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Family and paid work: A critical discourse analysis of government policy and mothers’ talk

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Psychology at Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand

Eleanor Ruth Kahu
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ella@kahu.org
Abstract

This study, developed within a feminist social constructionist framework, examines the discourses which construct women’s roles as mother and worker. It argues that government policy influences women’s lives, not just materially through legislation, but ideologically through the promotion of certain discourses, which enable and constrain women’s choices. In order to explore the interface between policy and experience, critical discourse analysis was used to examine two texts: the *Action Plan for New Zealand Women* (Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2004a), a government policy document, and the talk of two groups of first time mothers. This methodology focuses on the power of language to constitute reality and examines which institutions and ideologies are supported by discursive constructions.

Although freedom to choose a life path is part of the policy’s vision for New Zealand women, paid work is consistently privileged over caring roles. Motherhood is all but invisible and is constructed as an inevitable and undesirable demand, while paid work is constructed as essential to individual well-being and a duty of citizenship. An economic rationalist discourse positions women as workers first and foremost with a responsibility to financially provide for themselves and their children. Despite drawing on feminist discourses to warrant its vision, the policy is driven by capitalist goals of increased productivity and economic growth rather than the needs of women.

The women deployed an intensive mother discourse which privileged their maternal role and positioned babies as needing parental care, and mothers as the natural providers of that care. However, they also felt the pressure of the successful woman and economic rationalist discourses in which paid work is essential and motherhood is devalued. The tension between these discourses manifested as guilt and conflict, managed in part through the emergence of newer constructions of independent mother and child. In making their decision about re-entering the paid workforce, in most instances the traditional paternal role as primary breadwinner was unchallenged, while the maternal role was expanded to incorporate not just primary caregiver, but also worker.

The thesis finishes by considering the social consequences of these discursive constructions and argues that current discourses do not serve women, children, or men well. What is needed is a more complete breakdown of the public/private divide: a society which values care and work, both as responsibilities and rewards of citizenship, and which will therefore allow both women and men to construct more balanced lives and identities.
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