

THE DANCE OF NURTURE: EMBODYING INFANT FEEDING

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A sequel to *From Virtue to Vice: Explaining Anorexia as an activity*, this book examines breastfeeding and young child feeding from a set of related biocultural assumptions. Once again, we argue that the activities of feeding and eating are embedded in processes of nurturance, reciprocity, intimacy and commensality – terms that derive their meanings from local contexts. These processes provide a framework for examining nurture as an activity, and an object of anthropological investigation.

Processes of nurture have escaped the scrutiny of analysts who are locked into different ways of thinking about food and eating. Anorexics, as we demonstrated in *From Virtue to Vice...*, caught in their spirals of self-starvation, reject these processes of nurturance, reciprocity, intimacy and commensality, which characterize breastfeeding, the first act of nurturing newborns. All other acts of sharing food and feeding others are modeled on breastfeeding, this paradigmatic act of nurture.

In the second book, we further develop the idea that eating and feeding are morally charged activities. Breastfeeding is “good to think” with and through. The process is an example of giving of oneself, literally and not just figuratively. Mothers nurture infants, first within their bodies, and later by breastfeeding or bottle feeding. These processes constitute the dance of nurture. A dance has steps, rhythm and dancers. Mothers come to breastfeed with an already formed unique embodied “constitution”, just as dance steps exist before individual dancers execute the steps. Infants, too, develop unique constitutions. The challenge of breastfeeding is to negotiate how the unique constitutions of mothers and infants regulate each other. This aspect of co-regulation has an important and unrecognized part to play in defining the activity of breastfeeding. Co-regulation is easier to establish with breastfeeding than with bottle feeding, because of the complexity of the hormonal and physiological aspects of lactation that choreograph the dance of nurture.

Making use of stories that women in North America and elsewhere tell about their breastfeeding and infant feeding experiences, and accounts of breastfeeding advocacy efforts, the book challenges past approaches to breastfeeding as a lifestyle choice, and unpacks a complex reality, immune to public health directives that “breast is best”. Using cross-cultural ethnographic examples, interviews with women about their infant feeding experiences, and published narratives about breastfeeding, we place infant feeding practices in local contexts. In addition, we examine efforts to promote breastfeeding and the national and international bureaucracies that work to “improve” infant feeding practices globally.

Relation between the manuscripts: By collaborating on this second book, we hope to broaden the range of meanings that have been associated with breastfeeding, to open up the metaphor so that it can take us deeper into understanding the human condition. For, like eating disorders, the interpretive context for breastfeeding has been too narrow, too constrained by biomedical, patriarchal and enlightenment thinking.

Both cases illustrate instances of nurture, or the failure of nurture, and the theoretical arguments for the two cases were developed together. We found that examining modernity’s impact on breastfeeding clarifies its impact on anorexia and vice versa. The two books make related cases for moving beyond nature vs. nurture dualism to considerations of the lifecycle. They both use

the same holistic methodology and biocultural approach. The definitions and conceptual tools are consistent across the two books.

Both cases faced the same conceptual roadblocks – dualistic thinking, reductionism, the search for single underlying causes, and interventions that don't work. While interventions to assist anorexics fail to take adequate note of the complexities of a particular moment in the lifecourse – adolescence, breastfeeding interventions often fail to address the complexities of the reproductive continuum, cutting pregnancy off from childbirth and postpartum, cutting breastfeeding off from complementary feeding, and from nurture, interdependence and commensality.

The Dance of Nurture will be completed after *From Virtue to Vice*.. is published, and will build on its theoretical foundation, citing but not repeating its arguments. *The Dance of Nurture* is more cross-cultural and of necessity, more explicitly gender-focused. The two books have substantive and theoretical linkages. Dividing mind from body, reason from emotion, public from private and individual from society makes both eating disorders and breastfeeding incomprehensible in the modern world. Prior work on both subjects is flawed because it begins from the assumption that humans are autonomous self-interested beings, underestimating the moral complexity of eating and feeding others. We use breastfeeding and eating disorders as instances of nurture and the failure of nurture to demonstrate the importance of anthropological approaches to understanding the human condition, and to demonstrate why anthropology matters in the modern world.

Timeline: We expect to complete the manuscript by August, 2012, ideally a year following the publication of *From Virtue to Vice*. However, partial drafts or detailed outlines of most chapters are completed. We expect the manuscript to run 280 pages.

Outline of the Chapters

In eight chapters grouped in four sections, our book offers a comprehensive approach to breastfeeding and child nurture from an anthropological perspective.

Section I: Puzzles

- Ch 1 Recovering Nurture
- Ch 2 Cartesian Confusions

Section II: Contexts

- Ch 3 Nurture as Biocultural Imperative
- Ch 4 Entering the Commensal Circle

Section III: Diversities

- Ch 5 Local Regimens
- Ch 6 Modern Intrusions on Nurture

Section IV: Interventions

- Ch 7 Mastering Nurture: Trying to get Nurture Right
- Ch 8 Negotiating Nurture Today

SECTION I (PUZZLES) introduces the argument and develops our approach to nurture. It identifies the theoretical baggage that has complicated the study of child feeding, including reliance on binary oppositions to address the paradoxical puzzles emerging from embodied experiences like breastfeeding. The first chapter begins with personal and public stories about breastfeeding and child feeding, and demonstrates that, like anorexia, breastfeeding must be considered as a biocultural whole. It must be understood in its own terms in relation to its place in contemporary life. The second chapter shows how centuries of dualistic thinking have made it impossible to interpret activities like breastfeeding. The dualisms that entangle breastfeeding and make it difficult to explain include the separation of mind from body, self from other, individual from society and public from private. This theoretical baggage has had a negative impact on the way breastfeeding is thought and talked about.

SECTION II (CONTEXTS) analyzes breastfeeding as a social act, and nurture as part of our primate heritage. It provides evidence for the argument that humans feel sympathy for one another, that as social primates, we are inherently social, cultural and moral beings, not just hastily made-over apes. Chapter 3 develops the argument that we survive as humans due to the nurture of others – first maternal nurture, and then care by others. The first section grounds the argument in recent research on primate evolution, infant development and nutrition. We show how the activity of breastfeeding is highly contingent – a parent’s funeral, an impatient midwife, an unappeased spirit – can set in motion a chain of events that seem to have “a life of their own”. These contingent experiences demonstrate the weakness of characterizing infant feeding decisions as options to bottle feed or breastfeed. Chapter four explores nurturing others and sharing food as part of the commensal core of humanity. We place infant feeding at the centre of this commensal core of families and communities. Beginning with breastfeeding and child feeding, we demonstrate how differently constructed food systems manage the work of care and nurture, and how this work fits into broader systems of feeding self and others.

SECTION III (DIVERSITIES) explores how and why context matters. Breastfeeding in a village in Thailand or Tanzania provides a very different context from breastfeeding in Chicago, London or Montreal; in the former, breastfeeding is accomplished within breastfeeding cultures where using alternatives to maternal breastfeeding have very clear, but rapidly changing meanings; in the latter, breastfeeding is accomplished in bottle feeding cultures where a wide range of alternative products are available and promoted. With ethnographic examples, primarily from Southeast Asia, we show how nurture is played out in different local regimens, and how child feeding is integrated into different life worlds. Chapter six shows how modernity disrupts the contexts that make nurture possible. Modernity teaches us to be, and to see ourselves as separate autonomous individuals with competing interests, not as links in a larger cooperative chain – the lifecycle. But modernity does not erase the fact that we exist all by virtue of the nurture of others.

SECTION IV (INTERVENTIONS) locates infant feeding practices as part of modernity’s march of progress and improvement, by examining national and international interventions to promote breastfeeding and optimal young child feeding. Bureaucracies try to master nurture by offering support to mothers, and by trying to make better use of local knowledge. The problems around policy-making are further explored by examining how modern bureaucratic practices can disrupt nurture by the use of “one size fits all” approaches. But even marketing codes fail to protect breastfeeding from aggressive promotion of artificial baby milks. But in the end, it is the open-endedness of nurturing practices that need to be understood. In the last chapter, we return to the biocultural model to remind us that, as social primates, we adapt to the group. This means that infant feeding is constantly being negotiated. With breastfeeding, some of that negotiation is physiological and it always requires co-regulation between mothers and infants. In the concluding section, we consider advocacy efforts to reposition breastfeeding in the context of broader negotiations around feeding and supporting others. We look for creative ways to encourage conditions where nurture thrives and identify ways to unlearn modern practices that undercut nurture.

Significance in Relation to Other Literature

Although the breastfeeding literature is voluminous, our work stands alone in applying anthropology's comparative and holistic perspectives to the problem of child feeding. No recent books address breastfeeding from a biocultural perspective; we study breastfeeding as a nurture-into-nature biocultural hybrid that has a double historical life of its own – one within every mother-infant dyad and another within different societies entering the modern era. Other works opt for a biological or a cultural view rather than studying their interface.

We position this book in relation to a number of literatures, some of which we draw on and review in the book. There has been a growing interest in breastfeeding since the 70s, with a wide range of books for mothers providing advice on breastfeeding and child feeding. Since the many editions of Dr. Spock books, these advice books, as well as magazines have provided generations of women with expert advice on “scientific motherhood”, including instructions on how to feed infants and young children.

The first widely used book on Breastfeeding, *Human Milk in the Modern World* (D&E Jelliffe, 1978) combined medical and political approaches to the subject of breastfeeding. Interdisciplinary edited readers such as Stuart-McAdam and Dettwyler's book *Breastfeeding: Bicultural Perspectives* (1995) provide expert papers on different aspects of breastfeeding from various biological or cultural perspectives, but provide no holistic explanation for the ambiguous position of breastfeeding in the modern world. Breastfeeding books have now expanded into books on young child feeding, recognizing that the introduction of complementary food is a critical component often missing from policy and programs on breastfeeding. With intensive policy development in this area since the 1980s, research reports are constantly in the media. WHO and UNICEF reports on infant feeding do not get wide circulation and apply primarily to policy-making contexts.

Books on advocacy and new social movements often use the breast-bottle controversy as a case study of successful consumer activism. Our book provides an insider's view of the breastfeeding movement, at the same time, placing it in a critical perspective. Edited readers on child survival, child feeding, or breastfeeding, all with different political and disciplinary perspectives, fail to provide a theory that puts the pieces back together, and takes context - biological, cultural and historical – into account. None address the idea of embodied nurture that motivates this book. As with anorexia, there is also a substantial literature on personal narratives about breastfeeding, often very literary and poetic.

There have been several scholarly analyses of breastfeeding from specific theoretical perspectives – feminist, *Mother's Milk* (B Hausman, 2003), psychological – *Maternal Desire* (de Marneffe, 2004), historical – *A History of the Breast* (Yalom, 1997), *Don't Kill Your Baby* (Wolf, 2001). These books have all been useful to us, but they often lack reference to the evolutionary or biological context, so well articulated in Hrdy's *Mother Nature* (1999), for example.

In 1992, Maher brought a group of ethnographic papers together in *The Anthropology of Breastfeeding*. This book hinted at the diversity of infant feeding practices worldwide, but offered no context or explanation for the diversity. Other ethnographic works that have included breastfeeding include A. Gottlieb's *The Afterlife is Where We Come From* (2004) and *Hunger and Shame* by M Howard and A Millard. No literature to our knowledge tries to place breastfeeding in the global north and global south into the same framework. They are left as very separate fields, the global north stressing “the dark side of breastfeeding” or romanticizing it; the global south stressing hunger, infant mortality and interventions to improve feeding practices.

Audience

By detailing how culture and biology interact in child feeding, our findings address medical and nutritional anthropology, gender, public anthropology and international development interventions. Our intended audience includes the educated reader who has a personal or professional stake in child nurture or women's reproductive health. It may also be of interest to a broader audience of families considering infant feeding practices. It should be of special interest to health care professionals, social scientists including anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, women's studies and policy makers. Breastfeeding and breastfeeding advocacy is a useful case study for classes in public policy, health policy, women's health, medical anthropology, nursing, social movements, and international development. It may be suitable for classroom use in nursing schools. Colleagues still use *Beyond the Breast-Bottle Controversy* (Van Esterik 1989, Rutgers), although the research is no longer new. Combined with a textbook or an edited reader in a discipline, this book will provide students with the opportunity to explore one problem in depth, in all its complexity. We also envision classes using *From Virtue to Vice* with *The Dance of Nurture* together, in upper level or graduate courses, as examples of how to develop biocultural models in two very different cases. Teachers could then consider having students apply a biocultural model to other topics such as obesity, childcare, autism, or elder care, for example.

Biographical Sketches

In this second collaboration, two anthropologists, both drawn to public anthropology - one a breastfeeding activist, the other, the father of a recovered anorexic - continue to explore the challenges of nurture in the modern world.

Penny Van Esterik — I am a Canadian anthropologist, born in Toronto and trained at University of Toronto (BA) and University of Illinois (MA, PhD). After 2 years as a CUSO volunteer in Thailand, I went to graduate school to study the anthropology of Southeast Asia. I met Richard at various Thai Studies meetings, and we found we had many similar approaches to the discipline and to our individual projects. I teach nutritional anthropology, advocacy anthropology and feminist theory at York University, Toronto. Past books published include *Beyond the Breast-Bottle Controversy* (on infant feeding in developing countries), *Materializing Thailand* (on cultural interpretations of gender in Thailand), *Taking Refuge: Lao Buddhists in North America* (on the reintroduction of Buddhism by Lao refugees to North America), and *Food and Culture: a reader*, edited with Carole Counihan (recently updated). I am a founding member of WABA (World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action) and have a long history of advocacy work with this NGO on gender and issues and contemporary challenges to infant feeding such as environmental contaminants and HIV/AIDS.

Richard A. O'Connor — Born in Washington State, I grew up in Northern Virginia, just outside the other Washington. I did my BA at the College of William and Mary where I discovered that what I'd always loved was called anthropology. I went to Cornell University (MA, PhD) where I did thesis work on Thai urbanism via fieldwork in Buddhist temples in Bangkok. I subsequently wrote *A Theory of Indigenous Southeast Asian Urbanism* (1983), and expanding my research from cities into the countryside led to "Agricultural Change and Ethnic Succession in Southeast Asian States". My daughter's anorexia abruptly changed the course of my research. Since her recovery in 1999, I have devoted my scholarship to the study of eating disorders. When I began to realize the size and complexity of this project I sought the collaboration of Penny, an old friend from Thai Studies. Since graduate school I have taught at Sewanee, a small liberal arts college in Tennessee, where I treat my teaching as seriously as my research. I am also a Senior Fellow for the Center for Liberal Education and Community Engagement at the University of the South.