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Debates

Motherhood, breastfeeding and the internet

discussion

# Breastfeeding, internet, and power relations

## Amamentação, internet e relações de poder

## Lactancia, internet y relaciones de poder

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In one of this issue's article, Natália Fazzioni and Kátia Lerner[1] relate breastfeeding, motherhood, and the internet in Brazil by using the digital platform called Baby Center as a research field, specifically the discussions about breastfeeding in the Community section in which users post and answer questions. The text discusses how the experience of breastfeeding is crossed by information available online and also by the digital interactions between mothers.

Among the contributions of Fazzioni and Lerner's[1] article, I highlight the three main ones in my opinion: taking a communication and anthropological perspective on breastfeeding, unlike most studies that mainly start from the medical and public health perspective; performing the methodological gesture of listening to women who experienced dilemmas related to breastfeeding and who used the Internet as a source of information and interaction with other mothers; unveiling tensions and power relations that surround breastfeeding and, consequently, motherhood today. I will focus on the last two topics, seeking to reflect on the propositions of the text and add complementary perspectives. It is worth mentioning that I interact with the article from the position I occupy as a feminist researcher, mother, and woman from the Amazon region.

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As for the methodology, the research mapped the content in the interactions in the Baby Center Community using the keyword "milk". The authors also conducted interviews and analyzed the statements of five users. The ages of the interviewees ranged from 24 to 38 years old, three identified themselves as white women, residents of the cities of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, two of them had an income of five to ten minimum wages and one had an income of more than ten. The others identified themselves as black women, one living in a municipality of the state of Espírito Santo and the other in the city of Nova Iguaçu, in the state of Rio de Janeiro. One reported receiving up to two minimum wages and the other, up to one minimum wage.

Listening to the participants who experience the context under investigation and considering their speeches is fundamental to broaden the academy's perspectives on social and symbolic reality. The theoretical and methodological discussions of Global South and decolonial feminism can make important contributions. The first point to consider is to question, as researchers, our perspectives and the spaces we occupy in history and culture[2].

This means clarifying the mediations that build our perspectives as researchers. Ochy Curiel[3] argues that subordinate subjects must cease to be "objects" and become "subjects of knowledge". Thus, while it is essential to work on a process of deobjectification of our research interlocutors, we also need to make explicit the places and privileges we occupy as researchers. The concern and care with the interviewees' speeches expressed in Fazzioni and Lerner's[1] text advance in this direction and can inspire other propositions.

Another challenge this type of research faces is to avoid universalizing "women" and "gender" as homogeneous categories[4]. In this sense, it is necessary to take into account the crossings of different systems of oppression (such as, for example, colonialism, racism, sexism, capitalism, heteronormativity) that complicate the social and symbolic positions of women and thus make it impossible to categorize gender, class, and race in isolation[5].

Fazzioni and Lerner[1] mention several elements that can be analyzed in the light of the feminist discussion on power when unveiling power relations that surround breastfeeding and, consequently, motherhood.

We start from a theoretical construction that seeks to think and observe power relations to escape the bias of "domination" to see complex processes by which women can also resist, act politically, and build solidarity[6]. We are based on the key reading suggested by Amy Allen[7] that discusses the concepts of "power over", "power to" and "power with" and we develop them from the relationship with political philosophy and social sciences authors.

Some central characteristics of the idea of "power over" are[6]: a) The ability of an actor or group of actors to restrict the options available to another actor or groups of actors, in a non-trivial way; b) The domination based on beliefs and customs, such as patriarchal domination; c) The internalization of dominant values by the dominated ones, so that domination is perceived as a tacit agreement. Another aspect of power

that we have covered is "power to." According to Allen[7], this term refers to the ability to achieve one or more goals and is related to the construction and pursuit of life projects. Empowerment and resistance are specific forms of "power to".

The last analytical distinction of power that we consider is "power with", which is related to the construction of a collective will and the ability to act together[8]. Solidarity plays a key role in this aspect of power and contributes to the formation of collective actions.

When justifying the choice of "milk" as a term for research in the online Community, Fazzioni and Lerner[1] discuss the different meanings related to this word, from breastfeeding to the use of infant formula and/or other types of milk. The authors argue that there is a pattern of official communication from specialists and campaigns that preach an ideal breastfeeding model (for example, exclusive breastfeeding until six months) "which crosses the experience of mothers in a deterministic way and offers some listening occasions and visibility to what women do when they cannot breastfeed" (p. 5).

Thus, there are external pressures on how the woman-mother should act that have repercussions on internal pressures and sometimes cause distress in the postpartum period. In our view, this process is the result of power relations such as domination, arising not only from patriarchy, but from the moral, social, and political construction of what would be expected from a "good mother". These social and moral regulations also act on the decision regarding the type of delivery, so that one would have to feel the pains of childbirth to be seen as a "good mother"[9]. Both breastfeeding and the decision about childbirth raise questions about the limits and possibilities of freedom and autonomy of the woman-mother.

Thus, it is expected that the interviewees always try to seek to validate the choices they have made, after having consulted the Community, using "scientific evidence" and/ or official recommendations. There is, however, the expression of resistance, such as searching for ways to improve breastfeeding, as reported by Joana, or eating canjica, a dish popularly known for increasing breast milk production.

The interviewees also indicate that the online search for information occurs "because they do not feel confident, or because it would add to the information they receive or will receive from healthcare providers (supposedly also with scientific evidence)"[1] (p. 9). We wonder whether this distrust of medical knowledge was related to other violence or prohibitions experienced during pregnancy and childbirth.

From the perspective of resistance and "power to", we can also analyze the authors' finding on the monetization of learning about motherhood with the creation of profiles in digital media. In this case, there seems to be a convergence regarding the characteristics of the digital media environment itself, with the sharing of intimate moments as a way to generate greater engagement and, consequently, monetization. Based on the experience of motherhood and the visibility of these media, women-mothers identify themselves and are identified as specialists.

Finally, we consider the relationships established in the Baby Center as a process of creating bonds and solidarity between mothers from the perspective of "power with". It is a community for sharing and mutual support at a time when the mother is socially left out, and attention and social care are focused on the baby.

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## Referências


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