

'This is a natural thing, why can I not do this?': The impact of early breastfeeding difficulties on first-time mothers

Dawn Leeming , Iain Williamson , Sally Johnson and Steven Lyttle

Although there is now a considerable body of literature which seeks to understand breastfeeding by exploring the perspectives of breastfeeding mothers, knowledge of how breastfeeding difficulties are managed in the very early post-partum period, and the impact of these difficulties on mothers, is still limited. In this paper we use a social constructionist version of interpretative phenomenological analysis to explore the experiences of eight first-time mothers who struggled with breastfeeding in the first post-partum week. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and audio-diaries. The over-arching theme identified was of a tension between the participants' lived, embodied experience of struggling to breastfeed and the cultural construction of breastfeeding as 'natural' and hence relatively trouble-free. We discuss three ways in which this tension was problematic for the mothers and sometimes led to high levels of distress. Firstly, the women's perception that they were unable to engage successfully in what they saw as a key 'natural' aspect of motherhood posed a significant threat to their emerging identity as a mother. Secondly, the participants were surprised by the intensity and duration of the pain they experienced breastfeeding and were unsure how to make sense of, and respond to, this. Thirdly, some of the participants experienced a mismatch between the support they were offered by health professionals and the support they felt they needed. We discuss some of the implications of these findings for supporting mothers for whom breastfeeding is difficult. We also consider the need for a realistic rather than romanticised and potentially mother-blaming approach to the promotion of breastfeeding.

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