

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.

“Leave your dignity at the door”: Technologies of power and the maternal body

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the Degree of

Master of Science

in

Psychology

at Massey University, Manawatū, New Zealand

Laura Jean Quin

2017

Abstract

Women in Aotearoa New Zealand are immersed in multiple and contradictory discourses, and create meaning of their lived experiences from within them. Maternity and motherhood are life events and stages that are embedded in gendered social power relations, with the motherhood mandate positioning all women as potential mothers. A literature review highlighted how neoliberalism and biopower both enable and constrain the experience of maternity and mothering. This research aimed to tease apart some of the threads of power that produce sites of tension for women and the maternal body. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eleven women about their experiences of maternity and motherhood and a feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis was used to understand how gendered social power relations enable and constrain women's experiences. The analysis showed that the neoliberal political landscape impacted on women's experiences, particularly where related to their everyday experience of maternity and mothering. The biomedical becomes the ordinary in an environment of uptake of interventions as the norm, and where a risk-adverse maternity system positions every potential risk as absolute. The expectation on women to perform 'good motherhood' amongst the tensions of biomedical and natural discourses also constrains them to making morally correct choices in an environment where they have limited agency. This research sought to disrupt the status quo of producing women as docile bodies within biomedical power and neoliberalism, and to empower them to continue to resist.

Acknowledgements

To the eleven inspirational women who shared their stories with me. Your stories have been with me daily for the duration of this project. Thank you for sharing some of your most personal and private moments with me for the sake of making a difference for other women. This work belongs to all of us, and I am in awe of your strength and insight. You boosted me up when I needed it most, and you gave me so much to finish this for. I could only include tiny parts of your stories, know that even your text that was left on the cutting room floor due to space restrictions still contributed to the whole. This is yours.

To Dr. Leigh Coombes. Leigh, thank you for changing my life. My feminism, my interest in social justice, and my activism directly stems from you igniting the passion for this work in me. I could never have done this without you, and thank you for dealing with my very regular crises of confidence, tears, and a ridiculous number of emails. You say “when you can’t find the word, use a sentence”, but even sentences cannot really show my gratitude and how blessed I feel to have you as part of this journey.

To family and friends who have supported me through this very long process, you all have helped to propel me through this. I wish I had the space to thank you all individually, please take this as a personal acknowledgement of what your support has meant to me.

Thank you to MUHEC for helping to provide a constructive framework to ensure my research was ethical, and to EXMSS and Graduate Women Manawatū, and Massey University Postgraduate Research Fund for assistance with funding.

I dedicate this work to my husband and best friend, Finn Ogle. You have given me unwavering support and love through this process, and you have kept our family on an even keel. The future is bright given we have made it through these tough few years without any conflict, and with our relationship only getting stronger. I am grateful every day that I get to grow old with you. And to our children, thank you for being so patient. I love you more than I can ever say.

Table of Contents

Abstract	i
Acknowledgements	ii
Table of Contents.....	v
Poem	vii
Introduction	1
Chapter One: Literature Review	13
Neoliberalism.....	13
Essentialism.....	14
The Motherhood Mandate	16
Good Mother	20
Internalised Technologies of Gender	21
Risk Discourse and the Biomedical Model	24
Neoliberalism, Maternity, and Notions of Choice.....	26
Sociocultural Concerns	30
Sex and the Maternal Body.....	31
The Public Maternal Body	33
Out of Control Bodies	34
The Impact of Maternity Staff.....	35
Summary.....	40
Chapter Two: Methodology and Method.....	43
Methodology	43
Method.....	53
Chapter Three: Analysis and discussion	65
Becoming Pregnant.....	65
Finding Out.....	76
Morning Sickness.....	80
Seeing the Baby	83
The Public Maternal Body	95
“It was as though I was a disease.” Navigating the biomedical.....	97
Decision Making.....	108
The cascade effect of errors and interventions.	115
Birth in the public gaze.....	123
When Things Go Wrong.....	127
Leaving the emergency decisions to the woman.....	129
After the Birth	131
NICU	133
At home	139
When staff meet women’s needs.....	141
Feeding	143
Mother guilt	147
Cultural specificity	152

Chapter Four: Conclusion	1
Limitations.....	5
A final reflection	6
References.....	10
Appendices.....	35
Appendix A.....	35
MUHEC Ethics Screen	35
Appendix B.....	38
MUHEC Low Risk Notification.....	38
Appendix C.....	42
Participant Information Sheet.....	42
Appendix E.....	44
Participant Consent Form	44
Appendix E.....	45
Transcript Release Form	45
Appendix F.....	46
Interview Questions	46

Poem

A secret heaviness, the weight of an occupied womb,

Forty tiny fingers and toes.

Every cell produced entirely by me, yet separate.

The dichotomy of intense love and longing; with the guilt of discomfort and sickness.

My body feels right, as a home for these children;

All at once complete and satisfied, yet awkward and afraid.

My womb is separate to me, no longer mine;

As my fetuses turn somersaults and caress each other through a thin veil of membrane.

They are mine, yet they belong to them,

The doctors, with their cloudy spectacles of deficit and disease.

I am to blame if something happens to my children while I protect my own body,

From scalpels and needles that are poised, ready for my weak moment.

I am no longer human, I am a growing room, a machine of incubation.

I am a child, I am blind, deaf, and mute.

A naughty child, refusing to place my signature on their paper,

A vessel of risk, a vagina and a uterus, a difficult patient.

Not a woman. Not a mother. Not a person.

