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Women's perceptions, knowledge and breastfeeding decision-making

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Acknowledgements

When I started my PhD project, the timing did not seem very sensible. I was lecturing at the Hanze University of Applied Sciences in the Dutch city of Groningen, and my husband was then in the process of resigning from his position at a large health care organisation in order to start his own practice. We had a lively, growing family with four children between the ages of 7 and 19, one of whom is a top-level athlete. Still, this is the way things went. Fortunately we don't know in advance exactly how things will go, or we would never start anything.

This thesis is the result of my research project. But at the same time, it is also the result of a journey through many people's lives.

It all began when I was expecting my first baby. I intended to start breastfeeding, because I felt this was the obvious and most natural choice. When my daughter Sanna was born, while my feelings about this were indeed very natural, I had no idea what I was supposed to do, and my mother wasn't there to support me. Many things had to be arranged, and I had a lot on my mind. Fortunately, Sanna was healthy and she knew exactly what to do.

Nine years earlier I had done my first anthropological fieldwork in a West African village, and I kept thinking about the women I met there. What about these women? It had seemed as if they all knew what to do. Was this because they had no choice, and was breastfeeding a matter of survival? But why was I struggling now? For me it was not about survival – I had access to good health care, and also formula if necessary, which could be used in hygienic conditions. Or was this the price I had to pay for being a well-educated woman in a 'developed' society: I was in charge of my own life (at least to a certain extent), and could rely on my own intuition as long as it served the purpose, and at the same time I had access to high-quality health care and medical science.

And, what about my sister Sybrit? She always managed to get every newborn lamb to start nursing, even after a complicated delivery or when the mother didn't want to accept it. In nine out of ten cases, her patience paid off. So when she had her first child, why wasn't she able to start breastfeeding herself and did she end up having to use formula? Just because of a maternity assistant who had mistakenly told her that latching on would be pointless because there wouldn't be any milk during the first few days?

With my experiences as a mother, as a farmers' daughter, as an anthropologist, as a lecturer, and as an academic, I found myself in the middle of a national breastfeeding debate in the Netherlands in 2008. This debate provided the impetus for this thesis.

While this debate was going on, I met Prof. dr. ir. Hinke Haisma, who introduced me to her research on breastfeeding in Brazil. She had conducted research from a

physiological and nutritional perspective, and had gradually become fascinated by the mothers' experiences and stories. Hinke and I started talking, and we've never stopped. Meeting Hinke made me realise I wanted to do research again like I'd done in the past with Tanja, who was a fellow student at the time and also became a kindred spirit because of the unforgettable experiences we shared as researchers. I really missed doing fieldwork in Africa, doing participant observation, going into the fields with the farmers and out onto the water with the fishermen, conducting interviews, choosing a theory and considering it thoroughly, feeling completely lost in a totally different culture and being able to find yourself again and feel completely at home.

Together with Hinke, I contacted Prof. dr. Cees van der Schans, lector of the Research group Healthy Ageing, Allied Health Care, and Nursing within the School of Health at the Hanze University of Applied Sciences. And Cees had faith in me. I started my research, and together with a few colleagues from the research group, I attended a course on qualitative research given by Prof. dr. Inge Hutter and Dr. Ajay Bailey at the Department of Demography within the Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen. At the same time, Hinke was appointed to a position in this department. My research and I moved along with her, and Inge and Hinke became my PhD advisors.

I am grateful to the many people who contributed to my research project along the way. First of all, I would like to thank the mothers I interviewed, and also their families. You shared your most intimate experiences with me. I really enjoyed listening to your stories and hearing about your expectations, worries, joys, and struggles. It was fantastic to go looking for your addresses in such a wide variety of places, and to meet your husbands and see and hold your babies.

I want to thank the midwives of midwife clinics 'De Vlinder' in Heerenveen and LEDA in Winschoten. You were absolutely great at recruiting the women and facilitating the interviews.

Inge, thank you for being my PhD advisor. You are so inspiring, and talking to you always showed me things I didn't know were there. In this way I always managed to find the meaning in my data. The book you wrote with Monique and Ajay described what I had already been doing – I just didn't know it. Even when we had fewer appointments, your voice was there in the background and continued to support me.

Hinke, my supervisor and PhD advisor, it's wonderful to be your first PhD candidate. You have been the engine behind the research project the whole time, and you've always supported me, even when I was complaining. We've also discussed many other subjects and become friends. I really don't think there's anything we haven't talked about ... I've never met anyone who was so easy to be friends with, and who was my supervisor at the same time. You're really good at this!

The three of us – Inge, Hinke, and I – made a wonderful team. At the same time, we also went through difficult periods in our lives. This was something very special. I'm also grateful to all of my colleagues at the Department of Demography with whom I shared a desk, an office, or even just the corridor or canteen. Even though I could usually only be there one day a week, it was really good to be with you. Thank you all!

Thank you, Alice, for doing the transcriptions, which is not the most wonderful kind of job ... Colleen, you are a really fabulous corrector and editor. It feels strange that we've never met, but I'm sure that will change very soon ...

Thanks to the Research group Healthy Ageing, Allied Health Care, and Nursing and all of the researchers there, especially Cees. The period when I wasn't producing any visible output was difficult for both of us. It took some effort, but you continued to have faith in me. I really appreciate this, and am very grateful. Judith and Ineke, thank you for arranging so many things! Wolter and Roos, it was fun to do the qualitative research course with you. Margreet, we had a lovely time at the Qualitative Health Research Conference in Vancouver. We should do that again sometime, wherever it happens to be held in Canada!

To the Department of Physical Therapy, thank you for giving me this chance. To the management team, my colleagues, and everyone I shared an office with (and there were quite a few of you): we make a great team. I've always been something of a special case, not a physical therapist, nor a physician, nor a quantitative researcher. Thank you all for your support and for all of the good times we had together. Marjanne, you helped me so much by being the pilot for the first series of interviews. Miriam and Paul, you were very inspiring to me, as scientists and as lecturer-researchers. You know so much, and at the same time also have the courage to say 'I don't know'. Paul, we make an excellent 'quant' and 'qual' team. I was so happy you said 'yes' when I asked you to be my paranymph.

Thank you, Tanja. What can I say. Sharing a hut in Perai for four months, we had a fabulous time, and in the end got really good at carrying those buckets on our heads 'first thing in the morning'. And especially all of that 'just sit and wait'. Later, in Igombe, the stone, the fishermen, joining them for a whole day to fish for Tilapia (and not Nile perch!) on Lake Victoria, and finding out that not allowing women on board has nothing to do with ritual or beliefs but is purely for practical reasons ... I want to thank our supervisors, and also apologise to Dr. van den Breemer for not finishing our paper, which we should have completed in 1990. It just couldn't be put into words ... Special thanks to Prof. dr. Slikkerveer, who introduced us to the world of 'indigenous knowledge' – it was wonderful working with you. On two occasions you invited me to do a PhD with you, and I didn't take you up on your invitation – something that seems ridiculous now that I'm writing this, but which was logical at the time. In 1991, it didn't fit into my life, and in 2008, it wasn't practical to travel to Leiden. I want to thank you for your inspiration. My thanks

also go out to Dr. Voorhoeve. You were the first Dutch tropical paediatrician, and I found it extraordinary that you gave me your original documents.

To my friends. The past few years, I haven't been as thoughtful or shown as much interest as I would have liked. Although I said no most of the time, you kept inviting me for dinner or to go for a hike or to the theatre. You have always been loyal, and interested in my research, even though you must have occasionally wondered, 'What the hell is she talking about?' Wilma and Ditty, you were always somewhat critical of the idea of 'doing research' in general, which kept me on my toes! Rianne, your incredible stories about the department were so touching, and as a result, very inspiring. Beppie, you knew I would do this one day, even before I knew it myself – wasn't that in Riga, in June of 2007? Trijntje, I can't get enough of your stories about your work with mothers and their babies. And, well, yes, life must be lived forward ...

Special thanks to Trienke and also to Sjouke. From your perspectives, the children always came first. You've been like real parents, and also grandparents, to them.

Marjo and Sybrit, everyone would want to have sisters like you. I've always felt your support. Marjo, thank you for your translations, especially the quotes, and the last-minute corrections. Sybrit, you always thought along with me, and often surprised me by your particular way of asking questions. We have such good times together, the three of us, and because of this we keep the memories of Papa and Mama alive. You are the carriers of my past, and therefore also of today and the future.

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Sanna and Frouke, you are everything to me. Thank you for your boundless support. Sanna, you've always held up a mirror for me and you still do, even though you're probably not aware of this yourself. Frouke, I'm sorry that one way or the other you somehow started writing your own baby book when you were five years old. It's rather embarrassing, and I wish I'd done it for you, like my mother did for me, like it's meant to be. I hope it's some kind of consolation that we're now writing FBMCHKAX together.