

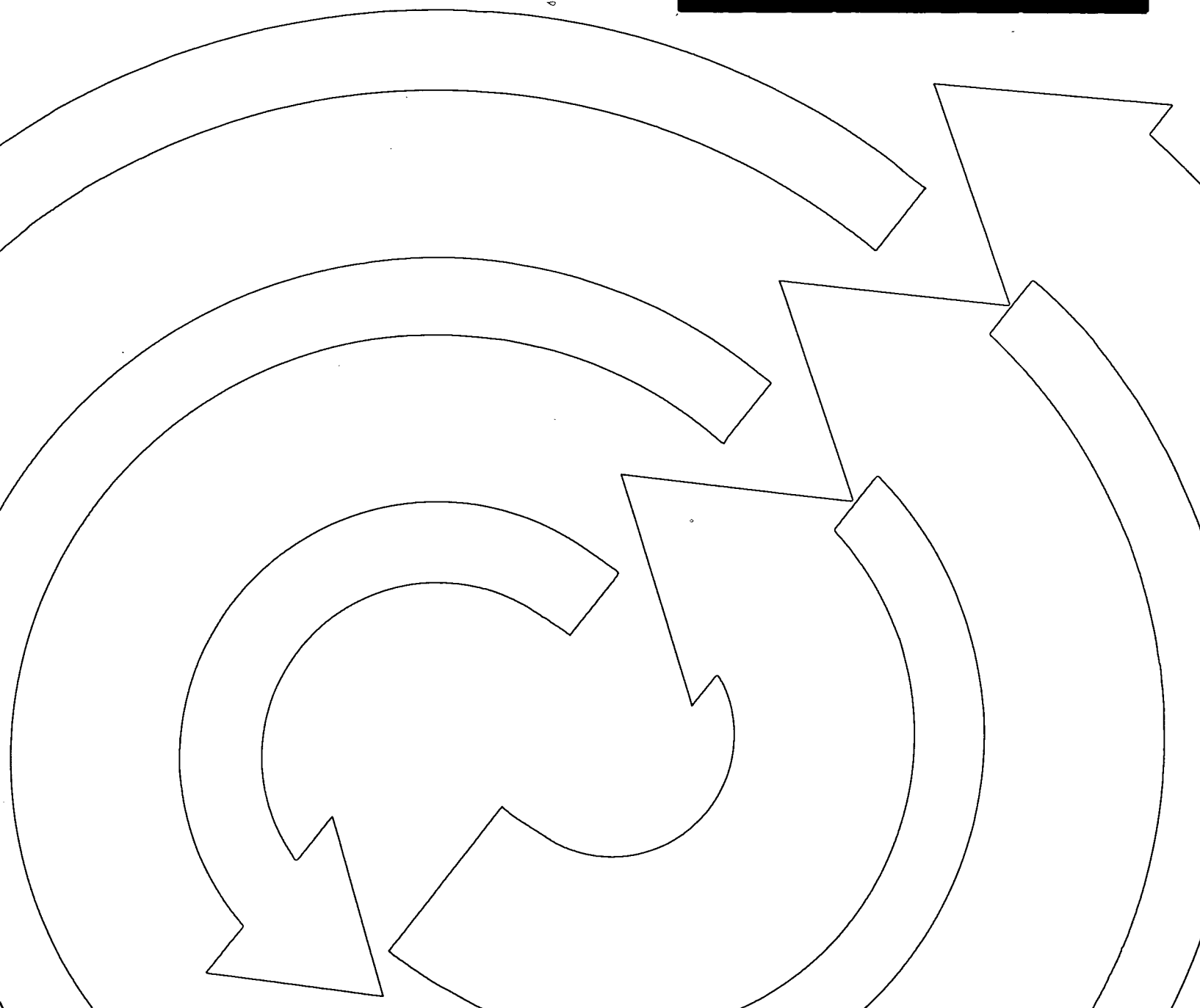


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THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION  
OF MOTHERHOOD:  
BREASTFEEDING AS A TOPIC FOR  
FEMINIST RESEARCH

by Linda M. Blum

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THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF MOTHERHOOD:  
Breastfeeding as a Topic for Feminist Research

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INTRODUCTION

I have joked with colleagues that a better title for today's talk might have been: "From paychecks to breasts: the story of my 'second strike'." As this sillier title indicates, I hope to accomplish several things in this talk. Primarily I want to explain how I got from my "first strike" research on the comparable worth/pay equity movement, to today's topic of breastfeeding and the social construction of motherhood. I also will give you a glimpse of the fieldwork I've begun, but I can't really go further than that. So my purpose today is merely to introduce and locate the topic.

Now a lot of you can guess at a major intervening variable in my transition from first to second strike (and it wasn't social), namely my individual construction of motherhood. And of course the topic did emerge from the immediacy of my own daily life with an infant. However, I think the "turn" in my research represents, and is informed by, a more general move in feminist scholarship. One way we might characterize it: a move away from androcentric, male-centered notions of equality, and the attempt to find a woman-centered vision, but one which does not fall into either an essentialist or a universalist notion of woman. (I'll explain this in a moment.)

So this talk is going to have two major parts: first I'll elaborate this transition in feminist theory, and within that I will place my work on the comparable worth movement. Then in the second part, I will turn to the topic of breastfeeding and discuss why I think it's important, and I will close with some of my plans for this research and where it's headed.

I. TRANSITIONS IN FEMINIST THEORY: From capitalist patriarchy to a gendered theory of capitalism.

Most radical feminists have consistently articulated woman-centered perspectives by valorizing those traits denigrated in misogynist cultures, as for example, in the writings of Mary Daly (1978) or Adrienne Rich (1980). But much of this work falls into the traps just mentioned -- it either essentializes gendered traits, making them the inevitable result of biology (much like sociobiology); and/or it universalizes female experience, denying the significance of class, race, ethnic, and national differences. However, through the 1970s, the dominant voices in both liberal and Marxist/socialist strands of feminism paid less attention to this work, which was veering off in practice into forms of separatism. Dominant strands emphasized instead the equal treatment of the sexes, defined as the same or similar treatment, and the vision of a gender-blind, androgynous society. Such strategies, often modeled on a race analogy after the victories of the Civil Rights movement (Ferree 1987), were assumed superior to the woman-centered perspectives because major objectives involved access, gaining access to male public realms, and separatism, if useful in limited doses, was not widely shared as an ultimate goal.

Although the equality-as-similarity approach did lead to significant gains, it began by the 1980s to seem more problematic. Such a vision of feminism shares the limitations of what Ehrenreich and English (1978) called the 19th Century rationalist women's movement; that is, as they point out, by demanding women's entrance into public spheres without questioning the implicit male-centered organization of public life, both incarnations of feminism reinforced the denigration of women's spheres and activities. This is easier to see in the case of liberal feminism, which clearly encouraged women to rush into the competitive marketplace, to follow male career models, and to turn woman into a female version of "economic man" (e.g. Friedan 1963). By the 1980s, even Gloria Steinem had quipped: "We have become the men we wanted to marry" (cited in Rothman 1989: 198).

But many will now argue, following Ehrenreich and English, that Marxist- and socialist-feminism in the 1970s shared a similar limitation; it was as unwittingly androcentric or male-

centered as liberal feminism. Looking back at some of the now-classic articles, I notice that there was little distinct notion of gender transformation, or of a feminist program, apart from the eradication of the sexual division of labor and the nuclear family. What we wanted to replace these "smashed" institutions with remained largely unexamined, and in the case of the family in particular, slipped too easily into instrumentalized visions of atomized individuals (similar to what I described as "society without the mother" in an early article [Blum 1987]). Even those such as Zillah Eisenstein (1979), who repeatedly cited the contribution of radical feminism to capitalist-patriarchy theory, primarily used this to bolster the conceptual distinction of gender from class (as separate but mutually interdependent structures, dual systems, etc.) rather than to develop a woman-centered standpoint.

In fact, the rhetoric of capitalist-patriarchy theory, adopted from various strands of structural Marxism, was itself extremely masculinist (in addition to other, related problems: functionalist, agent-less, etc.). As Barbara Ehrenreich wrote in the mid-'80s in a wonderful series in Socialist Review on the impasse of socialist-feminism (reprinted in Hansen and Philipson 1990):

The problem was that we were too deferential to Marxism. Socialist feminists tried to account for large areas of women's experience . . . in the language of commodities and exchange . . .

In this rhetoric, childrearing and women's non-instrumental, care-giving activities were reduced to "domestic labor," functioning for capitalism to "reproduce labor power" and for patriarchy, to give men control over women (Ehrenreich 1990: 274). One of the clearest examples of this perspective was Heidi Hartmann's (1981) vision of the family as a locus of struggle between self-interested, utility-maximizing individuals in which women are caught in a vicious circle between capital and men.<sup>1</sup> But I don't mean to be overly disparaging -- this was a widely shared framework in the 1970s -- and it promoted much insightful work examining how gender undergirds the class structure, including studies of women's position in the secondary labor market, the tenacity of the sexual division of labor, and women's exclusion from labor and revolutionary movements.

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1 This notion of the family was severely criticized by women of color. Because racial/ethnic men do not share the privilege of white men, the minority family could not be considered the same site of male domination and inevitable gender conflict (Glenn 1987).

So, now let me insert myself, coming to graduate school in 1978, the heyday of the capitalist-patriarchy framework. I began studying the efforts of working-class women in sex-segregated jobs to gain comparable pay in the early '80s from well within this framework. I originally intended to write (and have in part written) a class analysis of the women's movement through a comparison of comparable worth and affirmative action strategies. Also, I wanted to apply Eisenstein's notion of the "radical potential of liberal feminism" (1981) -- that is, liberal feminism, according to Eisenstein, has radical implications (in class terms) because of the always-implicit question of which men women want to be equal to -- thus more limited demands like affirmative action raise expectations that become almost inevitably frustrated, tending to provoke more radical claims like comparable worth. Finally, the capitalist-patriarchy framework argues for the significance of the feminist-labor alliances I saw emerge, if not completely harmoniously, in my case studies.

So working with this framework, here is what initially stood out to me: affirmative action, being about access, has served primarily as an individual mobility strategy allowing limited numbers of women, primarily privileged women, to gain entry to male fields, primarily elite managerial and professional fields. In contrast, comparable worth, despite its shortcomings, addresses the class position of the great majority of employed women and demands a more collective form of mobility, in terms less individualistic and meritocratic than affirmative action.

At this point, I had gender only in partial focus; although I was concerned with women workers, I was interested in feminist consciousness mainly as a vehicle to class consciousness and action. But in listening more closely to the respondents in my case studies, gender began to stand out, often as the stronger basis for group identification and political action, and providing different motivations. And as I turned my focus, what stood out in my analysis changed. It struck me (as it struck some of my respondents), that affirmative action is always about moving women into male positions and male fields, implicitly sharing assumptions of the greater value and desirability of men's work. Comparable worth voices a different stance on gender, arguing that we ought to value women's work more highly rather than trying to make women be like men. The underlying

feminist project suggested is thus also quite different, emphasizing that more than access, we need to undo the processes by which whatever traits and activities women are assigned become systematically devalued. As the postmodern theorists might suggest, many comparable worth activists have an implicit vision seeking equality and difference, for they are less interested in attacking gender boundary lines than in receiving greater honor as women workers.

The move on my part to bring gender into sharper focus (which I think is accomplished in my book [Blum 1991]), parallels, and was informed by, the general development of feminist scholarship during the late 1980s. This most recent period is characterized by what Joan Scott has called "the turn to gender as an analytic category" (1988) -- that is, especially for those coming from Marxism, the move to make gender a central analytic issue rather than the derivative or by-product of more significant social forces, namely capital accumulation and class formation. For some, such as Scott (1988) and Eisenstein (1988) this has meant the leap into poststructuralism. But for others, and here I include myself, this has not meant as clear a break with what Geoff Eley identifies as non-reductionist Marxism (1990) -- it is rather a turn to what we might call a gendered theory of capitalism. Anthropologist Sandra Morgen recently made a similar argument; stretching the metaphor of the unhappy marriage of Marxism and feminism, she argues that we should not sign the final divorce papers yet (1990: 280). And Joan Acker, whose recent work is influenced by poststructuralism, retains a Marxist perspective; she argues that putatively gender-neutral structures (built upon deeply embedded substructures of gender difference), are part of the larger strategy of control in industrial capitalist societies, but she does not discard the notion of the capitalist social formation itself (1988, 1989, 1990).

For those grappling with a gendered theory of capitalism, the need for a feminist vision beyond equality-as-sameness developed from the theoretical limitations of capitalist-patriarchy theory, but the "turn" was also a response to the material changes and harsh economic restructuring of the 1980s. As the contributors to the socialist feminist impasse series argued (in Hansen and Philipson 1990), postindustrial capitalism seemed out to "smash" the traditional family with little help from the women's movement. With fewer men earning a "family wage,"

women were torn by increasingly incompatible work and family demands (Stacey 1990, among many); many faced divorce, the feminization of poverty, and the rigors of single parenting (Weitzman 1985), while others remained married but faced the rigors of family "speed up" and the "second shift" (Curry *et al.* 1990, Hochschild 1989). Feminist scholars, instructed by women of color (e.g. Clarke and Wolfson 1990), began realizing, as Judith Van Allen writes:

[that] The right to bear and raise children without sacrificing one's health, one's sanity, or one's job, and without having to be a man's wife, will be a much more difficult right to gain than was the right not to have a child (1990: 297).

While in the 1960s and '70s feminists battled pronatalist ideology to free women from the coercion to mother, by the '80s, the authentic desire to mother became at least as resonant a theme in feminist scholarship. The influential woman-centered perspectives of Nancy Chodorow (1978), Carol Gilligan (1982), and more recently, Barbara Katz Rothman (1989), value motherhood as a social rather than biological phenomenon, and provide important correctives to the previous androcentric theories. Such perspectives also seem both more subversive and pertinent within the present material context (in which, as Van Allen comments, wage work pressures us "not to have children or to handle the needs of those children we have 'on our own time'." [1990: 297]). However, many see such arguments bringing us directly back to the traps of radical feminism, that is, by romanticizing traditional roles to invite right-wing antifeminist claims, to rationalize discrimination, and to deny differences among women.

## II. SO WHY LOOK AT BREASTFEEDING?

Because of this dilemma of equality versus difference, much gender scholarship currently focuses on those embodied experiences which ultimately differentiate women, particularly focusing on pregnancy and childbirth. Such embodied differences present especially intransigent obstacles to equal treatment and establishing rights to be like men, but some suggest they provide grounds for a politics that honors difference (Eisenstein 1988, Kessler-Harris 1987). Breastfeeding usually gets a brief mention in these recent discussions of the female body, but has been surprisingly neglected as a topic for extended research and analysis (Eisenstein 1988; Rothman 1989; Martin



1987). I argue that breastfeeding deserves greater attention, not because it poses an immediate answer to the equality-difference dilemma, but because I think the breastfeeding experience poses a most fruitful lens to view the problem and to grapple with new theoretical directions. I say this because, in breastfeeding, one may find the most intense experience of late 20th century conflict, and feminist ambivalence, over the social construction of motherhood, that is, what the postindustrial, "postfeminist" mother is and ought to be. But let me break this into three parts and look at each in turn: (1) I suggest that breastfeeding may represent the most intense version of public/private contradictions, (2) but that it is a form of embodied interdependence which, like pregnancy, we may not want to view as optional; and finally, (3) I argue that competing ideologies of breastfeeding and motherhood are already out there which capture the equality/difference dilemma.

(1) Even more than pregnancy, breastfeeding heightens the contradictions between public and private spheres created by the postindustrial economy's incompatible work and family demands. The workplace, a spatially separate sphere in which time and activity are externally controlled, assumes an individual bodily integrity and autonomy that are more severely compromised by breastfeeding than all but the most difficult of pregnancies. Moreover, researchers suggest that rigid control of time and space are more characteristic of women's pink collar jobs than many male jobs (Cosser 1982; Maier 1990). Acker goes further, to argue that activities associated with women's bodies -- including sexuality, childbearing and lactation, as well as emotionality -- are all ruled "out of order" in the workplace (1990). Similarly, anthropologist Emily Martin writes that: "Women are perceived as malfunctioning and their hormones out of balance rather than the organization of society and work perceived as in need of transformation..." (1987: 123).

Nevertheless, 52% of mothers with children under one year of age can be found in the workplace, and most are there fulltime (cited in Eisenstein 1988: 210). With no mandatory maternity leaves (and 6 weeks considered generous), scarce on-site nurseries, and certainly no

mandatory nursing breaks, one wonders at the American Pediatric Association's recommendation to breastfeed for one year -- or the recent suggestion by the U.S. Surgeon General that the lucky baby nurses until two (Novello 1990). In fact, only 40% of mothers breastfeed for 3 months (NCEMCH 1985: 7), and at one year the figure is down to just 8% (LLLI 1989).

But ironically, such numbers do represent an increase from the low numbers between 1940 and 1970. In that period, although most mothers were at home, thanks to the collusion of the (male) medical profession and the corporate producers of breastmilk substitutes, less than 10% breastfed for longer than a few token weeks. Current improved figures from the US and the other advanced nations, however, stand out as dramatically low in both cross-cultural and historical comparisons (e.g., Knodel *et al.* 1990; Palmer 1988).

(2) But why does this matter? Breast may be best, but we have scientifically-derived formulas, and entire generations have been raised safely on them; and we have sanitary conditions and safe water supplies, not like the 3rd world -- so what difference does it make if women choose not to breastfeed? Isn't it even an advantage, from a feminist perspective, for women to be free of obligatory breastfeeding?

Well, I'm arriving at what may be a somewhat paradoxical position (one that I don't feel wholly comfortable with) -- that it may be wrong to look at breastfeeding in such optional terms. Despite the core feminist insight that our knowledge of nature, of biological reality, is always partial, mediated, and culturally constructed, as Denise Riley (cited in Alcoff 1988) has argued, there really IS biology. And, even with only a partial view, the biological evidence seems incontrovertible, not only that "breast is best," but that breastmilk substitutes are far from adequate.

Gabrielle Palmer, in a world systems analysis of breastfeeding trends; points out that the health effects of breast vs. bottlefeeding are often distorted for political-economic reasons. The makers of infant formula sell \$4 billion of their product every year, and they provide the largest portion of research grants, scholarly conferences, advice pamphlets, and hospital advising

worldwide (1988: 8-9, 60). Nonetheless, public health research has accumulated, particularly since the late '70s and the consciousness-raising impact of the Nestle boycott, which indicates the undeniable superiority of breastmilk. Artificial feeding may not be lethal for most groups in the advanced nations today, but studies find that bottlefed babies are 15 times more likely to be hospitalized than breastfed (with social class controlled), and that the healthcare costs for bottlefed babies average more than 10 times higher than for breastfed (in 1979, \$68,684 compared to \$4,460) (Palmer 1988: 182-183). The medical profession now acknowledges that breastmilk has less-understood, "living" immunological properties that prevent allergies, respond to and prohibit infection, condition the immature digestive system, and cannot be artificially duplicated (LLLI 1987: Chapter 18). They are less quick to acknowledge that the inadequacies of formula may continue to pose serious risks. Just one of many possible examples was covered in the New York Times recently. Researchers found that some formulas are deficient in an essential fatty acid, crucial for eye and brain development, and also thought to help prevent heart disease. Although the medical researchers exhort parents not to panic, the Times reporter comments that: "Researchers believe that what babies eat in the first months of life is critical and that it may not be possible to undo some of the damage that may be done then" (Burros, 1990).

As a new mother, I was shocked to discover that there has been little regulation of breastmilk substitutes in the U.S. There was no regulation of content and ingredients until 1980, when as a response to an earlier near-lethal incident of a discovered inadequacy, legislation was adopted. There was little enforcement, however, due to the pro-business stance of the Reagan administration. Similarly, in 1981 the U.S. rejected the WHO/UNICEF code restricting the marketing of artificial formulas approved by 118 other countries (Palmer 1988: 209-215).

Sadly, the health benefits of breastfeeding are not distributed evenly in American society -- class and race are major determinants of which children receive the advantages. Rates at birth (in hospital) are, for above median income levels, as high as 75-80%; for lower incomes, as low as 20-40%. And this is at birth; the percentages drop off sharply in the early months among all groups (Coutts 1985). The U.S. government continues to be the major purchaser of breastmilk

substitutes, and plays no small role in perpetuating this problem. One of my respondents, a breastfeeding advocate, maintained that 25% of infant formula is sold to the U.S. government. Much of this goes to the federal WIC program, the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants and Children, intended to prevent malnutrition and reduce infant mortality among low-income groups (CDF Reports 1990a). The WIC program hands out free formula during the child's first year, and while they will give extra food vouchers to breastfeeding mothers, statistics indicate they have done little to encourage breastfeeding. For example, one study of WIC mothers in Washington D.C. found that as few as 26% breastfed at birth (Coutts 1985).<sup>2</sup>

With infant mortality rates rising among the black and poor in America, the failure to effectively promote breastfeeding seems tragic. A recent Associated Press report in the Ann Arbor News stated: "About 40,000 infants under twelve months die annually in the U.S. . . . Two black infants die for every white one, the worst racial disparity in 50 years" (Ryckman 1990: C8). Because the greatest killer is low birthweight (CDF Reports 1990b), the immunological properties of breastmilk found to be of special advantage to "premies" would give some of these infants improved chances of survival (LLLI 1987: 291-292). While certainly not a panacea (as the ravages of poverty cause many intractable problems), low-income babies at highest risk most need the advantages of breastfeeding.<sup>3</sup> And promoting breastfeeding would seem to make good sense as public policy -- it is always far more economical than artificial feeding -- but especially at a time when formula prices are soaring, social program budgets are being slashed, and even at present funding levels, WIC can serve only 60% of those eligible (see CDF Reports 1990b). Yet in contemporary America, breastfeeding has become a luxury good.

Emily Martin has written that it was the denigration of women's bodies which led to the widespread belief that a scientifically formulated artificial product was better for babies than

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2 To date my qualitative research confirms this. Breastfeeding advocates I have interviewed report that local WIC programs have not been receptive to their efforts. Also, low-income teen mothers are actively discouraged from breastfeeding according to a social worker who specializes in teen parenting problems.

3 Breastfeeding advocates report that worldwide, one million children die each year from diseases that can be prevented with adequate breastfeeding (LLLI 1990: 176).

breastmilk -- formula could be controlled, regularized, and made safe as women's bodies could not (1987: 146). If today we may have learned to trust some women's bodies, it is only those of the proper race and class.

So -- to sum up this second point -- I am becoming persuaded that we should talk about breastfeeding as a vital part of early nurture, or perhaps even as a child's right, rather than as a woman's option. Feminists, with good cause, have objected to arguments based on biology, and it is a paradox in my discussion (particularly dangerous in the present conservative era) to seem to be relegating mothers back to the home. Also, just as difficult for feminists, there may be little escaping the fact that breastfeeding is an autonomy-compromising experience. Even under the best imagined form of social organization (and one could imagine far better), it could not be shared with coparenting partners. Judith Stacey (1983: 576) once observed that

Resenting the transhistoric female responsibility for unilateral nurturance of children, and perhaps fearing . . . the possibility that the needs and interests of contemporary women and children may not be fully compatible, feminist theorists have tended to neglect the question of what children need.

I suggest that this mix of fear and resentment may underly our reluctance to fully examine breastfeeding. It certainly represents the child at its neediest, most dependent stage, and it requires an extreme form of interdependence that can be even more taxing than pregnancy (where at least your dependent is within your body, and you can basically move about where and when you like). But like pregnancy, now being made "optional" through reproductive technologies and surrogacy arrangements, we may want to argue against being made "free" of the obligation.<sup>4</sup>

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4 I am grateful to Julia Adams and Linda Frankel for clarifying a central problem with this discussion: I have argued for breastfeeding here solely in terms of the content of breastmilk. This leads to several problems, of which I am aware, but as yet have no resolution.

First, I have unintentionally duplicated the disembodied, mechanistic character of the medical paradigm's interpretation of breastfeeding. Placing so little value on the presence of the mother or the mother/infant interaction begs questions (as Adams and Frankel posed), like: what if we had better breast pumps? You know, you can freeze breastmilk, and then what if the baby is given the bottles by a consistent, warm, attentive, father, coparenting partner, or other primary caregiver? I want to argue that while this may be a fine parttime compromise, it is not the same experientially or emotionally, and should not be made the equivalent. However, here I duplicate the equality-difference dilemma: while on the one hand I feel uncomfortable with the medical paradigm's devaluing of the mother, I feel nearly as uncomfortable with a position that veers so close to biological essentialism.

(3) The third way in which breastfeeding exemplifies late 20th century conflict over motherhood is through the promulgation of competing paradigms. Two distinct interpretations or ideologies of breastfeeding exist and confront new mothers, each with its own normative prescription for motherhood. Interestingly, these parallel the competing visions of gender transformation: the medical profession utilizes the androgynous, equality-based framework popularized by liberal feminism, while La Leche League, a group organized in the 1950s to promote breastfeeding, honors women's traditional spheres and in so doing, walks the thin line between promoting a woman-centered or more antifeminist perspective.

The medical profession exemplifies the androgyny perspective by failing to value woman's difference, even in this rather striking instance. Although professing that "breast is best," they portray the use of artificial substitutes as an attractive option, and often suggest a disembodied, mechanistic view of the breastfeeding experience, in which mechanical pump and rubber nipple are considered equivalent. The difficulties of combining paid work and breastfeeding are typically glossed over, resulting in some extraordinary images of "supermom" (who either nurses all night and works all day, or becomes a champion of mechanical pumping).<sup>5</sup> Here is one example, from the introductory fashion show at a medical conference promoting breastfeeding:

Representing the United States is Jane Newall, an all-American mother, who nurses her daughter, works full-time as a computer programmer and makes time to run, swim and bike regularly. Jane is sporting red running shorts with her . . . Triathlon shirt commemorating the event in which she took first place . . . last.

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Second, if I argue that there is something uniquely valuable in the embodied experience and mutual sensual pleasure of mother and baby (the position of La Leche League, as I will point out below), this is difficult to reconcile with the shared primary parenting argument of Chodorow (1978), as well as Dorothy Dinnerstein (1976). That is, if the social subordination of women ultimately rests on who the child separates and individuates from, my (tentative) argument may mean that early separation would continue to implicate women and spare men, even if men share all other aspects of early care and nurturance. (In fact, I may be observing something like this in my own infant son.)

Obviously, further working out this issue will be crucial.

5 Ironically, much of this advice is presented in pamphlets put out by formula companies. It is as if they know that most women won't be able to live up to such an ideal, and will therefore end up relying on their products.

month. Her daughters, 8 month-old Kara, and 22 month-old Alexis, are in matching Oshkosh overalls (NCEMCH 1985: 7).

The interesting thing in this depiction is that the physical presence of the mother seems almost unnecessary -- mother and baby seem to have a breastfeeding relationship without the breast while mom is off working and working out.

In sharp contrast to the medical profession and its disembodied, androgynous images, La Leche League International, a "mother to mother" organization I began doing fieldwork on last summer, advocates the unique value of the mother's presence and has constructed an alternative interpretation of breastfeeding.<sup>6</sup> LLL has members in 46 countries, but originated and remains based in the U.S.; its 9,000 local leaders assist an estimated 300,000 women each year through support groups and telephone counseling; their manual, The Womanly Art of Breastfeeding, has sold nearly two million copies, and they publish and distribute numerous materials on breastfeeding.<sup>7</sup>

Initially approaching the League as a participant observer, I was extremely wary, wondering how honest I should be about my identity. I thought they would espouse a combination of '60s "back to nature" philosophy mixed with a vehement disapproval of employed mothers. The League has this negative reputation -- when mentioning this research to friends, I got comments like: "La Leche League, they believe you should breastfeed your child until college!", or "They're like breastfeed or DIE!" But to my chagrin, I found much that was appealing in their perspective, and that I was comfortable being fairly honest about both my identity and this research.

LLL's interpretation of breastfeeding, in contrast to the medical profession, emphasizes the embodied experience and the infants' need for physical, intimate nurture; the League therefore

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6 La Leche League began in the U.S. but was named after a Spanish shrine in Florida dedicated to the Mother of Christ, "Nuestra Senora de la Leche y Buen Parto," Our Lady of Happy Delivery and Plentiful Milk (LLLI 1987).

7 I attended meetings of 3 different groups in southeastern Michigan during the summer of 1990, and have conducted one-on-one interviews (averaging 2 hours) with 21 of those attending (including leaders, very involved and less involved mothers); I intend to conduct a total of 30 interviews.

advocates minimal amounts of mother-baby separation, complete demand-feeding, lengthy night nursing, child-led weaning, even shared family beds. LLL is also explicit that theirs is more than a view of breastfeeding, but a total philosophy of mothering. For example, one LLL founder wrote: ". . . the needs of their babies are not only for mother's milk, or mother's breast, but for all of her" (White 1987).

What are the things I found appealing in this totalistic construction? First, LLL provides crucial information on breastfeeding that is largely unavailable from other sources. Physicians may profess that breast is best, but they typically have read less than a page on the topic,<sup>8</sup> often lack basic information, and even spread misinformation; and most of course lack firsthand experience. LLL has become a truly woman-centered alternative source of knowledge, committed to proffering supportive, hands-on, empathetic advice. You can call on them 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year. And with 35 years of experience, they can solve many of the physical problems that nursing mothers confront.

Second, the organization itself is open, run on a volunteer basis, with the aim to be nonjudgemental and provide mother-to-mother support for all women. And the organization strains to meet this ideal, even in the face of postindustrial, "postfeminist" realities. They have struggled over how and whether to counsel employed mothers when many leaders found it difficult to condone less than fulltime mothering. The 1981 edition of The Womanly Art [271] bluntly stated: "Our plea to any mother who is thinking about taking an outside job is, 'if at all possible, don't.'" However, the group has doggedly clung to its formal ideal (refusing to play into the media-hyped "mommy wars"), adding a new positively-worded advice chapter for employed nursing mothers to the 1987 edition of The Womanly Art, and training all leaders to counsel mothers "where they are at."

They are also not unaware of class and race problems. While members acknowledge that the League is primarily made up of white, middle class, married women, in the 1980s LLL had community outreach programs designed to enter black neighborhoods, and they have recently

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8 Confirmed to me by one breastfeeding advocate who trains medical residents.



begun peer counselor training to better work with low-income mothers. I talked to a black woman in Flint, a coleader of this effort, who has been in LLL for twelve years, primarily with the hope to reach minority mothers. She felt it was a good organization within which to pursue this purpose. In short, I think LLL is grappling to avoid one of the same traps as feminists, the universalist trap -- that is, how to maintain a woman-centered perspective without denying, and perhaps even while addressing, important differences among women. It does not always work -- most members will still not accept employed women as leader-applicants, and they have few minority, low-income, or unmarried leaders. But even with that, they have become a major source of advice and support for employed nursing mothers. And they continue to rethink strategies for reaching excluded groups of mothers.

## CONCLUSION

LLL is a fascinating, complex organization, and I can say little more about it today -- perhaps the topic of a future talk. (I should write another paper to talk about their construction of breastfeeding and the essentialism problem). But I want to conclude today by telling you a bit of my research plans and where I'm headed.

In contrast to those such as Joan Scott who pose only highly abstract, theoretical solutions to the equality-difference dilemma, I intend in this research to take a more grounded, phenomenological approach. In other words, while I also hope to move beyond the dichotomy of androcentric versus woman-centered standpoints, I want to bring in the concrete experience and understandings of women moving beyond this dichotomy in their own lives. (In part this is because I don't have an answer, and want to explore new theoretical directions; but in part this is because I am always more interested in the ground, the ground for action, and the ground for social transformation.) And, for the reasons I have outlined in this talk, I am using breastfeeding as the lens that I think wonderfully magnifies the entire picture of late 20th century motherhood.

So, what I have begun to do, in what will be a multifaceted, qualitative project, is to explore the subjective understandings of the breastfeeding experience with diverse groups of

women (using fieldwork and interviewing). I began with LLL, to probe in depth the degree to which participants adhere to the League philosophy, how they understand and respond to the normative messages conveyed, and how they also may have used or rejected the medical paradigm.

In additional facets of the study I plan to tap other groups of women of varied race and class backgrounds that have breast and bottlefed. Working my way down the socioeconomic ladder, I will tap working and middle-class white and minority women. Finally, I hope to do fieldwork in an alternative school for teenage mothers, probably at the bottom rung of the ladder. So in addition to grappling with the equality-difference dilemma, I also hope to address important questions of gender diversity. For women of differing race and class position being female and being mother does not carry the same meaning, and the divergence of breastfeeding experiences illuminates the parameters within which motherhood is honored in our society. With breastfeeding becoming a luxury item, I will examine how women who cannot afford to be as "motherly" give meaning to their experience. In short, I intend to examine how diverse groups of women are themselves reconstructing motherhood amid newly emerging social constraints.

## EPILOGUE

I have two brief stories I cannot resist adding on here, both indicating what is left out of this paper.

The first one: last month my thesis advisor, Michael Burawoy, was visiting. And as I rather feebly tried to tell him about this new research, he concluded with a laugh: "It sounds pretty 'discoursey' to me!" So, I think it isn't only (or maybe I still have too much of a transference relationship with Michael to want to admit it). But obviously I have skirted around the poststructuralist challenge in this paper and will have to confront it more directly.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> As Michael Kennedy has helped me to clarify, while being about the discursive construction of motherhood, I hope the project will not end there.

The second story: driving home two weeks ago, worried about this talk, I had this very surreal experience. On the radio I suddenly heard:

Women's Breasts! Is Bigger Better or were the '80s Breast Obsessed? Why Have We Rejected the large chests and bursting bustiers of the '80s? Tonight's Inside Story on "Entertainment Tonight".

And I realized that I had thought very little about sexuality, which of course, when Americans think of breasts is their most immediate association. We are a breast-obsessed culture -- in fact, over a million women have had breast implant surgery, and that number increases by some 300,000 every year, and probably few of these women care that this makes them incapable of breastfeeding. And when I told women friends I was pursuing breastfeeding as my "second strike," several said they'd be terrified of the topic because of such associations; one said, "It sounds okay, just don't use the word 'breasts'."<sup>10</sup>

So in my incomplete journey from paychecks to breasts, I end here, if somewhat abruptly.

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<sup>10</sup> As note 4 above indicates, it will be crucial to think through this issue more carefully.

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