejection of the shiny new gadgets that new parents are expected to acquire whether they can afford them or not. And she made a compelling feminist argument for keeping baby close. Women can and should trust their bodies to nourish their babies, she said. Say no to medical domination. Say no to patriarchal constructions of the sexualized breast. Take it back. And she was effective. As Mary Beth presented her argument, I watched my students process the information. One student caught my attention. Anxiet evident on her face. During the lively Q and A she finally burst out with the following:

I'm really struggling with this.... On the one hand, I am trying to fight oppression and claim my place in society, get recognized in the work force, you know, get liberated. But now you are telling me that to be really free, I should go back home and take care of babies, breastfeeding them all the time. And it does sound really great. But I feel stuck. I don't know what I am supposed to do!

As she spoke, I nodded knowingly. This dilemma haunts many feminists as they struggle to define and shape their lives and the knot at the center of feminist mothering scholarship. Mothering scholar and sociologist Evelyn Nakano Glenn pointed to the conflict between feminists who regard maternally-derived gender differences as oppressive and those who reclaim motherhood as a source of power and status when she wrote:

We are reluctant to give up the idea that motherhood is special. Pregnancy, birth, and breastfeeding are such powerful bodily experiences, and the emotional attachment to the infant so intense, that it is difficult for women who have gone through these experiences and emotions to think that they do not constitute unique female experiences that create an unbridgeable gap between men and women (22-23).

My aim in this chapter is to respond to this dilemma by looking closely at the kind of attached mothering practice that Mary Beth advocates as an expression of feminism.

Mary Beth is part of an emerging social movement of women I call "natural mothers." The natural mothers give birth to their babies at home or in hospitals; they home school or unschool; they grow much of their family's produce, and sew many of their clothes. The natural mothers seem, at first glance, an anarchism, recalling a time when some women derived their identities from raising families and excelling at the domestic arts. While their contemporaries negotiate daycare, babysitters, and bottle-feeding, the natural mothers reject almost everything that facilitates mother-child separation. They believe that consumerism, technology, and the detachment from nature are social ills that mothers can and should oppose.

The natural mothers constitute a counterculture that enacts a particular form of activism, a kind of "everyday activism," to use Baumgardner and Richards' term or what New Social Movements scholars increasingly find in contemporary social movements—a focus on the day to day content of personal lives, linked with issues of identity rather than economic grievances characteristic of, for example, working class movements (see Johnston, Larana, and Gusfield). Natural mothers, working at the level of the individual and the family, seek to change culture one family at a time. But what is natural mothering's promise for social change? Does this particular kind of mothering trap or liberate women?

Getting to Know Natural Mothering

In the mid 1990s, I grew to know several small intersecting communities of natural mothers. I spent over two years in the field—participating in playgrounds with my toddler and attending La Leche League meetings (the international breastfeeding support organization). I joined a food coop and "Creating Stronger Families (CSF)," an association of those who chose home-schooling, home birth, and other parenting alternatives. CSF met for monthly potlucks and "working bees" in which members assisted the host family with a house project, and held an annual weekend conference that drew families throughout the Midwest. Later, I interviewed 12 natural mothers I met during the course of my fieldwork. Through these observations and interviews, I learned that Natural Mothering merges two lifestyle practices—Voluntary Simplicity and Attachment Parenting—while taking inspiration from Cultural Feminism.

Consciously anti-materialist and anti-consumerist, Voluntary Simplicity promotes a life freed from, as one of my informants put it, "biggering and bettering."

Voluntary Simplicity, also called Simple Living, dictates a lifestyle that derives meaning from relative austerity, minimized consumption and the belief that in-
individual well being is entangled with the well being of society at large (Longacre). Proponents of this lifestyle reject material preoccupations and opt for recycling, and in some cases, bartering and trading in place of traditional market exchange. They seek meaning in "doing it oneself," freed from the constraints of institutions and experts.

The practice of Attachment Parenting (AP), which is related to Voluntary Simpliciy, addresses the concerns of parents who seek to depart from what they believe is the norm in a changing, alienating, and child-denierent culture. Family practice physician William Sears, together with his wife Martha Sears, R.N., popularized AP in their 30 books on pregnancy, birth, infancy, toddlerhood, discipline and nighttime parenting, beginning with The Baby Book in 1993. Now, the Sears are joined by their two oldest sons (also pediatricians) who characterize AP as "just doing what comes naturally" (http://www.askdsears.com/tap/ap2.asp). AP, the Sears argue, is the best way to create and maintain a bond with your children. AP facilitates healthy physical, spiritual, emotional and moral child development by placing a premium on extensive mother-child physical contact: "This style is a way of caring that brings out best in parents and their babies (1993: 2), they say. The Sears acknowledge that AP is not new, but simply "common sense parenting we all would do if left to our own healthy resources" (2).

Notably, while the practice is called Attachment Parenting and not mothering, this terminology is misleading. On the popular website AskDrSears.com, it is stated that "for the first year or two, a child is primarily bonded to his mother" and AP practices inscribe and support this bond. Mothers are attached to children and fathers and other potential caregivers operate merely in supporting roles.

Finally, as a movement that celebrates, rather than denigrates gendered qualities of nurturance and care, Natural Mothering is inspired by cultural feminism's unapologetic reclamation of domesticity and maternity. Cultural feminism, derived from Radical Feminist Theory, is also known as feminine feminism, domestic feminism, and difference feminism. It differs from more popular liberal feminist theory which regards essentialism as the source of women's subordination. Cultural feminist theory, on the contrary, names the devaluing of women's essential differences (whether biologically derived or culturally constructed) as problematic and at the root of sexism. Cultural feminists believe that women have developed their unique social orientation in the context of the domestic sphere, especially through the practice of mothering, as Nancy Chodorow famously argued. Creating a climate that celebrates rather than denigrates difference is the aim of cultural feminists. Natural mothering is seen as a concrete expression of this conceptualization. Nearly 50 percent of the natural mothers I studied explicitly identified as feminists or expressed ideas consistent with feminist politics but did not call themselves feminists. Many of the mothers expressed frustration with a particular kind of feminism (typically seen as the feminism) which they saw as dictating that working outside the home was a measure of a woman's worth; they preferred a feminism that foregrounded their identity as women and resisted male standards.

For example, as natural mother Grace Burton stated:

-785-
CHRI S BOBE L

heart of natural mothering is the way it marginalizes fathers. When I pressed
the mothers to say why they, as women, were the designated stay-at-home
caregiver, practicing what Sharon Hays calls “intensive motherhood,” explana-
tions based on biological difference surfaced. Primarily due to the importance
placed on breastfeeding, mothers seldom shared infant feeding with fathers or other
potential caregivers. Over time, these feeding norms established caring patterns
that persisted throughout mothers’ and fathers’ parenting careers. When the
mother is positioned as the singular food source and furthermore, when nursing
becomes the primary means of comfort for baby, mothers are quickly constructed
as irreplaceable. Based on a deeper understanding of the paradoxes of natural
mothering, I turn to a brief discussion of this particular style of parenting’s poten-
tial for social change.

Can Natural Mothering Fulfill Its Promise?

Most of the natural mothers viewed their lives as strategic missions to effect soc-
cial change. For example, Grace Burton claimed passionately: “I’ve decided that absol utely everything I do is political.” But the expression of this politicization
varies among the mothers. While some natural mothers participate in public ac-
tions, such as “nurse-ins” most strive to effect social change through their daily
practice of mothering outside the mainstream. But, I ask, can natural mothering
form society, one family at a time, or is it simply a form of narcissistic retreat
divid of impact beyond the empire of the individual family?

Sociologist and mothering theorist Barbara Katz Rothman conceptualizes
American motherhood as “resting on three deeply rooted ideologies—capitalism,
technology, and patriarchy.” Katz Rothman argues that the effect of the three
ideologies has been to split motherhood apart, forcing it into a series of dysfunc-
tional dualisms such as mind and body, public and private, personal and political,
work and home, production and reproduction and masculine and feminine, and
I add to this list: nature and culture. Natural mothering, I argue, ably resists two
of these three institutions: capitalism and technology, challenging the bifurcations
that these institutions forge. But at the same time, its discourses of choice and con-

-786-

-787-
where and when possible. Natural mothering, a lifestyle that is simultaneously rebellious and obedient, represents precisely the kind of negotiation within male-dominated and defined circumstances that Kandiyoti theorizes.

Because natural mothering accommodates patriarchy, its potential for social change is compromised. But this is not the only reason, I venture, that the movement is limited. The privilege necessarily attached to this particular lifestyle constrains natural mothering as the domain of the few, especially because natural mothers themselves seem blind to this privilege. Consider, for example, my conversation with natural mother Jeanette Zientarski who spoke of mothering as “changing the world.” She argued for an instinctual basis for her natural mothering much like the intuitively derived practice beyond the scope of rational choice I discussed earlier. When asked, “why isn’t this kind of mothering instinctual for everyone?” she met the question with silence. Recall that the natural mothers “just know” what is in the best interest of their children—mothering this way is driven by feeling, by gut level awareness. Thus, intellectualizing their “choices” is impossible, they told me, implying that my question was the wrong one, that I just didn’t get it. But how can it be that some mothers operate on instinct while others do not? There must be a deeper explanation, and so, I turn to the characteristics of the natural mothers themselves.

All the informants were white and all appeared to be heterosexual; 88 percent were married; 87 percent owned homes; 75 percent of the husbands were white-collar professionals. 81 percent of the mothers had attended college and 69 percent had completed a degree (many of them advanced degrees). Fifty-three percent had significant and often extended travel experience, including living abroad, Peace Corps and missionary work. Obviously, this demographic does not reflect the general American population. These privileged women have access to resources as wives and homemakers, enjoying the prestige that accompanies their class, race, and sexuality. Since beginning my research on natural mothers, I’ve learned that the population is a bit more diverse than I first encountered. “Hip Mamas” (typically women in their 20s and early 30s with a political and or Punk edge who identify with icon of “the next generation of mothers” mother-writer Ariel Gore, lesbian mothers, and working class mothers also number among the women. But, on the whole, the mothers still enjoy what Pierre Bourdieu calls cultural capital.

Because most natural mothers are white and college educated, they are less likely to come under attack for their alternative “choices.” Imagine a poor woman of color spotted publicly breastfeeding an older child—she is vulnerable in a way a woman of more social privilege is not. A mother receiving state aid does not have the option of waiving vaccinations while an economically secure mother with private insurance does. An immigrant woman known to use herbal remedies to treat illness may be scolded by her child’s pediatrician. At the same time, a more privileged mother may meet similar resistance, but her decision will not be seen as a consequence of her assumed ignorance or her “backward” culture. In sum, natural mothering is a parenting lifestyle not possible for everyone.

But it is not only the necessity of some measure of privilege that undermines the force of the movement to effect social change. The absence of an analysis advanced by the movement itself is noted, including the relative blindness the mothers have to their own cultural capital. This blind eye became apparent to me when I asked the mothers to describe the “typical natural mother.” Their answers ranged from “people suspicious of pop culture,” “Moms attuned to the sense of the natural,” and people with “a strong sense of self.” No one cited race, class, or sexuality characteristics as meaningful. This silence was profound and raises serious questions about the viability of a movement that does not fully see itself.

As I’ve shown, while the natural mothers resist technology and capitalism, they fail to challenge patriarchy. Natural mothers work to extract meaning and power from the maternal role, marshalling tremendous creativity and resourcefulness, and framing their choices with pride and a hope for social change. At homeschoolers, homebirthers, and natural health care consumers, they turn their backs on the mainstream. In so doing, they ask important questions about our parenting holy grails. But at the same time that the natural mothers live on the margins and swim upstream, they capitulate to definitions of womanhood and motherhood written in the service of patriarchy. Theirs is not a project of rebelling against the expectation that mothers foreground their children’s needs. Theirs is not a project of challenging fathers to roll up their sleeves and provide more instrumental care (as both Nancy Chodorow and Sara Ruddick prescribed). Furthermore, because natural mothering fails to see the fundamental place of privilege in enactment of the lifestyle, it is vulnerable to cooptation. Natural Mothering resists, but not too much.

Notes

1This is a pseudonym as are the names of the informants I will discuss later in the paper.

2Of course, AP is not contained in the affluent “first world.” Meredith Small for example, takes great care to point out the historical and global practice of AP, demonstrating the anomaly that is Western-style parenting with its premium on independence and mother–baby separation.

3This of course, is neither a new observation nor an original argument. Over 30 years ago, Michelle Rosaldo pointed to women’s childbearing and lactation as impairing their mobility and thus, dooming them to domesticity and subordination.

4An activist tactic through which mothers publicly breastfeed their children in protest of policies which ban or otherwise undermine breastfeeding (see Harmon).

References