

**BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES**  
**BREASTFEEDING AS DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION AND**  
**EMBODIED EXPERIENCE**

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## **CERTIFICATE**

I hereby certify that this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not being submitted as part of a candidature for any other degree.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me and that any help I have received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis studies maternal subjectivity in a group of 25 Australian women in the 1990s. The research uses a poststructuralist perspective to answer the question: How do women create a maternal subjectivity and give meaning to their lives when they become mothers for the first time? Discourse analysis is used to analyse data collected through a series of interviews with women, from late pregnancy to six months after birth. The early finding that breastfeeding was central to women's experience as mothers focused this research on the place of breastfeeding and the maternal body in the construction of contemporary motherhood.

The majority of participating women constructed breastfeeding as crucial to their maternal identity. They were committed to breastfeeding. In their accounts, breastfeeding was 'natural' and 'taken for granted', pivotal to their relationship with their baby, 'best for the baby', and something that a 'good' mother does. Personal accounts of success and achievement were particularly prominent. Breastfeeding required 'perseverance' and became an 'identity project'.

Breastfeeding, however, was not only constructed in Foucauldian terms through varying discourses, but was simultaneously an 'embodied' experience, sensed and perceived by women in diverse ways. This embodied or 'non-discursive' dimension of breastfeeding was difficult for these women to articulate and is poorly understood by health professionals. For some, breastfeeding fostered a connected, intimate and sensual relationship with the baby. These women were comfortable with or tolerated the 'blurred' boundaries of self and 'other', mother and child. Other women, however, found breastfeeding to be disruptive of body boundaries and routines, and distorting of their known experience of their breasts and body. At times, they felt disconnected or desired 'separation' from their infants. This difficult and distressing breastfeeding experience challenges the public and professional discourses that persuade women to breastfeed. The connected and intimate embodied experience of breastfeeding, however, presents a threat to a woman's sense of rational autonomy and independence.

This thesis uses feminist and other poststructuralist and phenomenological theories, to explore the complexity of the relationship between personal embodied experiences and the public and professional discourses and practices of breastfeeding. The findings of this study challenge midwives, nurses and lactation consultants to understand the diversity of women's personal experience of breastfeeding. Health professionals need to reflect upon their role in producing and reproducing the contradictions and tensions of motherhood and breastfeeding in the late 1990s.