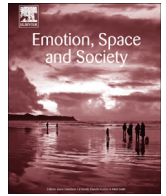




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Learning to be affected: Maternal connection, intuition and “elimination communication”[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Even when heterosexual couples have relatively egalitarian relationships prior to children, once children are born, mothers tend to take on more and more of the care tasks associated with the home and family. Mothers themselves often report an unwillingness to leave their infants in the care of others, even co-parents, for fear that the caregiver may not be able to read or intuit the needs of their infant. The aim of this paper is to examine the sociomaterial and embodied process by which mothers deliberately come to develop intuition – in this case around their infant’s elimination needs. Using the experiences of practitioners of both the early infant toileting practice “elimination communication” and the equivalent Chinese practice of *ba niao*, I argue intuition can be deliberately cultivated through parenting practices that promote embodied and responsive connection. I describe how mothers and (a few) others “learn to be affected” (Latour, 2004b) by their infants preverbal communication, and conclude that the practice offers a way for other committed caregivers to develop a form of “maternal” intuition.

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1. Introduction

A mother/ With her intuition/ Will know just what to do

Carly Simon

At least once, I have found myself hiding under the blankets in utter despair, as one of my children claws at me, crying, asking me to fix whatever problem it was that overwhelmed them (and, let’s face it, me) that day. Many parents are familiar with this feeling – a mixture of panic and despair, realising that we actually do not know what we are meant to do in a particular parenting situation, yet the buck stops with us as the grown up. Yet perhaps we forget to remind ourselves of the many, many times when we *do* just know what to do. In the early days, mothers in particular (but not exclusively) spend many long hours reading the nonverbal cues of their small infants, responding with breastfeeding, nappy-

changing, shifting position, funny faces, or whatever it is that seems to work. This may start out as quite conscious, but over time becomes intuitive, embodied, and second-nature. The moments of panic and despair and total miscommunication may still surface, but for most people, a developing connection with a child results in mostly getting it right, enough of the time. This knowing-through-connectedness could be close to what Carly Simon, in her classic song about the Winnie-the-Pooh character Kanga, identifies as “a mother’s intuition”.

In this paper, I seek to examine the idea of “mothers’ intuition”. Not as a matter of fact, not to debunk through answering *what is it, really?* where the answer we might expect now is “a social construction”. Rather, I seek to understand mothers’ intuition as a matter of concern (Latour, 2004a), or even a matter of care (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). As both Latour and Puig de Bellacasa insist, to examine these “matters” intertwined with the materiality of the social world is not to deconstruct “the facts” in an endless parade of critique, but to pay close attention to the their materialities, socialities and spatialities, which constitute the assemblages that somehow work together to produce what we know as reality. The point is to take up these matters of care, and dissent “from within” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). In this paper I take up the challenge of examining and interrogating not just the social aspects, but the interconnected material, biological and spatial aspects that are part

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of this “thing” called mothers’ intuition. Not to use the “facts” of biology to protect and care for essentialist assumptions about mothering, which work to spatially and socially constrain the lives of women (and children, and other caring adults) by assigning a natural biological cause to mothers’ intuition. No, not that either. But to protect and care for the lived realities and stories of diverse mothers who have shared their feelings of concern, embodied connection and intuitive knowing with regards to their children – including their feelings of unwillingness to leave the care of their loved one to anyone but themselves.

In this paper I thus proceed to treat the idea of mothers’ intuition as something precious, something to care for and protect¹ – but also to extend, to expand and to share beyond mothers. Not to deny mothers their own precious intuitive connections, but to *expand the possible intuitive connections* a child might benefit from, particularly with fathers and co-parents.

And so here we have the heart of it: in order to examine this idea of mothers’ intuition, this form of knowing-through-connectedness, I must dance very close to the flame of essentialism. Yet, if I want to expand and share this intuitive knowing-through-connectedness beyond mothers, I must also avoid diving headlong into that same flame. It is for this reason that I avoid examining the development of intuition in the area of breastfeeding, birthing or other such specifically “female” areas. Instead, I examine the sociomaterial and embodied process by which mothers (for both ecological and cultural reasons) deliberately develop their intuition around their infant’s toileting needs, to the degree that nappies become optional rather than essential in infant hygiene assemblages. In examining the practice known as “elimination communication” (EC) in Australia and New Zealand and *baniao* (把尿) in China, I am able to detail how mothers and (a few) others “learn to be affected” (Latour, 2004b) by their infant’s preverbal communication, to which they respond by holding their babies out bare-bottomed as needed from a very young age. Although intuition becomes deeply embodied and entwined with mothers’ care-work and identity, it may be that it can be deliberately cultivated in fathers and others through less-gendered parenting practices, such as EC, that habituate embodied and responsive connection with an infant. Paying attention to the socio-material practices that work to develop embodied connection and intuition is a way of extending and caring for intuition beyond essentialist understandings of mothers’ “natural” powers, and also beyond social constructivist perspectives that do not adequately account for the embodied materiality of intuition.

Cultivating embodied and responsive connections through the socio-material practice of EC does require time, and commitment, and a sense of responsibility. It is through such time-consuming, nurturing care-work that mothers often develop the ability to concretely attend to children’s demands and needs while keeping in sight the bigger picture, what Ruddick terms “maternal thinking” (1989). This maternal thinking, concrete and grounded yet idealistic, is argued to be something that any person engaging in a form of “mothering” might develop (Ruddick, 1989; Stephens, 2011). Since then, Rehel (2014) has found through empirical research that when ‘the transition to parenthood is structured for fathers in ways comparable to mothers, fathers come to think about and enact parenting in ways that are similar to mothers’ (p111). There is hope, then, that engaging in intensive embodied care practices such as EC might enable fathers and other committed caregivers to develop not just forms of maternal thinking, but forms of “maternal” intuition. It is this hope that I explore in what follows. I first lay out the

practice of elimination communication as embodied connection, then examine the process by which mothers and others initially come to learn to be affected by infant communications. By understanding better how a “mothers’ intuition” is learned and habituated, I highlight how other caring adults might also develop it through coming to be affected and connected in similar ways.

2. Elimination communication as embodied connection

A number of embodied practices are understood to contribute to the development of an attachment relationship between a mother and a child, such as breastfeeding (Tharner et al., 2012) and infant carrying (Anisfeld et al., 1990). In this paper I discuss something a bit more unusual to the English speaking world: the practice of infant toileting. This practice is known in English as Elimination Communication (EC) and in Mandarin Chinese as *baniao* (literally, “to hold out to urinate”). Like the sociobiological practice of breastfeeding, EC works by caregivers learning the particular idiosyncratic signs their baby makes to communicate, in this case, before the baby “eliminates” body waste. These signs are then responded to by holding the baby in a comfortable position in an appropriate place with bottom bared (see Fig. 1). As the baby eliminates, a cue noise is used to encourage an association with the feeling of release. The baby may then begin to develop some of its signs (or adopt new ones) into more deliberate signals and can learn to voluntarily release eliminations when cued. A number of specific and discrete activities (watching, cueing, signing, holding) contribute to the overall practice of EC or *baniao*. In my research, mothers and other caregivers practicing EC/*baniao* reported developing a sense of intuition about when a baby was about to “go”, experienced as “a sudden thought”, or “just knowing” or finding themselves responding to their child’s signals reflexively, precognitively even.

Like the infants of the Digo people of the Congo (deVries and deVries, 1977) and other parts of the world where a form of EC is the norm, EC and *baniao* babies can be dry through the night and



Fig. 1. Holding out.

¹ I am inspired here by Katharine McKinnon’s thoughtful work on “Naked Scholarship” (2016).

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