

Women who breastfeed face prejudices, study finds

August 9 2011, By Carol Schmidt

(Medical Xpress) -- A study conducted at Montana State University concludes that even though breastfeeding is healthy, cheap and benefits both mother and child, there exists a strong bias against nursing mothers by both men and women.

Jessi L. Smith, professor of psychology at MSU, found that participants in three double-blind studies thought nursing mothers were not as competent mentally as other groups of women and said they would be less likely to hire [breastfeeding mothers](#) for a job.

The results of the study were published this summer in the article "Spoiled Milk: An Experimental Examination of Bias Against Mothers Who Breastfeed" published in *Sage Publishing's Personality and [Social Psychology Bulletin](#)*.

Former MSU students Kristin Hawkinson and Kelli Paull, who helped with the research conducted from 2006 to 2008 at MSU, were co-authors.

In one study, for example, Smith, Hawkinson and Paull asked questions of 57 MSU students who thought they were participating in a marketing study. None of the participants were parents but all knew at least one person who had breastfed.

Study participants were asked a series of questions about how they perceived [breastfeeding](#) moms in terms of overall competence, math

competence, and the likelihood that they would hire a nursing mother as opposed to other groups, such as women or non-nursing mothers. The questions provided the basis for three double-blind studies, Smith said. A double-blind study means that neither the administrators of the study nor the participants know the critical aspects of the research. This procedure guards against unintended bias.

In all three studies, the students rated breastfeeding women as significantly less competent in general, and in particularly less competent in math.

[Study participants](#) didn't actually see a breastfeeding mother. However, they were given prompts to make them think that the person next to them was "going home later" to nurse her child, and then were asked questions about breastfeeding. "We can only speculate that the evidence for bias would be even greater if people were to rate an actual woman engaging in public nursing," Smith said.

Smith said her research has helped define an obstacle to a practice that she believes remains relevant and important for contemporary mothers.

"It's the 21st century," she said. "We have come a long way today in educating ourselves about the health and economic benefits of nursing to both mother and child, but we have done nothing to talk about the fact that breast milk actually comes from the breast and not bottles."

She pointed out that a myriad of health organizations, including the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Women's Health, point out the economic and health benefits of nursing and advise that breastfeeding protects babies, benefits mothers' health and society. Smith became a mother in 2007 after the study was under way and did breastfeed her child. She said it is not surprising that new mothers frequently are daunted at breastfeeding their child considering the

obstacles that confront nursing mothers.

Smith said that one way to improve bias against nursing mothers is for society to promote breastfeeding and increase numbers of mothers nursing, so that it isn't seen as a rare phenomenon.

"Right now, it's not surprising that nursing mothers feel isolated," she said.

Smith suggests employers could do their part to encourage breastfeeding by providing a private place for mothers to nurse their children. Many mothers are required to return to work six weeks after the birth of their baby.

"You can't establish a good breastfeeding bond in six weeks and make a good assessment if breastfeeding will work for you and your child," she said.

Smith has put her belief into action at MSU. As the former president of the MSU Women's Faculty Caucus, Smith was instrumental in getting a family care room on the MSU campus. Located in 123 Hamilton Hall, it provides a comfortable and private comfortable space where mothers may nurse their children or pump breastmilk. Smith said there is even a parking space for the room which can be used by mothers in the MSU community

Smith has taken her research one step further with an INBRE funded grant to study actual social psychological barriers to breastfeeding mothers. She has collected data from new [mothers](#) beyond the university to five Montana locations -- Kalispell, Miles City, Missoula, Billings and Bozeman. She is currently analyzing the data and plans to disseminate the results early next year.

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