

## **Maternity and Its Discontents**

Sallie S. Han and Rebecca L. Upton, Ph.D.\*  
University of Michigan  
Department of Anthropology and  
Center for the Ethnography of Everyday Life,  
An Alfred P. Sloan Center for the Study of Working Families  
426 Thompson St.  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1248  
sshhan@umich.edu  
rpton@umich.edu

\*Co-authors names are alphabetical. This paper is a work in progress and should not be cited without the authors' permission. Prepared for the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Sociological Society, April 5-8, 2001, in St. Louis, Missouri, for panel on "Making Sense of Work and Family in Everyday Life," Elizabeth C. Rudd, organizer. The authors gratefully acknowledge the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation for the funding provided for this research.

“It’s the most cataclysmic thing that will happen to a woman,” claimed a woman we will call Elena. “Nothing – I mean, you could win a Nobel, you could go into space, but nothing else you do will so overturn your life”. A year after the birth of her first son, Elena, 39, admitted that she still struggled with what it meant to be a mother, in her own words, “how dislocating it is to have a child, how unbelievably – at every level, physically – it’s exhausting, it wipes you out”. Carolyn, 32, and the mother of one, told us, “pregnancy does change everything, your body in particular – and then you have more work – you have to work so hard to get it back”. When her daughter was almost 1 ½ years old, Carolyn recalled, “we thought we were pregnant again, and I was really happy and when I told my husband he was happy too but then he saw what I was thinking and said, ‘Awww... just when you got your body back’”.

As a woman whose career as a writer preceded marriage by almost 10 years and motherhood by almost 15 years, Elena experienced pregnancy as a challenge to her sense of self as a woman, a professional and a wife. For Carolyn, pregnancy also challenged the idea of her physical self and its presentation. The central concern of our paper is to explore how pregnancy “wipes out” a woman (and re-makes her as a mother). In this paper, we examine ways in which pregnancy presents challenges to a woman’s sense of self as well as to her social or public personhood. Thus, we are interested not only in women’s subjective experiences of the pregnant body, but also in the pregnant body itself as a symbol of dislocation and transformation in the cultural context of the United States. As a caveat, we would add that the focus of our paper is not on maternity and its “contents”, (the unmarked, the unchallenged experiences) which are many, as we have observed in our research and to which our informants can attest. Rather we are writing

about maternity and its “discontents” – that is, the ways in which women experience pregnancy as a challenge, even a problem, in terms of the categories of person, work and family that often are taken for granted.

This paper is based on research from two larger research projects on the meaning of work and family in contemporary American, middle-class families. We draw upon studies we have conducted individually, with first-time mothers and with women who recently had or are planning to have a second child. Our projects intersect in many ways. Both of us have been engaged in ethnographic studies with women (mothers) in dual-earner couples in southeastern Michigan. In our studies, we both apply an anthropological perspective, paying particular attention to the cultural construction of identities, especially the symbols and meanings attached to life events and the significance of family in various contexts. Most relevant in terms of this paper is our shared interest in practices and ideas of the body at various stages of pregnancy and childrearing. We are concerned especially with what it means to be a “fit” woman, worker or mother the middle-class American way. In particular, we both have examined the significance of clothing, fitness and food as they relate to the construction of the pregnant body.

Contrary to the contemporary American “folk” belief in a stable, unified and uniform self or person – a belief that our informants certainly shared – anthropologists, sociologists and others long have asserted that the self is negotiated, negotiable and dynamic over time and space. Earlier scholarship examined the creation of particular identities and personalities (Benedict 1959[1934]) and brought attention to the differences in concepts of personhood across cultures (Geertz 1973). This led to the

recognition that we are talking not about the construction of the individual universally, but of the individual within society and within a particular, social, cultural and historical milieu. The self, then, is not so much a product or products, but a process or processes. The idea of the self as situational and as based in social interaction grew largely out of work done by Marcel Mauss (1938) (in Carrithers et al. 1985), who argued that a self cannot exist outside of relationships with others. The work that one does and the roles that one plays all are connected integrally to each other; they both are constituted by and are constituents of one another. In addition, theorists such as Charles Taylor (1985) (in Carrithers et al. 1985), and Erving Goffman (1981) emphasize the performance aspects of the self, bringing attention to the role of the body as well as the mind in social interactions. For example, Taylor, a philosopher, suggests that narratives (and more fundamentally, the human ability to narrate) are essential to Western self-making. Most recently, discourse from feminist and medical anthropology has brought sharp focus upon the female body and the interplay among the mind, narrative and the body (Martin 1987; Butler 1990). In our research, we have found that the role of the body and its presentations and representations is indeed profound.

### **Clothing the Pregnant Body**

For working women, pregnancy poses a challenge to categories of work and family because these categories – like their bodies and clothes – no longer fit the way they did before pregnancy. What is at stake in the blurring of boundaries between work and home is a woman's own sense of self.

Recalling her two pregnancies, Kate, 44, identified the central problem of keeping

work and family issues separate in order to be identified and taken seriously as a professional person in the workplace – in other words, to be recognized as the same person she was before pregnancy. “Being nine months [pregnant] works like bringing a baby to work,” she said. For Kate, the workplace demanded professional behavior, which meant not allowing “your personal life to spill over into your work life.” It also demanded professional demeanor. Pregnancy posed a problem on both counts. Kate noted that in the workplace, co-workers behaved differently toward pregnant women: “You know, instead of the first topic being some work topic, people are saying, ‘Oh, how’s your baby?’ You know, there’s a lot of personal talk and that can make some people feel uncomfortable, you know, if you’re trying to do a job.” Moreover, she added, “you really feel like a whale and you look – it’s hard to be discreet when you’re nine months pregnant”.

In her 1994 study of pregnant working women, Robbie Davis-Floyd found that her informants, like Kate, conceived of a “fundamental and clear-cut distinction between the personal and professional realm” (Davis-Floyd 1994:204-5) in spatial and bodily terms: “Presence in either the personal or professional realm is expressed through bodily adornment – suits and tailored dresses at work, shorts or jogging suits at home” (*ibid*). In the same way that shorts and jogging suits seemed unsuitable for the workplace, the pregnant body itself presented a visible affront to business as usual. Kate believed that although pregnancy itself did not interfere with a woman’s ability to do her work, other people’s attentions to the pregnant body were disruptive in terms of professional behavior and disrespectful of a woman’s professional personhood. In order to minimize non-work-related interaction in the workplace, she said it was important for women to keep

up a professional appearance during pregnancy. “If you’re pregnant, the good advice might be, be discreet,” Kate said. “You know, wear – be even more professional looking.” For Kate, this explicitly meant “no big bows” or “pastel colors” and certainly no “leotards” or other tight-fitting clothing that displayed the belly or otherwise focused attention on the pregnancy and the pregnant body.

Informants viewed clothing as reflective of a sense of self and tied intimately to their sense of personhood. Women often described their clothing in order to talk about themselves. Josie, 28, described herself as “pretty Plain Jane – you know, I like things simple and comfortable.” She identified herself as “the kind of person” who preferred comfort to style. Elena, however, identified herself as “one of those people who wore tailored, skirted suits, you know, and I had the skirted suit with the blouse, pumps and heels, and that’s what I wore to work for like 10 years.” By describing what they wore, both Josie and Elena identified who they were as particular individuals – and as individuals of particular kinds. Certain styles of dress evince certain lifestyles as well as status. Moreover, as Kate emphasized, clothing can be as modification of the body and, therefore, of the self.

These examples demonstrate that clothing is not a trivial matter for pregnant women. By paying attention to it, scholars can come to understand how working women in the United States today experience pregnancy as both beyond and within their control. Clothing is central to how pregnant women feel the constraints of social control. It is central also to how women act as agents and express themselves as individuals. Informants exhibited a keen interest in and sophisticated awareness of both aspects of clothing. In fact, it is their comprehension of how clothing acts as constraint that allows

them to use clothing as a means toward their own ends.

Sociologist Diana Crane suggested that the significance of Western clothing is two-fold – “as a form of social control by organizations both public and private” and “as an instrument of self-enhancement for the individual” (Crane 2000:67). Uniforms and dress codes offer “naked” examples of how workplaces might use clothing as social control. Even in the absence of explicit rules, workers often adhere to codes that are understood though unspoken – an exercise of self-control. The invention of maternity clothes serves as another particular example of social control. Attire for pregnant women changes as certain restrictions on their behavior became more relaxed during the late 19th and early 20th century (Bailey 1992). As long as women were expected to remain in “confinement” during pregnancy, maternity clothes as a category (including specially cut clothing for breastfeeding mothers) did not exist. Today, the maternity wear market in the United States alone is estimated to be worth almost \$1 billion (The Advocate Online 5/21/2000, accessed 3/29/2001). “Dress for success” advice has become available widely for the working mother-to-be through sources such as *Fit Pregnancy* magazine, the pregnancy manual *What to Expect When You’re Expecting* and the book *Pregnancy Chic*, which is devoted exclusively to maternity fashion and the ease with which one can achieve the ideal “look”. The maternity wear market includes national chain stores such as Motherhood and Mimi as well as higher-end designer labels such as Liz Lange and Japanese Weekend. Recently, even popular non-maternity specific clothing marketers have begun to sell maternity fashions. Carrie, 29, claimed, “This is definitely a good time to be pregnant. There’s so much out there, especially with the Internet. Even The Gap now is making maternity clothes.”

For Carrie, having different styles of maternity clothes to choose from meant that she could continue to use clothing to express herself as an individual, even wearing the same styles of pants from The Gap that she had worn prior to her pregnancy. Carrie celebrated the fact that she now had what she considered freedom of choice. Of course, this freedom itself had parameters – Carrie was choosing from the same styles of clothing that scores of other women also browsed on the Web. The use of clothing to express the individual is a collective enterprise. In fact, anthropologist Edward Sapir identified fashion as “the discreet solution of the subtle conflict” between the individual and the collective: “The slight changes from the established in dress or other forms of behavior seem for the moment to give the victory to the individual, while the fact that one’s fellows revolt in the same direction gives one a feeling of adventurous safety” (Sapir 1985[1949]).

As a linguist, Sapir understood that clothing could be used to express the individual because of the very fact that it is a highly conventionalized and even systematized form of expression. The fact that Carrie began wearing maternity clothes, even if they were from The Gap, marked her as a pregnant woman. Similarly, for Elena, a change in clothes marked a change in identity from working woman to working mother:

Part of it is that your body does change afterward... like, I gained 2 inches in my waist that are never going away...and also you just, um – I’m growing my hair out because I used to wear it really short. I think that after a baby, you just feel – on the positive side, you – I feel a lot softer and more accepting of things, more in touch with my feminine side if I’m allowed to say that. You know, less – the power suits just don’t feel right to me. They don’t reflect me anymore.

Not only had Elena begun thinking of herself as changed, but she also wanted other

persons to recognize that she had and has changed. For Elena, wearing clothes that did not “feel right” was experienced as misrepresentation.

Scholars have contended that the primary function of Western dress is to create a self-image for others to view (Hollander 1993[1975], Goffman 1967). Informants comprehended fully that although clothing could be used as a vehicle of self-expression, it also could be used as a powerful tool of self-impression upon others. In particular, women commented on how clothing could be used to modify the appearance of the pregnant body, thereby manipulating or controlling the impression that others received.

Showing and telling, or hiding, pregnancy in the workplace emerged as a theme during conversations with informants. Carrie, 29, had no particular wish to announce her pregnancy to customers at the boutique where she worked – again, this would represent a blurring of work and family boundaries – though she did tell a few of her regular customers as well as her co-workers whom she considered her friends. A first-time mother, Carrie was able to conceal her pregnancy until her fifth month by wearing looser clothing. “I’m definitely getting a belly, definitely expanding in the waistline,” she said. “[But] I don’t think people can really tell that I’m pregnant, depending on what I happen to be wearing.” Viviana, 41, told no one about her pregnancy until she was well into her fourth month. She and her husband had delayed sharing their news with co-workers and even family members because her first pregnancy had been “pretty traumatic” – Viviana had gone into pre-term labor and spent the last three months of her first pregnancy in and out of the hospital. “In case of a miscarriage, I didn’t want to have to take it all back,” she said. As a woman expecting her second child, however, Viviana recalls “there was a little tricky period...when I was definitely showing but I was just wearing loose clothes”.

For Carrie and especially for Viviana, clothing helped control the appearance of their bodies in the workplace. Carrie said this was particularly important for her because she worked with customers and co-workers who were especially fashion-conscious. By controlling at least the appearance of their bodies, both women were able to control news of their pregnancies, or at least prevent the word from spreading before they were ready or willing to tell. This was particularly important for Viviana, who wanted time to decide how much leave she could ask for and afford. She asked for – and got – a leave of 10 months.

### **Fitting the Pregnant Body**

In the same way that decisions about clothing illustrate the simultaneous blurring of and strict adherence to boundaries between work and family, so, too, does the discourse on “fitness” highlight tensions between these categories. They also bring to the fore how contemporary American women conceive of their bodies in relation to their selves. Being “fit” and in control are key concepts in the narratives of pregnant and postpartum women of the dual-earning middle class.

In this section, we examine how women construct and view “fitness” as indexical of a particular lifestyle – in other words, as a particular middle class “look” or value that they hope to embody. In addition, we also discuss how being a “fit” mother is linked inextricably to ideas about health, one’s physical body, and control over that body. A central thread weaving together these discussions is theme of public scrutiny of the individual self. In the everyday, lived experiences of our informants, the body as the physical self is also a public self under intense scrutiny.

Being fit and in control emerge as significant themes in contemporary middle-class American discourse, and they carry multiple meanings. Informants often talk about being fit and healthy in terms of their bodily state – by this, they refer not so much to their physical functioning as to their physical appearance or “looking good”. In addition, being a “fit” mother has everything to do with how one conducts one’s life and sets examples for and through their children for others to scrutinize. As Deirdre, 33, and a mother of two, observed:

I think that if you don’t keep yourself together, well then it’s just like you’re letting everything go – you know, yourself, you’re setting a bad example and all. I mean, I might eat cookies for breakfast and one of the kids will ask if they can have one too, but I say, ‘No, now you know, we don’t eat cookies for breakfast,’ [laughter] which is true, I want them to grow up with a healthy set of ideas about food and exercise and if you want kids to be healthy, then you have to show them how... Part of that is not giving them those Lunchables, even if you have no time, those are the worst... It’s like, part of them being healthy is you being healthy and not too fat... There’s a mom at day care..., she sends her kid in with a bottle of that Evian water... That’s a pretty good mom.

For Deirdre, being a successful mother entails teaching her children the “right” discourse about fitness and health. While she herself admits to transgressing some of her own rules (eating cookies for breakfast), she repeatedly states that a good example must be set – that a mother should have control over her eating habits and her body, and by extension, her family’s eating habits and her family as well. Such mores are not confined to discourse about food. They also are evident in literature aimed at a middle-class audience with respect to the ability to perform well in the workplace. Magazines such as *Harper’s* point out that “in corporate America, being fat is taboo, is surefire career killer. If you can’t control your own contours, how can you control money?”(3/2000:47). Here,

the underlying assumption is that “your contours” (the state of one’s body) reflects upon “you” – or more specifically, the state of one’s mind. Failure at the menial task of maintaining control over one’s body throws into question one’s capacity to accomplish the brainwork of controlling capital. For contemporary middle-class professionals, being “fit” signifies success and socioeconomic status. One need look no further than magazine advertisements and television commercials, which feature stylishly thin, fit and “doing it all” super-parents making dinner, buying cars or taking meetings by cellular phone in order to take their kids to Disney World instead.

Being fit is a theme that suffuses the narratives told to and told by women during and after pregnancy. Our informants actively sought and consumed advice from such sources as *What to Expect When You’re Expecting* and *Fit Pregnancy*, which features a photographic spread of a different exercise plan in every bimonthly issue. Some women participated in prenatal exercise classes at the local Y or community college and other women purchased workouts on videotape to exercise at home. All of these sources touted the myriad benefits of exercise during pregnancy – everything from preventing varicose veins to ensuring an easier delivery. Leigh, 37, claimed: “I kept reading all those articles [in *Fit Pregnancy*, for example] and I totally believe it – exercise gave me more energy, not less. I had to cut back a bit, but it was a total stress reliever and I think made it much easier for me to have my kids”. By exercising and thereby relieving her own stress, Leigh felt that she was protecting her pregnancy. In fact, many exercise advice narratives emphasized the relationship between fitness during pregnancy and the health or wellbeing of one’s child. Exercise, by being “good” for the mother, is assumed to be “good” for the baby as well.

Many informants described the social pressure during pregnancy to conform to a certain idealized notion of the pregnant woman – of literally and figuratively being a fit mother-to-be. This meant acting and dressing the part – for if one is planning to engage in exercise, then one also must wear the appropriate exercise clothing. Fitness gear offers an interesting example of the ways in which maternity clothes operate as a tool of social control. As Joely, 29, a mother of one, pointed out:

In aerobics class here, you hardly ever see a pregnant woman. There was this one woman I remember seeing in spin class, and she wore the tightest clothes ever. Everyone stared and was like, ‘Gosh, I hope she knows what’s she’s doing – should she really be here?’ that kind of stuff, and then I think, well, that’s very unusual in the U.S. I think we’re more used to having pregnant women wear loose stuff, especially at the gym, even when the rest of the time you’d be wearing your cute little tight outfits.

For Joely, who confessed to wearing “tight outfits when I worked out before, but definitely not when I was pregnant”, the distinction between what counted as appropriate fitness wear for women varied according to their pregnancy status. By wearing “the tightest clothes ever”, the pregnant woman exercising in the gym demonstrated her lack of fitness as a mother-to-be. Moreover, the woman flaunted her lack of fitness in a public setting, further recriminating herself as unfit. Form-fitting fitness gear that accentuated one’s pregnant body was taken as a visual assault upon what was appropriate, right and conventional – that is, upon cultural constructions of female identity in the public domain. Joely questioned the appropriateness of the woman’s outfit both for a person of her status or in her condition and for engagement in this particular activity. In fact, there was concern over whether or not the woman should be participating in the first place.

If it was possible for women while working to show, tell, hide and control

information about their pregnancies – for example, through their use of clothing – then this was not the case when women were working out. Informants described how their pregnant bodies became the locus of special attention and, in fact, public policing during their everyday exercise routines. Indeed, a woman can be marked simultaneously as physically “fit” and maternally “unfit”. “I was working out, climbing the Stairmaster, you know, and this woman, I don’t even know her, comes right up to me, gets in my face and starts asking if my doctor knows I was there working out! I couldn’t believe it!”

Charlene, 37, said of an encounter at the gym where she regularly exercises. “It was like she was accusing me of working out too hard, of not knowing what I was doing all because she could see I was pregnant.... Yeah, I wasn’t even wearing tight stuff [clothes], you know, but when else would you ever, ever go up to someone and start harassing them like that about their body?” she said. What Charlene’s story vividly illustrates is that the pregnant body is considered a public body – open to advice, intervention and criticism not only from family members, friends, health care providers and other experts, but even from strangers.

Fitness remains a concern during pregnancy and after. Many informants described maintaining and then regaining their bodies after pregnancy as a personal priority. Again, they turned to such sources as *Fit Pregnancy* and *Working Mother*, which emphasize both the necessity to lose weight as well as to get “one’s body back”. In fact, there is no shortage of advice on getting back one’s body. An entire industry has grown up around the postpartum body, including workout videos, special programs at health clubs, Web sites and chat groups. Recently, Slim-Fast, a popular diet product, has launched an advertising campaign to appeal to women who “can’t wait to get back into

[their] pre-pregnancy clothes”. In short, women are bombarded with the message that re-attaining a certain self is paramount. Ironically, this message is concurrent with others that suggest that a woman’s body and self have been changed profoundly and irrevocably by pregnancy – one is no longer just a woman or a worker, but a mother or a working mom. Not surprisingly, we heard narratives of getting back one’s body from many informants and their families. In addition to Carolyn’s story about her husband and his comment about getting back her body, which prefaced this paper, Lynn, also 32, remarked:

It was like all this pressure after having my first son, people always telling you to get your old body back as soon as possible.... I mean, granted it took nine months to put weight on, so you should expect it to take that long to get it off, but still...always warning you about getting that ol’ bod back so when you have your next kid, you’re not starting off with more weight.... Yep, my husband, my mother, everyone talking about it, whether directly to me or not, it was like, every time I wanted to eat some M & M’s, I felt like people were thinking..., ‘Oh well, she’ll never... she must not want to get back to her old self,’ and I felt so obvious.

### **Weighing the Pregnant Body**

The fact that women (and their husbands and others) talk about getting back their bodies implies that they have “lost” them to begin with – or rather, that they have lost control over their bodies during pregnancy. Physical changes in the body often were surprising, even alarming to several informants, even if they had read the “required” reading manuals such as *What to Expect When You’re Expecting* from cover to cover. Josie complained that, in fact, these books did not go far enough in describing bodily changes and how to prepare for them. “I mean I think that they keep a lot of these things

secret so that, you know, you'll get pregnant [laughter] and produce children," she said. "But, um, they say that your mucus membranes and your sinuses especially are extra swollen because of all the extra blood and all that in your body – and hormones – it's totally bizarre. It's like a sideshow, I mean."

In particular, loss of control over one's appetite and especially over one's weight proved distressing for informants. Prior to conception, Josie had been on a diet and lost 25 pounds as what she called a "pre-emptive attack" on the weight that she anticipated gaining during her pregnancy. As a result, she considered the "problem" of her weight under control. Once she became pregnant, however, she learned otherwise. Josie admitted: "I ate pretty much all day to try and wave off the nausea, so I gained a lot of weight in my first trimester, which was really fast – at least for me, because I struggle with my weight going up and down a lot. . . , it was kind of frightening. Because I had seen women – I mean pretty regular size women – who gain like 60 or 70 pounds during pregnancy and I was like, Oh no."

On the one hand, informants like Josie understood and accepted that weight gain is unavoidable, even necessary, for a normal, healthy pregnancy. On the other hand, like the trope of fitness, certain notions about body weight (especially the need to maintain a certain weight) are ubiquitous in contemporary American discourse about what it means to be a woman. As many scholars have observed, the ideal middle-class American person is constructed now as having a thin, fit body. Americans are bombarded with images of emaciated yet successful celebrities that can have profound effects upon the ways in which women come to view the body in social context (Bordo 1993, Goodman 1995, Sault 1994, Nichter 2000, Gilman 1999, Counihan and Van Esterik 1997). Ideas

about fitness and weight are linked directly to socioeconomic stratification as the body itself symbolizes a certain social status. As Hortense Powdermaker noted, “obesity for women is therefore somewhat symbolic for lower class. In our socially mobile society this is a powerful deterrent [for women]... the image for mother and for mate may be in conflict”(in Counihan and Van Esterik 1997: 207).

Although the burgeoning body of pregnancy presents a problem for women striving to attain or maintain the ideal physical form of middle-class American culture, there also exist ideal pregnant bodies. Today, even publications specifically targeting pregnant women – including not only glossy magazines like *Fit Pregnancy*, but also educational brochures from the March of Dimes – feature attractive, model-thin mothers-to-be. *Vogue* magazine published an article celebrating pregnant bodies with an accompanying photograph of supermodel Elle MacPherson (September 2000). In the buff and looking buff, Elle’s pregnancy was visible only in her perfectly curved breasts and belly. Such images represent the increased visibility of the pregnant body, a recent development in contemporary American culture (Matthews and Wexler 2000). Discourse on maternal and infant health in the United States can be traced back to the Progressive era of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Klaus 1993). Over the years, an ideal pregnant body has become institutionalized within medical science, which has educated women on benefits and naturalness of this idea.

For example, the focus of a hospital-sponsored pregnancy “lifestyle” class recently was on nutrition and exercise. Told that too much weight gain during pregnancy can cause complications during delivery or even imperil the baby’s well being – as well as make weight loss more difficult postpartum – women attending the class had particular

questions about what was considered “proper” weight gain. Currently, pregnant women are advised: “The weight you should gain depends on your weight before pregnancy” (see NECS handout). For women of “normal weight” before pregnancy, the “suggested weight gain” is 25-35 pounds during the course of 40 weeks – approximately 2-5 pounds during the first trimester per week and then 1 pound a week thereafter. Given such specific numbers, several women expressed concerns about exceeding what they had been told were “target” gains. The fact is, too, that each prenatal check-up at the doctor’s office is marked by a weighing-in that is recorded on a woman’s medical chart. One woman asked if it was appropriate to diet – that is, if she gained “too much” weight one week, she reasoned that she should “make up” for it by making efforts not to gain extra weight the following week. Although she was advised not to do so because of the nutritional needs of her fetus, one can certainly see the temptation of dieting under this kind of surveillance. In fact, her impulse to diet was correct in that it was consistent with other ubiquitous (and institutionalized) ideas about the ideal female form that were discussed earlier. Thus, she demonstrated not so much the failure of her maternal instinct as the success of her internalization of middle-class American values. She was engaged in self-policing.

In addition to the self-policing of one’s weight during pregnancy, there is also a great deal of public policing from other individuals (such as family members or even strangers on the street who comment upon a woman’s appearance). Charlene recalled an incident when she ate lunch with some co-workers. She had shared news of her pregnancy only with a few friends – “my waistband was snug but I was still pretty sure you couldn’t tell”. She was surprised to learn otherwise:

And then this co-worker, a guy, he came up and sat with us at lunchtime and looked at my plate, which had nothing out of the ordinary on it, you know, no huge pile or anything, and he says, 'So, Charlene, that's quite an appetite you've got there. You better be careful, it looks like you're packing on the pounds!'... And you know, he was trying to be funny, like a way to let me know he knew I was pregnant, but still, it was this incredibly weird moment for me.

Perhaps one reason why the co-worker thought that his comments were not inappropriate was that a certain amount of "packing on the pounds" is considered permissible during pregnancy. For example, consider the often-heard jokes about "eating for two".

Informants themselves made note of and even reveled in the fact that during pregnancy was perhaps the only time in their lives when they were "allowed" to look fat – when in fact they were admired and when they admired themselves for a softer, rounder figure.

As Elena emphasized, "the pregnancy silhouette is so distinctive that all of the other issues about your figure are gone...Saddlebags? Nobody will see them...to me, it was really kind of cool. I was a different person – and I gained a lot of weight. I was one large girl. But – I loved it." It is a short-lived period of freedom, however – as we learned from our informants. After the baby has been born, women are expected to get those bodies back and demonstrate their abilities as "fit" mothers through weight loss.

### **Breastfeeding and the Body**

An important means through which physical and metaphorical maternal fitness is attained in the postpartum period is through breastfeeding, or nursing. For many informants, the media presented powerful and convincing messages connecting breastfeeding with notions of fitness. In contrast to advice dating to a few decades

earlier, parenting magazines and pregnancy manuals today promote nursing by touting its benefits not just for one's baby, but one's body as well. According to *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, breastfeeding "helps speed the shrinking of the uterus back to its prepregnancy size" and "can help burn off the fat accumulated during pregnancy. If a woman is careful to consume only enough calories to keep her milk supply and energy up, and makes certain that all those calories come from nutritious foods, she can fill all of her infant's nutritional needs while recovering her own figure" (Eisenberg et. al 1996: 252-3).

Given this kind of win-win situation – in which women simultaneously regain physical fitness and prove their maternal fitness – no wonder, then that many informants regard breast as best. Angela, 43, noted that "my mother, she never breast fed us, I guess they just didn't really promote that then, but I nursed both my kids, it was great-we connected that way and I really felt like, totally maternal then, I think my mom seeing that...she felt like maybe in the end she missed something." Indeed, many of our informants at least attempted to nurse and a number of them continued even after returning to their jobs.

For women who chose to continue nursing after the return to work however, breastfeeding was experienced as a direct challenge to work and family domains in much the same manner that pregnancy was. Gina, 35, found that "it was really hard to get people to stop thinking of me as this baby machine – here I was at work, first I'm pregnant and trying to wear concealing clothes, but then you've got to pump and you know, that's hard to conceal! I felt like I was caught between doing a really good job as a mother and being seen as this less efficient worker." Gina was forced to work around the

demands of her body – and her baby for whose benefit she was pumping in the first place. In a sense, Gina’s pumping brought the baby into the workplace, blurring the boundaries between family and work. The workplace appears to be less hospitable to breastfeeding however than it is to pregnancy. What Elena most resented about returning to work was that she was told that there was a place for her to pump – in the restroom. “I mean – I had to sit on the floor. [laughter] I’m not going to sit on the toilet. So, I sat on the floor, pumping, and I hated that.” she recalled. Elena appeared to have been most upset by the way in which nursing in the workplace became equated with other functions of the body that are considered polluting, or else the expulsion of pollution from the body. Sitting on the floor was Elena’s way of distinguishing nursing from these other biological functions.

The designation of places as appropriate for breastfeeding extends beyond the workplace, to control of bodies in other public arenas. Carolyn described a confrontation over pumping in the ladies’ locker room at her gym:

It was a comfy area, you know, with cushy chairs.... It’s right where you go to dry your hair, put on make-up, stuff like that. It’s also right near where the TV is mounted, so you can watch that and all.... So, I thought it’d be a good, sort of relaxing place, [laughter] well, as relaxing as it can be.... So, here I was with my shirt up and jog bra up and the pump whirring and, yes, people would notice and kind of look away, or try not to look, you know, but finally, some people must’ve commented to the gym personnel because one day, Jill, [an employee of the gym] who is my friend, came in and said something to me about how it made people uncomfortable.... I couldn’t believe it! I completely got mad and felt like insisting I had every right to be there and do that, but by then I felt so conspicuous and like I was breaking some rule or something.... So much for thinking this was this really great, liberal community – I mean all these women’s kids [who are in the gym day care] are in there all the time – you’d think they’d remember what it’s like!

In this narrative, Carolyn was reacting to several ironies that she perceived. The first was

that the ladies' locker room is apparently an inappropriate place for a woman to bare her breasts in order to pump, though that space might be used appropriately to disrobe and shower or otherwise care for one's body. The second was the hypocrisy of other women Carolyn she thought should have been sympathetic and, in fact, empathetic regarding the necessity of pumping breast milk.

A third irony had to do with "this really great, liberal community" that turned out to be not so liberal after all. This idea became repeated in conversations with other informants. For example, one man claimed, "You know, what's funny about this area is you can really tell when you're in a rich area or not – there is Beltintown, where everyone is quite wealthy and into being 'fit', but wouldn't be caught dead breastfeeding – no way! On the other hand, you can be pretty well-off and live in Sandville, where the whole thing is, 'Hey, we're rich, but we are liberals,' and there it's like, sheesh... everyone's breastfeeding on the street!" Thus, the landscape becomes marked in terms of class ("a rich area or not") and measured in terms of residents' attitudes toward public nursing (conservative rich versus liberal rich).

As we have discussed throughout this paper, control over the pregnant and postpartum body is filtered through various media in contemporary American culture – in particular, food, fitness and fashion. The relationship between breastfeeding and clothing is especially significant. Just as there is proper attire for work and for working out, certain clothes must be purchased in order to conveniently and more importantly, discreetly, breastfeed. As Charlene recalled:

When I was at home, it was great. The first week, I actually never wore a shirt, just walked around the house naked from the waist up. The next

week my mother-in-law was there, so I put a jog bra on and just wore that. Of course, then my dad came, so I finally had to deal with putting a shirt on over it... a total hassle! Of course, I had no idea of what going to work was going to be like, buying new shirts with these handy flaps and stuff so you can quickly pump and keep it [laughter] under wraps!

Clothing can control information about the body after pregnancy much in the same way that it was used during pregnancy. Nursing wear, with its easy on-and-off buttons and snaps and “handy flaps”, allows women the convenience of nursing or pumping without having to disrobe. It also allows them to be discreet or maintain the demeanor considered proper or appropriate for a public setting such as a workplace. In the same way that the invention of maternity clothes as a category allowed pregnant women to be present in the public, nursing wear allows women who are breastfeeding to participate in a wider range of activities in public life.

Nursing clothes become necessary because, directly contradicting all of the promises made in pregnancy and parenting manuals, nursing does not necessarily give a woman’s body “back” to her. In fact, in certain ways, the lactating woman is left at the mercy of her body’s apparent whims. Informants told us stories about letdown and leakage occurring at the most inopportune times. Women arranged their work schedules as best as they could to accommodate their biological clocks because failing to express milk regularly can cause engorgement, pain and even problems producing enough milk to nurse one’s child. Moreover, a woman’s body is not hers because the baby has a right to it. Tricia, 28, said her eating habits changed during pregnancy and yet again when she was breastfeeding. For example, Tricia began skipping even foods considered beneficial during pregnancy such as broccoli, cauliflower and beans when she realized that eating them could upset her daughter’s stomach after nursing. This was in addition to skipping

foods that she considered nonnutritive and even harmful, such as chocolate, which she said she avoided because it contained caffeine. Tricia's revelation had come to her during her hospital stay after the birth: "The second night in the hospital she [the baby] was really gassy. I'd had – they gave me a can of pop with my lunch or whatever. I didn't think anything of drinking pop – other than the caffeine – but I guess the carbonation makes a difference too, at least in the beginning. [Laughter.] Now it doesn't bother her". Nor did the fact that Tricia did not get back control over her body especially bother her. She accepted this as a "natural" fact of "biology." Tricia said that she enjoyed nursing and even thought that changing her eating habits for her daughter's sake was beneficial for her own body as well, echoing advice in parenting manuals and magazines. For example, she lost her "baby weight" within a few months after the delivery. Tricia also felt that nursing had helped her to adapt to her new role in life: "It really made me feel like I was a mom".

Perhaps one reason why Tricia felt content over not getting back control over her body was that she had decided during the final month of her pregnancy to postpone her return to work indefinitely. Tricia's experience stands in contrast to those of Gina and Elena, who both had returned to the work while still nursing their children. For Gina and Elena, returning to work meant returning to their pre-pregnancy roles with their post-pregnancies bodies. What others expected of them in the workplace – and what they expected of themselves – was to reclaim their pre-pregnancy selves. As Elena observed, however: "Maybe it's just the body image changes are a good thing because they teach you that you're never going back. You're never going back to where you are."

### **Controlling the Body: Conclusions**

In this paper, we have explored several ways in which the pregnant body poses a challenge to concepts of person, work and family. Women's narratives about clothing, fitness and food illustrate ways in which middle-class American values shape the pregnant (and postpartum) body. The pregnant body represents a physical challenge to the categories of person, woman and worker. The body becomes controlled through the use of material goods (clothing) and character goods (being a "fit" mother).

Our research relies heavily upon the notion that the self is embedded in a complex web of relations – it is situational and dependent upon social interaction. In addition, the self involves performance. Individuals can act upon their own agency and affect those sets of relations. Our focus has been upon the intersection of this self and the body at the point where it is often most conspicuous and challenging for women – during pregnancy. We have explored how women act as agents who can exert control over their bodies in myriad ways and through various mediums. In addition, we have explored how, simultaneously, social and cultural constructions about gender and the body constrain their efforts. The tension between effort and constraint became evident in our examination of clothing choices, ideas about physical exercise and metaphorical "fitness", and practices of weight control and breastfeeding that, on the one hand, are supposed to help a woman get back her body, but, on the other hand, serve as reminders that her body is no longer just her own (if it ever were). Individuals are situated always within complex webs of symbols and meanings that define certain domains, such as those of gender and the body. Thus, only certain types of clothing are deemed appropriate

when pregnant or breastfeeding. What it means to be a “fit” mother depends largely on social constructions about what is a “fit” body. As Carolyn’s story about the confrontation in the ladies’ locker room illustrated, there also are times and places when and where it is less than fitting for a mother to be present or seen.

Davis-Floyd, in her 1994 study, found that American professional women perceived pregnancy as a challenge because of the ways in which their experiences upset the mind-body hierarchy. The pregnant women in her study said that they felt “out of control” because pregnancy seemed to be a biological experience under the control of the body, not the mind. Similar themes emerged from our own research. Many informants felt that they had lost control over their bodies during their pregnancies. They equated this experience with losing their selves. For these women, regaining control over the body after pregnancy signified recovering one’s lost self. Literally and figuratively, however, they had become different persons during pregnancy – they became mothers.

How maternity and its discontents are limited and controlled by cultural power and individual agency has been the subject of our research. Although we have not discovered the way to get one’s body back, we have learned that the struggle to do so highlights the ways in which the female body has been constructed in contemporary American culture as well as the strategies that women draw upon to shape their own lives.

## References cited

- Bailey, Rebecca.  
1992. "Clothes Encounters of the Gynecological Kind: Medical Mandates and Maternity Modes in the USA, 1850-1990." In Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning, Ruth Barnes and Joanne Eicher, editors. Pages 248-65. New York: Berg.
- Benedict, Ruth.  
1959[1934]. Patterns of Culture. New York: New American Library.
- Bordo, Susan.  
1993. Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Butler, Judith.  
1990. Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. New York: Routledge.
- Carrithers, Michael, Steven Collins and Steven Lukes, editors.  
1985. The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Counihan, Carole and Penny Van Esterik, editors.  
1997. Food and Culture. New York: Routledge.
- Crane, Diana.  
2000. Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender and Identity in Clothing. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Critser, Greg.  
2000. "Let Them Eat Fat: The Heavy Truths About American Obesity," Harper's Magazine, March: 41-9.
- Davis-Floyd, Robbie.  
1994. "Mind over Body: The Pregnant Professional." In Many Mirrors. Nicole Sault, editor. Pages 204-33. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Eisenberg, Arlene, Heidi E. Murkoff and Sandee E. Hathaway.  
1996. What to Expect When You're Expecting. New York: Workman Publishing.
- Geertz, Clifford.  
1973. The Interpretation of Cultures. New York: Basic Books.  
1983. Local Knowledge. New York: Basic Books.
- Gilman, Sander.  
1999. Making the Body Beautiful. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Goffman, Erving.  
1959. The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. New York: Doubleday.  
1981[1967]. Forms of Talk. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Goodman, W. Charisse.  
1995. The Invisible Woman. Carlsbad, CA: Gurze Books.
- Hollander, Anne.

- 1993[1975]. Seeing Through Clothes. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Klaus, Alisa.  
1993. Every Child a Lion: The Origins of Maternal and Infant Health Policy in the United States and France 1890-1920. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Martin, Emily.  
1987. The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction. Boston: Beacon Press
- Matthews, Sandra and Laura Wexler.  
2000. Pregnant Pictures. New York: Routledge.
- Nichter, Mimi.  
2000. Fat Talk. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Sapir, Edward.  
1985[1949]. Selected Writings of Edward Sapir in Language, Culture and Personality. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Sault, Nicole.  
1996. Many Mirrors. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Sauser, Rebecca.  
2000. "Maternity Suits Fulfill Growing Market." Electronic document.  
[www.stamfordadvocate.com/Advocate/release/05-21-2000/article\\_biz1.html](http://www.stamfordadvocate.com/Advocate/release/05-21-2000/article_biz1.html).
- Urquhart, Rachel.  
2000. "Living Large," *Vogue*. September: 515-6.