

‘Doing the best thing for my child’: Narratives of self/lessness in accounts of attachment parenting

Abstract

This paper emerges from a research project involving a network of mothers – in London – who breastfeed their children to ‘full term’. Typically, this would be up to the age of three or four, though ranged, in this case, between one and eight years old. In line with an evolutionary-based ‘hominid blueprint’, other typical practices amongst this sample of mothers include breastfeeding ‘on-cue’, bed-sharing and ‘baby-wearing’ as part of a philosophy of what is called ‘attachment’ parenting (Sears and Sears 2001).

Women frequently talk about their practices as 'doing the best thing for my child', whether in terms of physical, emotional or psychological health. Yet these mothers also face considerable public opprobrium over their decision to continue breastfeeding, with accusations that they are 'selfish' or doing it 'for their own sake' (often with the implication of sexual gratification). By way of rebuke, attachment mothers frequently frame their accounts of feeding as an act of *selflessness*, or at least, as child-centred. This paper therefore explores some of the ways in which mothering practices might be considered part of individuals' 'self-work', within the context of contemporary UK parenting culture. At the same time, it addresses some of the contradictions inherent to framing these debates through a dualistic self/other.

Background and Methods

The research for this study involved long-term ethnographic fieldwork (over the course of 2006-7) with women in *La Leche League International* groups, the world's foremost breastfeeding support organization. The group was founded in 1956 in the United States by a group of seven mothers, to support all women who wanted to breastfeed their babies. It has now become a global organisation offering

breastfeeding support through publications, telephone helplines and local meetings. Whilst it offers support for all women who want to breastfeed, it is known amongst the various breastfeeding groups to be supportive of women who breastfeed for 'extended' periods, and has a significant proportion of members who practice what is known as 'attachment parenting.' This was a term coined by William and Martha Sears (the husband and wife pediatrician team) in the 1980s, and is a style of care which endorses long-term proximity between infant and care-taker (most typically, the mother). Drawing on the work done by Bowlby into attachment and Klaus and Kennell on bonding, as well as a wealth of evolutionary arguments, the logic is that babies have certain physiological expectations that must be met if they are to mature into healthy, productive, happy people (Bobel, 2002: 61, Faircloth 2013).

Feeding is arguably one of the most conspicuously moralized elements of mothering today. Because of its vital importance for the survival and healthy development of infants, feeding is a highly scrutinized domain where mothers must counter any charges of practicing unusual, harmful or morally suspect feeding techniques (Murphy 1999). Strong feelings about feeding are derived from the fact that it operates as a 'signal issue' which boxes women off into different parenting 'camps' (Kukla 2005). The WHO states that breastfeeding in developed countries should be exclusive for six months and continue 'for up to two years, or beyond' in conjunction with other foods (2003). There are no statistics for the number of children breastfed beyond one year in the UK, though by six months 75% of children are totally weaned off breastmilk, and only two percent of women breastfeed exclusively for the recommended six months (Department of Health 2005). So women breastfeeding to full term are non-conventional, and engage 'accountability strategies' to explain why they do what they do (Faircloth 2013, Strathern 2000).

Participant observation at ten local LLL groups was complemented by 22 semi-structured interviews and 25 questionnaires with individual women.ⁱ Mothers were in the vast majority white, middle-aged (on average, 34), well-educated (to university level or equivalent), not currently working, and married. Those that were identified as 'full-term' breastfeeders and attachment parents made up just over

half of the sample, and it is their accounts I focus on here.ⁱⁱ Certainly not all mothers in the organization breastfeed to full term, though I engage particularly with the accounts of those who do, and with the values they promote and enact. In taking their feeding practices to an extreme, they magnify mainstream issues around motherhood and the construction of the self. These accounts do not represent official LLL philosophy, but are rather particular women's understandings of their breastfeeding experiences, equally influenced by broader philosophies of 'natural' or 'attachment' parenting.

Theoretical rationale: Selfhood and Motherhood

The concept of personal identity has had a long trajectory in the social sciences (see, for example, Giddens 1991; Jenkins 1996; Mead 1934; Strathern 1992b; Stryker 1968), where the term is typically used to denote an individual's comprehension of selfhood.

Many of the discussions around identity or 'the self' have aimed at de-stabilising the notion that it is a natural, fixed or objective criteria, asserting that identity itself is instead a political project in which individuals and groups engage in accordance with social and historical contingencies (Giddens 1991). In their critique of 'identity' as a concept, for example, Brubaker and Cooper (2000) note that there remains a tendency in scholarly writing to confuse identity as a category of practice and as a category of analysis, leaving it a somewhat ill-defined term floating between the poles of reification and ambiguity.

For that reason, the focus here is on 'self work' rather than on 'selfhood' per se. This is intended to highlight the active processes by which selfhood is constructed, as well as the inherently social nature of this enterprise (as opposed to it being simply a means of self-expression). Thus, whilst selfhood itself may be an abstract entity, its manifestations and the ways it is exercised are often open to view: in language, dress, behaviour, use of space and so forth. During social encounters individuals assert elements of their identity through these mechanisms; in this sense self work

refers to the range of activities in which individuals engage to create, present and sustain their personal identity or selfhood (Goffman 1959).

In this study, women's self work is examined in the accounts they articulated during interviews or in questionnaires concerning their infant feeding practices, especially, long-term breastfeeding. Many scholars have emphasised the role of language in the constitution of selfhood, arguing 'that human beings actually live out their lives as 'narratives', [and] that we make use of the stories of the self that our culture makes available to us to plan out our lives ... to account for events and give them significance, to accord ourselves an identity' (Rose 1999: xviii).

For Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995), our biographies are increasingly choice biographies. In the contemporary age, they argue, we must reflexively make our own narratives as traditional structures such as class, gender and racial constraints fall away. Indeed, they argue that in this context, having children is increasingly connected with hopes of being rooted and of life becoming meaningful, and with a 'claim to happiness' based on the close (and understood to be permanent) relationship with the child. Having a child is a meaningful experience, because it is an experience of the self:

The desire for children [is] ego-related and connected with the present: parents want to ... get something for themselves from giving birth, nursing, raising and providing for their children. ... Hope of discovering oneself through one's children is more widespread ... it is [typical] of a large number of parents that having children is no longer primarily understood as a service, a kind of devotion of social obligation. Instead it is admitted to be a way of life in which one pursues one's own interests (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995: x).

Strathern (2005) echoes this, in using a vignette drawn from the work of Miller, who worked with mothers in National Childbirth Trust (NCT) groups in North London. He illustrates how mothers are occupied by risk-avoidance and optimization for their children, the means of which are a constant subject of debate. Strathern observes:

...the young mother is placed in a position of responsibility *by her knowledge of* the effects of these substances and toys on the growing body, and on the growing mind and sets of behaviours... the child seems to embody the conscientiousness with which the mother has acted on her knowledge and stuck to her principles... its development reflects the application of her own knowledge. (Strathern 2004: 4-5, emphasis in original)

Why is this so critical for the mother? Strathern notes that a parent shares a body with the child twice over:

First is the body of genetic inheritance, a given, a matter regarded colloquially as of common blood or common substance. Second is the body that is a sign of the parent's devotion—or neglect—and it is in this middle class milieu above all through the application of knowledge that the parent's efforts make this body...[Miller] jokes that the child grows the mother. (Strathern 2005:5)

Parenting is thus not only about how adults react try to shape their children; it is also about how adults make statements about themselves (Furedi 2002: 107). In deciding how to dress, feed, put to sleep and transport their children, adults do not simply live their lives through children but, in part, develop their own selfhood through them.

Contextualising full-term breastfeeding: Selfish mothers?

Typically, whenever I discuss my research – with peers, colleagues or friends – a frequent response is surprise, if not outright disgust. ('Breastfeeding a five year old? That's gross!') The majority of people I speak to don't know that a woman can lactate for such an extended period of time, let alone that many of them would want to. There is generally a sense that there was something strange – possibly even perverted – in women's 'need to be needed'. (See also Dowling 2009a and 2009b on the stigmatisation women experience when breastfeeding for extended periods of time).

An example of this attitude is found in a *Daily Mail* article on the subject, published in June 2008:

Her friends are horrified, but the woman who still suckles her five-year-old insists: I'll breastfeed till they're EIGHT! (*Daily Mail*, 13 June 2008)

Stella Onions doesn't worry about people staring.

Whether sitting outside a cafe or walking round the park, whenever she breastfeeds her two children, she ignores the women gawping and men brazenly pointing her out to their friends.

Even in her own home - the only place she now lets her son and daughter feed from her - she barely cared when one friend turned away, unable to watch as they suckled.

But such reactions are hardly surprising; the babes sucking at this middle-aged mother's breasts are toddlers aged five and three years old.

For many, breastfeeding at this age is unnatural, crossing the boundaries of normal maternal behaviour.

This picture was published, with the caption: *Mother knows best: Stella Onions breastfeeds daughter Josephine, aged five, who says she does not want to stop until she's married, and four-year-old Zac [sic].]*



Picture accompanying *Daily Mail* article, reproduced with permission, Alistair Heap / Solo Syndication

In a similar vein, the comments below come from a BBC Radio 1 internet forum, following the screening of a Channel 4 documentary 'Extraordinary Breastfeeding' in 2006, which featured Veronika Robinson, editor of *The Mother Magazine*, a natural parenting magazine, LLL member and prominent figure in the attachment parenting community breastfeeding her seven-year-old daughter. Radio 1 is the BBC's 'New Music' station, with a young target audience.ⁱⁱⁱ

[Emphasis added] ***Women who keep going until their kids are nine years old [sic] feature in Channel 4's documentary Extraordinary Breastfeeding...Does that thought freak you out? Or are we too uptight?***

Leila: I think breastfeeding beyond 1-2 yrs is a bit bizarre and *becomes more about the mother's psychological want, not a child's biological need.* Women continue to lactate because of the stimulation through feeding, not because of a nutritional need of their offspring.

Gaz: *This is sick!* How exactly do these mothers think they are helping their children's development? You wouldn't let your 10 year old walk round with a bottle with a teat on it would you? *Here's an idea - get all their friends and their parents round to show them what they do - let's see how normal they feel then.*

Jenny: *This is just wrong,* ok fair enough babies need nutrients and the goodness that comes from a mother's milk when they are born but past 6 months they are perfectly capable of producing the nutrients through other means and *this is just abuse to a certain extent.* Who in their right mind would think that it is 'right' and 'necessary' for a 3 year old or worse 8 or 9 year old drinking from their breast?! It's absolutely disgusting.

In a more sober fashion, one mother I spoke to – who had gone along to an LLL meeting but decided it wasn't for her, sums up many of these concerns:

Charlotte: Why isn't it for you [breastfeeding to full term]?

Sarah [breastfed both daughters for a year]: well, I just question sometimes [are] the mother[s] doing it for [themselves] and [their] emotional need, or are they doing it for the child's needs? And I think, I don't think the child needs it nutritionally, you know it provides a very strong bond, but then I think it can become a sort of a crutch....but also, also sorry, sorry this is sort of challenging all my prejudices and stuff, but I have sort of read about it in the case of the single mother and her only boy child, you know, which I always feel a little strange about, and I think in some ways the boy child has replaced a partner, I mean, I don't sort of think that every woman that is breastfeeding is sitting there thinking sexual thoughts, because it just isn't like that, I don't think that is at all what happens, and I just think, I wonder if it is emotionally beneficial to the child.

As we can see, many of the comments include an undertone of sexual gratification on the part of mothers, with the implication that they might be 'selfishly' keeping their children 'attached' for their own pleasure.

Accounting for full-term feeding: Selfless self-making

What emerged in the accounts from mothers was – perhaps not surprisingly – a lot less sensational. Indeed most long-term breastfeeders, as a way of countering these accusations, tended to focus on the benefits to their child in their explanations as to why they engage in this practice which runs against the social norm. These were both immunological, and psychological.

When I asked my informants why they were 'still' breastfeeding, for example, 'attachment mothers' would usually answer by turning my question around: why would you stop? Breastmilk – and the immunity and nutrition it provides – continues to be beneficial at whatever age it is consumed, they told me:

Jane [25, LLL Leader Applicant, breastfeeding her 16-month-old son]: It's just as nutritious as the day they were born, so that is great. And just things like, last week I was really ill, and I couldn't get out of bed, and we just stayed in bed and breastfeeding, and he was still getting all the nutrition he needed, and that would probably apply if he was a bit older too... and when he is upset or anything, or poorly, it is just such a comfort...Mmm. Yeah, there are lots of health benefits there for the mother as well, and for the child.

There was also a definite sense that women felt that by mothering in this way, they were building 'secure emotional foundations' for their children:

Sally [42, breastfeeding her 1-year-old daughter]: ... we really hope that by the time she is a teenager, she will have had her fill of being held and touched and breastfed, and be quite a secure person.

Being able to comfort a toddler having a tantrum, or a hurt child was said to be the most gratifying reason for continuing to breastfeed, and one which made the work

of mothering considerably easier. Women also frequently mentioned the fact that older children could talk about breastfeeding was an advantage, given it was such an important part of their relationship. They hoped that since they kept breastfeeding their children when they were old enough to talk, meant they would also be able to remember this happy time:

Charlotte: So, you said that when you were pregnant you would feed probably for six months...?

Judy [39 breastfeeding her 4- and 2-year-old daughters]: My mother breastfed for nine months, and my reference was that really, she said 'once you were big enough to start undoing my buttons I knew it was time to stop'. And so every month I did after that, with [child] really, as I had more time to think about it, I thought it's a bit sad my mother didn't experience this. Because an older child communicates about it, talks more about it, it's likely she will remember it...we spend so many hours doing it, and there is so much conversation around it...

What is also clear, however, is that these responses form part of women's construction of selfhood (or 'self work') in the narrativisation of themselves *as* mothers. Alice – a 47-year-old mother to 25- and 15-year-old sons, and a five-year-old daughter, whom she had just weaned – says, for example, as to why she breastfed, that 'It is what nature intended and any other way of feeding is a very different experience for a child. I don't know what adverse effects there could be for a child not breastfeed, and was not going to take the responsibility of denying them the experience.' Later, in the same questionnaire, in line with a focus on self/essness, she mentions 'owing it to her children' to not 'withhold the best' several times. Anastasia, [38, 5- and 2-year old daughters, breastfeeding 20-month-old daughter] went further in described breastfeeding as 'The ultimate expression of motherhood.'

So whilst women's accounts are both 'child-centred', they are also part of their own 'self-work'. Ultimately, however, they point to one of the inherent problems with approaching this as either 'mother-centred' or 'child-centred' and reveal that continued breastfeeding was something considered mutually beneficial and pleasurable:

Signe [30, LLL Leader Applicant, breastfeeding her 3 year old son]: I guess I continue to do it because it is important for [my son] and, and because he asks for it...it obviously makes him feel better, he talks about it a lot, and says a lot of really sweet things about it. And because I find it an easy way to comfort him and to calm him down, and if he is feeling bad about something and doesn't always know how to talk about it, we can just take the time to sit down... and it's totally different to a year ago...I guess, I enjoy it [too], I enjoy the chance to sit down and in the evenings [whilst breastfeeding] I can sit down and read a book or something.

Breastfeeding, body boundaries and individuality

For my informants, who were well aware that many viewed them as 'sick' or even 'abusive', full-term breastfeeding and attachment parenting in contemporary Britain are hard because 'separation is endemic to our society' (Sally). When I asked why it was that people might have a problem with the sight (or idea) of a child breastfeeding beyond infancy, Veronika Robinson (mentioned earlier) told me, that 'to have a baby attached to the mother through breastfeeding is just the opposite of what our society is encouraging'. This is not confined to older children but is an anxiety that intensifies over time if the child is not considered to be 'separating' from its mother:

Veronika [37, 8-year-old daughter, breastfeeding her 7-year-old daughter]: It's a cultural thing. If you look at our society everything is designed to separate mother from child; it happens, you get pregnant and you have a scan, and that is the first thing, that separation, it is telling the mother not to trust her own intuition, you know a mother has to rely on something outside to tell her about herself. And then the baby is born and the cord is cut straight away...everything right from those beginning stages, 'get the mother away from the baby'. It's everything; the sleeping, the walking – we celebrate milestones of separation. So if you have a baby that is attached to the mother through breastfeeding, that is just the opposite of what our society is encouraging.

Leticia added that mothers who do not 'separate properly' from their children are considered suspect (and selfish). I asked her whether there was a pressure on women to stop breastfeeding after a certain age, and she replied:

Leticia [36, 3-and-a-half-year-old son, breastfeeding her 2-year-old daughter, my emphasis]: I think socially there is a pressure to 'get out and get your life back'. I think there is a pressure there, to get

the baby in its own room at a certain point, to get it out of the bed at a certain point. To create a certain distance between you and the baby, *I think that is thought of as very healthy and if you are not doing that you are considered to be depriving your child, or not quite adjusted somehow.*

For Strathern, the individuality of persons is the first fact of English kinship (1992b: 14). She says, '[i]t is when persons become visible as individuals that the English feel they "relate" to one another' (Strathern 1992b:49). To follow her argument (and without wanting to either reify it, or claim its uniqueness to the English example), one might say that to 'relate' to each another, separation of the mother from the child (as part of this process of individuation) must be cultivated so that 'attachment' can begin. This separation is catalyzed through techniques of visualization typical of fetal scans (Petchesky 1987), as much as in the moment of birth.

Indeed, this is not a transition confined to a moment; rather, it is processual. In *Parts and Wholes*, Strathern (1992a) notes that people do not arrive as individuals, but are made so through processes of socialization (and, arguably, separation), which in turn enables their participation in social life (a plurality of individuals):

The English person conceptualised as an individual was in one important sense incomplete... There always appeared to be 'more than' the person in social life. When the singular person was taken as a unit, relationships involved others as like units. Social life was thus conceptualised as the person's participation in a plurality. As a result, an individual person was only ever part of some more encompassing aggregate and thereby less than the whole. Where a prototypical Melanesian might have conceptualised the dissolution of the cognatic person as making incomplete an entity already completed by the actions of others, our prototypical English took the person – powerfully symbolised in the child that must be socialised – as requiring completion by society. (Strathern 1992a: 86-7)^v

Making selves: Separation and attachment

A book frequently referred to by 'attachment mothers' as they spoke about maternal-infant subjectivity was Kaplan's *Oneness and Separateness: From Infant to Individual* (1978). The book is a mix of psychoanalytic insights and parenting advice. It opens by saying:

In the first three years of life every human being undergoes yet a second birth, in which he is born as a psychological being possessing selfhood and a separate identity. The quality of self an infant achieves in those crucial three years will profoundly affect all of his subsequent existence. (Kaplan 1978: 15)

A well-adjusted child, it is argued, should separate from its mother gradually (as is in keeping with the philosophy of attachment parenting rather than rushing through them, as is more typical in wider society. Kaplan argues that individuation in the child (from seeing oneself as an extension of the mother, towards seeing oneself as an agential, separate entity) comes from an appreciation of ‘the inner mother,’ imprinted in the child through early experiences of mothering. Not allowing this imprinting to happen can leave the child in a state of limbo – between oneness and separateness:

When this process goes wrong, a human being will have difficulties loving others, nurturing the young, taming his own aggression, knowing the boundaries of immediate time and space, mourning the dead and caring about the destiny of the human species. (Kaplan 1978:19)

For Strathern, English people arrive attached, are ‘separated’ through socialisation, and thereby able to ‘relate’ to others as individuals. Being able to (re-)attach themselves autonomously to others allows them to participate in society. For the women in LLL groups in London, however, breastfeeding is a primary means by which to prolong the attachment of their children (and yet, as I discuss below, it is by preventing this separation that they open themselves up to the charge of selfishness). They would talk actively of the mother-infant dyad as something which needed ‘protection’ from society. For them, separation need not be cultivated (or, at least, rushed), as being attached to the mother serves as a template for being attached to others (and, in due course, secure sense of self). In other words, the same end is aspired for (an ‘individual self’), but reached by different means.

The interesting question is why ‘attachment mothers’, resist so strongly the separations they associate with normal perinatal practices – such as cutting the umbilical cord, formula feeding or separate sleeping. Borrowing an idea from Miller

(1997), it is arguable that this language of individuation and attachment is not only about creating the child's sense of self, but also that of the mother, which is embodied in a 'dual persona'.

Miller (1997) describes the 'semi-cultic' practices of the National Childbirth Trust groups he attended as *rites de passage* through which women negate their previous values and purify themselves in preparation to become new beings. He inverts traditional psychoanalytic theory from Klein to ask whether the stages a child is said to undergo (paranoid schizoid, depressive or otherwise) might not best be applied to the development of new mothers. Klein (1936), for example, argued that the paranoid-schizoid position occurs in infants when the child cannot understand how the mother can be both the 'good breast' and the 'bad breast' – the source of all things good, and bad. Miller says the same is true for the mother, for whom the child is at once the source of all things good, and all things awful. Breastfeeding is but one example of where the child's perceived need is both enjoyable and constraining:

The infant's constant demands are accepted as essential priorities and at no point should the mother's own desires prevent them being attended to...All her skills of self-construction through agency become negated. This negation is acceptable because the baby is not viewed as another, but as part of the newly recycled dual persona of mother-infant. This may be related to Freud's observation that 'Parental love, which is so moving and at bottom so childish, is nothing but the parents' narcissism born again, which, transformed into object-love, unmistakably reveals its former nature'. (Freud 1984 [1914]: 85, in Miller 1997: 72-3)

Indeed, within psychoanalytic literature there is a focus on the transformation of the mother during the process of birth and post-partum life. It is considered a time of psychic crisis that prompts her to work through her own infantile issues (Baraitser 2006). Typically, there is a suggestion that although a mother extends herself (literally, she reproduces), she also loses something. Naomi Wolf writes, for example:

When I spoke to new mothers, it seemed to me that although a child and new love has been born, something else within them had passed away, and the experience was made harder because at some

level, underneath their joy in their babies, these women were quietly mourning for this part of their earlier selves. (Wolf 2001: 6)

The implication here is that a mother's self is changed irrevocably, demanding that a woman leave behind her previous, unified self, and embrace a dyadic existence (however illusory the unified self might have been). Generally, 'attachment mothers' had a mixture of feelings on this issue. Amelia said, for example: 'Sometimes we have a great time and co-operate and other times I shout or feel dominated by my child'. Another said: In answer to my question, 'Is it hard to balance your own needs with those of your child or children?' Claudine [24, breastfeeding her 17-month-old daughter] replied "Not really because I am not the self-sacrificing type at all! First, most of my needs do not exclude her or contradict hers, second I do always take the time to fill my own needs for as I say I am not the self-sacrificing type at all, and also she seems to understand my needs and gives me the space to fill them. But I guess this also because her dad is a great father, which allows me to have my own space. I suppose it might be more difficult with two or more children, or no daddy on hand'.

Miller's observations are largely confined to the early period of the child's life (typically, before six months of age). There comes a time, he says, when the child pushes the boundaries of the 'newly recycled dual persona', and 'intervention' is required – such as when the child needs to be told, for example, to wait to be breastfed. This is when the child starts being seen as an 'individual'. Indeed, a topic that came up frequently at meetings was at which point a child's 'needs' became their 'wants' – and therefore, at what point a child could be asked to wait, for example, before being breastfed, or whether a mother could put her own 'need' to sleep through the night above that of her child's by ceasing night-time feeding.^v These tensions are not confined to attachment parents, of course, but part of wider realities parents must negotiate. Veronika Robinson notes, about full-term breastfeeding in particular, however: 'it depends on the age of the child. Around two or three they are emerging in the world, and starting to see themselves as separate from the mothers, and so as a mother you have to let them explore, and sort of let them push the boundary; other times you have to create that boundary, that is what

parenting is about. ...And so, yeah, I mean, child-led weaning doesn't mean that the child determines every time they are going to breastfeed... it is different to when you have a tiny baby. Their wants are their needs at that point.... it might be that you say 'we are not going to do it in the day' or 'in the night,' whatever the mother's thing is, and I don't think there is anything wrong with it...I think once they are moving around it's important to say that, you know, because you will have some children that will have you on the couch all day breastfeeding!

Defending self and other

The link between the body with definable boundaries and self-hood is long established in Western philosophy. These bodies, which are the property of the subjects who inhabit (or 'are') them, maintain a distinction from other bodies by managing the transgression of their boundaries (such as in the flow of substance between them). Breastfeeding is therefore a challenge to the notion of the individual body, since the ejection of milk from the breast does not sit easily with the 'fortress' metaphor of the body/self (Martin 1998).

Martin (1998) has written about the inability of women to be an 'individual' (one who cannot be divided) as a deeply political fact. Quoting Franklin and Haraway, she says:

...pregnancy is precisely about one body becoming two, two bodies becoming one, the exact antithesis of individuality (Franklin 1991: 203). Donna Haraway (1991: 253n) explains: 'Why have women had so much trouble counting as individuals in modern western discourses? Their personal, bounded individuality is compromised by their bodies' troubling talent for making other bodies, whose individuality can take precedence over their own.' (Martin 1998: 134-5)

In pregnancy, a woman's body/self becomes doubled – and breastfeeding, particularly for 'extended' periods, serves as a reminder of this ability to reproduce and transgress these boundaries. Martin continues:

... not only the state of motherhood but also women's state of health in general, their failure in many ways to achieve the male norm of the self as a defended castle, leads to the same effect. Whether leaking fluids through ducts and membranes (which simultaneously allows penetration of the foreign into the body) or permitting the body to turn against itself, this porous, hybrid, leaky, disorderly female self is the antithesis of the sharp-edged man... (Martin 1998: 135).

Thus most mothers in my sample perceived the problem with long-term breastfeeding 'in society' as one where people understand it as (bodily) evidence of the child not really being separate from the mother: a relic from the time at which a baby is unable to act autonomously and therefore precluding, one could argue, either the mother or the child from participating in the plurality of society as individuals. Perhaps not surprisingly, 'judgement' was the most commonly cited challenge women mentioned to their full-term breastfeeding, often with the implication that women have selfishly 'kept the child for themselves':

Charlotte: We were talking at the group about the documentary [that featured Veronika Robinson]...
Sandra [Leader, 35, breastfeeding her 4-year-old daughter]: I did see it, yes. My in-laws were a bit like 'that's disgusting', especially with the older children. They are still a bit uncomfy about the fact I still do it. 'Don't do it in front of us, and we won't comment' sort of thing. It has been quite good in terms of generating discussion; you know, a way for us to broach it and explain why we're doing this.

Many women simply lied to people, or at least kept their breastfeeding as discreet as possible. As Katy put it, 'I do tell people if they ask me directly, but to be honest, I find it easier to avoid the topic'. This included health professionals. Others used jokes to divert the attention – such as about *Little Britain's* 'bitty' sketch, (a comedy show featuring character who breastfeeds as an aristocratic adult) or to suggest their children would still be breastfeeding when they went to university. Some women talked about being 'strong-minded' and the criticisms being 'like water off a duck's back':

La Leche League operates as a network offering women support for their full-term breastfeeding, and a social identity formed around a shared set of mothering values. Although the LLL leaders interviewed insisted that La Leche League was a space for

all breastfeeding mothers, many were aware that LLL had a reputation for being 'extreme' in the wider community. One leader, talking about how LLL was perceived in the wider community, commented:

Annette [Leader, breastfeeding her 7-year-old son]: I suppose they probably just think that it is over-zealous really. And, erm, the earth mother sort of thing, of a women who gives all to her children and wastes her own life, because they can't see the value in what the mothers are doing.

Sociologists have noted that one of the enduring features of social groups are their 'commitment mechanisms'. Kanter, who writes about Utopian communities in the United States during the 1970s:

A person becomes increasingly committed both as more of his own internal satisfaction becomes dependent on the group, and his chance to make other choices or pursue other options declines. (Kanter 1972: 70)

Kanter notes that the idea of sacrifice and/or renunciation is central to group coherence (Kanter 1972: 72). In the questionnaire, women were asked to list some of the reasons they thought other women did not breastfeed their children. Just over half said it was because they 'wanted their bodies back' for themselves and their partners. Other phrases that arose frequently were that women were 'brainwashed' by formula manufacturers, and 'too selfish' to breastfeed. These comments were typical:

Claire [38, 7-year-old son, breastfeeding 11-month-old son]: They put themselves before their babies/children but babes only need us like this for a relatively short time overall in breastfeeding, it's no real hardship is it?

Debbie [46, 8-year-old son, breastfeeding 4-year-old son]: A lot of women want a life away from their children and you cannot do both.

Women who have given up careers, as many of my informants had, might be said to have a greater investment in motherhood as a source of selfhood than those who had not. Several women pointed out above that work is not possible if one wants to

be able to breastfeed to full term (and, we could infer, parent in an attachment parenting style). The implication is that one cannot parent according to a child's needs unless one is also willing to make this sacrifice. These women said, in a joint interview:

Lila [37, breastfeeding her 4-year-old son]: And people make out [breastfeeding] is such a long time, and so tedious, and you think... it really is not that long a period, it's just a few years.

Lila: People are more selfish today. People still have this idea of self-sacrifice with breastfeeding... So they have to promote it in terms of losing weight...this 'me' thing comes through, they have to watch what they eat, can't drink. People have such a drive towards selfishness.

Rachel: My sister-in-law wanted to go out drinking! So she stopped at six months!

Lila: People have such a drive for individuality. They see it as a sacrifice. People don't see that investing now will save time later. It is a fraction of their lives. It is just too much for people. People find it too hard to not watch telly, or not have something for a few days. We can't deal with not having things now. Everything is a race...Other people are too selfish to mother like we do – we are all too much part of the 'me' generation.

We see here, then, how the discourse around selfishness is taken up by some attachment mothers and used as a means of judging 'other mothers' in the course of bolstering their own 'self-work'.

Conclusion

The giving of 'accountability' takes on a particularly moralised edge in the context of mothering, because mothers share not one but *two* bodies with their children (Strathern 2005). To this extent, the child becomes a symbol of maternal devotion, and reflection of her diligence. Mothers do not simply encourage the development of their child's social self through mothering, but develop their own 'selves' in this process, both in relation to their child, and in relation to others.

It is interesting, then, that methods of childcare are so often framed as a trade-off between the needs of the mother and those of the child. As soon as methods of care are defined as either child-centred or mother-centred then one 'side' logically has to

lose out. Accounts of attachment parenting (or indeed, any kind of parenting) which portray women as sacrificing their 'selves' to be subsumed by the self of their child are simplistic, and problematic. It seems almost inevitable that by becoming a mother, a woman's 'self' changes. Whether a woman's devotion to her child constitutes a diminution of her autonomous selfhood or an extension of it will long be a source of debate. Bristow (2007) comments:

When individuals become parents they don't subsume themselves but extend themselves – in a sense, they become more than what they were before. The act of raising children, loving them, caring for them, setting them on a trajectory through life, is an act of selfhood, and people do it because they sense it is ultimately more rewarding and meaningful than the accomplishments they might make on their own, as individuals. To pretend that this impulse isn't there, that as a parent you are doing something despite your own interests rather than because of them, is a dishonest conceit. (Bristow 2007)^{vi}

The 'attachment mothers' here are confronted with a need to justify what is seen to be anti-social, selfish behaviour (to use Strathern's definition of society). Yet 'child-centred' approaches to parenting should better be understood as part of these mothers' struggle for self-identity, and a prominent part of their self fashioning. This process is not necessarily experienced by 'attachment mothers' as a form of sacrifice for an other or 'oppression' to their individualised selves, rather, as an extension of agency, when understood through the more relational model. Ironically, in accusing other mothers of not being 'selfless' enough to provide the 'best' form of care for their children, the power of this dualistic discourse remains unchallenged.

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i Parallel research was also conducted in Paris, though these data are not referred to here.

ii These are women who practice an ‘attachment parenting’ philosophy in addition to being members of LLL. Classification is based on statistics and responses derived from the questionnaire – that is, those women breastfeeding their children beyond a year – as well as the author’s observations at groups meetings and interviews. All names have been anonymised.

iii http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio1/news/newsbeat/060201_extraordinarybreastfeeding.shtml Accessed 20 December 2006. The page has since expired.

iv I do not enter into a discussion here about the over-simplification of a Euro-American, bounded self and an othered ‘relational’ one. See Carsten’s *Cultures of Relatedness* (2000: 83) for a good summary.

v It is debatable at what point a child is reflexive enough to have a ‘want’ rather than a ‘need’. This raises questions of autonomy and informed consent, the parameters of which are managed by mothers.

vi Of course, Bristow’s comment can only be understood in the context of widely available contraception and abortion.