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Becoming a Parent: Discourses, Experience and Narratives

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For Keith and our children Maryse, Pablo and Antonio

ABSTRACT

This thesis is focussed on the question of how people become parents. Foucault's theory of discourse and ideas from Contemporary Phenomenology guided a dual approach to answering the question. Discourses from within the previous academic research literature on becoming a parent and the popular child-rearing manuals of this century were analysed. Fieldwork, over an 18 month period, was carried out with a small group of parents, in an urban New Zealand context, who were becoming parents for the first time.

In the academic literature, previous researchers worked within a discourse that asserts that the experience of becoming a parent is a (normal) crisis. These researchers argued the need to examine people's experiences but investigated these through the categories they believed relevant, abstracting people's experiences from the time, place and relationships in which they were embedded. Within the popular child-rearing manuals of this century, the overarching dominant discourse was one in which the social ills of each generation were to be remedied for the next through individual change. Initially, the dominant discourse was underpinned by ideas and practices about physical and mental hygiene and a moral order based on habits. By the middle of the century, the dominant discourse was underpinned by ideas and practices about normal emotional and cognitive development and a moral order based on social adjustment.

The material gathered throughout the fieldwork suggests that the people who participated in this research became parents through experience; through trial and error, observing and undergoing. This experience was mediated by the knowledge of trusted others, people's experiences of their own families and expert knowledge. As they narrated their accounts of this experience they used the vocabulary and judgements of the discourses of psychology and liberal feminism. They also commonly referred to a discourse of common sense. The narratives revealed that the effects of these discourses, in themselves, are neither emancipatory nor oppressive but need to be examined in the particular context of their use. As the mothers and fathers created a life for their child they reflexively engaged with both the projects of the self and the other.

The material from the fieldwork shows that people continually engage in dialogue about child-rearing, influencing and shaping others as they are influenced and shaped by others. However, the accounts that people gave of their experiences and the dominant discourses from within the academic research and popular literature constitute parenting and child-rearing as private concerns of the family. On the basis of the findings of this research it is argued that efforts should be directed towards creating a genuine democratic public culture of dialogue around issues of child-rearing.

Throughout the thesis the material from the fieldwork is used to reflect on contemporary debates about the nature of subjectivity. The research process of the fieldwork is also reflexively examined in terms of dominant discourses constituting research, and the plurality of data that constitute the experience of the researcher.

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