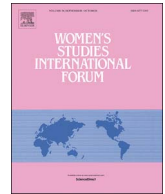




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## Women's Studies International Forum

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/wsif](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/wsif)

# The breastfeeding problematic: Negotiating maternal sexuality in heterosexual partnerships<sup>☆</sup>

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Keywords:

Breastfeeding  
Maternal sexuality  
Gender performativity  
Breasted embodiment

## ABSTRACT

This study brings attention to the breastfeeding problematic—an embodied dilemma that arises where maternity meets sexuality. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 17 breastfeeding women from middle-Tennessee, this study examines maternal sexuality through the negotiation of their gendered embodiment as mothers and lovers during lactation. Contributing to the growing literature that marks father support as central to breastfeeding outcomes, this study explores the dimension of maternal sexuality to clarify the role of father influence. Participants attest to the complexities of maternal performativity as they regulate their behavior in response to the presence of men when breastfeeding in public, coupled with the experience of interrupted intimacy with their partners. The participants' experiences highlight the dilemma of maternal sexuality as women struggle with the sexual fluidity of their breasts in social and intimate contexts.

Breastfeeding blurs the distinction between maternal and sexual uses of women's breasts (Campo, 2010; Galupo & Ayers, 2002; Stearns, 1999), though this aspect of breastfeeding is generally ignored in the robust literature focused on the promotion of breastfeeding. Public health initiatives to promote breastfeeding have successfully launched the “breast is best” discourse, yet the rates of women who breastfeed consistently fall short of health agency goals (Acker, 2009; U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, 2011; WHO and UNICEF, 2007). The medical community widely espouses the benefits of breast milk as the ideal food source for infants; most studies suggest that it provides complete nutrition, immunological protection against illness, aids cognitive development, fosters psychological bonding between mother and child, as it also provides social and economic returns (e.g., U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, 2011; WHO and UNICEF, 2007). Myriad factors influence breastfeeding outcomes however, including restrictions due to a mother's employment, a perceived or actual physical inability, or limited social support (e.g., Rippeyoung & Noonan, 2012; Shahla, Fahy, & Kable, 2010). The embodied experience of maternal sexuality presents another potential dilemma, as women's breasts have been socially constructed as sites of heteronormative sexual pleasure—having positive social significance primarily when connected to sexuality—evidencing the “proper” use of breasts as instruments of sexual enticement (Bartlett, 2005a; Campo, 2010; Galupo & Ayers, 2002). In contemporary U.S. society, this discourse privileges the strictly sexual interpretation of women's breasts while problematizing lactation, particularly in the context of intimate sexual relations but

also in embodied experience in the public sphere.

In this work, I explore maternal sexuality by asking how cisgender, heterosexual women navigate lactation as mothers and lovers, to highlight the constraints on women's maternal performativity that disallow an embodiment of maternal sexuality and deeply problematize the experience of breastfeeding. A better understanding of the difficulties that breastfeeding women face may elucidate strategies to manage maternal sexuality. Importantly, I focus on women's narratives as they reflect on their male partners' attitudes and behaviors, rather than on the experiences of male partners of breastfeeding women. I contend that the breastfeeding problematic is revealed as women struggle to mesh the demands of hypersexualized body images and expectations with the realities of motherhood and lactating breasts. I assess how women navigate their experiences as mothers and lovers while breastfeeding in heterosexual partnerships through an analysis of data collected via in-depth interviews with 17 breastfeeding women. It's important to note the purposive focus on cisgender women in this work and in the literature more broadly, although lactation is not necessarily a practice exclusive to women. This analysis contributes to the conceptual gap in breastfeeding literature on the role of fathers' influence in breastfeeding decisions and outcomes by identifying the breastfeeding problematic as a mechanism that implicates the complex negotiation of maternal sexuality.

<sup>☆</sup> Conflicts of interest: none.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2017.10.002>

Received 6 June 2017; Received in revised form 29 September 2017; Accepted 12 October 2017  
0277-5395/ © 2017 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

## Maternal sexuality and gender performativity

Recent studies have approached the persistence of low breastfeeding rates by suggesting the need to evaluate and inform men's attitudes and understandings about breastfeeding (Acker, 2009; Mitchell-Box & Braun, 2013; Rempel & Rempel, 2011; Sherriff, Hall, & Pantoni, 2014; Stremmler & Lovera, 2004; Susin & Giugliani, 2008). These studies broadly contend that men's stated or even *perceived* attitudes on breastfeeding may impact their partner's decision to breastfeed, her success after initiation, and the duration she chooses to breastfeed (Rempel & Rempel, 2011; Susin & Giugliani, 2008; U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, 2011). What these studies fail to address is *why* men play such a significant role in the breastfeeding experience. Although having a supportive partner is undoubtedly beneficial to mothers, the intimate parameters of maternal sexuality within the breastfeeding relationship have yet to be thoroughly researched. Feminist scholarship suggests that the heteronormative social construction of women's bodies for men's pleasure likely influences men to devalue breastfeeding (Bartlett, 2005a; Campo, 2010). Drawing on this scholarship through empirical investigation, I contend that breastfeeding problematizes maternal sexuality by interfering with the sexuality of women's breasts through a number of potential mechanisms: by purposing her breasts to serve a child instead of a partner, by inhibiting sexual access to the mother's body, by altering the physical appearance of her breasts, and by offering an intimately satisfying experience to the woman outside of the man's participation.

Cultural imagery of woman as mother has perpetuated as an icon of perfected womanhood, leading contemporary women to interpret their experiences of motherhood in a milieu where women have been thoroughly sexualized and even symbolically deconstructed into celebrated body parts—particularly their breasts (Young, 2003). For women in contemporary U.S. society, a dilemma may emerge when they become mothers, as their sexuality is subverted by the expectations of ideal motherhood, i.e. *woman as mother* may often be experienced as incongruous with *woman as lover*. Women's breasts, perhaps the most hypersexualized part of their bodies, are regulated by conflicting roles when they become mothers, and even more so when they choose to breastfeed, as a salient portion of their socially constructed femininity is divorced from the demands of sexual enticement and repurposed as a feeding instrument (Bartlett, 2005a). In this way, breastfeeding is an act of gender performativity, following Butler (1990) with the potential to “trouble” the gendered display of women's breasts as they attempt to negotiate maternity and sexuality simultaneously.

Exalted as the emblematic signifier of the feminine “Other,” breasts are celebrated only when they serve to emphasize a woman's sexuality (Stearns, 1999). This cultural standard of femininity requires women's breasts to not only meet a criteria of physical demands—that they be perfect orbs, large and unmarred by evidence of motherhood or disease—but they must also be consistently available for sexual pleasure. The ubiquity of the hypersexualized breast has led to the conflation of breasts with sexuality in contemporary U.S. society, which helps explain the rejection and disapproval of breasts outside of sexual definition. Public breastfeeding is widely seen as immodest, vulgar, an act of indecency; breastfeeding mothers who nurse in public have been labeled “nasty, offensive, rude, and distasteful” (Acker, 2009, 479). This is problematic given the general social acceptance of revealing breast cleavage in public. This suggests that women's breasts are not the problem—rather, it's the interpretation of embodied maternal performativity—what's being *done* with the breasts.

Power is central to understanding this issue, i.e. how does power establish discourse regulating appropriate maternal performativity. I consider the experience of breastfeeding in contemporary U.S. society by assessing the relevant discourses, that is, “historically variable ways of specifying knowledge and truth” (Ramazanoglu, 1993, 19). These heteronormative definitions of femininity have influenced discourse on to women's bodies, glorifying breasts as they relate strictly to men—as

sexualized—and devaluing breasts as they relate to children.

Researchers find few depictions of breastfeeding in the media aside from magazines marketed toward new and expectant mothers, and even there, images of breastfeeding are seldom and discreet. According to Michele Acker, “images available emphasize the private sphere of life with mothers in nightgowns, rather than out in public” (2009, 477). This implies that lactating breasts should be relegated to the home, emphasizing the “natural” domesticity of mothers and in contrast to the sexualized breasts welcomed, and even expected, in the heteronormative public sphere. Separation of spheres ideology constructs a racialized and patriarchal discourse on (white women's) maternity as a pure, virtuous expression of femininity (see Golden, 1996). Alison Bartlett also finds that images of breastfeeding mothers “perform a preferred version of motherhood and gender that is soft, calm, passive and idealized. It is a picture of sacred motherhood” (2005a, 110). This vision of maternity is decidedly divorced from sexuality.

In her essay on the “scandalous” act of public breastfeeding, Bartlett emphasizes the importance of discretion in the debate over women “performing their maternity” (2002, 114). She attributes moderate social support for “discreet” breastfeeding to the “traditional performance of female modesty” whereby women enact gender performativity in an innocuous (i.e., desexualized) way (2002, 117). Judith Butler (1990) elucidates a social constructivist notion of gender performativity—describing how gender is actively constructed in daily life such that it may be reified and projected onto (and by) an individual as an identity. Exploring Butler's notion of gender performativity, Bartlett claims “Specific acts of breastfeeding can therefore be read as challenging and resisting dominant discourses—of changing the cultural scripts available” (2002, 113). In this way, breastfeeding in the public sphere can be seen as a “symbolic threat” to the discourse that demands mothering be confined to the home (Bartlett, 2002, 118). To disrupt this forced separation of maternity and sexuality is to create gender trouble, as conceptualized in Butler's (1990) notion of a *subversive bodily act*. Performing breastfeeding in public spaces challenges the traditional maternal discourse, which emphasizes domesticity as the “natural” arena for mothering.

## Breasted (Dis) embodiment

Linda Blum (1999) addresses experiences of maternal embodiment, noting that contemporary mothers may struggle for recognition of their sexual agency while negotiating their lactating bodies. In an early testament to the potential role of men as partners in the breastfeeding experience, Blum notes parenting expert Dr. Spock's claim that some fathers will understandably “object to breastfeeding—they can't help feeling jealous” (cited in Blum 1999, 39). Through analysis of archival prescriptive literature, Blum suggests a tenuous relationship between maternity and sexuality, noting that in such sources “breastfeeding is often linked to the marriage bond, and implicit then is the notion that it is something like adultery, *especially if enjoyed by mother and baby*” (1999, 39, emphasis added). Here we see heteronormative discourse legitimating men's claims to women's bodily autonomy.

Drawing on data from qualitative focus groups, Monica Campo (2010) finds breastfeeding women “revealed self-conscious tensions existing between sexuality and motherhood” as they expressed “exasperation” about their lactating bodies and the cultural discourse on sexualized breasts (2010, 52). Campo (2010) suggests modern women experience breastfeeding as contradictory: an incomplete experience of breastfeeding arises from the individual and ideological separation of maternal and sexual bodily being. Galupo and Ayers (2002) also find evidence of this maternal/sexual separation. Examining narratives collected from 30 women with extended breastfeeding experiences of at least a year, Galupo and Ayers (2002) suggest that women are able to enjoy self-acceptance through an ideological shift away from sexual and toward maternal identification with their breasts. They do not discuss breasted embodiment through an *incorporation* of the maternal/sexual

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