



Body-led mothering: Constructions of the breast in attachment parenting literature



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ABSTRACT

The breast is absent in much breastfeeding literature, yet it is central to political controversies surrounding breastfeeding in public. This study examines social constructions of the breast in Attachment Parenting literature on breastfeeding. Attachment Parenting, an approach growing in popularity in many western societies, advocates breastfeeding as a core component of parenting and is consistent with broader mothering ideals. Findings indicate that the breast is constructed as the *ultimate mother* – engaging in practices that mirror idealized depictions of hegemonic motherhood toward both the baby and the mother. The texts represent the breast engaging in *body-led mothering* by providing nurturing and protection to both baby and mother, and teaching the mother how to mother her baby. These depictions corroborate essentialist views of femininity and mothering in western societies by locating socially defined characteristics within the female body, and contribute to views of the breastfeeding breast as inherently motherly rather than sexual.

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Introduction

The breast occupies a precarious position in breastfeeding discourses and politics. It is absent in much popular and official literature on breastfeeding, which instead emphasizes topics such as infant health and maternal-infant bonding (Blum, 1999; Jansson, 2009; Kukla, 2006). However, the breast is the site of controversy in relation to breastfeeding in public, apparent in scenarios where a mother is asked to “cover up” or to leave a public establishment for nursing her baby, or is required to remove breastfeeding photos from social networking sites such as Facebook, which have been reported by many mothers in western societies including the U.S. and U.K. (Owens, Carter, Nordham, & Ford, 2016; Boyer, 2011). In such scenarios, it is the exposure or potential exposure of the breast (rather than breastfeeding itself) that precipitates the sanctions. For example, Facebook’s official policy allows for photos of “women actively engaged in breastfeeding” but restricts “some images of female breasts if they expose the nipple” (Facebook, 2017). Similarly, women who breastfeed in public have reported experiencing less opposition to the practice when conducted “discreetly” (Owens et al., 2016; Boyer, 2011; Grant, 2016; Stearns, 1999). Thus, the breast is central to breastfeeding politics. Academic research has largely fallen in line with the former portrayal of the breast, emphasizing *breastfeeding* as a topic of inquiry, with less emphasis on *breasts*, although there is a burgeoning body of social science research

focusing on breastfeeding and *embodiment* (for example, Hausman, 2004; McBride-Henry, White, & Benn, 2009; Ryan, Todres, & Alexander, 2011; Schmied & Barclay, 1999; Schmied & Lupton, 2001; Stearns, 2013; Tomori, 2015). Among studies that focus on discourse, previous research has examined social constructions of *breastfeeding* in popular and biomedical discourses, however constructions of the *breast* itself have not been examined in this context.

Attachment Parenting is a parenting philosophy growing in popularity in some western societies that explicitly advocates breastfeeding as a key component of idealized mothering. Based on attachment theory, Attachment Parenting promotes proximity-based parenting, including the practices of on-demand breastfeeding, co-sleeping, and baby-wearing (Faircloth, 2013; Granju & Kennedy, 1999; Sears & Sears, 2001). Its proponents advocate minimal medical and technological interventions into pregnancy and childbirth, arguing that such technologies interfere with the “natural” mechanisms that promote mother-baby bonding through pregnancy, birth, and the postpartum period. Attachment Parenting provides guidance for handling contemporary western middle-class parenting concerns such as pesticide and chemical exposure, nutrition, and emotional wellbeing. Although distinct in some ways from other mainstream parenting models, Attachment Parenting is one iteration of the broader paradigm of idealized motherhood in western industrialized societies identified by Hays (1996) as “intensive mothering.”

This article investigates the social construction of the breast in Attachment Parenting breastfeeding literature. The breast itself is the focus of this research due to its lack of attention in previous studies of breastfeeding discourses combined with its central position in

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breastfeeding politics. Attachment Parenting literature was selected as the site for studying the construction of the breast due to its growing popularity in western societies and its promotion of breastfeeding as a key component of good parenting – unlike many mainstream parenting texts that describe breastfeeding as the optimal form of infant feeding followed closely by formula, Attachment Parenting literature portrays breastfeeding as an essential component of good parenting and mother–baby bonding. For example, the *What to Expect* (n.d.) website states, “When it comes to feeding your baby, breast is best – but sometimes you may need to supplement breast milk with formula or feed your baby formula full time. The good news is that infant formula is safer and more nutritious than ever before, so there’s no need to worry...” Similarly, *The Girlfriends’ Guide to Pregnancy* (Iovine, 1999: 241) describes breastfeeding as “politically correct” and states, “If you don’t like it, you have our permission to quit.” In contrast, Attachment Parenting literature lists breastfeeding as one of the “Seven Attachment Tools” (Sears & Sears, 2001), and explains “Why breastfeeding is the attachment model” (Nicholson & Parker, 2013). Attachment Parenting literature describes bottle feeding as last resort, and recommends that, when necessary, bottle feeding should mimic breastfeeding as much as possible through what its advocates have termed “bottle nursing” (Nicholson & Parker, 2013).

Breastfeeding discourses and embodiment

Discursive constructions of breastfeeding

Previous research has identified several ways breastfeeding is constructed in different discursive contexts that each presents breastfeeding as a disembodied phenomenon. A dominant theme is the construction of breastfeeding as an infant health issue. Medical texts and informational materials distributed to expectant mothers portray breastfeeding as a child-centered issue, highlighting the health benefits for babies. This discourse emphasizes properties of the milk itself, portraying it as an entity that is independent and disembodied from mothers (Blum, 1999; Wall, 2001).

Along with the theme of infant health and consistent with neoliberal ideologies, breastfeeding is constructed as an individual decision mothers make that is independent of social, cultural, and physical barriers. This theme is identified in popular discourse such as magazines and newspapers (Frerichs, Andsager, Campo, Aquilino, & Dyer, 2006) and in national and international policies (Jansson, 2009). According to this discourse, the “good mother” chooses to breastfeed her baby based on her knowledge about its health benefits and her commitment to her child’s good health (Avisai, 2007; Blum, 1999). This construction minimizes broader cultural and structural factors that inhibit breastfeeding, holding mothers independently responsible for infant health outcomes at the individual, national, and international levels. This construction supports policies that target women, making them responsible for meeting national health objectives rather than implementing structural changes that would make breastfeeding accessible for more women (Jansson, 2009).

Literature aimed at teaching women how to breastfeed presents the female body as a participant in breastfeeding, yet it draws on Cartesian mind–body dualism that dominates western thought and biomedical discourse. These discourses present breastfeeding as both “natural” and “medical” processes. Utilizing an image of breastfeeding as natural, self-help literature portrays infants having an innate drive and ability to obtain milk, which mothers’ bodies automatically produce at the ideal quantity and quality; the process is normal, natural, and requires no training, preparation, support, or resources (Foss, 2010; Locke, 2009; Nadesan & Sotirin, 1998). This image contrasts with the medicalization of breastfeeding prevalent in medical and scientific discourses, which construct breastfeeding as a learned skill requiring medical surveillance and training (Locke, 2009; Nadesan & Sotirin, 1998). Although seemingly contradictory, Locke (2009) contends that constructions of breastfeeding as natural and medical are consistent with the western

perception that scientific medicine can correct inadequacies presented by nature, particularly those inherent to the female body. This construction portrays the female body as participating in breastfeeding, yet it is presented as a body-as-machine, separated from female subjectivity, rather than an embodied, corporeal experience (Locke, 2009).

Breastfeeding discourses and the body

Two analyses of breastfeeding discourses focus specifically on breastfeeding and the body, and therefore are relevant to the current study. In analysis of La Leche League documents and practices, Blum (1999) argues that the League advocates “embodied motherhood,” a form of mothering that requires physical presence of the mother and an intimate physical relationship between mother and baby that is best facilitated by breastfeeding. In embodied motherhood, the baby needs the whole mother, not just her milk or her breasts. The League contends that embodied motherhood is facilitated by self-care rather than by prioritizing the baby’s needs above the mother’s, or by making physical sacrifices to the mother’s body. The maternal body in this context is portrayed as an “unfixed” body that is substantially impacted by social and cultural factors. Therefore, insufficient milk production, for example, is interpreted as the result of fatigue, overwork, and/or lack of support rather than as a physical problem. The overarching view is of a “body that works,” which differs from the western biomedical view of the female reproductive body as inherently defective (Martin, 1992).

In a broad analysis of breastfeeding discourses and practices in western societies, Bartlett (2002) identifies that breastfeeding is largely constructed as “headwork.” Drawing on the western dichotomized perception of mind and body, biology and physiology texts used to train midwives portray breastfeeding as an activity that is primarily carried out in the head rather than the body. Breastfeeding is constructed as a series of nerve impulses and hormone releases orchestrated by the brain, and breastfeeding as practice is something that must be learned. Bartlett argues this construction of breastfeeding as mind-driven rather than body-driven facilitates a shift in expertise from those who breastfeed to those who learn about breastfeeding – thus “breastfeeding experts” are those who study breastfeeding academically but may not have breastfed themselves. Bartlett argues this shift disempowers women by contributing to the medicalization of breastfeeding and discrediting personal experience.

Bartlett (2002) advocates creating new breastfeeding narratives that use women’s embodied experiences as a starting point and consider multiple sites of bodily intelligence. She recounts her own breastfeeding experience where her breasts would speak to her about her overall health. After dedicating too many hours to academic labor her breasts spoke to her through pain, sending messages to slow down and tend to her body. Bartlett calls for a conceptualization of breasts as intelligent, intuitive and communicative. She suggests that:

New conceptual formations that question the materialist boundaries given to the brain, and that invite us to recognize the body as literate matter... might enable us to regard breasts as thoughtful, knowledgeable, responsive, literate. Breastfeeding could be regarded as a form of bodily intelligence....

(Bartlett, 2002: 381)

Bartlett acknowledges that this construction of the body and breasts will be difficult given the current gendered power/knowledge embedded in western language, but suggests that recognizing the body “as literate matter” can have a transformative impact on women’s breastfeeding experiences.

Women’s breastfeeding experiences

Despite limited attention to embodiment in breastfeeding discourses, research on women’s breastfeeding experiences illustrates

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