EXPLORING PUBLIC OPINION:  
THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF  
CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

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

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2007
Crime has been positioned as a serious social problem within New Zealand society over the last decade. Continual claims that ordinary citizens are under threat from a growing population of predatory people has become the norm. Such claims call for harsher and more punitive forms of punishment which are evidenced in the increased use of incarceration as a treatment for criminal offenders. The result is that a punitive, get-tough movement has come to dominate the justice system resulting in the overpopulating of the nation’s prisons. Frequently cited as the impetus for current penal practices is public opinion which is determined by presenting forced choice questions through surveys, polls and referenda. Present understandings of public opinion are that it is fixed, static and punitively orientated. Yet people’s opinions are subjective, contextually arranged and show a great deal of variability and inconsistency when explored discursively.

The present study, developed from within a qualitative and social constructionist framework, explores public opinion in reference to crime and punishment and the punitiveness of current penal practices. Twelve people were engaged in conversation and produced a complex but uncomplicated understanding on this topic. Two broad discourses were identified as emerging from people’s talk: punitively orientated discourses of crime and punishment, and alternative non-punitive discourses. Discourses of punitiveness were drawn upon to construct an understanding of crime and punishment that was contextual and conditional. Participants also engaged with alternative discourses to construct a non-punitive point of view that drew on notions of offender rehabilitation, crime prevention and humanitarian ideals in the treatment of criminal offenders.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are a number of people to acknowledge and thank for their support and assistance in completing this project. First, I would like to show appreciation for my wonderful family. Their patience, understanding and many forms of support throughout the frequent moments of distress and anguish was constant and gave me the strength and tenacity I needed to continue and complete this project.

Second, I thank my very special friends. Their time and dedicated understanding, wisdom and humour never failed to alleviate the thesis pains, elevate my confidence and make me trust in my own ability.

I acknowledge the help of the twelve people who agreed to participate in this study. They gave life to this project and provided a rich source of data. The interest and enthusiasm they showed for this project was indeed inspirational. Without them, this project would not have been possible.

Special thanks to my supervisor Mei Wah Williams, her ongoing support, guidance and encouragement throughout the life of this project made what seemed like an insurmountable task manageable and possible. Times of doubt and frustration were many, but she never failed to help redirect muddled thoughts, encourage positive thinking and offer constructive and valuable feedback.

A very special thank you is extended to Dr Leigh Coombes. For introducing me to the field of criminal psychology in 2004 and for the many hours of assistance she selflessly gave to pulling this project together in the final weeks. It would not be the project it is without her contribution.

A special mention to BRCSS for honouring me with the 2007 Masters Research Award.

This has been a journey of incredible personal growth and momentous academic experience; each of you have journeyed along side me and I extend to you all a very deep and sincere thank you.
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