



Infant feeding: Medicalization, the state and techniques of the body



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines infant feeding in relation to three core concerns: its medicalization, normalization by technologies of the state, and its expression through techniques of the body. This three-tiered focus allows for a respective focus on how medicine exercises authority over spheres of life not previously considered medical; the internalisation of the state's disciplinary regimes and their perpetuation through the use of normalising judgement in practice; and the minute practices of everyday infant nurture, and what these say about the development of specific types of people. In so doing, we build on a stream of feminist scholarship on infant feeding since the 1980s, but we also diverge, in that our focus is not only breastfeeding but more broadly the nourishment of infants – be this from the mother's breasts, or through lactational surrogacy, including wet-nursing and milk sharing as well as infant milks derived from other sources, animal or vegetable. To this, we expand our view beyond milks to include the feeding of other foodstuffs and the absorption of nourishment through other-than-oral nourishing practices. In so doing, we highlight the epistemologies that underscore these practices, and problematize the ontological premises of the concept of nurture.

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Introduction

This special issue examines infant feeding in relation to three core concerns: its medicalization, normalization by technologies of the state, and its expression through techniques of the body. There are clear overlaps between these areas, but this three-tiered approach allows for a respective focus on 1) how medicine exercises authority over areas of life not previously considered medical; 2) the internalisation of the state's disciplinary regimes and their perpetuation through the use of normalising judgement in practice; and finally, 3) the micro-levels, and minute practices of everyday infant nurture, and what these say about the development of specific types of people. In so doing, we build on a stream of feminist scholarship on breastfeeding since the 1980s, but we also diverge, in that our focus is not only breastfeeding but more broadly the nourishment of infants – be this from the birth mother's breasts, or through what Tanya Cassidy (2015) has recently called 'lactational surrogacy', including thereby wet-nursing and milk sharing as well as infant milks derived from other sources, animal and vegetable. To this, we expand our view beyond milks to include the feeding of other foodstuffs and the absorption of nourishment through massage, bathing, the reciting of blessings and even, in one case, rubbing the underbelly of the tongue. In canvassing these other-than-oral nourishing practices, we highlight the epistemologies that underscore

them, and problematise the ontological premises of the concept of nurture itself.

To date, much feminist scholarship on infant feeding has been concerned with the controversies between breast and commercial formula feeding, and rightly so given the ways in which formula feeding has so often been demonstrated to ensnare women into relations of medical and state control, capitalist markets, industrial conceptions of time and the body, and not least, given the devastating consequences for infant survival. Another generation of women, distrustful of the medical establishment, the state and multinational corporations, turned to breastfeeding as the 'natural' alternative which offered benefits for infant and maternal health. Yet these efforts at breastfeeding advocacy have also been folded into systems of medical and state authority, as well as social hierarchies of race and class, in ways that have been demonstrably problematic. Aside from the question of breast or bottle there are, of course, a great many other feeding practices that have been drawn upon to nourish infants across different times and places, which have slipped out from view. In this special issue, we offer fresh empirical material to engage these long-standing controversies, but from these three vantage points which, we suggest, open out new routes of inquiry.

A whistle-stop review

Reviewing the foundational body of work on infant feeding, chiefly on breastfeeding, the field divides into historical studies and contemporary analyses. First among the historical studies is Valerie Fildes' (1986) *Breasts, Bottles and Babies: A History of Infant Feeding*. This book was

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ground-breaking in bringing together paediatric, midwifery and religious texts and child-rearing advice books alongside private notes, letters and diaries between 1500 and 1800. Fildes documented patterns of infant feeding in Western Europe in considerable detail, highlighting shifts towards an earlier initiation of breastfeeding, the spread of wet-nursing and then, at the end of the period, its progressive replacement by artificial feeding. She linked these changes to new medical recommendations, the pronouncements of the Church, the trickling-down of fashions from the higher classes, and the forces of economic circumstance and gender and generational hierarchies at the level of the household. Fildes insists on the importance of this period because, as European domination spread, European norms demonstrably influenced practices across the rest of the world (a point developed by King & Ashworth, 1987, and see below).

The United States has also presented a very rich site for historical investigation. Rima Apple's (1987) *Mothers and Medicine: A Social History of Infant Feeding* documented the shift from breastfeeding to artificial bottle feeding in late 19th and early 20th century America, emphasizing the increasingly specialised profession of paediatrics and the expansion of commercial infant foods, in a context where paediatricians controlled women's understanding of the complicated 'percentage' formulas only they could administer as breastmilk substitutes. Janet Golden's (2001) *A Social History of Wet Nursing in America: From Breast to Bottle* explored the displacement of wet-nursing by artificial feeding, detailing the economic relationships between wet-nurses, their employers, physicians, and the often tragic consequences for the survival of wet-nurses' own birth children. Most recently, Amy Bentley's (2014) *Inventing Baby Food* examines the proliferation of commercial baby foods in post-war America, seeing these canned foods as apt preparation for the highly processed, minimally nutritious and calorie-dense food cultures of the United States.

Among the contemporary analyses, Gabrielle Palmer's (1988) *The Politics of Breastfeeding* offered a searing critique of the marketing of infant formula companies in the developing world and of the distorting effects of corporate-funded research on our understandings of the health effects of breast versus bottle feeding. Whilst agreeing about the problematic ways in which women have been controlled by the medical establishment, state authorities and infant formula corporations, Vanessa Maher's (1992) *The Anthropology of Breastfeeding* added a critique of breastfeeding promotion efforts for disregarding the interests of mothers and treating them as a mere vehicle for improving the health of infants. Maher emphasized the recurrent finding that infant health in developing countries is determined more powerfully not by whether a baby was breastfed or not, but by the wealth of the household she is born into. She charged that, in situations where women and children are already side-lined in the allocation of food and other scarce resources, admonitions that women breastfeed their infants seemingly expect women to deplete their bodily resources in order to compensate impossibly for the inequalities of their societies and households.

In the mid-1990s, attention turned to the inequalities between women that are, arguably, exacerbated by the ways in which breastfeeding advocacy is taken up. Treading between these controversies, Linda Blum (1993) argued in the context of the United States that it is problematic if the positive, sensuous and non-commodified experience of one's body that breastfeeding can offer women is a 'luxury' enjoyed chiefly by White, middle class, married women. Similarly, Penny van Esterik (1994) endorsed breastfeeding advocacy as a feminist prerogative, but highlighted how breastfeeding involves contradictions that the women's movement is still grappling with, such as, perhaps most stubbornly, the tensions between liberal and maternalist politics (later, see also Hausman, 2004, and Wolf, 2006). The mid-1990s also saw a re-centring of biology in the debates. Biological anthropologists Stuart-Macadam and Dettwyler (1995) warned of 'the perils of ignoring the "bio" factor of the biocultural equation' (p. 1). Obermeyer and Castle's (1996) discussion of the 'insufficient milk syndrome' drew links between the biological mechanisms involved in the supply

of milk, behavioural factors like the number of feeds per day, length of feeds and intervals between them, and wider social inequalities such as patriarchal family structures, poverty and powerlessness. Mara Mabilia's (2002) study of the Wagogo in Tanzania endorsed the biocultural reality of Gogo women's fears about the heating and spoiling effects of postpartum sexual activity on their breastmilk by linking these fears to the inhibitory effect of stress on the 'let-down reflex'. Attempting to bridging the gap between our ancestral heritage and current practice, Ball and Russell's (2012) work suggests how 'new cultural environments' have compromised the care conditions that characterised 'ancestral environments' pointing out that emulating some of the latter is 'crucial to the operation of our mammalian, primate, and hominid physiology' (p. 255).

More recently, feminist scholarship has moved further to critique the idea of breastfeeding as 'natural'. Liamputtong's (2007) collection *Infant Feeding Practices: A Cross-Cultural Perspective* and Dykes and Hall-Moran's (2009) *Infant and Young Child Feeding* highlight contradictions whereby breastfeeding, though constructed as a 'natural activity', is simultaneously also deemed to need improvement through the assistance of experts. Furthermore, the studies in these collections show that for a great many women across the world, 'natural' breastfeeding is only enabled by the intervention of manifold technologies ranging from the consumption of galactogogues to the pumping of milk to increase supply (see especially Avishai, 2007). Faircloth (2013) critiques the contradictions between British 'attachment parents' discourse about long-term breastfeeding as an evolutionary inheritance from our hominid past, and their 'cherry-picking' of the hominid inheritance as part of their identity work in affiliating to their particular 'parenting camp'. If being 'natural' has been shown to be profoundly cultural and, arguably, in need of cultural critique (see Strathern, 1992), then so is the doctrine that 'breast is best'. In her recent appraisal of research on the health benefits of breastfeeding for infants, Wolf (2011) finds the medical research to be surprisingly equivocal, at least in North America. She charges that this has not filtered into public culture because of the obsession with personal responsibility and perfect mothering.

Mirroring the swell of historical interest in wet-nursing, the most recent turn in feminist scholarship on breastfeeding seems to emphasize breastfeeding as a collective accomplishment rather than the act of a birth mother-infant dyad alone, with Shaw and Bartlett's (2010) collection *Giving Breastmilk* shining a light on breastmilk exchange, Tomori's (2014) *Night-time Breastfeeding: An American Cultural Dilemma* emphasizing the significance of husbands/fathers in mothers' breastfeeding trajectories, and Cassidy and El Tom's (2015) collection *Ethnographies of Breastfeeding* including a number of case studies of milk sharing and milk banking as instances of 'lactational surrogacy'. Concepts of giving have moved centre-stage. While Mabilia (2005), drawing from Marcel Mauss (1969), discusses the ambivalent gifting relationship established between the mother and infant as a result of the exchange-demand of breastfeeding, Giles (2010) takes up Jacques Godbout's (1998) *The World of the Gift* to explore how the human subject is formed through ethical relations, as interpersonal reciprocity and openness to others transform strangers into familiars. Her argument is directed to those who give milk to other mothers. However, it may also be a useful way of understanding how infant-others are made into kin (Carsten, 1997; de Graeve & Longman, 2013; Vilaça, 2002). Thus, even beyond Euro-American ontologies of biomedical ethics, commoditization and altruism in the sharing of breastmilk, the wider (environmentally-extended) ethics of an enlarged sharing community, based on a cosmivision of mutual trust and reciprocity in which infants also engage, is one consistently brought to bear in discussions of child development and feeding in contexts of subsistence sociality (see *inter alia* Overing, 1989; Gow, 1989; Hewlett, Lamb, Leyendecker, & Schölmerich, 2000; Bird-David, 2008). In such contexts, the sharing of breastmilk with non-humans is common practice (see Bird-David, 2008, p. 534). This, Bird-David (2008) argues, breaks down any clear cut distinction between the human and the animal subject and, by

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