
Analysis and Application of the Concept of Modesty to Breastfeeding

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Abstract

Modesty may be a significant variable impacting breastfeeding outcomes in western cultures, yet this term has received minimal attention in the breastfeeding literature. An analysis of the concept of modesty was conducted to gain greater understanding of the potential impact of modesty on breastfeeding outcomes. Various uses of the term *modesty* and particularly modesty in the context of breastfeeding are discussed in this paper. The defining attributes of breastfeeding modesty are identified and examples are provided. Implications for research and clinical practice are suggested.

Journal of Perinatal Education, 8(4), 19-26; *modesty, breastfeeding, insufficient milk supply.*

Breastfeeding advocates suggest that, in order to behave modestly, many women will not breastfeed in certain social situations (Dettwyler, 1995; Minchin, 1985). Thus, modesty may be a cultural factor associated with poor breastfeeding initiation and duration rates. Some mothers may initially choose not to breastfeed due to concerns regarding modesty. A survey of 81 mothers' reasons for choosing infant feeding method (84% bottle-feeders) found that 27% considered breastfeeding embarrassing (Dix, 1991). Modesty was the most frequently cited public education barrier to breastfeeding in a survey of state health officials and other professionals concerned with breastfeeding (Spisak & Gross, 1991). Research of women in Connecticut, Scotland, and England suggested that women who felt comfortable feeding in public breastfed longer than women who were not comfortable (Allen & Peltó, 1985).



Modesty is a familiar term, yet it does not appear to be conceptually defined or considered in published research. The concept may be related to breastfeeding behaviors and outcomes, such as the phenomenon of insufficient milk supply, but apparently this relationship has not been studied in the breastfeeding literature (Moran, 1998). A concept analysis that explores usage of the term *modesty* will help to clarify its meaning and aid in the development of a conceptual definition. This may subsequently lead to a greater knowledge of factors affecting breastfeeding outcomes and to the development of increasingly effective breastfeeding promotion and support strategies.

Modesty Defined

Modesty has been used as a grammatical principle, a communication pattern, a sociological concept related to self-presentation and self-esteem, and a religious virtue. Attention to the concept is far more prevalent in refer-

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ences from the early part of this century. Apart from religious references, the term is scarcely found in the current literature. However, a discussion of the concept's origins may help the reader better understand the origin of feelings of modesty, especially when they interfere with breastfeeding.

According to the *American Heritage Dictionary* (1982), modesty consists of observing the conventional proprieties in speech, dress, and behavior. Many definitions focus on sexuality: Modesty is a "curbing influence on the sex instinct, a brake or a bridle" (De la Vaissiere, 1937, p. 58), and it is a protection for purity, a protecting hedge (Buckley, 1960). Modesty is an almost instinctive fear prompting concealment and usually centering on sex (Ellis, 1913). In a book about the development of clothing fashions, modesty is defined as "a check on the impulse to self-aggrandizement, an inhibition of 'dressing up'; an attempt to damp down sexual allure" (Laver, 1969). Modesty is an inhibitory impulse directed against either social or sexual forms of display. Modesty is opposed to wearing gorgeous clothes and too few clothes, and aims at prevention of desire, disgust, shame, or disapproval (Laver, 1969). Modesty is reserve in regard to putting oneself on display (Weinberg, 1965). These definitions, although varying in their specifics, contain common elements. Thus, in a society that strongly emphasizes only the sexuality of breasts, an apparent conflict between breastfeeding and modesty may be inevitable.

There are also nonsexual connotations of modesty, such as a ban on self-promotion. For example, the modesty principle in grammar consists of giving the least prominence to oneself when a personal pronoun and another noun are used together (e.g., "John and I" or "between you and me") (Walther, 1995). Modesty is discussed in the sociological literature in reference to how individuals, especially women, present themselves. A norm of modesty guides appropriate behavior for women under the premise "thou shalt not self-promote"

(Janoff-Bulman & Wade, 1996, p. 145). Modesty is described as a communication pattern consisting of downplaying or denying one's capabilities and achievements, or discouraging one from being a showoff (Hall & Nouguchi, 1995). This protects the individual from negative feedback. Sociologist R. A. Stebbins defines modesty as occurring when an individual aims for "ideal or nearly ideal conformity to the rules of etiquette [or social expectations] that pertain to discourse of the achievements of self and others" (Stebbins, 1993, p. 83).

Religion

The concept of modesty is prevalent among literature from different religious traditions, including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. These discussions focus on modesty as a protection from sexual impulses. Modesty in these contexts dictates standards of behavior and dress for adherents to the religious tradition, and involves the individual's attitude and relationship to God.

For example, Christian scripture states, "I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety" (I Timothy 2:9-10, New International Version). One Christian writer says behaviors constituting modesty vary by context (e.g., public vs. private) (Rushmore, 1997). The Roman Catholic Church discusses modesty at some length in its catechism (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994). Modesty is viewed as protective of loving relationships and as encouraging patience and moderation in these relationships. Modesty is akin to decency, inspires choice of clothing, and is required to support purity and temperance. The Catholic catechism also states that the forms taken by modesty vary in different contexts.

The Torah of Judaism instructs that any behavior that stands out and seems to demand "Look at me!" is a lack of modesty. Modesty includes adhering to behavioral codes and standards of dress. However, modesty is more than a dress code; it is an interest in an internal standard and in what God thinks of you. The word *tzniut*, which is translated as *modesty*, is also defined as *humbly* in scripture (e.g., Micah 6:8) (Jewish Learning Exchange, 1995).

An Islamic definition of modesty is "that peculiar characteristic of man's conduct which supports him in his moments of need when he can 'fall' " (Nadvi, 1987, p. 190). Modesty protects people from the consequences

of behavior, particularly sexual behavior, which violates expectations of the faith.

When a woman's or family's view of modesty is rooted in religious faith, one can expect that this view is not readily changed. Thus, breastfeeding may be viewed as immodest in conjunction with a religious belief demanding the covering up of body parts associated with sexuality. When breastfeeding appears contradictory to modest behavior, adherents to various religious traditions encounter a conflict that may affect breastfeeding behavior.

Modesty and Breastfeeding

A survey reported in *Nursing Times* reports that British men perceive breastfeeding in public as embarrassing, unnecessary, a form of exhibitionism, and something that attracts attention or is "disgusting behavior" (Laurent, 1993, p. 14). This author suggests that these attitudes may influence breastfeeding behaviors and that valuable strides may be taken in convincing people who breastfeed that it can be done discreetly.

No other research linking breastfeeding and modesty was found. However, modesty as related to breastfeeding is discussed extensively in lay communication forums (e.g., on the Internet) as well as in texts and breastfeeding guides written for nursing mothers.

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What constitutes appropriate breastfeeding behavior also varies considerably from one culture to another. Women in Saudi Arabia, although fully veiled, are not uncomfortable baring a breast to nurse a baby in public; yet in France, a woman might hesitate to nurse publicly, or at least might cover herself, though a topless bathing suit is acceptable (Riordan, 1998).

Although attitudes vary within the United States, it is clear that public breastfeeding is a significant issue in American culture. During the 1990s, two types of breastfeeding legislation related to modesty have been passed in at least 13 states and many cities (Baldwin &

Friedman, 1997a; 1997b). The first type specifically protects women's right to nurse their children wherever they are legally allowed to be. The second type excludes from indecent-exposure laws the baring of breasts or nipples during or incidental to breastfeeding. These laws make clear that, although people may feel uncomfortable in the presence of a breastfeeding woman, her behavior is not legally indecent. This type of legislation would not appear to be necessary if it were not for the significant number of incidents in which women have been asked to leave public places, including restaurants, shopping malls, museums, and even their own parked cars (Baumslag & Michels, 1995; Dettwyler, 1995; Feinberg, 1980, "Feeding Time," 1996). One particular incident, in which a woman quietly nursing a young infant was told to leave a restaurant, sparked a series of newspaper editorials and letters that culminated in Feinberg's book, *Tempest in a Teahouse* (1980).

References to modesty are found primarily in the context of nursing discreetly and inconspicuously. Most breastfeeding guides suggest particular clothing styles and offer advice to aid mothers to become unnoticed breastfeeders or to cope with social isolation (Huggins, 1990; La Leche League International, 1991; Reukauf & Trause, 1987; Riordan, 1991). Women may feel uncomfortable nursing in front of other people, or they may believe that others—such as bystanders or their own husbands—feel uncomfortable (Reukauf & Trause, 1987). In summary, although there may be considerable variation in what makes a particular woman feel uncomfortable, it appears that in some cultures breastfeeding in the presence of others often causes discomfort or embarrassment for either the breastfeeding mother or those around her.

Social Context. Consideration for bystanders appears to be an important aspect affecting public breastfeeding behavior. A distinction is often made between nursing in general public places and in more formal situations in which the mother is acting as a working professional (e.g., attending or presenting at a conference). A woman attending a conference wrote, "As much as I am not self-conscious about breastfeeding in public, I think male engineers are not comfortable with a woman stranger doing it in their presence, so I avoid this" (Breastfeeding at a Conference, 1997). Another mother states, "Although I typically don't care what most people

think and would publicly breastfeed as a matter of course, I would not do it at the conference where I was presenting and making a professional appearance" (Breastfeeding at a Conference, 1997).

An Evangelical Christian writer suggests, "A woman might, in clear conscience, nurse her baby openly in public, without regard to what part of her body is exposed. However, she must be sensitive to those who would find this offensive" (Prewett, 1997). Her comments emphasize the idea that modesty is determined by social context and that the impact of behavior on bystanders must be considered. Thus, it is not merely the mother's perception of absolute right or wrong, but her concerns about observers that affect breastfeeding behavior.

Breastfeeding Disguised. References to modesty and discreet breastfeeding appear in clothing advertisements targeted at nursing mothers and in advertisements for other breastfeeding accoutrements (Ameda-Egnell Corp., 1997; Motherwear, 1997). For example, the Internet homepage for Ameda-Egnell states, "Do breastfeeding mothers have to expose their breasts in public? No. Breastfeeding can be done very inconspicuously in the presence of other people. A mother can turn her back to get started nursing and then use a blanket or shawl over the chest and shoulder to conceal the breast. Many onlookers think the mother is cuddling the baby." Although true, these statements suggest that it is not just physical exposure of the breast that is problematic; it is also the idea that a baby suckling at the breast is disturbing and perhaps deemed by some to be inappropriate (Palmer, 1988). Knowledge that the baby is breastfeeding draws attention to the woman's breast. The implication of these statements is that it may be acceptable to nurse in public as long as no one realizes that you are doing so. Contradictory messages about the value and acceptability of breastfeeding may easily undermine the success of breastfeeding-promotion efforts.

The Defining Characteristics of Modesty

Rodgers and Knafl (1993) suggest in their book *Concept Development in Nursing* that a thorough analysis of a concept requires identification of its defining attributes (characteristics), a discussion of related concepts, and examples of use of the concept.

Examination of the uses of the concept of modesty as described above suggests that several attributes are essential to modesty. These include *offering protection*, *promoting moderation*, and *providing covering*. In addition to these three attributes, modesty must be understood as being *situational*. Specific behaviors reflecting modesty are dictated both by culture and specific social contexts, such as time of day, type of activity, and other people who may be present (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994; Stebbins, 1993; Weinberg, 1965). Lastly, modesty is relevant only when behaviors occur before an audience. The audience may be another person, a group of people, or even God, but the concept appears to have little relevance when there is no audience. Thus an antecedent of breastfeeding modesty is that a mother must be in the presence of at least one other person at a time when her baby needs or wants to nurse. A summary of the preceding literature review of each of the derived attributes of modesty follows:

Offering Protection. Modesty is concerned with exercising control over sexuality and is especially expected

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of women (Janoff-Bulman & Wade, 1996; Lowry, 1912; Thomas, 1907; Weinberg, 1965). Modesty may protect from the embarrassment and discomfort associated with exposure of the body or of the self. It may also protect from social disapproval or from inappropriate or unwanted sexual attention. If norms of modesty are violated, embarrassment and shame may result as a consequence. Social disapproval may also occur, which may result in further shame when nursing mothers are asked to leave public areas (Feinberg, 1980).

Promoting Moderation. Modesty also consists of maintaining balance and promoting moderation in behavior. It supports staying within the boundaries of acceptable, normative behavior. Modesty consists of behavior that attracts a minimum of excess attention.

Providing Covering. Lastly, modesty involves providing covering. Typically, this is a physical covering of a part of the body, such as the breasts. It may also

include a covering of the self—that is, covering up one's achievements, activities, or abilities.

Related Concepts. Several concepts are related to modesty. Modesty and pride may be socially acceptable variations in the expression of self-esteem. On the one hand, modesty is bordered by humility, a low personal regard revealed by a debasing reference to self (Stebbins, 1993). Pride, on the other hand, is bordered by conceit. Prudery may be an excess of modesty, and to be modest is to find a “golden mean of modesty,” which lies somewhere between being a prude and being a tramp (Weinberg, 1965). Similar terms include *decency* and *discretion*.

Discussion

Modesty is manifested in behaviors including choice of clothing, touches, gestures, deportment, and speech. Behaviors that suggest breastfeeding modesty include whether or not a woman covers her breast with her clothing, the baby, or a blanket to prevent an exposure of the breast. Behaviors that may prevent others from noticing that the baby is nursing may be considered modest. For example, a breastfeeding guide for mothers suggests, “In emergencies you will probably find that you can nurse quite unnoticed even in public places such as a park bench or a restaurant booth. You will feel conspicuous, but you won't be nearly as conspicuous as you would be with a screaming, hungry baby in your arms. Or you can . . . take a bottle of your own expressed milk with you to give the baby if he gets hungry when circumstances prohibit nursing” (Pryor, 1973, p. 220). This author repeatedly notes the importance of avoiding the situation of having to feed the baby in public while not being able to prevent others from realizing you are doing so. Although this text is dated, recent sources suggest a similar emphasis on concealing the fact that breastfeeding is occurring (Motherwear, 1997; Reukauf & Trause, 1987).

Model Cases. A model case is a description of the concept that includes all the defining attributes (characteristics). Katherine Dettwyler's description of appropriate clothing provides a sample model case for modesty in dress. She writes:

Under normal circumstances in the United States, women's breasts are covered up by clothing. Among "respectable" women, partial exposure of the tops and sides of the breasts is acceptable in public only in the evening and only in explicit, sexually-alluring circumstances. For example, a woman may wear a low-cut evening gown to a fancy party, with substantial cleavage exposed, and be admired by onlookers, especially if her breasts are large. The same dress worn to church, or to teach elementary school, would be considered inappropriate. Similarly, a scanty bikini top may be all right for the beach, but not for the office. Even the most daring evening or beachwear must, however, completely cover the nipple and areola of the breasts (Dettwyler, 1995, p. 175).

This case includes references to all the defining attributes of modesty. For example, an audience is noted, and comparisons between different contexts and social situations are made. Two references are made to what parts of the breast are covered by modest clothing.

Contrary Cases. Identifying cases that reflect the opposite or a related instance of a concept is helpful in clarifying the essential elements of a concept (Rodgers & Knafl, 1993). An example of a contrary case found on the Internet reflects excessive attention to modesty, which ends up drawing more attention to the nursing pair:

I was in a situation where a young mother needed to nurse her baby and had no choice but to do it in a group setting that included a few men. She was obviously uncomfortable and embarrassed as she draped herself and the baby with a large blanket. Then for good measure, perhaps wishing she could disappear entirely, she even covered her head with another blanket! Needless to say, this is what really attracted attention. The men probably wouldn't have noticed that she was nursing, but now they were asking, "what on earth is she doing under those blankets?" (Prewett, 1997).

Although the young woman was motivated by a desire to be modest, this case clearly does not meet all the requirements of modesty. Instead of minimizing attention, the woman's behavior caused even greater notice to be given to her and her nursing infant.

The following statement reflects the social reality that many people consider it immodest to breastfeed in front

of others: "To wear a low-cut evening gown indicates that one is not a prude. To slip a strap aside and attach a baby, thus covering a great deal of cleavage, is to shock one's friends" (Minchin, 1985, p. 62). Despite the fact that less physical exposure may occur than when wearing acceptable eveningwear, breastfeeding is still considered inappropriate. This appears to be both because bottle-feeding has become the normal, "decent" way to feed a child, due to commercial influences over successive generations, and because breasts have frequently been defined as only for sexual display (Dettwyler, 1995; Minchin, 1985; Reukauf & Trause, 1987). Sexual display is clearly the antithesis of modesty.

Concept Analysis Summary

Modesty is acting in accordance with social norms and does not necessarily reflect an individual's perception of what should be appropriate. Modesty serves as protection from social sanction and disapproval, and consists of covering up or deflecting attention from the individual, particularly from female sexuality. Because the female breast has become so linked with sexuality in western culture, it has become subject to the same norms of modesty that surround the genitals (Palmer, 1988). Thus, exposure of the female breast becomes immodest. Riordan comments that "simple modesty or shame accounts for at least some women's shying away from breastfeeding" (1991, p. 11). Even when the breast is not physically exposed, a behavior that draws attention to the presence of breasts, such as nursing a baby, is considered immodest.

Implications for Mothers

Women who wish to breastfeed in the presence of other people and who feel it is immodest to do so have several options: avoiding those situations, feeding the baby as usual and risking disapproval, leaving the room to feed the baby, feeding the baby under blankets, or giving the baby a bottle for the feeding. "This sense of modesty, whether natural or culturally induced, means that for women in [such a] society to function there must be reasonably private feeding-rooms provided in public places. Such facilities are scarce, so those unable to steel themselves to public feeding must stay home" (Minchin, 1985, p. 63). Thus, the promotion of breastfeeding in

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Additionally, breastfeeding women appear to be perceived as violating norms of moderation when they continue nursing past early infancy or when they nurse their infants "too often." Such cultural expectations clearly conflict with ideal breastfeeding management. Thus, the promotion of breastfeeding must also include the presentation of images of the older breastfeeding infant or young child.

Implications for Research and Clinical Practice

Implications for breastfeeding research are apparent. Modesty has been identified as a problem but not yet studied by breastfeeding proponents. Areas of research should include the following: development of reliable and valid instruments to measure modesty; exploration of the degree to which modesty affects breastfeeding outcomes, such as early termination of breastfeeding or perceived insufficient milk supply (Moran, 1998); and further development of effective interventions for breastfeeding promotion which address women's concerns about being immodest.

Nurses, lactation consultants, and perinatal educators are often in a position to promote breastfeeding. Thus, they can help to attain the national health objectives for breastfeeding: 75% initiation and 50% duration of at least 5 to 6 months (National Center for Health Statis-

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tics, 1995). Modesty appears to be a barrier to successful breastfeeding among women in western cultures; therefore, by recognizing the potential role of modesty, health professionals caring for mothers and infants may be more sensitive to breastfeeding difficulties mothers may experience. Nurses, lactation consultants, and perinatal educators also have a responsibility to educate the public and work to increase societal support for breastfeeding. They may be able to help mothers address their feelings about breastfeeding and become more comfortable with nursing in the presence of other people. They may also be able to help family and community members become more comfortable in the presence of breastfeeding women. Such cultural change is never easy but is necessary to help mothers achieve optimal nutrition for their infants.

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Suggested Reading:

“Safety of Alternative Approaches to Childbirth”

Peter F. Schlenzka, PhD, recently completed a doctoral dissertation at Stanford University entitled, “Safety of Alternative Approaches to Childbirth.” A volunteer has posted portions of the dissertation on the World Wide Web at <http://www.domiciliary.org/stanford.html>.