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TO IMMUNISE OR NOT TO IMMUNISE:
MOTHERS’ DISCOURSES OF CHILDHOOD IMMUNISATION

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Psychology at
Massey University

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The focus of the present study was on mothers’ talk about their decisions regarding childhood immunisation and the factors influencing them. This was examined using Potter and Wetherell’s (1987) and Parker’s (1992) approaches to discourse analysis. The participants consisted of six mothers who had chosen to have their children fully immunised and eight mothers who had chosen against fully immunising their children. The participants were interviewed about their decisions regarding childhood immunisation and the factors influencing them, using an open-ended unstructured approach to interviewing. Transcripts from the interviews were analysed. The analysis resulted in the identification of six discourses: immunisation as protection; immunisation as destruction; risk; disease severity; immune system; and the establishment discourses. Overall, analysis of these discourses revealed how they acted to construct childhood immunisation in both a positive manner, as something needed, beneficial, and safe, and in a negative manner as something unnecessary, unbeneﬁcial, and harmful. The analysis also revealed how the discourses drawn on by mothers ultimately served two opposing functions, these being, to support and justify decisions and arguments both for and against the use of childhood immunisation. These discourses were also found to position mothers as carers and protectors of children, and children as vulnerable and defenceless. Health professionals were positioned either as experts and carers of health, or conversely, as neglectful of and incompetent at health care. Two opposing power relations between mothers and health professionals were also reproduced. Additionally, it was revealed how these discourses acted to challenge and support the institutions of conventional and natural health and medicine, and their ideologies. Overall, these discourses were shown to have positive and negative repercussions for the acceptance and use of childhood immunisation.
The key issues arising from the findings are discussed, some general conclusions presented, and consideration given to how this research strengthens understanding in this area. Finally, the potential use of the findings are discussed and ideas for future research are considered.
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