



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Women's Studies International Forum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/wsif

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



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ARTICLE INFO

Available online 8 April 2016

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.

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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

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2016.02.015>

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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 idea that subjects 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 (Rúðólfsdóttir, 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 unconcerned with 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.

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