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“Uh Oh. Cue the [New] Mommy Wars”: The Ideology of Combative Mothering in Popular U.S. Newspaper Articles About Attachment Parenting

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Abstract

Through critique of concordance, we argue that popular U.S. newspaper articles about attachment parenting perpetuate the ideology of combative mothering, where mothers are in continuous competition with one another over parenting choices. Specifically, article writers construct a new, singular metaphorical mommy war between pro-attachment parenting and anti-attachment parenting proponents by prepackaging attachment parenting and its debate, advocating for attachment parenting through instinct and science, and rejecting attachment parenting because of harm to children, relationships, and mothers. A minority of articles, however, avoided reifying this pro-/anti-attachment parenting mommy war by exploring the complexities of parenting beyond prepackaged philosophies. We explore the implications of this new mommy war on ideologies of motherhood and the politics of choice.

Keywords: Attachment parenting, ideology, intensive mothering, mommy wars, news

The picture of the ideal mother in U.S. culture is painted as one who is endlessly patient, loving, and intensely devoted to satisfying her children’s needs (Hays, 1996). We are inundated with images of motherhood in the media; magazine covers featuring celebrities who gush over their babies contrast sharply with news stories about “bad” mothers who harm their children through a myriad of selfish behaviors (Ladd-Taylor & Umansky, 1998; Rizzo, Schiffrin, & Liss, 2013). Furthermore, discourses produced by childrearing experts (e.g., Brazelton, 1987; Leach, 1989; Sears & Sears, 2001; Spock & Rothenberg, 1985) of how mothers *naturally are* or *should be* continue to pervade our cultural understanding of families, shaping our collective imagination about what it means to be a “good” mother. Because “stories transmitted by popular culture are received passively and eventually become part of what we take for granted in performing our relationships” (Bochner, Ellis, & Tillmann-Healy, 2000, p. 20), mass media have particular power in constructing ideas about parenting practices. However, mass media are not a monolith; multiple voices often create concordance, or accommodation of interests, to construct and maintain hegemonic worldviews (Condit, 1994) about parenting philosophies.

Recently, attachment parenting (AP), a parenting philosophy criticized for the intensiveness of its practices (e.g., Warner, 2005), gained notoriety when *Time Magazine* published a 2012 cover photograph featuring a slim mother breastfeeding her 3-year-old son, accompanied by the text, “Are you mom enough?” (Pickert, 2012). Given the recent media attention to AP and the power news media have in constructing realities (e.g., Grossberg, Wartella, Whitney, & Wise, 2006), we explore the ideological consequences of articles about

AP in U.S. newspapers. Using Condit's (1994) critique of concordance method, we argue that the majority of articles work together to perpetuate an ideology that we term *combative mothering* through the metaphoric construction of a simplistic pro-AP/anti-AP mommy war. These articles often equated AP with the ideology of intensive mothering in order to fully support or fully reject AP. However, we also note a small number of articles that avoided the AP mommy war altogether by redefining AP to resist its conflation with both intensive mothering and combative mothering. In what follows, we first outline the development of the mommy wars metaphor, the ideology of intensive mothering, and AP. Next, we present our concordance critique of popular news articles about AP. Finally, we explore the implications of our analysis on the politics of choice.

The mommy wars, intensive mothering, and attachment parenting

Scholars have demonstrated how mediated labels surrounding motherhood—such as “the supermom,” “the soccer mom,” “the alpha mom,” and “the mommy wars”—continue to play an important role in centering motherhood as the most fundamental part of femininity (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; O'Brien Hallstein, 2010). Since 1990, the metaphor of the mommy wars has been harnessed in public discourse to define the opposition between stay-at-home and working mothers, thereby dividing mothers into two mutually exclusive, antagonistic categories (Douglas & Michaels, 2004). Journalist Nina Darnton (1990) wrote in her *Newsweek* article titled “Mommy vs. Mommy” that the stay-at-home mothers she interviewed found working mothers to be materialistic and selfish, while working mothers found stay-at-home mothers to be spoiled and uninteresting. While Darnton articulated the mommy wars in terms of individual competition, others have noted the perpetuation of the mommy wars in mass media representations of motherhood (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Peskowitz, 2005). According to media portrayals of the mommy wars, “It goes without saying that they allegedly hate each other's guts” (Douglas & Michaels, 2004, p. 12). However, some have critiqued the mommy wars metaphor for being an illusion created by the media or existing only in women's minds (e.g., Steiner, 2007). Further, scholars have critiqued the metaphor for reducing women to the role of mother (Douglas & Michaels, 2004) and dividing women against one another, thereby diverting attention away from structural issues that pose challenges for *all* mothers (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Zimmerman, Aberle, Krafchick, & Harvey, 2008). The metaphor also ignores mothers who work part-time and/or moved in and out of the paid labor force (Peskowitz, 2005). The mommy wars metaphor, then, constructs a problematic oversimplification of mothering in a world where women with children often shift between the paid workforce and home. However, regardless of whether a mother works full time, part time, or stays at home, all mothers continue to be held to the ideal of intensive mothering.

Scholars have argued that the ideology of intensive mothering defines “good” mothering today (Hays, 1996; O'Brien Hallstein, 2010). Although the meaning of good mothering has changed over time (Hays, 1996; Sacks, 1984), feminist scholars have demonstrated the persistence of intensive mothering since shortly before World War II (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Hays, 1996; O'Brien Hallstein, 2010). The three central tenets of intensive mothering include (a) women as primary caregivers, (b) emotionally intensive, labor-intensive, child-centered parenting, and (c) the separation of mothering from paid work (Hays, 1996). In other words, because children are considered innocent and sacred, they deserve a special place within the private sphere of the family. Douglas and Michaels (2004) further argued that “new momism,” a new iteration of intensive mothering born out of the 1980s, has fed the mommy wars metaphor. Specifically, new momism became “more hostile to mothers who work” and perpetuated the belief that “the enlightened mother chooses to stay at home with the kids” (Douglas & Michaels, 2004, p. 23). Hays (1996) further presented a fundamental contradiction facing contemporary mothers: The fact that over half of all mothers with young children work outside of the home and yet our culture pressures women to commit so much of themselves to raising children. Intensive mothering, then, remains the ideal for mothers on both “sides” of the mommy wars.

Recently, the parenting philosophy of attachment parenting (AP) gained media attention and criticism for its intensiveness after *Time Magazine* published its “Are you mom enough?” cover story. Popularized by spouses Dr. William Sears, a pediatrician, and Martha Sears, a Registered Nurse, AP arose in the early 1990s through a series of popular press books. In *The Attachment Parenting Book* they wrote, “We believe that attachment parenting immunizes children against many of the social and emotional diseases that plague our society” (Sears & Sears, 2001, p. ix). Proponents of AP emphasize parent–child attachment and bonding, positing that early experiences in children’s lives directly influence their development throughout life (Sears & Sears, 2001). Psychologist John Bowlby (1982), the author of attachment theory on which AP is based, argued that children’s experiences with caregivers during their early years result in powerful and long-lasting influences on children’s sense that they are deserving of care. Researchers have asserted that children with a secure attachment style (which AP practices¹ are meant to foster) are less likely to have emotional and behavioral problems later in life (e.g., Brennan & Shaver, 1995). The presumed stability of attachment styles, coupled with research theorizing cause-and-effect patterns based on infant attachment style, create an intensive mothering imperative for parents who desire to raise their children in the best way possible.

Criticisms of AP, however, circulate widely. Critiques stem from the demands and strains placed on a child’s primary caregiver—generally the mother (Raley, Bianchi, & Wang, 2012). American author Judith Warner (2005) criticized AP for placing an undue burden of guilt on mothers who are unable to do anything for themselves without concern for the long-term effects any “selfish” acts may have on their child(ren). French philosopher Elisabeth Badinter (2012) critiqued attachment theory for using scientific rhetoric to celebrate child-centered mothering as “natural.” Choices about if/when to have children, childcare, breastfeeding, discipline, and work–family balance are infused with strong emotions about what is right, selfish, moral, and what makes a good mother. The practices of AP have been critiqued for privileging being a good mother over all else, regardless of a mother’s pragmatic ability or desire to fulfill such intensive practices (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Hays, 1996; Warner, 2005). Our goal, then, was to explore the connections between AP, intensive mothering, and the mommy wars metaphor to critique the ideological and material consequences of these representations for families. Although Hays (1996) argued that the ideology of intensive mothering is separate from the ideology of American individualism, we demonstrate how AP news discourses actually contribute to the individualistic ideology of combative mothering. Combative mothering sustains the idea that mothers are in continuous competition with one another over parenting choices.

Critique of concordance

Because communication scholars posit that media can be a key way to reify and resist hegemonic ideologies (e.g., Cloud, 1996; Condit, 1994),² we engaged in a critique of concordance to analyze the mediated multiplicity of voices in newspaper stories about AP. We assessed the accommodation that has been reached across news discourse in order to explore the emergence of a dominant ideological position (Condit, 1994). We followed Condit’s steps for critiquing concordance. First, we gathered a variety of news articles about a specific social or political issue (in this case, AP). Second, we engaged in thematic description of newspaper articles. Third, we critiqued the hegemonic ideology that emerged from the newspaper articles’ multi-vocal concordance.

To gather articles about AP, we searched the top 15 most circulated daily newspapers in the United States, as compiled by the Alliance for Audited Media in March 2013, the most recent ranking list available. We chose to exclude online-only news sources with no printed counterpart (e.g., CNN; Huffington Post) because we desired to analyze a range of articles with reach and influence published by daily news outlets from a variety of geographic locations. Given that most of the top 15 most circulated newspapers also offered online content—and often there was no way for readers to distinguish between previously published print and online-only content—we chose to include all traditional articles and blog articles accessible through the

newspapers' Web sites. Although readers widely believe that online news content is replacing print news content, Alhers (2006) argued that "News consumers see media brands across media platforms as being complementary brand extensions" (p. 37), indicating that print and news media are complementary rather than in competition.

We chose to focus our analysis on newspapers rather than magazines or television shows because newspaper articles are often easily accessible online after initial publication, thereby remaining a lasting source of information for people. For this reason, we also excluded one newspaper that required readers to pay per article to access published content. We searched LexisNexis and the newspapers' Web sites for articles that specifically mentioned "attachment parenting" with no limitation on publication date, returning articles published between October 1997 and October 2013. If an article mentioned AP in a way that was relevant to the content, we included it in the analysis. If AP was only mentioned in a reader's comment, in a link to a related news story, or in a way not relevant to the content of the article (e.g., mentioning that the author also wrote a book on AP), we excluded the article, yielding 117 articles to analyze.

In the first phase of concordance critique, we followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) method of thematic analysis. First, we each inductively coded approximately half of the articles, independently generating a preliminary list of codes. The purpose of preliminary coding was to identify how each article constructed AP. Second, we came together and compared our list of preliminary codes and compared our terminology to develop an agreed-upon preliminary coding scheme. Third, we independently applied our agreed-upon coding scheme to the same 25% of our sample (approximately 30 articles at a time), coming together to compare results and reach consensus on the application and definition of our codes, sometimes adding new codes or merging existing codes. We engaged in this iterative process of defining, coding, and categorizing until we reached consensus on how each article represented AP.

We approached the second phase of concordance critique from the understanding that discourses surrounding contemporary motherhood are shaped by power relations tied to ideology or "a set of doctrines, myths, and beliefs that guide and have power over individuals, groups, and societies" (Tracy, 2013, p. 42). We began by analyzing how newspaper representations of AP perpetuated or resisted the ideology of intensive mothering by engaging in a collaborative axial coding or by organizing and synthesizing codes into new categories (Charmaz, 2011; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Although the newspaper articles often equated AP with intensive mothering in order to justify the writers' full embracement or rejection of the parenting philosophy, we realized that the metaphor of the mommy wars both explicitly and implicitly structured the majority of news discourse about AP. Therefore, the mommy wars metaphor serves as our overarching analytic category. Ultimately, we identified what we term the ideology of combative mothering to make sense of the dominant—yet multivocal—construction of AP across popular daily newspaper articles.

The attachment parenting mommy war

In what follows, we critique how popular newspaper articles about AP perpetuate and complicate the mommy wars metaphor. Although Sears and Sears (2001) named their philosophy attachment *parenting*, the parent in heterosexual relationships primarily responsible for childcare and delegating care—regardless of how much each spouse works outside the home—is overwhelmingly the mother (Cox, 2011; Raley et al., 2012). Calling the philosophy attachment *parenting*, then, is a form of "neutering" that collapses "mother" and "father" into "parent," thereby degendering, declassing, and deracing mothers' experiences (Fineman, 1995). This linguistic move to neutralize motherhood perpetuates a false notion of gender equality, which functions to veil women's lived experiences of marginalization. So, although many of the following exemplars use the term *parenting*, we contend that AP continues to be an endeavor largely undertaken by mothers, and the *mommy wars* metaphor remains relevant in discussions of AP.

In what follows, we argue that the mommy war metaphor continues to ideologically structure public discourse about AP by articulating motherhood as divisive, antagonistic, and combative. Thus, we contend that the structuring of parenting philosophies within the mommy wars metaphor perpetuates the ideology of combative mothering, which maintains the idea that mothers are in constant competition with one another over parenting choices. We illustrate how the majority of articles promote a new mommy war in three ways: by prepackaging attachment parenting and its debate, by promoting attachment parenting, and by rejecting attachment parenting. Together, these articles construct a new metaphorical mommy war between pro- and anti-AP advocates. However, a small set of articles uncoupled AP from both intensive and combative mothering, thereby explicitly resisting contributing to the mommy wars.

Perpetuating a new “mommy war”

Prepackaging attachment parenting and its debate

The majority of articles that mentioned AP briefly mentioned the philosophy in a long list of current or trending parenting philosophies, thereby juxtaposing AP as one among many approaches. For example, in reference to her daughter and son-in-law having a baby, a 2012 *Chicago Tribune* opinion piece stated: “Their current concern is choosing the appropriate parenting style for the baby. There are several popular options—the controversial Mom approach, attachment parenting, Sleep Systems for Self-Soothing and the French Parenting technique” (Androw, 2012, para. 7). Similarly, two *New York Times* authors in 2011 asked readers to “Find out about various styles of being a parent, like ‘free-range’ and ‘slow parenting,’ attachment parenting, ‘helicopter’ parenting and the ‘extreme’ approach currently associated with Amy Chua. What do you think your parents’ philosophy is?” (Doyne & Ojalvo, 2011, para. 7). One writer of a 2012 *Newsday* article even linked these parenting philosophies to the mommy war metaphor, stating that “we’ve indulged ourselves in divisive ‘mommy wars.’ We have bickered about which is better, attachment parenting or free-range? Stay-at-home mothers or moms with paychecks? Opting out or having it all?” (Michaud, 2012, para. 7). Together, these articles delineate and simplify parenting practices into narrow, predefined boxes that must be wholly embraced or rejected by parents.

Articles also constructed AP as a contentious debate by juxtaposing pro-AP and anti-AP arguments, thereby contributing to a singular pro-AP/anti-AP mommy war. The 2012 *Time Magazine* cover photograph was almost always at the heart of this theme. A 2012 *Denver Post* article framed the debate around the practice of extended breastfeeding among AP mothers, juxtaposing a quote from Jamie Lynne Grumet with online comments admonishing the practice. The article writer commented, “[T]here was debate about whether it’s OK to breastfeed beyond babyhood” (Harpaz, 2012, para. 6). Alternatively, a 2012 *Philadelphia Inquirer* article stated, “Uh oh. Cue the Mommy Wars. Things are jumping off again thanks to Time magazine’s controversial new cover depicting an attractive 26-year-old California mom breastfeeding her 3-year-old son” (Armstrong, 2012, paras. 1–2). These articles presented the most simplistic articulation of the AP mommy war, where mothers are pitted against one another for their childrearing choices (Gillespie & Temple, 2011; Peskowitz, 2005). Although these articulations of the pro-AP/anti-AP mommy war were essentially descriptive, they reinforce the simplistic, dualistic construction that AP is an all-or-nothing approach to parenting. In addition to articles that described the AP debate, other articles took a stance in the war by completely siding with or against AP.

Advocating for attachment parenting

A number of newspaper articles advocated for AP by equating the philosophy with good mothering, thereby constructing AP as the best parenting philosophy above all others. Notably, nearly all of these articles were written by women, indicating that AP continues to be in the domain of mothers, even with the neutered name of attachment *parenting*. Although few of these articles specifically articulated AP as “intensive mothering,” we argue that the ways in which these writers constructed AP aligns with, and supports, intensive mothering ideals. Much like the Douglas and Michaels’ (2004) “new momism” and Wolf’s (2011) “total motherhood,”

intensive mothering describes the ideology that mothers should physically, emotionally, and financially devote themselves totally to their children (Hays, 1996). In what follows, we argue that many of these articles normalize the ideology of intensive mothering by constructing AP as instinctual and scientifically supported. As such, these articles construct AP as the most beneficial parenting philosophy for children.

First, writers often constructed AP as instinctual, thereby normalizing the ideology of intensive mothering. Specifically, these articles naturalized the time intensiveness of AP for mothers by arguing that physical attachment between mother and child is biologically natural and therefore the most preferable way to parent. For example, a 2009 *Orange County Register* article stated:

The essence of attachment parenting is for parents to trust their instincts, and that way their children will trust that their needs will be met: It's a parent-child bond that lasts a lifetime. Those who practice attachment parenting want others to realize that a child should be held as long and as often as possible, and that is not an impossible task. (Nadel, 2009, para. 12)

Representations of AP as instinctual were often strengthened by the juxtaposition of "natural" AP practices to "unnatural" practices of other popular childrearing experts such as Dr. Ferber, who advocates that infants "cry it out" before parents offer comfort. A 2005 *Chicago Tribune* lifestyle article quoted a reader who described the influence Dr. Sears had on her parenting practices: "He has helped me learn how to answer the needs of my children while getting much-needed rest without the anxiety of the unnatural 'letting them cry it out.' A child's cry is supposed to mean something to a mother. Do not ignore your natural instinct to comfort your child" (Deardroff, 2005, para. 5).

Constructing AP practices as instinctual is problematic because it idealizes constant touch and attention between mother and baby, including on-demand and extended breastfeeding, babywearing, baby massage, or immediately responding to crying. Each of these practices is time and energy intensive for mothers who literally attach their child to them. Further, each of these practices is unrealistic for working mothers and single mothers, making it an unattainable ideal for the majority of mothers in the United States. The danger of constructing complete child centeredness as natural and instinctual rests largely in the valorization of a sacrificial and essentialized view of women who fulfill their highest calling through becoming mothers. As Badinter (2012) suggested, "[T]he reverence for all things natural glorifies an old concept of the maternal instinct and applauds masochism and sacrifice" (p. 167). Such reverence, she wrote, is also a "threat to women's emancipation and sexual equality" (p. 167) as women worked tirelessly to conquer inequality and then turned toward being servants to children.

Second, some news writers focused on AP as scientifically supported. For example, a 2013 *San Jose Mercury Times* article declared: "[R]esearch on attachment parenting continues to demonstrate not only the emotional benefits to children, but to actual brain development, particularly in the brain stem that provides the foundation for higher brain development" (Ciepiela, 2013, para. 5). Similarly, a 2012 *Daily News* writer interviewed Mayim Bialik, an actress and author with a neuroscience doctorate, who stated, "What I try to argue in the book is that this intuition is primed in your DNA. You want to be close to your child, so you don't kick them out of bed or take them off the breast until they tell you they are ready" (Pesce, 2012, para. 12). Articles that emphasized the scientific basis for AP further naturalize intensive mothering practices. It is not surprising that a scientific rationale is used to normalize AP, as science has been used to justify many practices throughout history, including segregating classrooms due to girls' and boys' "inherent" learning differences (Fausto-Sterling, 1992). However, despite abundant theories, scientists have for the most part been unable to show how breast milk works in an infant's body to "protect or promote health" (Wolf, 2011, p. xii). Yet, doctors, government institutions, and interest groups persistently declare the advantages of breast milk over formula.

Newspaper writers who focused on the scientifically supported benefits of AP echoed Wolf's (2011) notion of "risk culture" where mothers must build their lives around what scientists and other experts espouse regarding potential harm to children. For example, no longer is a mother keeping her baby clean through a daily bath adequate; she must also consult the Cosmetic Database's list of baby soap to score the toxicity of their bottle of suds. The link between AP and science means that mothers must seek out best practices,

eliminate risks to their children at all costs and take full responsibility for enhancing children's physical, intellectual, and emotional development. Thus, the obsession with what and how babies are fed, carried, put to sleep, responded to, and disciplined is aimed at minimizing any and all potential risks to the child.

Most importantly, newspaper articles that advocated for AP through instinct and science privilege children's well-being over parents'—especially mothers'—well-being. These articles diminish mothers' desires for independence in favor of babies' "needs" (Wolf, 2011). In linking AP to intensive mothering, these articles metaphorically construct a pro-AP/anti-AP war where AP is equated with good mothering due to its instinctually driven, scientifically supported practices. However, these articles also imply that good mothering is only attainable to mothers who are financially savvy, educated, and able to devote a great amount of time and energy to their children. Not surprisingly, another set of articles equated AP with intensive mothering but completely rejected the parenting philosophy.

Rejecting attachment parenting

Other articles explicitly rejected AP by arguing that the intensiveness of the philosophy is harmful to families. Just like the writers who advocated for AP, the writers who rejected AP were almost always women. Although on the surface we might applaud these news writers for resisting and criticizing the ideology of intensive mothering, we argue that these articles problematically contribute to the pro-AP/anti-AP metaphorical mommy war—and ideology of combative mothering—through their focus on the individual and total rejection of AP for *all* families. These writers focus on the negative social consequences of the constant physical attachment between mother and child. Unlike the aforementioned articles, these writers considered the effects of AP on the entire family unit to imply that the risks of AP are not worth any potential health benefits to children. Specifically, writers rejected AP by highlighting how the philosophy harms children, relationships, and mothers.

First, writers constructed AP as harmful to children and justified their criticisms and rejection of AP based on children's lack of discipline and hindered independence. A 2006 *New York Times* writer discussed the lack of discipline accompanying the AP trend:

These days, when parents tend to be older and more reluctant to change their lifestyles, and with "attachment parenting" in vogue (or, as one cynic put it, "the child as Vuitton bag"), tots are more likely to be integrated into evening plans, often less than seamlessly. "There's a new sect of parent who doesn't believe in discipline, that just letting them run wild is the thing to do," grouched a 39-year-old child-free multimedia producer. (Jacobs, 2006, para. 6)

Unlike the articles in the section above that emphasized the scientifically supported benefits of AP practices, these articles drew on anecdotal observations to highlight the negative outcomes of AP on child development. Specifically, these writers focused not on debunking the scientific support for individual practices of AP but on the problematic culture of consumerism, trendiness, and *laissez faire* attitudes among attachment parents.

Some of these articles argued that AP inevitably results in the hindrance of children's independence. Jamie Lynn Grumet, the mother on the *Time Magazine* cover, was quoted in a 2012 *New York Times* article as saying, "I had so much self-confidence as a child, and I know it's from [being breastfed until age 6]." The article writer refuted:

I beg to differ. Self-confidence doesn't come from endless affirmation — any more than it does from neglect. It's about giving kids a longer leash. Allowing them to exercise their own judgment — about how to cross the road, fix a meal or ward off lions — flexes important muscles for better use later in life. (Olopade, 2012, para. 8)

These writers contended that extended, ongoing physical attachment between mother and child is actually antithetical to the development of independent children. Ironically, attachment theorists argue that children with secure attachment styles, raised with AP practices early in life, grow up to become more independent, secure, and confident in exploring on their own (Bialik, 2012).

Second, articles also criticized the ways in which AP harms romantic relationships. As a result of the time-intensive practices of AP, these writers point to the strain put on marriages and families. A 2005 *New York Times* author detailed how the child-centered focus of AP has overshadowed other equally important aspects of marriage:

With the widespread acceptance of “attachment parenting”—family beds, long-term breastfeeding and all the rest—the physical boundaries between parents and children have worn away. Marital romance has dried up. Real intimacy has gone the way of bottle-feeding and playpens. In fact, the whole ideal of marriage as a union of soul mates, friends and lovers that’s as essential to a happy family life as, say, unconditional love for the children, has taken a direct hit. (Warner, 2005, para. 10)

Similarly, another writer of a 2010 *New York Times* article wrote, “[W]e tend to argue the pros and cons in terms of what is best, or not, for the children. Are we protecting them enough? Are we keeping them from growing up? Are we supportive? Are we smothering? But what is best for the *parents?*” (Belkin, 2010, para. 3). By criticizing the centralization of physical attachment in AP, some writers rejected intensive mothering by completely rejecting AP. For them, happy, intimate family life cannot under any circumstances be sustained through attachment parenting because of the evaporating physical boundaries between parents and children. For these authors on the anti-AP side of mommy war, favoring AP means choosing to place children at the center of marriage while eschewing the needs of adult partners.

Third, other writers stated that AP is harmful to mothers, arguing that time-intensive and child-centric philosophy is damaging primarily because it induces a notion of guilt, doubt, and competition. As a 2012 *New York Times* author argued, the AP debate “encompasses the self-doubt that all mothers perpetually face” (Min, 2012, para. 22). A 2004 *Chicago Tribune* writer called Sears’ expectations “too rigid and unrealistic” (Philbin, 2004, para. 14), and another 2012 *New York Times* blogger argued that “women’s obsession with being the perfect mother, especially ‘attachment parenting,’ has been bad for working mothers” (McDonald, 2012, para. 1). Indeed, Sears is a devout Christian who has been frank in his belief that mothers should not work outside the home (Sears & Sears, 1997).

For these writers, denouncing AP opposes the eagerness with which women blame themselves for anything they deem to be less than perfect childrearing. Because every aspect of children’s behavior is directly attributable to their mother’s parenting, successfully enacting AP practices become the measuring stick of personal worth. The articles that rejected AP because of its intensiveness argued against the negative social repercussions as well as the physical and emotional harm to family members from being “all in” all the time. Although the writers who rejected AP often avoided neutering “mother” and critiqued the intensiveness of AP, their wholesale dismissal of AP and its associated practices continues to pit mothers against one another. What is notable is the dualistic construction of AP in these newspaper articles as entirely equated with either “good” or “bad” mothering, thereby maintaining the ideology of combative mothering through the metaphorical pro- AP/anti-AP mommy war. This ideology sustains the belief that mothers need to be in constant, hostile competition with one another over parenting choices.

In summary, writers who represent AP as a simplistic prepackaged philosophy, advocate for AP, and reject AP contribute to the construction of a new mommy war between pro-AP and anti-AP proponents. This concordance in newspaper articles equates AP with intensive mothering and presents women with an ideology of total devotion of mother to child, which they must embrace or reject entirely if they wish to eschew harm to their families. In actuality, the debate about which parenting philosophy is the most harmful escalates the imperative on women to be the best mother possible and make the best individual choices that will directly influence her own family’s well-being. Thus, newspaper articles that construct AP within a framework of the mommy wars simultaneously align AP with intensive mothering—to either fully embrace or reject it—and perpetuate the ideology of combative mothering. This contradicts Hays’ (1996) assertion that the ideology of intensive mothering remains outside neoliberalism’s focus on individual competitive gain and illustrates how intensive mothering is part of a broader competitive ideology of competitive mothering

that interlaces into AP news discourse. In what follows, we turn our analysis to a final group of articles that confront the rigid either/or constructions of AP.

Working toward “mommy peace”

A few writers explained how parents *may* practice AP without it becoming intensive, thereby unlinking AP from the ideology of intensive mothering and bypassing the pro-AP/anti-AP mommy war—and ideology of combative mothering—constructed by most news writers. Like the pro-AP/anti-AP writers noted above, women almost exclusively authored these articles. However, unlike the aforementioned articles, these often explicitly discussed feminism and the relationship between motherhood, parenting practices, and institutional gender inequalities. Although these articles were in the minority, they presented the most interesting, complex, and nuanced articulation of AP, thereby offering an alternative voice among the multivocal, yet dominant, construction of the AP mommy war. These articles emphasized the contested status of AP by destabilizing the all-or-nothing perspective taken by the aforementioned writers, in turn undermining the ideology of combative mothering and promoting peace between parents. The authors of these articles stressed that parents can practice AP in an individualized and nonintensive manner *if* they draw on a few practices, engage in community-supported gender egalitarian practices and advocate for institutional changes that would lessen or eliminate the intensiveness of AP.

First, some writers described how AP offers many tools parents can adopt or eschew, explaining how AP practices can be modified to fit an individual family’s needs. Although these articles often acknowledged the portrayal of AP as extreme, they highlighted how aspects of the philosophy may be incorporated into general mainstream parenting practices, regardless of whether mothers stay at home or work. According to a 2012 *Washington Post* article:

Many of those who practice it, do so in an a la carte way—maybe a sling, maybe separate beds, maybe breastfeeding for a year. Those who “attach” are not necessarily judgmental about other choices, either. The truth that “attachment” parents are not a monolithic bloc is getting lost. (D’Arcy, 2012, May 14, paras. 16–18)

By emphasizing that AP is not a monolith, the writer reconfigured AP as a much looser, less intensive collection of practices that can be selected based on parents’ needs. Alternatively, a 2012 *New York Times* blogger noted how AP has the potential to be a tool of parenting or a tool of judgment: “Was I using attachment parenting to grade myself instead of using it as a tool for being present for my child? ... Like any tool, it can be misused and wielded as a weapon of judgment” (Blois, 2012, paras. 4–5). By acknowledging that AP is constituted by multiple practices and that AP can be a tool, writers reframed AP as providing guidance rather than rigid prescriptions. From this perspective, attachment parents need not ascribe to all of Sears’ tenets at the expense of everything else. This redefinition of AP from an exact set of rules to a loose collection of practices disrupts the pro-AP/anti-AP mommy war by destabilizing AP and unlinking it from intensive mothering and combative mothering.

Second, a few writers articulated AP as a more expansive, community-oriented approach to feminist parenting. Writers often mentioned the importance of AP community found in the La Leche League, an international organization dedicated to educating mothers about breastfeeding. A 2012 *New York Times* blogger wrote, “The women who pioneered attachment-parenting support groups and publications are not competitive celebrity divas with nannies on the side” (Bialik, 2012, para. 2). Another 2012 *New York Times* blogger explained how AP mothers require support from others:

Mothers in the third wave of feminism are charting a new path to equality.... Attachment parenting can make it easier for a working mother to bond with her children when they are together, but it isn’t something she can do alone. It requires a partnership (at a minimum) and a village (ideally) that rejects traditional patriarchal models of motherhood and instead adopts a nuanced flexible approach to balancing work, family and community. (Urban, 2012, paras. 1, 5)

This community-oriented approach echoes feminist scholars' conceptualization of alternatives to intensive mothering that focus on a collaboration and examination of the power structure of relationships, especially as manifested in the family (Glickman, 1993; O'Reilly, 2004).

As Carolina Mancuso (1994) argued, parenting practices should be willing to alter that power structure, to make it more democratic, but not by abandoning the wisdom of adult experience. In other words, we must search for balance in parenthood, "valuing new and youthful perspectives while maintaining authority when and where needed. It's about working together, about seeing ourselves, as agents for a changing world" (Mancuso, 1994, p. 177). The new path to equality these writers suggest may allow AP to become a source of connection and empowerment—a way to affect social change and cultural transformation. By advocating for a communal orientation, AP advocates propose that what families need is not the sacrificial love that has been emphasized by the ideology of intensive mothering. Instead, woman-centered mothering, where women are individuals who are not defined in terms of their reproductive function, would enable mothering to become a site of agency as women emerge as the makers and enforcers of rules. Thus, the writers who unlink AP from intensive mothering are simultaneously opening up a unique space within the context of the pro-AP/anti-AP war, where AP is no longer a prepackaged philosophy mothers must align with or against. Rather, AP practices have flexible meanings, connecting seemingly unbridgeable divides.

Third, some writers noted that it is institutional barriers that cause AP practices to be unnecessarily intensive. In other words, it is not the practices themselves that are oppressive but the culture in which they are enacted. Some articles speculated as to why AP clashes with U.S. culture, suggesting that the rigid boundaries between our public and private lives are prime sources of tension. A *Chicago Tribune* author quoted a breastfeeding advocate in a 2012 article: "One of the reasons there can be a conflict with attachment parenting in our culture is we don't have family-friendly environments. It's not part of our culture. We're expected to have a strict dichotomy between family and the rest of our lives" (Manker, 2012, para. 18). This strict dichotomy points to the structural conflict between institutions that espouse equality for women while presenting them with systematic challenges to working outside the home. Similarly, in 2012, a *Washington Post* writer commended another writer for confronting "the impossibility of separating work and family life" and for offering "concrete solutions to the national quandary: Embrace more telework options; talk openly about family in the workplace; respect family obligations as we do religious obligations" (D'Arcy, 2012, June 25, para. 12). AP, then, is not necessarily inherently intensive. Noting the relationship between AP and feminism explicitly, one 2012 *New York Times* article stated:

The choice that has emerged in the debate over Badinter's book—that we either view attachment parenting as a backlash against feminism and or embrace attachment parenting as feminism—is a false one. Neither vision of feminism challenges the fundamental conceptual oppositions that serve to rationalize and legitimate women's subordination. (Allen, 2012, para. 10)

In this small set of articles, the AP mommy war and ideology of combative mothering are disturbed by shifting the focus from parenting practices to institutional patriarchal structures that make the *practice of mothering* a challenge, regardless of which parenting philosophy a mother embraces.

The importance of understanding the broader structures in which these practices circulate should not be understated. Indeed, nearly four decades ago, Adrienne Rich (1976) made a fundamental distinction between the experience of motherhood and the institution of motherhood. The central point of Rich's argument is her distinction between motherhood understood as "the potential relationship of any woman to her power of reproduction and to children" and motherhood understood as "the institution, which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control" (Rich, 1976, p. 13). In other words, while the institution of motherhood has historically been male defined, the practice of mothering and the connection between mothers and children could be empowering. This nondominant position outside the concordance of combative mothering, we argue, provides an important articulation of AP and parenting philosophies that should be drawn upon in future discourse in order to work toward more gender egalitarianism in childrearing.

In summary, it is notable that a few news writers reconfigured AP to unlink the parenting philosophy from the ideologies of intensive mothering and combative mothering, thereby breaking down the dominant, pre-packaged understanding of AP and disrupting the mommy wars metaphor. Although these articles present a “middle ground” between the more extreme pro-AP/anti-AP positions discussed above, the news authors who promote mommy peace fail to secure the position of the “leading voice” due to the miniscule number of articles that offer this position (Condit, 1994, p. 218). Because critique of concordance fosters the opportunity for social change to arise from the interaction of multiple voices, this “evolutionary rather than a revolutionary” (Condit, 1994, p. 226) positioning emerges as those who craft this middle ground bypass the ideology of combative mothering. These “mommy peace” writers offer an important perspective on AP that rejects the idea that those who practice the philosophy must be entirely deprived of time and child focused. Further, these writers help mitigate the pro-AP/anti-AP war by representing the possibility of a less rigid and more gender-egalitarian, community-oriented vision of AP. Most importantly, this vision of AP offers a voice for the evolution of mothers’ marginalized social position toward more equal parenting realities. According to this voice, economically disadvantaged mothers, single mothers, working mothers, and fathers may make the choice to practice aspects of AP if they decide the practices are best for their families. However, the notion of “choice” is notoriously complex.

The implications of war

Feminist scholars have written extensively about how politics of “choice” dismantle feminism by turning attention to women’s individual choices and away from institutional mechanisms and cultural ideologies that enable and constrain choice (O’Brien Hallstein, 2010; O’Reilly, 2004). As feminists fought for access to educational and professional arenas, we witnessed the growing assertion that “women have choices, that they are active agents in control of their own destiny, that they have autonomy” (Douglas & Michaels, 2004, p. 5). Thus, having been raised in the context of white second-wave feminist successes, mothers today came of age inundated with rhetorics of choice. We argue that the notion of “choice” in AP new discourse is constructed largely as the choice to fully embrace *or* to reject the philosophy, rather than the choice to embrace certain practices, thereby singularizing (Condit, 1994) an ideology of combative, rather than intensive, mothering. The concordance of AP news discourse is highly ideologically skewed and, with the exception of a few articles that complicate the pro-AP/anti-AP mommy war, currently lacks the dissent necessary to work against this ideology of combative mothering. Moreover, as research on children’s emotional, physical, and intellectual development is ever increasing, parents may also find themselves ever more isolated as they seek out the “right” philosophy for them. Where women may have once found support in those who occupied the same “side” of the mommy wars, microdivisions among mothers make it progressively more difficult to find others who have made the same parenting choices and can relate to each other, even within a given socioeconomic class (Gillespie & Temple, 2011).

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. Importantly, our analysis contributes a more textured and ideologically layered understanding of the complexities of contemporary motherhood than can be captured by the “choice” to work or stay at home. Although our critique points to a new iteration of the mommy wars metaphor that encompasses the pro-AP/anti-AP war, future research on both mediated and interpersonal constructions of a wider array of parenting philosophies is needed to establish the nuances of the ideology of combative mothering.

Further, we concur with feminist scholars who argue that the mommy wars are not really about children's well-being at all (Zimmerman et al., 2008). Rather, the mommy wars metaphor distracts us from progressive political changes that might actually benefit families (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Peskowitz, 2005). Instead of arguing about the effect of mothers' choices to leave the workforce versus staying at home, we might discuss how we can advocate for afterschool activities and programs to combat child hunger. And instead of arguing about which parenting philosophy promotes the best one-size-fits-all outcomes across all families, we might scrutinize how poor parental-leave policies, unaffordable daycare, and a culture that equates "parenting" with "mothering" perpetuate divisions between women. In the end, the ideology of combative mothering diverts attention away from these important conversations.

In conclusion, how we communicate about motherhood matters. By implicitly and explicitly constructing AP as war between those who fully embrace and fully reject the philosophy, news media continue to unproductively divide mothers by turning them against one another based on their adherence to, or rejection of, AP. We commend the few writers who avoided this reification but acknowledge that much more work must be done to work against the problematic singularization of the ideology of combative mothering. Much like Rich's (1976) seashore trip with her two young sons where they abandoned the notion of socially appropriate parenting and lived "like outlaws from the institution of motherhood" (p. 195), we hope that we might escape from these constrictive mommy wars by talking about parenting in a less combative manner.

Notes

1. AP encompasses a range of parenting practices, including (a) cosleeping or bed sharing, where parents and children sleep together, (b) extended breastfeeding and breastfeeding on demand, (c) holding and touching, especially during the process of putting the child to sleep, (d) responding to crying, (e) baby-wearing, where parents carry their babies in wraps and slings most of the time, and (f) maintaining a child-centric schedule rather than one instituted by the parents (Miller & Commons, 2010; Sears & Sears, 2001). These practices are meant to build a strong attachment bond by reducing separation between primary parent and child (Etelson, 2007).
2. Although Condit (1994) and Cloud (1996) disagree about the role of concordance versus domination in media discourse (also see Cloud, 1997; Condit, 1996), we concur with Foust (2010) who contended that the two scholars' arguments can be read as two sides of the same coin.

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