

Maria Papadima

Joan B Wolf, 'Is breast best?' (New York & London: New York University Press, 2011), 256pp., ISBN 9780814794814. Taking on the breastfeeding experts and the new high stakes of motherhood.

Is breast best?, by American academic Joan B. Wolf, was recently published to an unsurprising chorus of vitriolic comments in pro-breastfeeding blogs and websites. The mere posing of the question – 'Is breast best?' – can nowadays feel daring, provocative, and even politically wrong-minded when there is so much still to be done (as common wisdom and government policy goes) to further promote breastfeeding rates.

But Wolf does indeed pose this provocative question. Not only that; she answers it in the negative. So, to cut a long story short: is breast best, according to Wolf? Her answer in this book is: no, not really, at least not if we attempt to answer this question through a review of the scientific research. According to Wolf's careful reading of the available research, there is currently lukewarm, at best, evidence for the idea that there are clear health benefits to exclusive breastfeeding, making it an undoubtedly superior choice when compared to infant formula. I will not summarise Wolf's detailed and persuasive arguments in terms of the 'scientific' research. Indeed, what Wolf chooses to focus on is the puzzling way current popular discourse presents this research on breastfeeding in terms of a scientific *consensus* when in fact such a consensus doesn't seem to be warranted. Wolf, therefore, takes a step back from the available research, adopts an impartial view, and questions the general way that scientific research is presented popularly when it comes to parenting and, more specifically, to motherhood. Additionally, she adopts what to my mind is a well thought out feminist perspective, highlighting the way that any health and lifestyle decisions in childrearing inescapably end up being viewed as the mother's responsibility.

Wolf notes how, in the vast majority of health decisions we are called to make daily, we have to deal with a bombardment of often-contradictory scientific views. She therefore wonders:

How did we arrive at a place [in the US which is her focus, but similarly in Europe]...where formula, which nourishes millions of healthy babies every year can be likened to nicotine? Where breastfeeding her baby can be considered more important to a teenaged mother than getting an education? Where, without

evidence, a doctor feels professionally and morally justified telling bottle-feeding mothers that not breastfeeding essentially causes babies' illnesses or that breastfed babies do not get sick? (Wolf, 2011, p. xi)

It is this *consensus* that Wolf finds remarkable. 'Why', she wonders, 'has breastfeeding become a potent, almost sacrosanct symbol, despite serious flaws in the scientific rationale for its health benefits?' (Wolf, 2011, p. xiii). The way this usually plays out in the early days of motherhood, as each of us who is a mother can attest to, is that regardless of whether one 'manages' (note the word 'manages' rather than 'chooses') to breastfeed or not, there is an implicit effort to justify one's feeding choices both to oneself and to others. New mothers tend to unquestionably acknowledge the superiority of breastfeeding and frequently feel the need to offer reasons of why it didn't prove possible if they end up formula feeding.

Wisely, Wolf effectively places the emphasis away from the purely 'scientific' evidence in regards to breast versus formula. She argues instead that the way to think about infant feeding is in the context of what she names 'total motherhood'. The wider context that provides the background for Wolf's arguments is the understanding of our (western) culture as one where, arguably, most choices made on a daily basis are considered in terms of personal responsibility in order to minimise risk (Beck, 1986/2000). Wolf describes how the 'desire to avoid risk is apparent everywhere' (2011, p. 48), with little understanding of the plain fact that each step we take in everyday life has to unavoidably accept a degree of risk. Not only do we try hard to avoid or eliminate risk though; the failure to do so falls under the 'pervasive neoliberal sentiment that every individual has a personal responsibility to make sense of this information, prevent health problems, and act as a good citizen' (Wolf, 2011, p. 50). It is therefore seen as our personal failure when risk is not avoided effectively.

An interesting idea developed in *Is breast best?* refers to the popular 'naturalism' that offers an alleged alternative to scientific decisions about risk. The agonising choices are then simplified: choose 'natural' things which are seen as 'good' or choose 'unnatural' things which are seen as bad (Wolf, 2011, pp. 57-58). Examples of this new naturalism abound; we see them in debates on epidurals, home birth and 'natural childbirth'; in discussions on 'attachment parenting'; in descriptions of the fashionable new concept of 'baby-led weaning'; and even in complex, unending comparisons of what the most 'natural' way to potty train a child is: is it to follow the no-nappies-ever method of 'elimination/communication' or is it to allow a child, who will of course be using washable nappies, to choose themselves when they're ready to abandon nappies?

These stark dichotomies between ‘extremely natural’, ‘somewhat natural’, and ‘unnatural’ parenting choices can understandably serve to decrease the anxiety surrounding what are seen as risky everyday decisions mothers (and it is, still, mostly mothers) need to make. The complex and conflict-ridden choices parenting involves, on a daily basis, can be made easier if one thinks: ‘I’m doing what’s *natural* and thus I’m doing what is best and least risky for my baby’. Breastfeeding remains the quintessential example of today’s naturalism and, more widely, of ‘total motherhood’ that aims to raise ‘risk-free children’ (Wolf, 2011, p. 71). The strong admonitions to breastfeed against all odds can be usefully understood within this context, and this is what Wolf does best in this book. Not only, she argues, is breastfeeding seen as ‘natural’ and therefore ‘good’, embracing it also manages to ‘prove’ that risk is successfully avoided in terms of the infant’s health.

Returning to the notion of ‘total motherhood’, Wolf argues that it is increasingly viewed as the duty of mothers to not only predict and minimise but, if possible, to totally *eliminate* any potential risk to their children. Not only that; as she interestingly argues, in the context of today’s discourse of ‘total motherhood’, the needs of the child are considered as *equivalent* to the needs of the mother. It is culturally assumed therefore that a ‘good mother’ will unquestionably desire that which is the least risky for her baby, even when the (perceived or real) risks to herself by adopting a certain practice are high. There is little sense, in the popular breastfeeding discourse, of balancing out the needs of two separate people, Wolf argues. Instead, the mother’s needs, desires and restrictions are virtually eliminated from the relevant debates. In a fascinating convergence of scientific evidence supporting breastfeeding and the underlying ‘natural’ appeal of the practice, mothers are strongly urged to breastfeed their babies as it is assumed that they want ‘only the best for their infants’ and are prepared to do anything to achieve the *best* outcome.

In any case, infant feeding, as Wolf suggests, has always been a ‘morally charged practice’ (Wolf, 2011, p. 1). It has only become increasingly so in our era of scientific and/or medicalised motherhood, with a rising number of experts advising mothers on every detail of parenting (see for example Ehrenreich & English, 1978/2005; Hardyment, 1983/2007; Hulbert, 2003). Coupled with the new naturalism that promotes breastfeeding as the most natural, the purest, the best option for babies, what is created is an explosive mixture where new mothers feel obligated to ‘give breastfeeding a go’ or, if not, to justify their alternative choice.

I found Wolf's approach refreshing, particularly the way she takes a distance from a moralistic approach regarding feeding choices and poses the question in a strikingly different way. And yet, I found myself thinking that however we might wish to (rightly) disentangle ourselves from moralistically-based and culturally enforced judgments surrounding infant feeding, in the end there *are* complicated unconscious issues, having to do with one's own deepest identity, that make infant feeding a loaded process for a new mother. In leading us away from merely seeing breastfeeding as a one-way street led by the idea that the 'baby needs the best milk possible', Wolf takes the right step. She does not however open up the question of the highly charged *psychic* processes that make breastfeeding a more complicated and emotionally charged process than formula feeding. The pressure that women feel they're under when it comes to breastfeeding their child is, of course, to a large degree culturally determined. But to look at this pressure as merely externally enforced is to only be aware of part of the picture. I suspect though that Wolf is correct in arguing that offering women a less rigid, more supportive, less moralistic, more open understanding of choices around infant feeding may be a step in the right direction.

References

- Beck, U. 1986/2000. *Risk society: Towards a new modernity*. Trans. M. Ritter, Trans.. London: Thousand Oaks; New Delhi: Sage .
- Ehrenreich, B., & English, D. 1978/2005. *For her own good: Two centuries of the experts' advice to women*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Hardyment, C. 1983/2007. *Dream babies: Childcare advice from John Locke to Gina Ford*. London: Frances Lincoln Limited.
- Hulbert, A. 2003. *Raising America: Experts, parents and a century of advice about children*. New York: Knopf Books.
- Wolf, J. B. 2011. *Is breast best?: taking on the breastfeeding experts and the new high stakes of motherhood*. New York & London: New York University Press.