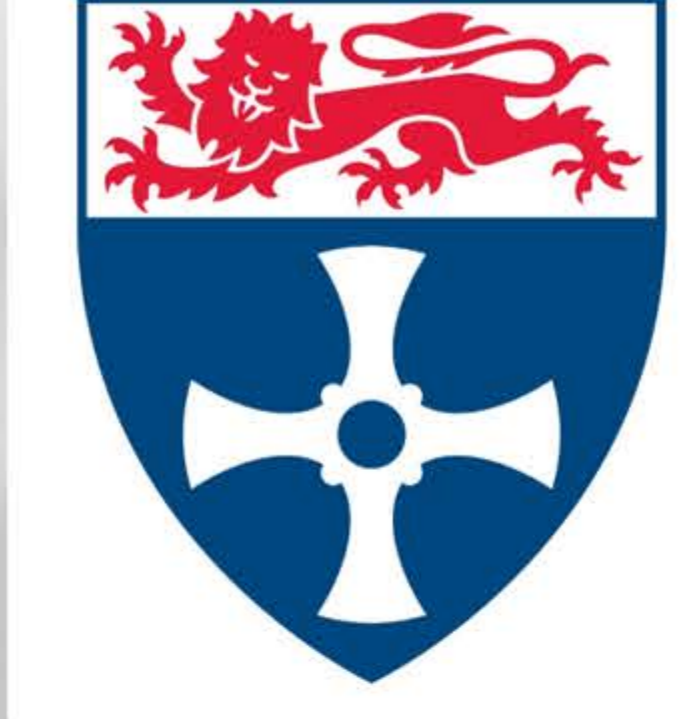
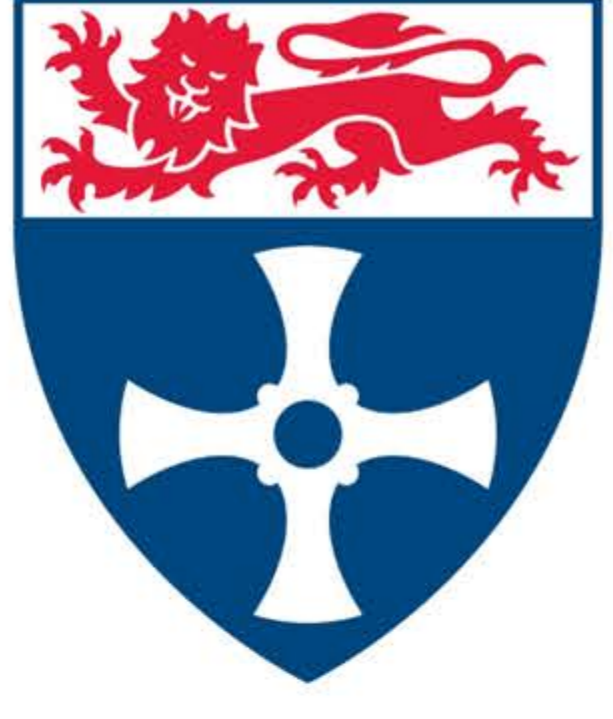


My Body Has a Purpose: Exploring body image through pregnancy and breastfeeding

Amy Fielden, Amber Black-Dominique, Elizabeth H. Evans
School of Psychology, Newcastle University, UK



Background

- Women's bodily form and function change rapidly during pregnancy and the post-partum period, entailing potentially profound impacts upon body image.
- Previous research exploring body image in pregnancy highlights women's perceived liberation from previously habitual dietary restraint [1] and greater appreciation of body functionality [2], but also difficulty adjusting to a new, larger body size [3].
- There is a lack of research examining body image transitions beyond birth and whilst breastfeeding [4].
- Women's pregnancy-based gains in perceived body functionality appear to dissipate once their bump is no longer prominent [5]. However, breastfeeding may facilitate a continued sense of body as 'instrument' as opposed to 'object' [6, p.9].
- This study explored the body-related experiences of women who had recently given birth and were exclusively breastfeeding.

Method

- A sample of 17 married, primiparous (n=12) and multiparous women (n=5) aged between 28-43 years old took part in interviews within six months of giving birth. Their infants ranged from 1-6 months old.
- Semi-structured interviews took place either face-to-face (n=4), over the phone (n=10) or using a secure online chat facility (n=3).
- Interviews explored women's experiences of physical changes during pregnancy and breastfeeding, and their implications for body image.
- Inductive thematic analysis (7) was used to analyse the data. A critical realist stance allowed the women's experiences to be contextualised, similarities to be explored and differences to be highlighted.

Conclusions

- Complex navigational processes underlie women's accommodation and assimilation of various identities during this period.
- Women's expectations of 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 their embodied personal and social identities.
- In line with similar findings [2,5], breastfeeding may help women to appreciate the functional purpose of their body shifting the focus from female body as object.

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Findings

Three themes were identified in the data, 'expectations and reality', 'bodily capabilities' and 'shifting perceptions'.

Expectations versus reality

Women's preconceptions about pregnancy and breastfeeding were variously fulfilled and challenged by the reality of the process.

"I thought I would be straight back out there, even like at first like a short walk was really quite painful. It hurt me and I'd been relatively active during my pregnancy so that shocked me like how much fitness I'd lost and how my body had changed." (P7)

"I underestimated how physically draining it would be because, I was just like well I'll plonk him on my boob and feed but no. I have to eat, a hell of a lot more than I ever have in my entire life to just keep up with him." (BF13)

Bodily capabilities

Women's journey through early motherhood highlighted both doubts and reassurances about what their bodies' could do.

"I was terrified, absolutely terrified of miscarriage all the way through. There was nothing to indicate, absolutely nothing to indicate it but I was so scared and just until, even until she started, until she started moving and I really started feeling it, I just didn't really believe that I would get to have a baby." (BF14)

"I love it, I really like it. I like that I'm giving her you know like, everything that she needs. It's really nice to think that your body, you don't really realise how amazing your body is, how amazing Mother Nature is like that's your body that's produced all this milk for me." (BF7)

Shifting perceptions

Women described an ongoing negotiation of physical and functional changes, highlighting both self-perceptions and those of others.

"It's just a lot of like, acceptance has come with it and learning that I am not, I'm not tied up in this whole thing of like flawless marble statue cos you can't be cos you're a woman and, you're naturally gonna carry more fat and having babies changes you." (BF13)

"Erm you definitely see your boobs as a more mechanical thing, they're there to do a job now rather than [Laughs] anything else. And you definitely erm, they belong to the baby more than your partner now...they're definitely seen as a tool now I think." (BF4)