

Book Review: Social Experiences of Breastfeeding

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Abstract:

The three editors are well-established researchers and policy advocates for breastfeeding in the United Kingdom. The book is based on a two-year, six-session seminar series, convened by these editors, highlighting research, practice, and policy in breastfeeding, with a focus on the United Kingdom. The 19 contributors were all presenters at this seminar series; collectively they represent an interdisciplinary group whose perspectives offer the reader differing but complementary perspectives highlighting the relationships between research, practice, and policy in breastfeeding.

Keywords: book review | breastfeeding | interdisciplinary studies | infant feeding

Article:

S. Dowling, D. Pontin & K Boyer . (Eds.). (2018). *Social Experiences of Breastfeeding*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press. 266 pp. \$30.00 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1-4473-3850-5.

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In this edited volume, the editors aim to both showcase a range of social science research on breastfeeding and demonstrate how this work can be used by policy makers and practitioners to support women to initiate breastfeeding and to breastfeed longer. The book is designed to be of use to a wide range of people to help them situate their own research and work into a broader context, including academics from a range of disciplines (e.g., anthropology, sociology, human geography, psychology, media, and communications, law, public health, and midwifery), policy makers at both local and national levels, and those working with breastfeeding women in a variety of statutory and nonstatutory situations.

Breastfeeding rates in the United Kingdom follow a typical pattern found in many Western and developing countries: Initiation is high but followed by a rapid decline; there are notable differences in rates by socioeconomic status, ethnicity, age, and education. Lower rates of breastfeeding are seen in more marginalized and vulnerable populations, and mothers have difficulties integrating breastfeeding into their lives. The editors refer to breastfeeding as a “wicked social problem,” meaning that the “reasons for variation in rates are complicated and multifaceted, and include social and cultural factors. Interventions at different levels, from individual interactions between mothers and their peers to governmental and global health policy, are important in promoting meaningful changes to support breastfeeding mothers” (p. 3). Further, it is clear that in the United Kingdom, as elsewhere, further education about the benefits of human milk is not likely to produce significant positive change in rates of duration and exclusivity. Rather, interventions across the social ecology, fueled by evidence that centers women’s experiences with breastfeeding, are needed.

The seminar series on which this book is based, “Social Experiences of Breastfeeding: Building Bridges Between Research and Policy,” held 2015–2016, was conceived to “facilitate a series of conversations about current issues in breastfeeding, and to synthesize new knowledge,” so as to further our “understanding of women’s embodied, affective and day-to-day experiences of trying to breastfeed their babies, and to talk about how more UK women might be able to breastfeed their babies for longer” (pp. 1–2). The series and the selected presentations covered in the book sought to answer the following questions: (a) How does attending to the embodied experiences of breastfeeding women help advance our knowledge about breastfeeding cessation and success? (b) How can we further our understanding about inequities in breastfeeding by focusing on the daily practices of breastfeeding? and (c) How could this new knowledge inform policy? The seminar series brought together, as both speakers and invited seminar participants, individuals representing research, practice, and policy from a variety of disciplines, with different levels of experiences and diverse perspectives to “create opportunities, knowledge transfer and collaborative problem-solving” (p. 3). The 12 chapters, plus four reflections on these chapters, are designed to re-create for a broader audience the excitement and dynamic exchanges of the series. Although the focus of the series and this book is the United Kingdom, the problems and challenges discussed, common as they are across cultures and borders, will be of use to scholars, practitioners, and policy makers outside the United Kingdom.

The book is divided into three parts: Breastfeeding and Emotions, Cultures of Breastfeeding, and Breastfeeding and Popular Culture. Each part consists of four chapters, based on the academic authors’ presentations at the seminar series, plus a commentary on those chapters written by core seminar participants to reflect the policy and/or practice perspectives. Additional chapters provide for more synthesis across chapters, themes, and information about the seminar series.

A notable strength of this book is that it presents a range of novel ideas in one collection. For example, we are able to reflect on the how the concept of “liminality” can help us further understand women’s experiences with breastfeeding (Part 1); on how migration can transform cultural infant feeding practices, and how considering breastfeeding as a “practice” rather than an individual “behavior” can help increase women’s “uptake” of breastfeeding; (Part 2); and on value of “belfries” and public art for advancing social support for breastfeeding (Part 3). These ideas are interwoven among chapters discussing ideas of broad interest including shame,

nighttime breastfeeding and sleep, modern parenting culture and ideologies, workplace support, and embodiment as a framework for advancing health.

While the volume does pull together research with policy, it would have been improved by a more robust synthesis of the seminar series' third goal of considering how this new knowledge could inform policy. To that end, the book would have been strengthened by more reflections within and across the chapters on novel policy and practice recommendations to improve breastfeeding support within a broad social context.

This book does, as proposed, bring together research with discussions of practice and policy. It pulls together science and new ways of thinking that can help us consider how we can use women's own experiences to improve the sociocultural and political context within which they make infant feeding decisions, engage in breastfeeding practice, and are, themselves, transformed by the experience.

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