

# Relational Perspective in Breastfeeding Research

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## Keywords

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Relationships are central to all human experience and when considering breastfeeding consideration of human interactions must be our first priority. (Dykes & Flacking, 2010, p. 734)

In a recent Lactations Newsmakers interview with Professor Fiona Dykes, we talked about the importance of the relational perspective in breastfeeding research, the underlying subject of most of both of our ethnographic research on breastfeeding (Cassidy & Dykes, 2019; Cassidy & El Tom, 2014; Dykes, 2006). This commentary offers a detailed perspective on the topic of relational perspective in breastfeeding research, particularly from the lens of the social and cultural sciences, through the use of ethnographic methods, which has long been argued to be the study of relations (Murdock, 1941). As this commentary will detail, the so-called “relational turn” in the social sciences engages some of the most prominent minds (Simmel, 1908), and has great potential for the future of breastfeeding research (Säilävaara, 2023). We begin by discussing some of the meanings associated with relational ethnographic perspective, and then turn our discussion to how the relational perspective can help to study the complex social and cultural issues underlying breastfeeding.

## Ethnographic Relations

The relational turn in social sciences has been the subject of an increasing number of articles and books in anthropology, sociology, political sciences, as well as other social sciences. Many discuss the philosophical origins of these ideas, and differentiate between substantivism (thinking about things or objects) and rationalism, with some discussing the existence of space–time itself (Pooley, 2013). In a recent discussion of what social scientists have called the “relational turn” Peeter Selg, an Estonian social scientist, says “our spontaneous view of the world is substantialist, not relational: in our language we express the world as being composed of substances, rather than emerging, unfolding and processual relations” (Selg, 2018, p. 539). In *Ethnographies of Breastfeeding* (Cassidy & El Tom, 2014), the juxtaposition between the product (the milk) and the process of

breastfeeding, framed breastfeeding research in the same way as Mustafa Emibayer’s often cited “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology” where he says “Sociologists today are faced with a fundamental dilemma: whether to conceive of the social world as consisting primarily in substances or in processes, in static ‘things’ or in dynamic, unfolding relations” (Emirbayer, 1997, p. 281). It is not a case of either/or, however, and so the relational turn has argued that there are relations connected with the substantive (things), and these are meaning making and dynamic as well.

The anthropologist Marylin Strathern has long contributed to anthropology’s discussions of relations (Strathern, 1988), arguing for the links between relations and understanding complexity (Strathern, 1995), and recently culminating in an important manuscript on the topic detailing the complexity of the concept itself (Strathern, 2018/2023, 2020). Strathern (2018, 2020) also explores the use of the term relationships and connections, arguing that these two terms are often used interchangeably with relations. As argued in the preface to *Ethnographies of Breastfeeding* (Cassidy & El Tom, 2014), we have seen a movement in the narrative of breastfeeding research from thinking about the process of breastfeeding relationships, in involving the maternal–infant dyad, to an emphasis on the product itself: the milk.

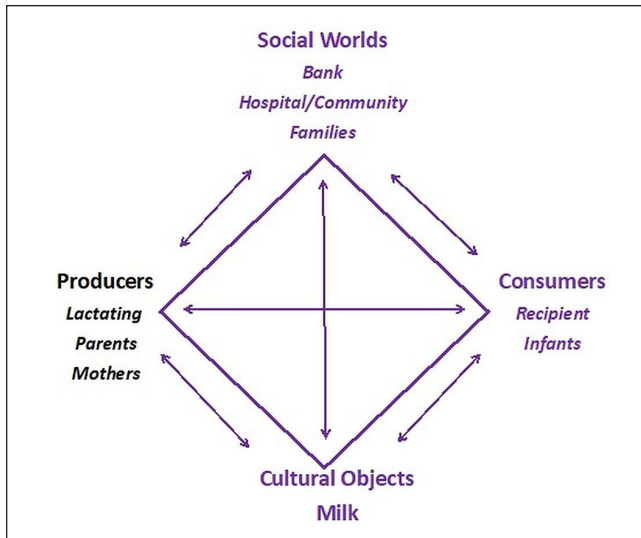
It is also helpful to consider the cultural heuristic originally presented by Griswold (1986), which shows potential connections between the social world and cultural objects, as well as those who produce and consume those cultural objects. The “cultural breastfeeding diamond” (Figure 1) which was originally adapted to show relations underlying

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**Figure 1.** The Cultural Breastfeeding Diamond.

Note. Adapted with permission from Wendy Griswold, the author and creator of this original image (see Griswold, 1986: 8; Griswold, 1994: 16)

human milk donation, is here presented to show the potential complex cultural connections underlying breastfeeding relations, with each arrow representing the potential bidirectional connections.

The *Cultural Breastfeeding Diamond* (Figure 1) is meant to help us to visualize the potential complex relations underlying not only the four points of the diamond (the social world, the producers, consumers, and cultural objects), but also the potential complexity of relations (represented by the arrows) which underly the social and cultural study of breastfeeding.

### Breastfeeding Research Relations

Almost a century has passed since the original ground breaking work of the American anthropologist Mead (1928), who suggested that we consider the cultural normalcy surrounding breastfeeding, emphasizing the community nature of the foundational cultural relations underlying breastfeeding and allomaternal nursing. *Banking on Milk* (Cassidy & Dykes, 2019) is an ethnographic study of human milk exchange relations, an important part of the world of breastfeeding. Not only are donor human milk services dependent on people who breastfeed to donate, they are also argued by many to be a bridge to breastfeeding (Kair & Flaherman, 2017). This perception of donor human milk was linked to the ground breaking work conducted in Brazil, by Almeida and Novak (2004), who not only developed the largest milk banking system in the world, but also tied this to supporting breastfeeding.

Dykes' (2006) original ethnographic work on breastfeeding in the hospital talks about the emphasis on the milk itself, made by both mothers and staff, rather than the breastfeeding

relations. In her later work with Flacking (Dykes & Flacking, 2010), they argue there are three key levels of relations involved in breastfeeding in the hospital: organizational, mother–baby (lactating parent–baby), and staff–parent. Both Dykes and Flacking have worked in hospital settings, the former in the United Kingdom and the latter in Sweden, so clearly we might argue that outside of the hospital there are other relational perspectives we could and should discuss, including relational connections with other family members, such as grandparents and non-lactating partners, such as fathers. However, following on from both the *Cultural Milk Diamond*, and thinking about interspecies relations, we might also want to consider relations with both human and non-human milk, and the animals who produce them. The breastfeeding relational perspective demands that we consider the social worlds involved, including hospitals, communities, and families; but also the lactating parents, and the recipient infants, as well as considering the milk itself, and other things that have become important in the world of breastfeeding.

A relational perspective can help us to gain more insight into the social and cultural complexities underlying breastfeeding, and ethnographic research can help to explore these complex relations. Furthermore, although ethnography is often time consuming, as a research method it can generate a greater level of trust and depth in breastfeeding research itself. The relational perspective gives both policy-makers and healthcare providers greater depth in their understanding, allowing them to better protect, promote, and support breastfeeding.

### Author Contributions

**Tanya M. Cassidy:** Conceptualization; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing.

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Clear evidence exists demonstrating that breastfeeding and human milk are the optimal sources of infant nutrition, yet many parents return to work soon after giving birth. When lactating parents return to work, the risk of discontinuing breastfeeding before reaching their intended goals increases. Our aim is to provide the lactation community with the most up-to-date evidence and insights on the relationship between returning to work and continuing breastfeeding.

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