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Going With and Against the Flow: A Dialectical Reading of Sustained Breastfeeding

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Abstract

In the act of breastfeeding their children beyond the age of two years women aspire to ideals for the future of the next generation. They seek physical health, emotional wellbeing, freedom of speech and human connection for their children. Yet the road is not clear for the realisation of such aspirations, and women develop various ways of managing the challenges they encounter on their breastfeeding journeys. In the face of social stigma about nursing a child beyond toddlerhood many women do not disclose their breastfeeding to others. Some encounter difficulties in the breastfeeding practice itself and an absence of places in which to talk openly about those challenges. I draw Julia Kristeva’s notion of abjection into Jameson’s dialectic of ideology and utopia in order to develop an interpretative methodology for reading women’s words about sustained breastfeeding. This enables manifestations of stigma and maternal guilt to be situated within an historical and social context. It also facilitates a particular way of understanding how women attempt to shift - to sublimate, in psychoanalytical terms - the tensions they encounter in the context of breastfeeding, into more manageable spaces. Such sublimatory practices include ways of talking and writing that hold the potential for influencing social change.
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# Contents

Abstract ii
Acknowledgements iii
Preface viii
Notes on Terminology x

Chapter One. Introducing Sustained Breastfeeding 1

Breastfeeding Past Infancy: Advocacy and Ambivalence 2
Sustained Breastfeeding and Physical Health 4
Psychoanalytical Discourses 6
Attachment Parenting and Evolutionary Discourses 11
Eroticism and the Visibility of Sustained Breastfeeding 14
Discussion 15
Overview of the Thesis 17

Chapter Two. Theory and Methodology 19

The Dialectic of Utopia and Ideology: Fredric Jameson 20
Abjection: Julia Kristeva 24
Utopia, Ideology and Abjection 27
Approaching Methodology 29
Research Methods 32
Researcher Reflexivity 37

Chapter Three. Introduction to the Women’s Narratives 40

“Going with the Flow” 41
Cross-Cultural Imaginings 43
Narratives as Expressions of “Cultural Revolution” 44
Preface

One of the most memorable moments of my eleven consecutive years of breastfeeding emerged in the context not of breastfeeding my own children, but of watching a video clip of another woman breastfeeding her seven year old. The sensations in my body as I watched this child latch onto her mother’s breast unsettled me considerably. I recall feeling somewhat repulsed by it. Yet at that time I was happily breastfeeding a child of around four years of age without qualms, and I was acutely aware of the discomforting effects that my own breastfeeding practice had upon others. I could not rationalise, nor explain, the feelings the video clip had aroused in me. Less still could I justify them. I knew that in terms of my views on breastfeeding I had no grounds upon which to dictate to another the age at which a child should stop breastfeeding. Yet there was something that disturbed me viscerally about that video footage. The very parameters of who I thought I was were being challenged.

In that moment of cognitive and corporeal dissonance I glimpsed at the apparent impossibility of utopia. I had been building a beautiful world over years of continually breastfeeding my children, of (as I saw it) responding to their needs. This world was inspired by the idea that my children would choose when they stopped breastfeeding rather than my imposing what could only be an arbitrary ending upon them. Yet there was no room in my vision for this other mother and child’s experience on a similar journey. Not only was there no room for it, I was revolted by it.

In many ways this thesis has grown out of that moment. It is an attempt to give voice to the aspirations and conflicts experienced by women who breastfeed their children beyond toddlerhood. In that context the experience of being ‘defiled’ as a lactating woman proves pivotal. It is my premise that, whilst it might be possible to render aspects of sustained breastfeeding more socially
acceptable, attention also needs to be given to how such visceral rejections of others occur. Though focussing upon processes of jettisoning and defilement, the potential emerges for considering how those processes might operate differently in order that more welcoming ways of negotiating the terrain of lactation and mothering more generally might begin to emerge.
Notes on terminology

In this thesis I have tended to use the term “sustained breastfeeding” to refer to the breastfeeding of a child aged two or more years. At times I also talk of “long-term breastfeeding” in such a context. The choice of terminology has been influenced by the work of Ann Sinnott (2010). She suggests that, whatever duration of breastfeeding is being referred to, phrases such as “extended breastfeeding” and “prolonged breastfeeding” “imply the normalcy of a shorter period” (2010, p.1). The terms “sustained” and “long-term” in relation to breastfeeding do not entirely avoid such connotations, as they pre-suppose that breastfeeding for a period such as two or more years is indeed sustained or long-term rather than simply the norm. However, I have found an absence of other appropriate lexica. I have avoided referring to “full-term” or “term breastfeeding” as, in my reading, such terminology implies a point (a “term”) at which breastfeeding is fully or naturally complete e.g. when a child weans him/herself from the breast. I prefer to understand breastfeeding and weaning as subtle and complex processes involving interaction between at least two people in a socio-cultural context.

The term weaning has multiple and often contradictory uses (Greiner, 1996). In this study I speak of weaning in terms of the cessation of breastfeeding, rather than the introduction of other foods into a child’s diet. However, I acknowledge that the cessation of breastfeeding, and therefore weaning, tends to be a process rather than a singular event (see, for example, Bengson, 2000). Gribble (2008) noted in her study of long-term breastfeeding that “breastfeeding was sometimes discontinuous, with children weaning from days to years before resuming breastfeeding” (p.5).