



The Role of Cultural Factors in Human Breastfeeding: Adaptive Behaviour or Biopower ?

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ABSTRACT The positive effects of exclusive breastfeeding on infant health are increasingly demonstrated by medical researchers, yet the majority of mothers worldwide do not conform with infant feeding recommendations published by the World Health Organisation. This article considers the implications of cultural variability in breastfeeding in both nutritional and non-nutritional contexts. It is argued that exclusive breastfeeding in humans cannot be considered “natural”, “traditional” or even the norm. Consistent with other primate species, breastfeeding shows considerable physiological and behavioural variability, which is predicted to allow adaptation to local ecological conditions. However, breastfeeding also contributes to the development of social relations, including the construction of infant and maternal identity. From these joint perspectives, advocacy of “optimal infant nutrition” can be seen both as the adaptive distribution of beneficial information, and as the mechanism by which women are subjected to biopower. Those working in medicine and nutritional science have generally failed to appreciate that breastfeeding concerns more than nutrition, and must improve their understanding of human behaviour if their aims of improving health are to be achieved.

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