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Speaking of Love

A discourse analysis
of single women's and men's talk
about hetero-sexual relationships
in their fourth decade.

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

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2005
Acknowledgements

My grateful thanks go to my supervisor, Dr Mandy Morgan. Without her scholarly guidance on the academic task and her womanly support when life threatened to overwhelm research, this thesis would not have been completed.

I also want to thank my family and friends for their multifarious, multifaceted and multidimensional support during my prolonged obsession.

With considerable awe I thank the women and men who gave of their time and themselves to speak with me so authentically and openly. I hope this analysis has done justice to the trust they placed in me and hope it may contribute to a greater understanding of the dilemmas they face in the contemporary discursive field of love and relationships.
Abstract

In Eurocentric countries unprecedented numbers of heterosexu- 

gal men and women in their fourth decade now live without partners.
Indications are that most would prefer to be in relationships, 
although not necessarily with children. Yet complex dilemmas 
face this population as they struggle to achieve goals of 
relationship while self protecting against failure, desperation and 
loss. The growing divide between mature single men and 
women is explicated through analysis of the gendered 
deployment of mutually exclusive discursive resources. After 
painful experiences of fictional constructions of romantic love, 
women favour the communicative assumptions and practices 
offered by the discourse of intimacy while men prefer self 
sufficiency enabled by individualism.
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Preface

Love is in the air
Every sight and every sound
(Song by John Paul Young)

Section 1: Speaking of love

If everything that human beings imbue with social meaning can be read as text, then we are saturated in texts of love from our earliest days, through film, song, print and talk. These multifarious texts may be subjected to multiple readings depending on the social context, life stage and experience of the ‘readers’. This project is an inquiry into the interpretations and expectations of love and relationship constructed by single, childless, heterosexual women and men in their fourth decade.

Chapter 1: Introduction first reflexively presents myself, personally, professionally and academically as a participant in the turbulent discursive field of love, attraction and relationship. Next it introduces my population of research interest and their particular advantages and difficulties within their context of social change. Statistical information follows with the intention of elaborating the extent and social depth of the dramatic changes in relationships and marriage in recent decades. The evidence of the current instability of marriage is juxtaposed with the beneficial effects of marriage and the negative consequences of family breakdown. Finally the chosen population is shown to be worthy of research. In order to have accepted the positions they now occupy, mature singles have engaged with and experienced the constraints, freedoms and dilemmas of contemporary relationships, therefore their viewpoints can be expected to produce valuable insights for discourse analysis.

Chapter 2: Social constructionist theory & literature review explores the theoretical literature on language and discourse and its relationship to power and social change. This leads into the specific objectives and research questions for this research project. A review of the literature relevant to those research questions follows. Particular attention is given to the history, evolution and construction of discourses deployed in the contemporary discursive field of relationships.

Chapter 3: Research method: A challenging and interactive process outlines the theoretically embedded design of this qualitative discourse analysis research project. Juxtaposed throughout are commentaries on the variations and deviations which occurred in implementing that theoretical plan with an inexperienced researcher and actual participants, in order to produce original texts for analysis.
Section 2: Analysis of texts

Chapter 4: To risk or self protect: Dilemmas in the construction of relationship goals addresses the first research question by identifying the goals which this demographic group have constructed in the discursive field in relation to the conventional story. It then explores the construction of self-protective alternative goals, fallback positions and dynamics of resistance that might militate against singles in their fourth decade achieving their relationship goals.

Chapter 5: Constructing love, relationship and identity: A process of struggle and learning. In this chapter the discourses which mature singles deploy to construct love and attraction and to achieve their desired goals in the discursive field of relationship are explicated. As people use language purposively and adaptively to achieve social goals, this chapter also explicates the discursive strategies and interpretative repertoires employed to self protect and self enhance in the face of the perceived high risk of failure and the pain of loss.

Chapter 6: Doing the business of love: Money, parenting and identity: Financial considerations permeate the relationship field. They may be as significant as love and attraction in their effects on partner selection, relationship resilience and decisions to parent, especially for men. This chapter explicates the deployment of discursive resources in order to manage financial considerations and minimise their negative effects on the achievement of relationship, parenting and identity goals.

Where possible, throughout Chapters 5 and 6, evaluations are made as to the functionality of the discourses and interpretative modifications employed by participants as they struggle to achieve their goals of relationship and parenting while maintaining enhanced identities.

Section 3: Results and Conclusions

Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusions The emerging social phenomenon of a growing divide between mature, heterosexual women and men is confirmed and explicated further by this study. Through a 'silent revolution' approximately 30% of contemporary heterosexual women and men in their fourth decade are living in unpartnered situations. Yet their preference is to be living in relationship with each other. This chapter discusses the negative effects on the achievement of goals of the gendered differences in the deployment of the mutually exclusive resources and practices of the discourses of intimacy and individualism. Recommendations are made for social policy, the talking therapies and further research.