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Some Features of Women's Stories of Self and Separation

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Abstract

Since the 1950s an increasingly significant strand of stress and trauma research has been research into separation and divorce. Approaches to separation by researchers in different fields, including sociology (e.g. Orbuch 1992), psychology (eg. White, 1991) and linguistics (e.g. Potter and Wetherall, 1987), all show the evolution of post-modern philosophical trends. The overlap between these fields has increased as the social constructionist theory of language has gained prevalence. In social constructionist theory, our thought and the organization of our society are products of the language with which we think and organize ourselves. The concepts and values and beliefs of society are implicit in the language available to the individual to interpret his/her own experiences. Research into people's responses to, and interpretations of, their experiences of change has focused increasingly on the language that people actually use in natural communicative contexts, and the accounts that they develop to account for what has happened.

This research explores the language used by a group of separated women to account for their separations. The theoretical orientation of the research is social constructionist. The main analytic concept that guides the research is the notion of interpretive repertoires. These are the words and images used by a group of speakers within a society, in relation to specific issues, that invoke the global patterns of understanding of the world that inform the speaker's interpretation of those issues.

The research has four main aims. It sets out to identify the characteristics of women's experience of transition, which is their psychological reorientation in response to change. It explores the mechanics and strategies by which women adjust to their separations and the adjustment differences between "dumpers" and "dumpees" and between "newly separated" and "formerly married women". It investigates the ways in which women validate themselves and their stories both by presenting witnesses and the evidence of spokespersons for our society, and by invoking selected discourses of our society.

The research shows internal consistency between women's perceptions of a woman's nature and their interpretations of women's roles, and it shows the conflict between the perceived nature and roles of a woman and the discourse of self-actualization.

Preface & Acknowledgments

This thesis was written in the laundry of a rented cottage in Te Awanga in 1999, in the only available space between the washing machine and deep freeze. Thanks to Wendy Gordon, who lent me her late grandmother's heater, I didn't freeze during the winter.

My own separation story inspired me to undertake the project and of course, influenced my perceptions and analysis of other women's stories. What I noticed first and foremost about the data were those themes that resonated with the themes of my own story. Writing this thesis has served me in several therapeutic ways. It provided a vehicle and framework for obsessively reviewing and adjusting to my own separation, it provided a means of meeting and talking to other separated women about separation, and it helped me to withstand the shifting sands of transition, by giving me a purpose and keeping me far too busy to fall apart.

Above all I would like to thank the five participants of the project. I have lived intimately with their intimate stories and I feel very connected to them. I thank them most sincerely for their trust, openness and enthusiasm for the project.

Thanks also to the many women, my friends and colleagues, who were engaged in the project in different ways. Tania Pattison supported the project as transcriber and technician and I thank her for her excellent work. Thanks too, to Sue Chapman who lent me her dictaphone, even though she thought I should get my own.

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