The Influence of Location On Breastfeeding Mothers’ Perceived Levels of Intelligence
Leslie Dooley CLC, Department of Psychology

Despite public campaigns promoting the benefits of breastfeeding for both mother and infant, breastfeeding rates in the United States have not met government goals. Many women are concerned about breastfeeding in public because in Western society breasts are objectified for sexual pleasure. Objectification of the female breast can cause women who breastfeed in public to feel shame or embarrassment. Previous research has found that both men and women feel uncomfortable when a woman breastfeeding in public (Smith, 2011). In addition, many mothers are concerned with the potential for social repercussions from breastfeeding in public (Sheeska, 2001).

This study examined the influence of the location where a mother breastfeeds and the potential stigma associated with breastfeeding on perceptions of her intelligence. We predicted that a mother breastfeeding in public would be perceived as significantly lower in intelligence in comparison to a mother bottle feeding in public.

**Methods**

Participants
Participants were recruited using several online methods, including email, Facebook, and Twitter. The study was posted online, and potential participants were given a link to follow if they were interested in participating. The sample consisted of 146 participants (69.9% women) with an average age of 24 years. The majority of the sample were white (87%) and were not parents (87.7%).

Procedure
- Participants were shown one of 4 images of a woman feeding her baby (breastfeeding in public; breastfeeding in private; bottle feeding in public; bottle feeding in private).
- Participants were then asked to read a short email that the woman in the picture had sent to her husband. This email was the same across conditions.
- Using a 7-point Likert scale, participants then rated the degree to which the woman in the picture had various traits.

**Measures**

Rosenberg’s Traits of Personality Impressions
Characteristics included intellectual and social desirability such as popular, intelligent, skillful.

Gender Stereotypic Dimensions
Characteristics included gender stereotypic dimensions such as strong, sexy, good with numbers.

Six traits from these scales were combined to create a subscale used to determine perceived intelligence. The items used included: reliable, logical, skillful, intellectual, cautious, and practical. This measure was found to be an internally consistent measure of perceived intelligence (6 items; coefficient alpha = .80).

**Results**

Two-way ANOVA was used to analyze the data.

The results were not significant, but they were in the predicted direction. The results show that mothers who breastfeed are perceived as less intelligent than women who bottle feed. In addition, mothers who breastfeed in public are perceived as being less intelligent than those who breastfeed at home.

The main effect for location was $F(1,91)= 0.898$, $p= 0.35$. The main effect for feeding was $F(1,91)= 2.86$, $p= 0.09$. The interaction effect was $F(1,96)=1.62$, $p= 0.21$.

**Discussion**

This study builds on prior research that found mothers who breastfeed are perceived as being incompetent. The current study found that this bias was magnified when participants rated a mother who was breastfeeding in public.

Bias against breastfeeding mothers may contribute to the currently low rates and duration of breastfeeding in the United States. Future research could focus on ways to empower breastfeeding mothers with tools to handle the social challenges of breastfeeding in public and create strategies to establish social support that would counteract social bias against breastfeeding women.

The primary limitation of the study was the small sample size. Future research should include more participants, increasing the statistical power of the sample and the likelihood of finding significant results. Furthermore, participants were recruited from friends and acquaintances of the researchers. Future research should use a more random sampling of the population.

**References**