At the Edges of Embodiment: Determinants of Breastfeeding for First Nations Women.

Objectives:
The objective of this study was to explore the question: Why do far fewer First Nations women initiate breastfeeding than other Canadians?

Methods:
We implemented a participatory, qualitative methodology emphasizing both social-ecological and indigenous feminist standpoint perspectives to explore breastfeeding in First Nations. Central to the current research is the notion of an embodiment within indigenous women’s health, and, more specifically, breastfeeding experiences and perspectives. We collected population demographics and infant feeding practice behaviours information through a survey and we conducted focus groups and interviews in three Canadian provinces (British Columbia, Manitoba, and Ontario) over the period of one-year (2010) from 65 women in seven First Nations.

Results:
Four overarching themes were found: (1) Personal, social, environmental factors influencing breastfeeding choice; (2) Challenging assumptions about self, motherhood, and breastfeeding, (3) Central contextual issues surrounding breastfeeding, and (4) The contribution of fathers. Main findings are that co-sleeping increases likelihood of breastfeeding while history of residential schools, trauma (physical and mental), evacuation at birth, and teen pregnancy were barriers to breastfeeding.

Conclusions:
While most women were familiar with the public health messages that “breast is best” many women found the physical, emotional, and cultural aspects of breastfeeding as more complex. Also, fathers and other immediate family members have tremendous influence on breastfeeding.

What are the implications of your research on practice or policy?
First Nations women's breastfeeding experiences have unique social and environmental influences and patterns. The implications of this research are that it can guide First Nations communities about the trans-generational impact of residential schools and trauma on breastfeeding on women's lives and bodies. This knowledge has the ability to transform women's lives.