The Fallacious Assumptions and Unrealistic Prescriptions of Attachment Theory: A Comment on "Parents' Socioemotional Investment in Children"
Author(s): Sharon Hays
Source: *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (Aug., 1998), pp. 782-790
Published by: National Council on Family Relations
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/353546
Accessed: 05-09-2019 09:26 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

National Council on Family Relations is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of Marriage and Family*

This content downloaded from 150.244.68.220 on Thu, 05 Sep 2019 09:26:26 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

FEEDBACK

The Fallacious Assumptions and Unrealistic Prescriptions of Attachment Theory: A Comment on "Parents' Socioemotional Investment in Children"

Dramatic changes in family life in the latter half of this century have meant that seven in 10 mothers now work in the paid labor force, the majority of two-parent families are now dual-earner families, and three in 10 households are now single-parent households (Hochschild, 1997; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1995). Despite these revolutions in family life and despite continuing efforts for gender equality, the task of childrearing remains primarily the responsibility of mothers. The fact that 88% of single-parent households are headed by women provides one obvious marker of this reality (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1995). Research on dual-earner families provides further confirmation: Mothers, on average, are responsible for 74% of the total parental hours spent in direct child care (Ishii-Kuntz & Coltrane, 1992). None of this information is news to the majority of readers of *Journal of Marriage and the Family*. But what we should find surprising in this context are the extraordinarily demanding childrearing prescriptions and maternalist assumptions represented by the recently published "Parents' Socioemotional Investment in Children" (Bradley, Whiteside-Mansell, Brisby, & Caldwell, 1997). Bradley et al. participate in the perpetuation of a series of powerful yet outdated cultural assumptions regarding the "proper" relationship between mothers and children.

What Bradley et al. ultimately offer us is a series of taxing and exacting prescriptions for completely selfless, constant mother care. These demands, however, are cloaked in gender-neutral verbiage and the language of science and objectivity. Bradley et al.'s explicit aim is to test the validity of a new research instrument they designed, the Parental Investment in the Child Questionnaire, referred to as the PIC. Many of the questions on the PIC are drawn directly from extant forms that measure parent-child "attachment," and all the items on the PIC are derived from existing psychological theories of appropriate parental behavior. The PIC is, nonetheless, distinct and particularly useful, the authors explain, because it is expedient and efficient and because, unlike most research questionnaires in this genre, the PIC measures the parents' experience of attachment, rather than the child's experience of attachment. For these two reasons, Bradley et al. expect the PIC to be useful in parental education programs. After providing a theoretically grounded rendering of the importance of parents' investment in children, the authors dedicate most of the article to laying out their methodology and statistically demonstrating that the PIC is, overall, internally consistent and reliably correlates with connected measures of parent-child attachment and measures of mental, familial, and social health. Hence, Bradley et al. conclude, the PIC is a "valid" as well as useful measure of parents' socioemotional investment in their children.

At first glance, this looks like good science. As a research instrument, the PIC follows directly from the scientific findings of its predecessors. The

This content downloaded from 150.244.68.220 on Thu, 05 Sep 2019 09:26:26 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

authors appear to have a solid grasp of the "objective" research in this genre, and the statistical methods they use for testing the consistency and validity of the PIC appear sound. But there are three central problems with the argument made by Bradley et al.: one regarding the neglect of existing methodological and theoretical critiques of attachment theory and two involving the cultural assumptions and social implications involved in the development and use of the PIC.

First, Bradley et al. do not address the longstanding criticisms of attachment theory that arise out of debates within psychology and that have been rendered and extended in the work of Diane Eyer (1992). Second, sociologists and others will notice that the PIC prescribes a model of parental behavior so demanding that it would be extremely difficult for even the most dedicated stay-at-home parent to follow and virtually impossible for single paid-working parents or dual-earner couples. The effect of this model, therefore, is to implicitly label such parents inadequate, socially unworthy, and neglectful of their children. Finally, feminists and other scholars who treat gender as an important category of analysis will recognize that this study, though explicitly addressed to "parents," is implicitly directed at mothers, as I will demonstrate. The PIC code of appropriate behavior thus not only contributes to maternal guilt, but also to the larger social backlash (particularly the contemporary efforts of the New Right) against mothers' participation in the paid labor force. In the same vein, the image of a good mother prescribed by the PIC is not only a demanding one, but also one that portrays the appropriate caregiver as completely selfless. In order to "correctly" respond to many of the questions on the PIC, the caregiver must not only be unselfish, she must also be a person who has no interests of her own beyond the fulfillment of the needs of others. Thus, the PIC is ultimately a perfect reflection of the cultural ideology of women as passive, nurturing caretakers. As such, the PIC contributes to the reproduction of gender inequalities in the economic and political realms as well as within the home.

The Underlying Logic of Attachment Theory

The logic of the PIC is explicitly based in (maternal) attachment theory. This theory rests on a set of essentialist, biologically determinist, and fundamentally gendered assumptions. Attachment theory research also has been repeatedly criticized. Although Bradley et al. may not fully agree with either these assumptions or the critiques of them, both the assumptions and the critiques are hidden from view in Bradley et al.'s rendering of the PIC. They deserve to be brought to light.

Attachment theory is squarely based in the work of John Bowlby (1951, 1969). Bowlby is the theorist made famous for his identification of "maternal deprivation syndrome." Drawing primarily on research involving nonhuman animals and on studies of juvenile delinquents and children raised in institutional settings, Bowlby argued that an intense and constant mother-child attachment was an absolutely essential foundation not only for the child's proper rearing, but also for the development of social organization in general. According to Bowlby, maternal attachment was an aspect of evolution, rooted in nature, observable in "universal" patterns of mother-child closeness, and following from the natural "instincts" of mothers and children. The social implication drawn from this research was that good mothers would stay at home with their children in order to avoid "depriving" those children of maternal sustenance. (See Eyer, 1992; Ehrenreich & English, 1978.)

Two of Bowlby's most well-recognized followers are Mary Ainsworth (1967; Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) and Marshall Klaus and John Kennell (1976). Ainsworth attempted to extend Bowlby's work by identifying and measuring both the signs of a securely attached child and the specific maternal behaviors involved in attachment. Like Bowlby, Ainsworth studied only females and their children. Kennell and Klaus are the initial and central theorists of "maternal bonding." They argue that maternal hormones dictate, and healthy child development requires, a period of close contact between mother and child in the hours following birth. With this, Kennell and Klaus claim, the pair are "bonded." The mother will take the appropriate, intense interest in her child, and the child will be appropriately "attached" and secure. This theory not only resulted in the establishment of institutional systems to guarantee bonding, but also provided a scientific grounding for the widespread cultural assumption that women, not men, are naturally suited for the role of attached parent. (See Eyer, 1992.)

Bowlby, Ainsworth, Kennel and Klaus, and their contemporary followers are consistently cited in Bradley et al. as the central sources for the logic of the PIC. Yet these theorists' research on attachment has been criticized repeatedly on methodological and conceptual grounds. Eyer (1992) lays out the history of these critiques, including the early theoretical criticisms leveled by Freudians,

This content downloaded from 150.244.68.220 on Thu, 05 Sep 2019 09:26:26 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

the discrediting of the faulty assumptions and poor designs of the nonhuman animal experiments and the studies of institutionalized children that fueled the theory initially, the attacks on the culturally bound conceptions and small and homogenous samples used to establish measures of attachment, and the failure to find consistent evidence of the lasting effects on maternal and child behavior that had been claimed to result from bonding. What is perhaps the most important critique of all, however, is the recognition of the conceptual errors involved in reducing the full range of potential causes for children's insecurity or bad behavior to the single causal factor of maternal deprivation. (See Eyer, 1992, especially pp. 35–41, 63–69.) None of these issues is addressed by Bradley et al.

I argue that the central reason that the mother-child attachment theory represented by Bradley et al. remains so alluring in the face of widespread and repeated criticisms is precisely because it flows so smoothly into extant cultural beliefs about the proper maternal role and because it operates so effectively as a means to keep women in their place. Yet, because their work is grounded in a longstanding research tradition, Bradley et al. do not deserve to be singled out as the sole perpetuators of attachment theory, nor should they be held personally responsible for the parental guilt and gendered assumptions that may be reproduced by the research tradition in which they engage. What is significant about Bradley et al.'s piece is that it appears in the pages of a respected interdisciplinary journal on the family without any reference to the critics of attachment theory and without any discussion of its implications in the contemporary context of family diversity, mothers' participation in the paid labor force, and the revolutions in family life that have occurred since Bowlby first offered his results to the World Health Organization in 1951. Furthermore, Bradley et al.'s article is instructive as a representative of the "scientific" rendering of the still popular logic that holds mothers responsible for an absolutely selfless investment in their children.

The PIC Portrait of Appropriate Childrearing

Parental Investment or Maternal Investment?

Like so much of the literature on childrearing these days, this article refers to "parents," rather than to mothers. Yet, as is true of most of that literature, there is an underlying belief that it is mothers who should or will take primary responsibility for raising the kids. All the original and central theorists in the area of attachment theory focus on maternal rather than parental or paternal attachment, and Bradley et al. stand directly on the backs of those theorists. Similarly, although the article's title and much of language used by the authors references "parents," their test of the validity of the PIC uses a sample of only mothers. The authors tell us that they have studied mothers rather than fathers solely because the available data on fathers were "insufficient" (1997, p. 81). Yet Bradley et al. do not question why insufficient data were available on fathers, just as they do not question the fact that much of the research upon which their study is piggybacked similarly lacks data on fathers. As Eyer (1997) points out, 90% of the research on attachment is, in fact, research on mothers.

Bradley et al. provide further markers of the assumption that mothers will be the primary targets of the PIC. Although the authors' use of the term "parents" to refer to their analysis seems to provide an indicator that the authors do not wish to perpetuate gender biases in childrearing research, their use of this language ultimately tends to disguise the fact that, nonetheless, they rely on theories and methods that focus on mothers, rather than fathers. This obfuscating process runs throughout the article, including, for example, their reference to Kennell and Klaus' book—*Mother-Infant Bonding*—as a discussion of the importance of "parental" attachment (1997, p. 78). Similarly, one of the earlier research instruments that Bradley et al. use as a model for the PIC and as a test of its reliability is explicitly called the Maternal Separation Anxiety Questionnaire. One finds no reference to parents here; this questionnaire is expressly designed to index "the *mother's* beliefs about the importance of *exclusive* maternal care" (p. 82, emphasis mine). Another clue to the gendering of Bradley et al.'s research (and of the attachment research on which they rely) is the assumption that a single primary caregiver is crucial. This is evident, for example, in the PIC measure, meant to be answered in the affirmative, that reads: "I worry when someone else cares for my child" (p. 90). Presumably, that "someone else" includes not only paid caregivers, relatives, and friends, but also one's spouse. Finally, even if Bradley et al. themselves believe in egalitarian parenting, there remains the question of whether the logic of Bowlby, Ainsworth, and Kennell and Klaus can be translated without revision into a theory of parenting. And, to the extent that the PIC is used to measure the adequacy of parenting, what

This content downloaded from 150.244.68.220 on Thu, 05 Sep 2019 09:26:26 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

are the implications of the fact that this measure will be administered in the context of a society where the bulk of parenting is done by mothers?

The Level of Appropriate Attachment

The implicit gendering of parental attachment is only one of the problematic assumptions of this research. Equally disturbing are the actual prescriptions for healthy caregiver-to-child attachment implied by the PIC.

There has been a long history of attacks on "overweening" mothers—mothers whom our culture has described as neurotically and sadistically attached to their children, mothers who are charged with damaging children by keeping them perpetually tied to invisible apron strings, and mothers who have been labeled as "vipers" seeking to "infantilize" their progeny. (See Chodorow & Contratto, 1982; Ehrenreich & English, 1978; Hays, 1996; Margolis, 1984.) But, for attachment theorists, it appears that almost no level attachment is too strong. In fact, it is clear that the mother or caregiver who will receive the highest marks on the PIC is one who is constantly, completely, and utterly devoted to her child. This logic is closely connected to what I have elsewhere described as the "intensive" and "child-centered" character of contemporary, Western cultural ideas regarding socially appropriate childrearing (Hays, 1996). The PIC provides a perfect rendering of this ideology.

The PIC consists of 24 questions that the parent is to respond to on a 4-point scale from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree.* Some of these items are taken directly from other research instruments; others were developed by the authors themselves. Bradley et al. argue that all four of the categories covered by these questions—acceptance of the parental role, the experience of joy and delight in parenting, knowledge of and sensitivity to the child's needs, and anxiety over separation with the child—are crucial to proper child development. The items on the PIC meant to measure these categories of parental investment provide such a striking representation of the demanding nature of contemporary childrearing prescriptions that I feel compelled to repeat them here.

The following measures of parental acceptance are answered correctly with the response, "strongly disagree":

1. Raising a child is so demanding, I look forward to a time later in my life when I can have time by myself.

2. I wish my child would hurry up and learn to do more things for himself (herself). That way, I wouldn't always have to do so much for him (her).

3. I had to give up doing lots of things I enjoy just to take care of my child.

(Note: Item 4 is missing.)

5. Sometimes I wish people would be as interested in me as they are in my baby.

6. It's been hard to deal with the demands placed on the family by this child.

7. It's usually too much of a hassle to take my child to the store.

A "good" parent will respond to the proceeding measures of delight with a strong affirmation:

8. I'm always bragging about my child to my friends and family.

9. I carry pictures of my child with me wherever I go.

10. I often find myself thinking about my child.

11. Holding and cuddling my child is more fun than most other things I do.

12. I enjoy going places my child will enjoy.

13. It's more fun to get my child something new than to get myself something new.

14. Most of the time when I go out of the house I take my child with me.

The test sample for the PIC consisted of 137 mothers of children aged 15 months to 2 years. I invite the reader to picture an average 2-year-old (and not while he or she is sleeping). Now consider that, to demonstrate proper acceptance of and delight in the maternal or parental role, the socially appropriate caregiver should claim, for instance, that she does not find children demanding, that she does not wish to have more time to herself, and that she does not hope for a day when the work of caring for the child becomes easier and less time-consuming. Although there are certainly differences among parents in the way that they perceive their children's demands, most parents, especially mothers, know that young children can be extraordinarily demanding and often require far more time and energy than the caregiver may feel able or willing to provide. Along the same lines, it seems at least somewhat curious that these questions imply that the proper caregiver will not look forward to her child's independence. Presumably, this means that one should not even dream of the day when one's child learns how to use a spoon. Furthermore, to score high on the PIC, the good, child-centered caregiver will have happily buried her own interests and desires in order to focus on those of the child. She will be perfectly content with the fact

This content downloaded from 150.244.68.220 on Thu, 05 Sep 2019 09:26:26 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

that the demands of parenting have caused her to give up things that she once enjoyed, just as she is pleased that people are less interested in her than they are in her child, and she is happy that her child is the center of every social interaction. It is debatable whether one should mourn or celebrate a caregiver who has so completely lost her sense of self.

Still, as odd as these questions may sound from a distanced point of view, the logic behind them should be somewhat familiar to the reader. This logic, after all, is part of a more widespread cultural model of the selfless mother ministering to the needs of the innocent and priceless child. (See Hays, 1996; Zelizer, 1985.) The point, however, is that the PIC implicitly condemns any caregiver who does not live up to the prescriptions of this cultural model.

Permissive Childrearing

In the first two sections of the PIC we receive the first hints of the interconnections among good parenting, properly attached children, child-centered childrearing, and passive, selfless caregiving. But there is more. The next section, in which the caregiver is asked to demonstrate her or his "Knowledge/Sensitivity," provides a useful rendition of child-centered, "permissive" childrearing—a rendition that would make proud one of its original and most popular proponents, Dr. Benjamin Spock (1946, 1985; see also Hays, 1996). All the following statements are most appropriately answered with "strongly disagree":

15. If you praise children a lot, they get conceited.
16. Babies have to learn they can't be picked up every time they cry.
17. Most parents seem too concerned that their children might get hurt.
18. Children just have to learn to adjust to the noise and lights in a house.
19. Lots of parents hold their children and carry them around way too much.

These questions are an implicit attack on the behaviorist methods of the early twentieth century, when Drs. Luther Emmett Holt, G. Stanley Hall, and John Watson, among others, recommended strict scheduling, detached handling, and letting the child "cry it out" (e.g., Cleverly & Phillips, 1986; Ehrenreich & English, 1978; Margolis, 1984). During the era of their popularity, all these methods were understood as the appropriate way to train children according to adult interests. By the early 1940s, however, these childrearing methods were superseded by the permissive methods that have reigned ever since. According to the ideology of permissive childrearing, good caregiving involves methods that are centered on children's interests and that place the needs and desires of the child ahead of those of the caregiver. The most important thing to recognize here is that these methods are culturally and historically specific. Further, there is no question that the logic of permissive childrearing can be carried to an extreme. The best example of this is Item 18, where the proper response is that children should not have to accustom themselves to noise and lights in the house. A good mother, then, no matter what else she might need to accomplish, no matter what else she might want to do, will turn off all the lights and refrain from making any noise if that is what her child needs or desires. Although some mothers (and fathers) are willing to do this under particular circumstances, it is, nonetheless, an extremely demanding childrearing prescription.

All this, of course, is closely connected to the selfless behavior we see in the categories marking "acceptance" and "delight." The needs, desires, and concerns of the mother should be completely subsumed to the needs, desires, and concerns of the child. This caregiver fits perfectly the model of "true womanhood" first established in the nineteenth century—she is nurturing, virtuous, passionless, unselfish, and passive (e.g., Cott, 1977; Matthaei, 1982; Welter, 1966). And just as that model of womanhood helped to keep women bound to the home, the PIC-attachment model effectively does the same.

Paid Work and "Separation Anxiety"

For paid working parents or mothers, the most immediately relevant section is the final one, measuring separation anxiety. Although anxiety may not sound like a healthy psychological state at first glance, the good parent will experience it and will correctly answer the following questions in the affirmative:

20. Except for emergencies or going to work, I wouldn't think of leaving the house without my child, even if I could get a sitter.
21. I sometimes feel as if my child and I are one.
22. I really have only 2 or 3 people I feel comfortable leaving my child with.
23. I worry that my child is never completely comfortable in an unfamiliar setting if I am not with him (her).
24. I worry when someone else cares for my child.

This content downloaded from 150.244.68.220 on Thu, 05 Sep 2019 09:26:26 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Item 20 is the sole statement in this entire questionnaire that mentions paid work, and it is, evidently, meant to cover the full range of changes in family life that have taken place in the latter half of the twentieth century. The authors imagine that they are acknowledging the issues faced by paid working mothers, single parents, and dual-earner couples by suggesting that these parents are allowed to treat their paid work as if it were in the same category as "emergencies" that force them to temporarily leave the children at home. This is certainly a relief. But how are single mothers or the primary caregivers in dual-earner couples or, for that matter, dedicated stay-at-home mothers supposed to cope with all those out-of-home activities that do not qualify as emergencies and yet are still not paid? And when, one might ask, will these caregivers find time for themselves?

Furthermore, given that paid work requires the use of an alternative caregiver, Items 23 and 24 suggest that the properly invested mother will not be free of (the requisite) separation anxiety while she is at work—because she knows that the child is "never completely comfortable" with anyone else but her (including, as I have pointed out, the child's father or other parental figures). All this seems to suggest that mothers should feel guilty and remorseful each day when they head off to their paying jobs. In fact, the Maternal Separation Anxiety Questionnaire used as a model and a correlative for the PIC is specifically meant to assess the level of "worry, sadness, and guilt" a mother *appropriately* feels when she is separated from her child, no matter what the circumstances (Bradley et al., 1997, p. 82).

The Cultural Specificity of the PIC Model

Of course, it is true that many paid working mothers do wish that they could give their children more attention and do feel guilty about the time they spend at their jobs (e.g., Hochschild, 1989, 1997). But these feelings do not follow immutably from maternal instinct or from the absolute requirements of children. Mothers' guilt is, instead, closely connected to the historically specific, socially constructed, cultural prescriptions that are represented—and reproduced—by instruments like the PIC. And these cultural prescriptions, as gendered prescriptions, are further reinforced by women's economic dependence and by women's lesser political power (e.g., Blumberg & Coleman, 1989; Brines, 1994; Hartmann, 1981; Hays, 1996; Risman & Ferree, 1995). This is not to say that children should be ignored or cast aside simply because their rearing involves unequal power relations and is modeled on culturally and historically specific assumptions. Our cultural model of appropriate caregiving is significant, not only in terms of what it means, in practice, for children and parents, but also because it represents important social and moral trends in our beliefs about the proper role of mothers, fathers, children, and the family, more generally. What should be emphasized in this context, however, is that the particular gendered model of childrearing implied by the research of Bradley et al. is a historically and cross-culturally specific construction, and it is not the only way to raise a healthy and happy child.

Just as Bradley et al. fail to discuss the historical and cross-cultural specificity of attachment theory, they also make no mention of the possibility of valid or acceptable differences in parenting due to class or race or nationality or sexual orientation or employment. For attachment theorists, of course, attachment is not a parenting "style." It simply follows "naturally" from maternal instinct, maternal hormones, and the "facts" about what children need and what children, therefore, deserve. Yet the sociologically minded reader would probably be interested in knowing if there are systematic differences in the "socioemotional investment" of working-class mothers and middle-class mothers, White mothers and non-White mothers, native-born mothers and recently immigrated mothers, heterosexual mothers and lesbian mothers, stay-at-home mothers and paid-working mothers. Surely one would expect some differences in these groups based in their differential interest in and their differential ability to carry out the prescriptions implied by the PIC. Although data were available to examine these issues—one third of Bradley et al.'s respondents were on public assistance, for instance, and one third were non-White—they were not analyzed.

And, of course, as the authors note in their conclusion, "the applicability of PIC to fathers . . . is unknown" (1997, p. 87). But the assumption, apparently, is that fathers' scores on the PIC would differ only according to the adequacy or inadequacy of their parental investment and not according to their gendered cultural, economic, and political position. Just as mothers on welfare are understood as identical to mothers with massive stock portfolios, fathers and mothers are simply "parents" according to the PIC. But, just as there are significant sociological reasons to expect differences between welfare recipients and the rich, given what we know about the gendered division of labor in child care, it

This content downloaded from 150.244.68.220 on Thu, 05 Sep 2019 09:26:26 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

is highly unlikely that fathers' scores would be identical to those of mothers. (See, e.g., Ferree, 1991; LaRossa, 1988; LaRossa & LaRossa, 1981; Thompson & Walker, 1989.)

One final comment regarding the PIC is in order. It is hard to know what, exactly, any given score on the PIC represents. With reference to fathers, we could guess that some men might answer certain questions correctly, not because they, for instance, enjoy meeting the demands of their toddlers, but because they are not required to meet those demands on the same regular basis as mothers and, therefore, do not find them troublesome. In other words, fathers might respond to PIC questions in a manner that is not so much a measure of their emotional investment in their children as it is a marker of their social role. More significantly, mothers' scores on the PIC might similarly differ according to social, rather than psychological, criteria. The childrearing prescriptions found on the PIC are pervasive. The same passive, nurturing, maternal caregivers and child-centered methods we find in attachment theory are also portrayed in the popular media, in the most widely distributed parenting magazines, and in all the best-selling childrearing manuals (Hays, 1996). And the impact of childrearing advice is far reaching: 97% of mothers read childrearing manuals, and millions read and subscribe to parenting magazines (Brown, 1993; Geboy, 1981; Lodge, 1993). Might it be possible that mothers, well trained in the ideology of appropriate childrearing, would answer the questions on the PIC according to their ideas about how they should experience their children, rather than how they actually do, on any given day, experience their children? Further, if knowledge of the code of appropriate childrearing enters into one's ability to score high on the PIC, could it be that "traditional" women and women with the appropriate cultural knowledge would answer these questions in a way that would satisfy the researchers, and women who are less knowledgeable about or less willing to swallow the methods of childrearing prescribed by this instrument—including, for instance, some feminists, poor women, non-White women, and immigrant women—would appear to lack the "healthy" and socially appropriate dedication to their children? Is it possible that the perfect caregiver, then, would be a White, middle-class, nonfeminist, native-born, stay-at-home mother?

Conclusion: Debatable and Unrealistic Childrearing Prescriptions

There are two important and valid assumptions that underlie attachment theory. First, humans are social beings, and children, like adults, require social contact. Second, human children are so underdeveloped at birth that initially they are absolutely dependent on others for their care. Yet there is a wide range of possible methods to meet these requirements. As historical and cross-cultural research demonstrates, the way that any given society responds to these requirements has little to do with maternal instincts, maternal hormones, or the absolute, objective truth about what is best for children and child development (e.g., Badinter, 1981; Mead, 1962; Mead & Wolfenstein, 1955; Scheper-Hughes, 1987; Weisner & Gallimore, 1977; Whiting & Edwards, 1988). What does shape the childrearing prescriptions and practices of any given society (in complicated but decipherable ways) are the economic, political, and cultural structures of that society.

There are, therefore, a number of reasons to be skeptical of accounts that claim objective standards for appropriate childrearing. Once we have recognized the historical and cultural specificity of attachment theory, we are left with the implicit claim that, although these standards of care may not be universally applicable, they are, in fact, superior. Given, for instance, that children in many non-Western cultures are not raised exclusively by individual mothers but, instead, in circumstances where childrearing is shared with other women and with the child's older siblings (see Weisner & Gallimore, 1977), attachment theory implies that all these children suffer from some level of maternal deprivation. The ethnocentric implication is that the West is better than the rest and that we have "progressed" beyond the "backward" standards of other, more "primitive" peoples.

One still might ask, isn't the kind of attachment and constant care prescribed by the PIC, even if it is a historical construction, at least the optimal level of care for children in this society? Although this may be true with reference to certain aspects of contemporary Western childrearing practices, one should be skeptical of any generalized claim that intensive, permissive, mother care is necessarily the "best" form of care. There has been a great deal of debate regarding the superiority of exclusive maternal care and child-centered childrearing methods. The critics of attachment theory have not only been concerned with the problems of small, unrepresentative samples and poorly designed experiments on monkeys and on children

This content downloaded from 150.244.68.220 on Thu, 05 Sep 2019 09:26:26 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

raised in wartime orphanages. There remains a central conceptual difficulty with the claims of attachment theory in that it is impossible to prove or disprove the posited causal relationship between parent-child attachment on the one side and the development of socially and psychologically "healthy" children-turned-adults on the other. It is impossible, in other words, to fully separate the results of attachment from the results of the child's other life experiences both inside and outside the family. Additionally, as Bowlby's Freudian critics point out, attachment theory is arguably simple-minded and shallow because it fails to recognize the deep complexity of child development and, more crucially, it ignores the fact that (to put it in layperson's terms) separation from one's caregiver is a "normal" part of growing up. (See Eyer, 1992.) Furthermore, it is not entirely clear whether child-centered methods, taken alone, will ultimately produce healthy, well-adjusted children or if their result, instead, will be the creation of self-absorbed, narcissistic monsters (e.g., Lasch, 1977, 1980; Reiff, 1968; Slater, 1976). Particularly relevant to the widespread use of alternative caregivers is the fact that there is no reason to believe that children cannot be happily and fruitfully attached to a whole range of adults (Eyer, 1992, 1997; O'Connell, 1987). Finally, one might also note, as Chodorow (1978) and Benjamin (1988) do, that exclusive mothering simply reproduces more mothering and thereby takes part in reproducing the gendered division of labor in society as a whole.

In the end, one of the most chilling points made by Bradley et al. is their suggestion that the PIC be used in parental guidance clinics. As they put it, "the attitudes and behaviors that represent parental investment may be central targets of parental education and guidance programs" (1997, p. 77). With this, the PIC and the attachment theory that stands behind it are no longer simply the misguided (if well-meaning) experimentation of research scientists in ivory towers. The PIC, instead, becomes the "scientific" basis for what are, in fact, moral and political judgments about the acceptability and unacceptability of people—in this case, judgments that largely will be directed at mothers. Here we are confronted with the problem that the PIC is likely to discriminate against certain categories of persons, as I have suggested. More than that, we return to the issue that the childrearing methods prescribed by the PIC are so demanding that they are completely unrealistic for the majority of contemporary families. What the use of the PIC would ultimately produce, therefore, is maternal guilt (and, less frequently, paternal guilt), and mothers, who in struggling to live up to the model of an appropriately invested parent, would find themselves emotionally and physically exhausted. This guilt and exhaustion, in turn, diminish women's chances for advancement in the political and economic realms and contribute to the reproduction of larger gender inequalities.

Again, this is not to say that women should give up mothering or that Bradley et al. should give up their concern with the needs of children. Nor is this meant to imply that parenting and paid work are an either/or proposition. But Bradley et al. and other attachment theorists do need to address the gendered nature of childrearing, take a more balanced approach toward the needs of children and the needs of caregivers, and recognize the problems connected to the devaluation of nurturing in the larger world of economic and political life.

The argument found in Bradley et al. represents a disquieting step backward in its neglect of massive changes in the family, persistent gender inequalities in parenting, and the historical, cultural, political, and economic structuring of childrearing beliefs and practices. This neglect is not only damaging to struggles for gender equality, but it also provides a unrealistic portrait of contemporary family life.

Note

I thank Barbara Risman for encouraging me to write this response and the anonymous *JMF* reviewers for their helpful and thoughtful comments on an earlier draft.

SHARON HAYS
Department of Sociology, 539 Cabell Hall
University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA 22903
(sh2q@virginia.edu)

References

Ainsworth, M. (1967). *Infancy in Uganda: Infant care and the growth of attachment.* Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Ainsworth, M., Blehar, M. C., Waters, E., & Wall, S. (1978). *Patterns of attachment: A psychological study of the strange situation.* Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Badinter, E. (1981). *Mother love: Myth and reality.* New York: Macmillan.

Benjamin, J. (1988). *The bonds of love: Psychoanalysis, feminism, and the problem of domination.* New York: Pantheon Books.

Blumberg, R. L., & Coleman, M. T. (1989). A theoretical look at the gender balance of power in the American couple. *Journal of Family Issues, 10,* 225-250.

Bowlby, J. (1951). *Maternal care and mental health* (2nd ed., Series 2). Geneva: World Health Organization.

This content downloaded from 150.244.68.220 on Thu, 05 Sep 2019 09:26:26 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment.* New York: Basic Books.

Bradley, R. H., Whiteside-Mansell, L., Brisby, J. A., & Caldwell, B. M. (1997). Parents' socioemotional investment in children. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 59,* 77-90.

Brines, J. (1994). Economic dependency, gender, and the division of labor at home. *American Journal of Sociology, 100,* 652-688.

Brown, P. L. (1993, August 19). Magazines remake family, or vice versa. *The New York Times,* p. A24.

Chodorow, N. (1978). *The reproduction of mothering.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Chodorow, N., & Contratto, S. (1982). The fantasy of the perfect mother. In B. Thorne (Ed.), *Rethinking the family: Some feminist questions* (pp. 54-75). New York: Longman.

Cleverly, J., & Phillips, D. C. (1986). *Visions of childhood: Influential models from Locke to Spock.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Cott, N. F. (1977). *The bonds of womanhood: "Woman's sphere" in New England, 1780–1835.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Ehrenreich, B., & English, D. (1978). *For her own good: Fifty years of experts' advice to women.* New York: Doubleday.

Eyer, D. E. (1997). There is no evidence that mothers harm their infants and toddlers by working outside the home. In M. R. Walsh (Ed.), *Women, men, and gender: Ongoing debates* (pp. 386-390). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Eyer, D. E. (1992). *Mother-infant bonding.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Ferree, M. M. 1991. The gender division of labor in two-earner marriages. *Journal of Family Issues, 12,* 158-180.

Geboy, M. 1981. Who is listening to the "experts"? The use of child care materials by parents. *Family Relations, 30,* 205-210.

Hartmann, H. (1981). The unhappy marriage of Marxism and feminism: Towards a more progressive union. In L. Sargent (Ed.), *Women and revolution: A discussion of the unhappy marriage of marxism and feminism* (pp. 1-41). Boston: South End Press.

Hays, S. (1996). *The cultural contradictions of motherhood.* New Haven, CT: Yale University.

Hochschild, A. R. (1997). *The time bind: When work becomes home and home becomes work.* New York: Metropolitan.

Hochschild, A. R., with Machung, A. (1989). *The second shift: Working parents and the revolution at home.* New York: Viking.

Ishii-Kuntz, M., & Coltrane, S. (1992). Predicting the sharing of household labor: Are parenting and housework distinct? *Sociological Perspectives, 35,* 629-647.

Klaus, M., & Kennell, J. (1976). *Mother-infant bonding: The impact of early separation or loss on family development.* St. Louis, MO: Mosby.

LaRossa, R. (1988). Fatherhood and social change. *Family Relations, 34,* 451-457.

LaRossa, R., & LaRossa, M. M. (1981). *Transition to parenthood: How infants change families.* Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Lasch, C. (1977). *Haven in a heartless world.* New York: Basic.

Lasch, C. (1980). *The culture of narcissism.* New York: Warner.

Lodge, S. (1993, October 18). Raising today's kids by the book. *Publishers Weekly,* pp. 36-41.

Margolis, M. (1984). *Mothers and such: Views of American women and why they changed.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Matthaei, J. A. (1982). *An economic history of women in America.* New York: Schocken.

Mead, M. (1962). A cultural anthropologist's approach to maternal deprivation. In M. D. Ainsworth, R. B. Andry, R. G. Harlow, S. Lebovici, M. Mead, D. G. Prugh, & B. Wootton (Eds.), *Deprivation of maternal care: A reassessment of its effects* (pp. 45-62). Geneva: World Health Organization.

Mead, M., & Wolfenstein, M. (1955). *Childhood in contemporary cultures.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

O'Connell, J. C. (1987). Children of working mothers: What the research tells us. In M. R. Walsh (Ed.), *The psychology of women: Ongoing debates* (pp. 367-377). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Reiff, P. (1968). *The triumph of the therapeutic.* New York: Harper and Row.

Risman, B. J., & Ferree, M. M. (1995). Making gender visible. *American Journal of Sociology. 60,* 775-782.

Scheper-Hughes, N. (1987). *Death without weeping: The violence of everyday life in Brazil.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Slater, P. (1976). *The pursuit of loneliness: American culture at the breaking point.* Boston: Beacon Press.

Spock, B. M. (1946). *The pocket book of baby and child care.* New York: Pocket Books.

Spock, B. M., & Rothenberg, M. B. (1985). *Dr. Spock's baby and child care.* New York: Pocket Books.

Thompson, L., & Walker, A. J. 1989. Gender in families: Women and men in marriage, work, and parenthood. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 51,* 845-871.

U.S. Bureau of the Census (1995). *Marital status and living arrangements: March 1994* (Current Population Reports, Series P20, No. 484). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Weisner, T., & Gallimore, R. (1977). My brother's keeper: Child and sibling caretaking. *Current Anthropology, 18,* 169-189.

Welter, B. (1966). The cult of true womanhood, 1820–1860. *American Quarterly, 18,* 151-174.

Whiting, B. B., & Edwards, C. P. (1988). *Children of different worlds.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Zelizer, V. A. (1985). *Pricing the priceless child.* New York: Basic.

Appendix

Item 4 was inadvertently left out of the Parental Investment in the Child Questionnaire in the February, 1997, issue of *Journal of Marriage and the Family.* Item 4 is: "Since my child came, I feel like I don't have any privacy any more."

This content downloaded from 150.244.68.220 on Thu, 05 Sep 2019 09:26:26 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms