

## Lactation Newsmakers Column: An interview with Penny Van Esterik, MA, PHD

By: [Paige Hall Smith](#)

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### **Abstract:**

It is my great pleasure to interview Penny Van Esterik, who is truly a “foremother” in our field. Penny is an anthropologist, and it is that background that defines her approach to scholarship and practice. She was educated in both the United States and Canada and is Professor Emerita in the Department of Anthropology at York University in Toronto where she worked for 30 years. She has authored many books, chapters, and articles and continues to be a sought-after speaker. This interview was inspired by her keynote address at the 2018 Breastfeeding and Feminism International Conference, where she spoke about themes from her recently published book, *The Dance of Nurture: Negotiating Infant Feeding* (Van Esterik & O’Connor, 2017). Her 1989 book, *Beyond the Breast-Bottle Controversy* (Van Esterik, 1989), was widely read and helped us better position breastfeeding within the context of both food systems and gender. She has consulted with, among others, UNICEF, Wellstart Lactation Management, Canadian International Development Agency, the Population Council, and the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA). Her writing considers breastfeeding and nurture within many different contexts including culture, gender, work, food systems, HIV/AIDS, body politics, environmental sustainability, and human rights. Her work illustrates that the personal is political and the political, personal, reminding us to align our policies and practices to reflect the real stories and experiences of real people in their real contexts.

**Keywords:** Penny Van Esterik | breastfeeding | interview | infant feeding

### **Article:**

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Penny Van Esterik, MA, PhD

## **Interview**

This is a verbatim interview.

PHS: To begin, how did you come to work in the field of breastfeeding.

PVE: Like many breastfeeding advocates, I had difficulties breastfeeding my daughter. I received no help from the hospital and a friend from La Leche League helped me. When I was doing fieldwork in Thailand, I was struck with the power of Nestlé marketing and by the differences in attitude about breastfeeding between urban and rural areas. Those two things were important influences. When I came back to the US I got involved in advocacy work and the Nestlé boycott and even debated formula company representatives. That was an important lesson—how to address important issues like conflict of interest and, really, the power of baby food companies.

PHS: You raise many issues! Let's start with Thailand. How did your work there come about?

PVE: I had really important teachers who taught me about Southeast Asia and I was involved in the anti-Vietnam war protests. I went to a lot of teach-ins and that really got me interested in the region. I was also a Canadian University Service Overseas volunteer in Thailand for two years and that solidified my interest in that region and in that country.

PHS: You did breastfeeding research in Thailand as well.

PVE: When I was in Thailand I helped universities establish anthropology programs. I became interested in issues around women and Buddhism and studying food issues generally. In those early years I kept my breastfeeding advocacy, even in Thailand, quite separate from my academic work. But I couldn't help but notice . . . the hospitals full of advertisement, and the milk nurses. My formal research was more related to a project with Michael Latham and the Population Council on infant feeding among the urban poor in developing countries. We did research in Bangkok, Thailand, Semarang, Indonesia, Nairobi, Kenya, and Bogota, Columbia.

PHS: What was it like to work with Michael Latham?

PVE: He's been my inspiration since the time I first met him. I joined Michael Latham at Cornell, and I was fortunate to be an ethnographer working for nutritionists and public health people. I learned so much about infant nutrition, but one of my key lessons that I carry with me today is that wonderful balance between evidence-based research in lactation and absolutely fierce advocacy in support of breastfeeding. He changed hats so easily and so seamlessly . . . it was a pleasure to watch. He was always policy oriented but so compassionate and concerned about mothers and babies in developing countries. It was . . . inspiring.

PHS: Was it after working with him that brought your research and your advocacy closer together?

PVE: Yes . . . I must admit, it also helps being tenured in a program. There are times when you meet colleagues who say you shouldn't be involved in . . . advocacy work, so it's nice to feel secure. I wrote a paper in 1985 on this topic called "*Confronting advocacy, confronting anthropology*" (Van Esterik, 1986).

PHS: You said you debated the formula company representatives. How did that come about?

PVE: The Infant Formula Action Coalition, the group that began the boycott against Nestle had just formed in Minneapolis, and there was a lot interest at the University of Notre Dame in social justice. I think some of the sisters brought some of the abuses of formula to the attention of people that might be considered active in liberation theology. . . . It was almost natural that the efforts against Nestlé that were going on in Minneapolis and Chicago were brought to Notre Dame for debate. I'd already done a little bit of publishing on this. I was in touch with the activists, so it was easy to ask me because I was teaching there. It was a painful experience. At one of the debates, the plan was for me to take the role of the disinterested academic anthropologist who was just telling truth to power, and I was prepared with my academic approach to breastfeeding. But the most experienced speaker and debater from the activist group was unable to come, and I found myself having to take the role of the activist, and I wasn't really prepared for it. . . . In other words, while our plan was the activists would take the extreme position and I would be the disinterested academic providing evidence to support their advocacy statements, I had to be the one screaming about . . . "Nestlé kills babies." I basically had to take on both roles, and I lost the clarity that a debater needs. At one point I could see the Nestlé officials saying, "Well, as Professor Van Esterik will surely agree, women are not duped by advertising; they have their own agency. They simply want to choose what's best for their

babies.” They put you in a corner where you do not want to be—you don’t want to get those discourses mixed up.

PHS: What’s the best way for academics to be advocates?

PVE: I think things have progressed in the past ten years, and there’s no need to keep our “objectivity and distance.” But, these issues are still very easily depoliticized in academia, that’s for sure. I look back to Michael; he could be the detached nutrition professional and the advocate, but he always knew which hat he was wearing at which time. And make sure that you know which discourse you’re using. The debate I’m talking about now was a nightmare because I had to switch hats too fast, and I didn’t feel sure as to which discourse I was really using.

PHS: You’re an anthropologist but many in the field are from nutrition, nursing, medicine—what unique voice does anthropology bring to breastfeeding?

PVE: Anthropology brings unique methods to the study of infant feeding. Ethnographic work is gaining in popularity, but it needs to be framed around suitable social science concepts, and not just adopted as a research method. Anthropology brings a holistic approach to cross cultural differences, the biological and physiological basis of lactation, and socio-cultural factors that influence infant feeding decisions. It also draws attention to gender ideology and gender analysis. My training combined cultural and biological anthropology, an important benefit for infant feeding research. The founding fathers and mothers of American anthropology saw that the contribution of anthropology was, to paraphrase anthropologist Ruth Benedict, to make the world safe for differences, and to see the world from various angles. That is still my vision of the field.

PHS: How do you see that playing out in the field of breastfeeding?

PVE: Well, it just follows from my argument that there’s no one best way to feed an infant . . . to breastfeed an infant, . . . to nurture an infant, which makes it hard for policy making. There’s going to be an incredible variation in the way mothers and infants interact. . . . We’ve got class differences, differences around ethnicity and cultural patterns, and now we’re much more aware of gender orientation and how that will affect infant feeding. There are many different ways to breastfeed, and this poses really great difficulties in making sure that we don’t have a policy that says, “This is how you do it, and if you don’t do it like this you’re wrong, and you need to be educated.”

PHS: You write about breastfeeding being local and personal, and being part of culturally embedded practices, yet we have global strategies and policies being applied around the world to increase rates in initiation, exclusivity, and duration to a global standard. Given the wide diversity in experiences, how do we move forward with policy?

PVE: Well, it’s interesting, as an anthropologist I have never taken a course on policy, I’ve learned about policy from Latham, from observing, and being involved in policy arenas. Speaking from my personal experience, I worry that sometimes global approaches become very easily depoliticized. Bureaucracies are often uncomfortable with confrontational tactics against

companies. And of course, we're just now coming to grips with the subtlety of conflict of interest. It used to be something was just in your face, but now we realize that it's a very subtle, complex process, so that's a very important policy piece that we need to pay attention to. I think we're very much aware of the rigidity of bureaucracies and how much difficulty they have in managing diversity. As well, we could pay more attention to how trade policies might impact infant feeding. For instance, countries that produce surplus milk are motivated to find new products and new markets. So, for example, North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) negotiations may be relevant for infant feeding policies. Additionally, we need to pay more attention to how breastfeeding interacts with other parts of life. I worked with my coauthor, Richard O'Connor for both *The Dance of Nurture* (Van Esterik & O'Connor, 2017) and *From Virtue to Vice: Negotiating Anorexia* (O'Connor & Van Esterik, 2015), and working with him made me aware of how breastfeeding links to other problems such as disordered eating, or food security. I think one policy advantage would be placing breastfeeding in these broader contexts; in other words, breastfeeding work is often in a . . . silo but it's relevant for all sorts of food discussions.

PHS: I'm wondering if the current focus on how breastfeeding relates to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals might be one of the ways to move this forward.

PVE: Yes, I think so. Sustainability becomes extremely important because economic concerns, like the dairy industry, can fit in this framework. Also, we shouldn't just be focusing on this generation of mothers and infants; we should be reflecting the evidence on the effects of infant feeding across generations. So, the grandmother, the mother, and the daughter, and future generations are all interconnected through breastfeeding or feeding with a milk-based product; the sustainability focus fits well with the idea of working across generations, and not putting all our attention on this 20-year-old mother with a new baby and telling her how to feed the baby.

PHS: You're really arguing for what public health calls a "social ecological approach" which goes beyond the individual to focus on broader systems.

PVE: Absolutely, and I think we can benefit from more practical attention on the concepts of nurture and care and recognizing how complex they are. And, how important they have been both in shaping human evolution and in shaping the development of every individual. We sometimes act as if aggression and competition were the great movers in human evolution, and we tend to ignore nurture.

PHS: Do you think we elevate competition over nurture because competition is associated with men and nurture is associated with women?

PVE: The whole focus on aggression and competition was a male based view of human development. Issues around women and nurture and care, have just been conveniently ignored in much of the understanding of the human condition. And, nurture doesn't have to be a gender-based practice. Nurturing practices don't have to be gendered. . . .

PHS: In the mid-1990s at a conference at Georgetown University that focused on breastfeeding and women, you gave a talk on "breastfeeding and feminism" (Van Esterik, 1994a). That is the

first paper I know of that focused on the intersection between these two. Can talk about how [that] talk came about?

PVE: I took it as such a natural development. Something that belonged in the conversation. It was important to talk about it because breastfeeding brings forth difficult topics such as a fear of biological essentialism. And I wanted to contribute to explicating that whole area. One of my greatest concerns now is all the backlash about breastfeeding being anti-feminist, and breastfeeding advocacy being anti-feminist. And I find that whole discourse troubling and very misdirected. That view represents a total misreading of the evidence and the approach people take to breastfeeding; however, I do recognize that working internationally, a term like feminism has to be constantly redefined and placed in the context of what local women consider feminism. And, phrases like “breastfeeding empowers women” may not work in places where women are told they have to breastfeed. The idea that breastfeeding empowers women doesn’t translate easily into some other languages. . . . So, I’m very conscious of the danger of taking as a norm, the “weird”—I use “weird” to represent the “western educated industrial rich democratic.” And that gives us a really unrealistic bias, which isn’t going to help our global policy making any.

PHS: What do you think feminist perspectives bring to the breastfeeding field?

PVE: Well, of course, feminist perspectives bring the whole idea of intersectionality into the fore; they bring up questions of the agency of women; they provide a way to deal with the personal and the emotional as important factors; and they bring the idea of stories and narratives, as valid ways of understanding the world. They do that and more.

PHS: What do you think breastfeeding practices and ideas bring to feminism?

PVE: Breastfeeding issues bring to feminism a need for a realistic body orientation, and help feminists come to grips with the fact that we are primates and mammals. These ideas don’t make life simpler for a feminist, because they are very complex.

PHS: You talk about a relaxed feminism (Van Esterik, 2018). Can you tell me what that means?

PVE: Relaxed feminism stresses collective action not individual perfection, sustainability across generations, and communicating across differences. It confronts privilege, absorbs queer theory, and engages with evidence from science and experience. In short, it is not ideological but a practical approach to social change.

PHS: In 1994 you gave a talk in Toronto on “Lessons From Our Lives: Breastfeeding in a Personal Context” (Van Esterik, 1994b) where you draw this wonderful connection between our own stories and experiences with breastfeeding, what these experiences teach us about our lives, how these experiences help inform research. Can you tell us more about this?

PVE: It was an attempt to show how stories about breastfeeding reveal the uniqueness in every mother and infant interaction. Evidence about the diversity of experience should inform research by carrying us away from the search for the one best way for breastfeeding or nurturing a child. And, as a mother, I think breastfeeding taught me how to be in the moment, how to focus on one

thing. I wasn't very good at that, how to match my pace to an infant's pace, to my child's pace, and maybe when to seek help and the comfort . . . no, actually, being comfortable asking for help. Those are some of my personal lessons. But as a researcher breastfeeding taught me about intersectionality in practice. I was fine teaching about intersectionality using other peoples' work, but breastfeeding is a constant lesson in how race, class, ethnicity, occupation, gender orientation, all impact your mothering style. So, that practical intersectionality was very important. It taught me the importance of working in interdisciplinary teams; I think it taught me to be prepared for unanticipated consequences, and it is a constant lesson in holism, that everything is connected to everything else. And I think breastfeeding teaches us about temporal orientation—the importance of thinking about time, how breastfeeding fits into the life cycle, and how the temporal cycles of parents and children have to be integrated. Those are some of the things the breastfeeding stories have taught me.

PHS: What do you see as some of the stories we're telling about breastfeeding today?

PVE: Certainly, the new stories are that human milk is enough, it's all a baby needs, and that's a hard lesson to learn. People are always concerned that they don't have enough, that it's not good enough, that they can't produce enough, but it is what it is. There are new stories about the resilience of the whole physiological system of lactation; it's amazing how it operates even in emergencies and natural disasters, so I think resilience is an important new story. Of course, there are different ways to nurture a child, so all those stories are wonderful, all the nuances of gender identity and orientation provide us with new stories, and I think there are new stories now about the importance of the immediate post-partum period. I remember, two days after my daughter was born, I broke out head to toe in hives, even down my respiratory tract. If I hadn't had such a strong breastfeeding advocate for a pediatrician, I know I wouldn't have continued because I had to take strong doses of antihistamine to get rid of the hives, and that dried up my milk just as it was coming in. Now, more than forty years later I go to the Breastfeeding and Feminism International Conference and I meet women talking about breastfeeding aversion; and I learned that many people finding great discomfort with breastfeeding also had hives. I don't know how to talk about this but each time we hear a new story about aversion to breastfeeding it might end up leading us towards asking new questions. For me, I have no idea where those hives came from. Every new story may bring a new research question which has to be explored. One of my stories about hives triggered one of their stories about aversion, which triggered some story from another researcher about problems with breastfeeding. This is just a way of saying that stories can turn us in new research directions.

PHS: You have been involved in many ways with WABA. Talk about your work with them.

PVE: WABA was founded at a UNICEF meeting. I was at that meeting, but my inspiration for continuing my work with WABA came from observing how Derrick Jelleffe and Michael Latham handled that UNICEF meeting. I admired their dedication to evidence-based research, that they were strong advocates, and very informed about the formula companies. I was impressed that UNICEF chose to bring together activists and academics to implement policies around breastfeeding. I worked with WABA on issues related to women and work, food security and the environment. I think I have made some conceptual contributions. The editors of *Breastfeeding: new anthropological perspectives* generously assessed my contributions to the

field in their introduction (Tomori, Palmquist, & Quinn, 2018). All I see is the mistakes I have put into print! But one thing I do is write academic papers with proper citations; any time I think I've got a good idea I try to make sure I also write an advocacy piece for the general public, pieces that can be easily translated into other languages. WABA would often translate materials into at least six languages. I also did some conceptual work around product and process, and now I rethink of product and process not as opposition, but as reflections of one another, they are really interconnected.

PHS: That sounds like good advice for many academics—find ways to translate our scientific work into pieces that can be easily digested and possibly used for social change.

PVE: Yes, but you also have to be aware that you will end up over simplifying and being accused by academic colleagues of not using proper citations or not providing evidence. So, you need a thick skin on that one.

PHS: Lastly, what advice or recommendations do you have for emerging scholars in the field?

PVE: Develop a thick skin! For new scholars . . . follow your passion. And, I like the idea of always doing the double writing: for the academic audience and writing for the public or advocacy audience at the same time. Honestly, I don't feel in a position to provide advice, people are so brilliant now with their social media and all that sort of thing. I can't even tweet!

PHS: Thank you so much Penny for sharing this time with us.

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