The Future of Motherhood

As Warner (2012) aptly notes: “It’s hardly even a matter of debate anymore that the demands of American motherhood have spiraled out of control” (p. 53). Throughout this text we have looked at many factors that have had a profound influence on mothering practice in contemporary Western societies. Theory and popular culture set the stage for how we have come to think about what makes a good mother and exactly who can and cannot adequately fill the role. We have looked at how socially prescribed and condoned gender roles as well as the complications of paid employment work in concert to complicate the lives of women who choose to mother. In Western societies we have seen how neoliberalism and its associated policies have created tensions for women who work as well as for those who live in poverty. And we have seen the effects of mental health paradigms as well as the stresses placed on those who mother outside of what is currently defined as acceptable mothering practice. Such discussions paint a rather bleak picture for many women contemplating motherhood as well as for those who are mothers. While there have been many positive changes over the past few decades, motherhood remains a site of tension for many women in Western societies. Ironically, as mothers today spend more time raising children than was ever the case in the past, regardless of whether they are single or partnered, stay-at-home or working mothers, they are also being encouraged to be productive members of the paid labour force. Although
mothering can obviously be a site of joy and possibly empowerment for women, the structures defining motherhood in modern Western societies contribute significantly to the stresses and strains mothers face and for many result in untenable living situations. Alongside practical solutions that would see changes to policy supporting parenting practice, including increased emphasis and funding for daycare, social and economic supports, and parental leaves, a paradigm shift in how we understand mothering and motherhood is needed. Current wisdom about who mothers best and how that mothering can be accomplished is supported by neoliberal agendas, promoted by media, research and policy agendas, and intersects at a fundamental level with constructed notions of masculinity and femininity. What is best for the well-being of a nation’s women, men, and children is a question whose answer requires a dramatic rethinking.

**Theory Revisited**

While it can be difficult to step outside of our own cultural paradigm to see how we might come to perceive the world in different and less familiar ways, a rethinking of attachment theory provides one example of how this might be accomplished. As seen in previous chapters, attachment theory informed the way we understand the role mothers play in caregiving and in ensuring healthy infant, child, and adult development. To this end, attachment theory has led to the privileging of specific kinds of mothering and mothering behaviours. It has disenfranchised men and women who do not or cannot mother in the ways prescribed by the theory. Like many other Western theories, attachment theory has also been critiqued for its “profound ethnocentrism” (Quinn & Mageo, 2013). What we see as we begin to unpack some of the critical underlying tenets of the theory are the ways it fails to provide valid explanations for mother-infant behaviours in cultures outside of those found in Western societies. If mother-infant behaviours can be shown to vary, we are then forced to think twice about the validity of a theory that purports to explain behaviours in Western societies. Gaskins (2013) asks, “How can a universal evolutionary based process that increases the likelihood of infant survival also be culturally constructed, vary across cultures, and produce healthy members of society?” (p. 42). While it is clear that the behaviours associated with attachment from both caregivers’ and infants’ perspectives are seen in all cultures, interactions of caregivers...
with infants differ markedly across cultures (Gaskins). Attachment theory is premised on some universal assumptions, including, for example, that infants are able to differentiate between familiar people and strangers, and that caregivers have a biological imperative to attend to infant needs. What varies across cultures is the emphasis placed on single versus multiple caregivers, the ways in which caregivers respond to infants, who infants choose to seek contact with when they are distressed, how separation anxiety and fear of strangers is manifested in infants/children, and how children explore the environment around them and use their caregivers as a secure base. These infant and caregiver behaviours may still be used as indicators of attachment, but because they vary across cultures they are more accurately conceptualized as sources for “cultural organization” (Gaskins, p. 57). In other words, how infants and young children learn to approach caregivers and how, in turn, they are responded to, largely depends upon the priorities cultures place on specific behaviours and emotions that meet the needs of their societies. Whereas some cultures value independence and autonomy and use childrearing practices to promote these attributes, others place an emphasis on communal qualities and will use childrearing strategies to achieve these social and cultural goals. The ways in which Western societies have come to privilege certain mother-infant interactions to promote secure infant attachment styles can be interpreted as a construction of Western societies. Further, the mother-centred focus of attachment theory, discussed in Chapter 2, can also be interpreted as a construction of Western societies. This is a focus that has created an untenable situation for many Western women, both as insiders and outsiders of the group defined as good mothers, and for men who could be described as other mothers.

While powerful theories and popular media continue to interpret the mother-infant dyad as critical to infant development, contrasting evidence shows us that “cooperative child care characterizes many (if not most) cultures around the world, cutting across geographic, economic, political, and social boundaries” (Crittenden & Marlowe, 2013, p. 68). Childrearing practices that come from cultures outside of the West provide evidence for a wide range of caregivers available to infants from birth onwards. Studies of the Hazda of Northern Tanzania (Crittenden & Marlowe), the Aka of Central Africa (Meehan & Hawkes, 2013), and similar groups in Indonesia and Northern India (Seymour, 2013) all provide examples of multiple caregiving
arrangements. Closer to home, ethnicity and SES in North America have been shown to impact the kinds of living arrangements in which infants and children are raised (Fouts, Roopnarine, Lamb, & Evans, 2012). The literature promotes the idea that African American families “rely more heavily on extended kin networks than European Americans ... [and] ... lower SES families rely more than middle-income families on extended kin for child care regardless of ethnicity” (Fouts et al., p. 329). However, based on a small sample observational study, Fouts and colleagues concluded that ethnicity and SES are both related to child care practices. Regardless of whether the key variable in predicting multiple caregiving arrangements is ethnicity or SES, for many women in North America, mothering is accomplished as a shared endeavour. Similarly, in a study of children raised in a Kibbutzim environment in Israel, Sagi and colleagues (1985) found evidence for extended care networks and for infant attachment relationships that went beyond mothers to non-familial caregivers. Clearly, “most societies around the world do not expect mothers or parents to rear children alone” (Seymour, 2013).

**Intensive Mothering**

Caring for infants and children by multiple caregivers is a task that is taken on all over the world and can be conceptualized as a “universal practice with a long history, not a dangerous innovation” (Lamb, 1998 cited in Seymour, 2013, p. 116). Still, Western societies, supported by neoliberal ideologies, continue to expect mothers to tackle the lion’s share of child care alone and, for many, to do so alongside paid employment or in other equally challenging circumstances. This bias towards exclusive mothering has dominated Western psychology as well as the popular press for decades. Partly a consequence of assumptions that continue to inform separate and distinct gender roles for women and men, this focus on exclusive mothering also arises from the idea that this sort of mothering is the only way to ensure the development of secure infants, children, and ultimately adults. But the emphasis on secure attachment as the optimal outcome of an exclusive mother-infant-dyad ignores the fact that “there is a wider range of normal emotional development than has been imagined in attachment theory” (Chapin, 2013, p. 145). Childrearing practices are responsible for “shaping culturally consonant people,” a term used by Chapin in her
studies of Sinhala families in rural Sri Lanka and highlighted by others in looking at childrearing practices used to promote autonomous and independent citizens in the Murik of Papua New Guinea (Barlow, 2013), peoples of Samoa (Mageo, 2013), and the Ifaluk of the Pacific Islands (Quinn, 2013). In short, childrearing practices should be seen as those promoting the needs of the cultures in which children are being raised and not as fixed biological imperatives. Whether or not practices associated with attachment parenting or intensive mothering can adequately meet this mandate for Western societies is up for debate. The generation of young children and adolescents who have the most experience of being intensively mothered are just now beginning to take their place as adults in Western societies. However, we know that for many mothers in Western society “the anxiety, isolation, and sense of overwhelmedness that go hand in hand with toxic levels of intensive mothering” (Warner, 2012, p. 53) are not good for women.

Intensive mothering, like attachment parenting, is child-centric, putting the needs of children ahead of parents, minimizing physical distances between mother and child as a strategy designed to enhance mother-infant bonding (Liss & Erchull, 2012). Attachment parents engage in activities such as extended breastfeeding, breastfeeding on demand, co-sleeping, frequent child holding, and “baby-wearing.” Largely, the mandate for intensive and attachment parenting falls to the mother. Even in the most egalitarian couples, attitudes about who is best suited to be the primary caregiver shift following the birth of the child. Men’s and women’s beliefs about gender roles become more traditional when they enter into parenthood and often include the idea that women are better able to fulfill the parenting role and, perhaps more critically, that this role should be of central importance to women (Liss & Erchull). In support of this shift in ideology, Green and Groves (2008) found, for groups of parents who adhered to an attachment parenting ideology that the attachment parenting was largely done by mothers. A significant minority of the attachment mothers interviewed by Green and Groves indicated that all of the attachment parenting was being done by themselves. Many of these mothers reported having never left their infants in the care of others, including the father. Not unlike attachment parenting, “intensive mothering,” a term introduced by Hays (1996), represents the dominant discourse surrounding modern motherhood in Western societies.
As with attachment parenting, beliefs surrounding intensive mothering include the idea that childrearing is a woman’s responsibility and that raising children should take priority over all else. Not only do such tenets create cultural contradictions for women, but, as with attachment theory’s prescriptions for optimal childrearing practices, intensive mothering asks mothers to sacrifice their own needs for those of their children (Liss, M., Schiffrin, Mackintosh, Miles-McLean, & Erchull, 2013). It is difficult, if not impossible, for women to sidestep these issues (Hays, 1996). Intensive mothering has reached a whole new level in contemporary society. Liss and colleagues found that women feel extreme pressure to abide by Western cultural standards that demand highly involved parenting and by the conviction that parenting is best done by mothers. These authors also suggest that contemporary mothers still tend to view fathers as well intentioned but less competent than mothers in meeting infants’ and children’s needs.

Theories essentializing women’s nurturing nature in general and specific theories promoting the importance of an exclusive mother-child bond underlie assumptions about how contemporary mothering should be enacted. Intensive mothering adopts these ideologies and then goes one step further. Mothers are no longer just responsible for raising happy, healthy children but are accountable for more aspects of a child’s intellectual, behavioural, and emotional outcomes than has ever been the case before. New brain research further emphasizes the important role of intensive mothering in optimizing child brain development and for children’s future intellectual development (Wall, 2010). Whereas attachment theory once loosely framed itself within scientific discourses, the new brain research and mothering advice that results “borrows from the language and authority of neuroscience to frame children’s brains as technologically complex machines that need the correct inputs in order to attain maximum efficiency at a later time” (Wall, p. 254). Like attachment theory before it, the new brain research discourses are firmly entrenched in the popular media, supporting a neoliberal rationality emphasizing individual responsibility, self-management, preoccupation with planning and control, and future success (Wall).

Reflecting middle-class Western values, the intensive mothering ideology “positions children as vulnerable, passive, and lacking agency, and
good mothers, in relation to this, as those who take on the task of developing the potential in their children” (Wall, 2010, p. 255). Related to this, as a natural outcome, is a relative loss of freedom and autonomy for children who are being raised in a culture that views them as increasingly vulnerable. And perhaps most importantly from the mothers’ perspective, the intensive mothering agenda places unreasonable demands on women to dedicate large amounts of time and energy, regardless of their employment situation outside of the home, to nurturing children’s emotional and intellectual development. The results, for many mothers, in expending massive amounts of emotional, physical, and financial resources on their children, as well as in their heavy reliance on experts to guide them into producing the best possible developmental outcomes for their children, are stress, impatience, loneliness, feelings of loss, vulnerability, guilt, shame, and bitterness, to name but a few (Hays, 1996; Johnstone & Swanson, 2006, 2007).

While the intensive mothering ideology favours women in middle- and upper-class families who have the physical resources to provide the necessary material supports for their children, with this new moral code for motherhood “all mothers, regardless of their income, share particular challenges in their efforts to be good mothers today” (Gazso, 2012, p. 27). However, the broad cultural acceptance of intensive mothering ideals has far-ranging implications for all women and for men. Some will be judged as adequate, some as inadequate. Some will feel the physical, economic, and emotional burdens resulting from this mothering ideology more intensely than will others. Ironically, “despite what appears to be widespread consensus about the value of intensive mothering, mothering itself remains both culturally and politically devalued” (Damaske, 2013, p. 438).

Although early masculinity studies largely ignored men’s role as fathers, in the 1980s, this picture began to change with an increased interest in the history of fatherhood (Ramey, 2012). Drawing largely on evidence focused on white, middle-class men and influenced by gendered notions of separate spheres, a model emerged of fathers defined by their breadwinning and moral leadership roles within the family (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000). Nineteenth-century industrialization and urbanization contributed to the rise of men’s patriarchal power within the family and to the shaping of fatherhood as we know it today. At the same time as fathers
were coming to be recognized as providers and moral leaders, beliefs that women were “inherently moral, more spiritual, and more tender than men” (Rotundo, 1985, p. 10) made them seem better suited to take on the tasks associated with caregiving roles. Such beliefs, along with changes in men’s roles at home, encouraged a new and more powerful view of motherhood. A simplified analysis would suggest that these two factors resulted in men’s increased responsibility away from the home, with a concurrent increase in women’s responsibilities in the domestic sphere, including mothering. The dynamics of modern fatherhood resulted in two contradictory and opposing trends around one key issue: “the degree of involvement that a father should have in the family” (Rotundo, p. 13). Rotundo suggests that because men in modernity no longer occupied such a commanding paternal role, fathers were able to withdraw physically and emotionally, with the exception of their economic role, from all spheres of family life. This fact notwithstanding, the modern fatherhood paradigm at the same time freed men from the formalities of their earlier roles and allowed them to develop new, different, more playful and affectionate relationships with their children. What remained, until the early 1970s, was the notion that men’s responsibilities as fathers were peripheral to the day-to-day functioning of the family in terms of child care. Men remained largely absent on this front, yet at the same time retained their functional role as head of the household. As Rotundo notes, “in the early 1970s, father-involvement helped to form the basis for a new style of fatherhood that posed an alternative to the dominant modern style” (p. 15). But clearly, father involvement has not gone far enough and has certainly not relieved women of the primary responsibility for child care. Thus, while an ethos of intensive parenting prevails in contemporary Western society, the parenting aspect is in name only. The fact is that the demands of intensive parenting are asked only of mothers.

Is there a way out? The reality is that mothers are giving up work, sleep and relaxation time in order to engage in intensive mothering (Wall, 2010). Intensive mothering scripts inform the mothering practice for all mothers, including those groups already discussed in this text. While the practice of everyday motherhood can involve both joys and struggles for mothers, the
pressures to provide children with perfect lives seem both unsustainable and undesirable for many women, for men, and for children. It is important to note that women’s mothering identities are not theirs alone to make, adopt, and/or integrate into their own lives. In fact, socio-demographic, economic, and cultural factors all influence the array of options that women have at their disposal as they think about creating their own personal mothering identities (Damaske, 2013).

Western cultures can learn from other cultures, not only in terms of understanding the interplay between the theory that underlies childrearing practices and its relationship to children’s emotional and behavioural outcomes but also with regard to the value societies place on the practice of mothering. Anthropology, as an academic discipline, has helped us to understand the ways in which human behaviour is dependent on the interrelationships between biological and cultural systems (Stern & Kruckman, 1983). Ross (2014) observes that “although childbirth is a universal biological event, it is not an event independent of its social and cultural context” (p. 167). As such, childbirth, maternal care, and childrearing practices should be seen as “differentially patterned and organized according to [a society’s] specific values, attitudes, and beliefs” (Stern & Kruckman, p. 1027). In assessing prevalence rates of postpartum depression in non-Western societies, Stern and Kruckman (1983), stressed the need to acknowledge that depression could not be described as a disease or mental disorder but instead as a syndrome in Western culture, which has resulted, in part, from modern birth practices. Support for this notion comes from seeing the impact of postpartum rituals and caring activities on women’s mental health in non-Western cultures where postpartum depression was less frequent or nonexistent. These practices provide some insight into the specific ideologies and communities of care that mitigate or may prevent altogether the experience of postpartum depression. Stern and Kruckman list positive practices surrounding maternal care such as the formalizing and structuring of a distinct period of time postpartum to protect new mothers from stress by mandating rest periods, social seclusion, and assistance from relatives and midwives for extended periods of time following childbirth. Other rituals, such as gift-giving and ceremonial meals, were also used to celebrate and honour a woman’s new position as a mother (Stern & Kruckman, 1983): in other words, practices valuing motherhood.
Changes in attitudes about women being more competent to parent than men need to happen. Dramatic changes not only in the way we imagine what it means to be a good parent but also in the value Western societies place on current intensive mothering practice must occur in concert with economic and social reforms that support both women and men as primary caregivers. The way forward, as with all revolutions in the past, will involve struggle; and the struggle belongs not only to women and children but to all members of society who see the benefits that will follow from the responsible rethinking of what mothering and motherhood could mean in contemporary Western societies.