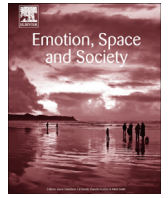




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The emotional resonances of breastfeeding in public: The role of strangers in breastfeeding practice

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers some of the disparate emotional and affective resonances that breastfeeding can produce. On the one hand, breastfeeding is the iconic symbol of succour and comfort-giving. It is associated with better health for babies as well as lower rates of post-natal depression for mothers (as well as other health benefits). Yet it can also be a source of both physical and psychic discomfort, with the variance in the emotional resonance breastfeeding produces being bound up with where it takes place and the 'sense' of whether or not breastfeeding is welcome in that locale. In this paper I begin by putting the UK's very low rates of breastfeeding beyond the first weeks post-birth in an international context, then trace in broad outline the spatial variability in breastfeeding rates across the UK. I then consider women's experiences breastfeeding in public through a combination of interviews, survey-work, participant observation, and 770 posts to the UK parenting website *mumsnet*. I take conceptual work forward by arguing that *strangers* play an important role in breastfeeding assemblages in terms of shaping mothers' experiences and feelings about breastfeeding practice. Drawing on concepts of affective atmospheres (Anderson 2009), public comfort (Ahmed 2004 & 2010), and secret-keeping (Deleuze and Guattari 1998), I argue that women's (often negative) affective experiences breastfeeding in public is a contributing factor in why breastfeeding rates in the UK are so low. Finally, I highlight some of the social and material changes that would be needed to make public space in the UK more breastfeeding-friendly.

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1. Introduction

This paper considers the emotional resonances of breastfeeding, focusing on experiences of breastfeeding in public in the contemporary UK. Breastfeeding is an archetypal form of giving comfort. Despite the wide variation in how it is experienced and understood across different cultural contexts and in different time periods, breastfeeding has stood throughout history as a symbol of nurturing, succour and wellbeing. Yet as scholarship has shown (Hausman, 2003), breastfeeding can also be marked by a range of other (less positive) aspects. In this paper I seek to explore some of the varied affective resonances that can be enfolded within breastfeeding practice. I focus on women's experiences of breastfeeding in public, employing the term 'public' in its broad, common-sense use to refer to space outside the home, including shops, cafes and streets spaces. I situate this work within the

context of the UK's very low rates of breastfeeding beyond the first four weeks post-birth, and argue that women's (often negative) affective experiences of breastfeeding in public are a contributing factor in this.

This study draws on and extends a number of important bodies of scholarship in and beyond Geography. This includes research on embodiment (Colls, 2007; Nast and Pile, 1998) and maternal bodies in particular (Longhurst, 2008, 2001); the socio-spatial politics of breastfeeding (Leeming et al., 2013; Mahon-Daly and Andrews, 2002; Newell, 2013; Pain et al., 2001); and the growing body of scholarship on the spaces, affects and materiality bound up in parenting practice (Aitken, 2000; Dowling, 2000; Gilmartin and Migge, 2015; Holloway, 1998; Longhurst, 2013; Luzia, 2010; Madge & O'Connor, 2005; Rose, 2004 and others). This literature has shown that attitudes about infant feeding are bound up with ideas about what it means to be a good parent (Pain et al., 2001), and that breastfeeding can serve as a marker for the transition into the new life-stage of parenting (Mahon-Daly and Andrews, 2002). Relatedly, Longhurst's work in this area has shown how both pregnant and lactating bodies can be profoundly marked by fear of

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bodily effluvia transgressing the body-boundary (Longhurst, 2001).

This scholarship has also shone light on the emotional dimensions of mothering. Longhurst (2013), for example, has shown the role Skype¹ can play for mothers as a means of maintaining emotional connections with their children, while Madge & O'Connor (2005) have traced out the importance of on-line discussion groups for new mothers as a space to find emotional support. In a similar vein, through their study of feelings of belonging amongst migrants in Ireland, Gilmartin and Midge show how mothers' sense of belonging is generated through interpersonal relations with both family and wider social networks (Gilmartin and Migge, 2015). Meanwhile, Longhurst and Hodgetts have shown how experiences of lone mothers attending University in New Zealand reveal feelings of both guilt and pride (Longhurst et al., 2012).²

This paper extends both empirical and conceptual work on the socio-spatial politics of mothering and infant-feeding. I build on existing empirical work by situating UK breastfeeding rates in an international context; outlining the spatial variability in breastfeeding rates across different parts of the UK; and highlighting women's unease with breastfeeding in public as a factor in breastfeeding cessation. In turn, I build on existing conceptual work on maternal practice by highlighting the role of unknown others as a factor shaping women's experiences of infant feeding. I extend existing analyses by approaching breastfeeding in public through conceptual lenses of affective atmospheres, public comfort and secret-keeping. Drawing on the work of Deleuze and Guattari as well as that of Lucilla Newell, I approach breastfeeding an assemblage into which an array of human and non-human actors and actants are enrolled (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988; Newell, 2013). I conceptualise breastfeeding assemblages as including not only mothers and babies but partners, family, friends, health professionals, the materiality of milk and breasts, policies, spaces in which breastfeeding takes place, artefacts, knowledges, and the broader public. Elsewhere I have written about the agency of breastmilk itself within breastfeeding assemblages (Boyer, 2016), and mother-baby assemblages in the context of urban mobility (Boyer and Spinney, 2016). Building on that work, in this paper I take existing conceptual work forward by highlighting the role of strangers in breastfeeding assemblages, highlighting the role of strangers in breastfeeding assemblages and arguing that the resonances or affective forces between breastfeeding women and strangers in public can shape women's feelings about breastfeeding practice.

I draw on an empirical base of four kinds of primary data. These include: interviews (N = 11), participant-observation, and survey work (N = 57) with new mothers in Southampton, a mid-size city in the South of England. These data were collected in 2008–9. Analysis also draws on 770 non-password-protected postings on breastfeeding in public made on UK parenting website mumsnet³ between December 2011 and April 2015. Finally, these data are supplemented by my own experiences breastfeeding as a new mother in Southampton in 2008–9. The size of the interview set was based on the work of Pain et al. (2001), who also interviewed eleven first-time mothers for their work on breastfeeding. My interviews were held with mums in a parenting group formed out of (free) National Health Service parenting classes offered by a Doctor's Clinic in the neighbourhood of Freemantle, which had an

average household income in-line with the UK overall but lower than average for the South East of England. I participated in these parenting classes myself as a participant-observer. All members of the group had breastfed for at least two weeks and all but one had stopped by one year.⁴

Surveys were gathered at an in-town neighbourhood sale of second-hand baby clothes sponsored by the NCT (the UK's largest parenting charity with a largely middle-class membership). The area in which this event took place is characterised by a mix of upper-income single-family homes, apartment complexes and student housing. This site was the largest event of its kind in the city at the time of the research, attracting over 300 people. I then analysed bulletin-board postings in order to put the survey, interview and participant observation data into a wider context. As Robinson (2001) notes, on-line discussion boards can provide a good way of gaining insight into the experiences of individuals who may feel isolated, as mothers of young babies can often be. Following the ethical protocol laid out by Robinson (2001) I drew only on non-password protected information and have anonymised all posts to protect privacy.

After Taguchi (2012) I approached my analysis *diffractionally*, meaning that I sought to gain insight into participants' understandings of their experiences but also acknowledge the role my own experiences play in the sense I have made of these data. As such the findings outlined here reflect a synthesis of the data itself and my interpretation of them. Data were analysed by identifying cross-cutting themes which were then coded and interpreted through reference to relevant secondary and conceptual literature. However, this analysis does not purport to be a comprehensive analysis of all the themes that emerged out of this research, but rather a reflection across the fieldwork on a particular suite of issues. For my analysis I draw on conceptual work from both Deleuze and Guattari about secrets and secret-keeping in their essay 'memories of a secret' in *A Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988), and Sarah Ahmed on public comfort (Ahmed, 2004, 2010). Through an engagement with these concepts I suggest that while breastfeeding is meant to occur it is also meant to be hidden in order not to discomfit others, such that undertaking this activity in public can be seen as a deterritorialization of received forms of gendered bodily comportment.

The final concept on which I draw is that of affective atmospheres as it has emerged in cultural geography scholarship over the last ten years (Anderson, 2009; Bissell, 2010; Buser, 2014; Duff, 2010; Thrift, 2004). Drawing on the scholarship of Deleuze and Guattari, Spinoza, Bohme and others, this conceptual approach focuses on the 'intra-corporeal' ways in which bodies affect and are affected by one another; and the collective senses that trans-personal intensities can generate. As Deleuze and Guattari put it, affect can be understood as 'the active discharge of emotion' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988 p.400). Put another way, affect is the mood or sense created by what passes between people. As well, affect is produced socially and culturally as well spatially. Relating this to the theme at hand, this means that how breastfeeding mothers perceive and react to the feelings of others varies across space and by social and cultural context. As Anderson (2009) observes, the concept of 'affective atmospheres' can provide a fruitful means of attending to both (personal) emotions and trans-personal intensities or affects that can emerge between humans, as well as between humans, matter and other kinds of non-humans.

Other contributors to this journal have employed the concept of affect as a means to approach the 'forces of encounter' (Roelvink

¹ Skype is a means of communicating through computers that including both video and sound.

² And of course, the essays in this special issue will greatly advance work in this field.

³ Mumsnet is the UK's biggest parenting website with 10 million visits per month.

⁴ Please see Section One for more information on my study site.

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