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**NUTRITIONAL HEALTH MESSAGES:
A CONFLICTUAL SPACE FOR WOMEN**

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

Master of Arts

in

Psychology

at Massey University, Albany, New Zealand

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2003

ABSTRACT

Several health-threatening diseases (e.g., stroke, diabetes, heart disease) are believed to be attributable in part to inadequate nutritional intake. Individuals' dietary practices have thus been construed as a problem and have become a public health issue. Consequently, nutritional health messages constituting a 'healthy diet' have become increasingly widespread. Women's magazines provide a key source through which nutritional health information is disseminated. To date, psychological research into individuals' dietary practices has focused predominantly on how intra-psychic factors (e.g., attitudes, intentions) operate to bring about dietary choices. However, to the lay person, one's dietary choices are not based solely on a rational cost-benefit analysis of the nutritional composition of foods for health maintenance reasons. Food has a multiplicity of meanings and signification which arise through interactions between individuals in the social sphere and are derived from the discursive construction of food and nutrition. The current study provides an analysis of those discourses that surround nutritional health messages featured in women's magazines. It also examines women's own meanings through an analysis of their accounts from focus group discussions about food, dietary practices, health and the media. Four discourses were identified in the media texts, moral, biomedical, scientific, and mothering. These four discourses were also drawn on in the women's talk, as was a discourse of feminine beauty. Together these constituted a discursive web that acts to position women as inexpert, uneducated, susceptible and immoral both as individuals and as mothers. Participants were shown to actively resist the discursive positioning afforded them, and in doing so, were seen to reject the claims made in nutritional health messages of food as health promoting. The results of this study problematise the conceptualisation that increasing individual knowledge around food and nutritional health is an effective means by which to engage people in healthy dietary practices.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to acknowledge the help of the seven women who participated in this study. Their discussions provided a rich source of data for exploring the discursive web that surrounds food and nutritional health.

Special thanks to my supervisor Kerry Chamberlain for his ongoing support and guidance, and to fellow Discourse Analysis Group members who were both supportive and encouraging. Knowing that other students were in the 'same boat' as myself certainly helped me to get through the troughs and peaks that I encountered along the way. Finally, thank you to all my friends who offered an endless supply of encouraging words and an unwavering faith in my ability. A special dedication goes to my mother, whom I want to thank for modelling the practices of commitment and endurance.

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