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Choice, Morality and Vulnerability: Young Women's Discourses of Cervical Screening

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

Master of Science

in

Psychology (Endorsement in Health Psychology)

At Massey University, Albany

New Zealand

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2016

Abstract

Cervical screening is a health surveillance tool used to prevent cervical cancer. In New Zealand, research into cervical screening has largely focused on barriers to participation. This type of research implicitly assumes that cervical screening is a desirable health behaviour for women to engage in, and does not explore how social and political factors are implicated in cervical screening behaviour. This research sought to explore women's understandings and experiences of cervical screening. Ten women aged 20 to 30 were interviewed, their responses recorded and transcribed, and an interpretive analysis conducted. From the analysis, three broad webs of discourse surrounding cervical screening – choice, morality and vulnerability – were identified and discussed. Each web of discourse was used to construct cervical screening in different ways. For choice, participants constructed cervical screening as an autonomous choice, routine, or an obligation. Morality was drawn upon for its role in cervical screening around ideas of individual and social responsibility, and sexual activity. Finally, vulnerability was explored through the fear of getting cervical cancer, the vulnerability experienced as part of screening, and the protection it was seen to offer. Choice, morality and vulnerability worked together to limit the available ways of experiencing and acting in relation to cervical screening, constructing compliance as the only option for women. Those who do not comply are positioned as problematic, irresponsible and immoral by women, their friends and families, and health professionals. This research highlighted the ways in which discourses produce realities which create and maintain power imbalances which govern and control women's bodies. Rather than viewing cervical screening as a desirable yet morally neutral act which all women ought to participate in, it is a site where women may choose to comply or resist dominant discourses which exert power over women's bodies.

Acknowledgements

I am so grateful to the individuals and groups who made this project possible. Immense thanks to the amazing women who took part in the research, sharing their stories and experiences; to the New Zealand Federation of Graduate Women North Shore Branch for awarding me with their Scholar of the Year scholarship to make life infinitely less stressful; to my supervisor Kerry Chamberlain for the ongoing guidance and pushing me to challenge myself; to everyone at Women's Health Action for their support and encouragement; to Sam for being my own personal cheerleader; to my family and friends for their endless patience with my stress and procrastination; and to Ernest Hemingway for the mantra that got me through this year: the first draft of anything is shit.

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