MULTIPLE CHOICE? THE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN WITH MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS: OPPRESSION, OPTIONS, OPPORTUNITIES.

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Social Work
at Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand.

Susan (Sioux) Elisabeth Natasha Green

2001

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of

Maureen Elenor Walsh

27 October 1943 - 08 October 2000

and

Andrew Leslie Cantwell

22 November 1955 - 19 December 2000

and

Mike John Deane

31 May 1955 - 05 January 2001

in recognition of their friendship and support
for the completion of this work.

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the ways in which women with Multiple Sclerosis (MS) experience disability as their disease progresses over time. Underpinning my analysis of the process of becoming disabled is a critique of the ways in which a combination of patriarchal discourse and the medicalisation of disability result in the social construction of disability. This study contends that such a construction can exclude and oppress women with MS, reducing their choices in life.

Additionally, this research examined whether or not the alternative discourses of feminism and the social model of disability offered women with MS options for politicising their experiences and opportunities for empowerment and emancipation.

Seven women participated in in-depth interviews. Additional information was obtained from documentation provided by six of the participants. Finally, one male was interviewed and provided documentation about his recently deceased wife's experiences of MS which was presented as a case study separate to the main body of the data.

Themes which emerged from the data suggested that the greater the number of oppressive variables present in a participant's life, the higher her risk of social oppression and exclusion appeared to be. Counterbalancing this, the greater her access to appropriate assistance, alternative discourses and strategies of resistance, the more she seemed enabled to resist disability as social oppression.

Emerging themes around the political issues of oppressive and inadequate welfare assistance, fragmented and uncoordinated health and care systems and poorly actioned employment and human rights policy are discussed; as is the civil rights issue of the underfunding, non-subsidisation and capped budgets for medical treatment of people with Multiple Sclerosis which promotes exclusion and dependency.

The aim of this thesis is to highlight these themes, to offer alternative discourses of the social model of disability and feminist theory as options for empowerment, and to politicise the experiences of this group of women. In so doing, the aim of this thesis is also to inform professionals and policy makers of the very real need to promote a politics of difference and inclusion, rather than oppression and exclusion for women with Multiple Sclerosis.

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