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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 heterosexual 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*.

Table of Contents

	Title Page	i
	Acknowledgements	ii
	Abstract	iii
	Table of Contents	iv
	Preface	vi
PART I	The contemporary field of relationships	
Chapter 1:	Introduction	2
1.1.	Reflexivity	2
	Personal	2
	Professional	3
1.2.	The research population for this project	4
	Fig.1.1. Marriage and divorce rates in New Zealand	4
	Fig.1.2. Proportion never married in New Zealand	5
1.3.	A context of change in relationships	7
	Statistical indicators of change in relationships	7
	Fig.1.3. Family type 1991, 1996, 2001.	8
	Solo parenting and poverty	8
1.4.	The beneficial effects of marriage	9
	Is marriage good enough for women?	
1.5.	If marriage is so great . . . why break up?	11
	Women who break up	11
	Men and breakups	11
	Children and breakups	12
1.6.	Justification for this discourse analysis research project	12
Chapter 2:	Literature Review	14
2.1.	Social constructionist theory	14
	From essential self to language	14
2.2.	Discourse, power and social change	16
	Interpretative repertoires	19
	Subject positions	20
2.3.	Objectives and research questions	21
2.4.	Discourses of security and romantic love	21
2.5.	Gender and the discourse of intimacy	27
2.6.	Love in intimacy is a function of behaviour	33
2.7.	Presence of the security discourse	34
2.8.	The discourse of individualism	35
2.9.	The soul mate discourse	36
2.10.	Summary	38
Chapter 3:	Research method: A challenging & interactive process	
3.1.	Recruiting participants and obtaining informed consent ...	40
3.2.	Interviewing participants and the production of texts ...	44
3.3.	Researcher bias and reflexivity	47
3.4.	Power relations and professional boundaries	48
3.5.	Validity and reliability in discourse analysis	50
3.6.	Procedures for processing data	51
3.7.	A summary of the ethical considerations	53
	Informed Consent	53
	Confidentiality and anonymity	54
	Potential harm to participants	54
	Conflict of interest	54
	Cultural concerns	54

PART II Analysis of texts

Chapter 4: To risk or self protect: Dilemmas in the construction of relationship goals

4.1.	Introduction	...	...	...	...	57
4.2.	Relationship goals	...	...	...	...	58
	The List					61
	Change: The only constant					62
	Summary of relationship goals					63
4.3.	Identity goals	...	...	...	...	64
	To risk or stay safe					68
	Summary of goals of identity					70
4.4.	Parenting goals	...	...	...	...	71
4.5.	Summary of goals	...	...	...	...	73

Chapter 5: Constructing love, relationship and identity: A process of struggle and learning

5.1.	Introduction	...	...	...	...	75
5.2.	Romantic constructions of love and attraction	...	...	...	...	75
5.3.	Alternative constructions of love and attraction	...	...	...	...	79
5.4.	Transcending despondency & desperation: Soul mates	...	...	...	...	85
5.5.	Avoiding despondency & desperation: Individualism	...	...	...	...	87
5.6.	Circumventing despondency & desperation: Intimacy	...	...	...	...	90
5.7.	Intimacy and gendered talking practice	...	...	...	...	92
5.8.	Hey, I'm a man: Individualism and the male sex drive	...	...	...	...	96
5.9.	Summary	...	...	...	...	99

Chapter 6: Doing the business of love: Money, parenting & identity

6.1.	Introduction	...	...	...	...	101
6.2.	Gender, money and relationship	...	...	...	...	102
6.3.	Gender, money and mothering	...	...	...	...	110
6.4.	Gender, money and fathering	...	...	...	...	112
6.5.	Constructing 'Me' as childfree	...	...	...	...	113
6.6.	Solo mother: the controversial position	...	...	...	...	116
6.7.	Good parent/Bad parent	...	...	...	...	118
6.8.	The good old days: security and gender	...	...	...	...	119
6.9.	A lateral shift in the relationship field	...	...	...	...	121
6.10.	Summary	...	...	...	...	122

PART III Conclusions

Chapter 7: Results and discussion

7.1.	Introduction	...	...	...	...	124
7.2.	Summary of findings	...	...	...	...	125
	Goals					125
	Discourses					126
	Interpretative repertoires					129
	Functionality					130
7.3.	Implications for the talking therapies	...	...	...	...	132
7.4.	Implications for social policy	...	...	...	...	133
7.5.	Limitations of this study	134
7.6.	Implications for future research	135

Reference List	137
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Appendix

A.	Interview Schedule	144
B.	Information Sheet	145
C.	Consent Form	147
D.	Poster	...	...	...	...	148

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.