**“I shall try to unpick the maternal ideal to discover the threads that weave it together[[1]](#footnote-0)”: a reflective design journal**

Introduction

The idea for this project was born out of several frustrations I felt about breastfeeding advocacy, baby-feeding culture and discourse. As the daughter of a La Leche League[[2]](#footnote-1) leader, I grew up immersed in breastfeeding culture and as a mother, I exclusively breastfed my own two children. But since childhood I have found breastfeeding campaign literature and posters deeply unappealing. Before I had children, I felt they represented a type of motherhood I never envisaged for myself. After having children, I found them equally alienating. The images of floaty nightgowns, flowing tresses, and long and loving gazes into the eyes of the suckling infant did not reflect my experience or the experiences I saw around me.

My firstborn is 10 this year, and my fascination with the politics of breastfeeding pre-dates his birth. A decade of enthusiastically consuming the few available books on the topic, alongside a burgeoning interest in feminism, persuaded me that baby-feeding is rarely a matter of free choice and it’s certainly not a single issue. It straddles a tangled intersection of other issues: feminism, reproductive rights, health, employment and workplace rights, capitalism, big business, politics and agricultural lobbying.

The complexity of the issue has been largely ignored by governments, healthcare workers, feminists and the media. Most experienced breastfeeding advocates have an understanding of the complexity, but communicating it effectively to a wider public has, for whatever reason, eluded them. They’ve tended to fall back on traditional ideas about motherly duty in promotional campaigns targeted at individuals.

In 2018, I created a series of breastfeeding illustrations–The Everyday Breastfeeding Project–which were exhibited in the Science Gallery in Trinity College, Dublin. The illustrations captured a diverse range of people breastfeeding in everyday situations. The feedback I received from my audience was enthusiastic and positive, convincing me that it wasn’t just my cynicism which made me bristle at traditional breastfeeding advocacy campaigns. There was a legitimate desire to see new ways of communicating and advocating on this issue.

In this essay, I lay out my research methodologies with a focus on two key types of investigation: the gathering of information through qualitative interviews, and the exploration of academic feminist theories around motherhood. The research I conducted took place over the course of a year (Spring ’21-Spring ’22). I then explain how this research changed the direction of my project, and informed my design practice. Lastly, I look at my research learnings and where I would like the project to go in the future.

Qualitative research: interviews

I began the interview process early on in my research. I chose to conduct qualitative research interviews because I wanted to be able to collect nuanced information about people’s emotional responses to breastfeeding advocacy campaign literature. I interviewed people instead of surveying them for a few reasons. Firstly; Bainne Beatha[[3]](#footnote-2) were already conducting quantitative research into breastfeeding supports in Ireland, secondly; I thought I’d get a better sense of people’s emotions in interviews, and thirdly; I wanted to be able to adapt my interview questions, or follow unexpected lines of enquiry, depending on what direction the conversation took.

I identified a number of people I wanted to interview, some were what I refer to in this essay as “individuals”, by which I mean they were parents whose personal experiences I was primarily interested in. In some cases, the individuals might have in-depth or professional knowledge which would impact their understanding of the baby-feeding issue (for example, if they worked in politics, or volunteered with breastfeeding groups), but the main focus of my interviews with them was their personal experience. Later, I interviewed people who I refer to in this text as “stakeholders/experts”. They are people who I wanted to interview because of their knowledge or work in a specific area. While their personal experiences as parents often came up in interviews, those experiences were not the focus.

I interviewed 28 people in total. Most of the interviews were conducted over Zoom. Some were in person, and some were on the phone, depending on what best suited interviewees. I had permission from all participants to record the interviews. I did this for my own future reference, and so that I could be fully present and engaged in the interview, undistracted by note-taking. I had a set of basic questions I intended to ask all interviewees, and a few specific questions which I had tailored for individuals, based on what I already knew of their experiences or area of expertise.

With the individuals, I began by asking them to tell me about their knowledge of breastfeeding before and during pregnancy, when a healthcare professional first brought up the topic of baby-feeding, the support they received after brith, leading on to their personal baby-feeding experience.

I conducted my first few interviews with good friends. Initially, my reasoning for this was so that I could get some interview practice in a relaxed environment, but I think it had the positive consequence of setting a tone of conversational, empathic friendliness for future interviews.

I found conducting qualitative interviews to be a balancing act, requiring self-awareness throughout. I needed to create an atmosphere whereby people would feel comfortable sharing very personal stories, without me sharing too much of my own experiences, feelings or biases. I wanted to allow interviewees a level of freedom to tell their story in their own way, while also being able to gently draw them back to my line of questioning when required.

My second round of interviews was with the stakeholders/experts. I deliberately left time between concluding my individual interviews and beginning the stakeholder/expert ones. I wanted to allow time to assimilate all of the information from the individuals and draw on that information to create very pertinent questions for my stakeholders/experts.

My pool of expert/stakeholder interviewees included a paediatrician, a psychotherapist, a GP and medical lecturer, a non-binary doula and queer perinatal educator, a breastfeeding researcher, a senator, and two artists. Their reactions to my research were largely interest and enthusiasm. They were aware of the many systemic barriers to breastfeeding, and mentioned them as problems which needed to be addressed if we wanted to increase breastfeeding rates. Most had identified the need for breastfeeding to be advocated for in

a way that doesn’t negatively impact women’s mental health. They had identified the need for a new direction in advocacy, but were at a loss as to what that new direction should look like.

Academic research: feminist theory

Running parallel to my qualitative research was a lot of in-depth feminist academic reading on the topics of baby-feeding and motherhood. There were a few papers I read early on in my research–*Ethics and Ideology in Breastfeeding Advocacy Campaigns (2006)* by Rebecca (Quill) Kukla, *Breastfeeding Divisions in Ethics and Politics of Feminism* (2018) bySuzana Ignjatović & Zeljka Buturovic, *Breastfeeding, Rhetoric, and the Politics of Feminism* (2013) by Bernice L. Hausman,and *New Directions in Motherhood Studies* (2011) by Samira Kawash–which introduced a number of key concepts to me, and would determine the direction my enquiries went.

I found Kukla’s assessment (*Ethics and Ideology in Breastfeeding Advocacy Campaigns,* 2006) that modern breastfeeding advocacy continues to draw on traditional ideas about motherly duty and responsibility, using patriarchal tools such as guilt and shame, to be a compelling one. Kukla argues that the barriers to breastfeeding are largely social, cultural and systemic, and so targeting individuals–with an increasingly risk-focused style of advocacy campaigning–is inappropriate and unethical (Kukla, 2006).

While I was aware that feminists were split over their beliefs about what mode of baby-feeding was the truly liberating one, Bernice L. Hausman (2013), and Suzana Ignjatović & Zeljka Buturovic (2018) gave me a much deeper understanding of the roots of this split. I found Hausman’s critical assessment of this split–that it kept feminists paralysed in a state of constant rhetorical reflection, unable to enact real world changes that might have positive effects on women’s lives–persuasive.

Reading Samira Kawash’s *New Directions in Motherhood Studies* (2011)taught me that this feminist inaction in the arena of baby-feeding was reflective of a wider feminist disinterest in motherhood as a subject. I had first-hand experience of being asked to leave a feminist-themed panel discussion in the past because I audaciously turned up with my (then) quiet and well-behaved child, but I hadn’t since given much thought to feminism’s discomfort with, or hostility towards, mothers. *New Directions in Motherhood Studies* introduced me to the works of Adrienne Rich and Andrea O’Reilly, and their respective ideas about the “mother outlaw” (Rich, 1976) and matricentric feminism[[4]](#footnote-3), which would be hugely influential on my work. Using these texts as a jumping-off point, I delved into more feminist writings on the subjects of baby-feeding and motherhood, coming to a number of conclusions. Many of these conclusions were aligning with my qualitative interview findings.

Reflection:

After interviewing individuals, I allowed the key findings to settle in my head for a few months before talking to stakeholders/experts. At this stage in the research, it was clear that my typical interviewee was white, cishet, partnered, middle-class and educated. I had been able to interview a few queer parents and women of African diaspora, but they had been people from within my own friend circle. I made a renewed effort to gather information from other marginalised communities.

I contacted Traveller and Roma community groups. The community workers are understandably very protective of their communities and declined to put me in touch with individuals for interviews, but were very helpful in answering questions and sending relevant resources and information. I also interviewed a trans man who had gestated and birthed two children using donor sperm.

My research interviews made it clear that the problematic messaging in breastfeeding advocacy campaigns is a symptom of a much larger problem: our very out-dated societal attitude towards and expectations of mothers. I believe that these out-dated notions were able to linger long after we had (as a society) overhauled our traditional ideas about women in general, because of feminists’ unwillingness to tackle the motherhood issue head on.

I considered my initial proposal–to give breastfeeding advocacy campaigns an overhaul–again. I was sure I could do it successfully, I could create a campaign which would be nicely designed with feminist messaging and edgy graphics. But it wouldn’t really address the root cause of the problem or have a long-term impact.

Informed by theories of essential complexity and speculative design, I decided that first the complex topics of motherhood and baby-feeding would need to be untangled, and laid out in a manner that made them more comprehensible. I needed to highlight the injustices and mobilise mothers to start thinking about these as political issues, and not individual domestic inequalities. I felt that, in order to achieve any real and lasting change, this political mobilisation would need feminist stakeholders. That would mean convincing feminists to accept the inherent contradictions that motherhood embodies, and to prioritise conversations and activism around the rights of mothers.

Design development and practical work

I had been drawn to the idea of creating a zine from the early stages of the project. Their history within punk and feminist movements as a quick and cheap way to spread information and ideas really appealed to me.

The zine will contain five essays which chart key reflections on the issues of baby-feeding and motherhood–how we arrived at this point, and where we might like to go in the future. I wanted to take the topic of baby-feeding and motherhood offline (which has been the site for so much controversy and misunderstanding on the issue) and into a medium which is more conducive to thoughtful contemplation. The inherently political nature of zines juxtaposes them against a culture of consumerist “mommy magazines”.

“The zine is a form of what’s called “participatory media, media made by individuals rather than by the consumer culture industries, and participatory media have been part of women’s and feminist history since the 1850s. Participatory media represent a way of engaging with unfriendly mass culture and transforming it” (Piepmeier, 2009, p. 29).

I was particularly inspired by the idea that zines allow women and girls to “critically engage the social roles prescribed for them and to construct new possibilities for women’s work, and women’s identities” (Mecklenberg-Faenger in Piepmeier, 2009, p. 30). The long-running *Riot Grrrl* zine, which emerged out of the Washington punk scene in the early 90s and is credited by many with developing the third wave of feminism, shows the lasting global impact this medium can have on our culture.

At the same time, textiles–with their rich history globally within women’s lives, and within my own matrilineage–also felt like a logical choice of medium. As breastfeeding and motherhood are topics so decisively situated in the body, I was drawn to how the body, or more specifically the costumed body, can be used in protest.

Drag is a particularly fascinating example, serving so many purposes: creative expression, entertainment, protest, subversion and a brave refusal to make one’s queer self go unnoticed. The importance of drag culture within queer culture and history can be understood as a lesson in protest–it shouldn’t be something we compartmentalise, and needs to be woven into the fabric of our lives.

At the heart of drag lies Judith Butler’s famous theory on gender–that “gender is neither natural or innate, but rather, is a social construct which serves particular purposes and institutions” (Sullivan, 2003, p. 82). The illusion of gender is created through “the performative effect of reiterative acts, that is, acts that can be, and are, repeated” (Sullivan, 2003, p. 82).

This idea of performance was brought up by a number of my interviewees, who felt that particular emotions or mental states (ambivalence, depression) made it difficult for them to “perform” motherhood in a socially-sanctioned way.

This idea of performing a constructed role is explored by Andrea O’Reilly in *Matricentric Feminism* (2021)*.* She argues that what we perceive as a universal and innate experience of motherhood, has in fact been “socially and historically constructed by imperialist, white supremacist, and capitalist patriarchy” (2021, p. 26). Matricentric feminism “challenges the assumption that maternity is natural to women–that all women naturally know how to mother–and that the work of mothering is driven by instinct rather than intelligence, and developed by habit rather than skill” (2021, p. 27).

Rozsika Parker, in *The Subversive Stitch* (2010), examines this same patriarchal notion of women’s essential proclivities for certain tasks with relation to textiles and “domestic” crafts. Parker notes the “role played by embroidery in the maintenance and creation of the feminine ideal… [w]omen embroidered because they were naturally feminine and were feminine because they naturally embroidered” (2010, p. 11).

She is critical of the “notion that femininity, and embroidery as the art of the feminine, come naturally to women” (2003, p. 208) because of the paradoxical way this both elevates and denigrates the work. When the capacity for needlework is seen as mystical and god-given, it undermines the “qualities necessary to make a sustained effort in needlework… [the] physical and mental skills, fine aesthetic judgement in colour, texture and composition; patience during long training; and assertive individuality of design”. (Walker, 1981, in Parker, 2010, p. 207)

My final submission will consist of a risograph-printed zine, and five textile pieces–representing the public and private spheres respectively. The boundaries between the two separate spheres become blurred, with the zines borrowing elements of needlework, and the textile pieces functioning as typographic tools for protest.

Learnings and future thinkings

Many of the things I felt constrained this research were out of my control. I can probably count on one hand the number of weeks of undisrupted childcare I’ve had in the last year. It felt like I was constantly haemorrhaging valuable time, and the stress of this had at times an impact on my ability to think clearly about my major project.

Keeping with the theme or spirit of my research though, I tried as much as possible to prioritise rest, put myself first, and to step back from commitments to other people. It would have been disingenuous of me to work myself into the ground creating a body of work which argues for the rights of mothers to prioritise themselves and their basic needs.

The interview process provided many learnings. The interview findings were key in shaping the direction the project took, so starting them early in the initial research phase (as I had been advised by tutors) was paramount. I tried to maintain an attitude of flexibility and open curiosity, even–or rather especially–when interviewees' opinions clashed with my expectations or my own personal beliefs. I relied heavily on my intuition in interviews, particularly with regards to following unexpected lines of enquiry and drawing interviewees back to prepared questions. In the future, I would try to conduct my second round of interviews sooner, as–during this project–they began to encroach upon the time I had set for testing and creating my finished pieces.

My interviewees felt comfortable enough to share very personal details with me, sometimes to the extent that I was caught off-guard by their openness. I think partly this was because they were glad to have an opportunity to tell their stories and have someone listen, with a number of interviewees remarking that it “felt like therapy”. I didn’t share my own story in much depth (to avoid leading interviewees), but I think they got a sense that I brought a lived experience similar to theirs, which allowed us to build a level of trust and intimacy quite quickly. In contrast, I noticed it took longer to build that trust with the trans father I interviewed.

This realisation–paired with the reluctance of Roma and Traveller community workers to give access to their communities–led me to thinking about the ethics of research. There is an ethical implication to a funded researcher entering a marginalised community, mining the unpaid members of that community for information, leaving the community, and producing work that may not be of any value to the community.

I think if research is conducted by a member from within a marginalised community, there is not only more likely to be an established level of trust, but the researcher brings a tacit knowledge, which could positively impact the depth of insight in the resulting work. This understanding is something I would like to bring to future research–asking myself if I am best placed to conduct this research, if part of the research needs to be outsourced, etc.

In the short-to-medium term, I have two main goals for this project within the contexts of health, and politics. It is well-documented that women’s health in general is underfunded and under-researched[[5]](#footnote-4) but this project has shown that there are real issues in the areas of general postnatal support and perinatal mental health, which deserve further qualitative and quantitative research. I would like to see the findings of this project contribute to that research, in the hopes that a public maternity care programme can be developed, which is centred on the birthing person and addresses their needs in a more holistic way.

I think for these health goals to be achieved, we need a commitment from feminists that they will recognise motherhood as an important intersection, deserving of their time, energy, and activism. Outside of the sphere of public health, I would like to see feminists challenging the traditional and outdated ideas that are still perpetuated about motherhood, and to organise around dismantling barriers that still exist for mothers existing in the public sphere. Ultimately, I want this work to kickstart imaginings and conversations about what we want the future of empowered motherhood and parenthood to be.

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1. Parker, 2005, p. 35 [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. La Leche League are an international mother-to-mother breastfeeding support group [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Bainne Beatha are an Irish mother-led group who campaign for an improvement in structural breastfeeding supports [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Matricentric feminism proposes that the category of mother cannot be conflated with the category of woman because “many of the problems mothers face - socially, economically, politically, culturally, and psychologically - are specific to [their]... identity as mothers” (O’Reilly, 2019, p.13) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Caroline Criado Perez details this in Part 4 of *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men* (2019) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)