








REFLECTING ON THE SACRALIZATION OF BREASTFEEDING AND ITS INFLUENCE ON MATERNAL SEXUALITY

REFLETINDO SOBRE A SACRALIZAÇÃO DA AMAMENTAÇÃO E SUA INFLUÊNCIA NA SEXUALIDADE MATERNA

REFLEXIONANDO SOBRE LA SACRALIZACIÓN DE LA LACTANCIA MATERNA Y SU INFLUENCIA EN LA SEXUALIDAD MATERNA

-  Elaine Lutz Martins¹
-  Carla Marins Silva²
-  Luciane Marques de Araujo¹
-  Jane Márcia Progianti¹
-  Laís Antunes Wilhelm³
-  Olga Regina Ziguelli Garcia³
-  Octavio Muniz da Costa Vargens⁴

¹Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro - UERJ, Faculdade de Enfermagem - FACENF, Departamento de Enfermagem Materno-Infantil. Rio de Janeiro, RJ - Brazil.

²Universidade de São Paulo - USP, Escola de Enfermagem - EE, Departamento Materno-Infantil e Psiquiátrico. São Paulo, SP - Brazil.

³Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina - UFSC, Centro de Ciências da Saúde - CCS, Departamento de Enfermagem. Florianópolis, SC - Brazil.

⁴UERJ, FACENF, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Enfermagem. Rio de Janeiro, RJ - Brazil.

Corresponding Author: Elaine Lutz Martins
E-mail: elainelutzmartins@yahoo.com.br

Authors' Contributions:

Conceptualization: Elaine L. Martins, Carla M. Silva, Luciane M. Araujo, Jane M. Progianti, Laís A. Wilhelm, Olga R. Z. Garcia, Octavio M. C. Vargens; **Data Collection:** Elaine L. Martins, Octavio M. C. Vargens; **Investigation:** Elaine L. Martins, Carla M. Silva, Octavio M. C. Vargens; **Methodology:** Elaine L. Martins, Carla M. Silva, Luciane M. Araujo, Jane M. Progianti, Laís A. Wilhelm, Olga R. Z. Garcia, Octavio M. C. Vargens; **Project Management:** Elaine L. Martins, Carla M. Silva, Octavio M. C. Vargens; **Supervision:** Octavio M. C. Vargens; **Writing – Original Draft Preparation:** Elaine L. Martins, Carla M. Silva, Luciane M. Araujo, Jane M. Progianti, Laís A. Wilhelm, Olga R. Z. Garcia, Octavio M. C. Vargens; **Writing – Review and Editing:** Elaine L. Martins, Carla M. Silva, Luciane M. Araujo, Jane M. Progianti, Laís A. Wilhelm, Olga R. Z. Garcia, Octavio M. C. Vargens.

Funding: No funding.

Submitted on: 2020/11/18
Approved on: 2021/08/18

Responsible Editors:

-  Mariana Santos Felisbino-Mendes
-  Luciana Regina Ferreira da Mata

ABSTRACT

Objective: to reflect on the sacralization of breastfeeding and its influence on maternal sexuality. **Method:** this is a theoretical-reflective study on the experience of breastfeeding, centered on socially instituted conceptions about the act of breastfeeding and on the experience of sexuality during motherhood. **Results:** the articulation of the study with the reality experienced by women who breastfeed enabled the recognition of the influence of the current paradigm of sacralization of breastfeeding on the meanings and choices of how women act. The repercussions can be harmful for both maternal and child health, through the experience of feelings of guilt, shame or even the decision to wean early. **Conclusion:** breastfeeding is based on the foundation of meanings involving divinity and the sacralization of the act of breastfeeding, nullifying perspectives of sexuality and resulting in a distorted and veiled view of what is experienced when compared to what is socially desired for this period.

Palavras-chave: Breast Feeding; Women's Health; Sexuality.

RESUMO

Objetivo: refletir sobre a sacralização da amamentação e sua influência na sexualidade materna. **Método:** trata-se de estudo teórico-reflexivo sobre a experiência da amamentação, centrado nas concepções instituídas socialmente sobre o ato de amamentar e na vivência da sexualidade durante a maternidade. **Resultados:** a articulação do estudo com a realidade vivida por mulheres que amamentam possibilitou o reconhecimento da influência do paradigma vigente da sacralização da amamentação nos significados e escolhas da forma de agir das mulheres. As repercussões podem ser danosas tanto para a saúde materna quanto para a criança, por meio da vivência de sentimentos de culpa, vergonha ou até mesmo a decisão pelo desmame precoce. **Conclusão:** a amamentação é pautada no alicerce dos significados que envolve a divindade e a sacralização do ato de amamentar, anulando perspectivas da sexualidade e tendo como consequência uma visão distorcida e velada do que é vivido quando comparado com o que é desejado socialmente para esse período.

Palavras-chave: Aleitamento Materno; Saúde da Mulher; Sexualidade.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: reflexionar sobre la sacralización de la lactancia materna y su influencia en la sexualidad materna. **Método:** se trata de un estudio teórico-reflexivo sobre la experiencia de la lactancia materna, centrado en concepciones socialmente instituidas sobre el acto de amamentar y sobre la vivencia de la sexualidad durante la maternidad. **Resultados:** la articulación del estudio con la realidad vivida por las mujeres que amamentan permitió reconocer la influencia del paradigma actual de sacralización de la lactancia materna sobre los significados y elecciones de cómo actúan las mujeres. Las repercusiones pueden ser perjudiciales para la salud tanto materna como infantil, a través de la experiencia de sentimientos de culpa, vergüenza o incluso la decisión de realizar un destete temprano. **Conclusión:** la lactancia materna se basa en el fundamento de significados que involucran la divinidad y la sacralización del acto de amamentar, anulando las perspectivas de la sexualidad y dando como resultado una visión distorsionada y velada de lo vivido frente a lo socialmente deseado para este período.

Palabras clave: Lactancia Materna; Salud de la Mujer; Sexualidad.

How to cite this article:

Martins EL, Silva CM, Araujo LM, Progianti JM, Wilhelm LA, Garcia ORZ, Vargens OMC. Reflecting on the sacralization of breastfeeding and its influence on maternal sexuality. REME - Rev Min Enferm. 2021[cited _____];25:e-1401. Available from: _____
DOI: 10.5935/1415-2762-20210049

INTRODUCTION

“Breast feeding is a sacred and pure act!”, “Breast feeding is something divine. It’s hard to explain”.¹ Who has never heard these affirmative speeches that demonstrate the symbols and meanings socially constructed about the act of breast feeding? Often, after acknowledging the biological aspects and benefits of breast milk for mother and child, it is observed in social dialogues the understanding of breast feeding as an act with meanings that involve a relationship with the divinity and its sacralization.

This is supposed to occur in the context of the socialization of breast feeding, in which society expects behaviors and attitudes that meet social and moral standards for women who breastfeed, excessively controlling their sexuality.² From this perspective, this theoretical reflection study considers maternal sexuality in the conceptual constructivist scope, that is, influenced by social and historical aspects, in the scope of sensations of pleasure, eroticism and intimacy.

It is noticed that the female body during breast feeding is socially forbidden to exercise sexuality, that is, it becomes deprived of feelings of pleasure, eroticism and intimacy, reflecting the predominance of sacralization of breast feeding.¹ This normative is so permeated in the perception and appreciation to the point where women themselves act according to the prevailing social, cultural and medical dictates in society, in which any unusual experience of feelings of sexual pleasure with their own bodies, such as sexual excitement when breast feeding, is experienced and interpreted as unhealthy. Thus, the imposition and/or expectation of “ideal” social roles to be experienced by women during the breast feeding period trigger behaviors that deprive the experience of maternal sexuality freely, without prejudice and taboos.

In this sense, it must be considered that many women experience pleasurable sensations of sexual excitement during breast feeding that can be interpreted and experienced as something absurd, surreal, uncomfortable, bad, bizarre and horrible, which may mean a wrong sensation to be felt at the time of breast feeding.¹ However, it is noteworthy that these sensations are part of the human sexual response, in which the physiological, bodily and neural stimuli triggered by the child’s sucking directly on the breast generate sensations of sexual excitement in the female body, which can be perceived and reported through increased vaginal lubrication, nipple erection, vaginal contraction, and deep relaxation after feedings.¹

Consequently, from this experience, there is a blockage in the dimension of their bodily experience, such as the sexual one during breast feeding, which can lead to tragic consequences for breast feeding when women feel uncomfortable with the physical perceptions of their bodies and when society may regard the mother’s sexual experience of breast feeding as abusive,³ incestuous, or even sinful.

This conception is based on the lack of knowledge about the physiology of sexual arousal experienced during breast feeding. Reflecting on this interpretation of the experience of sexuality during breast feeding, it is clear that the subjectivity that involves women and the act of breast feeding is disregarded, indicating gaps in knowledge about the experience of sexuality at this stage of life. Searching the National Library of Medicine (PubMed), ScienceDirect, Latin American and Caribbean Literature on Health Sciences (LILACS) and Nursing Database (NDB) with the descriptors “breast feeding” and “sexuality”, 339 articles were obtained, in which titles, abstracts and keywords were analyzed, identifying a large deficit of scientific knowledge related to the object of this reflection and time interval between publications, between the oldest of 1980 and the most recent of 2019.

Still, it is known that this field of discussion about sexuality and breast feeding is surrounded by prejudices, taboos, beliefs, symbols, and different meanings, becoming controversial and often hidden. Thus, as this knowledge is still little explored, it is necessary to think about it critically from the perspective of the scientific field and of those who experience it. It is believed that it is necessary to reflect on the social, cultural, political, and economic aspects, but it is also necessary to consider the influences that socially shared mental representations on the experience of sexuality and the experience of sexual pleasure during breastfeeding exert on this practice among women.

Thus, the significance of this reflection is justified, highlighting the possible advances regarding the breaking of paradigms that involve the meanings of the act of breastfeeding and maternal sexuality. It is intended that all women have universal access to sexual and reproductive health, through sexual and reproductive rights at all stages of life, including motherhood, so that they can experience their sexuality without fear, shame, and guilt. It is noteworthy that this reflection is in line with the Sustainable Development Agenda, which recognizes the need to ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health services, which includes female empowerment, information, and education, as well as the integration of sexual and reproductive health in national strategies and programs.⁴

Furthermore, the idea that breastfeeding is part of a component of the total experience of sexuality is corroborated.³ In this sense, the perspective adopted in this study is the recognition of the context in which women are inserted during motherhood and breastfeeding, and visibility of the aspects that influence and promote the dissemination of the idea that breastfeeding is a sacred, pure, innocent act, free from any aspect of sexuality.¹ Thus, the following question arises as a reflection: “does the dominant paradigm of the sacralization of breastfeeding influence the maintenance of behaviors, perceptions, and ways of acting of women, which can generate harmful repercussions for breastfeeding and for maternal sexuality?” Therefore, the study aims to encourage reflections on the sacralization of breastfeeding and its influence on maternal sexuality.

METHODOLOGY

This is a theoretical-reflective study whose foundation is based on the discussion of the symbology of the act of breastfeeding, represented by the divinity and sacralization of breastfeeding, as well as the influence on the way of acting and making decisions about sexuality and breastfeeding. It presents symbolic interactionism as a theoretical framework,⁵ as it seeks to understand the reality, meanings, social interactions, experiences, and human actions of subjective aspects related to the experience of maternal sexuality during the act of breastfeeding.

A theoretical reflection study with analytical characteristics was carried out, in dialogue with the national and international literature, in the period from July to October 2020, in which seven health researchers participated, with a doctorate and specialization in the area of Obstetric Nursing. We sought to address socially instituted conceptual aspects about breastfeeding and how to deal with maternal sexuality in this period.

A doctoral thesis was used as a starting point,¹ which addressed how the socialization of breastfeeding influences the way of experiencing and meaning the sensations of sexual pleasure when breastfeeding, predominantly the socially established symbology that the act of breastfeeding is sacred, pure, free of eroticism, with maternal and nutritional pleasure prevailing. This study was organized by reflective impressions about the theme addressed, being compared, and interpreted with national and international literature, having as a guiding axis “the sacralization of

breastfeeding as a dominant paradigm and the repercussions for maternal sexuality”.

The sacralization of breastfeeding as a dominant paradigm and the repercussions for maternal sexuality

When discussing a paradigm, it is initially necessary to understand the meaning of its concept to later understand how a certain line of reasoning becomes dominant and accepted by society. In Thomas Kuhn’s philosophical conception, the paradigm is like a mental framework used to order the world and approach it, consciously or unconsciously.⁶ Paradigms also comprise the universally recognized scientific achievements that, for a time, provide problems and solutions models for a scientific community. Thus, research objects based on shared paradigms are committed to the same rules and standards of scientific practice in order to maintain a determined research tradition.⁶

In this sense, it is clear that breastfeeding as a field of scientific research preserves the tradition in studies carried out over the years with a dominant focus of the literature on the biological perspective, as an eminently nutritional phenomenon,⁷ excluding the symbolic and subjective dimensions that involve breastfeeding. In addition, the approach to the theme sexuality during breastfeeding also maintains a pattern of studies, predominantly discussions on marital sexuality and adaptations of the female body in the postpartum period, thus leaving gaps in the scope of the sensations of sexual pleasure when breastfeeding.⁸

Thus, the theoretical generalizations of a dominant paradigm involving the field of breastfeeding, that is, a paradigm with a nutritional and biomedical focus, hides the perceptions and subjectivity of sexuality during breastfeeding. This perspective influences the construction, maintenance, and perpetuation of the meaning of donation, duty, divinity and sacralization of breastfeeding.

This conception about the act of breastfeeding is constituted through the socialization of breastfeeding, that is, it is related to individual meanings, perceptions, symbols constructed through social interaction,^{1,5} being passed on from generation to generation and replicated in each experience. Furthermore, through social practices and actions, the patterns, and models of life to be followed are reproduced, using language as an instrument of discursive constructions and processes of meaning.

Thus, what can or should be accepted is constructed and what is in accordance with what institutions standardize as more adequate and socially desirable due to the influence of power relations.⁹

In this process of social interactions and construction of symbols and meanings, there is often an association with divine attributions for the experience of breastfeeding, being related to a blessing granted and created by God.^{10,11} This symbology also applies to the female body. The breasts during breastfeeding reinforce the thesis of being a sacred region⁹ belonging exclusively to the child.¹ This perception is based on the understanding of the female and maternal body as chaste and holy, according to discursive regulation that produces a type of sexual morality about this body.⁹

Also, the perception that the female body during breastfeeding belongs exclusively to the child and has a nutritional function contributed to the expropriation of maternal sexuality during this period.¹ Thus, in the breastfeeding experience, the being-woman cancels and distances herself of her body, of her existence, revealing a new way of being, inhabited by concerns about the child's exclusive health and well-being.¹²

Thus, breastfeeding can be experienced as a loss of identity, because the woman feels like a feeding machine for her child, representing a loss to herself.¹³ And with the predominance of the dominant paradigm of sacralization of breastfeeding and annulment from maternal sexuality, breastfeeding starts to be experienced and confused as proof of love, donation, and exclusive dedication to the child.

This symbology built in the social context and in the effectiveness of the interaction process in which women are inserted generates the priority to meet the child's needs at the expense of the experience of maternal sexuality. It is expected from women who breastfeed only purified, sacralized and romanticized attitudes, feelings, and perceptions about the act of breastfeeding and for the exclusive purpose of nutrition.¹

The meanings that breastfeeding has for these women are restricted to the biological aspects of the importance of breast milk for the child, being expressed by an act of affection and maternal love.^{12,14,15} In contrast, for women who experience sensations of sexual excitement, in a more subjective and physical perception with one's own body, this experience starts to be perceived as something inappropriate for the

moment of breastfeeding,¹ fleeing from what is expected or socially determined. Therefore, a contradiction is created insofar as what is apparently sexual cannot be maternal and what is maternal cannot be sexual.³

It is with this reasoning and with the pressure of social roles established during motherhood that women are faced with a reality that is totally veiled and different from the dominant discourses in their relationships. The means of communication and media present deficiencies and knowledge distortions in their discourses on sexuality, bodily changes in breastfeeding and stereotypes during motherhood.¹⁶

This scenario reproduces the dominant paradigm of the sacralization of breastfeeding and enhances the repercussions of the concealment of sexuality, becoming harmful to the psychosexual health of women, generating feelings of guilt,¹³ discomfort, shame, rejection of the child or even the abandonment of breastfeeding.¹ These ways of acting, thinking and feeling are expressed by women who breastfeed, needing to be increasingly recognized and discussed by health professionals and society, in order to minimize the impacts generated by social and behavioral patterns that involve breastfeeding and maternal sexuality.

Barriers in communication about the physiology of sexual arousal during breastfeeding and the lack of naturalization of women's processes of autonomy over their own sexuality in different stages of life, including the period of breastfeeding, cause consequences that could be minimized by the performance of health professionals. The insertion of this theme in professional training, in continuing education and health education practices is necessary as a strategy for change and resignification on the experience of sexuality during breastfeeding. The results of this reflection serve as an appeal for actions for future change in maternal and child health care, aiming at valuing and empowering women with regard to their own sexuality during breastfeeding.

As limitations of this study, the complexity of the theme sexuality during breastfeeding is highlighted, as it is still involved by taboos rooted in our society, which are reinforced and socially replicated by the paradigm of sacralization of breastfeeding. And the temporal gap between the published works indicates the urgency of new studies and theoretical-scientific deepening, aiming at changing the influencing paradigms in the experience of maternal sexuality.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In view of the reflections presented, the sacralization of breastfeeding is considered as the dominant paradigm, as it presents a strong domain and social convention on the act of breastfeeding, which through the socially constructed and shared meanings influence the maintenance of behaviors, perceptions, and ways of acting, it can generate harmful repercussions for maternity and breastfeeding when there is simultaneously the annulment of maternal sexuality.

In this context, it is noted that women start to experience conflicts between the reality of sexual pleasure experienced during breastfeeding and a socially idealized, sacred, and internalized discourse, which is materialized in the self-demanding of attitudes that involve proof of love, donation, and exclusive dedication to the son. The sensations of sexual excitement experienced with her own body during breastfeeding, being perceived as unusual and inappropriate, contradict the relative impositions of desired behaviors replicated in interactional processes and discourses. Thus, there is an effort among women in an attempt to eliminate any bodily experience perceived as sexual during breastfeeding in order to follow the patterns of sacralization of breastfeeding, reinforcing the limits between being a woman-mother who inhabits the same body.

Finally, it is understood that the recognition of the problems experienced in motherhood and breastfeeding is the key point to foster discussions and reflections aiming at a care that involves the subject in its entirety, subjectivity, and individuality, seeking to reduce the impacts caused by social stereotypes that breastfeeding women carry with them. Thus, the discussion and reflection of maternal sexuality during breastfeeding in the academic, care and social environment becomes urgent.

REFERENCES

- Martins EL. Agregando novos sentidos ao ser mulher a partir da vivência da excitação sexual ao amamentar [Tese]. Rio de Janeiro: Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro; 2021. 115 p.
- Giordani RCF, Piccoli D, Bezerra I, Almeida CCB. Maternidade e amamentação: identidade, corpo e gênero. *Ciênc Saúde Colet*. 2018[cited 2020 July 18];23(8):2731-9. Available from: https://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1413-81232018000802731&lng=pt&tlng=pt
- Perlman L. Breastfeeding and female sexuality. *Psychoanal Rev*. 2019[cited 2020 July 20];106(2):131-48. Available from: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30977708/>
- Mamede MV. Força de trabalho da Enfermagem e obstetrícia e os novos objetivos de desenvolvimento sustentável (2016-2030). *Rev Rene*. 2017[cited 2021 July 10]18(6):710-1. Available from: doi:10.15253/2175-6783.2017000600001
- Blumer H. *Symbolic interactionism: perspective and method*. Berkeley: University of California; 1969. 208 p.
- Kuhn TS. *A estrutura das revoluções científicas*. 5ª ed. São Paulo: Perspectiva; 1998[cited 2020 Nov 12]. 257 p. Available from: https://edisciplinas.usp.br/pluginfile.php/4103727/mod_resource/content/1/Kuhn-Estrutura-das-revolucoes-cientificas%201989.pdf
- Macedo CC, Abreu LC, Oliveira GF, Peixoto CU, Damasceno MMS. Aleitamento materno: uma revisão sistemática da literatura em periódicos indexados de 2009 a 2012. *Cad Cult Ciênc*. 2013[cited 2020 Nov 6];12(1):58-71. Available from: http://periodicos.urca.br/ojs/index.php/cadernos/article/view/524/pdf_1
- Martins EL, Vargens OMC. Women's perceptions of sexuality while breast-feeding: an integrative review. *Rev Enferm UERJ*. 2014[cited 2020 July 18];22(2):271-7. Available from: <https://www.e-publicacoes.uerj.br/index.php/enfermagemuerj/article/view/13670>
- Gomes MCA. Violence, intolerance and female body: analysing the discursive reactions in the media around the practice of the breastfeeding. *Cad Linguagem Soc*. 2017[cited 2020 Aug 15];18(2):175-94. Available from: <https://periodicos.unb.br/index.php/les/article/view/5797/5249>
- Gutiérrez-Obregón Y, Marín-Arias L. Significado de lactancia materna y leche materna para las madres de una comunidad urbana y otra rural de Costa Rica. *Poblac Salud Mesoam*. 2017[cited 2020 Aug 20];15(1):1-23. Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318610235_Significado_de_lactancia_materna_y_leche_materna_para_las_madres_de_una_comunidad_urbana_y_otra_rural_de_Costa_Rica/fulltext/5972b2f9458515e26dfd9f2f/Significado-de-lactancia-materna-y-leche-materna-para-las-madres-de-una-comunidad-urbana-y-otra-rural-de-Costa-Rica.pdf
- García-Magdaleno VG, Laureano-Eugenio J. Social representations on breastfeeding among women living in urban and rural areas in Jalisco, Mexico: a qualitative study. *Rev Colomb Obstet Ginecol*. 2019[cited 2020 Aug 31];70(2):83-93. Available from: <https://revista.fecolso.org/index.php/rcog/article/view/3303/3527>
- Lima SP, dos Santos EKA, Erdmann AL, de Souza Erdmann. Unveiling the lived experience meaning of being a woman breastfeeding with puerperal complications. *Texto Contexto Enferm*. 2017[cited 2020 Aug 31];26(3):1-8. Available from: https://www.scielo.br/pdf/tce/v27n1/en_0104-0707-tce-27-01-e0880016.pdf
- Pastorelli PPL, Oliveira ECN, Silva LJ, Silva LR, Silva MDB. Meaning and cultural experiences of breastfeeding among women from two countries. *Rev Enferm UERJ*. 2019[cited 2020 Nov 12];27:1-7. Available from: <https://www.e-publicacoes.uerj.br/index.php/enfermagemuerj/article/view/40605/33073>
- Peixoto LO, de Azevedo DV, Britto LF, Vasconcelos IN. "Leite materno é importante": o que pensam as nutrizes de Fortaleza sobre amamentação. *Rev Bras Saúde Mater Infant*. 2019[cited 2020 Nov 12];19(1):165-72. Available from: https://www.scielo.br/pdf/rbsmi/v19n1/pt_1519-3829-rbsmi-19-01-0157.pdf

15. Morais AC, Lima BAS, Silva MT, Morais AC, Moreira RCR, Oliveira CBF. Breastfeeding in joint accommodation: perception of primiparous mothers in the immediate puerperium. *Rev Enfer Contemp*. 2020[cited 2020 July 21];9(1):66-72. Available from: <https://www5.bahiana.edu.br/index.php/enfermagemuerj/article/download/2594/3501>
 16. Silva MN, Facio BC, Sarpi LL, Bussadori JCC, Fabbro RC. Amamentação em foco: o que é publicado nas revistas femininas no Brasil?. *REME - Rev Min Enferm*. 2018[cited 2020 Aug 22];22:1-8. Available from: <http://www.reme.org.br/artigo/detalhes/1249>
-

