



The University of Bradford Institutional Repository

<http://bradscholars.brad.ac.uk>

This work is made available online in accordance with publisher policies. Please refer to the repository record for this item and our Policy Document available from the repository home page for further information.

To see the final version of this work please visit the publisher's website. Access to the published online version may require a subscription.

Link to publisher version: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2014.10.018>

Citation: Locke A (2015) Agency, 'good motherhood' and 'a load of mush': Constructions of baby-led weaning in the press. *Women's Studies International Forum*. 53: 139-146.

Copyright statement: © 2015 Elsevier. Reproduced in accordance with the publisher's self-archiving policy. This manuscript version is made available under the [CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).



Agency, 'good motherhood' and 'a load of mush': Constructions of Baby-Led Weaning in the Press.

Dr Abigail Locke

School of Human and Health Sciences

University of Huddersfield

Queensgate

Huddersfield

HD1 3DH

UK

Email: a.locke@hud.ac.uk

Tel: +44(0)1484472063

Abstract:

In this age of 'intensive motherhood', new mothers are flooded with information on the best ways in which to raise their children. One of the key issues is infant-feeding, in particular, the timing and method of weaning their children onto solid food. This paper examines a new approach called 'Baby-Led Weaning' (BLW) in which the child feeds themselves instead of being spoon-fed, that came into popular parenting culture in recent years, considering the ways in which it is represented in National and International newspapers. The media search database *Proquest International Newsstand*, was searched for 'baby-led weaning', producing an eventual sample of 78 articles from a number of countries. The articles were subject to a critical discursive psychological analysis. The key themes that emerged from the newspapers focused around two main areas; the infant as agentive in their eating behaviours; and, constructions of maternal identities and resisting 'good motherhood'.

Keywords: Baby-Led Weaning, good motherhood, intensive, choice, agency.

Introduction

Current Weaning Advice and Practice

Weaning is the process by which an infant moves away from purely having milk to having a range of solid foods. It is an important part of early parenting but as has been noted (e.g. Sachs, M. 2011), has received relatively low attention compared to other issues around infant feeding, such as breastfeeding.

The World Health Organization's (WHO) advises that babies should not be weaned on solid (complimentary) food until they reach six months of age. Official guidance around the globe varies but many seem to have aligned with the WHO's suggestions that are based on maximising exclusive breastfeeding for six months before complementary (solid) foods are introduced. This timeframe is, however, not without contention and there is much research in different countries noting that solids are introduced earlier than recommended (Grummer-Strawn et al, 2008; McAndrew, et al, 2012). Advice and recommendations for weaning are only guidelines and the agency for decision making is very much located with the caregiver, most often depicted as the mother. There are also 'risks' and 'benefits' associated with weaning timings including the idea of a 'critical period' in which to wean (Illingworth & Lister, 1964) and suggestions of obesity 'risk' associated with both weaning timing and method (Moorcroft et al, 2010; Townsend & Pitchford, 2012).

'Baby-Led Weaning'

The move to Baby-Led Weaning (BLW) came after the publication of a text in 2008 by Gill Rapley, a health-visitor and former midwife who had approached the topic of weaning for her Masters dissertation, and Tracey Murkett, a freelance writer (Rapley & Murkett, 2008). This text was produced as a parental guide on how to do

BLW. It was framed very much in terms of convenience and avoiding the 'mealtime battleground'. They argue that in BLW the baby is able to eat with the family, the baby feeds themselves and the baby is able to choose which of the foods they have been given to pick up, explore and eat. Reports suggest that BLW enables infants' to have exposure to textures, tastes and experiences (Brown & Lee, 2011, 2013). That is, the child decides which of the food's offered to them, they will eat, and how much of it they will eat, with the mothers following the baby's cues for readiness, hunger and satiety (Brown & Lee, 2011). In essence then, BLW constructs the child as agentic in their eating. At the time of writing this paper, BLW is a growing movement in child rearing circles. Reeves (2008) noted that there was little empirical work on BLW. That is still the case. However, as the BLW movement is gaining momentum, more work is being conducted. In the main the interest in BLW has been a UK phenomenon. However, it is beginning to spark interest in other parts of the world, as some academic studies and the media analysis will demonstrate. BLW was also in many ways a 'parenting-led' phenomenon; as a movement it gained momentum through parenting forums such as 'mumsnet' in the UK. As such, many note the mismatch between official advice on weaning methods and parenting practices (Cameron, et al, 2012; Sachs, M. 2011).

The preparation of food and mothering

As has been widely noted in the literature, cooking has a gendered nature (Baxter, 2000; DeVault, 1991) and positions women as nurturing 'homemakers' preparing meals for their families (Daniels, et al, 2012). As Oakley (2005) notes in her classic study of 'housewives', out of all of the household tasks, cooking is the one that the women didn't mind, it was something to be enjoyed or worked at as an

art. Furst (1997) suggests that cooking is a way of 'embodying femininity', or has been suggested, performing nurturing, that is, the preparation of food is a way of showing care (Daniels et al, 2012). According to Dunn (2004), feeding children becomes an essential act of motherhood because it is seen as part of a feminine nature. Through all of these pieces it is interesting to see how the self-sacrificial nature of motherhood has become embodied in infant feeding decisions and practice. This appears to position mothers subjectivities as relational whereas child's subjectivity is constructed as autonomous and agentive. Given the construction of the agentive child in the BLW literature, mothers who adopt BLW are not only deemed to be less controlling of their children's eating but more open to encouraging their children's development and independence. How mothers are making the decisions around how to wean though, and how these decisions are portrayed in the media, and linked to mothering ideologies, is of interest. As Glenn (1994) notes "agency is central to an understanding of mothering as a social, rather than biological, construct" (Glenn, 1994: 3).

In addition, when we consider the practices of caring for an infant, and choosing the best way to feed an infant, we move into discourses of choice and risk, as well as constructions of good mothering practices. This societal preoccupation with risk and benefits, evident here in discussions around BLW, has parallels with Foucault's notion of Governmentality (Foucault, 1991) in that individuals may be positioned within governmental discourses as active citizens, with the capacity for self-surveillance (Lupton, 1999). As such, they are, at least implicitly, accountable to make the 'right' decisions based on the risk information that they have received (Lupton, 1993) in order to avoid 'moral danger' (c.f. Sachs, L. 1996). As Crawford (2006) notes, there is a moral obligation to make the right choices for health. As

mothers, this moral duty becomes even more pronounced where the mother is accountable is pursuing the 'best' course of action for her child. This moral accountability positions citizens as responsible for avoiding risk and accountable for adverse outcomes in the event that a problem was encountered, that could have been avoided (Locke & Budds, 2013) and the parent becomes a 'risk manager' (Lee et al, 2010). When we consider how this links to discourses of increased risk of obesity depending on method of infant weaning (and feeding more generally), we can see that women are actively positioned as having to account for 'choosing' one method of weaning over another, and have to negotiate their decisions against the backdrop of this moralisation of risk.

The Good Mother

The expected self-sacrificing nature of motherhood has been noted (Bell, 2004). Women and mothers are still expected to take on the responsibility of childrearing and running the home, whilst not receiving any acknowledgement of, or praise for, doing so (Crittenden, 2001; Hochschild, 1989). Indeed Collins (1994: 47) refers to it as 'motherwork' instead of 'motherhood', whereby the mother is expected to be a participant engaging in the practice of motherhood. As Glenn (1994) notes, the responsibility is placed on the mother for children's formative years. Due to contemporary 'permissive' parenting culture's ideology of 'intensive mothering' (Hays, 1996) or 'overzealous motherhood' (Badinter, 2013), characterised by self-sacrificial discourses from the mother, 'good motherhood' has become defined as overwhelming child-centred. Through the intensive mothering lens, women who do not live up to this 'ideal', fear judgement and accusations of being a 'bad' mother

(Arendell, 2000; Christopher, 2012), whilst others embrace the superior superiority of the 'good mother' identity (Hays, 1996).

As has been widely noted, such 'good mothering' ideology is fraught with many assumptions. As Glenn (1994) suggests, when we consider this idealised good mother, she is typically middle class, and often a stay-at-home-mother who is "entirely fulfilled through domestic aspirations" (Johnston & Swanson, 2006: p. 509). Walkerdine & Lucey (1998) observed how in the UK childrearing practices are differentiated by class, with the middle class typically seen as 'right' and 'natural', and the working class as inadequate to the norm (see also Gillies, 2007). Duncan (2005) noted how class and parenting were linked in subtle, nuanced ways with class based differences in mothering appear in terms of choice and constraint or 'rationality' or 'preference' (page 73). The good mother is also typically heterosexual (Alldred, 1998), able-bodied (D'Aoust, 2014), white (Phoenix, 1991) and of an 'appropriate age' (Budds, et al, 2013; Phoenix, 1991). As Byrne (2006) claims: "at the core of practices of motherhood lies the intersection of race, class and gender, with white middle-classness often functioning as a norm of motherhood" (p. 1002). Similarly, Gillies (2007) notes how working class mothers are typically marginalised, whilst middle class mothers engage with raising children as a kind of parenting 'project'. This notion of a 'project' certainly ties into experimenting with different methods of child rearing and feeding methods. Yet, the provision of jarred baby food was, at one time, like infant formula, a preserve of the middle classes, noted as convenient and 'modern'. It was marketed, like formula milk, as a way of ensuring that your child would receive all of the essential nutrients and parents began to move away from home cooking (Bentley, 2014). A feature of contemporary parenting ideology is a return to the natural, and the BLW method, along with a swing to home-

cooked food, fits with this movement. This is where the cultural ideologies of parenting, including historical and social contexts, intersect with more material factors such as educational level, relationship status, and so on, which, in turn, influence caregiving decisions (Christopher, 2012). As has been noted elsewhere (e.g. Newson & Newson, 1963), the middle class have typically been seen as more attentive to their childrearing and feeding needs. With that in mind, the manuscript sets out to consider BLW as a 'new' introduction to the infant feeding terrain, considering how the choice of method of infant feeding becomes one of the aspects of demonstrating 'good motherhood' in this intensive mothering ideology. In particular, the study sets out to examine the ways in which Baby-Led Weaning is portrayed in newspapers; in particular considering the constructions of both mother and child.

Method

Sampling

The media search database *Proquest International Newsstand*, was searched for 'baby-led weaning' for all newspapers. This produced an initial sample of 585 articles across a number of countries. Duplicate and other non-related articles were removed. Two non-English language articles were removed (one from Mexico, the other from Germany) as once a basic translation of content was done these reflected other duplicated pieces and were removed. A final sample of 78 articles was subject to a full qualitative analysis. The final make up of articles per country is as follows; United Kingdom (57), New Zealand (8), EIRE (5), Canada (4), Australia (1), Israel (1), Bahrain (1), Malaysia (1). In terms of publication dates, we see these are

steadily increasing since the beginnings in 2006, as interest as in, and knowledge of, Baby-Led Weaning has steadily increased. 2012 and 2013 have shown dramatically more stories on BLW than in previous years. The second highest number of articles after the UK is New Zealand but it is still a relatively new concept there. The first article was published in New Zealand in October 2012. However, as we have seen from the academic literature, it is now emerging as a topic for the nutritionists to look at (e.g. Cameron et al, 2012).

In terms of the increase in story numbers on BLW, these reflect stories that emerge through from research work. For example, on 6th February 2012, the BBC website ran a story entitled “spoon feeding ‘makes babies fatter’” (BBC, 2012) that was based on a published journal article (Townsend & Pitchford, 2012) in the BMJ Open. In the resulting days the story was duplicated hundreds of times in the print press around the world. As a result, 399 of our original sample of 585 stories were removed as duplicates of this one news piece from 2012.

Analytic Approach

After coding the data for emerging themes (e.g. Budds, et al, 2013; Taylor & Ussher, 2001), the excerpts were analysed through considering discursive constructions (Edley, 2001; Wetherell, 1998). Consistent with a social constructionist position, there was a specific focus on the language used in the newspapers to construct discourses of both mother and child in BLW. A critical discursive approach to textual analysis was taken as it aims to explore how discourse can be both constitutive through positioning, identities and subjectivities, but, in addition, can be used as a way of constructing phenomena and knowledge. From the initial analysis of the 78 articles in the final sample, key discourses

emerged about the representations of BLW in the media data. These were how BLW facilitates the 'agentive child', and constructing and resisting the 'good mother'. The analysis will discuss these in more detail.

Analysis

The agentive child

Throughout the newspaper articles, much of the discussions around baby-led weaning itself were depicted in positive terms. These were framed in a number of ways; as being developmentally useful for the child, being a convenient way of feeding, and for avoiding the possibilities of future health problems. There are clear parallels between these and discourses around other types of infant feeding tell us, in particular breastfeeding, where similar stories as to the developmental benefits for mother and child emerge (Stanway, 2005). However, the articles also construct a positive aspect of BLW that the child would become a less 'fussy' eater. The rationale behind this is that BLW sets up the child as agentive in their eating practices. Such an example is given below:

"The new move towards baby-led weaning promises to make your baby a happy eater. Joanna Moorhead finds out how it's done. The BABY-LED weaning movement advocates, in a nutshell, giving infants solid food and allowing them to master eating for themselves, rather than spoon-feeding them purees. It has been gaining momentum for a while via word of mouth and through web forums such as mumsnet.com". (Irish Times, 18 November 2008).

As we see in the above excerpt, BLW is constructed as a method which enables the child to “master” their own feeding, rather than rely on an ‘other’ (mother) to feed them. This is a common construct through the BLW articles, with claims that if the baby chooses their own food, they are more likely to eat them without complaint. Note how the article positions BLW as a “movement” that has been “gaining momentum” through a variety of parent-led routes such as ‘mumsnet’ in the UK, rather than through official health channels. Online forums provide parent-led spaces where parenting practices are discussed and informal advice given, adopted and resisted. The web based nature of the spread of BLW is picked up across other articles, for example, a piece from the Gulf Weekly in 2008 replicated the wording of BLW ‘gaining momentum’, before continuing with ten ‘commandments’ for BLW. Such ‘commandments’ include “[a]llowing babies to eat what they want means they’ll learn to choose the nutrients they need, and to listen to their bodies telling them when they’ve had enough” (Gulf Weekly, Manama, Bahrain, 21 December 2008). The agentic nature of the child is brought to the fore here with the suggestion that the children will learn to eat healthily and regulate their own. Similar discourses around children and agency arise elsewhere, such as in an article in the Canadian Press (2008) that suggests that “a growing number of parents are giving up on spoon feeding and letting the kids set the pace” (The Globe & Mail, Toronto, Canada, 25 November 2008).

Not only is the child agentic in their eating through the mother adopting BLW as a feeding method, other aspects of a “happy” child (see excerpt one) are associated with this independence. In the excerpt below, Dr Miriam Stoppard, a parenting ‘expert’ in the UK writes about her experiences of attending a postnatal group and coming across BLW.

"One of the mums had opted to let her baby feed herself. I watched fascinated as she prepared her baby's food by cutting fruit, veg, cheese, bread into finger-like portions and let her daughter get on with it. Even more fascinating was watching how the six months old girl fed herself. There was no particular order - sweet mixed with savoury. She grasped, squashed and pressed food towards her mouth, managing to swallow a quarter of it. But most of all she was enjoying herself, learning to try, try, try again until she succeeded in getting a choice morsel to her mouth. And her pride - well, you could see the sense of achievement beaming from her face as she explored textures and tastes at will." (The Daily Mirror, UK, June 17, 2013).

As the author of the piece notes, the mother prepared the food for the child to feed herself and we can see here how the act of the daughter feeding herself is set up as enjoyable but also a skill that requires practice and learning as the child learns to feed herself. But more than this, the author suggests that the baby felt 'pride' and 'achievement' by being in control of her own eating; noted through her face 'beaming'. As such then, the mother's choice of BLW as a weaning method, is constructed here as a 'good mothering' choice given her daughter's visible enjoyment of eating.

As BLW is constructed in the articles as a 'new' method of infant feeding, it is often used in comparison with other feeding methods. In these comparisons, many of the accounts constructed BLW in a positive light, as in the example below which gives a personal account from a stay-at-home-mother of three children who has used different weaning methods with each of them. As such, it serves as a

comparison behind the methods. The relevance of invoking the mother's status of stay-at-home-mother suggests, amongst other things, a marker of her as working within a child-centred parenting ethos, given the UK context of this excerpt. I note that stay-at-home- parenting status may be for a myriad of reasons (e.g. Doucet, 2006). Yet, within a Western context, stay-at-home-mothering fits in with intensive mothering ideologies that require a self-sacrificial, child-centred focus.

"When the stay-at-home mum did decide to introduce food again she tried baby-led weaning, where children are offered a range of finger foods and they feed themselves what they want to eat. She says: 'It was down to him what he wanted and the milk was there to fill him. Now he will eat anything. But she says her older two sons, Karlum, aged six, and Jack, aged four, were both weaned at four months and are fussy eaters'" (The Sentinel (UK), 25 Jan, 2011).

For the mother in this article, her accounts of BLW are set up in contrast to her previous experiences of weaning her two older children. The agency of the child, and implicitly, their abilities in making choices in determining their own food input is demonstrated in the excerpt through the description of BLW, that children are 'offered a range' and they then *choose* what it is that they 'want to eat'. As the mother in the article says, his eating 'was down to him'. She notes, as do other articles, that her son will now 'eat anything', whereas in contrast, her two older sons who were weaned earlier, and by implication on traditional weaning methods, are 'fussy eaters'. Throughout the pro-BLW literature, we see the agentive nature of the child given as a reason in avoiding fussy eating, compared with spoon-fed children (Brown & Lee, 2011). A similar piece appeared in the New Zealand press. This time

it is the report of a mother feeding her baby using traditional methods and feeling that she was 'almost' force feeding him with purees and mashes.

"Caroline Casey was having trouble getting her 6-month-old son Blake to eat pureed food. Having breastfed him to that age she said she was following conventional advice to progress him to purees. "I was almost trying to force him to eat the purees and mashes," she said...Miss Casey then tried baby-led weaning. Baby-led weaning is the practice of allowing a child to feed themselves from the start of weaning. "The baby will pick at finger food," said Miss Casey. "This can be off your plate or they have their own. He would eat lightly cooked bits of broccoli, carrot and apple." (Bay of Times Plenty, New Zealand, Oct 27, 2012).

The mother in this piece claimed that her child was a fussy eater and that she was unable to get him to eat using traditional weaning methods of pureeing etc. However, she claims that once she adopted BLW as a weaning method, i.e. passed the agency of eating to her son, he began to feed himself quite happily and was no longer a fussy eater. Another example, once more from the New Zealand Press, notes the ease of using BLW as a weaning method.

"Greymouth mother Megan Kelly turned to baby-led weaning when her first child, Tom, now 6, refused to eat solids off a spoon. "It's a lazy parent's dream", she said. "You're not sitting there trying to shovel food in their face." Though it was messy, she continued down the same path with her second child, Arlo, now 2." (Dominion Post, Wellington, New Zealand, Nov 28, 2012).

The excerpt above is another example of a mother trying the traditional methods of baby weaning before turning to BLW. Once more, we have the example of the baby appearing to be fussy about eating solids until BLW was introduced. The mother in case manages her maternal identity as a relaxed mother, rather than a 'helicopter parent', that is someone who is overly child focused ('hovers') and over-parents. Indeed, this relaxed rhetoric comes through in research on breastfeeding promotions (no bottles to sterilise, no milk to prepare and warm, and so on). The mother continues that noting the success in her first child, she adopted BLW for her second child too, obviously successfully given the age cited in the article.

As we will see in the next excerpt though, BLW is not always constructed in positive terms. The following piece is taken from a larger article from the UK press that suggested parenting advice on the birth of Prince George to the Duke (William) and Duchess (Kate) of Cambridge. This excerpt is entitled "the great food fight" and discusses different methods of weaning.

"Official guidelines say six months is the earliest parents should start giving their baby food other than milk, although a study earlier this summer revealed that 96 percent ignore that advice and start earlier. Kate will soon realise that there is a huge debate about how to wean a baby: in one corner are fans of traditional spoon-fed puree; in the other are advocates of a new approach called Baby-Led Weaning, where small chunks of food are placed in front of your baby and it's up to him whether he eats it or throws it on the floor. It's a messy business, and although Kate presumably won't have to worry about extracting chewed green beans from the crevices in the high chair, BLW is a step too far for many mums." (The Telegraph, 21 July, 2013, UK).

If we were in any doubt as to where Western society at least places responsibility for parenting, this article from the UK press, makes it clear. Whilst it is a piece apparently written for the new 'parents' (William and Kate), the focus of the article is on giving advice to the mother (Kate). The article notes the debates between the two approaches and doesn't frame BLW positively due to concerns over waste and mess. It does however, construct the child as agentic once more in choosing whether to eat the foods offered to "him" or to discard and play with them. The coda from the piece, again in gendered terms, that BLW is "a step too far". That is, too complicated and time consuming a method of feeding.

As we've seen then, through the depiction of BLW in the newspaper articles, the child is constructed as agentic in their eating practices. This is an interesting argument and sets up two levels of choice. On the one hand we have the mother's choice to adopt the practice of BLW. On the other, we have the result that it then becomes the child's choice on how they eat. It is from this perspective, that it becomes evident how choice of weaning method becomes tied to the practice of 'good mothering'. Maternal culture operates on an ethos of 'informed choice' (Crossley, 2009; Kirkham, 2004) and given the positive nature of the reports BLW, as with breastfeeding, the mother becomes accountable for making the *correct* 'informed choice'. Thus, and as the following section discusses, there is an implicit accountability around making the 'informed choice' to adopt BLW in terms of protecting a 'good mothering' identity.

(Resisting) The Baby-Led Weaning 'Good Mother'

The previous section suggested that the main positive aspect of BLW was the agentic child, and articles outlined attributes associated with this self-regulation. As

noted though, the mother has to 'choose' the practice of BLW in order to give the child the agency to 'choose' their foods. Through the benefits of BLW outlined, it demonstrates how a 'good mother' would 'choose' this feeding method. Through the media analysis, it became evident that there were a stream of articles that discussed, and indeed problematized, this ethos of intensive mothering and activities associated with adopting a 'good mothering' identity that BLW has become associated with.

For the remainder of the paper, we will consider examples of where BLW is explicitly constructed in the press as part of this intensive mothering ideology. In this sense, notions of good motherhood are both constructed and resisted in the pieces (Knaak, 2010; Lawler, 2000). The first excerpt is from article that profiles different 'types' of mother. As the article demonstrates, BLW has become tied into this larger intensive self-sacrificial mothering ideology.

"MARTYR MUM

Three kids later, Martyr mum hasn't had a proper night's sleep in 10 years. If she stopped co-sleeping with them before they got their adult teeth she'd have less to complain about. All these years she's been either breast-feeding, feeding on command, exploring baby-led weaning or making gluten-free, vegan packed lunches. She's also become a 'Natural Doctor', so the whole family are constantly ill. Last time Martyr Mum went on a night out, it was her hen party. But even then she came home early from the Hare Krishna drop-in centre so she could practise her Buddhist chanting" (Daily Record, Glasgow, Aug 16, 2012).

The article constructs the type of mother who would adopt BLW as a 'martyr mum'. Note how the practice of BLW is bound with other parenting methods – 'co-sleeping', 'feeding on command' (note the irony here, the actual term is 'feeding on demand', therefore this is used to demonstrate that the baby is dictating the feeding schedules), and then other dietary choices. What is interesting in this intensive mothering ideology of self-sacrifice is how the sacrifice is portrayed in choice terms. The mother 'chose' to practice co-sleeping, she 'chose' different, potentially time consuming ways of feeding, she 'chose' to become a natural doctor, therefore the family are always ill. Again, more pressures on her as mother. Finally, it claims that the last time, such a mum went out was before her marriage and even then she 'chose' to leave early. Whilst this is an obvious caricature of a 'type', there is an implicit accountability within it that this type of mother 'chooses' to makes her life with children more complicated than it has to be, thereby able to claim 'good mothering' status through her martyred self-sacrifice (Vandenbeld Giles, 2014).

Whilst the excerpt above portrays a 'martyr mum' who is involved in these parenting practices, the excerpt below taken from another UK based newspaper is a clear example of the problematizing societal expectations of new parents and, in particular, 'contemporary maternal culture', and the pressures on mothers to navigate the parenting ethos.

"Anyone currently caught up in the maelstrom of parenting a small child in the UK will be acquainted with the shibboleths of contemporary maternal culture: 'natural pregnancy', 'natural birth', postpartum bonding fostered by 'plenty of skin-to-skin contact', 'baby-led weaning', 'baby-wearing', 'co-sleeping' and, above all, on-demand breastfeeding at least until the age of two, as recommended by the World

Health Organisation. It takes a lot of nerve for a new mother to defy these recommendations". (The Guardian (UK), 20 September 2013).

This article lists what it regards as being contemporary maternal culture that highlights the 'naturalness' of much of this type of parenting through pregnancy, birth, 'skin-to-skin contact', most often facilitated through breastfeeding – 'baby-wearing' – a strong suggestion from the attachment parenting movement (Sears & Sears, 2001), co-sleeping, and interestingly to be put in the category of 'good mothering', 'baby-led weaning'. As the article notes, it takes a 'lot of nerve' to go against these recommendations, particularly, as they serve to demonstrate what contemporary maternal culture constructs as 'good motherhood'. The ethos of this article sits closely with the work of Elisabeth Badinter in 'The Conflict' (2013) who attacks the self-sacrificing discourses of 'overzealous motherhood' that she feels are promoted through the turn to natural parenting. Indeed, the following article discusses the 'choices' available in contemporary maternal culture, but the problematic nature of the good/natural mothering mandate is humoured in this, as indeed it is in many of the articles.

"there are obvious rules - don't let them play in traffic, don't let them stick knitting needles in sockets, make them learn to read even if they would rather play - and the rest is just coming down on one side or the other, and then continuing to do that, unless something calamitous happens and you have to do the other thing. Routine Feeds or On Demand; Gina Ford or Snooze at Will; Breast or Formula; Puree or Finger Food. It's not like we're choosing a football team, or an ideology. Nobody's going to die. There isn't a fire" (The Guardian (UK), 14 March 2008).

The article sets up the obvious 'rules' of parenting, and these are done in humorous ways, regarding safety and child development. The author then turns to the contentious issues in contemporary maternal culture around how to feed a baby, sleeping routines, and so on. Note how she offers both sides of each debate as an option, rather than advocating a particular course of action. She notes that as parents, we will continue to do that unless 'something calamitous happens' and then the parent will do the 'other thing'. Note in this article, the resistance to the inflated importance of these decisions, and how the author downplays them, that we're not choosing an 'ideology', although maternal culture and decision making is often depicted in those terms (Hays, 1996). As the analysis of articles has demonstrated, BLW appears to have become tied up a natural move to parenting and a 'good mothering' identity. We have seen where the different options of contemporary parenting culture are outlined and in some ways resisted. The following excerpt is a humorous take on her attempts to attain 'Perfect Motherhood'.

"I was entirely focused on hunting down the recipe for Perfect Motherhood, determined to follow it to the letter. Co-sleeping, baby-led weaning, skin-to-skin contact, lots of fresh air and classical music; really, it was very simple" (Sunday Independent, Dublin, 6 October 2013).

In this excerpt, as in the previous, we see a list of ingredients for 'good motherhood', or in this case, the 'recipe for Perfect Motherhood'. Once more, baby-led weaning is included alongside the other markers. The author goes further though from the previous excerpt in that she ironizes the different activities tied to

good motherhood and includes giving the baby plenty of 'fresh air' and 'classical music; both of which have in previous times been recommended as important developmentally for babies. These different factors are constructed as 'choices' that the mother makes if she is trying to achieve a good or 'Perfect' mothering identity. Such humorous retrospective accounts of trying and failing at 'good motherhood' are common place in popular culture, for example, in the UK Daisy Waugh's popular text (2013) 'I don't know why she bothers' that claims to offer a guide to 'guilt free motherhood'. All of the articles found in the present sample that ironized and resisted good motherhood were UK based. However, I would suggest that this is due to the prevalence of BLW reports in the UK media at the present time, rather than resisting the intensive mothering as a UK specific phenomenon. The final article to be discussed in this piece discuss how the pressures of intensive mothering and 'choosing' particular methods of caring for an infant, can be problematic and have 'real' impacts on mothers. This comes from an article that gives one mother's personal story of her experiences of BLW in the context of 'good mothering', set against her post-natal depression.

"She wanted to give her children the very best start in life but in setting herself impossibly high standards, Leanne Morris came terrifyingly close to the edge...unaware of her condition, she pushed herself to be the perfect mum...'After I had her we used real nappies and we did baby-led weaning where, instead of pureeing up her foods, we let her feed herself. We made sure we ate quite healthily - whatever we were eating we put down in front of Jessica. The theory behind it is the children taste the food and when they're ready they start to chew and swallow. So we were doing a few different things

with Jessica but when John came along I couldn't cope with the pressure of it". (Daily Record, Glasgow, 2 July, 2013).

In the first line of the excerpt, the perspective taken by the newspaper is evident. It begins by referring to the mother, Leanne, wanting to give her children the 'very best start', but, by doing so, setting herself 'impossibly high standards'. It is this quest to be a 'perfect mum' that the article suggests, linking this with her developing 'condition' of post-natal depression that led her to become 'terrifyingly close to the edge'. Leanne herself outlines the activity that she was pursuing in her attempts for 'good motherhood' – using cloth nappies and BLW. After describing what BLW entails, Leanne says that after her second baby was born, she was unable to pursue BLW because she was unable to cope with the 'pressure of it', along with caring for a second baby. As such, Leanne constructs BLW and the practice of it as pressured, and something therefore that had to be changed. We see such discourses in early motherhood around stopping breastfeeding (Lee, 2007) but it is of note that it is being linked to a weaning method here and signifies the intensive mothering ideology whereby mothers are accountable for putting their children first. For Leanne, she positions herself as only stopping BLW once she was unable to carry on due to a medical condition of post-natal depression, thereby she is still able to occupy a 'good mothering' identity.

The excerpts presented in this section have demonstrated how BLW has become bound up with other markers of 'good motherhood' in contemporary maternal culture. In the first half of the analysis, we noted how BLW constructs the child as agentive, that is, as 'choosing' its own food and having its own preferences. The remainder of the paper considered the ways in which BLW has been constructed by the popular press, in particular how its constructed as part of the

return to the natural that has become associated with an intensive mothering ideology (along with particular methods of infant feeding, attachment parenting and the like). The analysis shows how this identity of the 'Baby-Led Weaning Good Mother' is both problematized and resisted in the newspaper articles. At times this is done in humorous ways, in others, as the example above demonstrates, the pressures associated with attaining a 'perfect mum' identity status are illustrated. We will pick these up further in the conclusions.

Conclusions

This paper tracks the emergence of a new practice of infant feeding called Baby-Led Weaning, in particular, considering the ways it is constructed in newspapers. As is noted throughout the paper, whilst at the time of writing BLW is most prevalent in the UK as its country of origin, it is beginning to be adopted in different parts of the world. The paper considered how BLW was presented as a 'choice' of weaning method to mothers, in the light of an intensive mothering ideology (Hays, 1996).

The analysis demonstrated how through descriptions of BLW, the newspapers constructed the child as agentive in their feeding behaviours. That is, the reports note how the child is given a selection of foods and then will 'choose' which of these to explore and eat. This ability for a child to self-regulate is portrayed as something that is inherent in the baby, this is 'natural' from birth, through self-regulating their milk feeds, but becomes lost through the practice of spoon-feeding in the weaning process. Therefore, by following BLW, the mother is engaging in a more 'natural' type of parenting. The move to natural, 'permissive' forms of parenting is having a renaissance in the parenting literature, most notably through the attachment parenting ethos (Sears & Sears, 2001). However, as others (e.g. Badinter, 2013)

have noted, this 'overzealous' approach to natural parenting sets up unattainable expectations and pressures for many women. Many of the articles portray the 'obvious' benefits to the child that BLW is suggested to provide, therefore the 'informed choice' (Crossley, 2009; Kirkham, 2004) for the mother to make is to follow BLW instead of more traditional methods of introducing solid food. The mothers in these first set of articles mentioned the ease of BLW in comparison with other methods and the enjoyment that the babies gained through 'mastering' their eating was noted. As such then, these excerpts demonstrated the performance of good mothering tied with the choice of method of infant feeding. This has been noted on many occasions on the debates between breast and formula feeding (e.g. Barston, 2012; Lee, 2007), but until now, the 'weaning wars' as a marker of good mothering have not been as prevalent. Good motherhood, as was noted in the introduction, is a privileged, class based construct and the articles analysed certainly appeared to represent this, promoting a middle-class child centred approach to mothering. BLW by definition is time intensive, therefore more likely to be performed by a mother who is in a stay-at-home role. As was noted earlier, the stay-at-home mother in a Westernised culture is, in some ways, noted as a privileged position, as not needing a second income, or being able to take a full year of maternity leave (as BLW starts from six months of age) and operates on traditional gendered divisions of labour and parenting roles (Bradley, 2013). Furthermore, as BLW is still a relatively new phenomenon, at the present time, many child care providers have not adopted BLW as a feeding method by their staff for babies on their premises. Therefore most mothers who adopt BLW are doing it themselves.

The second theme to be analysed demonstrated in more detail how BLW has become bound up with contemporary parenting culture and intensive mothering

ideology (Hays, 1996), and therefore, good motherhood, in the articles. However, this time the analysis illuminated how good mothering was both constructed and resisted in the articles. This was done in a number of ways including using humour and ironizing the demands of the trying to attain 'perfect motherhood', as well as personal stories of pressured feeding. The final excerpt gives a mother's personal experiences of attempting BLW as part of her mission of 'good motherhood' before falling into post-natal depression.

What is lacking through the discourses of BLW are class based discussions. As was discussed in the introduction, the 'good mother' is often constructed in class-based terms as a middle-class woman, noted through the activities and practices that she is involved in (attachment parenting, breastfeeding, and so on). As Gillies (2007) notes, middle class mothers are more likely to see parenting as a 'project', i.e. invest time into trying different methods of parenting for their children. This is a position of privilege as the parent needs both the time and material resources to do so, something that many working class families do not have. In the United Kingdom in particular, results from the latest Infant Feeding Survey (McAndrew et al, 2010) demonstrated how women from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to wean early, most likely weaning on (bought) purees. As has been noted elsewhere (e.g. Lawler, 2000; Gillies, 2007; Skeggs, 1997), working class parents, in popular mothers, are often absent from parenting discussions, unless being discussed as somehow different or deviant to the norm (Tyler, 2008).

A future angle for this research stream should focus on the women's experiences of negotiating their choice of weaning practice, in light of their maternal subjectivities, consider this in the wider context of the intensive mothering ideology in determining how choices are both presented and made. This needs to be discussed both within

and across countries in order to ascertain how contemporary parenting ideology affects practice and experiences of practice. As we are right at the starts of the BLW 'movement', watching how it unfolds and develops will be a worthwhile pursuit as an exemplar of seeking understanding of contemporary parenting ideology.

References

- Allred, Pam (1998) 'Making a mockery of family life? Lesbian mothers in the British media', *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 2: 9-21.
- Arendell, T. (2000). Conceiving and investigating motherhood: The decade's scholarship. *Journal of marriage and the family*, 62, 1192-1207.
- Badinter, Elisabeth (2013) *The conflict: How modern motherhood undermines the status of women*. Saint Martin's Press Inc.
- Barston, Suzanne (2012). *Bottled up: How the way we feed babies has come to define motherhood and why it shouldn't*. University of California Press: London.
- Baxter, Janeen (2000). The joys and justice of housework. *Sociology*, 34 (4): 609-631.
- BBC Health (2012). Spoon Feeding Makes Babies Fatter, 6 Feb 2012, Available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-16905371> accessed 15 October 2013.
- Bell, Susan, A. (2004). *Intensive performances of mothering: a sociological perspective*. *Qualitative Research*, 4, 45-75.
- Bentley, Amy (2014). *Inventing Baby Food. Taste, Health, and the Industrialization of the American Diet*. University of California Press.
- Bradley, H. (2013). *Gender*. London: Polity Press.
- Brown, Amy and Lee, Michelle (2011) 'A descriptive study investigating the use and nature of baby – led weaning in a UK sample of mothers' *Maternal and Child Nutrition*. 7, 34 – 47
- Brown, Amy and Lee, Michelle (2013). An exploration of experiences of mothers following a baby-led weaning style: developmental readiness for complementary foods. *Maternal and Child Nutrition*. 9, 233 – 243

- Budds, Kirsty, Locke, Abigail and Burr, Vivien (2013) Risky Business: Constructing the 'choice' to 'delay' motherhood in the British press. *Feminist Media Studies*, 13, 132-147.
- Byrne, Bridget (2006). In search of a 'Good Mix', Class, Gender and Practices of Mothering. *Sociology*, 40 (6): 1001-1017.
- Cameron, Sonya L., Heath, Anne-Louise M. & Taylor, Rachael W. (2012). Healthcare professionals' and mothers' knowledge of, attitudes to and experiences with, Baby-Led Weaning: a content analysis study. *BMJ Open* 2012; 2:e001542.
- Christopher, Karen (2012). Extensive Mothering: Employed Mothers' Constructions of the Good Mother. *Gender & Society*, 26, 73-96.
- Collins, Patricia Hill (1994) 'Shifting the Center: Race, Class, and Feminist Theorizing about Motherhood', in Evelyn. N. Glenn, Grace Chang and Linda R. Forcey (Eds) *Mothering*, pp. 45–65. New York: Routledge.
- Crawford, Robert (2006). Health as a meaningful social practice. *Health: an interdisciplinary journal for the social study of health, illness and medicine*, 10, 401-420.
- Crittenden, Ann (2001). *The price of motherhood: Why the most important job in the world is still the least valued*. New York: Metropolitan Books.
- Crossley, Michele, L. (2009). Breastfeeding as a Moral Imperative: An Autoethnographic Study. *Feminism & Psychology*, 19, 71-87.
- D'Aoust, Vicky (2014). Non-existent and struggling for identity. In Gloria Filax & Dena Taylor (Eds.) *Disabled Mothers: Stories and scholarship by and about mothers with disabilities*. Demeter Press: Toronto.
- Daniels, Sarah, Glorieux, Ignace, Minnen, Joeri, Pieter, van Tienoven, Theun Pieter

- (2012). More than preparing a meal? Concerning the meanings of home cooking. *Appetite*, 58, 1050-1056.
- DeVault, Marjorie (1991). *Feeding the family. The social organization of caring as gendered work*. London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Doucet, Andrea (2006). *Do men mother?* London: Sage.
- Duncan, Simon (2005). Mothering, class and rationality. *Sociological Review*, 50-76.
- Dunn, Elizabeth (2004). *Privatizing Poland: Baby food, big business, and the remaking of labor*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Edley, Nigel (2001). Analysing masculinity: Interpretative repertoires, ideological dilemmas and subject positions. In Margaret Wetherell, Stephanie Taylor & Simeon J. Yates (Eds.) *Discourse as Data: A Guide for Analysis*, pp.189-228). London: Open University Press.
- Foucault, Michel (1991) 'Governmentality', in G. Burchell, C. Gordon & P. Miller (Eds). *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*. pp, 87-104. Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hemel Hempstead.
- Furst, Elisabeth L'Orange (1997). Cooking and femininity. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 20 (3): 441-449.
- Gillies, Val (2007). *Marginalised Mothers: Exploring working-class experiences of parenting*. London: Routledge.
- Glenn, Evelyn.N. (1994) 'Social Constructions of Mothering: A Thematic Overview', in Evelyn. N. Glenn, Grace Chang and Linda .R. Forcey (Eds) *Mothering*, pp. 1-29. New York: Routledge.
- Grummer-Strawn, Laurence M., Scanlon, Kelley S and Fein, Sara B. (2008) Infant Feeding and Feeding Transitions During the First Year of Life. *Pediatrics* 2008;122;S36-S42

- Hays, Sharon (1996). *The cultural contradictions of motherhood*. New Hale: Yale University Press.
- Hochschild, Arlie (1989). *The second shift: Working parents and the revolution at home*. New York: Viking Press.
- Illingworth, R.S. & Lister, J. (1964). Critical or sensitive period with special reference to certain feeds problems in infants – children. *The Journal of Pediatrics*, 65, 839-848.
- Johnston, Deidre D. & Swanson, Debra H. (2006). Constructing the “Good Mother”: The Experience of Mothering Ideologies by Work Status. *Sex Roles*, 54: 509-519.
- Kirkham, Mavis (2004). Choice and bureaucracy. In Mavis Kirkham (Ed.) *Informed Choice in Maternity Care*. pp.265-290. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Knaak, Stephanie (2010). Conceptualising risk, constructing choice: Breastfeeding and good mothering in risk society. *Health, Risk & Society*, 12 (4): 345-355.
- Lawler, Steph (2000). *Mothering the Self: Mothers, Daughters, Subjects*. London: Routledge.
- Lee, Ellie (2007). Health, morality, and infant feeding: British mothers’ experiences of formula milk use in the early weeks. *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 29 (7): 1075-1090.
- Lee, Ellie; Macvarish, Jan & Bristow, Jennie (2010). Risk, health and parenting culture. *Health, risk and society*, 12, 293-300.
- Locke, Abigail (2009). Natural versus taught': competing discourses in antenatal breastfeeding workshops. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 14, 35-446.
- Locke, Abigail and Budds, Kirsty (2013) 'We thought if it's going to take two years

- then we need to start that now': Age, infertility risk and the timing of pregnancy in older first-time mothers . *Health, Risk and Society*, 15.
- Lupton, Deborah (1993). Risk as Moral Danger. *International Journal of Health Services*, 23, 425-35.
- Lupton, Deborah (1999). *Risk*. London: Routledge.
- McAndrew, Fiona; Thompson, Jane; Fellows, Lydia; Large, Alice; Speed, Mark and Renfrew, Mary, J. (2012). *Infant Feeding Survey 2010*. Health and Social Care Information Centre.
- Moorcroft, Kate. E., Marshall, Joyce, L., McCormick, Felicia M. (2010). Association between timing of introducing solid foods and obesity in infancy and childhood: A systematic review. *Maternal and Child Nutrition*, 7, 3-26.
- Newson, John & Newson, Elizabeth (1963). *Patterns of infant care in an urban community*. Middlesex: Penguin.
- Oakley, Ann (2005). *The Ann Oakley Reader. Gender, women and social science*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Phoenix, Ann (1991). *Young Mothers?* Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Rapley, Gill & Murkett, Tracey (2008). *Baby-led weaning: Helping your baby to love good food*. London: Vermillion.
- Reeves, Sue (2008). Baby-led weaning. *Nutrition Bulletin*, 33, 108-110.
- Sachs, Lisbeth (1996). Causality, responsibility and blame- core issues in the cultural construction and subtext of prevention. *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 18, 632-652.
- Sachs, Magda (2011). Baby – Led Weaning and current UK recommendations – are they compatible? *Maternal and Child Nutrition*. 7, 1 -2
- Sears, William and Sears, Martha (2001). *The Attachment Parenting Book: A*

Commonsense Guide to Understanding and Nurturing Your Baby. Little, Brown and Company.

Skeggs, Beverly (1997). *Formations of class and gender. Becoming respectable*. London: Sage.

Stanway, Penny (2005). *Breast is Best*. Pan Macmillan: London.

Taylor, Gary & Ussher, Jane (2001) 'Making sense of S&M: A discourse analytic account', *Sexualities*, 4, 293 - 314.

Townsend, Ellen & Pitchford, Nicola, J. (2012). Baby knows best? The impact of weaning style on food preferences and body mass index in early childhood in a case-controlled sample. *BMJ Open*, 2:e000298.

Tyler, Imogen (2008). Chav mum chav scum. *Feminist Media Studies*, 8 (1): 17-34.

Vandenbeld Giles, Melinda (2014). (Ed.) *Mothering in the Age of Neoliberalism*. Demeter Press: Toronto.

Walkerdine, Valerie & Lucey, Helen (1989). *Democracy in the Kitchen: Regulating Mothers and Socialising Daughters*. London: Virago.

Waugh, Daisy (2013). *I Don't Know Why She Bothers: Guilt Free Motherhood For Thoroughly Modern Women*. London: W&N.

Wetherell, Margaret (1998). Positioning and interpretative repertoires: conversation analysis and post-structuralism in dialogue. *Discourse and Society*, 9, 387-412.