 
 

**ESRC seminar series: Social experiences of breastfeeding: building bridges between research and policy**

**June 1st 2015: Breastfeeding, affect and materiality,**

**Speaker abstracts and biographies.**

**Alison Bartlett, PhD**

*Public Art and the Return of the Maternal: Patricia Piccinini’s Skywhale*

This paper is grounded in the idea that more visual imagery of breastfeeding will contribute to its normalization, and counter the sexual commercialisation of breasts. I suggest, however, that this strategy is not just about seeing but also about feeling. To demonstrate this I turn to a controversial piece of public art—Patricia Piccinini’s *Skywhale*— which was launched in Australia in 2013 and has begun touring internationally. The *Skywhale* is a fantastical creature that features 5 giant breasts on each side and sails through the air. This unexpected flying mammal provokes responses wherever it goes, and arguably provides productive ways of engaging public responses to breastfeeding and maternity. In this paper I examine responses to the *Skywhale*, analysing its affects through psychoanalytic concepts and its materiality through the tradition of public art and monuments. The extremes of intimacy and monumentality configured through the *Skywhale* offer an object *par excellence* for seeing breastfeeding writ large in the public domain, and feeling the return of the maternal.

Alison Bartlett works at the University of Western Australia in Gender Studies, and brings cultural studies/literary/feminist methods to her work on breastfeeding as a cultural practice. Her book *Breastwork: Rethinking breastfeeding* (2005) analyses the available discourses through which breastfeeding can be thought. A volume edited with Rhonda Shaw, *Giving Breast Milk: Body ethics and contemporary breastfeeding practice* (2010) addresses ethical relations of breastfeeding in essays by professionals and academics.

**Lucilla Newell, PhD**

*Disentangling the politics of breastfeeding*

Infant feeding has become a target of policy at international, national and local levels. In the UK, although breastfeeding has been recognised as having a major role to play in public health, less than 1% of babies are exclusively breastfed for the first six months of life. In this paper, I will develop an exploratory framework to understand this gap between policy and practice. This paper claims that to understand what is happening in this failure of governmentality, as this gap between what the State claims and supports as a social good (exclusive breastfeeding for 6 months) and diverse social practices could be understood, we need to first grasp how feeding relations get done, and attend to how these relate to different forms of politics around feeding. I describe then how actor-network theory (ANT) and the debates around vibrant materialities (see for instance Bennett 2004; Hawkins 2006) can bring fresh insights into the complex entanglements around breastfeeding, and its particular forms of politics. At the same time, I consider how the issues and materialities around feeding might challenge and enrich these approaches.

Lucila holds a PhD in Geography from the Open University. Her PhD focused on the politics of waste in Buenos Aires. Having children while doing her PhD meant her research interests veered in a new direction, and she is in the process of developing her research agenda using her theoretical background to understand issues of feminist mothering, and more specifically, the politics of breastfeeding. She is currently an Associate Researcher of of [CORTH](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/corth/) and the [Centre for Global Health Policy](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/globalhealthpolicy/) in the School of Global Studies, University of Sussex, and she is applying for grants, volunteering as a breastfeeding peer supporter and working on creating a collaborative research project with the NHS Breastfeeding Peer Support team in Brighton.

**Kate Boyer, PhD**

*Breastfeeding and modern early parenting culture – when worlds collide*

This paper looks at women’s experiences breastfeeding outside the home from the perspective of emotion and affect. It addresses the questions: what is breastfeeding outside the home like as an emotional experience; and what role do such experiences play in women’s decisions about breastfeeding cessation? It is based on qualitative data (survey and interviews) collected in the South-East of England in 2008 and 2009 together with an analysis of posts relating to breastfeeding in public made on *mumsnet* between 2007 and 2010. I analyse these data through an engagement with the work of cultural theorist Sara Ahmed on collective feelings (2010a, 2010b, 2008 and 2004) to argue that womens’ experiences breastfeeding in public in the UK can be understood through concepts of ‘public comfort’, and the desire not to upset the ‘comfort of strangers’. This paper advances knowledge by highlighting the role that interactions (both verbal and non-verbal) between breastfeeding women and the people around them while out and about can shape how mothers feel about their breastfeeding practice. In particular, I argue that even subtle ‘changes in atmosphere’ or mood can affect how comfortable (or uncomfortable) women are breastfeeding outside the home, and that concerns about upsetting ‘public comfort’ can contribute to the decision to stop breastfeeding.

Kate is a Feminist Geographer working as a lecturer in the School of Planning and Geography at Cardiff University.  She is interested in questions of embodiment, affect and materiality, and the way that wage-work and care-work relate to one another.  She brings these interests to bear on questions of breastfeeding and the broader field of parenting practice.  She has been researching and publishing on the social and spatial politics of breastfeeding in the UK and North America since 2007.  During this time she has written about women’s experiences breastfeeding in public; breast milk donation and the politics of mobile breast milk; women's experiences expressing breast milk, and the social politics of combining lactation with wage-work.   She has published this work in journals such as: Health and Place, Progress in Human Geography, Gender, Place and Culture and Feminist Theory.   She is also the mother of a seven year old boy.

**Nicki Symes**

*The Bristol Journy*

The presentation will give an overview of the journey that Bristol has made to begin to raise breastfeeding rates and address health inequalities. The work has been a story of working together across disciplines, at times working on hunches, observations and local intelligence, fitting small and large pieces of the jigsaw together, as well as following policy, research and best practice guidance. Whilst some success has been seen in raising rates and addressing health inequalities, there is still much to do to embed, secure and develop the programme of work.

After training and working as a nurse in Bath, Nicki spent 16 years supporting women to breastfeed their babies whilst working as a midwife in both hospital and community settings in Exeter and Bristol. Academic study in the 80’s and 90’s, led her to explore women’s health and lives from historical, feminist and political viewpoints. This has sparked an interest in women’s history and health. After breastfeeding her two daughters, she became interested in breastfeeding as a political and public health issue when studying to be a health visitor. This interest has led to almost 10 years working in breastfeeding public health, developing projects in South Wales and Bristol that support mothers to breastfeed. Currently, Nicki is the public health lead for breastfeeding and is based in the Early Years team at Bristol City Council. She commissions services to support mothers to breastfeed, works collaboratively to develop projects, supports health visiting and Children’s Centre teams with the UNICEF UK Baby Friendly Initiative standards and raise the profile of breastfeeding.