

“Conscious, exhausted and connected”: how far do the agencies of breastfeeding women go?

“Conscientes, exaustas e conectadas”: até onde vão os agenciamentos de mulheres que amamentam?

“Conscientes, agotadas y conectadas”: ¿hasta dónde llegan las agencias de las mujeres lactantes?

Irene Rocha Kalil^(a)

<irene.kalil@fiocruz.br> 

^(a) Laboratório de Comunicação e Saúde, Instituto de Comunicação e Informação Científica e Tecnológica em Saúde, Fundação Oswaldo Cruz. Avenida Brasil, 4036, sala 512, Campus Maré, Manginhos. Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brasil. 21040-361.

The article “Agenciamentos de mulheres que amamentam: refletindo sobre amamentação, maternidade e internet no Brasil”; (The agency of breastfeeding women: reflecting on breastfeeding, motherhood and the internet in Brazil)¹ belongs to a field of research dedicated to reflecting about the practices and discourses of motherhood, especially within -albeit not exclusively- what has been called gender studies. Authors from psychoanalysis, for example, have also made efforts to understand the causes and effects of current models of motherhood². This field is not homogeneous in its appreciation of the phenomenon of motherhood in the contemporary context. At the same time as we are witnessing the worldwide problematization of these models of breastfeeding and motherhood^{3,4,5,6}, we are witnessing the strengthening of an ‘ecological motherhood’³, which informs and is informed by an essentialist current of feminism, which ‘exalts ‘sexual difference’ and defends the existence of a ‘feminine essence’⁷’ (p. 45).

In the case of the article under analysis, it incorporates a critical perspective in relation to an ideal that romanticizes motherhood, one of the main elements of which is breastfeeding (BF). As the French philosopher Elisabeth Badinter pointed out, breastfeeding “is at the

heart of the maternal revolution that we have witnessed in the last twenty years”³ (p. 86), constituting what she called ‘the battle for milk’. The authors also add to the discussion an extremely topical reflection on the communication exchanges that take place between mothers from different socio-economic backgrounds in a digital interaction environment: Baby Center, an international portal for content on pregnancy and babies, in its Brazilian version. For this reason, the text has the merit of problematizing two interrelated objects: current maternity models and the use of new information and communication technologies by mothers.

Regarding the models of motherhood that prevail among the women interviewed, the study undertaken by the authors indicates that they reproduce much of what the official discourse advocates, including the use of “technical expressions such as ‘confusion of nipples’ and ‘exclusive breastfeeding’”¹ (p. 11), even among women from the lower social classes and with less schooling. This had also been recorded by Kalil and Aguiar⁸, whose study points out that many of the meanings found in the narratives of the mothers interviewed “are proposed in the pro-BF government discourses of yesterday and today, (...) which demonstrates the strength of the official discourse in the production of meanings by the women who live the experience” (p. 52).

The same remains true of the discourse of scientific evidence, as Fazzioni and Lerner noted, which is not confined to more educated mothers, but spreads - although not homogeneously - to all mothers subject to the paradigm of ‘evidence-based motherhood’⁹, the successor to ‘scientific motherhood’. While ‘scientific motherhood’¹⁰ aims to name the transformation in the exercise of motherhood, which ceased to be based on tradition and began to be structured on a scientific basis at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, ‘evidence-based motherhood’, although it arose from a movement in defense of the de-medicalization of the female body, in a context of humanizing care practices, paradoxically relies on “scientific evidence” as the privileged matrix for legitimizing humanized childbirth and breastfeeding practices, anchored in the assumptions of a universal female nature and that the female body is an extension of mammals in the animal kingdom” (p. 1). 1).

Due to the ideology of this evidence-based motherhood, which questions medical power, but at the same time opposes the more traditional care values brought by grandmothers, due to generational conflict, today’s mothers end up repelling the only support (or one of the few supports) they have, from their mother or mother-in-law, because they are seen as potential enemies of breastfeeding. Mothers and mothers-in-law often seem to be the only people who look at the newly-born woman and are concerned about her care, while the rest of the environment only has eyes for ‘his majesty the baby’¹¹ (p. 63).

On the other hand, a point of tension would be the inference made by the authors¹ that, while some mothers experience motherhood and breastfeeding more discreetly, women with less economic and social capital carry “a desire to monetize relationships by producing information about motherhood”¹ (p. 11). I think this can be problematized if we consider the number of profiles of new digital influencers, whether health professionals or not, in the context of discourses on motherhood and breastfeeding on social networks.



The doulas and breastfeeding consultants themselves, who are relatively young professions, seem to have already started their recent existence in the digital environment and are investing more and more time and resources in producing content to attract followers/customers to their social media profiles. Many of these new professionals in the childbirth and puerperium scene “have experienced these processes of motherhood, which they consider transformative, and have sought out free courses to train as doulas or consultants, as a way of combining their new interests, knowledge and experiences as mothers with a new professional role”¹² (p. 70). And to a large extent, imbued with the authority of experience, in recent years they have gained a place as new experts in the context of ‘evidence-based maternity’.

In this sense, the permeation of our experiences by mediatization cuts across all social strata, perhaps in different degrees and forms of appropriation from different contexts. The “media bios”, as defined by researcher Muniz Sodré, “is a kind of virtual clave applied to everyday life, to the real-historical existence of the individual. In terms of pure free will, you can go in and out of it, but in the civilizing conditions in which we live (...), we are immersed in media virtuality”¹³ (p. 108).

The authors found that the women interviewed not only use the internet to consume information, but also to produce it. They also noted that, although they defend the maxims advocated by the official discourse - breast milk as the best food and exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months - they need to negotiate meanings from their objective and subjective life contexts, doing the best they can or the best they can. But even though they have some room for maneuver, they are, as the authors rightly define it, “conscious, exhausted and connected” (not least because being connected is now another condition of motherhood). For Fazzioni and Lerner, while networks allow women to also be producers of information, and not just receivers, “on the other hand, this movement seems to add a greater burden in terms of caring for their children”¹¹ (p. 13). In this sense, it is worth questioning: how far do maternal actions go in the face of such powerful hegemonic models - breastfeeding as the measure of a good mother and evidence-based motherhood as the ideal standard - and the mediatization of life as a reality that affects us all?



Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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