Breastfeeding in the Academy: Another Way to Discriminate

Women on the tenure track would appear to be perfectly situated to breastfeed their children, given their flexible time and out-of-class schedules.

Not necessarily, according to Dr. Rosa Cintron, associate professor of higher education and policy Studies at University of Central Florida. She presented her upcoming research project on breastfeeding at a session called “Mrs. Mom to Dr. Faculty” at the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) conference in Seattle in March. (She acknowledged that discussions of breastfeeding include a universality of mothering and heterosexual privilege, and that using “Mrs.” in the title excludes the lesbian experience.)

Recalling the silence, guilt and secrecy she felt while breastfeeding more than 15 years ago, she told WIHE, “This paper is the result of my own experiences as an assistant faculty member on a tenure track. I had been breastfeeding my child, but this was something that I did not share with my colleagues—although I was sharing other things such as moving into a new house, the growth of my baby, being a new faculty member. I didn’t address this area, and no one asked me about it.”

Breastfeeding as icon

Breastfeeding is a very concrete expression of motherhood, and it’s no secret that the academy isn’t always friendly to mothers. Reflecting on her experience, Cintron still remembers how isolating it was to go through the experience alone. “Breastfeeding is a fulfilling yet very difficult experience,” she said. “I wanted to talk to other women to see if their experiences matched mine, to be able to process it.” She found that their experiences mirrored hers exactly. Now having tenure, she decided to study a subject that arouses her passion and activist tendencies.

Women are tied to biological clocks, and childbearing/breastfeeding often occur during the same time frame as the tenure process. The balancing act of doing both at the same time moves the experience from the private realm into the public, and therefore deserves conversation.

Cintron believes the tenure process and breastfeeding are in competition, because they both demand a lot of time and energy. You need to be relaxed to breastfeed, she said, because relaxation increases milk production. Stress decreases milk production, and of course being on the tenure track is stressful.

“They’re contradictory processes, and no one is talking about it,” she said. “It’s hard for women to speak about it, because the academy is male-dominated. Young women have a horrible expectation that if they speak up, the response would be ‘You knew what you were getting into. This is the way it is done.’”

Despite increased research on how women balance family and paid work, little research has addressed the intersection of faculty, tenure and breastfeeding.

‘Greedy’ institutions

As a workplace, the university follows a male career model, especially in the sciences, which still retain major barriers for women.

Some of Cintron’s subjects in the science and technology fields told her they’d chosen not to have children, because they would impede their career progression. Women with families feel there are roadblocks to developing their careers through travel abroad or attending conferences, because departments do not want to face childcare issues.

Many have found that they were “weeded out” of certain paths because of their children. Mason and Goulden (2002) found that a woman who had a baby within five years after earning her PhD was much less successful, whatever her discipline, than men at earning tenure.

These claims support Coser’s theory of “the greedy institution,” in which the university and the tenure process are described as requiring the full attention of a person: “organizations and groups, which, in contradiction to the prevailing principle, make total claims on their members and which attempt to encompass within their circle the whole personality... (these claims) are omnivorous (Coser, 1974).”

Similarly, Segal (1986) states "...these are organizations which make great demand on individuals in terms of commitment, loyalty, time and energy.”

It’s a concept that Dr. Cintron had always felt, but she had never seen it framed intellectually. She had an “aha!” moment when she found the research. These “greedy organizations” devour everything that you are, she said. They make a total claim on your time and your identity, and envelop the whole sphere of one’s life. “Thus, women faculty on the tenure-track who decide to breastfeed find themselves at the intersection of two societal institutions, both of which are greedy and omnivorous: the family and the university,” she said.

Breastfeeding is an ideal icon for women on the tenure track who find themselves balancing the academy and the family, as well as the demands of tenure and children. But breastfeeding brings up other issues as well.

Breastfeeding and the workplace

Breastfeeding is the optimal way to feed and nourish newborns, according to the World Health Organization, the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. Besides the nutritional and immunological benefits of breast milk for babies, there are positive psychosocial aspects for both mothers and infants.

Despite this knowledge, the United States is currently below the national standards proposed by Healthy People 2010, a report by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. It supports the Surgeon General’s goals to increase breastfeeding rates in the U.S. to 75% of infants as they leave the hospital and 50% at six months of age.

Despite the government and the medical community agreeing that breastfeeding for the first six months is the...
healthiest choice a mother can make for her child, a National
Women's Health Resource Center survey found that 32%
of new mothers have to give up breastfeeding within seven
weeks of returning to work, citing significant workplace
issues and barriers. While corporate workplace perceptions
of breastfeeding may have grown more positive in the past
five years, this may not be the case in the academy.
Rhoads and Rhoads (2003) conducted a study in 2002
of 75 females and 109 males—all assistant professors on
the tenure-track with a child under age two—who worked
at a school with some paid leave policy. They confirmed
that pregnancy and breastfeeding are indeed sex-specific
and that these conditions almost certainly slow women's
research and work agendas.

Other research has found that more than 75% of women
who are back at work within six months of giving birth did
not feel like they were functioning at full capacity, because
of the lack of support they are receiving for balancing their
new role with their old one.

The study also found that more than 85% of the female
academic respondents breastfed their babies exclusively
for some months, with the median being 10 months.
Despite the high percentage of female faculty who breast-
feed, they reported that although it was great for the baby
and enjoyable, it was also very time-consuming.

Because of the issues surrounding pregnancy, breast-
feeding and childcare demands, female study participants
were significantly more likely than males to agree that, "I
feel overwhelmed by my responsibilities as a parent."

Half of the female faculty had considered dropping off
of the tenure track because of family and work pressures,
compared with a quarter of male faculty surveyed.

Unique methodology

Seeking case studies with narratives and poetry to
reflect these issues, Cintron turned to the Web
for content for her preliminary paper. She
studied the responses of women who
commented on blogs, a unique meth-
odology that is global, interactive
and anonymous—and avoids prob-
lems raised by institutional review
boards.

The sample was a mix of women.
Some, like her, were reflecting on
their experiences breastfeeding years
ago, and some were recent moms. Her
thoughts were: "Let’s have this conver-
sation, and let’s talk to those who haven’t been able to." Exploring
their narratives, she found, was a horrific experience:

Narrative #1:

"As an academic trained in literature, I love looking for
narratives and how they function as stories through which we
imagine our lives. I also look to books to make sense of my own
social position and how I might function in the world. When I
began breastfeeding, I looked to books to help make sense of my
changed maternal self and how I might fit into this new identity.
I was mostly appalled by what I read about breastfeeding. There
was very little that appealed to me, and much that made me want
to resist its very moralistic and prescriptive tone, and so I began
thinking about what sort of narratives I was seeking...I inserted
some of my own frustrations and fantasies, and wrote an aca-
demic paper about breastfeeding narratives as my daughter
entered her second year of serious attachment to my breasts. I did
this secretly (Hausman, 2003)."

Narrative #2:

"I was a big breastfeeding proponent, because I’m into food,
organic agriculture, sustainable environments. Save the planet
by eating naturally, etc. Then my firstborn turned up with issues
that made breastfeeding a nightmare. I was so f*cked up about it.
Living in Berkeley, I felt I couldn’t leave the house and be seen
bottle feeding him in public. I was freaked out to have to buy
formula—I am feeding my baby heroin, I thought (Blog, posted
2005)."

Cintron hopes to rescue breastfeeding from the norm of
natural to make it a choice or option, so mothers who don’t
or can’t breastfeed don’t feel unnatural and excluded.
Breastfeeding, she said, can be defined as an:

• Act of conformity
• Act of love
• Act of pleasure
• Act of economic necessity

At her NASPA presentation, she expected an audience
of one or two people. Instead she had 15, including staff
and faculty. She found that the women wanted to talk and
share stories. Many volunteered to be in her study, which
seeks to discover:

- What does the act of breastfeeding mean?
- How do academics define the act of breastfeeding?
- There is a notion of privilege when talking about only
  faculty: What about staff?
- How does breastfeeding on campus relate to Title IX?
  To serve women who breastfeed, she suggests schools
create a “Nursing Mother’s Room” with a comfortable
armchair. She sees parallels between ADA rules and the
need for space for breastfeeding. "If I were an agent of
change, which I’m not, but if I were younger, I’d
push for a pleasant room for women who
are breastfeeding," she told WIRE. “If
we can have ADA ramps, we can have
such a room, a small place. There are
structural things that can be done”
to demonstrate acceptance, she
noted.

"Of course we’re in a financial
budget crisis," she said, “but there
is money for the things that presidents
deen important. The problem is that
women haven’t organized on the issue. Within
the greedy organization, there are patches where women
still need to act like men. And in this area of childrear-
ing, women still need to build solidarity and voice their
needs.”

The George Washington University in DC has
responded to the need, creating designated “motherhood
rooms” on its campuses at Foggy Bottom, Mount Vernon
and Ashburn.

One of the advantages of gaining tenure is that it frees
passionate people like Cintron to research and advocate
on issues that sorely need attention, if the academy is to
become a truly inclusive community.

—ELF

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Women in Higher Education (www.wihe.com) / July 2009

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