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Childbirth and Breastfeeding in the British Media

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A member of the House of Lords in a multi-coloured velcro suit is repeatedly throwing himself against a velcro lined wall. This is 'Superhuman: the work of the baby-builders' on British television. Lord Winston is a fertilised ovum attempting to implant in the uterine wall. Subsequently, the camera closes in on a vigorous crop of mushrooms, Lord Winston raises the hope that we shall, "grow human eggs as easily as we now harvest mushrooms." In these science documentaries there is always the dominant male who is doing the innovative construction and harvesting work and who turns barrenness to fertility and female failure to fulfillment: the reproductive scientist as Prospero.

Programmes about reproductive medicine are very popular on British TV. Another series, 'The Body Story', shows the embryo as a scheming alien which first takes endocrine control over the mother's whole physiological system and then ruthlessly exploits her body in its own interest. She is perceived as victim, passively suffering the fetal conquest.

TV comedy and drama shows in contrast, represent pregnancy and birth as leading to social embarrassment, highly stressed personal relationships and, ultimately, chaos. The father is particularly a figure of fun. He tends to say and do all the wrong things. He panics and drives off without the woman, takes the wrong one to hospital, then keels over, and the nurses have to tend him instead of the woman in labour.

The start of labour is signalled by sudden, agonising pain around the navel. The woman clutches her bump with a look of shocked horror on her face and is immediately immobilised, remaining in that state more or less until the baby is born. With each pain she clutches her abdomen again. On TV women rarely have backache labour.

Childbirth consists of a rush to get the woman to hospital. Everything else is irrelevant. She is like a parcel that has to be transported, pushed, pulled, and dumped on a delivery table in front of an eagerly awaiting gowned (and often masked) medical team.

The Senior Obstetrician cracks out staccato commands and a junior team member, almost invariably a woman, makes soothing noises.

One study shows that 26% of women on television never make it to the hospital in time for the birth. [1] Babies are usually delivered by doctors, not midwives, though in Britain, in reality, midwives deliver 68 per cent of babies. [2]

A hospital drama in which the mother expresses the hope that she will have a natural birth conveys a warning to the viewer that labor is likely to be long and difficult, and that she or the baby may die. In an episode of E.R. a woman who is already eclamptic says that she wants a natural birth and declines the suggestion of a Cesarean section. But she has to ask for an epidural, because the pain is too severe. Against an unfolding screed of medical diagnoses, a background of bleeping machines, and people running everywhere, there is shoulder dystocia, an emergency Cesarean, haemorrhage - and then she fits and dies. Her partner is left sitting in a rocking chair, his baby in his arms, grieving over his wife.

Home births only occur in historical dramas as a rule, or take place by accident, and they may result in the death of the baby. One writer comments that, "TV heroines only ever give birth in lifts, taxis, beside remote lakes or in planes, three miles up above the Earth." [3]

If this sounds familiar to American audiences, it is because a large proportion of soap operas, sitcoms and dramas on British and other European TV networks are, in fact, American. Though soaps are usually

broadcast during the day in the USA, in Britain they are screened at prime time. They aim to be socially realistic and attract an audience that covers a wide age range.

This may be how many children learn about birth. Few are present at the birth of younger siblings, and for many young women about to have a child this is the background to their perceptions of what birth is like. It takes a lot of discussion in childbirth classes to deconstruct such misinformation. But it makes for a lively session.

TV has produced a powerful mythology of birth. The drama of this myth is in the medical emergency, the speeding ambulance, the urgent bleep, and the struggles of a team of doctors and nurses to combat death. There are heart monitors on which the trace flattens out, cesarean deliveries, massive hemorrhages, resuscitation of the baby. It is a drama that feeds the fears inherent in the dominant medical model of birth and, in this way, it conditions pregnant women to submit to its rituals.

Media representations of breastfeeding are no better. A recently published study of the UK media found that breastfeeding was usually either invisible or negatively represented. Breastfeeding is portrayed as a socially marginal activity, unlike bottle feeding which is socially integrated into everyday scenes.

Breastfeeding is rarely shown on television, whereas representations of bottle feeding are common. Within the one month TV sample examined for this study there was just one scene which showed a baby being put to the breast and 9 of a breast pump (not in use). By contrast, there were 170 scenes which showed babies' bottles, formula preparation or bottle-feeding. [4]

This study also found that babies' bottles have become a routine and iconic way of visually representing babyhood and preparing formula milk is used to symbolise positive male involvement. For example, an advertisement for whisky shows a man wearing a dressing gown and preparing formula. The strap line is 'What have you been doing while Bells whisky has been maturing?' Breastfeeding, by contrast, is portrayed as a slightly abnormal activity and sometimes used to characterise particular types of women e.g. 'hippies' or middle class 'earth mothers'. [5]

This research also found that bottle feeding was usually represented as problem-free, whereas breastfeeding was seen as fraught with difficulties.

Scrutiny of both the press and television sample identified only one reference to potential difficulties associated with bottle-feeding (the 'hassle' of bottle washing) but 42 references to difficulties attributed to breastfeeding (sore nipples, 'saggy' breasts, sleepless nights). Most of these references suggest no ways in which such problems might be alleviated.

The study also found that routine mass media coverage rarely acknowledged the health implications of formula milk compared to breast milk. In the entire months sample there was only one, oblique, reference to any potential disadvantages of formula feeding on television and one newspaper report which questioned the safety of genetically modified ingredients in a particular brand. The health benefits of breast milk were not mentioned. [6]

Overall then, the media do not promote the idea that breastfeeding can be a positive act and experience.

However, there are some media representations which might help to challenge this marginalisation of breastfeeding. Several of the British soap operas have recently taken up the issue.

Brookside, a drama series set in a Liverpool community and shown at peak time and attracting large audiences, ran a storyline about breastfeeding last year. One episode portrayed a businesswoman challenging objections to her breastfeeding in public. Her colleagues stood up for her right to do so and the complainant, rather than she, was asked to leave the cafe bar.

Most intriguing of all is the way breastfeeding features in comedy programmes. Some of this humour exploits and reinforces ideas about the shame of leaking breasts, the 'disgusting' nature of breast milk or male double-standards about 'boobs'. However some representations are more reflective or even

subversive. The American sitcom 'Roseanne' (very popular on British television) showed a character breastfeeding as she took her marriage vows. At the words 'You may kiss the bride', she declared 'just let me change sides' and moved the baby to her other breast.

There are some signs that this may be happening with birth, too. A scriptwriter recently consulted Sheila about a medical drama series in which a woman will have a home birth, in spite of her doctor's disapproval. The writer herself gave birth at home. Her producers want drama and catastrophe. But she has won them over. This will be an uncomplicated and happy home birth.

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