La Leche League International: Class, Guilt, and Modern Motherhood

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La Leche League International (LLLI) is probably the best-known and most influential organization advocating that women breastfeed their infants and/or small children. LLLI is at the forefront of efforts to promote the societal value of motherhood, and their strongly child-centered ideology implicitly and explicitly encourages self-sacrifice on the part of mothers. Stay-at-home motherhood is not presented as one good choice among many; rather, it is presented as the morally superior choice. The underlying assumptions of LLLI's vision of motherhood are biased in favor of the affluent, however, since only women of means can choose not to return to work after the birth of a child. For many mothers, work is an economic necessity, not a luxury. By analyzing their website as a persuasive artifact, we can learn how LLLI uses it as a tool with which to influence and change women's (and the larger society's) thinking and behavior with regard to breastfeeding. This paper concludes that LLLI's mission can be seen in the larger context of the ongoing debate on women's proper role in society, as well as the heightened expectations of motherhood. Parents (and women in particular) are expected to be more hands-on than in previous generations, and there is a feeling that the stakes are high. There is great pressure, especially among the affluent, to raise perfect children who participate in meaningful activities, score well on tests, and have bright futures. Yet the nine-to-five workplace model is still premised on a male worker with no family or household responsibilities. This is a major disconnect and therefore a dilemma facing women today.

This paper examines portions of the website of La Leche League International (LLLI), probably the best-known and most influential organization advocating that women breastfeed their infants and/or small children. The group's website provides a great deal of information about their mission and philosophy, as well as numerous articles and frequently asked questions (FAQs) advocating breastfeeding and refuting possible arguments against the practice. The LLLI website is intended to be a resource for mothers seeking information, advice, and encouragement about breastfeeding, but it can also be analyzed as a persuasive artifact. LLLI uses their website as a tool with which to influence and change women's (and the larger society's) thinking and behavior with regard to breastfeeding.

It is useful to think about LLLI in the context of the development of American feminism over time. Metaphorically understood as a series of waves, the first wave of feminism is generally associated with the 19th century and early 20th century and the fight for women's suffrage and other legal rights; women like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott were pioneers in fighting women's unequal status under the law (Kerber, 2002, p. 91). The first part of the 20th century also saw women such as birth control activist Margaret Sanger, who believed that women could never achieve full self-determination until they were in control of their fertility and childbearing.

Second-wave feminism is generally associated with the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s. *The Feminine Mystique*, published by Betty Friedan in 1963, was a highly influential book that discussed women's frustration with the limitations of their assigned domestic role in American society (Myerowitz, 1993, p. 1455). Friedan is often credited with paving the way for the second wave of feminism and making possible the work of prominent women's rights activists such as Gloria Steinem. Second-wave feminism was later criticized for lacking diversity, since it largely reflected the concerns of white middle-class women. So-called third-wave feminism emerged after women who had come of age in the 1980s and 1990s sought to "refigure and enhance" the women's liberation movement (Mann & Huffman, 2005, p. 57).

Today, more than thirty years after the modern feminist revolution paved the way for American women's full participation in the workplace and in society, there appears to be a push-back against the idea that women can "have it all," i.e. that they can have fulfilling careers and be good mothers simultaneously. Since the Reagan era, a pro-family values discourse has gained strength, and today many women are pulled in different directions as they contemplate their varied roles in life and the choices before them. As Medved and Kirby put it, "Many women construct their identities in the midst of contradictory and competing societal expectations about career success and motherhood" (Medved & Kirby, 2005, p. 436). Barnes & Noble's shelves are literally lined with books telling of stressed-out modern-day women who struggle to balance work and family, or women who have focused on their careers so long that they have missed their opportunity to have children. *The New York Times* even "declared an 'opt-out revolution' in which professional women are leaving the workforce to stay at home with their children" (Foster, 2005, p. 77).

"Opt-out" is the key word here because for many women there is no choice but to work and raise a family at the same time. Economic necessity forces many (and perhaps the majority) of mothers to juggle their dual roles without societal support – no paid maternity leave, no government-sponsored daycare, etc. A single mother cannot opt out. A married woman making minimum wage cannot opt out. Clearly, opting out is the purview of women with husbands who can support the family. Indeed, even "choosing" to work is a middle-class luxury, which assumes a salary high enough to afford a nanny or to pay for daycare. Consequently, this modern debate is clearly class-based.

The dilemma, then, is the one facing privileged women. Because of their education, social status, and financial advantages, middle-class women have real choices about how to structure their lives, and they can indulge in meaningful contemplation of those choices. Once a choice is made, many women feel the need to justify their decision, both to themselves and to others. Faced with media voices who "eulogize traditional family arrangements and blame mothers who work in paid labor" (Medved & Kirby, 2005, p. 440), working mothers often respond by saying that their income is helping their family live a more comfortable life, or that they are acting as role models to their daughters. Some measure of defensiveness in the face of the new traditionalism is perhaps inevitable.

Conversely, stay-at-home middle-class mothers feel compelled to address the question of why they are "wasting" their educations by staying home with the kids, or must answer the condescending "So what do you do all day?" The reality is that American society exalts the idea of motherhood, but does not really support the day-to-day work of mothers. This societal lack of respect is not lost on full-time mothers, and it can create tension between women who have made different life choices. *Harper's Magazine* reported that "73% of full-time mothers thought employed mothers looked down on them"; ironically, at the same time, 66% of employed

mothers felt the stay-at-home mothers looked down on them as well (Foster, 2005, p. 77). Some full-time mothers have responded to real and perceived slights by identifying themselves as the CEO of their household, thereby transferring their former professional identity to their new role in the domestic sphere (Medved & Kirby, 2005, p. 441). Some women have reacted to society's devaluation of motherhood by embracing and taking great pride in the role of mother. Phrases like "I am my kids' mom" or "I'm doing the most important job in the world" serve as the rallying cry for the new "hypernatalism" (Borisoff, 2005, p. 8).

LLLI is at the forefront of efforts to promote the societal value of motherhood, a seemingly feminist objective. Their stated mission is to encourage women to breastfeed their babies and children, and the group has certainly helped many thousands of women master the sometimes-difficult practice of breastfeeding. In fact, "it was the denigration of women's bodies which led to the widespread belief that a scientifically formulated artificial product was better for babies than breast milk" (Blum, 1993, p. 299). By valuing what women have to offer their children naturally, LLLI takes an empowering stance. However, an examination of their website shows that the group goes beyond the simple promotion of breastfeeding, instead revealing an ideology of motherhood that heavily favors middle-class, stay-at-home mothers.

The central paradox is that the organization's philosophy of maternalism is both feminist and anti-feminist at the same time. "Exalting women's capacity to mother has contradictory implications to end women's subordination, as some use a woman-centered perspective to empower women while others use biological essentialism to constrain women's opportunities" (Bobel, 2001, p. 134). On the one hand, LLLI celebrates females' control of their bodies through natural childbirth and breastfeeding. On the other hand, the question remains, "Are women repossessing their bodies only to give them over to their children through on-demand nursing as long as the child wants" (Bobel, 2001, pp. 135-136)? Does a woman fully own her body if it belongs to her child? Is she essentially a walking meal?

Methods of Analysis

There are a number of ways in which we can analyze persuasive documents such as the LLLI website, and using a multi-pronged approach often leads to a more comprehensive understanding of the artifact. Writing in the fourth century, Aristotle provided us with the concepts of *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos* in order to describe the three methods of verbal persuasion (Aristotle, 2007/350, chap. 2, ¶2). *Ethos* is similar to our concept of credibility, *logos* is an appeal to logic or facts, and *pathos* is an appeal to emotion. Kenneth Burke, writing in the 20th century about persuasion, added the idea of identification (both conscious and unconscious) to our understanding of how humans communicate and persuade. He also contributed the notion that context is an important element of persuasion (Foss, Foss & Trapp, 1985).

Analyzing the LLLI Website

LLLI was founded in 1956 in response to a "dearth of breast-feeding information and support available to mothers" (Bobel, 2001, p. 130). Its mission is "to help mothers worldwide to breastfeed through mother-to-mother support, encouragement, information, and education, and to promote a better understanding of breastfeeding as an important element in the healthy development of the baby and mother" (La Leche League International, 2006). LLLI's mission is

supported, at least in part, by the American Academy of Pediatrics, which in 1997 advised that babies be breastfed for at least one year (Koerber, 2006, p. 88). LLLI clearly feels strongly about its mission, as evidenced by their website's unequivocal language arguing in favor of breastfeeding. It is not presented as one good choice among many, but rather as the only good choice. What is strongly implied is that other choices (for example, bottle feeding or using a combination of breastfeeding and bottle feeding) are not only inferior, but potentially harmful and morally deficient.

In stating its purpose, LLLI asserts that "breastfeeding, with its many important physical and psychological advantages, is best for baby and mother and is the ideal way to initiate good parent-child relationships" (LLLI, 2006). The group believes that breast milk is far superior to formula as a food for infants, and presents breastfeeding as a natural and necessary way for mothers to bond with their babies. Indeed, LLLI advocates continuing breastfeeding until the child wants to stop, even if this does not happen for several years. The group's ideology favoring natural methods also includes the idea that women should take an active role in childbirth, preferably without pain medication. LLLI "articulates a naturalistic, essentialist view of mothering and breast-feeding that celebrates the moral superiority and natural reproductive capacities of women" (Nadesan & Sotirin, 1998, p. 221). While the group does not specifically recommend that women stop working after becoming mothers (in fact, they offer advice on their site about how to continue breastfeeding while working full-time), their baby-centered focus and glowing testimonials from happy, breastfeeding mothers strongly imply that stay-at-home motherhood is best for all involved. LLLI's basic philosophy states that "mother and baby need to be together early and often to establish a satisfying relationship" (LLLI, 2006). In other words, they are promoting a specific model of motherhood; anything else is inferior and imperfect.

If we analyze the website's persuasive language in Aristotelian terms, we can clearly see clear appeals to *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos* (Aristotle, 2007/350, chap. 2, ¶2). One way in which the site establishes its credibility as an advocate of breastfeeding is by listing its International Health Advisory Council, made up of medical doctors from around the world. These professionals "meet the highest academic and experiential standards of their respective credentialing bodies and are recognized a[s] authorities in, and outside, their professional communities" (LLLI, 2006). To have a panel of medical experts associated with LLLI legitimizes the organization and lends credibility to the argument they are making, which rests on the reputation of scientists. In terms of *logos*, or appeal to logic, the website details the many benefits of nursing, including increased antibodies for the baby, decreased risk of breast and ovarian cancers for the mother, and fewer sick days for the employer of a breastfeeding woman (LLLI, 2006).

LLLI's main appeal, however, seems to be to *pathos*, or emotion, and this is the message that is most likely to be internalized by new mothers. The website's language has numerous references to how happy and healthy breastfed babies are, and how noble and satisfied their mothers are. The site pays tribute to motherhood, sacrifice, and the strong bond between mothers and children. We might say that this appeals to our human instinct to protect the weakest among us. It also appeals strongly to new mothers who want to do the best for their children and who want to do a good job in their new role.

However, LLLI's rhetoric also appeals to fear. For example, the website states that "a study in the Philippines showed that, 'Deaths from respiratory infections and diarrhea were eight to ten times higher in babies who were artificially fed than in those who were even partially breastfed for six months'" (LLLI, 2006). Logically, it does not necessarily follow that babies in the developed world die at a similar rate to babies in a developing country like the Philippines, but

no matter; the fear factor is there. What this discourse shows is "a failure to appropriately contextualize risk and benefit" of infant feeding alternatives (Knaak, 2006, p. 413). The scientific evidence certainly seems to point to the fact that breastfed babies do better by some measures, for example, that they tend to get sick less frequently. But how much better off are breastfed babies on a relative basis? Enough to make a noticeable difference five or even 20 years down the road? A scientific study of 5,000 children conducted by the University of Edinburgh concluded that the notion that breastfed babies are smarter is a myth; the mothers of breastfed infants do tend to be more intelligent and highly educated, but the baby's higher IQ is therefore a mostly inherited trait (Laurance, 2006). The LLLI website does not provide an appropriate context to weigh competing claims.

In addition, there is a strong undercurrent of guilt running through LLLI's website, perceived mainly in what is left unsaid. For example, the website's tag line is "happy mothers, breastfed babies." Is the reader to assume that bottle-fed babies and their mothers are less happy, or unhappy? If, as LLLI's basic philosophy states, "mothering through breastfeeding is the most natural and effective way of understanding and satisfying the needs of the baby," can we conclude that bottle-fed babies are not having their needs adequately met? An article on the site makes the argument that, since doctors already make women feel guilty about smoking during pregnancy, why not make them feel guilty about bottle-feeding if it is not best for the baby (Slaw, 1999, ¶2). To compare exposing a fetus to known carcinogens with giving a baby formula is highly questionable. The website's FAQ section is interesting in that it refutes every possible objection to or doubt about breastfeeding. From physical discomfort to inconvenience to societal disapproval, the site enthusiastically provides counter-arguments to all of those mothers who may be wavering in their commitment. The message is that there is nothing that a little humor and perseverance cannot overcome. If an enthymeme allows us to fill in the blanks, then the reader of the LLLI website may reasonably infer that a woman who chooses not to breastfeed is selfish, uncaring, or willfully ignorant.

Returning to Burke's methods of analysis (Foss, Foss & Trapp, 1985), the LLLI website seeks to be a place where breastfeeding women can identify with a larger community of like-minded individuals. New mothers often report feeling "overwhelmed and unprepared for the fatigue and exhaustion that breastfeeding, and especially breastfeeding with difficulties, can add to in the postpartum period (Wall, 2001, p. 597). Given the social isolation of new mothers, and in particular those who are breastfeeding on demand, this feeling of community and connectedness is surely appealing. In addition to the vast amount of information and advice on the website, the organization also runs support meetings across the United States and in many foreign countries. Their aim (and the image they try to project) is that they are a worldwide community of women supporting women in a noble endeavor. LLLI Leaders are women with experience nursing their own children who mentor and advise other women who are just starting to breastfeed. Promoting a personal choice that you have made can be a means of justifying or reinforcing the correctness of that choice.

Burke also teaches us that context is an important element of persuasion (Foss, Foss & Trapp, 1985). LLLI operates largely in the context of wealthy, industrialized countries (such as the United States, Canada, Japan, and Western Europe) and the ongoing debate over the proper role of women in society. As Bobel (2001) observes, "the membership of LLLI appears to be almost exclusively white, middle-class, and married" (p. 146). It should be noted that this observation was made in the context of the United States, and that LLLI also operates in poor countries such as Bolivia and India, though it is beyond the scope of this paper to determine the

demographics of LLLI's international membership (LLLI, 2007). Are LLLI's members in developing countries drawn primarily from the middle and upper classes?

In many ways, breastfeeding and the discussion surrounding it favor the educated and well-to-do. Mothers who do not have to work and who have supportive partners clearly have an advantage in implementing their choice to breastfeed. Breast pumps that allow for milk expression at work are expensive, and, moreover, comparatively few working women have private offices in which to discreetly pump. Highly educated women are more likely to familiarize themselves with the medical literature detailing the health benefits of breastfeeding and are more likely to stand up for themselves if a doctor or other health professional discourages their plan to breastfeed. Not surprisingly, "the mothers least likely to breastfeed are those with insufficient resources in terms of time, energy, material and social support" (Knaak, 2006, p. 412). Of course, LLLI could make the argument that they are leveling the playing field by making their information available to the general public by way of the internet, and this is a valid point. However, there is a real possibility that LLLI's US membership is not more diverse because "League practice assumes an intact, stable family, preferably supported by a breadwinning father" (Bobel, 2001, p. 146). While LLLI does reach out to underserved communities to a certain extent, they do not seem to be the organization's core constituency.

LLLI's sole mission is to promote breastfeeding. As such, the organization does not advocate for more family-friendly work policies, subsidized daycare, or extended parental leaves, all of which would be conducive to greater rates of breastfeeding. The group clearly states on their website that "The League's purpose is distinct. This singleness of purpose does not prevent interaction with other organizations with compatible purposes, but La Leche League will carefully guard against allying itself with another cause, however worthwhile that cause may be" (LLLI, 2006). By keeping their focus narrow and not working to change the context in which American women must make the decision to breastfeed or not, LLLI appears to be favoring the privileged few who can choose to stay at home with their children.

LLLI's mass media campaign over the past 50 years seems to have had a significant effect. According to the website's history page, breastfeeding rates were around 20% in 1956, the same year in which the organization was founded. By 1995, the rate was closer to 60% (LLLI, 2003). How much of this increase was due to the group's campaign of persuasion? It would be difficult to quantify. Better understanding of the medical benefits of breastfeeding has certainly played a role, but LLLI has done a great deal to make nursing more socially acceptable and to decrease the sense of isolation that nursing mothers may have felt in the past. Ironically, though, some degree of isolation seems inevitable among nursing mothers who follow LLLI's advice to nurse on-demand as long as the child desires. This is not the norm in society, and indeed, many LLLI mothers refer to themselves as rebellious or revolutionary (Bobel, 2001, p. 137). One suspects that these mothers would find great solace in attending LLLI meetings and meeting other like-minded mothers living through similar circumstances. In this sense, LLLI seems to be creating a self-perpetuating feedback loop.

Visual Elements of LLLI's Website

While LLLI's website is primarily text-based, it also has some visual elements that are worth noting. The logo for LLLI, located in the top left hand corner of the home page, is an oval showing a stylized mother and breastfeeding infant. It is a very tender image, which calls to mind the many images in art of the Madonna and child. Notably, the mother and child image is very

united, giving the impression of one cohesive unit, an idea which fits in with LLLI's philosophy of the extraordinary bond between mother and child and the mother's obligation to be with her child as much as possible.

The predominant color of LLLI's homepage is a soothing blue color, which has traditionally been associated with the Virgin Mary. Across the top of the website's home page is a series of photographs of happy, smiling babies. These images are clearly an appeal to the viewer's *pathos*. More significantly, however, these images and the others like it across the site are predominantly of Caucasian babies. Is this an oversight, or does it reflect LLLI's membership? Again, we are reminded that breastfeeding is often an option most suited to affluent women, who in American society are most likely to be white. It is difficult to speculate as to the reason for these images. Perhaps the creators of the website posted images that reminded them most of themselves and their experiences. Perhaps they were trying to appeal to upwardly mobile women. As Burke said, identification can be both conscious and unconscious (Foss, Foss & Trapp, 1985, pp. 158-159).

Issues of Identity

LLLI's website and larger mission shine a spotlight on questions of identity facing many American women today, particularly given the new child-centered focus of recent social discourse. Are we primarily defined by our ability to reproduce? Are we mothers or women first? Can we find satisfaction and meaning in both the public and private spheres? In 2007, why is the nine-to-five workplace model still premised on a male worker with no family or household responsibilities?

As Linda Blum puts it, "although breastfeeding at its best can be pleasurable, it is also an autonomy-compromising experience" (Blum, 1993, p. 300). Breastfeeding as promoted by LLLI can also be seen as "subtly restricting women's endeavors outside of motherhood" (Bobel, 2001, p. 138). LLLI acknowledges this reality, but consistently argues that any sacrifice is well worth it, that one's child is well worth it. The FAQ section of the website repeatedly encourages nursing mothers to persevere despite pain, infection, sleep deprivation, or other serious difficulties. In analyzing LLLI's website, one perceives "the invisibility of the mother as a subject with legitimate needs and wants" (Wall, 2001, p. 604). This is the unabashed promotion of self-sacrifice as a womanly virtue, and it is a disconcerting step backward in time.

Pressure and Expectations

We can logically place LLLI's persuasive campaign into the larger context of society's increasingly heightened expectations of parenting. Parents are expected to be more hands-on than in previous generations, and there is the feeling that the stakes are high. Women in particular are clearly feeling the pressure. Borisoff (2005) reports on several books examining the middle-class woman's plight, also known as "this choking cocktail of guilt and anxiety and resentment and regret" (Borisoff, p. 260). Those mothers who choose to work find themselves in demanding jobs without the benefit of societal support to help them balance work and family. At the same time, groups like LLLI have "raised the bar for effective parenting" (Borisoff, 2005, p. 261). The pressure starts before the baby is even born. The best-selling *What to Expect When You're Expecting* prescribes a rigid diet that "essentially defines the pregnant woman as a vehicle for the care of the fetus so that even small transgressions (e.g., dessert made with refined sugar)

cast women into the roles of 'bad mothers'" (Dobris & White-Mills, 2006, p. 33). There is great pressure, particularly among the affluent, to raise perfect children who participate in meaningful activities, score well on tests, and have bright futures. Children are inevitably perceived to be a reflection on their mothers (though, oddly, not their fathers). Implicit in many books is the message that women shoulder the responsibility for childcare as well as the blame for not 'performing' this role adequately. Two themes emerge in these works: high-powered careers are toxic to getting married and starting a family; and the work world is toxic to good mothering (Borisoff, 2005, p. 3).

Also implicit is the assumption that underlies much of LLLI's philosophy – that "mothers, and only mothers, are best suited to child care" (Borisoff, 2005, p. 6). This has the effect of placing the entire burden of childcare on the shoulders of one parent, namely, the mother.

The media also play a role. Magazines and entertainment news shows glamorize and idealize motherhood with endless coverage of pregnant celebrities and movie-star moms. "The celebrity mom image poses a paradox for women, as having it all is still an ideal to achieve while realistically most people know these celebrities have lots of help [personal trainers, nannies, etc.] to achieve it all" (Tropp, 2006, p. 862-863). The media report both on the growing problem of infertility, as well as 60-year olds having babies through the wonders of technology. The message is that women should be careful and not wait too long before having kids, but that advanced technology is available should they have trouble conceiving. Women today are bombarded with images and mixed messages and must process all of them as best they can.

Conclusion

What is certain is that we can learn a great deal about LLLI's strategies and techniques from the group's website. Appealing largely to emotion, but also to legitimate scientific evidence, they attempt to persuade women that breastfeeding is natural, desirable, beneficial, and morally superior. The statistics appear to show us that this persuasive message has met with considerable success. However, there is evidence that LLLI's philosophy and approach to mothering have a strong bias toward privileged women whose financial resources allow them choices in how to structure their lives.

LLLI's website can be seen as part of the larger debate happening about women's roles in society and the ongoing quest to "have it all." It is important to note that this debate is being carried on principally among the affluent and that the voices of the working class are largely silenced. LLLI's strongly child-centered ideology belongs to a new traditionalism which has steadily gained influence in the US, and which has been enabled by the fact that parents are very much left to their own devices in this society. Juggling work and motherhood is difficult, and some women, having left the public sphere, have chosen to reinvent their identities in the private sphere along the lines that LLLI advocates.

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Appendix A

The source material for this paper on persuasion was the website of La Leche League International (LLLI). The website is located at www.lalecheleague.org. Specifically, I analyzed portions of the "About" and "Resources" sections of the website in order to gain a sense of the organization's philosophy and persuasive approach. In doing so, I hoped to better understand how LLLI attempts to persuade women of the importance of breastfeeding their children. The "About" section of the website gave information about the history and *raison d'etre* of LLLI, whereas the "Resources" section included multiple articles addressing all aspects of breastfeeding, as well as a list of frequently asked questions

The visual elements of persuasion in the website include multiple pictures of happy, smiling babies and mothers, as well as LLLI's logo, shown below:

Appendix B

La Leche League Philosophy

The basic philosophy of La Leche League is summarized in the following statements:

- Mothering through breastfeeding is the most natural and effective way of understanding and satisfying the needs of the baby.
- Mother and baby need to be together early and often to establish a satisfying relationship and an adequate milk supply.
- In the early years the baby has an intense need to be with his mother, which is as basic as his need for food.
- Breast milk is the superior infant food.
- For the healthy, full-term baby, breast milk is the only food necessary until the baby shows signs of needing solids, about the middle of the first year after birth.
- Ideally the breastfeeding relationship will continue until the baby outgrows the need.
- Alert and active participation by the mother in childbirth is a help in getting breastfeeding off to a good start.
- Breastfeeding is enhanced and the nursing couple sustained by the loving support, help, and companionship of the baby's father. A father's unique relationship with his baby is an important element in the child's development from early infancy.
- Good nutrition means eating a well-balanced and varied diet of foods in as close to their natural state as possible.
- From infancy on, children need loving guidance, which reflects acceptance of their capabilities and sensitivity to their feelings.

(Source: LLLI publication No. 300-17, "La Leche League Purpose and Philosophy.")