



Moral work in women's narratives of breastfeeding[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Women's narratives of their breastfeeding experiences are sites of construction and reconstruction of self as they undertake moral work in relation to feeding their baby. We engaged Foucault's 'technologies of the self' and his notion of ethics (the relationship with self) to examine that moral work (individual actions rather than adherence to universal moral codes) in relation to women's subjectivity constructed in interviews with 49 women from the UK. Four categories of moral work were identified: biographical preservation, biographical repair, altruism and political action. We describe each of these and conclude that women's embodied experience and sense of self are disciplined within current, limited, often punishing discourses by undertaking painful moral work in order to maintain or repair their subjective positions. We suggest the development of new subject positions around infant feeding practices.

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Introduction

As various authors point out (Schmied & Lupton, 2001; Shaw, 2007; Wall, 2001), the majority of writing about breastfeeding presents it in positive biomedical and public health terms. Indeed, there are few public policy pronouncements better known than '*breast is best*'. Under the dominant biomedical discourse breastfeeding is typically considered to be a matter of individual choice and rational decision-making. Given the emphasis in both policy and sociological research on infants' health and development, it is not surprising that relatively little has been written about the moral work women undertake when engaging with breastfeeding and its cultural milieu. However a growing body of critical feminist academic (for example Bartlett, 2002; Crossley, 2009; Kelleher, 2006) and lay (Groskop, 2009; Rosin, 2009) literature acknowledges the difficulties women face in a breastfeeding unfriendly culture (Anon, 2009; Bartlett, 2003; Mesure & Brady, 2009; Savill, 2008; Smith, 2008). Women's narratives of breastfeeding are sites of daily construction and reconstruction of self as they undertake moral work in relation to feeding their baby, 'actively negotiating' (Crossley, 2002) tensions and contradictions, relationships and

social networks in an attempt to make sense of their experiences (Marshall, Godfrey, & Renfrew, 2007).

It is the moral work that women undertake when given the opportunity to construct narratives about their breastfeeding experiences that we explore in this paper, drawing on Foucault's (1986) notion of 'technologies of the self' for illumination (Lupton, 1997; Martin, 2003). We outline the ways in which women engage in moral work and draw on contemporary discourses around breastfeeding in their discursive construction of self. We also offer a 'new' discursive space in which women, carers and health professionals can understand and create meaning from embodied experiences of breastfeeding.

We believe the work described here extends the sociological research undertaken by Murphy (1999, 2000, 2003, 2004) by taking understandings of moral work beyond the decision to breast or bottle feed and into everyday practices associated with committed breastfeeding. We also extend Schmied and Lupton's (2001) thinking beyond the psychological, emotional, physical and social tensions and ambiguities inherent in current rhetoric about breastfeeding practice to look at the type of moral work that women undertake to reconcile these factors with their embodied experience in their constitution of self. Furthermore, we build on Shaw's (2004) understanding of breastfeeding women as moral and ethical subjects engaged in gendered and embodied performance.

Background

Numerous authors have written about the moral work undertaken through narrative (Frank, 1995; Kleinman, 1988; Ricoeur,

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1991) – how individuals draw on discourses to ‘govern’ themselves (Hunt, 1999; Rose, 1990) and how they tell stories to ‘care’ for themselves (Frank, 1998) – but there are few elaborations. More recently, moral work in relation to reproductive experience and maternity, particularly breastfeeding, assisted reproduction and motherhood, and how women choreograph their moral subjectivities has been addressed by some feminist scholars’ efforts to theorise the body. They have highlighted the cultural construction of the maternal body/breast, both nurturing and sexual, and how women negotiate individual responsibility around parenting (Wall, 2001), breastfeeding in public (Stearns, 1999), cross-nursing (Shaw, 2007), their relationship with their infant (Schmied & Lupton, 2001; Shaw, 2003) and knowledges of breastfeeding (Bartlett, 2002; Ryan & Grace, 2001) to manage their ‘moral identity as ethical subjects’ (Shaw, 2004, 2007, 2008a). None of these, however, explored in depth the different types of moral work, specifically related to breastfeeding practice, in which women engage.

One notable exception to this is Elizabeth Murphy’s research. She focuses on women’s decision to introduce bottles of infant formula to their babies *against* prevailing health professional advice. She has framed her exploration around the sociology of deviance (Murphy, 1999), risk and the ideology of ‘good’ motherhood (Murphy, 2000), governmentality and resistance (Murphy, 2003) and ‘motive talk’ – the link between actions and prior mental state (Murphy, 2004). These studies, where they encounter moral work, engage an understanding of it in terms of reconciling one’s actions before and after making choices that represent resistance to the moral imperatives of health experts: that is, resorting to infant formula in the face of pressure to breastfeed. Such resistance, Murphy says, is a violation of public morality that must be refuted or defended with excuses or justifications and she describes the ways in which women account for their decisions. Murphy (1999) acknowledges that infant feeding is a ‘moral minefield’ and sticks closely to the decision about feeding method, specifically the decision to use infant formula. We contend that there is moral work being undertaken *within the act of breastfeeding and related practices* that may be neither risky nor deviant nor resistant. She leaves relatively unexplored the private moral work within women’s narratives of their specific breastfeeding experience and the related emerging identities associated with transition to motherhood. Women construct their sense of self by balancing public ideologies and practical constraints in relation to breastfeeding, drawing on both expert and experiential knowledge in the process. They are not, of course, passive recipients of the public health imperative to breastfeed but rather engage in moral work to actively construct their emerging multiple identities in relation to becoming a mother (Carter, 1995; Marshall et al., 2007; Murphy, 2000; Schmied & Lupton, 2001).

The embodied nature of breastfeeding and the intensity of the relationship between a mother and her baby affect a woman’s sense of self. Schmied and Lupton (2001) identified the difficulty that some women experienced in reconciling ambiguities and tensions with feelings of loss of and disruption to self and disintegration of boundaries between self and other. Drawing on anthropological and feminist literature they analysed women’s (often negative) experiences in terms of intimacy, disruption and disconnection in opposition to ‘notions of identity that value autonomy, independence and control’ (p. 234). They did not, however, attempt to explain how these women reconciled their experiences with their sense of self and certainly not in terms of moral work. Nor did they discuss the moral work that is done in private on a daily basis by women who are content with their breastfeeding experiences. Shaw (2004), however, linked embodied experience with

self-governance, ethics and subjectification from a Foucauldian perspective, seeing women policing themselves against unproblematised social moral norms that prescribe decency and motherhood.

It is the moral work that women undertake and reflect in their constructed narratives, within their breastfeeding practice and associated activities, that we explore in this paper. We engage Foucault’s understanding of the formation of the subject, what he called technologies of the self ‘which permit individuals to perfect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality’ (Foucault, 1997, p. 225). Such technologies are evident in the way people present themselves, govern their bodies and manage the relationship between that body and the rational, self-governing subject (Foucault, 1986).

We are the inheritors of a social morality that seeks the rules for acceptable behaviour in relations with others...criticism of established morality has been undertaken in the name of recognizing and knowing the self (Foucault, 1997, p. 228).

Foucault’s later work refers to the relationship with oneself as ‘ethics’ and suggests that individuals can reflect internally ‘without the imposition of law or recourse to a universal morality’ (Barth, 1998, p. 260) and that they actively constitute their bodies and thoughts in the process of becoming rational subjects (Foucault, 1985). He also says that we constitute ourselves through a series of practices and that through knowing ourselves we devise ways of living in the world (Foucault, 1998, p. 117). There is a distinction to be made here between the moral codes developed and inherited over time and the many different moral actions by which we conduct ourselves. It is at the level of these moral actions, in the relationship with oneself (ethics), that we focus our analysis of moral work in this paper. Thus, the care of the self is concerned with (self) knowledge, politics and ethics and is ‘one of the ways in which people become subjects – members of society’ (Danaher, Schirato, & Webb, 2000, p. 135) who regulate their relationships with self and others.

Other scholars (Lupton, 1997; Monaghan, 2001) have taken Foucault’s understanding further to incorporate lived experience and the way that people engage in self-discipline to align (or resist aligning) their bodies with institutional discourses.

To Foucault...modern systems of truth and institutional operation expect the body to operate as a clear sign of the internal state of the subject. A disciplined and hygienic body is the sign of a correct subjectivity. As a consequence, the body’s movements, routines and presentation are all subordinate to the subject’s need to represent itself as proper (Mansfield, 2000, p. 76).

Thus, it would seem that there can be an internalised embodied morality (work to realign experience and expectation) which, at the same time, constitutes and is constituted by an individual’s sense of self and is not prescribed but is developed through one’s construction of subjectivity. Deconstruction and reconstruction of this embodied moral self is part of the biographical (repair) work undertaken by people in their narrative retelling at times of crisis in order to restore equilibrium. In adjusting to motherhood or when their actions do not coincide with expectations, recommendations or the prevailing parenting ideology, women undertake moral work (reunifying embodied experience and self) that may include redefining the self, repairing biography, reconciling expectation and reality, and maintaining and restoring internal subjective stability: in short ‘realignment of (the) self’ (Murphy, 2000).

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