

Kansas State University Libraries

New Prairie Press

---

Adult Education Research Conference

2016 Conference Proceedings (Charlotte, NC)

---

## "I saw a wrong and I wanted to stand up for what I thought was right:" A narrative study on becoming a breastfeeding activist

Jennifer Pemberton

Pennsylvania State University Harrisburg, jlp566@psu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc>



Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Administration Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Pemberton, Jennifer (2016). "I saw a wrong and I wanted to stand up for what I thought was right:" A narrative study on becoming a breastfeeding activist," *Adult Education Research Conference*.  
<https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2016/papers/40>

This Event is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact [cads@k-state.edu](mailto:cads@k-state.edu).

## **“I Saw a Wrong and I Wanted to Stand up for What I Thought Was Right:” A Narrative Study on Becoming a Breastfeeding Activist**

Jennifer L. Pemberton  
Penn State Harrisburg

**Abstract:** This narrative study considers how breastfeeding women develop a critical consciousness of their marginalization and the emancipatory process of learning to be an activist.

**Keywords:** feminism, marginalization, emancipatory learning, breastfeeding, activism

### **Introduction and Background**

Breastfeeding is nature’s way of ensuring that mothers can nurture their babies. Breastfeeding is associated with a number of benefits for both the mother and baby, such as increased immunity for the baby and a reduced risk of certain cancers for the mother (Kolinsky, 2010; Work Group on Breastfeeding, 1997). Breastfeeding in America has a long history, dating back to the 1600s. During the last four centuries, breastfeeding rates have ebbed and flowed, and the fluctuations in breastfeeding practices have been influenced by a number of factors. American breastfeeding rates were highest in the 1600s and hit an historical low in 1970, when initiation rates were 28%, and only 8% of infants were still breastfeeding at three months (Thulier, 2009). More recently, in 2009, although breastfeeding was initiated in 76.9% of births, the rate of breastfeeding at one year was 25.5% (Breastfeeding Report Card, 2012). A number of factors are involved in a woman’s decision to initiate and continue breastfeeding, among which are societal and cultural views and dynamics. Despite a number of initiatives intended to improve breastfeeding initiation and duration, the United States is far below the national goal of at least half of babies continuing to breastfeed at six months (Thulier, 2009). Kedrowski and Lipscomb (2008) suggest that the United States is not reaching breastfeeding goals because the federal courts do a poor job of protecting women’s breastfeeding rights, and individual states vary in their policies supporting breastfeeding mothers. Much of the legislation to promote breastfeeding is aspirational rather than mandatory. Thus, despite several decades of initiatives and policy to support breastfeeding, mothers still often lack the support and protections necessary to meet their personal and the nation’s breastfeeding goals.

To be sure, an assumption of the current study is that breastfeeding mothers are part of a marginalized group. *Breastfeeding women experience marginalization in a number of ways: through the way society views women and their bodies; by viewing infant-feeding as a commodity rather than an important and meaningful set of choices a mother makes; by maintaining a social structure that requires mothers to work but offers little support to assist women in their dual roles of mother and worker; and by giving precedence to the comfort of the general population over the emotional and physical needs of mothers and babies.* Both personal anecdotes and breastfeeding literature demonstrate that some breastfeeding mothers experience oppression. While some suggest that structural factors create this oppression (Blum, 1999; Hausman, Smith, & Labbok, 2012; Van Esterik, 1994), others argue that breastfeeding itself is inherently oppressive (Firestone, 1970; O’Brien, 1981). In contrast, breastfeeding can be liberating for women. Breastfeeding can serve as an opportunity for women to “embrace and enhance gender differences by fighting to remove the constraints placed on them by patriarchy and capitalism” (Thulier, 2009, p. 90). Women’s emancipation via breastfeeding may occur at a

private, individual level, or it can be more widespread in the form of activism activities. Women who find that breastfeeding is a catalyst for emancipatory learning can become activists for this vital women's issue.

### **Purpose**

There is a lack of research on the process by which breastfeeding women come to recognize their marginalization and move to activism. Thus, the purpose of this research is twofold: a) to examine how breastfeeding mothers learn they are members of a marginalized group, and b) to investigate how some of these mothers move from marginalization to emancipation and activism.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study was grounded in two interconnected theoretical frameworks: critical feminism (also with attention to embodied learning) and women's emancipatory learning in relation to breastfeeding and activism.

### **Women's Learning and Feminist Pedagogy**

Many traditional education systems emphasize "self-direction, autonomy, and competition, which perpetuate hegemony and privilege male domination" (Boucoulas & Lipson Lawrence, 2010, p. 43). Feminist scholars, however, acknowledge that many women learn differently from men. Hayes and Flannery (2002) identify, for example, several themes that characterize women's learning: affect and intuition, the importance of context, connection between the personal and social, and learning with others. Connected to intuitive knowing is embodied learning (Freiler, 2008). Hayes (1989) proposes that two assumptions underlie feminist pedagogy: 1) traditional educational models have not addressed the educational needs of most women, and 2) models that emphasize individual development and social change better address these needs. The work of Maher and Tetreault (1994) has influenced the themes that typify feminist pedagogy: how knowledge is constructed, voice, authority, identity as shifting, and positionality. More recently, English and Irving (2015) identify four goals of critical feminist pedagogy: fostering social analysis, supporting women's leadership, building organizations, and creating social change. Women's learning and feminist pedagogy are important in considering emancipatory learning theory as it applies to breastfeeding mothers.

### **Emancipatory Learning**

A logical assumption is that to become emancipated, one must first be marginalized or oppressed. Sheared (1994) defines marginalization as something that "occurs when one person's views are valued and voiced at the sociopolitical and historical expense of others" (p. 27). To assume the existence of oppression, we must also assume an imbalance of power. Thus, a marginalized group can be contrasted with the dominant group, which has increased power and access to resources, such as information and assets, and the ability to influence the policies that affect them (Sheared, 2006). Wilson and Nesbit (2005) contend that "because power is constructed in and through social interactions, it is always alterable and disruptable, hence the importance of understanding and using power in adult education" (p. 454). Freire (1993) asserts that the key to making meaning out of their struggle, those who are oppressed must work to regain their humanity; rather than becoming oppressors themselves, they must seek to restore the humanity of the both the oppressors and oppressed. He further argues that "this...is the great

humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well” (Freire, 1993, p. 26).

The major question the current study attempts to answer is how do breastfeeding mothers move from a place of marginalization to one of emancipation and activism? While this marginalization arguably comes from societal norms, women “are often very proactive, choosing change” (Flannery, 2002, p. 68). Even with a proclivity for taking action, “before women [can] change patriarchy we [have] to change ourselves; we [have] to raise our consciousness” (hooks, 2000, p. 7). Thus, consciousness is necessary for empowerment. Inglis (1997) states that “empowerment involves people developing capacities to act successfully within the existing structures of power, while emancipation concerns critically analyzing, resisting and challenging structures of power” (p. 4). For emancipation to occur, we must move from theory to action. As hooks (1994) explains, “Theory is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary. It fulfills this function only when we ask that it do so and direct our theorizing towards this end” (p. 61). Thus, we need specific tasks to frame the process of emancipatory learning. Brookfield (2005) proposes seven “learning tasks” that are embedded in critical learning. The first task is challenging ideology, which helps to reveal inequality and oppression. Next, one must contest hegemony, which Brookfield defines as the idea that “people learn to accept as natural and in their own best interest an unjust social order” (p. 43). Unmasking power is the third task, which involves recognizing how power is used and abused. The next task is overcoming alienation, which is necessary to allow for the possibility of freedom. Adults must learn to liberate themselves, the fifth of the seven learning tasks. Sixth, one must reclaim reason – the ability “to assess evidence, make predictions, judge arguments, recognize causality, and decide on actions where no clear choice is evident” (p. 55). Finally, the seventh task is practicing democracy to ensure equity. These learning tasks can help to frame the process by which breastfeeding women move from oppression and marginalization to emancipation and activism.

### **Methodological Overview**

The research questions that guide the study are:

1. In what ways do breastfeeding women see themselves as marginalized, and how do they come to recognize this marginalization?
2. For women who become breastfeeding activists, what is the process of moving from marginalization to activism, and what role does emancipatory learning play in this process?

The current study employs narrative inquiry. Clandinin & Connelly (2000) note that “life...is filled with narrative fragments, enacted in storied moments of time and space, and reflected upon and understood in terms of narrative unities and discontinuities” (p. 17). Narrative inquiry facilitates an understanding of a phenomenon through a collection of “narrative fragments” that comprise women’s stories. There were 11 participants in the study, chosen according to purposeful criteria related to the study’s purpose; they represent diversity in age, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, and educational background. Data collection included narrative semi-structured interviews, which were co-constructed between the researcher and the participants, and researcher-generated artifacts. Both narrative and constant-comparative analysis were used to analyze the data.

### **Findings and Implications**

There were three sets of findings that emerged from the data. First, those related to the marginalization of breastfeeding mothers indicate that their marginalization is manifested in:

negative views of breastfeeding in public; lack of breastfeeding support of some health professionals; the commercial formula industry; and returning to employment. Second, the findings regarding how they learned to be activists indicate they did so: by becoming conscious of marginalization; through mentoring, networking, and collaboration; through sometimes leveraging men's power and support; and through social media and technology. Third, the findings regarding what they learned from being activists center on: seeing activism as a continuum; perspective-taking; learning leadership skills; and claiming their own empowerment.

The findings from this study have implications for both theory and practice. Related to adult learning theory, this study offers new insight into the role of embodied learning as part of women's activist learning. The public health field can glean from this study how to better educate women not only on breastfeeding, but also on public health issues in general by fostering collaboration and connection, and adopting insights from feminist pedagogy. Further, integrating activism and emancipatory learning into the curriculum for health care professionals can help them not only in their efforts at patient education, but in their own activist efforts for healthcare.

### **Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

As with all research, this study has some limitations. I will discuss those limitations here, and then I will suggest ways in which future research could bridge the gaps this study was unable to fill.

#### **Lack of Attention to Socioeconomic Diversity**

I set out to include a diverse group of women in this study. My participants were diverse in race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion and age. The sample even had aspects of diversity that were unexpected – interracial marriage and disability, for example. Nevertheless, this study all but overlooks socioeconomic diversity. The participants in this study represent the middle class and have the privileges that come along with that status. All of the women were able to afford some leave after giving birth, which helped them to establish breastfeeding. The women who worked outside of the home hold professional jobs with benefits of flexible schedules and paid time off, which allowed them to care for their children and engage in activism. All of the women are married or are in a long-term, stable relationship; their partners provided financial and instrumental support, allowing the women to attend activist events as they desired. One participant reported that the women she encountered through breastfeeding activist work were highly educated and middle- to upper-middle class. Not surprisingly, lower-class mothers are less likely to breastfeed due to a number of barriers, including lower educational attainment, less flexible work schedules (often without paid benefits), and a lack of access to consistent medical care by professionals who are well-versed in breastfeeding (Hausman, Smith, & Lobbok, 2012). Thus, lower-class mothers are even more in need of social changes to benefit them and their babies. Furthermore, they have the potential to gain valuable skills and be empowered through activism. Future research should consider the implications of class on activism with a focus on how to create conditions that encourage women with socioeconomic challenges to become involved in activism.

#### **Underrepresentation of the Most Marginalized**

Community is an important aspect of feminist learning, particularly as women learn to be activists. There are many positive aspects to communities of activism, but “communities involve

boundaries, groupings distinguished from others; being *in* a community implies that others are *outside* of it...and there is always going to be someone who is excluded” (English & Irving, 2015, p.160). Too often, those who are the most marginalized are left out of communities, including those where women collaborate to learn activism. For instance, how do women with disabilities join these activist communities? For example, in this study, Sarah – despite being deaf – was able to find her niche within the activist community. But too often, when women with disabilities are interested in joining a community, they are pushed toward those communities concerned with their disability instead of having their activist interests honored (Batliwala, 2012). Clearly, the current study explores the experiences of women in the United States. What opportunities exist for marginalized women in developing countries who are compelled to work for social change but need the skills that feminist pedagogy and the tenets of women’s learning can cultivate? In sum, a major limitation of this study is its failure to include the voices of the most marginalized. Future research ought to investigate how feminist pedagogy and principles of women’s learning can create a place at the table for those who have the greatest need to be there. Women are powerful and given the right tools and context, even the most marginalized women have the potential to effect change and foster their own emancipation.

### References

- Batliwala, S. (2011). *Feminist leadership for social transformation: Clearing the conceptual cloud*. New Delhi, India: CREA. Retrieved from <http://web.creaworld.org/files/fl.pdf>
- Blum, L. M. (1999). *At the breast: Ideologies of breastfeeding and motherhood in the contemporary United States*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Boucoulalas, M., & Lipson Lawrence, R. (2010). Adult learning. In C. E. Kasworm, A. D. Rose, & J. M. Ross-Gordon (Eds.), *Handbook of adult and continuing education* (35-48). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Breastfeeding report card – U.S. (2012). In *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/breastfeeding/data/reportcard.htm>
- Brookfield, S. D. (2005). *The power of critical theory: Liberating adult learning and teaching*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco, CA: Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- English, L. M., & Irving, C. J. (2015). *Feminism in community: Adult education for transformation*. Boston, MA: Sense.
- Firestone, S. (2003). *The dialectic of sex: The case for a feminist revolution*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux.
- Flannery, D.D. (2002). Connection. In E. Hayes, & D. D. Flannery (Eds.), *Women as Learners: The Significance of Gender in Adult Learning* (111-137). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Freiler, T. J. (2008). Learning through the body. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 119, 37-47.
- Freire, P. (1993). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Hausman, B. L., Smith, P. H., & Lobbok, M. (2012). Introduction: Breastfeeding constraints and realities. In P. Hall Smith, B. L. Hausman, & M. Lobbok (Eds.), *Beyond health, beyond choice: Breastfeeding constraints and realities* (1-11). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers.
- Hayes, E. (1989). Effective Teaching Styles. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 43. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Hayes, E., & Flannery, D. D. (2002). *Women as learners: The significance of gender in adult*

- learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- hooks, b. (2000). *Feminism is for everybody: Passionate politics*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.
- Inglis, T. (1997). Empowerment and emancipation. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 48(1), 3-17.
- Kedrowski, K. M., & Lipscomb, M. E. (2008). *Breastfeeding rights in the United States*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Kolinsky, H. M. (2010). Respecting working mothers with infant children: The need for increased federal intervention to develop, protect, and support a breastfeeding culture in the United States. *Duke Journal of Gender Law & Policy*, 17, 333-362.
- Maher, F., & Tetreault, M. (1994). *The feminist classroom*. New York: Basic Books.
- O'Brien, M. (1981) *The politics of reproduction*. Boston, MA: Routledge.
- Sheared, V. (1994). Giving voice: An inclusive model of instruction – A womanist perspective. In E.R. Hayes & S. A. J. Colin (Eds.), *Confronting racism and sexism* (pp.27-37). New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, No. 61. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Sheared, V. (2006). The intersection of education, hegemony, and marginalization within the academy. In S. B. Merriam, B. C. Courtenay, & R. M. Cervero (Eds.), *Global issues and adult education: Perspectives from Latin America, Southern Africa, and the United States* (pp. 182-192). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Thulier, D. (2009). Breastfeeding in America: A history of influencing factors. *Journal of Human Lactation*, 25(1), 85-94.
- Van Esterik, P. (1994). Breastfeeding and feminism. *International Journal of Gynecology & Obstetrics*, 47, 41-54.
- Wilson, A. L., & Nesbit, T. (2005). The problem of power. In R. J. Hill & R. Kiely (Eds.), *The 46<sup>th</sup> Annual Adult Education Research Conference* (pp. 449-454). Athens: University of Georgia. Work Group on Breastfeeding (1997). Breastfeeding and the use of human milk. *Pediatrics*, 100(6), 1035-1039.