
 Irene Rocha Kalil  
 Adriana Cavalcanti de Aguiar

<sup>1</sup> Funda o Oswaldo Cruz, Instituto Nacional de Sa de da Mulher, da Crian a e do Adolescente Fernandes Figueira, N cleo de Comunica o Social e Design. Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brasil

<sup>2</sup> Funda o Oswaldo Cruz, Instituto de Comunica o e Informa o Cient fica e Tecnol gica em Sa de, Laborat rio de Comunica o e Sa de. Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brasil.

#### Correspondence

Irene Rocha Kalil  
[irenekalil@gmail.com](mailto:irenekalil@gmail.com)

## Pro-breastfeeding discourses and the configuration of contemporary motherhood

*Discursos de promo o ao aleitamento materno e a conforma o da(s) maternidade(s) contempor nea(s)*

#### Abstract

This essay aims to reflect on the historic role of the pro-breastfeeding discourses in the conformation of certain popular motherhood models in the contemporary Western world, a theme that has been provoking discussions in countries like England, the United States and Canada, among others. Its theoretical and methodological basis is comprised of two main fields: the first one is the Theory of Social Discourses or Semiology of Social Discourses, which, when applied to the empirical material by means of Discourse Analysis, understands the discourse as a constitutive/constituent element of social power relations; analyzes it based on its textual marks or clues; questions the privileged and naturalized meanings of said discourses, relating them to the pertaining ideologies, be they conscious or unconscious, in their conception and thinks communication as a process of negotiation of meanings between the producer and the receiver. The other is Gender Studies, which questions the supposed sexual essence of the concepts of masculine and feminine, arguing that they are, in fact, immersed in the political sphere and act so as to legitimize the inequality in the distribution of power between the sexes in society. In accordance with the analysis of the official discourses that laid the foundation for this article, the contemporary pro-breastfeeding discourses corroborate, to a large extent, the conception of a mother's breasts, body and subjectivity as

objects of external regulations, making the woman a means of providing the best food to the child. In this way, they compete for the conformation and conservation of certain motherhood models in force today, which establish a record of the social zeitgeist about what it means to be a "good mother".

**Keywords:** Breast Feeding, Parenting, Gender Studies, Health and Communication.

### **Resumo**

Este ensaio objetiva refletir sobre o papel histórico dos discursos pró-aleitamento materno na conformação de certos modelos de maternidade em voga no mundo ocidental contemporâneo, tema que vem suscitando discussões em países como Inglaterra, Estados Unidos e Canadá, entre outros. Sua base teórico-metodológica compreende dois campos principais: o primeiro é o da Teoria dos Discursos Sociais ou Semiologia dos Discursos Sociais, que, aplicado ao material empírico por meio da Análise de Discurso, entende o discurso como constitutivo/constituente das relações sociais de poder; analisa-o com base nas suas marcas ou pistas textuais; problematiza os sentidos privilegiados e naturalizados nesses discursos, relacionando-os às ideologias implicadas, consciente ou inconsciente, em sua concepção; e pensa a comunicação como processo de negociação de sentidos entre sujeitos emissor e receptor. O outro é o dos Estudos de Gênero, que questiona a suposta essência sexual dos conceitos de masculino e feminino, argumentando que eles estão imersos na esfera política e atuam no sentido de legitimar a desigualdade na distribuição do poder entre os sexos na sociedade. De acordo com a análise dos discursos oficiais que embasou este artigo, os discursos contemporâneos pró-aleitamento materno corroboram, em grande medida, a concepção dos seios, do corpo e da subjetividade materna como objetos de regulações externas, sendo a mulher compreendida como um meio de fornecimento do melhor alimento à criança. Desse modo, concorrem para a conformação e manutenção de certos modelos de maternidade em vigor, estabelecendo um recorte no imaginário social do que viria a ser uma "boa mãe".

**Palavras-chave:** Aleitamento materno. Maternidade. Estudos de Gênero. Comunicação em Saúde.

## INTRODUCTION

This essay proposes a reflection on the historic role of the discourses in favor of breastfeeding, especially those of the last decades of the 20th century, in the shaping of certain popular motherhood models in the contemporary Western world. It stems from the academic experience of the authors, in a research that began in 2011 and has been going ever since. The theme itself is relevant in today's society, having raised discussions inside and outside academia, in Brazil and in countries such as England, the United States and Canada, among others.

Our argument has two main theoretical and methodological basis. The first one is the Theory of Social Discourses<sup>1</sup> or Semiology of Social Discourses.<sup>2</sup> When applied to the empirical material by means of Discourse Analysis, this school of thought understands discourse as a constitutive/constituent element of social power relations; it analyzes the discourse based on its textual marks or clues; questions the privileged and naturalized meanings, relating them to their ideological roots, be they conscious or unconscious, the so-called "social conditions of production"; and sees communication as a process of negotiation of meanings between the producer and the receiver.

The second basis is Gender Studies, which, as pointed out by sociologist Jacqueline Pitanguy de Romani,<sup>3</sup> questions the supposed sexual essence of the concepts of masculine and feminine, arguing that they are, in fact, "immersed in the political sphere, legitimating asymmetrical positions in the social distribution of power between the sexes" (p. 65).

We believe, from the analysis of official materials and available literature, that the discourses in favor of breastfeeding, especially after the mid-1970s, with the global movement for the return of breastfeeding practices, stressed by Venancio,<sup>4</sup> mostly in developing countries, have significantly influenced the standards of contemporary motherhood. As well described by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu,<sup>5</sup> the female body was historically constituted as a "body for someone else", meaning that the women's image of their own bodies is mainly constituted by the objective representation of those bodies, i.e., by the "feedback sent by others (parents and peers etc.)." (p. 79).

In this sense, the reflection proposed by this article seeks to demonstrate how the contemporary discourses in favor of breastfeeding corroborate the conception of maternal breasts and of the woman's body as a whole, and its own subjectivity, as objects of external regulations, comprehended as a means or a channel to provide the food-product that is a right of the child.

## THEOTICAL BASIS AND DISCUSSION

In accordance with prior<sup>6</sup> and current investigations, we believe that motherhood - the choice of following it and the way in which one does it - can be considered, even nowadays, a controversial social issue and a theme that has still not garnered consensus and agreement in the feminist movement. We say this because, even after the various feminist waves, since the 1960s, motherhood is still a sensitive issue, which impacts and competes with other important subjects to the movement, such as women's professional careers, participation in the public sphere and, in a broader scope, gender equity.

On the other hand, it remains a delicate matter. Whereas some theorists and activists, like Badinter,<sup>7</sup> analyze motherhood as a permanent obligation of women, historically constructed by a patriarchal society, and constraining women within the private sphere, others see it as an area in which women can experience full "empowerment". Being the protagonist in childbirth (preferably without interventions), the practice of breastfeeding on demand, co-sleeping (parents and baby sleeping together), among other elements, comprise a model of raising children that has been growing internationally and is called attachment parenting.

According to Charlotte Faircloth,<sup>8</sup> attachment parenting is a global movement, with roots in the United Kingdom and the United States, that supports the intimacy between parents and children and usually involves extended, on demand breastfeeding, the "dressing of the baby" (with the use of slings or cloths that allow the baby to be transported always in close proximity to the body of the adult, the mother in general) and the family habit of children sleeping in the same room as their parents.

This vision of motherhood as female empowerment has, today, one of its representations in a concept called "mammalian motherhood", which appears in several networks of mothers on the internet. According to Brazilian researchers Fernanda Vecchi Alzuguir and Marina Fischer Nucci:<sup>9</sup>

[...] among the many points emphasized by the "mammalians", the defense of humanized, natural childbirth (both at home or in a hospital) and "extended" (for two years or more) and on demand (without a rigid, predefined schedule, i.e., whenever the child asks for the breast) breastfeeding stand out (p. 222).

They point out that "the 'mammalians' also advocate the idea of a 'return to nature' and the appreciation of a 'sacred feminine'" (p. 223).

Although relatively recent in Brazil with this nomenclature, the "mammalian motherhood" can be identified with the feminist "second wave". This wave was characterized by Elisabeth

Badinter<sup>10</sup> as a sort of *naturalism* or *ecological motherhood*, that emerged in Europe and North America in the late 1970s and early 1980s, in opposition to the more culturalist motto of the first currents of feminism. By considering "motherhood the crucial experience of femininity from which one can build a world that is more humane and just" (p. 71), this movement reflects a process of appreciation of the biological differences between the sexes by means of the acknowledgment of motherhood's natural character, and breastfeeding as the fulfillment of a desire and a form of affirming one's femininity.

Fernanda Vecchi Alzuguir and Marina Fischer Nucci<sup>9</sup> observed how the scientific discourse has been resignified in the virtual networks of mothers - communities and blogs - "so as to legitimize practices and lifestyles that conform to the ideals of the humanization of childbirth and breastfeeding anchored on the idea of a universal feminine nature" (p. 219), hence establishing what they named as "motherhood based on evidence". The authors stress that their purpose is not to invalidate the social and political importance of these social networks of mothers, including their importance as support networks, "in the sense of the construction of the sexual and reproductive autonomy of women and the critique of the medicalization of the female body" (p. 220). On the contrary, they state that their intention is to reinforce the urgency of a critical analysis of this idea of a "universal feminine nature", that has for centuries been anchored on biological determinism, understanding that such an idea "does not put into question the social conditions of the emergence of gender inequalities and, consequently, the political dimension of motherhood" (p. 220).

The contemporary theoretical and political debate around motherhood directly relates with the theme we have been studying, especially as of 2011, during the first author's doctoral program, which approached the official guidance and appreciation of breastfeeding discourses, analyzing the meanings that were privileged and their silences or absences. In fact, our statements demand explanation: we agree with researcher Dagmar Estermann Meyer,<sup>11</sup> that we have today "motherhood pedagogies", which are, to a large extent, created by the breastfeeding discourses. In this author's opinion, the disciplining and social control networks that are produced and placed in circulation by these contemporary pro-breastfeeding discourses influence the production of gender identities and the conceptions of motherhood in our current society.

Meyer<sup>11</sup> questions the limits and possibilities of "flesh and bone" mothers to recognize themselves in these representations and at what cost, and asks herself "what other interests are at stake when we produce definitions of motherhood that transform breastfeeding in an

irrefutable and unquestionable imperative" (p. 15), acting in the consolidation perspective which the author named as a "new politicization of the breast and breastfeeding".

Some women who study gender have identified this movement of which Meyer speaks as a new model of motherhood. Based on the naturalization of the social function of women by reinforcing the myth of motherly love and the biologization of breastfeeding, this new model or ideology was called by researcher Joan Wolf<sup>12</sup> as *total motherhood* and by Sharon Hays<sup>13</sup> as *intensified motherhood*.

This model, which, to a large extent, resembles an offshoot of the healthcare discourse about mother's responsibility for childcare, their health and full development, is related to the idea of an intensive exercise of motherhood, of a motherhood that is established as total or all-encompassing in what pertains to the subjectivity and identity of the woman who chooses to have a child. In the intensified or total motherhood, mothers must become "experts" in everything that their children may find or need, from pediatricians, psychologists and educators, to the people responsible for inspecting the safety of consumer goods.

Thusly, "it is expected of mothers not only to protect their children from immediate threats, but also to anticipate and prevent any circumstance that may interfere in their child's supposedly normal development"<sup>12</sup> (p. 615), a responsibility that begins during pregnancy. To Wolf,<sup>12</sup> the practice of this moral code often implies a negotiation between what mothers *may* enjoy and that babies and children *must* have. A process that is always unbalanced, because, as she stresses, "whereas mothers have desires, like a sense of physical, emotional and psychological autonomy, children have needs" (p. 616). Thus, it is expected of a "good mother" to reduce all risks to which her children may be exposed, regardless of the potential costs of any nature that behavior such as this may cause to her own life.

Sharon Hays,<sup>13</sup> in turn, called the "ideology of intensified motherhood" an "idea that the education of children requires a huge amount of money, specialized skills and immense volumes of physical, moral, mental and emotional energy on the part of the mother" (p. 7). In this ideology, which would come to reach a good part of the western world, breastfeeding seems to be the key issue, since it is possible to identify the presence of this model in many of the international discourses in defense of breastfeeding.

In Brazil, the situation is not different. In the book that resulted from the previous study,<sup>6</sup> in which the educational materials produced by the Ministério da Saúde (Ministry of Health) to women and health professionals and campaign pieces of the World Breastfeeding Week - which

takes place annually, from August 1st to the 7th - were analyzed, some important points that are common to most of these discourses were observed. Some of them shall be shared in this text.

Firstly, it is important to emphasize that, although much of the promotional and guidance material for breastfeeding is directed to women, the policy is not intended for her, but for the child. The National Policy for the Promotion, Protection and Support to Breastfeeding is connected to the Coordenação-Geral de Saúde da Criança e Aleitamento Materno (General Superintendence of Child Health and Breastfeeding), and its ultimate goal is the health of the child, especially in what pertains to nutrition and immunization. In the majority of the official discourses of this policy, the woman is not treated as a subject, but as an instrument necessary for the supply of breast milk - the so-called best food - to the child. In order for the woman to adopt the practice of breastfeeding within the parameters recommended by the Ministério da Saúde (Ministry of Health) - which closely follow the parameters of the World Health Organization -, the discourses adopt, in general, a prescriptive, imperative tone, with the use of sentences such as "Give your child what is best" and "Breastfeed exclusively until the child is 6 months old".

The perspectives of women are hardly considered in the formulation of these discourses. But of what perspectives are we talking about? The discourses do not mention any of the feelings breastfeeding women have, nor do they help to overcome potential difficulties they might have, pinning upon the woman's desire the possibility of her keeping on breastfeeding after the end of the maternity leave, with sentences such as "all women are capable of breastfeeding".

They also do not regard the interactions and social impacts that are implied in breastfeeding, such as: parents sexuality during breastfeeding, women's work - whether at home or in the formal labor market - and the participation of the father or partner both in breastfeeding, and in child care, pointing to a new way of framing mothering as a practice that can be exercised by the mother, but also by others who share in the care of the child.

Not even the *Cartilha para a mãe trabalhadora que amamenta*<sup>14</sup> (Booklet for the breastfeeding working mom) regards the difficulties of women who work in the labor market and breastfeed. While it explains in minute details the process of milking, conserving and offering the milk to the baby, it does not offer one single clue about the possibility of weaning the baby in preparation for the mother's return to work after birth, nor does it discuss the emotional impact, both for mother and the baby, of this moment of separation. Finally, the discourses generally individualize the practice of breastfeeding and impose upon the woman the greater part of the responsibility. As stated in the *Cartilha*<sup>14</sup>: "Is it possible to keep feeding your child with breast milk even after you go back to work? Sure it is!" (p. 26).

Thus, many women end up feeling guilty or ashamed for not wanting or for being unable to breastfeed. According to Erin N. Taylor and Lora Ebert Wallace,<sup>15</sup> the issues of guilt and shame emerge from the discrepancies between the meanings proposed by the hegemonic discourse of the national and international organizations and the meanings produced by those who breastfeed. Mothers who do not breastfeed or do not comply with the defined parameters of breastfeeding may feel guilt, sadness or a sense of inadequacy. In addition, mothers who do not reflect the hegemonic expectations of breastfeeding can be deemed as having rejected an ideal of femininity that relates breastfeeding to the feminine nature. Such criticisms can make a mother who does not breastfeed feel "an incomplete woman".

In a 2014 article, Irene Kalil, Marcelo Robalinho Ferraz and Adriana Cavalcanti de Aguiar<sup>16</sup> observed convergences and divergences between the information produced by the Ministério da Saúde (Ministry of Health) and the knowledge of mothers about breastfeeding. For this purpose, they proposed a discourse analysis of a campaign piece of the World Breastfeeding Week of 2010 and, subsequently, a first approximation with the maternal perceptions about breastfeeding and also about the same material they analyzed. Seven mothers from the Northeast of Brazil were interviewed, with ages between 25 and 40, married or living in common-law marriage, all of which had graduate or postgraduate degrees, had gainful employment at home or not, who were mothers of babies younger than two years old and in the process of breastfeeding or having weaned their babies no longer than two years before.

The text of the analyzed poster exposes the motto of the official discourse about breastfeeding:

When a woman is pregnant, she and all of those around her must prepare to offer all of what is best for the baby. And there is nothing better than breastfeeding. Therefore, breastfeed your baby in its first hour of life. Let it suckle as much as it likes. Your milk is the only food that it needs, up to when it is six months old. Only then should you start feeding it with other foods. But keep breastfeeding until the child is two years old or more. Breastfeeding is a lot more than just feeding the child. It is an important step to a healthier life.

The interviewees' responses regarding what motivated them to breastfeed demonstrated a substantial incorporation of this official discourse, reflecting the discursive effect that Verón<sup>1</sup> called the "absolute discourse". In the construction of the imagery, however, the idealized conception of breastfeeding as a perfect, problem-free practice is dissociated from the experiences and perceptions of mothers.



It is important to observe that five of the seven mothers expressed disagreement with the recommendation of the Ministério da Saúde (Ministry of Health) that babies should be breastfed until they are two years old or older. The reasons they argued were related to the nutritional state and socialization of the baby; to the autonomy and social life of the mother; to the child's own initiative in getting weaned before the age expressed in the campaign; and the existence of other ways of strengthening the relationship between mother and son that go well beyond breastfeeding.

In the aforementioned study,<sup>6</sup> the analysis of educational materials and campaigns has allowed us to identify that, even today, most of these discourses still emphasize the importance of breastfeeding for the child's health, looking at it under the light of "motherly breastfeeding" (provision of milk to the baby) in detriment of "breastfeeding" (intersubjective and complex process with potential psychological and social consequences for those involved).

Therefore, like in the material mentioned, most discourses adopt a tone of command, worded in present tense and, in general, imperative verbs, seeking to produce an effect of truth. Such artifice "aims to try to make sure that the receiver demonstrates, in the future, the behavior expressed by the state of things to which it alludes", as pointed out by linguist Milton Pinto.<sup>2</sup> They are addressed especially to women - pregnant women, mothers, lactating women - aiming to discipline their motherly body, especially their breasts, which is a necessary element and condition for breastfeeding to take place.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, we intended to reflect upon the historic role of pro-breastfeeding discourses in the shaping of certain popular models of motherhood in the Western world today. By means of the analysis of the official materials produced in the last two decades in Brazil, we were able to observe that their prevailing vision is that of a predominantly instrumental relationship in regard to breastfeeding: it is up to the woman to provide her child with the best food, which is both the safest and the most complete, from a nutritional standpoint, and with an invaluable immunological value. The mother is persuaded to breastfeed based, primarily, by the publicization of the attributes of breastmilk and its supposedly indispensable character to the health of the child, and such situation implies the appreciation or extolling of certain meanings in detriment of others, which are often erased or obscured.

This conclusion is not meant to minimize the importance of breastfeeding, but to question how the discourses naturalize this practice, reducing it to biological behaviors that define the

natural role of women in society. Breastfeeding is a complex experience is seldom explored, which helps us to understand the context in which weaning is a silenced process of transition and the psychological condition of breastfeeding is consistently relegated.<sup>17</sup> Thusly, women and their perspectives about breastfeeding are stereotyped, configuring a rigid model of motherhood, which constrains mothers in their forms of caring, their choice of whether or not to breastfeed and their motivations to continue breastfeeding.

Also in the context of health, Jordana Moreira de Almeida, Sylvana de Araújo Barros Luz and Fábio da Veiga Ued<sup>18</sup> stressed that, although mothers seek professional help for their problems related to breastfeeding, such professionals "generally impose many rules and regulations that do not contemplate their reality and that ends up generating fear and insecurity in the nursing mother" (p. 360). In the same direction, Juliana Cristina dos Santos Monteiro, Flávia Azevedo Gomes and Ana Maria Spanó Nakano<sup>19</sup> observed that the discourses in favor of breastfeeding, used to spread the practice as a universal social behavior of women, "tend to evidence the romantic vision of this act, omitting possible problems that may occur" (p. 148), including those related to the different meanings of the breast and the female body.

In this sense, the authors<sup>19</sup> advocate the formulation of a new model, one that continues to respect the right of women to decide on the use they are going to make of their breasts and bodies. Thus, it is up to health professionals to "accept these women, understand their way of life and respect their opinions, so as to support them in their decisions regarding the breastfeeding process" (p. 149).

We recognize that such motherhood models are not homogeneous in different societies, or even within one given society, since they constantly move and are reconfigured, and vary according to a number of factors. They still maintain a relation to the family policies adopted in each country, which may or may not provide greater balance in the maternal and paternal roles, updating or putting at stake the traditional division of labor between the sexes, as suggested by us in our previous work.<sup>20</sup>

Obviously, such discourses are part of what the researcher Inesita Soares de Araújo<sup>21</sup> called discursive competition, and its grasp by women and society in general goes through a process of negotiation of meanings, in which personal and group experiences, as well as conditions arising from elements such as "race", social and territorial status, other constructions and, currently, the exchange that occurs in virtual communities come into play.

With regard to the official materials for the promotion and guidance of breastfeeding, however, we conclude that, although a considerable polyphony in the discourses uttered in

different situations and for different audiences is noticeable, the child remains as the center of the approach about breastfeeding, by means of a language that objectifies women, giving the clear idea that it is a woman's duty to act in the sense of achieving the physical, mental and emotional health of their children.

A source of precious milk, the female body is the subject of governmental regulation, converting it into an instrument of public policy in favor of children's health. Such discourses, thereby, compete for the conformation and conservation of some of the motherhood models in force, which establish a record of the social zeitgeist about what it means to be a "good mother".

In this sense, we emphasize the need to carry out further research that might indicate how the breastfeeding and weaning process are experienced by its many actors, in order to render the approach of this matter in the official materials more complex, thus enabling the configuration of motherhood models that are less prescriptive and more adapted to the concrete realities of women in the world today.

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### **Colaboradores**

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