7 Control and Resistance in Infant Feeding Regimes

... breastfeeding is a feminist issue because it encourages women's self reliance, confirms a woman's power to control her own body, challenges models of women as consumers and sex objects, requires a new interpretation of women's work and encourages solidarity among women. (Van Esterik, 1989: 69)

The findings of my study and the arguments I have presented here suggest that breast-feeding does not always represent these advantages to women in Western cultures. It is the intention of this chapter to review the complex discourses of power and control, discussed in earlier chapters, within which infant feeding practices have developed, and to explore the ways in which women are able to resist these. I argue here that it is important to recognize the complexity of women's situations with regard to infant feeding and to avoid the essentialism implicit in even feminist accounts such as that of Van Esterik. At the heart of her argument is a deeper foundation: 'The capacity to nurture infants and others, and to make things grow, is the basis of women's social production; it is basic to women's physiological and psychological well-being, self esteem and economic self reliance' (ibid: 68–9).

Here what women frequently do, 'nurture others' is merged with what they 'are', their being. The essence of 'woman' here is nurturing and what is fought for are the conditions in which this can be valued. As I observed in chapter one, most feminist comment on infant feeding appears to approximate to this way of thinking. I set out in my study to examine this more closely particularly from the point of view of the kinds of women who have long been seen as a problem
with regard to low rates of breast-feeding. This chapter and the next will examine the meaning and implications of breast and bottle feeding for the women who adopt them. For example, it is important to address the question of whether breast-feeding is an important part of women’s real self, ‘the very core of our identity’ (Palmer, 1988: 13).

DISCOURSES OF INFANT FEEDING

I drew attention, in chapter one, to Foucault’s questions concerning the links between discourses and power relations: ‘What were the most immediate, the most local power relations at work? How did they make possible these kind of discourses and conversely how were these discourses used to support power relations?’ (Foucault, 1981: 97). It was proposed in that chapter to examine the discursive field concerning infant feeding as one which is also a conversation about femininity. In each of the chapters that followed I have suggested aspects of this ‘conversation’ in the form of texts, practices, and beliefs which shape the meaning of women’s experience. These have provided a highly complex and sometimes contradictory web of expectations. One important dimension of these is the idea of femininity as a ‘natural’ entity, but one which must be worked at by women themselves and by others such as health professionals and by those who offer health advice. Women are deemed, in some of these texts and practices, to be linked to nature, and therefore outside culture and the public sphere, although they are allowed to enter these on a conditional, controlled basis. Paradoxically even their place in the private sphere is problematic in that they have to negotiate with others what they do there: men in relation to where breast-feeding can ‘safely’ be undertaken; health professionals with regard to whether they are behaving as proper mothers. In this way I have suggested that although infant feeding is deemed as ‘private’ in the sense of an unpaid domestic responsibility, it nevertheless remains a public issue. Infant feeding practices disrupt the whole notion of separate public and private domains.

In relation to breast-feeding, there has for a long time in