Social Relations Emerging from Infant Feeding:
Practices of Mothers with Strict Diets while Exclusively Breastfeeding their Children

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to examine the ways so-called ‘bio-power’ (M. Foucault 1976) works in the field of infant feeding in contemporary Japanese society. My argument will be based on research (fieldwork and interviews) that I carried out at a local, privately-operated breastfeeding consultation room in Amagasaki, Hyogo, from 2009 to 2014. The consultation room is run by an experienced and devoted midwife who specializes in breast massage and alimentary therapy. Based on the idea that what mothers eat go directly to their children via their breast milk, mothers with allergic children are encouraged not just to breastfeed exclusively but also to eat healthy and to be more knowledgeable about their food choices.

I will argue that the relationship of their practices to the workings of bio-power is ambiguous or equivocal: on the one hand, there is little doubt that their practices enhance surveillance at home. Through such technologies as the ‘obento’ system and ‘food diary’ as well as the rhetoric of ‘breast milk cannot tell a lie’, mothers are encouraged to engage in self-surveillance, even when at home alone. On the other hand, however, mothers acquire a certain strength or vitality through the very same practices. Especially in the context of increased food insecurity in infant food, it is important to note that these mothers successfully control such fear by fully committing themselves to the practice.

Key Words: infant feeding, practice, bio power