

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

***'HAVING TO REBUILD EVERYTHING'***  
***WOMEN, SEPARATION AND SOCIAL MOBILITY IN***  
***NEW ZEALAND***

**A dissertation presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Social Anthropology  
at Massey University**

**Robyn Ann ANDREWS**

**2000**

---

## *ABSTRACT*

This thesis explores the experience of social mobility after marital separation in New Zealand. It is based on a series of case studies constructed around a set of interviews with a small group of women who have experienced separation in recent years. Class-based experiences both before and after separation are described.

The classification techniques used by this group of women to ascribe class positions to themselves and to others in their social world are discussed. The various "markers" of class (material, symbolic and ideational) and the significance placed upon the different types of markers are also explored.

The most significant themes to emerge from analysis of the case studies are the participants' search for respect after the breakdown of their marriages, the problems they have encountered in relation to the larger social world in achieving that respect, and the ways in which they have rebuilt their social capital in order to rebuild respect.

As well as the analysis based upon the interview material this work includes the life stories of each of the participants. These provide experiential depth as well as contextualising the analytical chapters.

**KEYWORDS:** CLASS; CASE STUDY; DIVORCE; ETHNOGRAPHY; EXPERIENCE;  
FAMILY LAW; MARRIAGE; MARITAL SEPARATION; NARRATIVE;  
NEW ZEALAND; RESPECT; SOCIAL CAPITAL; SOCIAL MOBILITY;  
SOCIAL WELFARE; SUFFERING; WOMEN.

---

## ***ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS***

This thesis would not have been possible, let alone the fulfilling and enjoyable experience it was, without the help of many people. I wish to thank them all for their involvement.

First of all, my research participants: thank you for entrusting me with your stories, for your good company, for your continued involvement with this research, for enriching my life and leading me to challenge the way I live my life.

Henry Barnard, thank you for the best possible supervision. Thank you for nurturing and encouraging my interest in this area of research, for your guidance, practical assistance and stunningly efficient, unerringly helpful comments throughout. Thanks too for sharing your knowledge, your clear-sightedness, and your friendship.

My family: thank you, Bruce, for your sustained interest and enthusiasm for this project, for reading every word I wrote, for challenging some of them - for style and, at times, content - and especially for your love and support. My children (including step- and -in laws): for the encouragement and occasional hugely affirming "this is actually quite interesting", when (short on reading material?) they read some of what I'd written.

Noeline Arnott and Di Barnard: for generously and willingly proof-reading and editing the final draft, and for your positive comments. Cherie Brooshooft, for assistance in solving "computer problems" and for your ever cheerful company.

And finally, friends and colleagues who contributed in numerous ways: for allowing me to rehearse my ideas over coffees and teas, for your thoughts and insightful comments (many of which provided the seeds for further exploration) from the earliest days of this research and for your humour and opinions so generously shared.

## **CONTENTS**

<b><i>Abstract</i></b> .....	<b><i>ii</i></b>
<b><i>Acknowledgements</i></b> .....	<b><i>iii</i></b>
<b><i>Introduction</i></b> .....	<b><i>1</i></b>
Methodology .....	3
Selection of research participants.....	3
Interviews .....	4
Life stories.....	5
Reaction to their stories .....	6
Outline of contents.....	7
<b><i>PART A - Life Stories</i></b> .....	<b><i>10</i></b>
<b><i>Helen</i></b> .....	<b><i>11</i></b>
<b><i>Mary</i></b> .....	<b><i>23</i></b>
<b><i>Rosemary</i></b> .....	<b><i>34</i></b>
<b><i>Anna</i></b> .....	<b><i>45</i></b>
<b><i>Jane</i></b> .....	<b><i>61</i></b>
<b><i>Rebecca</i></b> .....	<b><i>77</i></b>
<b><i>PART B - Reflections</i></b> .....	<b><i>95</i></b>
<b><i>Chapter One</i></b> .....	<b><i>96</i></b>
<b><i>Class, classification and class consciousness</i></b> .....	<b><i>96</i></b>
Introduction.....	96
Classification by social scientists.....	97
The classification process.....	99
Class consciousness and social mobility .....	100

---

Classes in New Zealand as viewed by the research participants .....	109
How the research participants view their current social position .....	112
“Once you’re up, you can’t come down” (Rebecca) .....	117
Classification by others .....	119
First experiences of classification .....	120
Later experiences .....	121
Status .....	125
Class consciousness and the interview process.....	128
<b>Chapter Two.....</b>	<b>133</b>
<b><i>Reclaiming Respect.....</i></b>	<b><i>133</i></b>
Introduction.....	133
Respect - The word.....	133
Respect in anthropological writings on class.....	135
The social significance of respect .....	138
Middle-Class Respect .....	140
Respect.....	140
Within Marriage.....	140
After Separation.....	143
The Exception.....	153
Rebuilding respect .....	154
Conclusion .....	157
<b>Chapter Three.....</b>	<b>158</b>
<b><i>The effects of government practice and policy.....</i></b>	<b><i>158</i></b>
Introduction.....	158

---

Interaction with WINZ.....	159
Visits to WINZ offices .....	160
Obstacles .....	161
Case Managers.....	167
Institutionalised attitudes.....	168
The effect of State policy on post-separation spousal inequality.....	172
Matrimonial Property .....	176
Spousal maintenance and future earnings .....	177
Child Support.....	178
Conclusion .....	181
<b><i>Conclusion.....</i></b>	<b><i>183</i></b>
<b><i>Afterword: Their lives now.....</i></b>	<b><i>189</i></b>
<b><i>Bibliography.....</i></b>	<b><i>191</i></b>
<b><i>Appendix 1 – Introductory letter to research participants.....</i></b>	<b><i>200</i></b>
<b><i>Appendix 2 – WINZ (2000) brochure for domestic and widows' benefit...</i></b>	<b><i>202</i></b>

## INTRODUCTION

I commenced this project intending to explore New Zealand's class system and to gain insights into the experience of downward social mobility. I was, and continue to be, interested in understanding how women who identify themselves as downwardly socially mobile experience and account for their situation. I had anticipated that I would gain from women such as these an understanding of the nature of New Zealand's class-based social system. They seem to me to be ideally positioned, socially, to have made observations from more than one class position.

Downward social mobility is an under-researched area. While upward social mobility is valorised in terms of individualistic and meritocratic ideologies, downward social mobility, although statistically quite evident, is largely ignored in the public sphere. Stories of those in this trajectory are seldom recorded. Katherine Newman in her works *Falling from Grace* and *Declining Fortunes* is one of the few anthropologists to explore this topic albeit in an American setting.

Downward social mobility may be precipitated by a number of factors including loss of employment, national economic downturn such as share market crashes and family upheavals such as death or marriage breakdown. In this project I narrow the scope of research by exploring one factor only - that of marriage breakdown. I have further narrowed the class perspective by researching the middle-class experience of marriage breakdown. In terms of gender, I have restricted this research further to women's experience of marriage breakdown. Unintentionally (as it turned out), I spoke only to Pakeha New Zealand women, narrowing the field yet further, by restricting the ethnic dimension.

Like many social science and humanities researchers before me, I have a personal interest in this area having spent four years, beginning almost two decades ago now, separated from my first husband. During this time I supported myself and infant daughter through a combination of the Domestic Purposes Benefit and occasional part-



time employment. I remember clearly the day I finally and reluctantly calculated my budget and found that, even living as frugally as I was, my budget would never extend to such “luxuries” as running a car, buying any new clothes or eating out. These were all activities which I had enjoyed before separating from my husband and which had contributed to my identity. The loss, as a result of my new financial circumstances, of the ability to continue to enjoy these activities was also a loss of part of my social identity.

I was keen to explore class and class position from an experiential perspective having personally experienced life in a variety of class positions. I had increased my cultural capital through education, acquiring a BA in Social Anthropology and also through marriage to a professional man. For me, these experiences, including marital separation and fluctuating class experience, had aroused an interest in class as a social determinant.

Anthropology is well suited to research of class and social mobility. Newman, who studied both the middle classes and downward social mobility in the U.S.A., wrote:

Anthropologists strive to understand the world view of ordinary people as they understand it themselves. While we pay attention to surveys and polls, this is not our medium. Anthropology works through the words of people under study and tries to present their perspectives faithfully (1993:xi).

Newman adds that under stressful economic conditions people “often lay bare the cultural expectations, collective memories, and internal sources of division that might otherwise be obscured” (1993:xi)<sup>1</sup>. The work of the anthropologist, then, is to hear the words of the respondents, to interpret, uncover, and analyse their meaning in terms of the specific cultural setting, and to present that understanding in a way which is recognised as “true” by those who have spoken the words, that is, in a manner that resonates with their experiences.

---

<sup>1</sup>Bedggood, (1980) a sociologist, has made a similar point at the societal level that Newman makes at the level of the individual.

## METHODOLOGY<sup>2</sup>

### Selection of research participants

I had expected, because of the social stigma attached to downward social mobility, that I would have difficulty in finding candidates willing to be involved in this research. I was wrong. The first and most fruitful source of research participants was an introductory anthropology lecture. Having been invited to talk about the research I was proposing to undertake I took the opportunity to tell the students that I was at the stage of looking for women who, firstly, considered that they fitted the criteria (that they identified as being downwardly socially mobile as a result of the breakdown of their marriage to middle-class men) and secondly, would be willing to work with me. From that short presentation three of the research participants came to hear about my proposed research and offered to work with me. The next three research participants heard about my proposed work through mutual friends and acquaintances. I received further offers but resisted increasing the number beyond six to keep the research within manageable proportions. Each of the women I spoke to offered a unique perspective while contributing to general ideas found in all the accounts. To engage more women in this work may have strengthened it, but at a cost. I would have been forced into less extensive engagement with each of them in order to complete the research in the time available.

The women were all Pakeha New Zealanders aged between their late-thirties and mid-forties. They had been married for between five and eighteen years and had been separated for between approximately two years and seven years at the time I interviewed them. They lived in three different New Zealand cities. Some had repartnered while others had not.

---

<sup>2</sup> I read a considerable amount of methodological literature including work from feminists in parallel with my research (Davidson & Tolich 1999, Foster 1996, McBeth & Horne 1996, Moody-Adams 1998, Oakley 1981, Olsen & Shopes 1991, Parr 1998, Rucker & Abbron 1996, Stacey 1991, Standing 1998). I found many similarities between the ideas in the literature and my own methods. However, discussing the methodological material at length would add little to the substance of the thesis.

In most cases my engagement with the research participants began with a telephone call. This was followed by a letter<sup>3</sup> outlining the proposed research, the research methods I intended to employ and information about the part they could play in the research. I discussed ethical concerns in that letter and again immediately prior to commencing the first interview. I assured each of them that I would not use their names and that I would write about them in a way which would, as far as possible, conceal their identities. I also requested that they remain involved in my work after the interview stage in order that they might assist me, by reading what I had written as I wrote it, to ensure that what I was writing was both easily readable and an accurate representation of their experiences.

### **Interviews**

Three or four interviews were conducted with each research participant. Each interview was one to two hours in duration. The local interviews were shorter but more frequent and the interviews in other cities were longer but less frequent. The interviews became increasingly enjoyable experiences for me as I came to know each woman better. What began as 'work' became a fulfilling social and academic experience. I was unprepared for the way they each opened their lives and hearts to me, entrusting me with their painful, private, anguished experiences and with their moments of pride, fulfillment, revelation and joy. I was honoured by the warmth and openness that each of these women extended to me.

The interviews were semi-structured and informal. Some research participants requested an outline of the areas we would be covering, while others were content to let the process evolve on the day. I would usually begin the interview (after first catching up on any events since the previous interview) with a few general questions or areas to be covered. I endeavoured to keep the interviews open in order that the research participants could control the process rather than be constrained by my preconceived guidelines. My wish was to address the issues that were important to each research

---

<sup>3</sup> A copy of which is attached in the appendix.

participant rather than focus on those that I thought were important. While this was my aim, one of the research participants revealed, after the interviews were completed, that she had become irritated at times on my insistence that she define so many aspects of her life in terms of class. I was aware before commencing this research that there was a tension between, on the one hand, wanting to present an emic perspective, while on the other being aware that class is not, for most New Zealanders, a category used in their conscious world view.

Most of my research participants did not have a well-developed class-consciousness. In this characteristic they were representative of New Zealand's population generally. This lack of class consciousness is perhaps one of the reasons for the dearth of anthropological class research in New Zealand and other Western countries.

### **Life stories**

When I commenced the research I had not anticipated that I would write the life stories of each of the research participants. I had expected to use their words to illustrate and discuss the issues and themes which emerged from the interview material. As I collected their life stories I realised that these stories provided an essential background. It was only against this background that one could understand the impact of their experiences arising from the breakdown of their respective marriages. I decided to include their life stories to assist those reading the analytical chapters of this thesis to contextualise the individual women's comments and reactions.

Gluck and Patai note that narrators are not true partners in the process and that while they may exercise some control in the interview phase, their control generally ends there (1991:2). Borland (1991:70) raises questions about interpretive authority and the intrusion of the researcher into collected texts. She makes the point that historically researchers did not need to be concerned about being challenged by those about whom they wrote (1991:64). The combination of increasing numbers of projects based "at home", the technological ability to communicate easily wherever in the world one is working and the influence of feminist research methods, all exert subtle pressure to be honest and transparent about one's methodology.

With this in mind I sought to share textual authority by referring draft text to the research participants. As I wrote each woman's story I sent the text to her and arranged to meet her to discuss what I had written. I stressed that each woman had the last say on her story. I raised with each woman the possibility that I may have inappropriately emphasised some aspects of her life at the expense of others or that there may be parts of the interview that she did not want to see in her story. I also invited each participant to rephrase sentences, complete unfinished sentences and change the grammar if she wished to.

### **Reaction to their stories**

Examples of typical reactions to the stories were:

- Mary said that she'd read it and thought "Thank goodness that's over".
- Jane said "My partner says this is what I've been saying for the last two years". This comment was encouraging as it indicated that what she had said in our interviews was representative rather than merely a product of the interview process.
- Helen commented that the discussion of her childhood hometown and family life was "Good and strong and how I meant it to be".

Anna on the other hand said that it was "weird to read it" and that she sounded "pathetic and naïve". She wanted to change it so that it would read more intelligently. In fact she has changed very little.

In writing life stories a fine balance must be walked between editing for clarity and being true to the research participants by honestly using their words and sentence constructions. The research participants asked for no significant changes between the stories I first wrote and sent to them and those which appear in this thesis. The biggest and most significant complaint about what I had written was that they did not like the way their spoken words looked on paper. Perhaps I ought to have followed the advice of Gluck and Patai in my treatment of my research participants.

Rendering the oral narrative into an accessible form for public consumption requires considerable intervention on the part of the researcher/editor. The literal transcription is usually edited into a continuous narrative, in the process of which choices are constantly made about how to translate the spoken word into the written word. Because the final product is in most cases a text that is to be read, it must conform, to a greater or lesser extent, to literary expectations. Punctuation is added, repetitions are deleted, words and passages are discarded, highlighted, and/or taken out of sequence. In short, conventional editorial considerations come into play. Typically, the speaker is consulted, if at all, only once the editing process is completed (1991: 5).

While I made a number of choices about what would appear in each story, I chose to invite research participants to make editing alterations. In this way the words remain, genuinely, those of the research participants words.

I also collaborated with the research participants about the three analytical chapters. While I retained the right to the last word in these chapters I did at times alter my interpretation or footnote dissenting comments.

When I commenced this project I did so with few preconceived ideas about the final content of this thesis. The exception is the theme of class which was discussed deliberately and comprehensively in the interviews. Even this discussion contains material which I had not foreseen such as the disparity between objective markers as a consequence of adopting an emic or etic perspective.

In analysis I have largely adopted a Grounded Theory approach. That is, an approach which allows the data collected to generate its own theory rather than superimposing a theoretical perspective on the data (Rountree & Laing 1991, Strauss & Corbin 1994). The origins of the chapters on respect and the intervention of government practices and policies are based on issues which were of concern to the research participants.

## **OUTLINE OF CONTENTS**

The thesis comprises two distinct parts. The first is the research participants' stories which are presented in the order in which I interviewed the research participants. The



second contains three chapters which are reflections on issues which emerged from the interviews. Some of the same events are examined in more than one chapter.

In Chapter One of the second part I discuss the classes in New Zealand as identified by the research participants and the classification techniques they used. As well as describing the various characteristics of the people who occupy the different class positions I discuss downward social mobility and its effect on the class consciousness of those involved. An issue which arose was the discrepancy between one's self-ascribed class position and one's class position as seen by others. I explore the features, both material and social, which are used as indicators of class position. I also explore the methodologically interesting issue of the effect of the interview process on the research participants' class-consciousness.

Chapter Two discusses issues of self-respect and perceived societal respect both of which are affected by one's class position and class movement. Generally the research participants felt that, as they 'slipped' socially, their sense of self-worth was lowered, as was the respect accorded them by others. I discuss the strategies they employed to avoid losing societal respect and to rebuild respect (in their own and others' view) through building up their social capital.

In Chapter Three I discuss the research participants' interaction with relevant government practices and policies. Most of the research participants were in receipt of the Domestic Purposes Benefit for some period of time after their marital separation. For the first time in their lives they were in a position of reliance upon the State and of having to interact with WINZ. This was generally a socially diminishing experience. I explore aspects of WINZ "culture" as it relates to the research participants' experiences.

The second part of Chapter Three looks at aspects of "family law" such as legislation relating to Matrimonial Property, Spousal Maintenance, and Child Support. All negatively affect the financial situation of middle-class women such as my research participants, contributing to the downward social mobility of these women and their

---

children. Almost inevitably there is a disparity between the income and lifestyle of themselves and their former husbands as well as between their own pre- and post-separation lives.

In conclusion this thesis presents a case study of six middle-class New Zealand women who, through the precipitating event of marital separation, have experienced downward social mobility from or within the middle classes. The issues explored in this work make it as much a study of social suffering as a study of class in New Zealand.