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**Responding to the Call to Care:
Women's Experience of Breastfeeding in
New Zealand**

A thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Nursing

at Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand.

Karen Sharee McBride-Henry

2004



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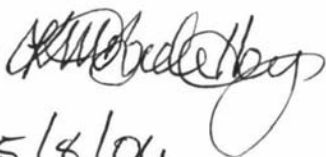
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Abstract

New Zealand breastfeeding experts have long contended that New Zealand does not have a breastfeeding culture, as demonstrated by anecdotal evidence suggesting that women find breastfeeding difficult to initiate and sustain. A review of the literature indicates that, in New Zealand, breastfeeding knowledge falls within the domain of health care professionals, which marginalises women's own experiential knowledge about breastfeeding. Therefore, this study explores the experience of breastfeeding for women in New Zealand. A reflective lifeworld research methodology underpins this study, allowing the participants' narratives to be explored without the use of pre-existing theoretical frameworks that may close down on aspects of the interpretive analysis. Nineteen women were interviewed for this study, all of whom were New Zealanders who were either breastfeeding at the time of the interviews, or had breastfed within the last two years. Many of the participants had breastfed more than one child.

What emerges as the central thesis of this study is that breastfeeding is *a priori* to unique embodied experiences. A number of sub-themes, which further explicate this central thesis, include: the silencing of the reality of breastfeeding within the public domain, the pervasive influence of society, or 'the they', through the accepted frameworks by which breastfeeding women interpret their individual breastfeeding experiences, and breastfeeding as a means of facilitating close relationships between women and their infants. The findings of this study will assist health care professionals working alongside breastfeeding women, as it offers fresh understandings of what it is to be a breastfeeding woman. It is important that health care professionals lay aside their previously-held perceptions about breastfeeding, and pay careful attention to individual women's experiences prior to planning interventions. If health care professionals value women's embodied breastfeeding narratives, women will be supported to articulate their breastfeeding experiences, thereby increasing women's confidence in their embodied breastfeeding knowledge and capabilities.

Acknowledgements

I am so grateful for the wisdom, experience and courage of the women who shared their life stories. They have touched my life, which is forever changed because they were open to talking about their lives. It is important that they know that, because of all they taught me, I was able to breastfeed my son.

My wonderful husband, Norm, has astounded me with all the ways he has managed to support me whilst I spent hours locked away with my computer, not the least of which was editing my final draft. I am grateful that he, a devout physicist, was open-minded enough to accept my phenomenological turning.

Matthew, my little gift, has taught me an incredible amount over the last 16 months. He has extended my horizon, and there is no going back.

I also need to acknowledge my family's contribution to this project. They have offered me endless encouragement, and bolstered my confidence during challenging periods. My mother always told me I should never settle for anything other than my best – I hope I have lived up to her expectations. I am so grateful for the family that my Mum and Dad built, which has provided me with such amazing and unceasing support.

I now appreciate the immensity of the commitment that Associate Professor Gill White and Associate Professor Cheryl Benn made when they agreed to supervise this process. I am grateful for the wise counsel they have both provided, which has shaped my thinking and writing.

The Journey

As a child thoughts bigger than words sought me
Criticised: My time, my place prevented thoughts from finding me
Fidelity's acceptance of my openness, my turning
Illuminates the breath that will lift me
My soul echoes with the voice of excitement
For the language that my body has always longed to speak is at last –
Coming to me

Karen McBride-Henry

16 June 1999

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