

Others' Milk: An Ethnography of Non-normative Breastfeeding in the West
Sabbatical Leave Proposal for the Academic Year 2015-2016
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Abstract

1. Introduction and Background

I teach ANTHR1-Biological Anthropology, ANTHR2-Cultural Anthropology, and ANTHR17-Forensic Anthropology in the Anthropology department. I am interested in research in medical anthropology and social justice. I plan either a Fall 2015 sabbatical or a full year contingent on funding. The *purposes* of the sabbatical fit criteria a) scholarly endeavor in the discipline being taught, b) Improvement in skills in the discipline being taught, d) Improvement of teaching skills, and e) Development of programs and curriculum. The leave belongs to *Category B* as outlined in the CCFT contract: a special project or research problem planned with specific objectives.

2. Objectives

This sabbatical project will be to: a) increase my effectiveness as a teacher by improving my engagement with the discipline, particularly in the two main areas that I teach: biological anthropology and cultural anthropology and b) foster my professional development.

3. Activities

I will write a publication-ready 200-page manuscript provisionally entitled *Others Milk*, which is based on prior qualitative research on non-normative breastfeeding.

4. Benefits to the College

This proposed project benefits the college by improving my teaching, fostering my professional development, and providing students with opportunities like internships, jobs, and further study in anthropology, sociology, and women's studies.

5. Outcomes to be Submitted to SLRB with Report

Outcomes will include a 200-page manuscript ready for publication plus extensive bibliography, an op-ed piece, a Flex Week presentation, five Twitter updates on the research, a list of professional contacts that I can use to provide connections for students, two updated syllabi, and portions of new curricula for a cross-listed women's studies-anthropology course.

1. Introduction and Background

I first taught at Cabrillo College as an adjunct beginning in 1999, teaching a total of 24 class sections over a few years' time. I returned as a full-time instructor in Fall 2005 and I serve as Chair of the Anthropology Department. I teach Biological Anthropology, Cultural Anthropology, and Forensic Anthropology. I will be teaching an anthropology course in Globalization as part of the AA-T degree and I am developing an anthropology course that will be cross-listed with Women's Studies. I am a medical anthropologist/sociologist with interdisciplinary research interests that crosscut sociology, anthropology, and women's studies. Most of my research in recent years—including my book *Not Trying: Infertility, Childlessness, and Ambivalence* (Vanderbilt University Press 2014)—has been in reproductive justice, an area of study that draws equally on biological and cultural anthropology (the two main courses that I teach).

I am applying for outside funding from grant agencies including the National Institute for Health, National Science Foundation, and the Wenner-Gren Foundation. These grant applications are all due November 2014; awards are announced by May 2015.

The purpose of the sabbatical is to complete a book manuscript on non-normative breastfeeding in the West. Medical research suggests that breastfeeding reduces risks of childhood asthma and diabetes, improves children's self-esteem by strengthening parent-child bonds, and may even increase IQ and brain development. For breastfeeding mothers, it may reduce the risk of certain cancers and help with post-pregnancy weight loss.

Existing scholarly work on the topic tends to champion breastfeeding without considering what it *means* to those who do it and how breastfeeders are actually doing it. The research I present in this proposed book seeks to fill this gap. Many breastfeeding practices contrast with conventional medical recommendations but studies show that most caregivers now agree that "breast is best" and many get creative to provide the benefits to themselves and their children.

Rather than being a biologically determined practice, breastfeeding—which is indeed natural to mammals—is, for humans, intensely social and always mitigated through cultural belief systems. The proliferation of infant formula in the 20th century industrialized world led to such a dramatic drop in breastfeeding that the current generation of breastfeeders must reinvent and redefine this biocultural practice.

In addition to ethnographic observation at a non-profit milk bank and in breastfeeding support groups in person and online, in Summer 2014, I conducted

over 75 in-depth interviews in person and over Skype with breastfeeders across the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the UK. These breastfeeders nourish their babies in ways that contrast with what our contemporary society considers “normal.” These include wet nurses, co-nursers, and tandem feeding breastfeeders, extended breastfeeders, lesbian partners co-nursing, gay men and transmasculine “chest”feeders, exclusive pumpers, milk donors and recipients, and trans* and butch-identified breastfeeders. This type of research highlights the most basic tenet of anthropology that I teach my students: holistic study is necessary because cultural and biological aspects of humanity are inextricably interwoven. This project will problematize essentialist ideas about gender (i.e., breastfeeding is “natural” and “feminine”). Breastfeeding is, for many, one of the most important times in their lives and that alone makes it worthy of study.

The project fits into the sabbatical purposes outlined in the CCFT contract

- It is a scholarly endeavor in my discipline (purpose a).
- Participation will improve my skills as an anthropologist and this translates into better teaching (purposes b and d).
- The project will help me with the development of curricula for cross-listed anthropology and women’s studies courses and provide an opportunity to update my syllabi with concrete examples (purpose e).

My participation in active research enriches my courses by providing relevant examples of key anthropological concepts and methods and bolsters my professional competence. Ultimately, the book will be available to instructors at Cabrillo as well as at other institutions teaching medical anthropology, women’s studies, sociology, family studies, and health-related disciplines. The audience will also include breastfeeders and the general public interested in family policy, public health, and feminist activism.

2. Objectives

This sabbatical project will increase my effectiveness as a teacher by improving my engagement with the discipline, particularly in the two main areas that I teach: biological anthropology and cultural anthropology. It will foster my professional development and help me make connections with other anthropologists and scholars in related fields and with journalists writing about women and health. These sorts of connections serve students by providing a conduit for student opportunities like internships, jobs, and further study beyond their tenure at Cabrillo.

3. Activities

I will use the sabbatical to work toward completing the manuscript described above. I accomplished the field research during Summer 2014. To garner feedback and establish connections with other scholars, I presented preliminary results at the August 2014 annual meetings of the American Sociological Association and the Society for the Study of Social Problems. By Summer 2015—before the sabbatical period begins—I will complete the transcription and analysis of the data and conduct a thorough literature review.

Currently, I am in conversation about publication of the manuscript with editors at three top academic presses: Vanderbilt University (Michael Ames), New York University (Ilene Kalish), and Routledge (Samantha Barbaro). I will likely send book proposals to other presses as well. I applied for and received a scholarship from The Op-Ed Project to attend their acclaimed weekend workshop held in San Francisco September 2014. It is a program that trains women academics how to work with journalists in getting their work cited and out to the public. I also underwent two social media training sessions for publicly engaged academics given at the American Sociological Association meeting and the Sociologists for Women in Society meeting in August 2014. These trainings not only provided me with the skills to effectively pen an op-ed piece and compose professional-quality tweets about my research, but the programs also provide me with formal, ongoing mentorships.

Writing will begin Fall 2015. I will continue with editing Spring 2016, with the plan of finishing by the end of summer. This process involves many reviews by editors and outside scholars; as a consequence, there will be several drafts.

Intensive writing and editing will take place primarily in my home office from 8 am-4 pm Monday through Friday. I will use resources available at the UCSC and Georgia State University libraries where I have visiting scholar access. The writing process itself involves connecting the data with larger ideas and suggestions for social change. It is not enough to share this work within my discipline and my institution. Research findings matter more if they reach stakeholders and the general public. Toward this end, I will prepare an op-ed piece for wider circulation and connect my research with news items on Twitter in at least five updates. According to a 2008 Rutgers University study, well-placed op-eds have been shown to have a large impact in policy development. As breastfeeding policy changes have increased breastfeeding rates in the US by over 50% since the 1980s; clearly, policies make a real difference.

The social media platform Twitter is important because it has become a key avenue for intellectual exchange between academics, professionals, and journalists. Social researchers, in particular, take Twitter seriously as a way to improve their theorizing (by crowd-sourcing ideas) and as a way to expand their networks.

Several of the outcomes (e.g., tweets and syllabi updates) will happen concurrently with the manuscript development. I will complete this work when manuscript drafts

are out for review. I know from my previous book project that my entire manuscript will be out for review for two-week periods at least twice. This is the perfect time to spend connecting the work with Cabrillo-related projects.

The following well-published, highly-regarded scholars have agreed to read and comment on drafts of my work: Wendy Simonds, Professor, Sociology, Georgia State University, Barbara Katz Rothman, Professor, Sociology, Baruch College, City University of New York, Aunchalee Palmquist, Assistant Professor, Anthropology, Elon University, Elroi Windsor, Assistant Professor, Sociology, Salem College, Michelle Walks, Post-doc, Anthropology and Nursing, University of Ottawa, and Katherine Carroll, Research Manager, Mayo Clinic. The academic press editors mentioned above have requested outlines, proposals, and chapters.

See Appendix A for a list of some of the references that I will use in my work and Appendix B for a draft of the chapter outline.

4. Benefits to the College

This proposed project benefits the college by improving my teaching, fostering my professional development, and providing opportunities for students transferring in anthropology, sociology, and women's studies to utilize my academic connections. Based on the robust response I received at the sociology meetings and from the gatekeepers that led me to my study participants, I expect this project to garner some media attention. This experience prompted me to receive training in working with the media, as discussed above, in order to best represent my work and myself, my discipline, and the college. My participation in this project will be beneficial to the college as it will result in my being engaged in my discipline and intellectually stimulated.

The experience I gain from this project will allow me to develop new curriculum in Women's Studies, which has recently gained donor funding to expand its interdisciplinary offerings. The book project will provide the opportunity to update my syllabi in ANTHR1 (Introduction to Biological Anthropology) and ANTHR2 (Introduction to Cultural Anthropology) with readings and lectures that tie back to my research. It will increase my competence as a professional anthropologist.

My first book, mentioned above, took several years to complete as I could only work on it during the summer. It would be more beneficial to me and to the college to publish the research in a timely manner.

5. Outcomes to be Submitted to SLRB with Report

- 1) I will submit a 200-page manuscript ready for publication that includes an extensive bibliography (at least 125 citations). I expect this book to be published eventually by an academic press.
- 2) I will prepare an op-ed piece for wider circulation.
- 3) I will share my work with colleagues at Cabrillo via a Flex Week presentation.
- 4) I will connect my research with news items on Twitter in at least five updates.
- 5) In order to help students take advantage of my networks for internships, jobs, and applying for programs, I will generate a list of my professional connections with their contact information and job titles that I can submit to the SLRB.
- 6) I will update the syllabi for my Biological and Cultural Anthropology courses. These syllabi are available to everyone at the college.
- 7) Finally, I will submit new curricula for a cross-listed women's studies/anthropology course.

Appendix A

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Appendix B

Chapter 1- “Nursing in Public,” discusses the historical and cultural context of breastfeeding in the West. It points to evolving popular images and narratives that reflect and shape how breastfeeding gets done and what it means.

Chapter 2-“Cleavages,” focuses on the rich spectrum of meanings that emerge via the embodiment of breasts and breastfeeding. I use quotes and stories from participants to highlight the broad range of experiences and to theorize how these experiences can be transformative.

Chapter 3-“Others’ Milk” considers non-gestational caregivers whose breastfeeding and comfort nursing makes it impossible to essentialize breastfeeding as purely natural. I discuss why breastfeeding matters to these caregivers and detail what they see as the challenges and triumphs. The practice of nursing a child that one did not give birth to has the capacity to redefine relationships and self-concepts.

Chapter 4-“Bosom Buddies” highlights the range of experiences among breastfeeders who share the breastfeeding of their children with others. They forge new kinds of kin-like relationships and revive social roles that have been long-forgotten (e.g., wetnurses).

Chapter 5-“Liquid Gold” reveals myriad ways that the meaning of milk is in transition. Milk sharing carries with it significant social implications and is in danger of formal regulation that may curtail the liberating aspects of this practice.

Chapter 6-“Social Nourishment” delves into the deep theoretical implications of breastfeeding and milk sharing. These embodied behaviors nourish not only babies and those providing the milk but also our understanding of gender, kinship, community, and the body as outlined in Chapters 2-5.

Chapter 7-“Feeling the Flow” defines potential avenues to accessing experienced breastfeeders’ wisdom and the barriers that block it.