

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

Going With and Against the Flow: A Dialectical Reading of Sustained Breastfeeding

**A thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Philosophy (by thesis only) in Sociology
at Massey University, Albany, New Zealand**

Anna Fielder

2014

Abstract

In the act of breastfeeding their children beyond the age of two years women aspire to ideals for the future of the next generation. They seek physical health, emotional wellbeing, freedom of speech and human connection for their children. Yet the road is not clear for the realisation of such aspirations, and women develop various ways of managing the challenges they encounter on their breastfeeding journeys. In the face of social stigma about nursing a child beyond toddlerhood many women do not disclose their breastfeeding to others. Some encounter difficulties in the breastfeeding practice itself and an absence of places in which to talk openly about those challenges. I draw Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection into Jameson's dialectic of ideology and utopia in order to develop an interpretative methodology for reading women's words about sustained breastfeeding. This enables manifestations of stigma and maternal guilt to be situated within an historical and social context. It also facilitates a particular way of understanding how women attempt to shift - to sublimate, in psychoanalytical terms - the tensions they encounter in the context of breastfeeding, into more manageable spaces. Such sublimatory practices include ways of talking and writing that hold the potential for influencing social change.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost my thanks go to the women who took part in this study. They have made this research possible, and I have been humbled by the integrity and honesty with which they spoke of their breastfeeding experiences. I am also very grateful to the women's family members who enabled and supported them to participate in the project.

My sincere thanks go to La Leche League New Zealand for circulating my advertisement for research participants, and to The Natural Parent Magazine who put the advertisement on their Facebook page. Thank you also to all the women who responded to my adverts for participants. It seems that more research is needed to accommodate the number of women who would like to talk about this topic.

My supervisor Dr Warwick Tie has supported me superbly, with patience and humour, through the valences of this project. I am incredibly grateful for the conversations we have had, and for his insight, tutelage and friendship. Many thanks also go to Dr Mary Murray who has given intelligent and helpful feedback throughout. Dr Fiva Fa'alau and Dr Fiona Te Momo have provided cultural advice for aspects of this project, for which I am very grateful. Thank you to them both. I am also very grateful to Massey University for providing me with a Massey University Masterate Scholarship to carry out the project.

My mum, Mavis Kirkham, has expressed much interest in this study, talked about it at length with me (often in the middle of her night) and provided continual support and love. I value that deeply. The support of my dad, Robin Fielder, has also been very special for me over recent months. I hope we'll be able to cross hemispheres soon and see each other in person.

Numerous friends have been there for me and my family over the past year. I am thankful to them all for their ongoing friendships and for the opportunities they have provided for the children in my life to play with the children in theirs. They have gifted me with many valuable hours for writing. Particular thanks go to Rochana and Simon Sheward who continually remind me of what is important in life as we share food, talk, music, laughs, children and camping.

My partner, Luqman, has supported and loved me throughout the writing of this thesis in ways that far exceed words. I am, as always, so very grateful for the life we create together. And as for Aaron, Torin and Isla... well they have, in their various ways, inspired this thesis. They have also interrupted its writing with endless opportunities for hugs, laughs, playtimes and soccer. For that, and for all that they bring to my life, I am more thankful than I can say.

Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Preface	viii
Notes on Terminology	x
Chapter One. Introducing Sustained Breastfeeding	1
Breastfeeding Past Infancy: Advocacy and Ambivalence	2
Sustained Breastfeeding and Physical Health	4
Psychoanalytical Discourses	6
Attachment Parenting and Evolutionary Discourses	11
Eroticism and the Visibility of Sustained Breastfeeding	14
Discussion	15
Overview of the Thesis	17
Chapter Two. Theory and Methodology	19
The Dialectic of Utopia and Ideology: Fredric Jameson	20
Abjection: Julia Kristeva	24
Utopia, Ideology and Abjection	27
Approaching Methodology	29
Research Methods	32
Researcher Reflexivity	37
Chapter Three. Introduction to the Women's Narratives	40
"Going with the Flow"	41
Cross-Cultural Imaginings	43
Narratives as Expressions of "Cultural Revolution"	44

Chapter Four. Aspirations to Freedom: Utopian Urges in the Women's Narratives	47
Theme 1: Physical Health	48
Theme 2: Emotional Wellbeing	51
Theme 3: Freedom of Speech	55
Theme 4: Connection and Attachment	57
Theme 5: Breasts	59
Grappling with the Fragility of Utopian Urges	62
 Chapter Five. Negotiating Ideology: The Contradictions of Not Disclosing Sustained Breastfeeding	 64
Conflicting Ideologies	65
Introducing Abjection	67
The Secrecy of Sustained Breastfeeding	69
"Preserving the Status Quo"	73
The Utopian Kernel	76
 Chapter Six. Abjection, Weaning and Guilt	 79
Feelings of Excess and Overload	80
Feeling "Touched Out" and "Breastfeeding Agitation"	83
Guilt and Maternal Subjectivity	86
Weaning	90
Discussion	95
 Chapter Seven. "[I]t <i>does</i> suck...and it's <i>okay</i> that it sucks": Shifting Utopias	 97
Writing	97
Talking	101
Utopian Aspirations in Research	104
Shifting Utopias	106
 Chapter Eight. Concluding Thoughts	 109

References	113
Appendix A. Advertisement for Research Participants	131
Appendix B. Semi-Structured Interview Schedule	132
Appendix C. Participant Information Sheet	134
Appendix D. Participant Consent Form	136
Appendix E. Consent for Release of Transcript Form	137

Preface

One of the most memorable moments of my eleven consecutive years of breastfeeding emerged in the context not of breastfeeding my own children, but of watching a video clip of another woman breastfeeding her seven year old. The sensations in my body as I watched this child latch onto her mother's breast unsettled me considerably. I recall feeling somewhat repulsed by it. Yet at that time I was happily breastfeeding a child of around four years of age without qualms, and I was acutely aware of the discomforting effects that my own breastfeeding practice had upon others. I could not rationalise, nor explain, the feelings the video clip had aroused in me. Less still could I justify them. I knew that in terms of my views on breastfeeding I had no grounds upon which to dictate to another the age at which a child should stop breastfeeding. Yet there was something that disturbed me viscerally about that video footage. The very parameters of who I thought I was were being challenged.

In that moment of cognitive and corporeal dissonance I glimpsed at the apparent impossibility of utopia. I had been building a beautiful world over years of continually breastfeeding my children, of (as I saw it) responding to their needs. This world was inspired by the idea that my children would choose when they stopped breastfeeding rather than my imposing what could only be an arbitrary ending upon them. Yet there was no room in my vision for this other mother and child's experience on a similar journey. Not only was there no room for it, I was revolted by it.

In many ways this thesis has grown out of that moment. It is an attempt to give voice to the aspirations and conflicts experienced by women who breastfeed their children beyond toddlerhood. In that context the experience of being 'defiled' as a lactating woman proves pivotal. It is my premise that, whilst it might be possible to render aspects of sustained breastfeeding more socially

acceptable, attention also needs to be given to how such visceral rejections of others occur. Though focussing upon processes of jettisoning and defilement, the potential emerges for considering how those processes might operate differently in order that more welcoming ways of negotiating the terrain of lactation and mothering more generally might begin to emerge.

Notes on terminology

In this thesis I have tended to use the term “sustained breastfeeding” to refer to the breastfeeding of a child aged two or more years. At times I also talk of “long-term breastfeeding” in such a context. The choice of terminology has been influenced by the work of Ann Sinnott (2010). She suggests that, whatever duration of breastfeeding is being referred to, phrases such as “extended breastfeeding” and “prolonged breastfeeding” “imply the normalcy of a shorter period” (2010, p.1). The terms “sustained” and “long-term” in relation to breastfeeding do not entirely avoid such connotations, as they pre-suppose that breastfeeding for a period such as two or more years is indeed *sustained* or *long-term* rather than simply the norm. However, I have found an absence of other appropriate lexica. I have avoided referring to “full-term” or “term breastfeeding” as, in my reading, such terminology implies a point (a “term”) at which breastfeeding is fully or naturally complete e.g. when a child weans him/herself from the breast. I prefer to understand breastfeeding and weaning as subtle and complex processes involving interaction between at least two people in a socio-cultural context.

The term weaning has multiple and often contradictory uses (Greiner, 1996). In this study I speak of weaning in terms of the cessation of breastfeeding, rather than the introduction of other foods into a child’s diet. However, I acknowledge that the cessation of breastfeeding, and therefore weaning, tends to be a process rather than a singular event (see, for example, Bengson, 2000). Gribble (2008) noted in her study of long-term breastfeeding that “breastfeeding was sometimes discontinuous, with children weaning from days to years before resuming breastfeeding” (p.5).