

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

**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

2006

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.

Acknowledgements

There are a number of people whose contributions to this thesis have been invaluable. First and foremost are the eleven women who took time out from their demanding lives as new mothers to share something of themselves with me. It was an honour and a privilege to listen to their words and I hope that they too gained something from the experience. I wish each of them well on their continued journey through the pleasures (and challenges) of motherhood. Thanks also to Helen Thorpe, Paulene Gibbons, and Kendall Eade for caring for the babies during the focus groups, and to Hutt Playcentre Association who provided the rooms.

Secondly, my heartfelt thanks to Mandy Morgan, my supervisor at Massey University. Her wisdom and knowledge are a constant inspiration to me and throughout this year she has guided and challenged me to produce my very best. This would, without doubt, be a lesser thesis without her input. Thanks too to Massey University for honouring me with a scholarship, and the staff at the Distance Library Service for providing incredibly prompt and efficient service, both of which made my life much easier.

I also want to thank my family and friends who somehow all seemed to have the utmost faith in my ability to complete this thesis, a faith which encouraged and supported me at critical times: my mother, Pauline Baty, for listening as I struggled to articulate my thoughts and for sharing her wisdom with me; Helen Thorpe for always being there and for her encouragement and clear, insightful advice when I was battling with the analysis; and Paulene Gibbons for being my role model and for her meticulous proofreading. Finally, saving the best for last, all the thanks in the world to my children, Daniel and Hannah, for teaching me the value of care, and to my husband, Ty, for more than I have room to say, but mostly for being who he is and for allowing me to try and figure out who I might be, and for always believing in me.

Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	v
Table of Contents	vii
Chapter One: Introduction	1
Introduction	1
Women’s Participation in the Labour Force	2
Legislative Context	4
Aims of the Research	5
Organisation of the Thesis	5
Chapter Two: Literature Review	7
Introduction	7
Economic Accounts	8
Demographic variables	8
Financial variables	9
Psychological Accounts	13
Personality differences	13
Attitudes and beliefs	14
Limitations of attitudinal research	15
Preference theory	16
Attitude stability	19
A network of variables	21
Social Accounts	23
Structural factors	23
Sociological accounts	28
Social constructionism	30
Construction	31
Destruction	34
Resolution	36
Reconstruction	38
Summary	40

Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework	43
Introduction	43
Feminism	43
Origins of feminism	43
Strands of feminism	44
Social Constructionism	45
Knowledge, language, and power	45
Discourse	46
Identity and agency	47
Social constructionism meets feminism	49
Research Values	49
Agenda of social change	50
Balancing the power	51
Reflexivity	53
Summary	54
Chapter Four: Research Design	55
Introduction	55
Critical Discourse Analysis	55
Data Collection	58
Policy documents	59
Focus groups	59
Benefits and drawbacks	59
Recruitment	61
The women	63
Procedure	63
Ethical Considerations	64
Informed consent	65
Protection from harm	65
Anonymity and confidentiality	65
Research rigour	66
Summary	67
Chapter Five: Policy Analysis	69
Introduction	69
A Feminist Document?	69
Warranting	69

Setting a vision	72
Dualistic choices	75
Privileging the public	77
Two Themes	80
Economic sustainability	80
Work-life balance	82
Motherhood	87
Economic Rationalism	89
Conclusion	93
Chapter Six: Focus Groups Analysis	95
Introduction	95
Constructing Motherhood	95
Intensive mother	96
As worthless	107
As an important job	112
Constructing (Paid) Work	113
As provision for the family	114
As economic independence	116
As desirable	119
As normal	121
Choice, Conflict, and Constraint	122
Making a decision	123
Conflict	125
Children first	127
Financial constraint	128
Independent mother	131
Independent child	132
Best of Both Worlds	134
Conclusion	136
Chapter Seven: Discussion	139
Introduction	139
Similarities and Differences	139
Motherhood	139
Paid work	141
Making choices	141
Consequences	143

Conclusion	146
Chapter Eight: Conclusion	147
Introduction	147
Making Changes	147
Future Research	149
The Women	151
Conclusion	151
References	153
Appendices	169
Appendix A: Information Sheet	169
Appendix B: Confidentiality Agreement	171
Appendix C: Consent Form	172
Appendix D: Focus Group Questions	173
Appendix E: Authority for Transcript Release	174

List of Figures

<i>Figure 1.</i> Female LFP, 1951-1991, full time workers only	3
<i>Figure 2.</i> Female LFP, 1976 and 1991, full and part time workers	3
<i>Figure 3.</i> The complex relationships between factors influencing women's choices	22
<i>Figure 4.</i> Female and male statistics	78
<i>Figure 5.</i> Photograph from the Action Plan	89
<i>Figure 6.</i> Evening Post, 21 November 1964	93
<i>Figure 7.</i> The Dominion Post, 1 February 2005	93