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**BREASTFEEDING FOR THE FIRST TIME:  
A CRITICAL-INTERPRETATIVE PERSPECTIVE ON  
EXPERIENCE AND THE BODY POLITIC**

**A dissertation presented in  
partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in Social Anthropology at Massey University**

**Annette Noble BEASLEY  
1993**

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## ABSTRACT

Biomedical discourse constructs the process of breastfeeding as purely physiological, assessing and understanding individual experience by its proximity to or divergence from a norm which biomedicine itself defines. Through a process of medicalisation, this discourse has taken on hegemonic status. This thesis explores the constitution of the breastfeeding body as a body politic, as the site where a number of discourses - hegemonic and counter hegemonic - converge and articulate with physical processes. The study draws on three sets of data: first, a survey of the literature on breastfeeding which demonstrates how even the best intentioned cultural studies are permeated and formed by the biomedical hegemony; second, the experience of the author as a mother who has breastfed all her children with the growing realisation of her own body as the site of struggle; and third, the experiences of four first-time breastfeeding mothers and their reflections on this experience during the first three months of their infant's lives. The investigation presents an experiential account of the process of breastfeeding focusing on the experience of physiological functioning, relationships with significant others and experiences of conflict and resolution. It adopts this strategy deliberately as a counter hegemonic one to demonstrate the irreducibility of the experience of breastfeeding to that constructed by biomedicine.

**KEYWORDS:** BIOMEDICINE; BODY; BREASTFEEDING; DISCOURSE;  
ETHNOGRAPHY; EXPERIENCE; HABITUS; HEGEMONY;  
MEDICALISATION; SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

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