THE NATURAL MOTHER
Discourse and representation of motherhood in an Italian Facebook group

Silvia Marchesi

Supervisor: Lauren E. La Fauci, Gender Studies, LiU

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INTRODUCTION

Nature still plays a prominent role in shaping social expectations about the tasks of parents, especially mothers. The transition from the previous model of mothering and the contemporary one in Italy is definitely characterized by a revival of what is perceived as the ancient way of childrearing. Home births are a concrete alternative to hospital ones. Many women prefer to consult a midwife instead of a doctor in order to have a less medicalized pregnancy and delivery. Practices such as breastfeeding or co-sleeping are reevaluated from professionals as better for both mothers and children. At the same time, nature is also used to establish ideas about women and motherhood that are socially constructed. The gender inequality that characterizes maternity is somehow justified as part of an inevitable process where it is only or mainly the mother who has to stay home and provide care for children. The belief is well-established in Italian society and many women embrace it without any questioning.

This research seeks to understand the appeal that the concept of the natural mother exercises today on many women. Empirically, my focus is on the Italian context. Departing from questions coming from my personal experience of motherhood, I carried out an investigation of an on-line group that I had joined prior to the research. The Facebook group provides support and information about a natural approach to motherhood. I started by addressing the thorny relationship between women, motherhood and nature through the ecofeminist theory. Trying to overcome the essentialism implied in the supposed special connection between women and nature, contemporary ecofeminism seeks to revalue maternity not as an unavoidable commitment but as a choice for women. With the aid of discourse analysis and online ethnography methods, I have tried to disclose contemporary use of nature in the cultural representation of maternity. Finally I have applied intersectionality in the analysis, focusing on gender, religion and disability in a perspective which aims to challenge the discourse that today delimits the role of mothers (Robinson 2013).

The study reveals the role that breastfeeding plays in present-day Italy in modeling a natural approach to motherhood. More precisely, breastfeeding is the core for understanding the idea of the natural mother. The significance of the research is that it highlights how breastfeeding raises the contradiction of the natural motherhood approach: on the one hand, it claims a stronger voice for women’s needs and expectations of their pregnancy and maternity experiences; on the other, it supports a conservative rhetoric about gender roles.
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Through this analysis I wanted to understand and define the current discourse of the natural mother. First, why is the call of nature in motherhood so appealing again? Literature on the topic shows how, despite all the attempts at creating an immutable image of it, motherhood has been considered and lived in very different ways in the past centuries in Western societies. However, the work of Elizabeth Badinter shows how every time that mothers needed to be brought back to their childcare duties, the call of nature appeared again (2012). Could this backlash be an explanation of the currently widespread concept of the natural mother or was there something more? According to previous studies, the natural idea behind motherhood originated as an objection to the medicalization process of pregnancy and births (Thomson and al. 2011). However, it has since “been added to an ever-expanding choice menu of products and practices deemed good, pure and close to nature, regardless of the manufacturing involved in their production” (Thomson and al. 2011: p. 358/4964).

The mobilization of nature in the discourse of maternity have raised a second question: how is the concept of nature currently used to create or to influence the cultural representation of motherhood in Italy? It is the aim of this study to understand what does it mean to be a “natural mother” and what beliefs and practices, according to the current discourse, distinguish a natural mother from the others. Moreover, the study wants to discover the main topics discussed in an on-line group of natural motherhood, giving space to what mothers who embrace this view consider important. I believe that recognition of their needs could be a useful starting point in order to understand why and how nature is engaged in the discourse.

In my analysis I have used an intersectional lens. At the last point, the study aims to understand if the idea of the natural mother can be extended to parents in general (people identifying as men/male-identified people and queer people as well) or whether it is a specific definition only for heterosexual, cisgendered women. Does the concept on the natural mother incorporate or exclude other categories such as different ethnicity, sexual orientations, religion and disability? How have they been taken into account in the discourse of natural motherhood?

SITUATING MYSELF

On 31st March 2016 I was admitted to the Master program in Gender Studies - Intersectionality and Change at Linköping University. During the previous fall I spent a lot of time preparing all the
required documents for the admission: taking the IELTS test, getting translations of my degrees, writing the letter of intent. I had very little academic knowledge of the topic and I nervously passed the winter waiting for the result. On 17th April 2016 I found out about my pregnancy. I do not know in which kind of conjunction it happened, but these two events in my life seemed intertwined. My experiences of pregnancy and motherhood have been strongly influenced by my feminist studies, and probably this is true also the other way around.

Through my pregnancy and my first year of motherhood I have personally experienced the discourses that society intended to inflict on me. The biggest difficulty for me was the expectations of others to conform to their idea of motherhood, mostly justified with the sentence “You know, in nature, mothers...”. This response caught me totally unprepared. To be sure I was not living a life lacking of episodes marked by gender inequalities, but probably, given my privileged position as a white, heterosexual, middle-class and working woman living in a European country, I was involved in a softer version of it. Motherhood changed everything. I started to feel the pressures to conform to what was expected to be the natural role of mothers. Douglas and Michaels have described “a taken-for-granted, natural standard of how women should imagine their lives” (2004: p. 250/7936).

I immediately tried to distance myself from all this, labeling it as anti-feminist. But maternity, together with its load of joy and astonishment, also brought a series of uncertainty and fragility that I had never undergone before. It was easy to lose my bearings. Anyway, going through this path gave rise to my desire to understand more about the discourse that nowadays surrounds motherhood in Italy.

Being part of a Facebook group on natural motherhood myself, I was particularly interested in parent networks on the Internet. When the time came to think about the thesis, it was inevitable for me to reflect on my pregnancy and my first year of motherhood. My feelings about it were various, and sometimes contrasting. I started to notice that almost everyone involved in raising children referred to nature as a concept as part of a system of knowledge quite articulated. But at one point a friend of mine, who became a mother a few months before me, gave a name to this system of values, calling it the “natural mother”. After that first time, I heard the word more often and I started to get familiar with its assumptions. I learned how today the discourse of natural motherhood makes corresponding the “good mother” with the “natural mother”. I also discovered what, according to this concept, distinguished a good mother from a bad one, or actually what is valid in these years in terms of birth, work and parenting.
As Haugh has stated in her work, “I feel as if motherhood is a club [...]” (2016: 67). This is why being a mother means also being “part of a broader group of women” (Haugh 2016: 67). Actually, I have never felt as a full member of this club. The concept of the natural mother raised a sort of awkwardness in me. I studied how in human history nature has been largely used in order to justify all kinds of inequalities. Patriarchal societies have referred to nature also to explain the roles of men and women in every stage of their life. In this sense, parenthood is not an exception. Nature has been invoked to justify the strict roles considered appropriate for ensuring good mothers and fathers. Summarizing, the natural mother reminded me of reactionary arguments used in order to put women back to their household duties. I expected these kinds of discourses from sexist and conservative people. But it was not like this. The call of nature was everywhere: in the conversation with mothers or pregnant women, in the contents of the childbirth classes, in Facebook groups, magazines and books on motherhood. Most of the time, nature appeared in conversation with people that I would have classified as alternatives, unconventional, liberal. Have they been somehow incorporated into a more commercial and conservative vision? But how? There was something in the discourse that I was missing and I aimed to understand what it was.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

My research was framed within ecofeminist theory. I decided to choose this framework because the relationship between women and nature is one of the main issues raised by ecofeminism: according to Greta Gaard, one of the field’s major theorists, “[e]cofeminism emerged from the intersections of feminist research and the various movements for social justice and environmental health, explorations that uncovered the linked oppressions of gender, ecology, race, species, and nation [...]” (Gaard 2011: 27). Early ecofeminism aimed to discuss and overcome discriminatory models operating in patriarchal society, where reality was interpreted according to the dichotomous metaphor masculine-human and feminine-nature. Through this binary distinction, the feminine was underestimated as associated with what concerned the body, emotions, cooperation, instinct to care, and sympathetic ability, while the masculine was celebrated because it was combined with opposing concepts such as rationality, intellect, competition, and domination (Cima 2017).

The ecofeminist critique also showed the role played by the Enlightenment in the institutionalization of sexism. The attempt to identify universal human qualities colluded with a system of domination in which “Others [are] defined as less-than-human” (Sturgeon 1997: 9). The dualism was built valuating things associated to the self and describing as of lesser value all what differed from it. This category of Others included not only women but also non-Western people and
animals as well. In Italy as elsewhere, ecofeminism intertwined with pacifism, anti-racism, anti-colonialism, and the antinuclear movement, as well as more general critiques of polluting capitalism and aggressive policies toward the ecosystem. It became clear that no environmental change could be pursued without social change. Consequently, dismantling women’s oppression would work only by addressing environmental degradation too (Gaard and Gruen 1993).

Nevertheless, ecofeminism’s appreciation and celebration of the alleged characteristics of the feminine brought some feminists on a war footing, accusing it of essentialism. Undoubtedly, elements of the female biology, such as pregnancy, menstruation, and lactation have frequently been used to proclaim a univocal destiny for all women. The assumption that nature is always essentialist prevented researchers from investigating it from a feminist perspective for some time. Those who were studying the intersections between women and nature even attempted to rename the approach in order not to be charged with essentialism (Gaard 2011). Yet the position was problematic because not taking motherhood into account in any feminist research implied a devaluation of the activities related with the reproduction of human beings, which was, paradoxically, in harmony with a patriarchal vision (Robinson 2013). Some feminists claimed that the problem was not in the word itself but in the meanings constructed around its application: “the use of essentialist arguments to uphold inequalities and perpetuate injustices is a historically situated phenomenon, not an essence in itself” (Sturgeon 1997: 9). According to Janis Birkenland, “the assertion of ‘difference’ is based on the historical socialization and oppression of women, not biologism” (Gaard 1993: 22). Moreover, thinking nature as separated from culture was a legacy of patriarchal society itself (1993).

Ecofeminist theory applied with the intersectional approach allows us to recognize explicitly that often in a general group such as “women” or “migrants” or “the poor” there is a multiplicity of experience. The acknowledgment of the interconnection between categories of exclusion is fundamental for addressing different kind of discrimination. Intersectionality is a concept closely related to anti-racist and anti-colonial feminism, grown as a critique of white, Western, middle-class feminism (Lykke 2010). It was introduced into the context of feminism by law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, who studied how legislation addressed issues where both gender and race were combined. Particularly, through the analysis of a lawsuit between General Motors and a group of African American women, where the latter reported their systematic exclusion from employment opportunities offered by the company, Crenshaw showed how they were subjected to a double form of exclusion. White feminism wrongly expected to incorporate in its action the fight of racism
endured by non-western women, in the name of a supposed common sisterhood. Intersectionality revealed the ineffectiveness of this vision because inequality that women experience in their daily life is deeply conditioned by their economic, political, and social conditions and their geographical locations (Levine-Rasky 2011).

Intersectional theory has a wide diffusion in feminist studies especially for its countless possibilities for use in feminist critical research. An intersectional approach is a tool which allows us to consider exclusion for people marked by many categories of difference (Crenshaw 1989; Levine-Rasky 2011). Although it had also been subject to several criticisms (Carbin and Edenheim 2013), it is considered as an important tool for a deeper understanding of processes of discrimination, which involve multiple inequalities. Gender is a category that can be examined as a concept itself, but in practice it should be considered in relation to other categories such as sexuality, race, religion, and class (Adib and Guerrier 2003).

In this research project, ecofeminist theory is combined with an intersectional framework in order to assess whether there are categories today that are missing from the current discourse of natural motherhood in Italy.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The isolation of modern mothers in post-industrial societies has been a widely-discussed issue in the past decades. The demographic trends showed a constant decrease in the number of children per family and consequently per neighborhoods, which contributed to creating “a more adult-centered and less child-friendly environment” (Coonts in Drentea and Moren-Cross 2005: 921). Moreover, the high level of medicalization of pregnancy and motherhood, treated as pathological rather than as occurrences to the ordinary life circle, distanced these experiences from women’s daily life (Wu Song et al. 2012). The loss of importance of the family and networks in neighborhoods and communities left women without the informal support of mothering that they have traditionally shared. After few days in the hospital, arriving at home with a completely dependent being and spending the whole time alone can be an extremely stressful and depressing experience. Motherhood can surely be rewarding and joyful, but mothering young children is very intense. Besides, mothers and parents in general feel very insecure because of the requirements on parents to practice “an extremely detailed level of micromanaging parenting” (Sjöberg and Lindgren 2017: 249) that has increased greatly in the last decades.
Parents still need to find information about pregnancy, mothering, and parenthood. This empty space can be filled by the Internet, which allows people from different geographic and social locations but in a similar stage of life to meet and share requests, experiences, and advice. As Douglas and Michaels have stated, “motherhood is a collective experience” (2004: p. 533/7936). Sometimes, the fact that the individuals virtually met are outside their network makes people feel even more comfortable sharing personal stories and details (Drentea and Moren-Cross 2005).

The Internet, and especially social networks, has created new spaces that allow parents to get in touch and interact. “Studies have shown that parents choose to search for parental information online, as it is described as a convenient and comfortable way to gather information and offers a more detailed and interactive form of immediate information than does that provided by face-to-face support groups” (Sjöberg and Lindgren 2017: 250).

Many previous studies have analyzed the importance of web communities as tool of information and emotional support for parents, especially for mothers. Drentea and Moren-Cross have examined how social capital is developed and used in a mothering board on a parents’ website (2005). Madge and O'Connor have written about the paradox raised by the Internet: on the one hand, empowering women in transition to motherhood, providing the information they are looking for; on the other hand, the reiteration of very traditional stereotypes of mothering and gender roles (2006). Brady and Guerin have explored how participants in online parenting groups experience support via web and what types of assistance they receive on an Irish website (2010). Wu Song et al. have analyzed the women’s use of the Internet to manage pregnancy and mediate the doctor–patient relationship (2012). Sjöberg and Lindgren have focused on Facebook groups about young parents support in Sweden, perceived by the Government as a high-risk target (2017). Del Negro Visintin and Aiello-Vaisbgerg have investigated the collective imaginary about motherhood portrayed in Brazilian blogs (2017).

This research project contributes to the analysis of the Internet, especially the social network Facebook, as source and supplier of knowledge about maternity. More in detail, the study examines the contemporary use of nature in the discourse of motherhood discussed within this group focused on natural mothering.

**METHODS**

This study has used a qualitative approach. The research questions have been answered using a
combination of two different methods of research: on-line ethnography and discursive analysis. I decided to analyze contents in a Facebook group on natural motherhood. At the beginning I was hesitant to analyze a virtual space, for different reasons. I had never done research on web communities and I was worried about ethics and the proper methods to be used: fortunately in the last decades the on-line world has become a subject of analysis and I could find important suggestions in previous research. In addition, I do not feel at ease with the use of social networks such as Facebook. Nevertheless, the setting of the research has to be defined on the basis of the research topic, rather than arbitrarily excluding possible arenas (Garcia et al. 2009), and the Facebook group looked like a very interesting and promising one. On-line ethnography was very useful for observing the daily life of the group and its interactions. With discourse analysis I could go deeper into the contents exchanged by the participants, trying to reveal the implicit meanings contained in the discussions.

**Online Ethnography**

Ethnography is a discipline “on the field”, which has historically required a certain degree of participation of the researcher to the life of the studied group. For this reason there has been a certain resistance to making qualitative ethnographic research on the Internet and in the computer-mediated communication (Garcia et al. 2009): the virtual space challenges traditional notions of what the research field is. However, recently it has been argued that the distinction between real and virtual “is no longer valid as the Internet has become an integral part of our contemporary social world” (Baker 2013: 132). According to this view, the detachment of the off-line and on-line life does not seem useful, especially for social research. In the on-line world, more people gather to share their opinion and experience; avoiding research on it means missing part of everyday social life too: “Much social life now exists on-line. New social media have become indispensable to people all over the world as platforms for communication” (Dalsgaard 2016: 96). In online research, observation involves watching text and images on a screen rather than watching people in offline settings. The off-line world observation requires at least the minimal participation of “being there” (Garcia et al. 2009) while most of the online settings give the opportunity for completely unobtrusive observation.

**Discourse Analysis**

Discourse analysis method is based on the idea that representation can be explained as the production of meaning through language. According to Hall, “things don’t mean: we construct meaning” (1997: 25). There is a distinction between the material and the symbolic world, and it is
in the latter that practice and processes operate through representation, meaning, and language. This definition is closely related to the acceptance of cultural relativism, which makes the difference between constructionism and the other two approaches to representation, reflective and intentional ones. An important contribution to the constructionist approach has been made by the linguists Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes. Saussure’s key point is that language, understood as a system of signs, is responsible for the production of meaning. The link provided by codes between the so-called signifiers (the form, the type of representation) and the signified (the idea, the concept associated to the form) is never inevitable or fixed because words shift their meanings. The work of Foucault tries to extend the concept of representation, including not only meaning but the production of knowledge through discourse as well. Foucault was interested in the practices that regulated discourse in different historical moments. According to the constructionist approach, things and actions “... take on meaning and become objects of knowledge [only] within the discourse” (Hall 1997: 45). It is the discourse that produces knowledge, and Foucault analyzed how knowledge production is intertwined with relations of power and used by institutions in order to regulate people's behavior. First of all, what a society “knows” in a certain period of time has real effects, becoming “true”. Foucault rejects the truth of knowledge in its absolute sense: he speaks about a discourse made for supporting a specific “regime of truth” (1997: 49), product of a specific time and culture. Second, power relations are at work on all levels of social life, regulating but also producing discourse applied to what Foucault sees as “[...] the center of the struggles between different formations of power/knowledge” (1997: 50): the human body.

**STUDY DESIGN**

Among the free social networking sites, Facebook is undoubtedly the most popular and dynamic online social community. In April 2018 it was the most used community in the world with a global usage penetration of 22.9 percent (Statista 2018). In Italy, statistics shows that at the end of 2016 Facebook counted over 30 million users per month (Vendrame 2017), and almost 53% of them were over 35 years old (Repubblica 2017) meaning that it is not a social network only for young people. The data demonstrate the indisputable role that Facebook nowadays plays in the life of many people.

A Facebook group is a function within Facebook’s platform. Users can create a webpage for the purpose of gathering people with a joint interest or identity (Sjöberg and Lindgren 2017). As in my case-study, the common identity is being a mother in need of interactions and discussions with peers. Users on Facebook register with the site and create a personal profile. Then, one’s personal
profile homepage, known as one’s Facebook “wall” (or “timeline”), is the space where a user shares discussion threads, pictures, videos, emotional statuses, and so on. In the Facebook group women use their personal experience to give advice and support each other. The group has a high level of activity, with a nonstop flow of discussion threads. A discussion thread is a conversation that users can have with other members of the Facebook group. Members can post their thoughts on a wall and interact through posts, which could be texts, videos or pictures. In this research I refer to discussion threads as posts. All the other users can comment the posts in the wall, and every comment can in turn get replies.

Regarding the choice of the group, I focused on a group on natural motherhood which I joined myself in 2017, before starting the research. I have seen other friends joining it and thought it could be helpful (I had a quite difficult breastfeeding experience). My request was approved and I could read what the other members were posting. Even if I was a member, I have never been really active on the Facebook group. I was following it because I found some of the topics very interesting but I never wrote or shared anything on it. I felt that this way of gathering and sharing experiences and comments was not the right one for me: the incessant exchange of different opinions, often conflicting, the high level of intimacy between the members in the name of the common motherhood experience – without knowing anything else of each other, the awareness that what I would write had no specific recipient but everyone could read and comment on it... everything pushed me away from sharing my troubles on the Facebook group. However, the group is very active, with around 20.000 members and lots of posts and comments exchanged every day. Therefore it seems to provide a strong support for the participants. Even if my personal experience with the Facebook group was not particularly productive, I was fascinated by the number of people using it and by the constant exchange of suggestions and advices.

Facebook groups do not have a set of tools for navigate and search through them. Actually the simple idea of just going backwards and observing the interactions happening in the group was hard and confusing, precisely for the amount of posts, comments and replies continually made. One of the functions available is the search engine: I decided to make a research with key words. Another function allows users to limit the research to a year or a month. The research has been carried out between March and April 2018. For the sake of the time and scope of this study, I restricted my research from the last quarter of 2017 until the first quarter of 2018, selecting only the discussions posted during the months of October, November, December 2017, and January, February, and March 2018, for a total of 6 months. I recorded the selected posts with Nimbus, a screenshot and
screen video recorder program. During my work I kept constantly in mind that the selected sample was very narrow and did not enable me to make any definitive conclusion about the researched group.

The two different methods of investigation have been used on different samples. Regarding discourse analysis, I made a research through the key words “nature” and “natural” in the posts. I did not consider the discussions in which those words were not in the central posts but only in the comments or in the replies to the comments. Posts where the main content was a picture or a video were excluded from the selection. The word “nature” has been found mostly in the posts related to breastfeeding, whereas the word “natural” could be matched to other topics as well, such as shopping advice or weaning. Nevertheless the superiority in number of the discussions which contained both the words “nature/natural” and “breastfeeding” hit my attention, and I decided to focus on them.

Online ethnography followed a different process of sampling. I realized that I could not investigate intersectionality among the participants of the group. My aim to analyze personal characteristics such as race, ethnicity, class, which might have been of critical importance for my research, could not be taken into account. In online settings identities are more easily concealed or altered: for example, profiles with non-Italian names or pictures with veils do not necessarily mean that the person is not Italian. This is why I chose to focus on the intersectionality of the results. Thus, in addition to the words “nature” and “natural”, I used also the words “disability”, “homosexuality” and “religion” as key for my research. In this case I considered the posts where those words were not in the main discussion but in comments or reply to the comments as well.

**RESEARCH ETHICS**

At the beginning of my project, one of the problems that were seriously troubling me about doing an analysis on a Facebook group was ethical. How could I get in touch with the participants in order to make them aware of my purposes? I was in a sort of dilemma, trying to find the way out without stepping on the privacy of anybody. As previous research has shown, ethical issues in Internet-based research cannot follow a universal set of guidelines because “There is simply too much diversity across internet cultures, values and modes of operation for that to be the case” (Connery and Cox 2012: 50). One idea was to write a nice post explaining my research directly in the group. But this option sounded arduous to me: as I wrote before, I hate to share posts or thoughts or requests on social networks and especially in such wide groups. Moreover, with almost 20,000
members how could I hope to get univocal approval? That was not a feasible option. Then I even considered the option of doing my research without informing people in the group. I would have used only the contents, without mentioning any personal information of the participants. After all, I tried to convince myself, I was a member of it and everything that was written in the group was automatically shared with all the members. Nevertheless, boundaries between public and private spheres are not that distinct and often in public online environment people act as if it was a private one. With taking part of the group those people agreed that other members could read and comment on their contents, but not to anyone’s using them for any further purpose.

I felt that I ran the risk of “lurking”, because I had already started to look at the contents, even if before choosing to perform a research on it. As Garcia et al. has written, “while researchers may be encouraged to lurk first to familiarize themselves with the setting before asking questions, it [is] not acceptable to collect data […] without permission or without identifying oneself as a researcher” (2009: 59). The recommendations of the Association of Internet Researchers suggest that individual privacy has to be protected when users of online venues assume or believe that their communication is private. Privacy can be protected through maintaining anonymity and asking consent (Ess and AOIR 2002). Thus I made a request to one of the group administrators, asking if I could follow the group for research purposes. I was worried they might reject my request because often researchers experience that members of some online communities may be more hesitant to being studied than people in face-to-face settings (Garcia et al. 2009). In the request I explained how I found the group and why I joined it initially, and I situated myself as a mother.

I immediately proposed to share with them the results of my study: I wanted to demonstrate my thankfulness for their help in advance. Previous research has mentioned the duty of reciprocity that ethnographers frequently feel towards the researched group (Neves and Mafalaia in Bhopal and Deuchar 2015). It is undeniable that the researcher gets back more from the study than the subjects in the field, thus it is not exactly a fair deal. Fortunately, the administrator responded that all the administrators of the group were positive towards my research, and they accepted my request.

However, sometimes working on my project made me feel uncomfortable. The very positive answer from the administrators increased my worries that the results of my study would not portray the group in the way they expected. Although I had no intentions of discrediting anyone, I was afraid of disappointing them somehow. The perception of “betrayal” is not new in ethnography. Halpherin
and Heath have pointed out that the struggle of being neutral while doing fieldwork requires much social interactions, making the researcher feel as betrayer and arriviste (2012). Carla Mafalaia has instead described her experience in the first person: her will of being transparent about her notes and fieldwork almost caused the participants of her study to lose their jobs. In this case they accused her of betrayal (Neves and Mafalaia in Bhopal and Deuchar 2015). “The truth is that even if the ethnographic product tries to be as candid as possible, it is not easy for participants to face their own lives exposed in a detailed way” (2015 : 55).

The solution to my dilemma consisted in a balance between the ambition of not presenting anyone in a bad light and the commitment to analyzing data in a meaningful way in order to answer my research questions. I started my work with an observation of the activity of the group, focusing then on the posts that I found meaningful for my investigation. The contents have been examined without any reference to personal details of the participants, assuring the anonymity of the sources. The recurring topics in the group have been analyzed in aggregate form.

THE STUDY

Description

The group aims to provide “support and information on breastfeeding and maternity understood in the most possible natural way” (group rules¹). It follows the World Health Organization guidelines, which claims that “Breastfeeding is the normal way of providing young infants with the nutrients they need for healthy growth and development. Virtually all mothers can breastfeed, provided they have accurate information, and the support of their family, the health care system and society at large” (WHO website). Because of this, the group seeks to promote accurate information about exclusive on-demand breastfeeding up to 6 months and about extended breastfeeding (along with appropriate complementary foods) up to the moment when both mother and child are ready to stop it (also called the natural end to breastfeeding).

New aspiring members are requested to read the group rules before asking to join the group. The allowed topics listed in the rules are breastfeeding, obstetrics, maternity, baby wearing, weaning, and child nutrition. The rules also provides a list of the forbidden ones: devices which interfere with breastfeeding, such as baby bottles, pacifiers, nipple shields; baby walkers; slim down program commercials; vaccines; advice about medicines and homeopathy. The regulation invites members to avoid using an offensive tone, advertisements not relevant to the group purposes and sharing

¹ All the translation Italian-English are mine.
screenshots of the discussions out of the group. Racially discriminating comments are also banned. Any violation of the rules would lead to suspension. In the rules, I found it very peculiar that the use of the word “extremism” is not admitted. However, I have discovered during my observation that one of the administrators had been accused of extremism by a few members because of her opinion on maternity. The accusation was rejected by the administrator, who asserted that she was promoting information based on scientific evidence.

The group counts 17 admins and 2 moderators. One of the permanent announcements explains who the admins are. All of them are mothers of one or more children who work there voluntarily. The role is quite active and demanding: all the posts and comments are carefully read before approval in order to avoid the circulation of information at odds with the guidelines and the discussion of the so-called “off topics” (OT). They intervene to moderate discussions and to ban members that do not respect the regulation.

The participants in this study include the members of the group. The group has a large number of people registered: on 7 April 2018 it counted 19,992 members. Comparisons with other similar Facebook groups on parenting support have shown that it is a considerable network.

Participants are only women because that was required by one of the group's rules (“This is a women-only group”). Their use of the word woman is not explained. In my opinion this is because it is implied only in an essentialist sense, addressing only cisgendered women. An exclusively female environment “brings motherhood away from the male-centered medical environment to a woman-centered environment” (Taylor in Drentea and Moren-Cross 2005: 924). In this way the group can encourage more openness and mutuality (Brady and Guerin 2010). The tone of conversations is mostly intimate; for example participants shares personal details, pictures with their children, problems with their partners and or family. All the members speak to the other participants calling them “mums” and never use the more formal “mothers”.

Among the mothers there are also professionals, such as midwives, IBCLC consultants (International Board Certified Lactation) and peer counselors. Members are free to ask for their opinions but it is up to the professional to decide, considered that they are not paid for their advice.

Results of the discourse analysis

Through the analysis of the contents I have made a selection of the five main points of the discourse
on natural motherhood on the selected post of the Facebook group: 1) home birth, 2) “Mother Nature,” 3) un-natural Technologies, 4) natural end of breastfeeding, and 5) breastfeeding in public. The sentences in italic are translated from the posts.

*Home birth*

Giving birth at home represents the ancient way of delivering children, in opposition to the modernity of hospital birth. In one post a mother shared a brief report of the first weeks with her second daughter. She wrote about her previous delivery experience, which happened in the hospital and where she did not find the help and the support she needed to breastfeed her child. Therefore for her second delivery she decided to have a home birth and “everything happened according to nature”. In this way, the participant supported a dualism of “hospital-artificial” and “home-natural”. As previous studies have shown, “The two contemporary Western cultural models of childbirth are generally presented as binary opposing models, forming a black and white world” (Viisainen 2001: 1119). Women who plan for a home birth describe their choice as inevitable “in order to have as natural a birth as possible” (2001: 1113). This choice is often motivated by the will to have control over the process and, if possible, to reduce superfluous involvement of medical technologies. The request for a less medicalized pregnancy and births might be related to the loss of cultural authority of doctors according to an ongoing “process of deprofessionalization” of the medical sphere (Wu Song et al. 2012: 777). Frequently the memory of the birth experience is not shaped by specific details of the delivery itself but rather by the possibility of choice and control of it (Cook 2012). This means that women trust their bodies and their ability to give birth. In the case of the mother writing this post, choosing home birth was also related to her past birth experience, described as unpleasant and where she was not given a chance to take part in the decision-making process. Home birth means also support for breastfeeding, because the delivery is assisted by midwives who promote it whereas in hospitals is not always provided (Campiotti and Dalle Pezze, 2017).

*Mother Nature*

The idea of Mother Nature plays an important part in the imaginary of natural motherhood. It has been intensively analyzed in Gender studies, especially by ecofeminist research (Roach 2003; Hyrdy 1999; Christ 2003). Nature is often portrayed as a maternal figure. In her study *Mother/Nature: Popular Culture and Environmental Ethics*, Catherine Roach analyzes how societies portray the ambivalence of good and bad nature, sketching the corresponding ambivalence towards motherhood (2003). It has been argued that Mother Nature provides a very powerful metaphor of the gift of life and the interconnections between human beings and environment. “By
considering mother-child dynamics together with relations to nature, ‘Mother Nature’ produces particularly evocative and powerful images of what it means to live in a natural environment” (2003: 9). But the idea that women are biologically designated to have a closer relationship with nature caused to receive ecofeminism a lot of criticism (Thompson 2017). Indeed the belief that the supposed female characteristics of more empathy, tenderness and sensitivity allow women to really connect with the Earth and make them the more suitable to fight for its restoration, is deceptive. It supports the patriarchal dichotomy of female and male traits which have been used to justify gender inequality. In addition, the idea of Mother Nature constantly reminds women about their main duty as caretakers (Vance in Gaard 1993).

In the group, Mother Nature is portrayed as perfect and infallible. Starting a discussion, a mother asked for advice for exercising nipples during pregnancy in order to start breastfeeding off on the right foot. She already had two children but she did not breastfeed them because of disinformation and interference from people. But this time she “wants to do things as mother nature commands”. Doing things as Mother Nature commands means to do things in the right way. The infallibility of Mother Nature lies in its personification as source of life. According to this view, by following Mother Nature it is impossible to be mistaken because mothers always know what is best for their children. This partly explains why the equivalence mother-nature works so well in the public imaginary. In such a context where mothers cannot be wrong, it is very hard to accept calmly the unavoidable mistakes that sometimes can happen. Likewise, the belief entails also a huge responsibility about child well-being exclusively on mothers.

Nevertheless, in the discourse, nature can be good and beautiful as a mother but also harsh and pitiless like a stepmother. In one post a mother shared her sense of guilt for interrupting breastfeeding. She had already written previously in the group asking for advice because she was pregnant with her second child while lactating the first one, and she suffered from breastfeeding pain. With a long post she explained that she could not deal with it, and so after 26 months she stopped breastfeeding her first child. Although the kid seemed serene, she felt that she “fell into the snare that nature made me and which I could not take on”. Here the change in the vision of nature is evident: from the good nature which always knows best to the bad nature which makes tricks in order to test people's will. This bipolar vision of good/cruel nature is similar to the portrait of God in the Catholic religion. It is deeply-rooted in the common imaginary and supported by literature as well. For example, in Giacomo Leopardi, one of the most famous Italian poets of the 19th century and exponent of Romanticism. His work is studied in every secondary school of the country as it is
part of the mandatory program. He described nature as a brutal stepmother, and in one specific tale he portrayed nature as a huge stone bust women, showing her unfairness and indifference in front of human suffering (Trevi 2003). According to the mother of the post, nature tested her will of breastfeeding which she could not engage, this is why she thought she failed. She explained widely that she desired a much longer breastfeeding experience with her first child. Even if the son did not look to suffer from the interruption, her anxiety was due to the suspicion that her own weakness prevented her from following her duty.

*Un-natural technologies*

The so-called “un-natural technologies” (Robinson 2016: 46) are all the devices that interfere with proper and natural breastfeeding. One post explained the difficulties that a mother was facing in breastfeeding her 3 months old baby. She started to use nipple shields, provided at the hospital, which she immediately hated (they detached while breastfeeding, they need to be washed right after their use). Eventually she managed to remove it and “could breastfeed in a natural way”. But later the pain provoked by the baby squashing against the nipples made her regret the decision. An IBLC consultant showed her the correct way to attach the baby but unfortunately the problem was not solved.

According to the vision of the group, all the devices related to lactation are to be avoided as they are considered at worse an obstruction, and at best, useless. It is true that the contemporary maternity market has been characterized by a limitless proliferation of objects and equipment, all of them sold as essentials for proper childcare and a successful motherhood experience. Marketing and commercial landscape did not forget to take into account the role of mothers as consumers: “As child rearing becomes increasingly embedded in the marketplace, being a (good) mother and providing the right kind of equipment for appropriate care, safety, development and enjoyment necessarily relies on some form (and usually a great deal) of buying” (Ponsford 2013: 252). Within this sort of advertisement bombing, it is hard to choose what is worth buying or not and some parents try to resist the consuming push (Miller 1997).

In Italy, the process of equipment sometime is supported by the public health care system as well: for example, as often reported in the group, it has happened that hospitals provided mothers with nipple shields as a tool that would make breastfeeding easier. As confirmed on La Leche Ligue website, “an incorrect use of nipple shields could create difficulties to breastfeeding”. But it is also written that they “should be used only with the help of a lactation consultant”: they are not
forbidden. It means that in some cases, maybe not the majority but still a number, nipple shields can provide a fundamental help for mothers who encounter difficulties nursing their children. This experience is stated also from some mothers of the group. To affirm that their use is always wrong because not natural, as sometime emerges from the group’s discussion, can devalue their experience and not provide a supportive help for those who are facing specific problems.

**Natural end of breastfeeding**

Lots of posts and comments were from mothers who complained about the lack of support from either their partners, friends or family or in some cases from all of them. At first glance, I would say that the different degrees of pressure they experienced from friends and family (and sometimes from doctors and pediatricians as well) to stop breastfeeding before they felt ready was one of the main problems raised. Usually these kind of posts encountered a lot of support from the other members, who in turn shared their personal story and or suggestions on how to deal with ostracism. Moreover, the end of the breastfeeding experience can be hard if women feel that it did not happen at the right time. Cessations which happens earlier than expected bring feelings of guilt and regret. This demonstrates that the all the phases of the lactation period, from the beginning to the end, require emotional support (Dietrich Leurer and Misskey 2015).

However, the natural end of breastfeeding when children are over 2 years is quite a spiny topic even in the group. For example, the picture of a mother nursing her child with the tag line “50 months of us!” generated a polemical discussion among the participants, which ended up with the ban of some users, while others left spontaneously. The controversy was between women who claimed that 50 months was too long time to breastfeed a child and those who admired the dedication of the mother. Some of the comments of the unfavorable were quite hostile, and I found it impressive how many times it was repeated that breastfeeding for 50 months was simply too long. The group encouraged and not ostracized extended breastfeeding, it was quite clear both in the rules and in the contents. There is no age considered proper to end breastfeeding – rather it should be a deliberate choice of the mother. Maybe the bad reactions were related to personal comparisons which brought back sense of guilt. Catherine Robinson wrote about the “experiences of guilt and shame emerging in a general climate of intensive motherhood” (2016: 42). Surely the group emphasized the importance of waiting the natural end of breastfeeding, which means when the child is ready to leave the breast. My impression was that, even if often implicitly, mothers were required to hold on as long as possible for the sake of their child. The word “sacrifice” is not infrequent in the posts. Generally there is a common sense spreading which insinuates that the individual mother is the only one
responsible for the child's welfare (Douglas and Michaels 2004). The collective imaginary requires mothers to forget individual feelings, interests, and desires in order to dedicate themselves totally to childcare, from which they will get all the fulfillment they need. Douglas and Michaels called it the “new momism”, a demanding view of maternity that requests standards hardly achievable by anyone (2004). The myth of the mother who sacrifices herself (Del Negro Visintin and Aiello-Vaisbgerg 2017) appeared regularly in the group, also in the comment to the post, and that might have raised distress among those who did not identify with it.

Breastfeeding in public

A post reported the frustration of a mother about breastfeeding in public: “We are in a society where nurturing your own son in the most ancient and natural way seems almost wrong”. Talking about the ambivalent views of breastfeeding in U.S. Culture, Gaard wrote that it consists in “either glorifying the intimacy and nurturance between a Madonna-like mother and child, or vilifying the infant’s prolonged dependence on the mother’s breast, and fearing the mother’s erotic attachment and engulfment of the child” (2013: 4). This ambivalence can be observed in Italian culture as well.

Particularly, breastfeeding in public spaces clearly splits popular opinion. During 2017, in Italy a case of a woman being expelled from a post office for breastfeeding appeared in the national newspapers. Although the Minister of Health approved the National guidelines on the protection, promotion and support of breastfeeding [Linee di indirizzo nazionali sulla protezione, la promozione ed il sostegno dell'allattamento al seno] where the right of mothers to breastfeeding in public spaces it is explicitly recognized (Ministero della Salute 2007), negative reactions are not uncommon. The fact again opened the debate between supporters and opponents. Among those who position themselves as being against this, their positions vary from the “contrary tout-court”, who see breastfeeding as something unpleasant to see, and thus something that should only happen in private settings, and the softer aversion from the people who can be called the “modest contrary”. The supporters of this argument are often women who think that showing a breast, even if it is for baby feeding, is unsuitable and exhibitionist. They accuse women who lactate of craving people's attention (Grant 2016). Therefore the “modest contrary” kindly invite them to be discreet, covering themselves while breastfeeding in order not to unsettle the morality of anyone. This type of discourse reflects the “strong level of surveillance and judgment towards women’s bodies and behavior” (Foucault in Grant 2016: 59), concealed by a prudish concern about morality.
Results of the on-line ethnography

At first glance, based on the posts, the group appears a tight-knit one. The situation sometimes changes when reading the comments and the related reply more deeply.

On the one hand, the creation of a female-only space (as required by the group rules) might have the effect of empowering them; on the other, the group contributes to shaping “the circle of motherhood as a female-dominated sphere, thus reinforcing male and female inequality” (Chodorow in Drentea and Moren-Cross 2005: 938). According to an investigation of the National Statistics Institute, at the end of 2014 most of the family work in Italy still relied upon women (ISTAT 2016). The gender gap for domestic labor in the country is one of the highest in Europe (Eurostat 2017). In addition, it has already been established that the arrival of the first child challenges the balance in couples. With the transition to parenthood, even couples who are quite equal experience a reactionary transformation of their respective roles, with men responsible for economic sustenance (the breadwinner) and women for family assistance (the caretaker) (Bertolini and Musmeci 2014). The result is that women are still in charge of most of the work of parenting, a situation that is rarely problematized in the group. Despite the possibility of empowerment offered to women by cyberspace, some of the discussions demonstrated that traditional stereotypes of mothering and gender roles were even reinforced (Madge and O’Connor 2006).

In this section, I will explicate the five main themes I uncovered in my online ethnography: 1) breastfeeding, 2) nostalgia for an imagined past, 3) homosexuality, 4) disability, 5) religion.

Breastfeeding

The most prevalent type of post is emotional support, and breastfeeding is definitely the most extensively discussed issue. Very often participants ask advice because of the problems encountered with breastfeeding: pain as the baby latches on, engorged breasts, mastitis, breast infections. Most of the users also share their surprise and their frustration because there is still a widespread notion that since breastfeeding is natural, it should not be so difficult: “Unsaid, but implicit in our culture, it is the myth that breastfeeding is a natural fact, and saying that ‘all women have milk’ and that ‘just follow instinct’ is tantamount to saying that when breastfeeding stops this is because of the woman’s inability or lack of will” (Sagone 2011: 30-31). Some of the comments to posts where mothers shared their difficulties reflect this belief. Nevertheless, normally the majority of the members and the administrators suggested contacting a IBCLC consultants in order to understand what the problem could be.
I have been quite astonished by the different approach regarding breastfeeding that the other members experienced in the public health care system. In my region, in accordance with the National guidelines, the hospitals and the family counseling clinics actively promote exclusive breastfeeding for the first 6 months of the baby’s life and besides they encourage mothers to extend the period of lactation even after the start of the weaning, up to one year or more. During childbirth classes the midwife talked extensively on the importance of breastfeeding, providing a lot of materials. Moreover, in the hospital (which was part of the Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative of UNICEF), I had no other choice than breastfeeding my baby, in a way that I found a bit aggressive. Other members of the group living in different Italian regions instead had diverse experiences and did not get any support from medical staff.

The contrast between what is recognized by scientific research and supported by the National government and what is really carried out by the health care system professionals seems quite dangerous to me. Indeed, mothers in the group often stopped believing their doctors and pediatricians because they were providing outdated information. My impression is that the contradiction contributes to increase skepticism towards everything that is medically related and to reviving the enthusiasm for the “do-it-yourself” and “follow our instinct” modes, where the concept of nature is used as source of legitimization.

**Nostalgia for an imagined past**

The use of the word nature often corresponds with a call to a simpler life, with a sort of nostalgia of the good old times. Although this is not a contemporary phenomenon, recently the nostalgia of the past has conquered the collective imaginary in every field. According to Baumann, the current “retropia” is an utopia of the past which locates an ideal and better society in the history and not in the future (2017). But as Heller reminds us, usually, implied in the return to a romantic past is the restoration of gender roles, destroyed by women's liberations movement: “Women and the poor have lived the real ‘simple life’ for centuries, impoverished by the economic and social institutions of compulsory heterosexuality, motherhood, and alienated labor” (in Gaard 1993: 238). In her romance *A Woman* [Una donna], Sibilla Aleramo, considered the first Italian feminist writer, published in 1906 gives a detailed description of the harsh conditions of the woman and mother roles in a small rural town in Central Italy. Reflecting on her personal story and her mother’s experience, she writes: “But the good mother should not be, as mine, a simple creature meant for sacrifice: she must be a woman, a human being” (Bonfanti Bozzini 2016). Thus, the return to the past should not appear very appealing. Anyway, in some discussions the past is idealized as a
Homosexuality
Generally, in the group there is no awareness about intersectionality between gender and sex: it seemed that cisgendered and heterosexual women were considered the only possible audience. In Italy, same-sex couples unions have been recognized only since 2016. The law aimed at regulating the rights and duties between the parties that make up the union but nothing was settled regarding the possibility of homosexual families to have children (Bellelli 2017). This is a paradoxical situation, considering that a survey made by the Higher Health Institute [Istituto Superiore di Sanità] yet in 2006 revealed that out of about 7,000 homosexuals interviewed, the 18% of gays and the 21% of lesbians over the age of 40 declared to have children and the data are constantly increasing (Baiocco et al. 2013). However, the lack of legal recognition contributes significantly to promote the “cultural invisibility” (Reed 2016: 190) of queer and homosexual families.

Homosexuality was not a widespread theme in the period researched. I have found only one post where a mother mentioned homosexuality, reporting her awkward episode at a pharmacy while looking for a baby bottle. Talking with the chemist (a woman), she explained that she was breastfeeding her children – both male, 6 months and 3 years old, and that she needed the bottle for the younger child during her time at work. According to the specialist, that was extremely damaging for the kids because through the milk, mothers release female hormones, which would lead them to “becoming homosexual”. The reporting mother ended the post incredulous that these words could be pronounced by a specialist (supposed, at this stage).

The tale got 120 comments, divided roughly into two areas: comments in the first one shared the same incredulity, making fun of the chemist; those in the second focused on suggestions on how avoiding the use of a baby bottle. Many members laughed with her for the incident at the pharmacy, as she thought; still, the purchase of the baby bottle was not perceived as a detail of the story but rather gave rise to several concerns. The mother who raised the discussion explained that she was telling the story just to make a bit of fun of the pharmacist. She had already considered the pros and cons of the use of the baby bottle and after hearing a lactation consultant's opinion, she decided for a specific teat which should not interfere so much with breastfeeding. Nevertheless, she continued to receive advice in order to stay away from the baby-bottle.
According to the UNICEF State of the World’s Children report, children with disabilities and their families are often invisible in statistics, in politics and in societies (2013). This tendency is confirmed by the absence of studies and updated data. Children with disabilities are often neglected in statistics both in numerical terms and in terms of achieving their rights. In Italy the lack of quality policies and services tends to relegate children and teenagers with disabilities to the margins of society. Even less attention is given to mothers with disabilities. A recent study conducted by the midwifery student Susanna Usai investigates problems and desires of Italian women and mothers with physical-motor disabilities, encouraging the break of the taboo about the topic on media and newspapers (2017).

Considering the marginalization of people with disabilities, it is not surprising that, also in the Facebook group, disability was disclosed in few posts. In any given post the main discussion was not the disability of mothers, nor of their children. I identified it only in the comments to posts related to other topics. I also used the key words “syndrome” and “disabled”.

In one post, the discussion was inquiring mothers about their experience of verbal abuse during their recovery in the hospital for the delivery. They were encouraged to share their stories and to tell what they would have needed instead. Among the 20 comments, one of the mothers revealed that her son had Down syndrome, and that during their time in the hospital he was not treated as a baby but rather as a clinical case. She wished less pitiful looks and more support to lactate. Her narrative raised reactions (likes, love and sadness) but no reply.

In another one post, a mother shared frustration about the difficult day she was having. In the comments, another mother was sympathetic because of the same problems but in addition she had stress for the physiotherapy of her 45 days old baby, who got a brachial plexus injury (paralyzed arm) during birth. A further mother joined, replying that her baby had Erb Durchenne paralysis (injury to the upper group of the arm's main nerves) with Horner syndrome (interruption of the sympathetic nerve supply). The two agreed immediately to move their conversation into a private setting.

The two posts show how disability is still a difficult topic to face, and that when brought to the attention, such as in the Facebook group, no further discussion is encouraged. Moreover, the stress that the group put about the perfection of the human body largely clashes with disability. Frequently
posts accentuate how well nature provided mothers and children with all the necessary for a healthy life. Our society makes a clear distinction between the able and the not-able body, labeling the first as the norm, and the latter as abnormal and unwanted (Atkins 2008). The approach of natural motherhood supports the belief that the able body is *normal*. In my opinion, the emphasis on physical abilities risks intensifying the exclusion of all those who, in our society, are considered to have (or have to deal with) un-able and ill bodies.

**Religion**

The search for the word “religion” generated more posts related to the topic. The founder and one of the administrators of the group is an Italian Muslim woman living in Germany, thus there is recognition of other religions than the Christian Catholic (which constituted 71.1% of the Italian population in 2016). The first discussion, coming from an apparent simple question about breastfeeding or not during bath time, degenerated into a racist offense to the administrator. 183 comments followed the post. One of the members, who was having quite an argument with the administrator, left the group and wrote her a private message. The administrator then shared the content with the other members: badly scolded, she was invited to “return to her country”, that her religion did not allow confrontation but in Italy the situation was different. The escaped mother also took care to add that she was not racist. Her insults mirrored the escalation of a wider racist discourse often used by populist politicians, in Italy as well as in many European countries.

A hint to religion appeared in other two comments of posts where it was not the main content discussion. In the first one, a mother posted data on the benefits of breastfeeding and added as a last comment that lactation was recommended by her religion and that Western people made her feel like an alien. In the second, a mother complained about the usually restricted rooms dedicated to breastfeeding in public spaces (at the hospital in the example). The information sign read “mother who breastfeed are welcome!” but she perceived it as awkward as she felt welcome everywhere while breastfeeding her daughter. Among the 138 comments, one member raised the issue of mothers who cannot undress publicly for religious reasons.

Another post consisted of an image with the tag line “Nursing Madonna”, a Catholic iconography in a chapel in northern Italy, showing Virgin Mary breastfeeding Jesus. Among the comments, one mother reported to have visited a similar place in the Holy Land: she stated that people in the Holy Land were “*behind compared to us*” (I interpreted it as being less developed, compared to Western countries) but mothers there wanted to nurse their children naturally, at least.
The discourse in the Facebook group was quite open regarding the topic of religion, probably due to the presence of a Muslim administrator. The posts showed that, apart from few racist posts immediately reported, the group tried to have a constructive approach towards different cultures but that happened as long as they were in harmony with the promotion of breastfeeding. The discussions never went outside of the lactation topic. Moreover, the last post about the Holy Land made it clear how a sneaking ethnocentrism was definitely present and rather accepted in the group. No one raised any objection to the accondiscent affirmation that made explicit a supposed inferiority of people in the Holy Land.

**DISCUSSION**

I am aware that my study focused on a small sample. First of all, I chose only one Facebook group; then I limited my research to only few key words and to a very narrow period. The results of this specific pattern cannot be extended to a broader context and surely cannot allow any generalization about the studied group; however, I would say that interesting sparks about contemporary maternity in Italy have emerged. The discourse analysis and online ethnography have emphasized the experiences, the worries and the fears of mothers participating to the Facebook group.

First, I could confirm that the initial impression about the call of nature was right: nowadays, nature has regained a new appeal for Italian mothers. For the supporter of natural motherhood, rediscovering the ancient ways of birth and childcare means rejecting the modern model where everything is in the hands of a medicalized system, without any possibility for women to be heard. In the last decades, the modern medical system in Italy has systematically disempowered women in relation to their own bodies. Thus the strong inflection on the confidence of the body and the claim of bringing back the knowledge into a female sphere give the impression that the natural mother is a concept that promotes gender equality and reevaluates women’s role. But together with this empowerment, the idea of the natural mother also embraces and incorporates a reactionary and conservative rhetoric where the only place for a mother is to be next to her children. The current discourse provides a fascinating and idealized vision of motherhood that “[…] on the surface exalts women but, in reality, is deeply attached to cultural organization modes and politics that we can call androcentric.” (Del Negro Visintin and Aiello-Vaisbgerg 2017: 113). The statement of natural motherhood as a model that claims a stronger role for women is yet incomplete. The natural mother approach still legitimizes an unequal division of tasks between partners and it fails to recognize the person beyond the mother, a human being with individual aspirations and desires as well.

Second, I noticed that the concept of nature is used to create a model of good motherhood which
very likely corresponds, or at least starts, with breastfeeding. When I was trying to unravel the huge amount of information that was shared in the Facebook group, I was immediately struck by the prominence of posts related to breastfeeding. Of course, given that promotion of breastfeeding was one of the goals of the group, I should not have been surprised. But breastfeeding has been a very challenging experience and a difficult topic for me, so I could not avoid noticing how many other women shared their stories, troubles, and questions. Conducting a research through the posts by the key words “nature” and “natural” showed me how in the group these concepts often overlap with breastfeeding. As Robinson writes: “Breastfeeding emerges as vital symbolic corporeal capital and absolutely vital to the production of a personal maternal identity understood as successful” (2016: 43).

Breastfeeding also performs an important role as a break with the past. In a comparative study between France and UK childcare styles, Charlotte Faircloth states that:

Today, in Britain and France, childcare can be roughly divided into styles that are structured, and those that are more liberal. The former is characterized by practices such as scheduled feeds, formula feeding, and separate sleeping. Liberal models, by contrast, take a less regimented approach in favor of more relaxed styles of care, often characterized by practices such as long-term, on-cue breastfeeding, a family bed and ‘positive’ discipline (2017: 21).

In the Italian context I would say that this contrast is between the current generation of mothers and the previous one. Therefore Italian mothers nowadays often cannot get the support they need from their mothers or mothers-in-law (a situation often lamented in the group by the members). Although breastfeeding has been highly reevaluated by scientific research and the Italian Ministry of Health included its promotion as a national strategy, the health care system, hospitals, pediatricians and doctors are conforming at different speeds in the whole country. This means that often mothers who choose exclusive and extended breastfeeding do not encounter any help from medical staff as well. They feel like they are alone against the whole society and the Facebook group allows them to get in touch with a rising number of mothers who share their same philosophy. According to Hall, the process of identification can work mainly because built in contrast with the Other: “identities are constructed through, not outside, difference” (1996: 4). The impression was that the constant conflict with a society that does not seem to take their needs in account pushed some participants into more radical positions and closed their possibility of confrontation with other experiences.

Within this context, supporters of breastfeeding reply to skepticism with great emphasis on the nature of women and her biological destiny. I felt that somehow the enthusiasm for a natural view
of maternity led to the thought that, for a woman, motherhood is not a choice but a destiny. In Italy this vision has been strongly supported by the Catholic Church, which still sees motherhood as a vocation (Bertolini et al. 2014). Old rhetoric of women’s roles, with mothers naturally consecrated exclusively to their child’s well-being (Rich 1986) reappears in the current discourse. Therefore breastfeeding risks to be seen not as the best choice for nurturing a baby but as the only possible one in order to be a good mother.

The renewed call to the power of women’s biological differences raises concerns among many feminists. Breastfeeding is a unique bond between mother and baby that has often been used as reason to force the duty of childcare, especially during the first years, exclusively on women. Consequently, breastfeeding can be seen as overlapping with traditional gender roles and gender inequality (Hall Smith 2013). But accepting this version of the story means embracing the sexism behind it. Childcare (as any other care) is devalued in our society because for long time it has been associated with women. In fact, I think it is pointless to blame women’s biological ability to lactate and the needs of breastfeeding mothers as responsible for the conditions of gender inequalities in Italian society, that are socially constructed. “Negating the lactating body does not eliminate gender inequality for most women. Instead, women whose bodily needs are not met must either seek special treatment or forgo opportunities to which they might otherwise have access or be entitled. As such, negating the body serves to exaggerate gender differences, [and] redistribute gender inequities...” (2013: 378). Women who want to breastfeed their children have to be free to choose it, without fearing the reclusion that society try to depict as a natural occurrence.

The change in the perspective on motherhood requires taking all the variety of experiences into account. As Fiona Robinson has argued, no “feminist political transformation” can be achieved by simply rejecting maternal thinking and labeling the role of mothers as reactionary (2013). The idea that fighting gender inequalities means undermining life on earth and that feminism is against children and families has been extensively exploited by patriarchal society. The current vision tries to depict motherhood and gender equality as incompatible, fomenting the idea that women, in order to be mothers, have to choose either one position or the other.

Third, the discourse of the natural mother is addressed almost exclusively towards those who the conservatives like to believe as the angels of the hearth of the traditional family: heterosexual and cisgendered women. All the categories that differ from what is considered normality – homosexual, transgendered, queer – seem to have no space in a vision of maternity that claims to be the natural
one. Even if it is not explicit, in the background the concept sustains a reactionary rhetoric where heterosexuality is the rule and everything else is an exception. The danger is that the natural mother can be used as an umbrella term where homophobic and sexist discourse can be legitimized in the name of a socially constructed idea of nature. Moreover, little space has been given to marks of difference such as religion, ethnicity and disability, highlighting the invisibility that our society tries to provide for them.

CONCLUSIONS

According to the number of members enrolled and the level of activity of the analyzed Facebook group, the approach of natural motherhood nowadays is popular among Italian mothers. So far, the discourse is not addressed to homosexual, transgendered and queer people. That is why talking about natural mothers today means mainly talking about cisgendered and heterosexual women. Natural mothers claim a stronger and more involving role for women, who rediscovered the ability of their bodies to give birth and to lactate. After years of formula milk, proclamations of experts about rules for setting up independence in babies of a few months and the proliferation of devices for childcare sold as necessary, natural mothers try to distance themselves from the very consuming and detached model toward a more plain and relaxed one. In this context, the idea of nature is used to build a socially constructed idea of what means to be a mother according to nature. Unfortunately the call of nature also brought back less romantic aspects, such as the expectation that the whole childcare relies only on mothers because they are naturally made for it.

Today, the transition to become a mother, in Italy, is still distinguished by a conservative and reactionary reaction of society. This affirmation does not imply that in other stages of their lives women experience a complete equality, nor that mothers face backlashes and women without children do not. But there is still a widespread belief that on becoming a mother, their center of interests, aspirations and desires will exclusively be for, and about, their child. The frustration that can arise from such an impossible and unreasonable goal increases a constant sense of guilt. Moreover there is the feeling of incompetence. As all the new and first experiences, also with maternity it is easy to make mistakes while learning: but if one is surrounded by the simplistic idea that everything should be easy and spontaneous because having children is natural, it is really hard not to get discouraged.

The study could be expanded in order to move forward the gender binary that characterizes natural maternity, at least externally. A productive critique could be provided by the “queering of
motherhood”, a strand of both inside and outside feminist studies which destabilizes conventional correlations between biological sex and gender identity (Shildrick in Thompson et al. 2011). The heteronormativity that yet surrounds parenthood needs to be challenged in a discourse that aims to include the variety of different experiences. A perspective that aims to see mothering “as an act of culture rather than nature” could help us to escape the essentialism and biological determinism that still today distinguishes the discourse (Halberstam in Park 2013: 20).

The concept of the natural mother is yet problematic because it has not overtaken the essentialism behind the word nature. There is still a lot of work to do in order to consider the natural motherhood approach really empowering for mothers. Nevertheless, the needs of women that have embraced nature as significant for their maternity experience have to be taken into account. For example in terms of support for extended breastfeeding or breastfeeding in public spaces. Neglecting them brings the risk of exclusion, and no confrontation can be made if people close tightly inside their position. The patriarchal idea that becoming a mother means to be (almost) the only one in charge of baby care and that a good mother is dedicated exclusively to children has to be dismantled.
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