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**Menopause in Context:  
A Constructivist/interpretive Perspective  
on the Attitudes, Perceptions, Expectations and Experiences  
Among Women in New Zealand**

**A thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirement  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in Social Anthropology  
at Massey University**

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## **Errata**

p16 line 5 **for** lense **read** lens

p103 line 11 **for** fledging **read** fledgling

p120 line 25 **for** trails **read** trials

p228 line 1 **for** syml **read** symptom control

p272 line 12 **for** tired **read** tried

p355 line 19 **for** practitioner's **read** practitioners

pp370-372 (Appendix 4) are in the wrong order and should be read as follows: p372,  
p371 and then p370

## ABSTRACT

This study examines the attitudes, perceptions, expectations and experience of menopause among women in New Zealand. It is based on focus groups and in-depth interviews with women aged thirty and above in the Feilding-Manawatu district and on narratives provided by respondents residing throughout the country. Additional information was collected from general practitioners, and readily accessible menopause educational programmes and material were also examined. The aim was to explore the social construction and individual experience of menopause with particular attention to the relation between the deficiency disease model and common sense knowledge about this life event. A constructivist/interpretive theoretical perspective was employed that recognises the socially constructed nature of menopause experience and accepts normative definitions of the feminine as crucial to social perception and individual experience.

Contrary to the medical view of menopause as a disease of hormone deficiency, the women maintained a common sense perception of this event as a normal, natural life-stage. Overall, their knowledge of physiological processes was limited and reflected the impact of medicalisation. Three central meanings associated with menopause were identified as mid-life and ageing, loss of fertility and health risk. Control of the menopausal body (the body politic) emerged as the central aspect of experience across the four age groups of women who defined themselves as 'in' or 'through' menopause. Against a tradition of taboo surrounding matters of female reproductive functioning and sexuality, the mechanisms or strategies of control have changed over time. There has been a shift from a strategy of stoicism (among those aged sixty and above) to the use of 'natural' strategies and hormone replacement therapy (commonly adopted by women in their fifties and forties). Each of these strategies was a response to common sense understanding of this event and accompanying social sanctions. Two broad conclusions were reached. First, that the deficiency disease model presents a linear, causal explanation of menopause which fails to recognise medical knowledge as part of the broader socio-cultural and historical processes which give meaning to this event. Second, that as women's experience of menopause occurs at the interface of socio-cultural, historical and physiological processes, the meanings of menopause are fluid and change over time.

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Approval for the research undertaken in this study was obtained from the Massey University Human Research Ethics Committee.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ABSTRACT</b>		i
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>		ii
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b>		iv
<b>LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES</b>		ix
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>		
	Personal motivation and interest	6
	Previous New Zealand research	8
	Aims and structure of the thesis	9
<b>CHAPTER 1</b>	<b>A Conceptual Classification and Review of the Literature</b>	15
	Popular literature	20
	Self-help manuals	21
	Critical accounts	22
	Biomedical/positivist orientation	26
	Humanistic/interpretive orientation	34
	Constructivist/critical orientation	47
	Conclusion	57
<b>CHAPTER 2</b>	<b>Theory and Method</b>	59
	Three theoretical orientations	59
	Biomedical/positivist	59
	Humanistic/interpretive	63
	Constructivist/critical	66
	Towards a theoretical approach	69
	The body politic	72
	Biomedical hegemony and medicalisation	73
	Common sense, agency and experience	74
	Common sense	74
	Agency	76
	Experience	76
	Study methodology	77
	Ethics	77
	Research sites - local and national	78
	The participants/respondents	80
	The women	80
	Medical practitioners	88
	New Zealand Family Planning educators	89
	Data sources and collection techniques	90
	Menopause education material	90
	Content analysis	90
	Focus groups	91
	In-depth interviews	95
	Narratives	97
	Data analysis	97

	The literature review	98
	Content analysis	98
	Focus groups	99
	In-depth interviews and respondent narratives	100
	Conclusion	100
<b>CHAPTER 3</b>	<b>Deficiency Disease or Normal Life-Stage?</b>	102
	The New Zealand medical profession	103
	Science and biomedical knowledge	104
	Menopause as a hormone deficiency disease	106
	General practitioner perspectives	107
	Definition of menopause and related symptoms	108
	Menopause as a life-stage	108
	Biological change and social factors	108
	Knowledge of the risks and benefits of HRT	110
	A hazardous life-stage	111
	Prescribing strategies	113
	Implications of general practitioner views and clinical strategies	117
	The National Advisory Committee Report	120
	Deficiency disease versus normal process	122
	The medicalisation of menopause	124
	Specialist consultant views	126
	Definition of menopause and associated symptoms	127
	Recognition of symptoms	127
	The risks and benefits of medical management of menopause	128
	The implications of the specialists' views	130
	Conclusion	131
<b>CHAPTER 4</b>	<b>A Time of Opportunities</b>	134
	Content analysis of selected educational material on menopause	135
	Three menopause workshops	136
	The Australasian Menopause Society workshop	136
	New Zealand Family Planning Association workshop	137
	Women's Health Action workshop	138
	Manifest characteristics of the three workshops	139
	Latent content of the three workshops	140
	Video, audio and printed material	142
	Videos	142
	Audio-tapes	143
	Booklets	144
	Manifest characteristics of videos, audio-tapes and printed material	146
	Latent content of videos, audio-tapes and printed material	150



	New Zealand Family Planning Association, menopause education	151
	Responses to selected videos and audio-tapes	153
	Conclusion	158
<b>CHAPTER 5</b>	<b>Knowledge and Taboo</b>	161
	Mothers and daughters	162
	Woman-to-woman	168
	Knowledge sources	172
	Commentary	176
	The women's knowledge	178
	Conclusion	182
<b>CHAPTER 6</b>	<b>Perceptions, Attitudes, Expectations and Meanings</b>	186
	Eight narratives	189
	Jacky: A reward	189
	Pat: Sadness and ageing	190
	Kath: Anticipation and health concerns	191
	Paula: Feeling robbed	192
	Sue N: A natural process	193
	Mary Ann: A process rather than a problem	194
	Nora: Part of life	195
	Marie: It will be great	196
	Mid-life and ageing	197
	A natural life-stage	197
	The ethic of stoicism	200
	The evolutionary view	203
	Loss of fertility	205
	End of menstruation	205
	Ageing in a youth orientated culture	210
	Male menopause	213
	Health risk	216
	HRT	220
	Health problems at menopause	224
	Conclusion	226
<b>CHAPTER 7</b>	<b>Our Stories</b>	229
	Mary	230
	Dulcie	230
	Beth	232
	Marion	236
	Helen	239
	Jackie	241
	Barbara	247
	Beverley	249
	Marilyn	250
	Pamela	253
	Marie	258
	Monique	259

Ainslie	261
Christine	265
Sue P	266
Gay	270
<b>CHAPTER 8</b>	
<b>Climacteric and Control</b>	<b>273</b>
Women aged seventy and over	274
Expectations	274
Onset of menopause	274
Coping with symptoms	275
Reflections	275
Commentary	277
Women in their sixties	281
Expectations	281
The onset of menopause	282
Coping with symptoms	283
Reflections	286
Commentary	287
Women in their fifties	291
Expectations	292
The onset of menopause	295
Coping with symptoms	297
Reflections	302
Commentary	304
Women in their forties	311
Expectations	311
The onset of menopause	313
Coping with symptoms	314
Reflections	316
Commentary	318
Conclusion	325
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>328</b>
Literature review and theoretical perspective	328
Health professionals and educational material	331
Menopause knowledge	335
The meanings of menopause	338
Experience across the age groups	341
A schematic integration	346
Implications for health and well-being	350
Research design and limitations	353
Future research	354
Ethnicity and cross-cultural comparisons	355
Medical treatment of menopause	355
Menopause education	356
Policy discourses and implications	356

**APPENDICES**

Appendix 1	Application to Massey University Human Research Ethics Committee	358
	Information sheet	361
	Consent form sent to social organisations	363
	Consent form - focus group interviews	364
	Consent form - in-depth interviews	365
Appendix 2	Letter to Feilding social organisations	366
Appendix 3	In-depth interview questionnaire	367
Appendix 4	Letter to <i>New Zealand Woman's Day</i> respondents	369
	Information sheet	371
Appendix 5	Letter to general practitioners	373
Appendix 6	Video and audio-tape educational programmes questionnaire	374
<b>REFERENCES</b>		<b>378</b>

## LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

### Figures

Figure 0.1	Two cartoons concerning menopause	2
Figure 1.1	Vector diagram identifying the three theoretical orientations of the literature on menopause	18
Figure 1.2	Theoretical location of representative studies of menopause	27
Figure 2.1	Biomedical/positivist orientation	60
Figure 2.2	Humanistic/interpretive orientation	62
Figure 2.3	Constructivist/critical orientation	65
Figure 2.4	Realist/relativist paradigms	68
Figure 2.5	Constructivist/interpretive orientation	70
Figure 2.6	Geographical distribution of study participants in New Zealand	83
Figure 9.1	A constructivist/interpretive schematic integration of factors affecting menopause	345

### Tables

Table 2.1	Characteristics of study participants (percentages)	87
Table 4.1	Manifest and latent content of the three menopause workshops	141
Table 4.2	Keywords and their categorisation manifest in videos, audio-tapes and printed material	146
Table 4.3	Deficiency disease and life-stage classification of key words	147
Table 4.4	Key word frequency: videos and audio-tapes	148
Table 4.5	Key word frequency: booklets and pamphlets	149
Table 4.6	Programme emphasis on aspects of menopause	156