CARE ETHICS
AND
ATTACHMENT PARENTING

A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH OF MOTHERS' EMPOWERING EXPERIENCES IN AND BEYOND PARENTING

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Foreword

Initially, I did not at all plan to write on motherhood or Attachment Parenting (AP). I wanted to discuss current eco-feminist practices and ideology, almost half a century after the first theories were launched on the link between women's and nature's oppression. I started thinking about some feminists' involvement in environmental, vegan, or anarchist activism and about their endorsement of ethical decision-making inside and outside the home.

Gradually, inspired by feminist care ethicists Sara Ruddick (1989) and Fisher and Tronto (1990), I found that much social and environmental activism started in the home, in care, in intimate relations with the children who would grow in a world that is affected by the ethical decisions that 'mothers' (or any parent who mothers) make. When I started looking up the parenting styles that endorsed this care ethics, I found several, quite similar, styles: natural parenting is a kind of holistic parenting is a kind of responsive parenting is a kind of gentle parenting is a kind of attachment parenting, and so on. Since AP seemed to be the most known and theorised parenting style, I decided to go with that one. And I was very pleased with what it promoted and represented.

But progressively, it started to dawn on me that these parenting styles in general and AP in specific were not as omni-accepted and self-explanatory as I had imagined them to be ("If you are an conscious and mindful parent AP surely is the only ethically sound choice you can make!"). Instead, AP was seen as a threat to – and even an undoing of - every feminist liberatory ideal that had been struggled for in the past. A science-lover, I was sure that AP did *at least* have science backing up its ethical claims, tenets such as postnatal bonding, breastfeeding, or babywearing. But gradually - browsing through the dozens of scientific articles on PubMed, Expecting Science and Science-Based Medicine (not all discussed in the thesis) - I came to realise that even the science was only partially there.

I started to feel confused over the value of AP. Even though I understood and interiorised much of the criticism directed at AP, and even though many of its benefits are not scientifically evidenced, I still felt drawn to the attitude to life that formed the basis of AP. Its insistence on non-violent communication, its resistance to authoritarian discipline, its valorisation of responsiveness, its holistic definition of care, its attempt to reclaim space and time for new parents to *become* parents and

to bond with their new family member. Furthermore I kept coming across various attachment mothers who *did* identify strongly with feminist liberation struggles and ideals (and who were aware of the potentially oppressive nature of AP or any childrearing ideology), whose partners were very involved, who were at ease with putting into practice those tenets that felt comfortable and abandoning those that did not, and who were not judging any other mother or parenting style. Their approach to AP seemed like a far cry from the dogmatic and anti-feminist approach that was discussed in nearly every paper.

Therefore, I did not perceive the advantages of dismissing AP altogether. Instead, I wanted to understand AP and focus on its *potential* power, empowerment and ethical relevance, as outlined above. This intent was sparked even more when I came across the article of Jenna Abetz and Julia Moore, who equally resist "to divide mothers by perpetuating and normalizing a new AP mommy war, where proponents and opponents uncritically argue about how chosen parenting philosophies entirely benefit or harm, and mothers must choose to be all-in or all-out in order to be good mothers" (2016, 59). The fundamental aim of my research is thus to depolarise the debate that has arisen around AP. The Attachment Parenting Controversy promotes dividedness and mother-blaming (going both directions) and it seems to me that it is precisely this unnuanced polarisation that is fundamentally antifeminist.

I would like to thank my interviewees - Bieke, Hanne, Jo, Joëlle, Julie, Maaike and Lieve – for their cooperation to make this thesis come about. Their openness, activism and honesty were a source of inspiration. I also want to thank Stefan for having had my back throughout the writing process and for having taken the time to go through the draughts multiple times. My last words of gratitude go to my promotor, Chia Longman, for having met with me many more times than with other master students (her words).

Abstract

EN: This research aims to challenge the Attachment Parenting Controversy that has taken root in the 1990s and was fuelled by a 2012 TIME-article on Attachment Parenting (AP). Whereas numerous feminists contend that AP is just another childrearing 'fad' that oppresses and essentialises mothers, proponents counter these attacks by appealing to scientific authority, maternal identity-making, and morality. How can we go beyond these dividing and staunch oppositions that seem to normalise mother shaming once more? I argue that we should look at the empowering potential of AP's embeddedness in an overarching 'care ethics' (Fisher and Tronto 1990). This care ethics endorses a holistic responsiveness not only in the mother-child dyad but also toward social and natural environments which are interwoven "in a complex, life-sustaining web" (*ibid,* 40). Having interviewed seven mothers sympathetic to AP, I discuss their heightened responsiveness and ethics which 1) propose a more compassionate interaction and attitude to life 2) challenge the narrow definition of AP and its partisans 3) and denounce new parents' unequal labour division and curtailment of choice as a result of Western society's focus on labour productivity.

NL: Dit onderzoek wilt een bijdrage leveren aan de depolarisering van de *Attachment Parenting Controversy*. Hierbij gaan tegenstanders van het Natuurlijk Ouderschap (NO) deze ouderschapsvorm integraal aanvallen of de aanhangers ervan scherp veroordelen. Bijgevolg discrediteren ook de aanhangers steeds meer de tegenstanders door beroep te doen op wetenschappelijke of identitaire argumenten. De controversie lijkt kortom een verderzetting van het oeroude *mother shaming*, waarbij vrouwen en moeders worden geculpabiliseerd op basis van de ouderschapskeuzes die ze maken. Om te ontsnappen aan deze logica, wil ik in dit onderzoek kijken naar de ruimere context waarin moeders kiezen voor NO en naar de potentiel *empowerende* ervaringen die zij hebben. Vaak is de keuze voor NO ingebed in een ruimere "zorgethiek", die, in het geval van de 7 moeders die ik interviewde, holistisch van aard is. Ik argumenteer dat deze holistische zorgethiek 1) een medelevendere en bewustere levenshouding aanmoedigt, 2) de controversie opentrekt door andere facetten van NO te benadrukken, en 3) bepaalde Westerse waarden en normen omtrent productiviteit, autonomie en zelfverwezenlijking uitdaagt en herschrijft.

Introduction

2012. Attachment Parenting, the famous parenting style focused on the bonding between primary caregiver and child, comes under siege once more. The front cover of a TIME-magazine shows the image of a young, model-like mother with a male toddler suckling at her breast. Even though the allegedly sexually charged photo is controversial in itself, the headline that accompanies the image proves to be controversial even more: "Are You Mom Enough?" the cover asks[1].

How should we interpret this question? A commentator argues that this "stark, accusatory question (…) captures the debate that's been raging ever since 1993" (Hughues 2012). The debate that Hughues referred to - the 'Mommy Wars' - concerns the ideological struggles between mothers who endorsed different views on childrearing. The most controversial topic at the time was whether mothers of young children should work or stay at home (Jones 2012). Feminists, who mingled in the debate, could not agree. And in 2012 - the discussions rekindled by the TIME-article - a veritable 'Attachment Parenting Controversy' was unleashed.

The reason why precisely Attachment Parenting (AP) came under siege, is because of the core tenets of this parenting style, which are perceived to endanger feminist liberation struggles. AP has come into existence in the post-World War II era and developed from de 1960s onwards. This parenting style is based on several biological, psychological and interactional tenets concerned with the bonding between the primary caregiver, which is usually the mother, and the child.

The initial focus was mostly psychological. Thereby, bonding between mother and child during the child's first life years was seen as crucial for (future) emotional and cognitive wellbeing. Later, the focus shifted to the bio-endocrinological importance of the mother-child nexus (i.a. breastfeeding, babywearing, co-sleeping). Yet, despite the increased emphasis on breastfeeding, the idea of the mother as the *required* - or *only* - primary caregiver has simultaneously become less evident. Paternal care received more attention and validation, and there has been a shift from the nuclear family to more communal forms of childrearing. A last

[1] Based on Sarah Hugues' 2012 article for The Guardian: *Attachment parenting: what's the problem?.*

development in Attachment Theory is the increased prominence of nonviolent interactional values in AP, such as gentle discipline, non-confrontative parenting, or responsiveness. This shift is illustrated by the fact that AP began to be frequently termed 'Responsive Parenting' (RP) [2]. Mothers, as well as fathers or other primary caregivers, became more and more invested in the emotional, physical, intellectual and moral growth of the child.

It is clear that this parenting style demands a lot from parents, especially mothers. Radical and liberal feminists have therefore been critical of AP. According to several (radical) feminists, women's childbearing capacities and motherhood itself have historically been the cause of women's oppression. With AP centralising maternal importance to the child's development, mothers' liberation could be endangered. Women are once more reminded of their childrearing duties and men are seemingly let off the hook. Another argument is that AP naturalises women as mothers, and mothers as instinctive beings. It ties women to their biology and to stereotypes of maternity. Furthermore, AP is just another ideology of the Good Mother, that haunts mothers' maternal practices and serves as an "institution" to control women (Rich 1976). Last, it is argued that AP is individualistic, entirely in line with neoliberal ideals of self-improvement and individual responsibility, and just another "child-rearing fad" (Pollitt 2012). How can we defuse this polarisation?

Adrienne Rich has made a distinction between "Institution of Motherhood" and "Experience of Motherhood" to argue that mothers and feminists should fight dogmatic and prescriptive motherhood ideologies (the Institution) and liberate the Experiences (1976). I will therefore argue that, by nuancing and taking edge of the ever-embittering parenting politics, the institution of motherhood may be undermined. Indeed, the polarisation is *itself* a manifestation of institutional motherhood, an institution that leaves individual attachment mothers disempowered. Moving beyond the institution, I instead want to explore the experiences of some attachment mothers. *Why do they feel drawn to AP? How is AP linked to different aspects of their lives? How does AP empower them?* These questions may enable us to explore the grey area of these mothers' experiences.

[2] Both Attachment Parenting (AP) and the lesser known Responsive Parenting (RP) are now used in academic and popular literature. Since AP is the term that was originally used in (ethno-) paediatrics and psychology. For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to AP in this thesis.

The questions equally enable us to consider AP in a larger ideological or ethical context: it is well-acknowledged that many AP-proponents feel also drawn to environmentalism or social activism (Badinter 2010, Hays 1996, Bialik, Granju and Kennedy 1990). Since AP centralises the importance of care and responsivity, these engagements often extend beyond childrearing and include a holistic[3] consideration for our natural and social environments.

This possible link between AP and an overarching 'holistic' care ethics is also supported by the frameworks of maternalism and feminist care ethics. In *Maternal Thinking*, philosopher Sara Ruddick (1989) emphasises the value of attentive nurturance not only toward children, but also toward any being that needs sustenance and nurturance. This maternalism is thus applicable to other domains in life - such as peace politics and anti-war activism (Ruddick 1989). Maternalism also ties in with care ethics. The relevance of this framework is well-formulated by Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto: care is everything we do "to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web" (1990, 40). This very definition goes to the heart of the link between the responsiveness centralised in AP and care ethics.

In a first part, I will develop the characteristics and origins of and debates surrounding AP as an ideology (institution). First, I will give an overview of AP, which comprises its theoretical underpinnings and practices (1st chapter), as well as its historical and intellectual roots (2nd chapter). In the 3rd chapter, I discern and explore the three main debates in the Attachment Parenting Controversy. These debates - on essentialisation, oppression and normativity - tie in with the question whether AP is feminist or not. The 4th and last chapter of this first part revolves around the question how we can shift from the current polarisation by centralising the potential areas of empowerment in AP.

In the second part, I will centralise the ethical experiences and practices of seven attachment mothers whom I have interviewed. After having developed my methodology (5th chapter), I will discuss four domains of ethical experience, that

[3] 'Holism' comes from the Greek *holos*, which signifies *whole* or *entire*. It is the philosophical understanding of the interconnectedness - the *wholism* - of everything.

the mothers have brought up during the interviews: Holistic thinking in consumption practices, adjusting power relations, alternative educational practices and empowerment through critical sense, gut-feeling and community (6th chapter).

***PART I**: A THEORETICAL OUTLINE OF AP, ITS HISTORY, AND ITS CONFLICTS*

1. What is AP? Basic Tenets

Different people endorse different tenets, and within these tenets they may place different accents. My account of the main AP-tenets is thus not exhaustive. On the other hand, it represents what many AP-instances and individual attachment parents propagate: breastfeeding; physical proximity - which entails both babywearing and co-sleeping; emotional responsiveness and gentle discipline; and the propagation of demedicalisation and natural health care.

1.1. (Extensive) Breastfeeding (On Demand)

> Over the last decades, Western civilization has succeeded in presenting breastfeeding, which has been evident and vital for ten thousands of generations of mothers and which it still is for three fourth of the world population, as an *option*. This, however, would implicate that there exist equivalent alternatives to breast milk. Mothers-to-be not only are confronted with the 'choice between breast milk or formula milk', they also get to hear that, if breastfeeding does not work out, they can always switch to formula. Who introduced the notion that breastfeeding *might not work out,* that the mother has not enough milk, that her breasts are not developed enough, that her baby does not like her milk*?* (Hugo Devlieger in Kendall-Tacket and Mohrbacher 2017, 9)

AP draws on cross-cultural and -historical evidence to make clear that the way we raise our children in the West is not necessarily the 'normal', 'natural' or 'best' way to do it. Paediatrician and professor in Medicine Hugo Devlieger, board member of the eminent Flemish non-profit institution De Bakermat[4], illustrates how

[4] De Bakermat, situated in Louvain, is an organization that consists of a centre of knowledge on breastfeeding, a maternity care expertise centre, and a midwifery group practice. The committee of

breastfeeding and physical proximity between mother and child are a matter of doing what the body, after birth-giving, is programmed to do: being responsive to the baby's non-verbal language. As a physician in non-Western contexts, Prof. Dr. Devlieger was able to observe the (lucky) absence of explanations, schemes or diagrams and other statistics showing 'the science of nurturing' a child. "Mothers in Central-Africa just look around them and feed their baby" (in Kendall-Tacket and Mohrbacher 2017, 9), which is considered to be a regular activity. Breastfeeding, he states, is a natural and simple event (*ibid*, 12).

Devlieger writes this in the introduction of the translation to *Breastfeeding Made Simple*, a lactation guide written by health psychologist Kathleen Kendall-Tacket and lactation consultant Nancy Mohrbacher. The authors highlight seven "natural laws of breastfeeding", under which: babies are destined to breastfeed; the mother's body is the baby's natural environment or 'habitat'; every 'breastfeeding duo' - mother and child - has its own pace; and kids stop breastfeeding on their own terms. Via these natural laws, backed up by multiple social, psychological, medical and anthropological studies, the authors explain how every mother is essentially capable of breastfeeding her baby, whatever "conflicting and inaccurate advices and cautions" (*ibid*, 12) the mothers may receive.

I will give a short overview of some of the reasons why AP endorses breastfeeding. I will not go into detail about all the alleged medical advantages of breast milk, since not every proclaimed advantage has been sufficiently or reliably evidenced (Kiefer 2015, Hall 2016, Kiefer 2018). Furthermore, "The "breast is best" mantra is likely true at a public-health level; for the individual mother–infant dyad, however, where there is a need to balance personal, social, family, and financial factors, that mantra is an oversimplification" (Wilson and Wilson, 2018). However, at the same time it should also be noted that paediatricians and health care organisations have agreed that breastfeeding should be encouraged and supported on the public level (Kind en Gezin, AAP 2012).

I will enlist some of the fairly consensus-based reasons to breastfeed, in order to understand the importance of breastfeeding to attachment parents: some aspects are

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the organisation comprises members as diverse as a family sociologist, a social worker, a paediatrician, a physician, an engineer, a pedagogue, *et caetera*.

primary immunisation (Mohrbacher 2017, 17), live antibodies (*ibid*, 19), the outbalanced and rich composition of nutrients that is unique to human's milk and different from other mammals' milk used in formula (Devlieger in *ibid*, 11); the production of the attachment hormone oxytocin (*ibid*, 48); risk reduction of severe gastrointestinal infections during an infant's first year of life (Kramer et al. 2001) . Furthermore, Kendall-Tacket and Mohrbacher cite a series of researches that have proven the risks and harmful consequences of formula milks (*ibid*, 20). For all of these reasons, AP considers exclusive breastfeeding as the "biological norm" (*idem)*.

Nonetheless, longer-term breastfeeding mothers in Flanders (and to a lesser extent in the Netherlands) are few. The Flemish translators of Kendall-Tacket and Mohrbacher distinguish several reasons for this, such as commercial pressure from the formula industry since the 1960s, and the undermining force of 'scientific mothering', which dictates mothers to closely track all the baby's nutrients and to stick to feeding schedules. But the most important reason why breastfeeding had come under pressure for over half a century now is because of the higher employment rates of women since the 1960s, which the formula industry saw as an opportunity for their product. Ever since, formula use has been normalised and as a consequence breastfeeding has become more and more an anomaly and socially unaccepted.

Current AP's insistence on breastfeeding partially stems from the devaluation of breast milk and the social unacceptability of a mother nursing her child in public. But it goes further than merely breastfeeding in AP. Breastfeeding should be done for longer stretches of time (at least two years) and 'on demand', which implies that the infant indicates when (s)he is hungry. Attachment parents interpret the baby's cry as a natural way to signal hunger or thirst or the need for consolation and intimacy. As AP-advocate, lactation consultant, and neuroscientist Dr. Mayim Bialik states: the infant's cry is always "legitimate" (2012, c). It is also legitimate for older children to ask for breastfeeding. Bialik explains that

> "[t]oddlers don't 'need' to breastfeed, but there are toddlers who *do* breastfeed and there is nothing wrong with it. Every child is different, every child has different needs, every child has a different pattern and a different schedule for independence. Some toddlers [simply] enjoy the bonding of breastfeeding, some toddlers will still show a tremendous need for that kind of closeness" (*idem*).

In conclusion, we can say that breastfeeding is one of the most widely recognised tenets of AP, albeit one of the most controversial, as I will come back to in the second chapter.

1.2. Physical Proximity: Babywearing and Co-Sleeping

Another important feature op AP is physical proximity, diurnally as well as nocturnally.

During the day, AP makes a case of carrying infants as often as possible. This is mostly done in slings in order to continue physical connection and communication. Some advantages are the practicality to pick up on hunger signals and to breastfeed; and the calming effect of bodily contact, which releases oxytocin (Kendall-Tacket and Mohrbacher 2017, 47; Morris 1992, 80-2).

There is no reliable evidence that babywearing is necessary for a healthy development of the child, even though regular babywearing is beneficial for several aspects. Babywearing is mostly defended by means of cross-cultural comparison. In many civilizations, children are bound onto the mother, even when the mother is out working. When the child is hungry, the mother can breastfeed the baby immediately and then continue her work (Kendall-Tacket and Mohrbacher 2017, 56). In Euro-American economical culture, however, the type of work has changed drastically over time and now differs significantly from the work in other economies. In most Western countries, furthermore, raising children is now seen as completely separated from the work environment, due to the public/private separation (Romany, 1994). Many AP-advocates consider this separation as unnecessarily harmful to children and parents and not so much as inevitable. For the most part, it comes down to social convention and to political reluctance to change the structure of our economy.

During the night, the proximity is continued by means of 'co-sleeping'. The bed of the child is *attached* to the parents' (or parent's) bed, or the child sleeps in the same bed as the parent/s. Some parents are afraid of suffocating or crushing their infants and therefore keep them in separate beds. It is also generally discouraged by childrearing expertise organisations, such as Kind en Gezin and the AAP - the

American Academy for Paediatrics, also exerting influence in Europe. Bialik, however, stresses that "safe co-sleeping is not contraindicated. There should be no surfaces that baby can slide into, no extra pillows or blankets, you shouldn't be under any influence on anything that makes you unable to be woken up easily: safe co-sleeping is meaningful, it makes sense, it is normal and it's natural" (2012, d).

She also points out that "the notion that babies and even young children or toddlers need to be able to put themselves to sleep as soon as possible is not supported by any scientific evidence. It's simply convention that really highly prizes early independence" (*idem*). This is echoed by others, who have even found that independent sleep training may be traumatic for children (Frissell-Deppe 1998, 51, Granju and Kennedy 1999). In another scientific paper entitled *Why babies should never sleep alone: A review of the co-sleeping controversy in relation to SIDS, bedsharing and breast feeding*, we read that

> [i]t appears that the biology underlying breast feeding behaviour - the new western feeding norm - acts as a 'hidden regulator' increasing night-time mother–infant proximity whether sleeping in the same bed or within arm reach on a different surface. (…) After all, mother–infant co-sleeping represents the most biologically appropriate sleeping arrangement for humans and is both ancient and ubiquitous simply because breast feeding is not possible, nor as easily managed, without it. (McDade and McKenna 2005, 135)

Even though the authors contest the "never sleep with your child" mantra, they approach co-sleeping in a nuanced way: "Discussions about infant and childhood sleeping arrangements will benefit by moving away from the notion that a single recommendation is appropriate" (McDade and McKenna 2005, 149). By drawing on bio-evolutional evidence, they recognise the plurality of human children's sleep patterns. Paediatric advice and health programmes, they maintain, should "appreciate and accommodate [more] the potential fluidity of sleeping arrangements in any given family and respond to the reality that many infants experience multiple sleep locations and arrangements, both social and solitary" (*ibid*, 150). Despite the plurality, the authors present overwhelming evidence that "co-sleeping at least in the form of room sharing especially with an actively breast feeding mother saves lives" (*ibid*, 134), thereby referring to a possibly reduced

threat of SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome) when co-sleeping and breastfeeding. The authors also point at other important benefits:

> The increased sensory contact and proximity between the mother and infant induces potentially beneficial behavioural and physiological changes in the infants. Such changes, observed by mothers, probably explain why within days of arriving home after giving birth mothers adopt one of two forms of co-sleeping, room sharing or bedsharing, for part or all of the night. Mothers report less infant crying, more maternal and infant sleep and increased milk supply due to the increased frequency of night-time breast feeding that close contact facilitates (135)

1.3. Meeting Children's Emotional Needs

As already touched upon above, many AP-advocates give zoological or bio-evolutional reasons for physical proximity. Neuroscientist Dr. Mayim Bialik, for instance, draws attention to the fact that humans are mammals and that mammals are biologically hardwired to go to their babies when they are in need of their parents. Reflexes are hardwired in children, too. Clinical psychologist Robert Karen (1990), echoing AP-founder John Bowlby, writes that "clinging, sucking, and following are all part of the child's instinctual repertoire, and (…) the goal of these behaviors is precisely to keep the mother close by".

Meeting children's needs is therefore seen as an important aspect of attachment parenting. Bialik denounces that we demand from small children to be as emotionally and physically autonomous as possible, as quickly as possible. She links this demand to Western society, in which efficiency and individualism are key, but "there is no statistical or scientific reason why [infants] need to learn that their needs will not be met immediately" (2012, c). Bialik finds it disturbing "that our culture emphasizes that our children need to be independent before they can even sit up" (*idem*).

The fact that our culture so highly prises independence does not only affect children, but parents too. Such as philosopher Mielle Chandler notes on the high toll of the autonomy ideal: "I speak as a mother forced by emancipation to wrench my child from me, to, day after day, compartmentalize my child away, so that I could pretend for eight hours that I was an individual. That is the price, for many mothers, of autonomy, of freedom, of movement, of speech (…), and that is a price

which is too high to pay" (1998, 280). Similarly, many mothers and fathers note that they feel they want to act and react otherwise when their child is crying, but that they are afraid of 'spoiling' the child, of 'being manipulated', or that the child 'will never put itself to sleep'.

The cry-it-out method (CIO), which trains children to fall asleep alone during sleep training, is therefore strongly criticised. It is not only very hard on mothers to hear their children cry for a substantial time, it also essentially teaches children that their needs will not be met. There is an oft-cited research that suggests that letting CIO is even harmful to children in the long-term (Middlemiss et al. 2012). However, this research has subsequently been debunked by several scientists and researchers (Mindell et al. 2006, Kiefer 2016a, Kiefer 2016b). Up to date there is no reliable scientific data that supports the claim that sleep training or CIO is harmful, nor that it is harmless.

The reason why the idea behind CIO is so alive, according to attachment parents, is that in Western society mistrust of emotional responsiveness is prevalent. We call those who need more than average emotional or physical care and attention, 'needy'. Writer and scholar Maggie Nelson formulates this cultural feeling of distrust succinctly as "the tendency to treat other people's needs as repulsive" (*ibid*, 127). In this vein, she also cites a fragment from Adam Phillips' and Barbara Taylor's *On Kindness* (2010): "The self without sympathetic attachments is either a fiction or a lunatic… [Yet] dependence is scorned even in intimate relationships, as though dependence were incompatible with self-reliance rather than the only thing that makes it possible" (Nelson 2015, 126). Thus, via meeting the emotional needs of the child, AP stresses that the child will be more secure and self-reliant.

1.4. Demedicalisation and Natural Health

API (Attachment Parenting International) does not take a stance on a lot of issues related to natural health, yet many AP-parents are nonetheless involved in various natural health practices (Bialik 2012, b). Some are vegan, some decline redundant medication, others cloth diaper their children, and so on. Within the AP-community there is also a group that even limits or resists vaccinations for their children, yet this is only a minority. I will discuss three issues here: the current insistence on

demedicalisation of pregnancy and birth-giving; Holistic Health Care (HHC); and Elimination Communication (EC).

Although it is an oft-heard claim that postnatal bonding is "a scientific fiction" (Eyer 1992) and merely catering to male medical experts' interests, this is contradicted by the fact that AP is in fact highly critical of medical expertise, which is regarded as a male-dominated industry that rationalizes and instrumentalizes the female pregnant and birthing body. Indeed, the way in which women currently deliver, is largely set by a medical obstetrics developed by male experts (Klaus et al. 2012). Furthermore is the rate of (epidurals) and artificial obstetrical delivery unprecedentedly high (SPE 2018). Even though there is no evidence that epidurals have a negative impact on the child and even though the risks for mothers are minimal, AP opts for natural birthing. Therefore, women should "learn to shift the way [they] perceive pain" (Bialik 2012, c). Perceptions of birth giving should therefore be altered through language: "we don't talk about 'contractions', we talk about 'surges'; we don't talk about 'pain', we talk about 'intensity'. And even those subtle shifts in language, do affect the way we perceive things" (*idem*).

Furthermore, many AP mothers decide to give birth at home, since it gives them a sense of empowerment and control. When home-birthing, they are most often assisted by a midwife and/or by a doula. Doulas are a fairly new phenomenon in the modern Western World. Her task consists of assisting the budding and new mother psychologically and materially. She does this by sharing her personal / formal experiences with and knowledge about birth-giving, relaxation, breastfeeding, physiology of the new-born, maternal health, *et caetera*. The most important aspect is to revive the principle of transmission, now considered to be lost in Western society (Klaus et al. 2012).

A second example is Holistic Health Care (HHC). HHC entails that the mother's health cannot be seen separately from the child's, nor from the rest of the community's or the world's. 'Health' thus goes well beyond the individual and physical level. Parents concerned with HHC, for instance, teach their children "to respect and care about the natural world", or limit their children's "exposure to advertising, marketing, and a consumer-driven culture" (Holistic Moms Network). Another essential pillar of HHC is green and non-toxic living (*idem*; Bialik 2012, b). This may comprise veganism, cloth diapering, and natural body care and

cleaning products that are devoid of harsh chemicals that endanger environment and health.

Also Elimination Communication (EC) a.k.a. 'Natural Infant Hygiene', my last example, is often advocated. This is a "natural approach to responding to babies' elimination needs" (Diaper Fee Baby). Here again, the naturalness is ethno-paediatrically explained and validated by referring to "families in traditional cultures around the world" (*idem*). Also biological and zoological claims are made. In this respect, it is maintained that babies instinctively avoid urinating and defecating on themselves, 'just like other animals' (*idem*). EC is a means to avoid learning and unlearning self-defecation by "observing one's baby's signs and signals, providing cue sounds and elimination-place associations" (Diaper Free baby). It is emphasised that EC "is a gentle, natural, non-coercive process by which a baby, preferably beginning in early infancy, learns with the loving assistance of parents and caregivers to communicate about and address his or her elimination needs" (*idem*). There is no evidence that non-EC practices are harmful to children in the long run (although it is unpleasant for children to sit in soiled diapers). Many of the older (mostly ethnographic) reports have merely been anecdotal. However, evolutionary psychologists Regine Schön and Maarit Silvén state that "contributions discussing infant toilet training in a Western context [Sun and Rugolotto, 2004; Boucke, 2006] are now starting to appear" (2007, 122).

Two things become clear when considering natural health: first, natural health seems to always involve the connection between emotional (psychological) and physical health, as well as between an individual and their surroundings; and second, AP perceives the natural approach often as the most gentle approach.

An analogical reasoning is in fact applied to the other tenets: what is natural is good (better) and *vice versa*, and what counts as natural is most likely though to be scientifically evidenced. Faircloth points out that attachment mothers often appeal to scientific authority to justify their parenting styles and choices, which she calls "[t]he widespread 'scientisation' of parenting" (Faircloth 2010). Science is no longer the expert's territory; it is instead "interpreted, internalized, and mobilized by individuals and networks in the course of 'identity work'" (*idem*). Faircloth also cites sociologist Frank Ferudi who indicates that that science becomes the secular version of a religion, which is interpreted as if it were a straightforward rationale

that needs no sociological questioning (cited in Faircloth 2010). We will see that the scientific groundings of AP have also *historically* been called into question.

2. The Historico-Ideological Roots of AP

There exist a tremendous number of historical overviews of AP; all adopting different perspectives and placing different emphases on AP-history. I will make an attempt to bring most of the existent perspectives together.

'Classical' AP finds its roots in the 1940s, when Benjamin Spock's *Baby And Childcare* (1946) appeared. Spock radically shifted away from 'scientific mothering', which had been the dominant childrearing method since before the turn of the century, and put forward by childrearing experts such as John Watson, Luther Emmett Holt, and Granville Stanley Hall. All of these psychologists and childcare specialists took Pavlovian behaviourist stances in their theories. In their opinion, for instance, parents (mothers) should let children "cry it out" and not soothe them, otherwise they would spoil them and instil the idea that they can manipulate their parents. In this era, mothering became professionalised. This meant that behavioural training was emphasised and, along with that, discipline was favoured to motherly affection, 'instinct', or morality (Hays, 1996).

The impact of these theories was great (Zelizer 1985, Hays 1996). Therefore, Spock encouraged mothers, who were the main target group, not to follow impersonal advice or rely on rigorous schedules for nursing their babies - as scientific mothering had demanded. Mothers should instead follow their own 'intuition'. Accordingly, the sentence that reappears multiple times in *Baby in Childcare* is "you know more than you think you do".

This phrase, however, is somewhat ironic. Even though Spock promotes mothers' intuition, this rather seems a strawman argument when holding the +900 pages counting book instructing mothers what to do.

In 1950s Europe, psycho-analyst and paediatrician John Bowlby was also one of the first to develop a theory of Attachment (1952), which he later brought together in a three volume series: Attachment (vol. 1); Separation: Anxiety & Anger (Vol. 2); Loss: Sadness & Depression (Vol. 3), published respectively in 1969, 1973 and 1980. Together with the American psychologist Mary Ainsworth (Bowlby et al.

1953), who put attachment theory on the map, he was able to set up grand experiments and tests. They focussed on mother-child bonding and developed theories on children's behavioural and emotional patterns in situations of attachment and loss. Both were much inspired by the famous child psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, "the British equivalent of Dr. Spock" (Karen 1990), who equally focused on the importance of the first years in child development. Another inspiration was the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, who argued that children understood the world's complexity more than we would assume.

Mary Ainsworth developed the "Strange situation" assessment (1969), where she observed children and mothers in their homes for one year and then observed children's reactions to the absence of mothers in a lab. Based on these observations, she developed three types of attachment: the anxious, the avoidant and the secure attachment. She argues that when the mother is "fairly consistently available" the children grew up secure and self-reliant (in Karen 1990). Karen writes that Ainsworth's findings

> "marked the beginning of a critical shift in perceptions about infancy and childrearing, set in motion a prolonged debate that divides infancy researchers to this day, and signalled a revolution in the field of developmental psychology—the branch of psychology that studies the processes by which we progress from infancy to adulthood" (1990).

As Karen makes clear: Ainsworth's work did inevitably give rise to some debate. One of the most virulent opponents were the classical analysts, behaviourists, and those who adopt a genetic perspective, such as Jerome Kagan, a developmental psychologist at Harvard. He states that "Ainsworth had a very small sample (…); it was restricted in variety; it's certainly not enough to build a theory on." (cited in Karen 1990). Other critiques were concerned with

> the reductionist tendency to assume that quality of attachment is all important. They argue that other aspects of parenting, such as teaching, playing, and having fun, may go well even if attachment goes poorly. Others believe that in focusing so much on the primary caregiver, which usually means the mother, attachment theory has not paid adequate attention to the father's role (*idem*).

Also the fact that AP relied heavily on ethology and animal-learning theory did not escape from criticism. Harry Harlow (1958), for instance, evidenced that the survival of non-human primates is dependent on the caregiver's presence and warmth. Since the same applies to many other mammals, he argues, it is not inconceivable that it also - to some extent - applies to humans. However, the plain extrapolation from non-human mammals to human mammals is questionable.

So far, I have discussed the earliest stages of AP. Later theory, however, is concerned with somewhat different issues than Ainsworth's or Bowlby's. In the 1970s, Jean Liedloff launched her theory of the 'Continuum Concept'. *The Continuum Concept* is an ethno-paediatric research of the Ye'kuana people in Venezuela, who kept their babies nearby throughout the day and co-slept at night. She noticed that the children nonetheless grew more independent than Western children. On the basis of these observations, Liedloff argues that babies have not adapted to 'Modernity' - i.e. the modern childrearing methods such as bottle feeding, separate cribs or strollers (1975). Consequently, the childrearing methods of the Ye'Kuana People are more 'natural' than Western 'scientific' childrearing.

The kind of ethno-paediatric research Liedloff did - whom would prove to have many successors - is nevertheless very contested among contemporary feminists. Cynthia Eller, for instance, writes that

> [T]he notion that all tribal peoples [*sic*] parent in the same "natural" way is untrue. It's also insulting. It suggests that "they," unlike "us," lack intelligence and initiative; that they act out of animal instinct and do not, as we do, create complex and unique cultures; that they are somehow closer to the apes than we are. As a scholar, I consider this kind of worshipful but patronizing attitude toward indigenous peoples a serious error in the interpretation and analysis of human culture. As a parent, I resent having to measure my civilized, bookish, awkward approach to mothering against the supposedly effortless, natural perfection of "simpler" women the world over (…), especially when these "simpler" and more "natural" women don't actually exist. (2015)

Yet it was only in the 1990s that AP truly became well-known by the general public. This was mainly due to the publication of *Baby Book* by William and Martha Sears in 1993. It was also the Searses who coined the term 'Attachment Parenting', by synthesising Bowlby's and Ainsworth's psychological use of attachment and

Liedloff's ethno-paediatric use. The Searses strongly advocated childrearing practices that, according to them, facilitate "babyreading" due to a heightened maternal sensitivity towards the child's signals (2001, 5-7). The authors highlight seven principles, called: "7 Baby B's" (*ibid,* 11; Ask Dr. Sears). These comprise *Birth bonding*, *Breastfeeding*, *Baby wearing*, *Bedding close to baby*, *Belief in the language value of your baby's cry*, *Beware of baby trainers*, and *Balance,* of which I have already discussed several.

Even though the Searses marked the actual beginning of the popularisation of AP, it also marked the beginning of its staunch contestations. The Searses, namely, have an outspoken Christian background which entails that their findings are biased (Eller 2015). One of their first books carries the title *Christian Parenting and Child Care* (1985) that had a follow-up in 1997, with the *Complete Book of Christian Parenting and Child Care: A Medical and Moral Guide to Raising Happy Healthy Children*. The Christian bias is well evidenced by the following quote: "wives should submit to their husbands in everything… God has placed within mothers both the chemistry and the sensitivity to respond to their babies appropriately" (cited in Freeman 2016). And since the medical claims are supported by little scientific evidence, it might be that the boundaries of the medical and the moral are quite fluid, certainly when we consider the fact that the studies by Bowlby and Ainsworth differed significantly from the Searses'. Issues like co-sleeping or babywearing had not been studied by the former two researchers (Rothenberg Gritz, 2012). Equally criticised is the million-dollar-industry that AP has become: the Searses namely not only *advocate* babywearing, they also *sell* the slings to facilitate this babywearing. According to some, this should ring a few alarm bells (Eller, 2015).

Aside from the Searses, the very foundations of AP are under attack. The main issue at stake is the background against which AP has developed. Several feminists have contended that AP was not merely a reaction to scientific mothering, as I described *supra*, but foremost a response in the USA to the end of the (Second World) War Economy (Tizard 2009) and the early stages of the Cold War (Vicedo 2011). When the war was over, women, who had entered the work force during the war, were discarded and sent back home. Since many women did not want to abandon their newly gained activities outside the home, patriarchal society was in need of an ideology that would draw women back to the home (*idem, idem*).

Therefore, several feminists suspect that AP is for a good deal grounded in this patriarchal ideology.

Patriarchy, Christian morality and bad science: is AP defined by its historical roots? This is the essential question that has given rise to the Attachment Parenting Controversy.

3. Debunking the Controversy: AP As an 'Institution of Motherhood'?

AP is very much in the picture, albeit in a paradoxical way. On the one hand it seems to become the new normative (in terms of breastfeeding, for instance), yet on the other hand it is controversial and ridiculed: many AP-mothers are depicted as mere "cranks", which is, as journalist Sarah Hughues reports, "largely propagated by movies and magazine articles" (Hughes, 2012). In her article she gives the example of one of the rare films that mention AP: *Away We Go* (2009). In this film, however, AP is not neutrally discussed or shown as a possible style of parenting, instead the mother is troubled and slightly hysterical, stating things like: "They gave me a stroller … I love my babies, why would I want to push them away from me?" (cited in Hughes, 2012).

But AP is not only scorned, it is also seen as highly controversial since many of its tenets conflict with current political trends: they are at odds with modern, scientific and male expert-guided culture; the structure of Western economics, and with certain aspects of (liberal) feminism. I have already touched upon the two first when outlining AP's basic tenets; this chapter will revolve around the conflict with feminism, as this conflict lies at the heart of the 'Attachment Parenting Controversy'. This controversy, as mentioned *supra*, is in fact a reconfiguration of the Mommy Wars in the 1990s and a manifestation of the historically strained relationship between feminism and parenting in general (see de Beauvoir (1949), Firestone (1970), Moller Okin (1989), Thurer (1995), Umansky (1996), Douglas and Michaels (2005), Badinter (2010), and many others).

I will discern and explore the three main debates on AP that tie in with feminist questions:

1) Is Attachment Parenting - or should we say *Mothering* - fundamentally essentialist?

2) Is AP 'exclusive' and used as a distinctive identity marker?

3) Is AP just another childrearing fad that aims to control mother's minds and bodies?

3.1. Essentialist Motherhood? On Maternal Instincts.

Feminist motherhood scholars were exhilarated when, in 1989, maternal feminist Sara Ruddick conceived of an appreciative theory of mothering. *Maternal Thinking* raised "a challenge to the non-cognitive notion of 'maternal instinct'" (Linker 2009, 41) and demanded "that we take seriously moral decision making which can occur in the context of a loving relationships [*sic*] between two unequal parties" (*idem*). By accentuating the cognition involved in mothering, feminists argued, theory could move beyond the merely *natural* or *instinctive*. But this project of denaturalisation seems to be endangered by AP. *Natural* and *instinctive*, namely, are often used to describe the practices endorsed by AP. AP is even termed 'natural parenting' or 'instinctive parenting' by some (Schön and Silvén 2007, Granju and Kennedy 1999). Also in Dutch, the translation of AP is *Natuurlijk Ouderschap* (MamAditi).

But what are the implications of calling a parenting style 'natural'? Is the underlying claim not: 'All other styles and practices of parenting are subsequently unnatural and thus less appropriate'? (Eller 2005, Freeman 2019,). Also the high insistence on maternal instinct has underlying claims: What about the mothers who suffer from post-natal depressions, or who do not feel they have a proper bond with the child as an infant, or who do not 'know' how to react to the babies' cries? The assumption that all mothers feel 'naturally drawn' to AP is therefore outraging to many feminists. But it goes even further:

> The Sears have [suggested] in their books that the only reason a woman might struggle with attachment parenting is because "your marriage was shaky going into pregnancy, or if you and your husband were not really ready". They also suggest that "women with a history of sexual abuse may find it difficult" (cited in Freeman, 2016).

This type of essentialism is what Patrice DiQuinzio more specifically terms "essential motherhood" (1999, xiii). Essential motherhood "is an ideological formation that specifies the essential attributes of motherhood and articulates femininity in terms of motherhood so understood" (*idem*). The more developed definition is the following:

> According to essential motherhood, mothering is a function of women's essentially female nature, women's biological reproductive capacities and/or human evolutionary development. Essential motherhood construes women's motherhood as natural and inevitable. It requires women's exclusive and selfless attention to and care of children based on women's psychological and emotional capacities for empathy, awareness of the needs of others, and self-sacrifice. According to essential motherhood, because these psychological and emotional capacities are natural in women, women's desires are oriented to mothering and women's psychological development and emotional satisfaction require mothering. (xiii)

DiQuinzio on the other hand stresses, like Ruddick (1989) and Hill Collins (1990, 2000) did, the importance of maternal *thinking* and promotes the recognition of "differences in women's experiences of mothering" (*idem*). Furthermore, we should conceive of "the relationship of mother and child as a relationship in which the subjectivity of each is continually constituted and transformed in relation to the other" (*ibid*, 211), which challenges the idea of a demarcated or fixed identity. These are all aspects that go against the essentialising discourse on mothers.

A voice that is the most critical (or judgmental?) of intensive parenting styles - like AP - is the French liberal feminist Elisabeth Badinter. Badinter states that from 1980 onward a "silent revolution" (2010, 9) has taken root, "which basically revolves around putting motherhood at the heart of women's destiny again" (*idem*). She considers this to be the consequence of a series of economical and identarian crises that resulted in "the temptation to return to good old Mother Nature" (*idem*), enforced by naturalising discourses. Badinter consequently refers to a renewed Rousseauian ideology that "convinces women to reconnect with nature and with maternal instinct" (*ibid*, 13). In this respect, she and many other feminists reject the revival of what people assume to be traditional and primeval (Eyer 1992, Hays

1996, Badinter 2010, Eller 2015, Freeman 2016, Freeman 2019). This becomes clear in the many instances of cross-cultural research and ethno-paediatrics (Badinter 2012, Liedloff 1975, Sears 2001, Kendall-Tacket and Mohrbacher 2017). Yet, justification of AP-tenets by anthropological research of 'native' childrearing practices may raise some questions (Eller 2015), as we have seen.

Not seldom, the critiques of instinct come from feminists who fear that the attribution of certain aspects of women to biology, genes and hormones will quickly revert to biological determinism and the essentialisation of women that has prevailed for centuries. And although there is reason to beware of this essentialisation, the question remains whether every piece of neuro-biological evidence can be rejected. Therefore, grand oppositions should be avoided. Just like people are not merely neuro-biologically determined, they are not merely culturally determined; the 'Woman' and the 'Mother' are or should not be as conflicting as Badinter implies[5]. A female parent *has* the built-in capacity to feed the children she has borne, so in a medical context unsupportive of breastfeeding and neglectful of female experience, it seems reasonable that some feminists have deemed it feminist or activist to honour the biology of their sex.

In this respect, Mayim Bialik (PhD) questions the critique that if AP is so-called natural, it might therefore be considered 'biologically superior' to other forms of parenting:

> [t]his is I think the sort of thing that we've gotten into with the whole parenting politics. Two things can't be equivalent: if you breastfeed, that's not the same thing as not breastfeeding, i.e. if I drink a soda, that's not the same as not drinking a soda. So I think it's important to use language to say what *is* consistent with the way our body was made and what's not, but not to make judgement about that. (…) [N]o one is saying that you're not a good parent or that your child won't be securely attached if you don't [practice AP] (2014).

AP is about grey areas: mothers should be able to makes the choices that feel intellectually and emotionally right to them, whether that means they will

[5] Nicely illustrated by the title of her book: *Le conflit: La femme et la mère.*

breastfeed, or not. It is this reclamation of maternal space that makes AP intrinsically feminist (Bialik 2012, a).

It is also false to assume that all AP-advocates unthinkingly equate biological predisposition with deterministic instincts. Many have repeatedly emphasised that breastfeeding and co-sleeping, albeit natural phenomena, are not instinctive activities. Rather, "the mother and her baby go through a process in which they learn to adapt and respond to one another" (Kendall-Tacket and Mohrbacher 2017, 12-13). So the scientific AP-community emphasises the learning process of responsiveness rather than maternal instincts.

3.2. AP as a Reinforcement of Unequal Labour Division?

It is generally acknowledged that having children, regardless the parenting style, has repercussions on parental equality (Hays 1996, Fox 1998, Williams 2000, Craig 2007, O'Reilly 2008, Reichert Powell 2008, Régnier-Loilier 2009, Badinter 2010, Jones 2012, O'Reilly 2016). In a 2007 comparative study[6], Lynn Craig states that it is still women who end up doing the majority of the childrearing work and doing so simultaneously with other tasks (2007, 133). Even though it is commonly recognised that educated women have fewer and more likely no children than non-educated women, Lynn also found that "those women who *do* become parents are actually likely to allocate even more time to child care than other women. They are particularly likely to spend more time in the development of their children's human capital" (*ibid*, 135). Even though highly educated men also spend more time with their children, this seems not sufficient to alleviate some of the balancing work mothers experience (*idem*). Women, Craig concludes, currently have three options: "not have children, work very hard balancing employment and family, or withdraw from paid work" (*ibid*, 138).

It is assumed that the observations cited *supra* necessarily apply to attachment parents, and this to an even greater extent. This is an assumption since virtually no studies have been conducted except for one study in the USA and Canada. This survey reports that the children spent most of the time exclusively with the mother (Green et al. 2008). On the basis of this conclusion, many feminists hold that, since

[6] The compared countries were Australia, Norway, Germany and Italy.

AP prioritises maternal care, it must be that attachment mothers need to 'opt out' and stay at home with their children, or that mothers who do choose to work, are struggling to balance work/life even more than 'regular' mothers.

First of all, when going back to the sources, the demand for mothers to stay at home is not so staunch. Although Bowlby (1969, 1973) and the Searses (1999) have indeed promoted the idea that mothers should stay at home, AP-founder Mary Ainsworth herself gave a rather nuanced view on this:

> People who focus primarily on the welfare of children tend to ignore what suits the mother. But it's really a matter of how do we adjust these two things. Had I myself had the children I longed for, I like to believe I could have arrived at some satisfactory combination of mothering and a career, but I do not believe that there is any universal, easy, ready-made solution. (cited in Karen 1990)

Many of the current key figures sympathetic to AP insist even more on this nuance (Erica Etelson (2007), Friedman (2008), Mayim Bialik (2012)).

Even though many attachment mothers *do* stay at home during the first (half) life year, this choice should not be overemphasised: minding small children can be merely a phase in mothers' lives, it should not equal a sacrifice of the mother's entire career. Conversely, attachment fathers can also become stay-at-home parents (*cf. infra* chapter 5.3.). Contrary to common belief, "attachment theory does not specify that caregiving must be done by mothers or be restricted to females" (Marris 1982, cited in Bretherton 1992, 770). Yet, it must be acknowledged that fathers rarely nurture their infant alone during the first months; rather, fathers will usually *co-parent* during the first period and/or be a single stay-at-home parent when the mother abandons exclusive breastfeeding.

In many AP-families, in fact, 'peer marriage' is quite common. Pepper Schwartz (2003) defines peer marriages as "marriages [or other ways of coexistence] in which the division of household labor remains within a sixty-forty split, power in decision making and over economic resources is shared equitably, and each partner's work is given equal weight in the couple's life plans" (cited in Mack-Canty and Wright 2008, 144). In the same vein, Barbara Risman and Dannette Johnson-Sumerford (1998), and more recently Randi S. Cowdery and Carmen Knudson-Martin (2005), talk about "Postgender Marriages", which "represent families in which husband and

wife [or male and female partner] divide work equally without regard to gender and mothering is a conscious collaboration" (cited in Mack-Canty and Wright 2008, 145). These definitions do certainly apply to many of the AP-community members. Stereotypes like the "competitive corporate-minded trendy celebrity divas toting secret nannies on the side [or the] perfection-driven bored subjugated barefoot lonely women setting feminism back 200 years" (Bialik 2012, a) do not make for a nuanced view of the diversity among attachment parents.

There is also the viable "refusal of work" critique to be made. Throughout the decades of feminist assessments of politics, culture and economics, it has become clear that "refusal of work" can be a feminist political statement (Weeks 2018, Federici 2006, Graeber 2013; 2018). It namely holds the refusal of the narrow definition of work (i.e. paid and public), of capitalist structures or of consumerism as well as a critique of modern society and its rat-race.

Work is steadily defined as a valuable and fulfilling aspect of a human's life. Many, however, question society's definition of and focus on career. Moreover, Kathy Weeks argues that many workers do not perform work that they would qualify as valuable, which she terms "the problem of quality" (2018). Analogically, David Graeber speaks of 'bullshit jobs' - unnecessary jobs - and 'shit jobs' - necessary but unpleasant jobs (2013; 2018). Weeks points at the current "dominant mythology" that workers should "cultivate an intimate relationship to work as a site of personal development and social belonging". Yet at the same time, the jobs that actually lead to personal fulfilment are scarce - the "problem of quantity" (*idem*).

Moreover, work has always been defined in quite a narrow way, excluding unwaged labour that often happens to be the 'private' care work, historically done by and associated with women/mothers and historically the latter's source of oppression. Yet the work in and of itself is still important and the kind of work that facilitates other work, society and social health altogether (Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto 1990, Kathi Weeks 2011; 2018). Therefore, the struggle for recognition of nurturance as valuable labour is taken seriously by many attachment mothers.

It seems unfair that the refusal of work can only be political for these reasons but excludes attachment mothers' desire to raise their children. Many attachment mothers *do* identify as feminists, who may actively challenge economic dictations

and strive to improve social health by prioritising childrearing (de Marneffe 2004, Etelson 2007, Bobel 2008, Hayes 2010, Erchull and Liss 2012).

We nonetheless have to recognise that the implications of women's or mothers' versus men's or fathers' refusal of work are different. Women putting their work on hold to nurse their infants rings historical bells for many feminists, who therefore consider AP a threat to women's liberation and a betrayal of the feminist struggles for equality in the labour market, financial independence, status and social equality (Hays 1996, Badinter 2010, Freeman 2016; 2019).

However, we must also remember that we can easily flip around the critique of today's mothers' alleged oppression: being forced to leave their baby behind - even if they do not want to or do not feel ready to - after only a couple of months, in order to become validated and emancipated workers-consumers again, could equally be seen as oppressive.

But the real issue, of course, is not whether women choose to stay at home with their children or go to work (Cossman 2009, Jones 2012). The issue is that mothers are insufficiently supported, regardless which decision they make. Inge Bleijenbergh, Jet Bussemaker and Jeanne de Bruijn discuss that, although "the [Belgian] government accepts some responsibility for helping families provide care for children while parents are employed" (2006, 318), this state support - comprising public childcare and central welfare provision - is still limited compared to countries like Denmark or Sweden (*idem*). In Belgium, paternity leave is still restricted to ten days, which leaves new mothers by themselves very soon after labour. The authors point out that when the European 1990s childcare policies were drafted "[m]en's participation in care was a controversial issue (…), but improving women's participation in the labor market was not" (*ibid*, 324). Therefore, the focus was once more placed on women's assimilation to neoliberal market standards, without having consideration for fathers' participation in childrearing and household work (Craig 2007, 131).

At the same time, the mothers are also little supported when they do go back to work (Ross 2016), and this is a trend that concerns attachment mothers and maternal activists alike (Bobel 2008). When breastfeeding or pumping facilities are not in place at work, or when the schedules are not supportive of new mothers who want to be with their small children on a fairly regular basis, this may encourage mothers to opt out (Belkin 2003, Jones 2012).

3.3. Another Fad That Aims to Regulate Maternal Behaviour?

Many scholars conceive of AP as a form of intensive parenting / mothering, which is according to them the currently dominant parenting climate[7] (Hays 1996, Stadtman Tucker 2008, Faircloth 2013, O'Reilly ref,). This 'currently dominant' parenting ideology is defined mostly negatively: Judith Stadtman Tucker, for instance, describes it as the "belief that children's optimal growth and development are directly and exclusively related to the quality and quantity of maternal care they receive, and [the belief that] caring mothers always put children's needs ahead of their own" (Stadtman Tucker 2008, 210). Also Sharon Hays stresses repeatedly that the core of intensive parenting / mothering revolves around *always* putting children's needs first (1996). Many feminists indeed contend that AP is simply the latest update of the historical discourse of the 'Good Mother' or of the 'Angel of the House', which regulates mother's behaviour and controls their minds (Thurer 1995, Hays 1996, Douglas and Michaels 2005, Warner 2005, Badinter 2010, Eller 2015, Freeman 2016, Tuteur 2016). Feminist Katha Pollitt expresses this sentiment very clearly:

> Child-rearing fashions come and go, but they're always about regulating the behavior of women—middle-class educated women. If these discussions were really about children, we would be debating the policies that affect them—what to do about our shocking level of child poverty, for example. (…) And only tangentially are child-raising fads about fathers; men are more "involved" now than fifty years ago, but you won't catch them beating themselves or one another up over not making organic baby food from scratch (2012).

AP is a *fad* that once again lets fathers off the hook. Also Freeman (2016) draws attention to the fact that it is mostly mothers who are targeted:

> When all around you is hormonal fog and existential fear, attachment parenting offers clarity and promise: follow these steps and you will bond more quickly with your baby, and they will

[7] However, one can think of many dominant views on childrearing that do not correspond with intensive parenting's. For instance, Evelien Lombaert points at the dominant economical model in Flanders as that of the "dual fulltime breadwinners" (2005, 99), which entails that society mainly puts parents' needs first. Children are indeed dropped off in schools, after-schooling, and a whole range of activities, classes and organizations in order to enable the dual full time breadwinners model (*idem*).

> be happier. It puts its thumb right on the maternal pressure point, by asking how much of yourself you are willing to give up for your child, mixing things most mothers already know (babies need human interaction) with their worst fears (anything less than constant devotion will cause your baby emotional harm).

In addition, Freeman calls AP "something (…) akin to female masochism in the pursuit of maternal perfection, a quiet belief that maybe feminism had sold them a pup and staying at home with the baby wasn't just what they could do, but *should* do" (2016). Elisabeth Badinter (2012), writing about how modern motherhood set feminism back, underscored how AP is guilting mothers for adopting modern medical practices, choosing day care, or not breastfeeding their children. These "Virtuous Earth Mothers" (2010, 52) spend their days obsessing over ecological choices and "reconnecting with nature" (*ibid*, 65).

Although the abovementioned accounts are rightly putting AP into historical perspective and addressing normative discourses, it seems that certain characterisations are exaggerated and that attachment mothers are being ridiculed: their status as Stepford Wives seems somewhat overstated, and the fact that more and more people show interest in Fair Trade and sustainable food choices, quite legitimate. These accounts are problematic in that many of the conscious practices associated with AP are discredited *because* it is mostly women who care for these practices. Childrearing ideologies are indeed mostly directed at women, but this may also be the result of reluctantly involved fathers. Could it thus be that the causation is not necessarily 'AP lets fathers off the hook', but equally 'AP reverberates more with the parents who are actually involved, i.e. mothers'? Could we not, instead of mocking attachment mothers, encourage fathers more to endorse responsiveness, or make informed parenting decisions and environmentally sounder choices? To put it with Ruddick's words: "I can't forget the first misogynists who called mothers 'Momists'. These mothers were not so unlike intensive mothers (…). They spent too much time with their children, loved them too much, paid them too much attention, and made them unfit for killing" (cited in O'Reilly 2009, 33). Thus, Ruddick points out that some feminist critiques of attachment mothers can be a form of 'mother shaming'.

But the same accusation goes the other way, as Amy Tuteur (2016) points out: "Attachment parenting says a single Latina woman who works in Walmart can't be a good mother. So if only wealthy white women can be good mothers, there's

something wrong with this definition of being a mother" (cited in Freeman 2016). Tuteur is definitely right when it comes to privilege as a source of mother shaming and exclusion. It is well-acknowledged that attachment parents are overall privileged: most accounts of AP put forward a relatively homogeneous profile, i.e. white, middle-class, often well-off, and sustained by favourable immediate social and physical environments – which have a significant impact on parental behaviour (Bradley 2002, 281). Privilege and disadvantage *are* shaping factors in experiences of motherhood (Hill Collins 1990, 2000; Williams Veazey 2015).

Some voices are more nuanced on the implications of the AP-rhetoric. Feminist motherhood scholar May Friedman, for instance, stresses the profound ambiguity and ambivalence of maternal empowerment versus breastfeeding. Aware of the guilt that breastfeeding rhetoric may engender, Friedman centralises the language of choice. In this respect we should "allow women to choose to breastfeed despite everything, to acknowledge the health benefits for our babies, but to also acknowledge the class and gender implications of breastfeeding, and to struggle with the individual costs and stressors of each nursing relationship" (2009, 34). Friedman argues that this is the only way breastfeeding can function as a site of maternal activism that simultaneously supports breastfeeding mothers and avoids guilting mothers who may not want or may not be able to breastfeed. This sensitivity toward the cultural embeddedness of mothers 'choices' is also illustrated by Jenna Abetz and Julia Moore, who uncover how the language of choice may "dismantle feminism by turning attention to women's individual choices and away from institutional mechanisms and cultural ideologies that enable and constrain choice" (2016, 59).

However, we can also argue for a more sensitive application of the term: instead of defining 'choice' as the choice to either fully embrace *or* to fully reject AP, we should define it as the choice "to embrace certain practices" (Abetz and Moore 2016, 59). This argumentation makes room for a nuanced view on AP-philosophy, since it allows for a differentiation between AP and the context in which AP exists. In itself, AP cannot be discriminatory or excluding; it is certain life conditions that enable or prevent parents from practicing AP-principles.

4. Toward Empowering 'Experiences of Motherhood'

The core question in the Attachment Parenting Controversy seems to be 'Is AP fundamentally oppressive?' Most analyses of intensive parenting and AP are very much concerned with the oppression that follows from the ideology of the 'Good Mother', i.e. AP as "institution" (Rich 1976). Some fear that AP is too dogmatic and will distort, confine, and control mothering practices and "experiences" (*idem*).

However, there are critical comments to be made on these analyses. In essence, AP theory, just like any other theory or philosophy, can be understood in a fundamentalist way, but there have been numerous voices that challenge this fundamentalism. Bialik, for instance, eagerly challenges the idea that there is a fixed set of rules that need to be followed. AP has no precise definition, she states, but functions as an umbrella term (2012 a,b). The notion is also constantly in evolution. These observations imply several things:

First, many critiques of AP are mere reproductions of critiques in the 1980s or '90s, when the notion came up strongly. The 1980s, however, are over 30 years ago. Challenged gender roles and women's rights were less mainstream than they are today. These developments surely had their impact on AP.

Furthermore, where does theory end and interpretation begin? Since different people highlight different issues in AP, it is difficult to know whether this or that aspect is inherent to AP. So *what aspects of AP exactly are contested* is important to know. There are of course several constituents – core tenets without which AP ceases to exist – such as breastfeeding and close proximity, but the extent or the degree of these constituents are open to discussion. *How long* should *the mother breastfeed? How long* should *a parent co-sleep or babywear? What does permanent close proximity entail, in what ways can it be organised? When can work re-enter life as an attachment parent?* There is little to no reliable research that gives an answer to these questions.

Third, there indeed exists dogma in AP; just like in any other ideology. Some *will* use AP as an identarian claim, be dogmatic in their childrearing views, or aggress non-attachment mothers. But many will not. Excesses do not represent a philosophy or ideology.

The previous point automatically leads to the last one: critics tend to homogenise attachment mothers' identities and practices. Since AP is an "umbrella term", there

necessarily exists much variety among the attachment mothers. Many different mothers call themselves attachment parents, yet there is a lot of diversity in their practices (such is case of my participants, *cf. infra*).

The critiques of AP specifically, and of intensive parenting in general, also fail to stress or even acknowledge the ethical and cognitive agency many attachment mothers have, which might disempower these women and overlook their individual experiences. Consequently, an interesting line of inquiry is to understand AP as a "form of a larger cultural opposition to the ideology of rationalized market societies. Mothers, in other words, are engaged in an explicit and systematic rejection of the logic of individualistic, competitive, and impersonal relations (Hays 1996, 154). This cultural opposition is expressed via what Stadtman Tucker calls an "a feminist ethic of care" (2008, 212), which she considers to be a potentially effective change narrative for motherhood in the 21st-century (*idem*). In this respect, we should consider "caring for others as an essential social function. Rather than valorizing maternal sensitivity and altruism as a vital resource, feminist care ethics aims to liberate caregiving from its peripheral status as women's work and reposition it as a primary human activity" (*idem*).

The feminist ethic of care mainly draws on the concepts of "maternal thinking" (Ruddick 1989), which recognises the cognitive and moral faculties involved in care, and the holistic definition of care as defined by Fisher and Tronto, i.e. everything we do "to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web" (1990, 40).

I will apply this framework of maternal thinking and care ethics to the lived practices and experiences of seven attachment mothers living in Ghent, Belgium.

PART II : *QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ON ATTACHMENT MOTHERS' EMPOWERING CARE ETHICS*

5. Methodology

There is little research available on the link between holistic care ethics and AP. Therefore, I necessarily had to break new ground. This thesis has consequently come about on the basis of induction. Induction holds that I start from a general premise - 'Attachment mothers may derive their childrearing ethics from an overarching care ethics or vice versa: they extrapolate their childrearing ethics to other domains in their lives' - which then needs to be evidenced by particular instances that demonstrate this general claim. The central aim of this second part is to generate such instances - individual mothers' accounts of their ethical experiences and practices – in order to back up my premise. It is also an important way to minimise the gap between theory and lived experience.

In this respect, I have conducted one-time and two-hour during interviews with seven interviewees who fitted the profile requirements for this thesis. I will expand on the participant recruitment procedure as well as of the interview proceedings (Mortelmans 2013) in the next chapter.

5.1. Qualitative Interviews: Recruitment and Proceeding

I recruited my interviewees mostly via a general announcement on the Facebook page of MamAditi (an AP-group based in Ghent), via contacts at Gentse Spruiten (another Ghentian organisation that brings parents together) and via clients in the two ecological shops that employ me (Tavontuur and OHNE). In these announcements I explicitly asked for female attachment parents who engage in social and/or environmental activism of practices. I also wanted to recruit in Ghent,

for two reasons: First, it facilitated real-life meetings, since I myself am based in Ghent; and second, it permits a well-defined socio-political setting.

While initially having up to twenty mothers who reacted, many did not live or even work in Ghent. From the twelve remaining mothers, seven continued their engagement.

The participants are particularly outspoken in their rapprochement to other forms of activism or ethics; they are or have been affiliated with *MamAditi* and/or with *La Leche League Flanders (LLLF)*; do social work, volunteer. Many of them are connected in some way; the most common connection is their children's 'unschooling' school: Sudbury School Gent.

The interviews were conducted in the contexts preferred by and familiar to the participants (Mortelmans 2013). For most of the participants this was at home, in the months of February and March of 2019. I recorded the live interviews and afterwards transcribed the fragments that were potentially relevant to my research.

I have refrained from asking too many questions, as I wanted them to talk freely, making links that are unique to their lives. The interview style was confidential and non-judgmental. When I did ask questions, I inquired about the participants' activities and practices as well as about their principles and beliefs with respect to AP. I asked what they think the absolute bottom line of AP is; how they navigate between motherhood and their ideologies, incorporate their ethics in childrearing processes and what strategies they employ in order to do so; how they link childrearing to other aspects in life; how they deal with societal pressure on their choices as to life- and parenting styles. The participants gave me permission to use their real first names. I did, however, not use the first names of the children since they were not present or too young to consent.

5.2. Grounded Theory

The four themes that were discussed in this second part have "emerged" from the semi-structured interviews, an approach based on 'Grounded Theory'. Grounded Theory is a way of studying people's experiences and of grounding a plausible theory in these real and lived experiences. This is done via induction, which is, as said, an approach whereby one departs from a general premise that is backed up by evidencing instances. Even though the beginnings of Grounded Theory (Glaser and

Strauss, 1967) were positivist, Kathi Charmaz (2014) implements more reflexive methods by emphasising that data are co-constructed by interviewer and interviewee.

I have recorded the interviews and afterwards transcribed them, methods that are useful to construe a theory (Charmaz 2014, 1-7). Next, I have selected 'recurrent themes' by means of colour codes. Thus, in all the transcriptions theme X corresponded to colour X and theme Y corresponded to colour Y. Finally, all the texts having been coded, the recurrence and prevalence of some of the colours indicated which themes I would be discussing in my thesis: the themes have 'emerged'.

However, as Charmaz points out, themes do not emerge 'neutrally', but have been co-constructed by the interviewer and the participants (*idem*). The 'deposit' – the emerged data: themes, concepts, ideas – are therefore evidently coloured by the interviewer's standpoint.

5.3. Situatedness and Intersectionality

As I have already discussed, AP is often related to privilege and white motherhood ideologies. Many feminists point at the relatively homogenous situatedness of attachment parents: they are mostly white, educated, well-off, and sustained by favourable immediate social and physical environments (Belkin 2003, Cossman 2009, Faircloth 2013, Freeman 2016, Tuteur 2016).

We should thus ask ourselves whether AP carries with it "implicit social class divisions" (Franzblau 1999, 22), which may serve to marginalise other groups of mothers (*idem*). There is no one-sided answer to that, as I have tried to demonstrate in the first part of this thesis. There may be identarian aspects to AP, and AP-as-an-institution may certainly exclude certain groups of mothers, but this does not tell us anything about the individual experiences of attachment mothers.

It is therefore important to acknowledge their "standpoints" (Hill Collins 1990, 2000) - the 'intersections' that define their situatedness. This I will address by briefly sketching my participants' backgrounds, identity components, household constellation, socioeconomical situation, work. There may be additional characteristics that they themselves have indicated in their self-description.

Bieke

White, Belgian, female-identified, able-bodied, middle-class, aged 47, non-religious, divorced, two sons of ages 10 and 13, anti-authoritarian, freelancer-writer, participant in public debates on feminist issues, co-founder of Sudbury School, co-director of the non-profit organisation RoSa (a knowledge centre on gender and feminism). Bieke stayed at home with her second.

Hanne

White, Belgian, female-identified, able-bodied, middle-class, aged 32, non-religious, heterosexual marriage, two children: a daughter of age 9 and a son of almost 18 months, communal living, fulltime youth welfare worker (mostly themes like poverty and politicising trajectories for and with vulnerable social groups), father works half-time, anarcho-feminist, ethical vegan. No stay-at-home parents in the past.

Jo

White, Belgian, female-identified, able-bodied, middle-class, aged 39, non-religious, heterosexual relationship, 2 children: a son of age 9 and a daughter of age 7, BA in moral philosophy, MA in comparative cultural sciences, work: zero-waste & organic health food store, humanist, the father was the stay-at-home parent.

Joëlle

White, Belgian, female-identified, able-bodied, lower (middle)-class, aged 31, no higher education, 2 sons (one in primary school, one at home until he is 3), divorced from father of the first child, LAT with new partner and father of the second child, stay-at-home mother, father works halftime.

Julie

White, Belgian, female-identified, able-bodied, middle-class, aged 25, non-religious, heterosexual relationship, daughter of age 2,5, no higher education, Both parents stay at home (prolonged absence, permanent contract).

Lieve

White, Belgian, female-identified, able-bodied, middle-class, aged 40, non-religious, heterosexual marriage, mother of twins (a boy and a girl) of age 9, work: independent herbalist and teacher alternative medicinal philosophy at the European Academy for Natural Health Care, Lieve and her husband were alternating stay-at-home parents.

Maaike

White, Belgian, female-identified, able-bodied, middle-class, Aged 40, non-religious, heterosexual marriage, two sons of ages 10 and 12, elementary teachers' training, officially a stay-at-home mother but founder of and volunteer in Sudbury school Gent. Both parents stayed at home when the children were infants.

All the mothers have in common that they are white, female-identified, able-bodied, non-religious (liberal), left-wing oriented and they have "cultural capital" (Bourdieu 1986). They all are or have been in heterosexual relationships. Differences lie in degree of education (all but two mothers were highly educated) and –in own AP backgrounds (most did not have AP-backgrounds, some were raised more ambiguously, with some AP-characteristics in their upbringings). They also differ greatly when it comes to economic position and status (most are middle-class, but several lack financial capital and live on welfare). The stay-at-home pattern equally varies greatly: some mothers stayed at home, some fathers decided to stay-at-home, several couples stayed at home together, one family did not stay at home, but went back to work after maternity and paternity leave. Another variable component is age: Whereas some mothers had their children rather or quite late, others had them very young.

By specifying their profiles, we can acknowledge the diversity within the homogeneous profile associated with AP, take stock of their privileges and disadvantages and make sure we portray them as individual attachment mothers who do not necessarily represent 'AP'.

6. Recurrent Examples of Empowering Ethics

> For me, a great deal of the appeal of AP lies in the word 'ethics': I consider AP to be a consistent extension of other [ethical aspects]. AP, in our view, hasn't got as much to do with pedagogy as with a more general way of living ethically in this world. On the basis of the latter we make a translation to childrearing. AP is not ideal but I believe it to be the most legitimate and righteous way to bring up children. (Hanne)

Many of my interviewees, such as Hanne, point at an "ethical dialectic" (Mongoven 2009) between 'maternal thinking' and 'civic virtue'. What this dialectic of ethical practices looks like, will be discussed in this chapter. Throughout the interviews, there are several themes that recur.

First of all, I will discuss how the interviewees are holistic thinkers. They see AP in one line with environmental care and thus extend AP to other contexts, such as consumption habits, and vice versa.

Second, the issues of rebalancing power relations and non-violent communication in the form of negotiation and gentle discipline will be discussed.

Third, I will expand on the interviewee's stances on formal education. They commonly perceive regular schools as grooming children to become docile workers and consumers. Therefore, many of them opt for an alternative.

Fourth and last, I will discuss the mothers' critique of an individualist and rationalised market society whereby they aim to reclaim self-reliance, gut-feeling and community empowerment.

6.1. "It is One World": How AP May Enable Holistic Thinking

> Taking care of the environment is not detached from AP as it holds taking care of and seeing the needs of the generations to come as well as of people all over the world. Global injustice and inequality are incredible. You will come to perceive environmental care and improvement as needs of everyone. It is all linked, there is only one world, there is only one system. That is why I think it is so important to *recognise* everyone as equal. (Jo)

Several mothers refer either implicitly or explicitly to the concept of holism (*holos* > whole, complete). The term is used in reference to the world as a system in which

all living and non-living elements are interconnected and interactive. A holistic - or 'wholistic' - vision of the world entails that all must be seen as a whole, rather than a sum of parts. Looking at the wholeness of all life aspects, every mother I spoke to related to the idea that everything is linked and operates together:

> To me, (...) a conscious and caring treatment of the earth is perfectly in line with that of a child: you want to give a child the best future in every possible way. Also, I understand that the things I do now, the choices I make now, impacts the future of my child and of other children. I want to establish that link between everything. (Joëlle)

Joëlle's reasoning is in line with the current problematisation of, and campaigns against, climate change. Children will confront and have to deal with the impact of global warming and depleted natural resources (*Cf.* The Future of Children 2016). This anticipation ideal is present for most of the women I interviewed.

A way to for Lieve to stimulate people to reconnect with the environment, is to train one's own perceptive and sensory faculties. This has been her ideal in parenting, but she also practices it in every aspect of her life, and preaches it in her work as a teacher of herbal medicine and as an independent foraging guide:

> I want to teach people how to reconnect with theirs senses, their observatory faculties. I want them to reconnect with the natural world. It is so important to look at what surrounds you. You cannot detach yourself from what you see around you. I experience these teachings as a kind of mission. It feels very logical and natural to look holistically at the world. (Lieve)

These are merely some excerpts showing how these mothers engage with a great deal more than just being a mother to her child. In fact, as Lieve states further in the interview: she is "as happy with her mothering life as she was with her childless life", after all "[she] never necessarily wanted to be a mother": the teachings she passes on and the caring she does extend beyond her children.

This holistic worldview also informs the consumption practices of these women. However, these practices differ greatly from Hays' assumption that "the permissive child-centered nature of intensive mothering helps to create little consumers" (Hays 1996, 163) or that "the logic of meeting all the child's needs and desires means that

the mothers are encouraged to buy all those baby accessories, fancy toys, and children's designer fashions" (*idem*). By discussing two recurrent examples - Waste reduction and alternative consumer ethics – I will show that my interviewees are anything but involved in raising consumers or meeting every material want of their children.

Cutting Down on Waste

All of my interviewees pioneered in attempts to reduce the amount of waste that goes to landfill each year. One way to this is to (re-)use cloth diapers on their babies instead of semi-plastic disposable ones. One of the reasons why these mothers opt for cloth diapers is because the these – as opposed to disposable diapers - are free from chloride, dioxins and other synthetics that are harmful to the natural environment (people included)[8]. These mothers also acknowledge the dangers inherent in plastics that are present in most regular diapers. Plastics are endocrine disruptors, substances or particles that are malign to the hormone system. Many children, on top of that, have irritated skins because of the material, like Jo illustrates:

> We opted for cloth diapering our babies. (…) The planet needs to be habitable for our children and we don't want our baby to have skin rashes all the time because of grating plastic". (Jo)

More and more the focus is placed on shifting away from single-uses: "There has been calculated that a baby [in single-use diapers] between zero and thirty months produces one ton of waste, which takes four to five hundred years to degrade. Moreover, the millions of tons of disposable diapers each year (…) are responsible for the destruction of 5,6 million trees around the world" (Badinter 2010, 67)[9]

[8] See some of the publications and research on "health, waste, food, climate change and women's empowerment" (UK WEN 2018, 199) by UK Women's Environmental Network: wen.org.uk/all-resources.

[9] For some inexplicable reason, Badinter has to 'conclude' - after having summed up the many ecological arguments in favour of reusable diapers, and without having been able to successfully counter these arguments - that the proposal to tax disposable diapers in France was "*fortunately* not

The overwhelming amount of diaper waste triggers a more general ecological awareness about 'waste'. Most of the mothers, therefore, take their waste-elimination attempts further: they try to avoid redundant packaging or "instant trash" by sending their children to school with reusable water bottles and lunchboxes, by avoiding straws in cafes and single-use toys from vending machines, or by bringing mesh bags when buying produce (in bulk). The mothers mention many ways in which they reduce their families' waste.

> 'Cloth diapers' essentially marked the starting point of our ecological consciousness. What do we eat? Where does it come from? Which clothes do we wear? Where have these been made? And what do we get for our babies? A baby doesn't *need* much. No bed, it can sleep in ours. No tons of fancy new clothes, for their clothes can be reused ones. (Maaike)

This fragment, in which Maaike ties all the dots of her family's consumption habits together, paves the way for the next subchapter: Anti-consumerism and sustainable shopping habits.

Anti-consumerism and Sustainable consumerism

> Seriously… What do we *need*, really? (Jo)

Most mothers abstained from buying stuff that is not really necessary. They were aware of the way the economic structure constantly lures people into thinking they 'need' things. As sociologist Dirk Geldof states: "Humans are in nature not beings with endless desires. The reason that we currently believe that, is the consequence of both societal and personal choices of human beings" (2007, 56). Marketing Scholars Susan Dobscha an Julie Ozanne, having conducted qualitative research on environmentally sensitive women "who protest consumerist society" (2001, 201),

implemented (…). At least not for now. But it is not clear whether *the obsession with 'biodegradable' and 'recycling' will stop when having justified doubts"* (2010, 67-68, *my italics*). What is so *fortunate* about *not* being sensitive to the environment and cutting down on parents' expenses (cloth diapers - even new ones - are much cheaper than disposable ones) is left unexplained. Why we have, after having depleted all of our natural resources, an "obsession" when trying to do better ecology-wise? This remains a mystery. What her 'justified doubts' are? Unknown.

found that ecological living by means of 'consuming less' has "emancipatory potential" (*idem*).

So beside consuming green, my participants, just like Dobscha and Ozanne's, "make consumption less central by shifting their household consumption patterns. They do without many of the conveniences that average consumers take for granted" (207) and move away from being 'a consumer' to being a 'preserver', both of human lives and the environment (205). In this respect, they will "avoid and limit marketplace solutions" (207). To give some examples: Some of my participants will go forage plants for tea, dishes and herbal tinctures; some will use old cloth pieces to make mesh bags from; some have their own gardens, some borrow toys and clothes from other children who have outgrown them; some will make their own soaps, body care products and cleaning products; some will go for leftover food in stores; some will use old newspapers to wraps their gifts; *et caetera*. There are many ways in which my participants come up with solutions that give them control over their families' health and ethical core values, such as the nonexploitative use of social and natural resources. This is nicely illustrated by Jo, who states that "We have a clear policy when it comes to buying stuff: If we buy something, we buy second-hand, and only if we *really* need something, we go to a store that sells sustainable brands".

Yet sometimes, the mothers admit, their anti-consumerist ethic may provoke discontent among the children:

> I understand it's sometimes hard for [my daughter]. She constantly sees things that she can't have. One time there was this fight over a *Primarky* fleece that she wanted so badly, but, you know, the fabric was polyester and you just know that it was manufactured by exploited people… I wouldn't be caught dead buying that stuff... So I proposed to make it myself: "Noooo!". We really had a fight then. Both of us crossed the line at that point (…). It's a difficult equilibrium. (Hanne)

Even though several mothers have indicated that their anti-consumerism is sometimes met with resistance and might unleash backlashes in the future, they perceive their acts as "the only challenge to consumerism", to speak with social scientists Gabriel and Lang (1995, 151).

Also when it comes to food, sustainable consumption is a priority. Almost all the participants were keenly aware of the origins of their food, the way it had been

produced, transported, packaged (or not) and where it is distributed. Most of the mothers indicated that they want to buy organic, local, Fair Trade and/or low waste. Several mothers were also subscribed to a self-picking farm or had a garden themselves. All of them seemed to endorse the idea of reconnection with their food. This explains also why many of them adopted vegetarian or vegan diets and raised their children accordingly. The mothers actively encourage the rest of the family and the community to adopt their critical stance *vis à vis* consumer decisions. As Dobscha and Ozanne state: "The most direct form of education and socialization occurs within the family" (2001, 209).

For some, sustainability is so important that they may clash with their partners. Referring to sustainable decision-making, Lieve explains that

> I think it is very important to make the right ethical decisions when it comes to… everything, really. It is such a huge issue for me, that it sometimes even paralyses me. Even though it is a good thing that my husband is less involved with [everyday ethical decision-making], it is simultaneously a great source of frustration. (…) He doesn't believe so much in the power of the citizen and the consumer. He thinks 'the State' needs to solve it, and experiences much less the feeling of control in everyday decisions. If we have to make a purchase, I will do research for hours; my husband just rushes to the store to go get the first thing he gets his hands on.

Yet even though it may sometimes be hard to be devoted to holistic thinking, the woman indicate it is often also a source of satisfaction and liberation. This also illustrates that their children's desires and needs are not necessarily met *and* that the women's care practices extend well beyond the family.

6.2. Adjusting Power Relations Via Negotiation and Gentle Communication

My interviewees sturdily endorse and put into practice the credo "Not power over others, but power with others[10]". They are sensitive to and try to identify the power dynamics in their families. At the core of the attempt lies the challenge to hierarchy on the basis of age or ability to express oneself, and thus the endorsement of

[10] A credo by the German ecofeminist and politician Petra Kelly (cited in Lucas 2018, 113).

children's rights. As Michel Vandenbroeck argues: this ['new sociology of childhood'] can be seen as a paradigm shift and considered as a step in the right direction since it empowers and gives a voice to a group in our civilisation which traditionally has, on the discriminatory basis of age, been excluded" (2005, 45).

But the challenge to have 'power over' extends beyond the family. To put it in Hanne's words:

> I consider myself to be an 'anarchising' person ['anarchist in 'process' and 'progress'] and developing a critical awareness of power dynamics is a crucial part thereof. Rethinking power dynamics entails challenging patriarchy, our relation to resources, raw materials, and production processes, our relation to our children and to people who are not a part of our family; it entails learning the difference between responsibility and authority in each relationship.

Feminist researchers Colleen Mack-Canty and Sue Marie Wright come to similar findings, when they conducted interviews with non-traditional families who "implement non-sexist parenting (…) that enable the children to become conscious of, and to challenge hierarchy and oppression more generally" (2008, 148). In their article, the authors often refer to 'inclusive communication' when discussing their mode of communication. The same applies to my participants, who will rather have dialogues with their children and partners than impose ideas and issue orders. The authors find, on the basis of their qualitative research that the children seem to express "a sense of empowerment (…), the ability to negotiate (…) and both a readiness to accept diversity and a willingness to challenge oppression" (*ibid*, 155). This is demonstrated by Maaike, who states that

> our vision in parenting has always been that our children need to be recognised as *people*. They have a voice and they should be enabled to be autonomous and make decisions for themselves. (…) We organise family meetings, for instance. But we also draw boundaries, of course.

The mothers aim to embody what feminist political theorist Susan Moller Okin rhetorised: "If families are not themselves governed by principle of justice, how can they morally educate [future] citizens fit to sustain a just society" (1989, 16). But even though the mothers endorse dialogue, they also acknowledge the importance of boundaries. This recognition enables them to anticipate potential insecurities

children may experience when having decision-making power (Van Crombrugge 2005, 80). With her first child, Hanne involved her child in all the discussions, but with the second, now 18 months old, she will do things differently:

> With our [second child] we will trust in his ability to follow our example, without us making explicit our values and deliberate with him. We can explain certain things later, if necessary. But to be honest, this is an area of tension, because it implies that you postpone decision-making opportunities. This way you may alleviate some of the difficulties and confusion that come together with choice, but this is only made possible by adopting an authoritarian position.

Vandenbroeck also warns that we should critically accommodate current notions and images such as "children as active citizens" or "the autonomous and competent child"[11]. Negotiation culture has become the norm, not only between adults (partners and/or parents), but also between parents and children. Furthermore, Tobin (1995) and Cannella (1997) have argued that "this pedagogical fixation on the autonomous child and the corresponding attention to self-expression are tightly entwined with the liberal free market that constantly searches for autonomous, entrepreneurial individuals" (in Vandenbroeck 2005, 51). A notion such as 'active citizenship' can consequently be seen as an inclusive concept that empowers children, yet at the same time it forces individuals to be self-governing and self-regulating (*ibid*, 52). As a consequence, it may potentially become a doxa "with unintentional excluding mechanisms" (*ibid*, 45-46).

In 1992, Kind en Gezin launched a poll which evidenced the importance parents attached to negotiation with their children; more importantly, "parents found

[11] Vandenbroeck argues that the child's status has developed over the centuries. To go short, the child has developed from the "Physically Fragile Child" - in the second half of the 19th century, with high child mortality rates and child employment - over the 'Mentally Fragile child' - in the Post-World-War II, accompanied by "new notions such as mental hygiene, attachment, developing phases, *et caetera*" (48) - to the "Active, Autonomous child" - since the 1990s up to date (2005, 46-52). It is important to acknowledge that these constructions of the child are not independent from constructions of the parents, and more specifically of the mother (ibid, 48). Mothers were being constructed as the 'Responsible Mother' (ibid, 47; Geinger et al. 2013) and with the mother role being increasingly idealised, mothers became more vulnerable for distrust and public scrutiny (ibid, 47-48).

negotiation to be the norm" (*ibid,* 53). Subsequently, Vandenbroeck argues, the results were distinctly presented as if negotiation were indeed the norm and incorporated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Vandekerkhove 2013). Both parents and children are also encouraged (and even ideologically pressured) to improve their negotiation capacities, via normative discourse drawing i.a. on developmental psychology (*ibid,* 54). Also Hans Van Crombrugge draws attention to the pressure this entails for parents: "Many parents do not know how to deal with [negotiation]. Can they still demand things from their child? What if the child does not agree? This pressure even grows because of all the information available: many parents are anxious to raise their children" (2005, 77). Since verbal competence, self-expression and individuality are so highly prised in our society, Vandebroeck fears that the negotiation model may potentially lead to exclusion: namely, the children who have not had 'democratic' upbringings, associated with mainly white, highly educated and well-off groups, may be disadvantaged (*ibid,* 54). Also it may potentially discredit parents who do not negotiate with their children (*idem*). Van Crombrugge, on the other hand, accentuates mostly the fact that "children are also and foremost the object of others' decisions before they get to co-decide" (2005, 80-81). In his opinion society has to limit freedom of choice for children, for their own good: "the relations between parents and children are in need of societal institutions, where societal judgements and norms create the frames in which parents can and must make decisions" (*ibid,* 81).

Even though I find Vandenbroeck's arguments very valuable, the alleged inevitability of the link between negotiation and autonomy is questionable: why can we not say that negotiation may as well lead to interdependency and connection (since *dialogue* stimulates this)? And can we discredit negotiation on the basis of a potential exclusion it may engender? It is clear, also, that power differences can never be entirely eradicated (Van Crombrugge 2005, 80). When I confronted one of my interviewees with this problematisation, she admitted that negotiation culture could potentially disadvantage less privileged children. Yet, she noted, it depends what your intention is: an urge to distinguish oneself, or an attempt to be inclusive and have a discussion with *everyone:*

> despite being mindful of people's different backgrounds, I am also still very convinced of the value of a negotiation culture where you consider and take into account other people's voices. (Hanne)

Hanne realises that if you want to sit down and negotiate with all children, from all backgrounds, that you are to be mindful about how to approach the children. For instance, Hanne wants to enable her children to ask questions, ask for explanation and contest things they do not agree with, but she emphasizes that she wants them to be polite and speak up respectfully. However, working with underprivileged children, she emphases that she must adapt this strategy when talking to these children:

> [t]one policing is a privilege and, simultaneously, a way to clamp down on the message. [At work, I clearly see that] not everyone has the experience of being taken seriously. If you don't have the experience that you will be heard when you say something in a calm way, you will not say things calmly. You will scream or tear down the furniture. (Hanne)

Hanne is very aware of the power of dialogue – in both the good and the bad way. Nevertheless, she, as well as many of the other mothers, still endorses and appreciates negotiation, inside and outside the family unit.

Dialogue and negotiation are also forms of gentle parenting, discipline or communication, a parenting technique that is highly prised by my participants. Four participants stated that they based much of their communication ideal on the book by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish, *How to Talk so Kids Will Listen & Listen so Kids will Talk*. The authors emphasise the importance of several tenets that are crucial in gentle parenting, such as expressing anger without being hurtful, setting firm limits and still maintaining goodwill, or using alternatives to punishment that promote self-discipline (2012). Bieke, who also kept the book as a guide when her toddlers were being "totally irrational", expands on the consistent link between AP and gentle communication:

> I recently went on a weekend with four women whom I met via LLL and MamAditi. And even though we are completely different from one another, we find each other in a certain 'voice'. If one of us brought something up that could be easily judged by us,

> I instead noticed how careful, responsive and respectful we reacted to that. And I am sure that we did not all do this intuitively before having our children. (Bieke)

Another participant, Julie, states that gentle communication has taught her not only to be more emotionally respectful toward her daughter and others, but also to be more aware of the aspect of *bodily* integrity:

> I have the feeling that my relationship with my daughter has informed the way I talk to others. Yet the opposite is also true: since adults don't consider it 'normal' to unsolicitedly touch other adults, well, I think the same applies to children. So when I need to change my daughter's diaper or I want to dress or undress her, I will *tell* her beforehand ("Mommy is gonna change your diaper, okay?"). This way, she may have less the feeling that she loses control over her own body.

It is thus clear that the mothers consider gentle communication to be essential in their care ethics, whereby emotional, intellectual and bodily integrity are secured to a maximum.

6.3. Challenging Educational Practices

> However scary it may be, children need to be given the freedom to determine their boundaries and to explore things. Often these things may not be what we as parents particularly approve of, such as gaming or eating lots of candy, even if many of us have *had* experiences of excess. And some children will be tempered and balanced from the beginning; others will not. (Maaike)

Maaike and the rest of the interviewees stimulate their children's need to explore boundaries. Even if these boundaries are not always exactly in line with her ideals, this exploration is seen as a growth process. Therefore, many of the mothers I have interviewed consider regular schooling to be problematic. In what ways they critique the regular system and wish to educate their children instead, shall be made clear in what follows.

A first principle the mothers find valuable but is seemingly lacking in the regular schooling system is moral education: as philosopher Marcia Baron's states:

"Learning to be good (…) is much more than just learning correct principles. Being good involves having the right (or some set of right) attitudes, feelings, and ways of viewing oneself and others" (2009, 227).

The ideal of moral education is further developed by ethicist Michael Slote. Slote, drawing on the feminist care ethics of Gilligan, Noddings and Ruddick[12], argues in favour of an "emotionally engaged" education (2009, 212-14), that centralises moral induction and empathy (*ibid*, 224).

Also my interviewees support the idea of moral induction in education. Rather than being moral police officers, these mothers want their children to *explore* the boundaries of morality and empathy *themselves*:

> I think it is more meaningful to let children discover things themselves than to impose all sorts of ideas, for instance, that H&M is of poor quality and ethics, or that eating animals is questionable: we inform them about it, but if they are served meat elsewhere, they have to make the decision themselves (Lieve)

The children should learn how their actions impact the social and natural world around them, be this world far or nearby. T

Therefore, my participants also endorse what environmentalist Geoff Fagan advocates: interrelated or "community-based learning":

> Education is about confrontation: external and internal. Stretching the boundaries of comfort, change and challenge. It is about embracing personal needs in a local context. It is about understanding the local to make sense of the global. It is about being informed, celebrating experiences and fitting that experience into a framework of understanding which includes an assessment of our impact on others" (Fagan 1996, 147).

Fagan advocates a sustainable form of education whereby learners connect with their social and natural environment as well as with themselves and their learning

[12] See Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (1982); and Nell Noddings' *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (1984). Both favoured women's caring capacity to men's alleged 'rational' abstract ethics of justice. Their 'care ethics' "has largely developed as a response to the idea of the difference between the way men and women approach morality" (Slote 2009, 212), whereby the male's approach was considered superior by influential male 'intellectuals'.

processes, an approach that is absent in regular education (Joëlle). Therefore, almost all of the mothers' children attended an alternative education programme: 'Sudbury School Gent[13]'. Sudbury School Gent is a state-independent and thus non-subsidised 'school' where children go to explore and learn - on their own terms and on their own pace – about anything that interests them and about co-existence with other individuals. They manage their own schedules; the only thing that is required is to be a part of the school's committee that evaluates the children's/teenagers' and supervisors' behaviour when necessary. Sudbury, in short, is a breach with everything that one generally conceives of as a school.

The co-founders of Sudbury were in fact two of my interviewees: Maaike en Bieke. Maaike explains:

> I graduated as an elementary school teacher. But I was never a passionate student or a teacher. (…) Later, I went living in Australia for three years and there I was introduced to a school where teaching methods and conceptions of 'education' were entirely different. They thought about education far more collectively and they organised lectures, debates and research days with everyone involved. That is how I came to Sudbury.

The mothers enlisted many reasons and cited several sources that convinced them of the favourability of unschooling. I will expand on some of them.

First of all there is the idea that children in unschooling situations have more confidence in their own capabilities and talents, and are more willing to learn and grow in their learning process. Carol Dweck, professor of Psychology at Stanford University and leading researcher on motivation, has provided evidence that the learning environment can influence people's mindsets (2006, 33). These can either be "fixed" or "growth" mindsets. The latter will cause individuals to believe that they evolve throughout their learning processes and that their intelligence, capacities and talents are not static (*idem*). Therefore, some interviewees have argued that they wanted their children to learn in environments that stimulated the growth mindsets, which happened to be an unschooling environment:

[13] In Ghent there is only one unschooling 'school', Sudbury School Gent, which is based on the American Sudbury Valley School (Brilliant et al., 1995).

> In Sudbury, Children become secure and self-conscious beings who may choose what, where and how they learn something. They also learn through dialogue with others, about co-existence, about their behaviour... That, to me, is much more important than meeting curricula. (Joëlle)

This is linked to a second reason. Numerous studies reported that unschooled children engaged more often in the kind of learning experiences that motivate further learning (Holt 1967, Griffith 1998, McKee 2002, Holt and Pat Farenga 2003, Dodd 2009, McGrath 2010, 2012, Ricci 2012, Gray 2013, Levin-Gutierrez 2015). As opposed to regularly schooled children, unschooled children thus participate in activities that are compelling to them and give them pleasure.

The reason for this, is what scholar and home schooling advocate Magda Levin-Gutierrez calls 'intrinsic motivation', which she argues is "[o]ne of the keys to successful learning" (2015, 39). She goes on to say that "unschooling provides a system where individual interests are nurtured and therefore intrinsic motivation is maintained" (*idem*). Regular schools, on the other hand, attempt to maintain the students' motivation by extrinsic rewards such as what Alfie Kohn summarises as "gold stars, incentive plans, A's, praise, and other bribes" (1993). Unschooling thus gives children a feeling of validation, motivation, and empowerment.

Another reason why unschooling is seen as in line with attachment parenting, is because of its critical stance on the ideals promoted by Western society and the disempowerment they entail. Joëlle clarifies:

> In [my son's] previous school, maths and all that were *drummed* into the children: even though he went to a method school, it was still a state-funded school, so it is tied to meeting the curricula. (...) When having read books about Sudbury, I understood that many children's rights are violated in regular schools. Also, the constant instruction of kids from an early age on is basically cramming these kids for 'Society', in which you have to be a productive and obedient citizen. (...) Every child is so incredibly different, on every level. How must they all learn and master the exact same thing at the exact same time? In [my son's] previous school they constantly focussed on his educational attainments, which were not always great. But he is a very sociable and loving child who contributed positively to the class climate. But instead of focussing on that and taking things from there, they hammered upon his reading backlog. After some time, he didn't *want* to read anymore. I recognised my own past struggles in his and I didn't want that for him. I want him to love himself and to see that he too is contributing in his own way. (...) I do seriously *not* worry *at all* about

> his ability to do this or that by now or by any point in time. [My son] picks up things at a slower pace and that is totally okay. (Joëlle)

Joëlle is joined by most of the other women, who feel that the schooling methods prevalent in our society are too much geared toward normalcy, systematic punishment, normative and often negative evaluation, authority or "power-assertion" (Hoffman, 2000). Julie argues that she thinks that the constant evaluations which the children have no control over limits them in their own capabilities of assessment and evaluation.

Therefore - and lastly - the direct democracy principle that is endorsed in Sudbury is another reason why unschooling is so important to my interviewees. Just like the mothers rethink relational power in the home, they also want the schools to do the same. This implies not only abstinence of power-assertion, but also active encouragement of participation in evaluation and decision-making:

> Every decision we make at school is better when multiple people - young and old - were involved. It makes the decision more just and more open. We want to include as much as possible all actors in school. (Maaike)

In Sudbury school, the children can sue each other or staff members when they feel justice must be done. Given that the 'plaintiff' has valuable arguments, recognised as such by the judicial committee, which all children and staff members participate in, he or she can win a case. Maaike, who volunteers in Sudbury, gives an example: "At one point there was a boy who sang 'Met de wijven niks as last'[14] and we [a female student and myself] simply sued him. It seemed like a good incentive for an elaborated conversation on misogyny and sexism in society" **.**

Maaike's example perfectly illustrates what professor of education Wiel Veugelers advocates: "critical-democratic citizenship" (2011, 29). Veugelers argues that "Children should learn to position themselves in modern society and to learn to use moral criteria in reflecting on their own opinions and actions" (*ibid*, 30), partially achieved via "active participation" in school (*idem*).

[14] Translated as "Nothing but trouble with them' chicks".

6.4. Critical Sense, Self-Reliance and Community Empowerment

Many of the mothers expressed their reservations about the advices they were given by several health and care services. Kind en Gezin, for instance, the main family health care instance in Belgium, was unanimously represented as disempowering. There were several reasons for this: First of all, the information the parents received was often conflicting and unclear. The mothers indicated that in the course of the years, Kind en Gezin drastically altered its directives on many issues, such as co-sleeping or breastfeeding, "going from discrediting mothers if they *did* certain things, to stalking mothers if they *didn't*" (Jo). To the mothers, this challenges "the expert knows best" mantra, since Kind en Gezin is equally subject to shifts in knowledge production, and thus 'knowledge regimes'.

> We are not taught to think critically for ourselves. We think we are, though. But we are indoctrinated, really. We just ought to listen to Kind en Gezin. But, you know, Kind en Gezin changes its whole vision every two years. So you already did things 'wrong' with your previous child. (Jo)

Another reservation the mothers expressed is that they never felt supported by Kind en Gezin:

> After giving birth, the visits of Kind en Gezin 'experts' - with checklists, to see whether my child is developing according to the boxes they would tick off - never felt helpful or supportive. I never considered their presence as empowering to women or mothers. On the contrary. Yet that seems to me the most important then, to get some trust and support: "Yes, you have an intuition and you may rely on that". (Hanne)

This intuition is often framed by the mothers as a form of critical sense with respect to modern medicine, which entailed the attitude 'don't blindly follow it, don't ignore it'. A lot of this starts with doing one's own research and inform oneself.

> Knowledge is power. Knowledge empowers. (…) The most important part of my job [at LLL] consisted of reassuring new mothers. Because they hear conflicting

> advice all the time, which makes them unsure about themselves, wavering. But if you have the knowledge, than you can go with the flow of being and becoming a mother. (Bieke)

Some parents point at a the grey area that separates or connects knowledge and gut feeling:

> Reading about (…) breastfeeding and so on worked very empowering. But I don't think we should collectively start reading academic articles, but focus on gut feeling. People intuitively know a lot. But of course, not to lose your intuition is difficult since you are ceaselessly bombarded with conflicting ideas, since pregnancy, really. (Joëlle)

Their attempt to empower themselves through a combination of knowledge and fidelity to their own intuition is what I would call a an attempt to revive a 'disappeared knowledge system':

> The knowledge of breastfeeding doesn't belong to the people anymore, knowledge that was passed along from mother to daughter. This knowledge now belongs to experts, which is a shame. (Hanne)

Yet some interviewees wanted to abstain from too much input altogether:

> I just wanted to follow my intuition and my personality. I read some when pregnant, but not that much. I just wanted to do it, you know, do what felt right. (...) I never really relied on AP-guides, because they can't tell me how I should deal with *my* specific children. And you can only mother in the way that *you are a mother*. And that is different in every interaction. (Lieve)

This is echoed by pedagogue Hans Van Crombrugge, who states that "[e]very education is necessarily different, since every child, every situation and every caregiver is unique. (…) And this is very hard to artificially (…) 'organize'. Parents grow in their parenting and also the parent-child relationship develops gradually. Parents and children should have time and space to be able to cohabit" (2005, 90). This reclamation of "time and space" is exactly what attachment parents are after. As Bieke points out:

> The first two or so life years of child are so important in his or her development, research has confirmed this. Not only for securing the child's attachment, also for the parents' wellbeing: How do I become a parent? How can I grow as a parent? If you give parents some space in that first period, it makes a world of difference.

In order to feel less alone in their reclamations of time and space, most of the interviewees have joined other women during those first years. Central to these gatherings were discussions on the radical act that staying at home with an infant seemed to be:

> The biggest challenge to a feminist mothering practice is the way our society is fundamentally organised. You have to be productive, both parents have to be fulltime workers, post-labour time is limited. Work and community and home are dispersed, so that one gets isolated quickly. How we treat our children is strongly entwined with the neoliberal capitalist ideology that people should be productive workers. So new mothers and fathers are to return to the labour force almost right after having the child. (Hanne)

Many of the women sought out other women to talk about the politics and economical structures that affect them and their vision on childrearing. But the mothers noted that their collective thinking went beyond childrearing: they had discussions about sustainability, social inclusion, feminism, children's rights (Jo).

Some of them stated that they needed a network, not only to counter social isolation, but also to stimulate other mothers' self-reliance and empowerment:

> I don't necessarily consider the online fora as my 'community' (I have other places), but I find info there and if I post something it will always be a genuine question, a question that I ask from a vulnerable position. In the hope that people will answer gently. The other way around, I will always answer empowering to a vulnerable and genuine question. And in part, the online LLL-community can be truly empowering. (Hanne)

It is also a way to enhance critical thinking: As medical ethicist and philosopher Anne Mongoven puts it: "The more socially isolated motherhood is, the more that tensions may be avoided rather than confronted – and avoidance removes critical resources for maternal thinking itself" (2009, 100). Mothers need a network, a community where they can unite the political and the personal. The AP-mothers I

interviewed are especially aware of how their choices may have isolating effects in the way Western economy is structured. One of the participants illustrates the isolation of motherhood in our society.

> Mothers have to return to the old very early after giving birth. And the question is why? You have to get back to work, you have to be 'present'. That is especially hard when you have other kids around and when your partner disappears after only ten days. That struck me as very odd: After having a baby - especially for the first time - you are extremely vulnerable, yet you are left alone. There is essentially no one to share your experiences with because everyone is at work. (Bieke)

The majority of the mothers found the online fora groups helpful for support and gather information. Also the sharing of experiences is presented as a fundamental reason why they look for each other's company.

> Via *MamAditi* and *Gentse Spruiten* I found a community. These women would work halftime, or at home, or made the decision not to. There was a huge diversity and yet no one felt she was to defend herself or account for her choice. Everybody knew that a specific awareness connected us. I think AP could be isolating, but thanks to these active networks that came into being, there are other possibilities. It doesn't have to divisive. (Joëlle)

Another reason these mothers would seek out other Attachment sympathisers or parents, is to find other 'social parents'. Feminist philosopher and care ethicist Amy Mullin argues that "multiple people can be maternal thinkers in response to one child" (2009, 52). A 'social parent' is someone who

> (1) has repeated interactions over a long time horizon with a child, (2) takes him- or herself and is taken by others to have some significant responsibility for the health, safety, and physical, emotional, cognitive and moral development of the child, and (3) whose interactions with the child are aimed at least in part at the ongoing care of and development of the child. (*ibid,* 55)

Even though the occasions are rare that they actually find intensive engagements with other attachment parents, they certainly occur: Jo, for instance, entrusted Bieke with her child when she went working. Bieke had quitted the job she had before becoming a mother again and had become a self-employed child minder for a while.

Jo explained that she felt "trustful leaving her child with Bieke, as she was equally responsive to children's needs" (Jo). But some of the interviewees also cared for the short-term and less intensive engagements:

> I felt at home at [MamAditi, an AP organisation] right from the start. It was such a relief to be among this group of likeminded people. Others *saw* the needs of my children. Since I have twins, organising myself and getting ready could be rather cumbersome and take somewhat longer. But there was always someone who, for instance, picked up my son while I was handling my daughter and made sure he felt safe. (Lieve)

To conclude this chapter, it is interesting to think of meeting groups such as MamAditi, LLL or Gentse Spruiten, as an empowering and educational platform for mothers (and to a lesser extent fathers). The idea of a discussion group where children can play together while the parents associate, exchange ideas and reflect on their practices as parents, seems very similar to pedagogue Hans Van Crombrugge's concept of 'parenting contract' (2005). This contract entails that "parents declare their willingness to be informed as well as possible about who their children are, what their children need and what they can offer their children [by means of] meetings where parents get together to reflect on what education means (for them), to ask questions, to exchange information, to listen to other parents" (*ibid*, 91).

7. Conclusion

Summary: This research has aimed to challenge the Attachment Parenting Controversy that has taken root in the 1990s and was fuelled by a 2012 TIME-article on Attachment Parenting (AP). Whereas numerous feminists contend that AP is just another childrearing 'fad' that oppresses and essentialises mothers, proponents counter these attacks by appealing to scientific authority, maternal identity-making, and morality. How can we go beyond these dividing and staunch oppositions that seem to normalise mother shaming once more? I argue that we should look at the empowering potential of AP's embeddedness in an overarching 'care ethics' (Fisher and Tronto 1990). In order to do this, I have divided my thesis in two sections: the first section dealt with AP as Institution (the ideology), the second dealt with seven maternal experiences that foregrounded their care ethics.

In the first part, I started with an outline of the characteristics of AP, which include breastfeeding, physical proximity through babywearing and co-sleeping, emotional responsiveness; and alternative approaches to health in pregnancy, labour and childrearing. In my discussion of the tenets, I have drawn on AP-sources as well as on scientific evidence that both supports and debunks the claims made. I found that several claims regarding the health benefits of AP have not been researched in the first place, such as the favourable duration and frequency of physical proximity. Many findings are inconclusive yet other findings have been supported. Iin the second chapter, I sketched the historical developments of AP, whereby I gave insight in the origins of AP. These included: AP as a reaction to scientific mothering that had ruled the waves since around 1900, a genuine psychological care for detached orphans, a post-war attempt to improve social health, a post-war attempt to send women back home, and a Christian moral impetus that needed women to be Guardians of Virtue. In the third chapter, I outlined the Attachment Parenting Controversy that has been dividing proponents and opponents ever since 2012. I discussed how AP is received in society and particularly by several feminists, who contest the bad science AP propagates, the possible naturalisation of mothers, its moralising nature that shames mothers who cannot live up to AP-standards. In the fourth and last chapter of this first part, I attempted to make space for a more experience-based look at AP. If we wanted to understand why mothers feel drawn

to AP, we would necessarily have to look beyond the disempowering arguments that AP is just another childrearing fad and that mothers have become slaves to their children.

This is what I aimed to show in the second part of the thesis. Here I have attempted to study the potential empowerment in care practices typically associated with AP, which are, as I have shown, often holistic in the sense that they consider the world as one, interconnected whole. Thereby the mothers are responsive to several aspects of their social and natural environments. The examples that I have discussed are: Holistic thinking in consumption practices; equitable power relations; alternative forms of education that strive to be more embedded in community-based learning and moral engagement; maternal reclamation of the right to proper information on maternity as well as of the space and time to make decisions for themselves. All of these ethical domains reflect the fact that the mothers' care ethics can be empowering in many different ways. For the sake of brevity, I will discuss only three here.

First of all, the care ethics associated with AP propose a more compassionate interaction and attitude to life. This is because notions of respect, responsiveness and awareness are so central to all the ethical experiences. Secondly, the care ethics also challenges the narrow definition many have of AP and its partisans. The mothers show that AP does not entail an all-or-nothing dogmatic ideology in which child is king (or queen). Thirdly, the care ethics endorsed by my interviewees denounces much of contemporary society that is harmful to women and mothers: namely, the focus on autonomy (Chandler 1998) or individualism, and the maintenance of new parents' unequal labour division. As a result of Western society's focus on labour productivity, namely, new parents are forced to go back to work so that they do not have the space or the time to *become* a parent and go through a bonding process with their child and each other. Especially for women, the current focus on labour productivity is harmful, since paternity leave is only ten days. It seems that it is not necessarily AP that curtails choice, but the broader political and economic context.

Relevance: I will discuss four reasons here why this paper is potentially relevant. First of all it broadens the view on AP by looking to the broader ethical context in which mothers raise their children. Second, the discussion of these ethics – clearly

holistic in nature – is relevant in a time that they are more widely acknowledged. While we should remain cautious to interpret and conceptualize ideological evolutions teleologically, it is hard to not notice that these ethics, from the 20th century onward, have become ever-extensive. However imperfectly, social and environmental rights are being institutionalized, empowerment discourses are becoming part of mainstream culture, and activist movements and organizations are blooming. The fact that we pay more and more attention to the child's voice is no coincidence. Third, the paper adds to the relatively small body of literature on the link between holistic care ethics and AP. It may encourage other researchers to have more consideration for the power of responsiveness, both in and outside the home. Fourth, this paper offers an escape route from the polarisation that has resulted from the Attachment Parenting Controversy: "the lactivists versus the formula feeders! the natural birth evangelists versus the C-sections!", such as Freeman (2019) describes it, is not an option. We have to acknowledge the diversity, hybridity and differences that exist among AP-practices and mothers. Only then we will clear the path for mutual understanding.

Limitations: However, this research necessarily has some limitations. Simultaneously, I will attempt to justify them by explaining some of the methodological and substantial choices I have made.

To begin, there is the problem of representation, which limits generalisation in several ways: I have worked with a very small sample; I have preselected my participants on the basis of their affinity with both AP and holistic care ethics, so that the participants may be radically different from other attachment parents; and geographical research field is limited (region of Ghent). As a consequence, the accounts of the mothers rather serve as stepping stones to broach subjects and examples of empowering experiences than as proper representations of 'AP'.

Another limitation is my focus on attachment mothers, which leaves out the ethical experiences of attachment fathers. The explanation here fore is threefold: First, women are the ones who have the anatomical equipment to carry the children, give life to them and feed them, important aspects in AP. Second, I wanted to continue the methodology of historical research on motherhood which centralised mothers' voices. Third, de Controversy targets mainly women, so it seemed somewhere logical to let individual mothers 'talk back'.

Furthermore, I would like to bring nuance to the distinction between AP as institution and AP as experience. I emphasize that I am aware of the danger of these dichotomies and of the fact that there necessarily exists continuity between AP as experience and AP as an ideology.

A last critique is concerned with holistic care ethics, which some may think of as non-essential to AP. And that is correct: it is non-essential to AP. Mothers who are not involved with AP (as to breastfeeding, babywearing, co-sleeping, …) may nevertheless be involved in environmental or social activism. They may also be concerned with non-authoritarian parenting techniques. However, it seems *plausible* – I have no data for this – that conscious parents might, on the whole, be more sensitive to alternative parenting styles. They might feel more drawn to ideas, practices, life styles that are less conventional or predominant. And AP is a part thereof. Whatever the ideological and historical background, AP allows for a different approach to childrearing in a society that values productivity and prestige over care and relationality. AP may allow parents to reclaim space and time to *become* a parent and to redefine what is essential in childrearing, whereby attachment, care and interdependency become more esteemed.

Future contributions: As to future contributions in the field of AP and care ethics, I suggest that qualitative and quantitative studies be combined to substantiate the connection between the AP and care ethics. Is it generally true that AP-mothers are implicated in holistic care ethics and if so: Do they find that AP and these ethics are mutually informative and constitutive?

Further research should also be concerned with our current 'knowledge regime', i.e. the scientisation of knowledge. Researchers as well as official institutions (Kind en Gezin, AAP, WHO, NHO …), whether they are sympathetic to AP or not, should stay away from presenting non-evidenced claims as facts and promoting bad science. Being torn between conflicted scientific opinions puts pressure on mothers and it corrodes the credibility of the organisations that are supposed to support mothers.

Simultaneously, research on parenting should not let Science (with capital S) hijack every debate or use it as the only "accountability strategy in justifying particular practices" (Faircloth 2010).

What I think is equally important in future research is that we aim to understand that AP is not all or nothing, either oppressive or empowering, either scientifically false or right, *et caetera*. In this research I have aimed to find the *conditions* in which AP felt empowering to the mothers I have interviewed. Other research may focus on the conditions in which AP can be oppressive, but not necessarily jump to the conclusion AP is therefore oppressive, exclusive, or anti-feminist. To go short, I suggest future research follow the example of May Friedman (2009) or Jenna Abetz and Julia Moore (2016), who have pointed to the (nuanced) crux of the matter:

> Although it is easy to criticize AP because of the dearth of scholarship linking it to the problematic ideology of intensive mothering, we argue that it is not the choice to adopt individual practices themselves that are problematic but rather the reifying articulation that all AP practices are always best. However, we find it equally problematic to reify that all AP practices are always wrong. These hegemonic narratives function to divide mothers by perpetuating and normalizing a new AP mommy war, where proponents and opponents uncritically argue about how chosen parenting philosophies entirely benefit or harm, and mothers must choose to be all-in or all-out in order to be good mothers. (Abetz and Moore 2016, 59)

Embracing the grey areas of AP and motherhood in general may entail a decrease in mother shaming, an increase in our understanding why mothers feel drawn or not to AP, and a broader view on how parenting styles communicate with general life styles and ideologies.

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