The Medicalization of Breastfeeding

Doctors, nurses, midwives, lactation consultants and the like have colonized breastfeeding, an apparently natural practice. Yet despite their interventions, women continue to report that early breastfeeding does not work – that it is painful, and that advice given by self-represented experts regarding latch, pain, and when to continue nursing is not helpful. Feminist discourses exhort women to listen to their bodies. Might this contradiction drive some away from breastfeeding entirely?

Breastfeeding research fits into three separate strains: historical, practical, and theoretical. Historical accounts trace the development of wet-nursing in specific times and places, or chronicle formula’s inroads on breastmilk, or examine breastfeeding advocacy materials over a period of time, say the La Leche League’s Womanly Art of Breastfeeding as it spans the period 1958 – 2010 in eight editions.

Practical research consists of quantifying breastfeeding experience by, for example, asking women to rank a number of reasons why they quit breastfeeding in a questionnaire sent after discharge from hospital. Practical research also continues to quantify the benefits of breastfeeding to both mother and baby.

Theoretical research examines the meanings of the lactating breast in a number of different cultural sites: as depicted in art, say, or in sexual and maternal terms as articulated, or not, by breastfeeding subjects, or in public debates on the appropriateness of breastfeeding outside the home. Some researchers also examine breastfeeding advice’s contradictory messages as found in places likely to be encountered by new mothers, such as new-baby guides or breastfeeding how-to books.

My paper will use theoretical research to come to practical conclusions about women’s experience of breastfeeding. Maternal breastfeeding rates in Canada decline sharply over the first six months of babies’ lives, from an initial high, in B.C., of 95% when babies are newborn to a mere 17% who are still feeding their babies exclusively on breastmilk, as recommended, at six months of age. This dramatic decline deserves explanation.

Biography
Carellin Brooks teaches Women in Literature at the University of British Columbia’s Women’s and Gender Studies Program. She received her doctorate from Oxford University in 2010, and in 2005 a version of her doctoral research was published by UBC Press as Every Inch a Woman: Femininity, Phallic Possession, and the Text. She lives in Vancouver.