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Thesis Prospectus

Dr. Centellas

Inst 421

Breastfeeding and Feminism in France

Introduction

Women in France have some of the lowest breastfeeding rates among industrialized countries in Europe. On average, only 63 percent of French mothers start breastfeeding, and typically stop after 17 weeks. While the WHO recommends children be breastfed until two years old, only 19 percent of children in France are breastfed up until six months. French mothers are quick to return to full-time employment after giving birth which is demonstrated specifically by one study from the EDEN (*étude des déterminants pré et post natal*) mother-child cohort in France showing that by the infant's first birthday over 80 percent of French mothers have returned to work. This push to return to work could also be correlated to France's below average maternity leave pay. Mothers are only given a combined 16 weeks leave before and after the birth of their first child; for every additional child, this number goes up. This is only two weeks above the 14 weeks minimum enforced by current European Union legislation. I believed these numbers to be perplexing because of the strong push we have in the United States to breastfeed for as long as possible, until I began to research the debate surrounding breastfeeding in France. This is a multifaceted controversy in which French mothers are challenging the compatibility of motherhood and feminism.

The competence of working mothers is questioned when they return to work too soon, use formula, or stop breastfeeding. However, mothers who do stay home and breastfeed for an

“appropriate” amount of time are accused of being antifeminist and being a source of regression for the movement. This is a debate that I believe to be universal, only brought to light by France’s unique views on breastfeeding compared to other European countries. It begs the question, are France’s low breastfeeding rates a result of French feminist movements and the push for women to remain autonomous throughout motherhood, or are there other factors affecting this issue such as maternity leave, the formula industry, or high birth rates.

Theoretical Framework

The second wave of feminist movements in France, much like in the US and the UK, were sparked in the 1960’s by activism countering the wars in Algeria and Vietnam. Women rebelled against sexual division of labour among activists and renounced prominent sexism in New Left organizations in France. Shortly after in 1970, the Mouvement de Libération des Femmes was established and headed the contemporary women’s movement. Today, both contraceptives and abortions have been legalized in France, and multiple laws surrounding breastfeeding have been established to protect women’s rights. These laws require workplaces to have separate rooms for women to breastfeed that are clean and have water, heat, and seats that are suitable for breastfeeding. These laws seem to support and encourage breastfeeding in the workplace, but France continues to have more mothers switching to formula earlier. Data taken in 2016 by UNICEF showed that while 81 percent of mothers in the UK and 74.4 percent in the US attempt to breastfeed, that number drops to only 63 percent of mothers in France, and typically stop after just 17 weeks. This trend continues when comparing how many mothers continue to breastfeed at three months, six months, and one year. This may not be remarkable considering the generous maternity leave offered by companies in the UK, averaging at just under a year of paid leave. However, the US seems to contradict this narrative by providing only

12 weeks of unpaid leave to mothers, reinforcing the enigma of what drives France's low breastfeeding rates, if not their access to maternity leave.

Eager to get back to work, it seems as though French women are more concerned with maintaining their careers than giving into societal expectations of "good mothers" to stay home and breastfeed. Social movements and institutional barriers tend to be at odds when it comes to enabling women's autonomy. However, this is not the case in France where the societal pressure to stay home maintaining the "good mother" facade has been removed and simultaneously facilitated women in the workplace. This is demonstrated by a number of factors, one of which being the country's below average length of maternity leave, at just 16 weeks combined both before and after the birth of the first child, as recorded by the European Parliament. Additionally, less than 20 percent of births in France occur at "Baby-friendly" hospitals. These are hospitals that correspond with WHO's Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative (BFHI), which informs new mothers of the importance of breastfeeding and enables them to breastfeed within a half-hour of birth. Over 35 percent of Europe implements this initiative, leaving France, as well as the US, below that average. At first glance, these statistics seem to be a disadvantage to French mothers; however, women who have jobs at the beginning of their pregnancies return to their careers, with little to no guilt over the quality of care their child will receive. A study conducted by the EDEN mother-child cohort perceived a correlation between the likelihood of French mothers to return to work within the first year of their child's life and their socioeconomic status. Mothers with more resources, including access to childcare, were more likely to return to work quicker after the birth of their child. In turn, this likely affects the rates at which these women stop breastfeeding.

Case Selection

My goal is to demonstrate the link between low breastfeeding rates and feminist movements in France. I will do this by researching how the rate of breastfeeding has fluctuated among French mothers since the 20th century. I have found multiple organizations that have data on this topic such as the WHO and UNICEF. In many cases, these are comparative studies including both high, middle, and low income countries which will be very useful for comparing France's averages to that of the United States and the United Kingdom. In my research, I have also found many parenting blogs in which French mothers disclose their experiences and opinions on breastfeeding in both France and the United States. This will be important to gain insight into the mentality French women share surrounding breastfeeding and the possible barriers they may face in their day to day lives and in the workplace.

In addition to finding data on breastfeeding, I will also research French feminist movements and how they have evolved since the 20th century, specifically addressing women's reproductive rights and laws. Contraceptives were legalized in 1967 in France during the second wave of feminist movements followed shortly by the legalization of abortion in 1975. I am hoping to see a trend between some of these dates and the rates of breastfeeding. Additionally, La Leche League is now an international activist group promoting breastfeeding that was initially founded in France. Their past and modern work will be crucial to analyze in relation to low breastfeeding rates in France. I am most interested in researching whether this group was founded in an attempt to address these low statistics and whether there are more factors influencing this issue than I originally perceived.

Hypothesis

At this point in my research, I hypothesize that with the rise in feminism in France, French mother's likelihood to breastfeed has declined.

Limitations

Determining whether I will be able to truly compare breastfeeding numbers or the general opinion and tendency of French mothers to breastfeed has yet to be seen. If I were to instead measure the willingness of French mothers to breastfeed, I would need to ascertain a method to quantitatively measure their sentiments and attitudes. Additionally, while I have seen that breastfeeding rates in France have slightly increased since 2000, it has largely been contributed to a spike in obesity which encouraged mothers to breastfeed and avoid formula in response. This will be a limitation in the analyzation of data and obtaining accurate results.

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