

Love and motherhood in Louis Theroux' *Mothers on the Edge*

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In our ethnography of a purpose-built mother-baby psychiatric unit (MBU), love was rarely a topic raised by the mothers and staff we spoke with (Connellan, Due, Riggs and Bartholomaeus 2020). In our ethnography we undertook interviews with staff and mothers, in addition to undertaking observations of how staff and mothers moved within the space. On the rare occasions where love was spoken about in the interviews we conducted, it was in reference to a love of certain aspects of the space, such as the ready availability of natural light, echoing research on psychiatric units more broadly (Connellan, Gaardboe, Riggs, Due, Reimscmidt and Mustillo 2013). This relatively limited focus on love was not surprising, given our research sought to explore how both mothers and staff experience the built environment of the MBU. In the literature on MBUs more broadly, however, love is also noticeably absent (Connellan, Bartholomaeus, Due and Riggs 2017). An exception to this appears in the work of Masciantonio, Hemer and Chur-Hansen (2018), who have examined how attachment theory may serve to reinforce normative assumptions about mother-baby love, potentially to the detriment of women staying in MBUs.

Given the relative lack of focus on love in the academic literature, it was somewhat surprising to us that in Louis Theroux' recent documentary *Mothers on the Edge* – which focuses on mothers staying with their children in MBUs located in the United Kingdom – love appeared to be a consistent theme. We say surprising, though given the points raised by Masciantonio, Hemer and Chur-Hansen (2018), it is not surprising that a documentary about mothers produced for public consumption should focus so closely on love. In this commentary we seek to briefly explore how love is represented in the documentary. Specifically, our interest, following Masciantonio, Hemer and Chur-Hansen, is on how women are held to account for what is depicted as a failure of 'maternal love', and what this says more broadly about how women as mothers and partners are expected to act and feel.

When speaking with the women included in the documentary, Theroux repeatedly asked about their feelings towards their children, and in voice overs questioned how it can be that a woman does not feel love towards her child. With one woman in particular – Katherine – Theroux repeatedly informed her that he can see that she loves her child and has a connection with her child. This was in the face of Katherine telling Theroux that "I took an overdose to kill myself because I don't feel I can be his Mum, or he deserves better than me or someone else should be looking after him that can love him". Later in the documentary Theroux tells Katherine that "I think the love, or let's say the connection, that is there, you sometimes struggle to feel it, to see it, but that it is there. And with time you'll come to see it more clearly", to which Katherine

responds “Or I might allow myself to feel it maybe. I think that’s half of it as well”. There is a disjuncture at play here. Whilst Theroux is insistent that there is love, or at least a connection, Katherine emphasises that she does not experience those feelings, though is open to feeling them in time. For Theroux, then, love or connection are axiomatic (i.e., ‘it is there’), whilst for Katherine they must be intentionally allowed.

The idea that a mother’s love for her child is axiomatic was also evident when Theroux spoke to the partner (Andy) of another mother (Lisa). Andy remarked to Theroux that Lisa “is the most caring motherly woman, so to suddenly see this behavior, I knew there was something very very wrong”. In this statement one image of motherhood is naturalized (i.e., mothers as loving), whilst another image is positioned as unnatural. Theroux takes this binary up later in the documentary when talking to Lisa about suicidal thoughts, when he states: “You’re also aware you have a husband who loves you, you’ve got three children who love you and need you, that these are things you need to consider . Was that in your head at all?”, to which Lisa responds ‘No, not at all’. For Theroux, it would seem, love creates an injunction towards which women should orient, implicitly positioning women who are suicidal and who do not take into account the love that is thought to be in front of them as failing to adhere to the cultural mandate placed upon women to be driven by the love of others.

The idea that women should sublimate their feelings in the service of others was evident when the documentary focused on an interaction between another woman, Marie, and her partner James. Marie shared that a recent home visit was cut short due to her experiencing panic attacks as a result of nightmares. For James, the perception was that the nightmares related to him, however Marie clarified that they related to a past experience of assault. James responded by telling Marie that “you should have told me” that is what the nightmares were about, to which Marie replies “I didn’t want you to get upset”. In the face of her own traumatic experiences relating to both the assault and her birthing experiences, Marie returned the focus of concern to James. Again, this is an example where normative narratives of women recognizing and responding to love can result in women’s own feelings being located outside the frame of the narrative.

These three examples of representations of love in *Women on the Edge* sit in the context of a myriad of examples within a documentary in which love is a constant theme. In each of these examples, either explicitly or implicitly, love is framed as automatic and indeed axiomatic, producing an injunction for women to respond to their children and partners in very particular, predetermined ways. That this type of framing is a problem for all women who are mothers and partners is undoubtedly true, and reflects broader tropes about how women as mothers and partners are depicted in both broader cinematic universes, and in documentary film making in particular (Fischer 2014). But in a documentary focused on women experiencing significant mental health concerns, the injunction to see, accept, and reciprocate love is, we would suggest, in many ways antithetical to a true focus on women’s experiences. Importantly, our suggestion is not that the women featured in the documentary may not have

experienced love: for their child, for their partner, or indeed for themselves. Rather, our point is that a normative framing of love in the context of MBUs specifically may serve to overwrite some of the feelings that women may struggle with upon the arrival of a child.

Notably, the staff interviewed for the documentary clearly acknowledged that 'maternal feelings' may be complex, and may often not centre upon a normative understanding of love. In the face of staff accounts, then, we would reiterate that Theroux' focus on love did not necessarily appear to be connected to the stories that he was told. Instead, our point in this commentary has been to suggest that narratives of love in regards to motherhood are so pervasive that they may often be imposed upon women, even in the face of their own struggles with how they might come to love or connect with their children. As Masciantonio, Hemer and Chur-Hansen (2018) suggest, then, reducing the mental health concerns experienced by women staying with their children in MBUs to a simplistic understanding of love and attachment may considerably underestimate the challenges that such women face. In relation to media representations of mothers, then, feminist media studies has an important role to play in challenging normative depictions of motherhood. This does not mean that love can no longer be part of the story, but rather than love must be understood as both an emotion and as a directive, one particularly placed upon woman. How love-as-directive operates as a standardized trope within documentaries and the media more broadly requires ongoing examination given its pervasive nature.

References

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