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How Are Babies Made?

*Discourses of foetal “persons” and pregnant “mothers” in news
media and health education texts*

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

Master of Philosophy in Women’s Studies

at Massey University, Palmerston North and Wellington,
New Zealand

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2007

Abstract

Adopting a social constructionist perspective this research asks *how are babies made?* This question destabilises the local reproductive context asking how foetuses and their mothers have come to matter. I have analysed “everyday” texts broadly circulated in this context addressing matters related to pregnancy. These include health education posters intended to communicate health information to pregnant women, and news media articles from daily newspapers throughout Aotearoa New Zealand. Using a discourse analytic method, I have identified a strong discursive practice of subjectifying foetuses as entities separate from pregnant women with distinct identities: foetal persons. While foetal subjects take various forms, the dominant construction is the “unborn baby,” a vulnerable infant who must be protected from harm and emerges as the central subject of pregnancy.

The construction of pregnant subjects in these texts relates to the construction of foetal subjects. Pregnant women (and potentially pregnant women) are reduced to their bodies’ reproductive role as “maternal environments,” ones which pose risks to the foetus. However, they are also constructed as maternal subjects. As “mothers,” pregnant women are individually responsible for ensuring the health and wellbeing of foetuses. The “good mother” *will of course do anything she can* for her “child” by self-regulating her potentially harmful behaviour. The “acquiescent mother” acquiesces to biomedical interventions on behalf of the foetus. Pregnant subjects who do not self-regulate their behaviour and acquiesce to biomedical interventions are “bad” maternal subjects who harm their “children.”

The discourses of biomedicine (and biomedical sciences) and public health, particularly those of risk, emerge as dominant in constructing and naturalising of these reproductive subjects. I consider the implications of these subjects for social practices around reproduction, and for midwifery practice.

Acknowledgements

The ideas presented in this thesis have been accumulated in my years both studying and practicing midwifery and were inspired by the women, whose journeys through this perhaps most complex and profound of human experiences, I have been lucky enough to share. However they are ideas which have been refined, developed and in many ways transformed through the process of undertaking this research. My thesis supervisors Dr Lesley Patterson and Dr Avril Bell have helped me enormously with this process and I have greatly appreciated their time, encouragement, feedback, and advice. I would also like to acknowledge Dr Jenny Coleman for her advice and encouragement at various points during this thesis. I would like to acknowledge the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Massey University Wellington for the provision of a wonderful postgraduate workspace and resources, and the support of the administrative staff in both the college and the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, Fred and Jasmine. I have also greatly appreciated the financial support for this thesis provided in the form of a Massey Masterate Scholarship.

Finally there are a huge number of people behind the scenes who have made the completion of this thesis possible. Firstly I would like to acknowledge the brilliant support of my fellow postgraduate colleagues at Massey University Wellington, in particular Michelle, Carmen, Sue and Nathan. Your encouragement, energy and fun have been enormously important. I would like to acknowledge and heartily thank those who have read and commented on various drafts of this thesis, in particular Kate and Creon. Thank you to Jasmine for your wonderful help with the images for this thesis. Thanks also to my parents Nancy and Ron, and sister Anna, for housing and feeding me through the last month or so of writing; I am sorry for being such appalling company. Huge thanks to the many friends who have contributed to this thesis through their on-going encouragement and support. In particular to Jackie, for your ideas and endless encouragement, you're brilliant. And last but certainly not least huge thanks to the wonderful Garrick, whose patience, enthusiasm for my work, and care blows me away. I look forward to returning the favour.

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Bodies, then, are not born: they are made

(Haraway, 1989: 10)