



Being both mother and worker: Conflicting constructions in government policy and women's talk

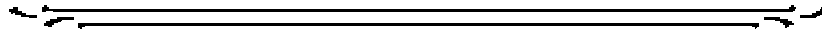
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Ella Kahu

Massey University

ella@kahu.org

Government policy influences lives not just materially, but also ideologically through the promotion of certain discourses. A Ministry of Women's Affairs policy and the talk of two focus groups of first time mothers were critically analysed to explore their differing understandings of what it means to be a mother and a worker. Deploying an economic rationalist discourse, the policy constructs motherhood as an inevitable but invisible demand, and paid work as essential to well-being and a duty of citizenship. The policy, driven by capitalist goals of economic growth rather than the needs of women, marginalises motherhood and positions women as workers first and foremost. In contrast, the mothers deployed an intensive mother discourse which privileged their maternal role and positioned them as the natural and best caregivers of their children. However, the pressure of increasingly dominant discourses that construct mothering as worthless and paid work as essential manifested in the women's talk as guilt and conflict. This tension is managed in part by the evolving independent mother discourse which strives to enable a more comfortable weaving of the identities of mother and worker. Current constructions of mother and worker do not serve women, men, or children well. Instead, care and work need to be equally valued as both responsibilities and rewards of citizenship to enable women and men to construct more balanced identities and lives.



Introduction

This research explored the discourses used to construct New Zealand women's choices around family and paid work through an analysis of government policy and the talk of two focus groups of first time mothers.

Women's labour force participation has been steadily increasing in New Zealand since the mid twentieth century (Alexander & Genç, 2005; Carmichael, 1975). Previous research into mothers' employment decisions can be loosely grouped into three categories. Firstly, economic accounts consider the impact of individual factors such as family composition and income, potential earnings, and childcare costs (e.g. Abrams & Goldscheider, 2002; Barrow, 1999). Secondly,

psychological accounts also take an individual perspective but consider personality and attitudes more important determinants. Central to this group is Hakim's (2000) preference theory which argues that women can be divided into three groups: home centred, work centred, and adaptive with 10-20% in each of the first two categories.

Finally, other researchers take the view that the individualistic perspective of economic and psychological accounts fails to acknowledge the importance of women's social context (Barlow, Duncan, & James, 2002; McRae, 2003). Cross cultural research for example has demonstrated that three clusters of contextual variables, social policy, economics, and ideology influence women's choices both materially by altering the financial costs, but

also socially through altering the perceived availability and moral value of choices (Daune-Richard, 1995; Trappe, 2000).

The current research sits within this third category and takes a social constructionist view of knowledge, arguing that how and what we know is contextual, sustained by social processes, and inextricably linked to social action (Gergen, 1985).

Research Design

Critical discourse analysis was used to examine two texts, the *Action Plan for New Zealand Women* (Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2004), a government policy document, and the talk of two focus groups of first time mothers. The analysis endeavoured to consider both the immediate function of the text as per Potter and Wetherell's (1994) discursive psychology, and how certain constructions support social institutions and ideologies (Parker, 1990).

The Action Plan is a glossy colourful publication that aims to articulate the government's commitment to improving women's lives. Such documents are increasingly being used by governments to bring about change through the management of public perceptions and the articulation of new discourses (Fairclough, 2001).

The eleven women were recruited through Plunket, SPACE, a Playcentre based parent support programme, and snowballing. Only first time mothers who had previously been in full time work and whose babies were under six months were included. Through self selection the groups were fairly homogenous: All were in stable heterosexual partnerships, of European descent, and with professional or clerical jobs. Three women were on paid parental leave, six on unpaid leave, one at home but not on leave, and one had returned to full time work with her husband an at-home father.

The policy document and the transcriptions of the focus groups were analysed separately and are reported in full elsewhere (Kahu & Morgan, 2007a, 2007b). This presentation aims to contrast and compare the texts' constructions of motherhood and paid work and then to explore the social consequences of these constructions (Kahu & Morgan, 2008).¹

Constructing Motherhood

Despite motherhood being a core element in most New Zealand women's lives, the word

'mother' is noticeably absent from the Action Plan. In addition, only one of the 20 photos of women in the Plan includes a child and even that one is not suggestive of mothering. The Plan talks of "valuing women's contribution to society" (p. 3), referring to caregiving and voluntary work, but by rendering motherhood as all but invisible, the Plan fails to do just that. Children are constructed as a demand that must be managed in order to enable women to undertake more paid work.

In contrast, the women in the groups clearly valued their maternal role. Drawing on what has been termed in previous research as the 'intensive mother' discourse (Hays, 1996), the women talked of the amazing power of the maternal bond, of their babies needing intensive parenting, and mothers as the best caregivers due to innate gender differences. Within this construction of motherhood, 'choosing' to be in full time paid work can be difficult.

However, discourses are multiple. Laid alongside the valorisation of motherhood was a discourse which more closely paralleled the Action Plan: 'motherhood as nothing'. Here the women talked of full time caregiving as 'doing nothing'. Within this discourse full time mother is an undesirable role and not sufficient for a successful woman.

Constructing Paid Work

The Action Plan deploys an economic rationalist discourse which privileges financial measures of well being and holds the traditional male norm of full time work as the ideal towards which women should strive. Women are positioned as needing to be economically independent, as providers for themselves and their children, and as needing to contribute to the economy through paid work. In addition, governments increasingly constitute paid work as essential to self fulfilment.

The women also constructed paid work as income, with their current position, financially dependent upon their partners, undesirable and a source of guilt. They also spoke of work as an important source of respect and social contact. For some, their paid work was central to their sense of self and therefore leaving the workforce was experienced as a powerful loss of identity.

Making Choices

The Action Plan's vision includes the "opportunity to choose and pursue a life path" (p. 3) suggesting that freedom for women to choose is

important. However, the different paths are not equally valued with paid work consistently privileged. For example, the work-life balance section positions women as needing more paid work, preferably full time, and childcare responsibilities as needing to be outsourced.

Although the women still saw themselves as primary caregivers, the feminine ideal has expanded to incorporate both mother and worker. The women were not deciding whether to return to paid work, they were deciding when and how much. With only one exception, the women assumed the father would continue in full time work and the decision was solely about what the mother would do. Donna, who earned twice what her husband earned, felt forced into her role as family provider. One other mother was planning to return to full time work at the end of the year while the rest were considering part time or work from home options. The key difference between how the Plan and the women constructed the choice was the prioritisation: within the Plan caregiving is something to be managed around paid work, while for the women paid work was something to be woven into their primary role as mothers.

Two discursive strategies were used by the women to justify different choices. Firstly, they spoke of motherhood as an important job. This strategy aims to accord the role the same value as paid work and therefore is used to support a choice to stay home. Secondly, they deployed what has been termed the 'independent mother' discourse that sees a good mother as one who does not devote herself exclusively to her children but rather seeks her own fulfilment through other activities (Lupton & Schmied, 2002). At its extreme, this risks positioning a woman who does not do this as smothering her child. Within the groups, the women deployed this discourse to justify time away from their children in part time work or other activities arguing that it made them better mothers.

It is important to stress that the decision making process was not easy for the women as they struggled with the inherent contradiction between the dominant discourses of intensive mother and successful woman. They wanted to be with their child but felt guilty for not earning and

experienced a loss of identity and independence through moving out of the workforce.

Discussion

It is important in a critical analysis to consider the consequences of the dominant discourses. The intensive mother discourse relies on the traditional gender divide which evolved as a support for capitalism: men producing in the workforce and women reproducing in the home. However, this structure has served to oppress women because the public sphere is privileged and only those within it are valued and accorded power. Feminists disagree on the solution to that oppression. Liberal feminists argue women need to move into the public sphere while communitarian feminists want to see an increased valuing of the private sphere (Guerrina, 2001). Although the Plan talks of both these solutions, only the former goes beyond the level of talk: Only one specific action in the Plan aims to increase the value that society places on caregiving and voluntary work, whereas 15 actions explicitly aim to either support women in paid work or enable more women to take up paid work.

When considered within the context of New Zealand's capitalist society, the prevalence of liberal feminism is not surprising. The current economic situation of low unemployment and increasing concerns over labour shortages means more women are needed in the workforce to increase productivity and sustain economic growth. This economic driver is clear within the Action Plan and also in other government texts such as the Employment Strategy (Department of Labour, 2005) and the Prime Minister's statement to parliament (Clark, 2005). Both liberal feminism and economic rationalism privilege the individual over the social and both see financial independence as central to citizenship; this commonality enables the Plan to draw upon feminist discourses to promote its economic goals.

The question then becomes, has this given women the freedom to choose? I would suggest not. The independent mother discourse, in its attempts to merge the requirements of a 'good' mother with the needs of capitalism has resulted in the double burden. As the women in the focus groups clearly articulate, participation in the workforce is not a choice, it is a social requirement. In order to be a good citizen, a worthwhile person and a success, a woman must be in paid work. This has not however

been matched by a reduction in their responsibilities for care and neither has it been matched by sufficient changes in the workforce to allow the satisfactory blending of the two roles.

Equally important is the effect of these discursive shifts on the lives and identities of men and children. The ideal worker remains the traditional masculine figure, willing and able to put work first in life, supported at home by a wife. The demands of the workplace are increasing: 35.1% of New Zealand men are working more than 50 hours per week, one of the highest rates in the OECD (Callister, 2004). In addition, the increasing demands upon women to also be in paid work means that men do not necessarily have the support at home that this model demands. These pressures result in men continuing to be denied the opportunity to take a more active role in the family and share the pleasures and rewards of caring.

Last, but by no means least, we need to consider the children. As mentioned earlier, within the Action Plan, children are positioned as responsibilities and as needing to be in care to free the mothers for work. Actions such as reviews of the ECE funding framework, child care assistance, and Out of School Care and Recreation are presented as tools for increasing women's attachment to the labour force.

Previous research in other Western countries has noted young children are increasingly positioned as needing to be in care in order to become independent, autonomous individuals (Blair-Loy, 2003; Hays, 1996). This discourse, labelled the independent child, was only deployed by one woman in the focus groups who suggested her child may be better off in daycare. Generally the groups positioned full time care as bad for young babies but part time as beneficial later on for social interaction. This parallels Australian research which found that children under a year are still positioned as needing intensive parental, preferably maternal, care (Lupton, 2000).

The repositioning of children as needing to be out of the home is desirable to Western governments because of the link between perceptions of children's needs and maternal behaviour. Policy analysts in both the UK and USA have explicitly noted the need to emphasise the benefits of childcare in order to encourage

women into the workforce (Barlow et al., 2002; Hartmann, 2004). In New Zealand, the blending of childcare with early childhood education and the increasing emphasis on young children needing to be educated by experts can be seen as part of this same shift. I am not suggesting that there are no benefits in early childhood education, but it is important to recognise that the educational needs of children and the caregiving needs of parents do not necessarily align. We need to consider carefully whether changes are being driven by the needs of the children or the needs of the state.

Solutions to these issues are not simple. I am certainly not advocating a return to the past when women were kept corralled within the home. However, current directions are not proving beneficial to women, men or children. What is needed is a more complete breakdown of the public/private divide: a society which enables both men and women to be carers and workers. For that to happen, at least two changes are required.

Firstly, the workplace needs restructuring. To date 'family friendly workplace' remains an ideal rather than a reality and much more is needed. Garey (1999) argues that as long as work and family automatically conflict, as long as the ideal worker is one who must work more than 40 hours per week, men will not expect to share the family load and women will not be seen as proper workers. The danger of such statements however is that they attend only to the liberal feminist side of the debate: They construct paid work as the desirable sphere from which women are excluded and the home as the undesirable burden. Valuing care is an essential second part of the solution.

While the intensive mother discourse served to oppress women, it also stands as a resistance to the increasing materialism and individualism of the capitalist society. The women in these focus groups continue to privilege family over work and in so doing, value care. Also important is the small but increasing shift towards a more egalitarian model of parenting which positions both mothers and fathers as important.

Government policy is needed which supports both parents who wish to work but feel constrained by lack of childcare, and those who wish to be at home but feel constrained by lack of money. From a social constructionist perspective, the government's

rhetoric is also critical. Rather than describing caregiving as women's contribution to society, care needs to be a central issue and we need to recognise its importance and value, not just to individuals but to the wellbeing of society. Finally, we focus on what we measure and so an important step is the increased use of measures of wellbeing that go beyond financial wealth and labour force participation.

This project is but a tiny step towards understanding how current ways of talking influence lives. Much more is needed. The women in this group represent only a portion of New Zealand women and we need to explore how these discourses are played out in the lives of other women with different ethnicities, different socio-economic statuses, and different family structures. We also need to listen to the fathers to understand the barriers which limit their involvement with their children. For example, Riley (2003), in his British research, concluded that the dominant construction of masculinity continues to be defined by the male provider role. As part of the project of valuing care we need to explore other constructions which legitimate care as a valued and necessary part of manhood.

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¹ As this summary does not include data extracts to support the analysis, I recommend interested readers either access the full thesis at digitalcommons.massey.ac.nz or the published articles listed above.