

## Background

Pregnancy and the post-partum period represent a period of rapid change in both bodily form and function. During such periods of rapid physical transition, profound transitions in body image may also occur. This study aimed to explore the embodied experiences of women who had recently given birth and were exclusively breastfeeding and sought to give voice to their experience.

## Method

A sample of 17 women (28-43 years old) took part in interviews within six months of giving birth. The semi-structured interviews explored their experiences of the physical changes during pregnancy and breastfeeding and their implications for body image. Inductive thematic analysis applied from a critical realist stance was used to analyse the data allowing the experiences to be contextualised.

## Findings

Three themes were identified in the data, 'expectations and reality', 'bodily capabilities' and 'shifting perceptions'. Whilst these themes represent discrete constructs there was a clear interaction between them. Expectations and reality refers to the women's preconceptions about pregnancy and breastfeeding and the extent to which their experiences matched up to these. Bodily capabilities describes how the journey to and early months of motherhood highlighted both doubts and reassurances about what their bodies' could do. The theme of shifting perceptions reflects the ongoing negotiation of the physical and functional changes that took place.

## Discussion

The findings highlight the complex nature of the processes involved in accommodating and assimilating the various identities women navigate during this transitional period. Women's expectations about what pregnancy and breastfeeding at times differed from reality, not least as the functional boundaries of their bodies' capabilities altered. These changes led to shifts in in their embodied personal and social identities.