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Making Sense of Euthanasia
A Foucauldian Discourse Analysis of Death and Dying

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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in
Psychology

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Anne Beryl Ryan
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This thesis is dedicated in loving memory of three remarkable, inspirational women:

Mary-Anne Ryan (née O'Brien) 1896-1968

Monica Vera Ryan (née Isaacson) 1926-2009

Rebeca Anne Nathan (Bex) 1986-2013

Abstract

A hugely contentious issue in society today is whether individuals have the right to choose when and how to die. This project examines how people make sense of euthanasia through both a genealogical perspective and an analysis of discourse. The first study presents a genealogy, a Foucauldian ‘history of the present’ that addresses the issue of how euthanasia has emerged as a possible solution to the problem of terminal illness. It investigates the conditions present at particular periods of time and a specific but disorderly collection of incidents that have enabled our present constructions of euthanasia. This genealogy challenges both the origins and functions of our present day ‘knowledge’ regarding euthanasia and the assumptions of self-evidence and inevitability that accompany prevailing discourses.

The second study involved interviews with 28 healthy people from the general population in Aotearoa/New Zealand to explore how they talked about and made sense of death, dying and euthanasia. A Foucauldian discourse analysis of the data revealed meanings of euthanasia that drew on three categories of construction: *identity, reciprocation, and burden and duty*. The discourses that enable these particular meanings of euthanasia to prevail in our society today and be accepted as ‘common sense’ provide the potential to act in certain ways, while marginalising alternative practices. The way in which people are positioned within these discourses will inevitably shape their understanding of themselves and the world and are pivotal to decisions regarding euthanasia. The power implications of these discursive constructions for vulnerable groups in society are considered in light of the euthanasia debate.

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Ehara taku toa, he takitahi, he toa takitini

Prologue

NORMA

I'm putting up 30 mgs over 24 hours ... even though she's unconscious from the morphine she's had already.

LESLEY

She was unconscious before I gave her the morphine.

Norma finishes with the syringe and turns to face Lesley.

NORMA

And you gave it for pain?

LESLEY

Yes ... I guess...

NORMA

Unconscious people don't feel pain. To give that much is to attempt...

LESLEY

(interrupting)

Euthanasia?

NORMA

(taking a sharp breath)

Euthanasia is illegal in this country.

They are facing off against each other, both deadly serious.

LESLEY

But it's cruel ... she's been through enough ... she's dying ... there's no hope anymore...

(From "...to die like a dog..." Martin, 2002, p. 160-161)

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