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Chris Bobel

When Good Enough Isn't *Mother Blame in* The Continuum Concept

Nearly ten years ago, I began collecting data for a study on women I termed “natural mothers,” women who practice a labour intensive, alternative type of parenting that relies less on technology and consumerism and more on what mothers claim, “feels right” (see Bobel, 2002). In addition to consuming a whole foods diet, relying largely on holistic health care (including homebirth), cloth diapering, often home-schooling and generally, living simply, the natural mothers practice “attachment parenting.”¹ I was interested in this mothering practice for a number of reasons, including the fact that it precludes work outside the home. For the natural mothers, the best kind of mothering requires a constant stay at home presence, something only a small number of women can afford to provide. For those who cannot manage to devote their full energies to mothering because they must work for pay or choose to do so for personal reasons, the dictates of natural mothering can lead to mother blame and its persistent companion, mother guilt. But why? What is it about natural mothering that carries with it the message that those who do not make themselves continually available to their babies are inadequate mothers? As I talked to the natural mothers at the center of my study, one explanation shifted into focus.

During the in-depth interview phase of the project, I first learned of *The Continuum Concept: In Search of Happiness Lost* by Jean Liedloff, originally published in 1975. And I quickly realized how vital the book was to the women I studied. For many natural mothers, Liedloff’s work earned her a hallowed place as the messenger of a certain truth about the best, most instinctual way to parent. One mother described reading *The Continuum Concept* as a “mind altering experience” (qtd. in Bobel, 2002: 88). Another mother credited the book with helping her prioritize caring for her children above all else, including

her very active life as a community organizer. Still another mother spoke of the book with a pained look. As she read, she told me, she tapped into a deep sadness realizing what she missed in her own upbringing. During subsequent interviews, the book came up again and again establishing it as “the holy grail” of natural mothering.

The Continuum Concept is based on Liedloff’s extended observations (over two-and-a-half years) of the indigenous Yequana² who inhabit the dense rain forest of the upper Caura River basin of Venezuela. During this time, Liedloff detected a contentment and joy uncharacteristic of her own Western (American) culture. Unbelievably, she writes, “The children were uniformly well-behaved: never fought, were never punished, always obeyed happily and instantly” (1985: 9). This pervasive “sense of rightness,” Liedloff concludes, is the direct consequence of the Yequana way of constant baby carrying (until baby begins to crawl), breastfeeding on demand and co-sleeping. For her, these “attached” practices are rooted in a set of principles she calls “The Continuum Concept,” defined as:

The sequence of experience which corresponds to the expectations and tendencies of the human species in an environment consistent with that in which those expectations and tendencies were formed. (Liedloff, 1985: 25)

When adopted, she asserts, “continuum-correct” practices yield categorically well adjusted, confident, contributing members of their community. The book, in its 26th printing and translated into 18 languages, has a significant international following spawning “The Liedloff Society for the Continuum Concept” (www.continuum-concept.org) established to network proponents of TCC (as it’s known to insiders) and maintain an active electronic discussion list with subscribers from all over the world.

The trouble with bringing the Yequana home: cultural contradictions and mismatches

My own reaction to the book produced a dizzying set of contradictions. On an academic level, the relationship between natural mothering and TCC was clear. Natural mothering, I found, embodied and extended TCC. It was no wonder that the book “spoke” to so many of my informants. But on a more intimate level, the book truly challenged me. My own child was born at home, slept in the family bed for three years and nursed for one-and-a-half years, thus, I felt validated for making choices regularly challenged by mainstream parents and child care “experts.” But as the mother of the same child who wailed inconsolably for the first several months of her life and spent considerable time in a stroller, an automatic swing and even a playpen on occasion, I felt guilty. I was proud of the ways I defied convention and cared for my baby in ways consistent with the Yequana Liedloff observed, but I felt judged for the balance

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of choices I made that were not “continuum correct.” It seemed that my best was not good enough and my non-continuum choices would lead to my daughter’s persistent unhappiness later in life. What was I to make of this powerful book? Was my guilt a signal that Liedloff spoke a truth too painful for me to face? Or, alternatively, was TCC really just another parenting straitjacket (written by a non parent) that prescribed a set of standards very few could realistically adopt?

Furthermore, what are the implications of a set of expectations extracted from a hunter-gatherer society and prescribed for parents who inhabit industrialized lives? As Petra Büskens astutely argues in her own analysis of popular parenting texts (including TCC), the elevation of the so-called “primitive” way of life is “classic romantic nostalgia for the ‘noble savage’ arising in conditions of destabilizing social change” (2004: 103). In addition to the ethnocentric, even racist reduction and appropriation of a constellation of cultural practices that grow out of particular material and social conditions, the directive to “simplify” and “attach” like nature intended, is an insidious set up for mothers everywhere to interpret their current parenting choices as inadequate, deficient, even dangerous. The “civilized” parent who turns her back on nature by deploying the modern conveniences of high tech strollers, solid oak cribs and scientifically tested formula, is faulted for doing irreparable harm to her child. The practice of appropriating Yequana culture produces a mismatch that leaves a void, and that void is filled by maternal blame. This perspective, I argue, inevitably feeds an already overdeveloped climate of ferocious mother blame that must be challenged; if mothers are to be truly empowered to do the best they can and believe that their best *is* good enough.

Taking my cue from Susan Douglas (co-author, with Meredith Michaels, of *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women* [2004]) who advocates for “talking back” when mothers are held to unrealistic and damaging standards, this essay engages a textual analysis of *The Continuum Concept* as a challenge to mother blame. My aim is to reveal Liedloff’s (1985) construction of mothers as omnipotent but flawed and singularly responsible for the shaping of children into adults. In Liedloff’s conception, children who mature into healthy, independent and well-adjusted individuals do so *solely* because mother, eschewing conventional, culture-bound norms of parenting, kept them in close physical contact. Complex realities such as material privilege, cultural capital and social context are not factors. Characterizations of Western maternal work as necessarily and by design cruel, cold hearted and responsible for devastating outcomes in contrast to idyllic representations of indigenous people operating blissfully on instinct create a binary opposition overly reductive and disrespectful to all involved. Furthermore, while TCC advances a compelling argument for “attachment parenting,” a structural analysis for *why* such mother-intensive, mother-dependant care is impractical or even unappealing for most and *what* measures must be in place to make this style of parenting a reality is largely missing from Liedloff’s work.

Liedloff's context of opposition

In order to fully understand how Liedloff (1985) constructs her prescriptions for infant care, it is important to show how she relies on oppositions. The book is driven by a revelation of sorts: in order to find peace with oneself, and by extension with the world, one must find "that sense of rightness (4)" or the emotional place "where things [are] as they ought to be (4)." This "missing center of things (5)" is located in *nature*, argues Liedloff, and can only be accessed when we allow our instinct to preempt our intellect. Nature, in this conception, is lost to "civilized" westerners who, enamored with so-called progress, forget how to be fully human. This fundamental opposition casts nature against culture and neglects the reality that even nature itself is a socially constructed category. Liedloff deploys a litany of poles including "savage" versus "civilized" and "stone age" versus "modern." While the oppositions suggest attempts at irony in some cases (as in "Who is the *real* savage here?"), through their oversimplification and decontextualization, they are rendered empty categories (as Maria Togovnick [1990] has argued elsewhere).³ Still, Liedloff deploys these categories to set up the central opposition of child versus mother (or child-centered versus mother-centered) culminating in the knock out punch of "continuum correct" versus "non continuum," or more crudely, right versus wrong. The quest for essential rightness is ended when civilized, modern mothers realize the errors of their ways and adapt the lifestyle of the Yequana. To do otherwise is perilous, causing great injury to one's child. According to Liedloff:

it must be understood that there is no mechanism in his early life that can take account of an inadequate mother, a mother without a working continuum, one who does not respond to infant signals, one who is set against, not for, the fulfillment of his expectations. (1985: 71)

The omnipotent, imperfect mother

There is a curious and frustrating contradiction woven throughout Liedloff's (1985) work. Liedloff describes the vibrant, cooperative and joyful life of the Yequana wherein mothers share the care of infants with others. Asserting that babies themselves do not discriminate among their caregivers, Liedloff suggests a gender-neutral, age-neutral "maternity" when she writes:

The maternal role, the only role that can relate to an infant in the earliest months, is instinctively played by fathers, other children, and anyone else who deals with the infant, even for a moment. Distinguishing between sex or age groups is not the business of a baby. (1985: 35)

In fact, Liedloff's own small photo archive of Yequana baby-carrying (accessible via the Liedloff Continuum Network) shows children carrying

babies more often than anyone else. Liedloff conveys very clearly that the Yequana regard infant and baby care as a community responsibility and practice (though mother is undoubtedly the central caregiver). This community-focus of childcare is a theme woven throughout TCC. Liedloff shows how childcare is a virtual “non activity” threaded into the everyday life of the Yequana. Babies are not the center of attention; rather, they are immediately integrated into daily work and play. Innately social, they long to be immersed in the life of their culture, as do their seldom-isolated caregivers, claims Liedloff.

But when her discussion shifts to what she terms “civilized” parenting, she speaks *exclusively* of mothers who seemingly do their mothering alone. There are no other caregivers of children in the scene. In the Introduction to the new edition (1985), for example, we hear only from mothers Millicent, Anthea, Rachel, Nancy and Rosalind. (Though fathers are mentioned, they are peripheral). While it might be argued that Liedloff is merely describing the division of childcare labour in two very different cultures (and there are plentiful data that mothers do provide the lion share of care),⁴ evidence abounds that she goes beyond mere description.

Later, in her tortuous description of the Western newborn’s first experiences, it is only the mother who makes the mistakes. The errant mother is characterized as selfish, cold hearted, foolish and naively reliant on parenting experts’ advice. If only she thought (read: felt) for herself, Liedloff laments:

It is standard practice in the “advanced” countries to buy a book on baby care the moment a new arrival is expected . . . Whatever it is, the young mothers read and obey, untrusting of their innate ability, untrusting of the baby’s “motives” in giving the still perfectly clear signals. Babies have, indeed, become a sort of enemy to be vanquished by the mother. (1985: 35)

Setting up mothers and babies in opposition as “enemies,” Liedloff (1985) shoots barb after relentless barb at “bad mothers” who have forgotten to listen to their instincts. Mother is depicted as the one who, “after much thought, has decided to allow [baby] access to her breast” (62). It is mother who naively follows her mothers’ advice “that if she gives in to [the crying baby] now he (sic) will be spoiled and cause trouble later” (63). Her choice to decorate and supply a nursery demonstrates the misplacement of her priorities. In the following passage, Liedloff transforms the innocence of the standard middle class nursery into the battleground where mother wages war against her child when putting baby down for a nap:

Softly, she closes the door. She has declared war upon him. Her will must prevail over his. Through the door she hears what sounds like someone being tortured. Her continuum recognizes it is as such. Nature does not make clear signals that someone is being tortured

unless it is the case. *It is precisely as serious as it sounds.* (1985: 63)

But in Liedloff's view, child neglect and denial of instinct are not the only transgressions. She also indicts mothers for their tendency to care *too much*, compromising a child's natural instinct to self protect. Liedloff asserts "the overprotected, weakened child is the one whose initiative has been usurped by an over eager mother" (159). Thus, mothers are not only to blame when their children, purportedly starved for touch, act out in socially unacceptable ways but their over eager care is responsible for producing weakness, too. Mothers, in Liedloff's conception, are the root of social problems.

Bad mothers, damaged children

While it may not have been Liedloff's (1985) intention, her causal link between "civilized" parenting norms and a host of problems blames mothers. The list of mother-induced consequences for denying her "unimpeachable instincts" ranges from children who run away from their mothers (86), get lost (87), suffer accidents (101-2), and lack creativity (89). Non-continuum children masturbate because they are deprived of the crucial in-arms phase (152) and adult sexuality is rendered dysfunctional, too. Per Liedloff, children who were not constantly carried by their mothers find that:

... in adulthood, excess energy is similarly concentrated by sexual foreplay and released by orgasm ... This incomplete release of the excess energy creates a fairly chronic state of dissatisfaction which manifests itself in bad temper, inordinate interest in sex, inability to concentrate, nervousness or promiscuity . (1985: 153)

Adults whose infantile needs were unmet (ostensibly, again, by mothers) are likely to pursue dysfunctional relationships (111-12), become homosexuals (122),⁵ develop into martyrs (119), criminals (123-4), drug addicts (126) and parents who beat their children (121). Liedloff's list of syndromes or personalities attributable to in-arms deprivation includes the Casanova, the slob, the actor, the compulsive academic, the conquistador and the compulsive traveler (117-120). These deprived adults may suffer from self-induced sickness (124) and or possibly commit suicide (110-11). Even literally "burned children are a more indirect expression of the deprivation in parents" (121).

By implication, Liedloff (1985) indicts mothers *alone* as responsible for this array of problems. This blaming represents a most unfortunate contradiction given her earlier acknowledgement that the Yequana *as a community*—not individual mothers—produce well adjusted people. In the "modern" context, where is the plurality of care?

Contributing to a legacy of mother blame

As a result, Liedloff contributes to a ferocious climate of mother blame-

ing—a climate already rife with chronically guilty mothers who chastise themselves for their inadequacies (see Caplan, 2000; Douglas and Michaels, 2004; Ladd-Taylor and Umansky, 1998). This mother blaming is not lost on readers of TCC or on Liedloff herself. Based on letters received following the 1975 publication of the book, the author includes a section in the Introduction to the revised edition (1985) aptly titled: “Why Not to Feel Guilty About Not Having Been the Only One in Western Civilization to Treat Your Child Correctly.”

In this section, Liedloff quotes from a letter sent by a mother named Rachel:

I think your book was one of the cruelest things I've ever read. I am not suggesting that you should not have written it. I am not even saying that I wish I had not read it. It's simply that it impressed me profoundly, hurt me deeply, and intrigued me greatly. I do not want to face the possible truth of your theory and am trying my best to avoid facing it.... It's a wonder to me, as matter of fact, that you were not tarred and feathered at some stage. (1985: xii)

Liedloff concludes this story by explaining that she and Rachel became good friends and Rachel herself “a great advocate of the continuum concept.” So, we are led to believe a mother might feel guilty, but the guilt will quickly dissolve if she subscribes to TCC; the open-minded mother will come around to Liedloff's irrefutable logic soon enough. Similarly, another mother, Rosalind found herself “sunk in a weeping depression” after reading the book but after a time, returned to the book for earnest study and presumably, adoption of its advice.

The stories of mothers who didn't find Rachel and Rosalind's resolutions are lost to us. We can only guess about the mothers who, enraged, threw the book across the room but its indictments lingered. We can wonder about the mothers who, too, fell into a depressed state but did not have the privilege of an “understanding and patient” husband to take over care of small children. More disturbing is the thought of the legions of readers of TCC who quietly absorbed the book's message that non continuum mothers tortured their children and the damage is certain and profound. Thus, the consequence of Liedloff's romanticized portrayal of the Yequana uncritically grafting their practices onto Western lives is to blame mothers. In yet another opposition, there are those mothers who get it and those who don't, and heaven help those who don't.

But Liedloff's (1985) mother blaming is not a new exercise. Indeed, she numbers among scores of writers, including academics, therapists and others, who indict mothers for a host of disorders, disappointments and diseases. Often this bias is revealed in the research design itself that focuses *only* on mother's culpability (see Caplan, 2000). Perhaps the most infamous (though

surely not the earliest) example of mother blaming is attributed to columnist Phillip Wylie. In his 1942 book *A Generation Of Vipers*, Wylie coined the term “momism” to name the so-called destructive maternal inclination to suppress, dominate and manipulate children. Wylie went so far as to blame over-protective mothers for raising unmasculine sons unfit for military service.

The practice of blaming mother persists. In fact, the mother-blaming trend in the field in psychology is ubiquitous enough to capture the attention of psychologists Paula Caplan and Ian Hall-McCorquodale (1985). They analyzed clinical psychology journals from 1970-1982 in search of instances of mother blaming such as pathologizing mothers and their mothering and holding mothers disproportionately responsible for their children's problems. They found that “mothers were blamed for seventy-two different kinds of problems in their offspring, ranging from bed wetting to schizophrenia, from inability to deal with color blindness to aggressive behavior, from learning problems to ‘homicidal transsexualism’” (as quoted in Caplan, 2000: 45). Fathers were blamed for none.

The lay community is quick to blame, too. Vicky Phares (1993) established that the type of problems blamed on mothers differed from those blamed on fathers. Mothers were regarded as more responsible for children's internalized behaviour problems (such as depression, anxiety and shyness) and fathers were rated as more responsible for their children's externalizing behaviour problems (such as aggression and argumentativeness). This research, Phares argues, should discourage “global mother-blaming” and call for finer grained analyses.

Mothers themselves, of course, tune into the blame they unfairly shoulder. Karen Secombe, Kimberly Battle Walters and Delores James (1998) found that many “welfare mothers” attribute their social status “to popular and contemporary individualist and cultural views which put the blame on the victims” (849). At the same time mothers may express frustration for being blamed, they engage in their own self-blame, disproportionately assuming responsibility for child outcomes (Penfold, 1985; Watson, 1986). In particular, G. R. Patterson (1980) documented that compared to fathers, mothers assumed *twice* as much responsibility for their children's problem behaviours.

One explanation for internalized mother blame may be the media's unrealistic depiction of perfect mothers: beautiful, successful women who manage the care of their children effortlessly and joyfully. These depictions, argue Douglas and Michaels (2004) constitute “the new momism”—the destructive trend of featuring, for example, “yummy mummies” (gorgeous and sexy celebrity moms who belie the legions of caregivers behind the scenes). Comparing motherhood to a panopticon in which motherhood is under constant surveillance, Douglas and Michaels demonstrate the impossibility of mothers feeling good about their motherwork. The disjuncture between a glamorized media portrayal and the reality of (down and dirty) everyday mothering leads many women to question if they are good enough.

Motherhood in context: real choices for real mothers

Of course, to deny that mothers do impact their children is not only inaccurate but renders invisible the countless hours of care that mothers provide. *Mothering does make a difference and sometimes that difference is negative.* But to place complex individual and social problems squarely on the backs of mothers amounts to sexist and counterproductive scapegoating. Further, this distortion siphons attention from finding social solutions that benefit children by supporting mothers. We are *collectively* responsible for how our children turn out, because the care of children takes place in a social context.

Is it possible to make recommendations regarding better ways to parent while respecting mothers and avoiding mother blaming? Yes, if we first promote changes at micro, meso and macro levels. If we genuinely create support networks that assist mothers—all mothers—so that the work they do is valued and shared in community, there is hope for the widespread adoption of TCC (see Crittenden, 2001, for a concrete set of mother-friendly recommendations). Without structural change, however, the push for CC-parenting unnecessarily burdens already over-taxed mothers. In the modern, civilized or what Büskens (2004) refers to as “socially differentiated” world, the kind of parenting (really, mothering) Liedloff (1985) advances occurs in a “geographic and social place of invisibility and irrelevance” (106). Thus, I must beg the question: even if we concede that attached/continuum-correct parenting is best for children, is it best for mothers?

Liedloff does acknowledge the isolation in which motherhood is experienced and advocates for mothers to gather together (sharing household work is one suggestion). But in U.S. society, for example, in which 70 percent of married mothers and 79 percent of single mothers of children 18 years and under are in the labour force (Department of Labour, 2001), it is difficult to imagine the easy integration of infants-in-arms into mothers’ paid work lives. Still, mothers who can imagine full time, attached motherhood—those who enjoy the material and situational privileges necessary to care for their children in the ways that Liedloff prescribes—should feel empowered to do so. But until motherhood is truly valued and spared the “global blame” for all that ails us, prescriptions for the care of children must always be weighed carefully and seen through the lens of real mothers doing the everyday situated work of mothering.

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¹The five “tools” of attachment parenting are: 1) connect with your baby early; 2) read and respond to your baby’s cues; 3) wear your baby (i.e. carry him or her

close to your body as much as possible, preferably using a "baby sling"); 4) breastfeed your baby; 5) share sleep with your baby (Sears and Sears, 1993: 5). While these techniques are hardly novel worldwide, in the contemporary American context, they are considered "alternative."

²The Yequana are more commonly referred to as the Makitare (see www.continuum-concept.org for links to plentiful information regarding this population).

³My thanks are due to Petra Büskens for introducing me to Togovnick's work.

⁴See Coltrane (2000) for a summary of this research

⁵Of course, listing homosexuality as one of a litany of "dysfunctional" childhood outcomes/problems is highly problematic.

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