

**Negotiating perceptions of failure, risk and redemption
in an Australian breast milk bank**

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Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

March 2013

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Abstract

This thesis explores how the centrality of successful gestation and lactation in early maternal identity becomes problematic when unexpected complications arise. It is widely accepted that lactation and subsequent breastfeeding is an automatic and 'natural' response to having a baby. Yet it is not uncommon for women to encounter difficulties producing sufficient breast milk or breastfeeding, particularly those who have premature babies. In considering a group of women who have premature babies and experience difficulties with lactation, this research examines how they are constructed as 'failed' because they cannot perform in ways that most mothers take for granted.

For women who are not able to produce their own breast milk, breast milk banks (BMBs) have been established to provide pasteurized, donor breast milk. The establishment of contemporary BMBs is supported by current medical and scientific discourses which endorse the benefits of breast milk over formula, where it is said that premature babies benefit considerably. Due to the powerful meanings associated with mothering, breastfeeding and breast milk, the concept of sharing breast milk in a BMB destabilises what is considered 'normal'. Women who rely on another woman's breast milk to feed their babies experience the use of the BMB as a challenge to their maternal identity, and they have to strategically manage and negotiate this process.

To explore how women navigate the experience of breast milk banking in an Australian context, this thesis draws on qualitative research, utilising the first person narratives of women who have been involved in a BMB either as donors and/or as recipients. Taking a post-structural and an inductive approach, this research uses semi-structured interviewing, observations and a detailed discourse analysis to interpret data. Based on these methodological foundations, this thesis applies and extends Foucault's theorisation on the body and power, which is central to the operation of the BMB. To extend the work of Foucault, this thesis engages with feminist critiques of his work to argue that women participate in a network of power through a project of 'body work', which is both constraining and enabling.

A key orientating device of this thesis is the concept of redemptive mothering. Redemptive mothering is a transformative process whereby women attempt to shift from being constructed as failed and inadequate, to successful mothers. This requires their active participation in a project of normalisation enacted in an attempt to correct their failed bodies. If they are unable to normalise their bodies they must manage the perceived risks associated with receiving donor breast milk in order to realign the uncertainties regarding the exchange of bodily fluids. In considering the ways women navigate the BMB, this research argues that redemptive mothering is a technology of the self, which becomes a way that women free themselves from the constraining aspects of power and responsibility associated with infant feeding practices.

Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in a university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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Gabriella Zizzo

Date

Acknowledgements

I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to all the people who have supported and contributed to this thesis.

To the women who participated in the interviews, thank you for inviting me into your homes and busy lives. I appreciate you opening up and sharing some very emotional yet uplifting stories about your unique experiences of motherhood. I also extend my gratitude to Dr Ben Hartmann and the PREM bank who welcomed me into KEMH and provided much assistance in introducing me to these women.

To the supervisory team involved in this project, a heartfelt and grateful thanks to you! Margie Ripper has been a wonderful asset to this research. Her quick wit knew what I was trying to get out before I did. I thank you Margie for all her positivity, encouragement and for pushing me to be bold.

Megan Warin came aboard part way through this research yet never blinked or faltered as she caught up. Megan's contribution to supervision has offered me tremendous support and encouraged professional, academic and intellectual growth. Thanks to Megan for being inspiringly motivational, never letting me go halfway, always pushing just enough and always in the right directions.

I also wish to thank Margaret Allen for her early contributions as supervisor. Working with Margaret as a tutor and supervisor has made an invaluable contribution to this project and my professional development.

The entire GWSI team: I have never worked with or around such an inspiring and insightful group of people. It was and is a pleasure to say I was involved with the supportive, encouraging environment that is Gender Studies at The University of Adelaide. It was always a comfort to know they were all there, busy but always ready with a quick hello, an encouraging chat or a sympathetic ear.

My past and current postgraduate colleagues at GWSI, we have taken this PhD journey together and I am grateful that we have grown into friends. Thank you to Ruthie O'Reilly, Penelope Eate, Clare Bartholomaeus, Tara Bates, Damian Creaser, Kanchana Bulumulle, Anne Burger, Jillian Schedneck, Pauline McLoughlin, Sharyn Goudie, Nadine Levy, and Toni Delany. I also wish to acknowledge the advice and support received through the duration of this thesis from post-graduates in other disciplines.

Also from GWSI, thank you to Sarah Hoggard for her constant kindness and support and Ryan Cortazzo, for always letting me bug you! Kathie Muir, Susan Oakley, Anna Szorenyi, Jessie Gunson and Dee Michell, thank you for your honesty and empathy.

Special acknowledgement to Pam Papadelos, for reading drafts, providing honest feedback and always being so supportive and kind. Thank you also to Amber Venner, Jacqui Seppelt, Tina Armiento and Joanna Diamantopoulos for so generously giving up their time to proofread. Thanks also to Dino Di Rosa for support.

I acknowledge the support of the Karen Halley Fund, GWSI and the Australian Postgraduate Award for funding this research. I also wish to acknowledge Flinders University for the opportunity in 2010. Flinders staff, especially Barbara Baird, thank you for your kindness, co-operation and acceptance. I also wish to thank Tanya Cassidy for her moral support and encouragement whilst in Ireland and at home.

I sincerely acknowledge and thank the support from all my closest friends and family who gave me an excuse to step away from thesis work occasionally to watch a movie, have a chat, share a pint or just escape! I acknowledge the support of my friends from Crosbie House, I have not forgotten your generosity and I am appreciative.

My family (and the blow-in from Ireland), my appreciation is unfathomable. Thank you all for helping and supporting me. I am especially grateful for the support from my sisters, Jessica Obushak and Emilee Zizzo. I truly could not have finished this enormous project without them offering to do my Christmas shopping as I worked in a flurry, feeding me, keeping me motivated and keeping my books and papers in their 'organised' piles! Special acknowledgement to Emilee for sharing her nursing and midwifery knowledge and reminding me that the women and babies I thought and wrote so much about are real people. I sincerely wish to thank Raymond and Emily Vozzo (and Portia) for generously opening their home in Scotland during the last small leg of the PhD. Many thanks for your welcome support.

Lastly, my parents Anna and Ralph. "Thank you" does not do justice for what they have done for me. They have both supported me unconditionally throughout this entire journey (I'm sure they regret that now!). To my mum especially, I appreciate everything she (with the help of our *nonni*) has done for me and my sisters. Mum, you have always encouraged me yet kept me level headed, constantly telling me as it is. I thank you dearly and I could not have done this without you. The words on these pages would not have been possible without you, so it is to you that I dedicate all of the hard work in this thesis.

Tanti grazie a tutti!