Original Research Study

Making Choices: Contradictions and Commonalities in the Valuing of Caring and Working by Government Policy and First Time Mothers

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Abstract

This paper examines the discourses which construct women's identities as mother and worker. In order to explore the discursive interface between policy and experience, two texts were analysed and compared: the New Zealand government policy for women and the talk of first time mothers. Both similarities and differences were identified but the key difference was one of priority. The policy document privileged paid work and constructed women's caregiving responsibilities as a demand. For the women, although paid work was financially and psychologically important, their priority was their mothering. The analysis reveals the increasing dominance of discourses of economic rationalism, which elevate market work to the status of essential and diminish the importance of reproduction and care. We argue that these discourses do not serve women, men, or children well. Although the women drew upon newer discourses which enable a more comfortable weaving together of their identities of mother and worker, this must not be seen as the total solution. What is needed is a more complete breakdown of the public/private divide: a society which values care and work, both as responsibilities and rewards of citizenship, and which will therefore allow both women and men to construct more balanced lives and identities.

Key Words: Motherhood; paid work; work-life balance; gender roles; discourse analysis

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore the discourses used to construct women's decisions surrounding family and paid work within contemporary New Zealand, and in particular to focus on the interface between government policy and women's lived experience. Policy impacts on people's lives both materially and socially. Governments aim to influence people's decisions through legislating to make certain choices easier than others, generally by altering the financial costs. For example, paid parental leave and subsidised childcare have both been shown to increase women's labour force participation (Jaumotte, 2003; McGovern et al., 2000; White, 2001). At a deeper level, however, policy is a powerful

element in the positioning of certain discourses as dominant which constrain and enable choices at an ideological level through making some subject positions more accessible than others (Fairclough, 2001).

This paper is positioned within a feminist social constructionist framework. Social constructionism views knowledge as constructed in the interactions between people and as entirely contextual: dependent upon and varying according to the social, historical, and cultural space and time within which it is created (Gergen, 1985). Language plays a central role and is seen not merely as expressive but as a cultural practice that constructs reality (Sampson, 1978). Words do not passively and neutrally reflect the world or experience, but rather they actively construct both object and subject (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1994). Within this framework, it is discourses, ways of talking, which become the focus of study rather than beliefs or experiences. Discourses construct our world so that how we understand and experience being a mother is dependent upon the discourses of motherhood that are available to us within our particular time and place in history.

Feminism's overriding goal is to improve women's lives and, for many, social constructionism allows a way of understanding the world with the potential to invoke change through challenging and resisting dominant gendered ways of being (Fonow & Cook, 1991). Harding (1987) argues that what makes research feminist is not its methodology but its underlying agenda: Feminist research is more than research on women by women, it is research for women (Webb, 1993). This study therefore has an agenda of social change: to make visible the dominant and marginalised discourses surrounding women's dual roles of mother and worker in order to understand, and perhaps influence, their social and political impact.

Various authors have described the dominant discourse of motherhood in Western countries, 'the intensive mother', as a gendered model which positions women as primary caregivers and children as needing to be with their mothers (Hays, 1996; Phoenix & Woollett, 1991; Villani & Ryan, 1997). At the same time, society deems mothering to be non-work and paid work as the source of a "socially valued sense of self" (Vincent, Ball, & Pietikainen, 2004, p. 577). Feminist calls for equality and women's increasing participation in paid work has resulted in women being positioned as needing to be fully committed to their careers in order to be equal to men, a discourse which has been labelled as 'successful woman' (Hughes, 2002; Lupton & Schmied, 2002). The inherent conflict between the 'intensive mother' and 'successful woman' discourses, and the difficulty that creates for mothers, has been well documented (Bailey, 1999; Benveniste, 1998; Stewart & Davis, 1996). Researchers in Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States have suggested that a newer discourse, the 'independent mother', is gaining ground and serves to reduce the tension by positioning women as needing to develop their own interests and spend time away from their children in order to be better mothers (Hughes, 2002; Lupton, 2000; Woodward, 1997). Similarly, in a study of cultural norms, McPherson (2006) found that in New Zealand there has been a "shift in the concept of what it means to be a good mother" (p. 5). While women still put their children first, being a good mother no longer necessarily means staying at home full-time. Paid work can be compatible with mothering. The present study aims to build on this body of literature through examining the role that government policy plays in this changing picture of New Zealand women's identities and lives.

Critical discourse analysis is an umbrella term for analyses which draw upon Foucault's work and which examine how the construction of objects and subjects support certain institutions, ideologies, and power relations (Parker, 1990). It has been identified as a particularly useful tool for the analysis of government policy: considering how policy

represents social problems and what the effects of that representation might be (Bacchi, 1999; Fairclough, 2001). Critical discourse analysis as a methodology is not rigorously prescribed and the resulting analysis is both personal and interpretive. This analysis loosely followed Parker's (1992) ten criteria including: examining how the objects and subjects relevant to the research question are constructed in the text; consideration of what identities and positions are made available by those constructions; identification of any contradictions and contrasts; and finally, consideration of the ideological effects of those discourses – who benefits from such constructions and would therefore wish to promote them.

In order to explore the interface between policy and lived experience, two pieces of text were analysed: a New Zealand government policy document, the *Action Plan for New Zealand Women* (Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2004), and the talk of two focus groups of first time mothers with children under six months old. The policy document (Action Plan), a colourful glossy presentation, was commissioned by the Labour government to articulate the range of policies and state actions focussing on "improving a range of outcomes for women and reducing inequalities between women and men, and between particular groups of women" (Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2004, p. 1). The Action Plan aims to achieve a vision, that "Aotearoa/New Zealand will be an equitable, inclusive and sustainable society where all women can achieve their aspirations…" (p. 3), and is structured around three themes: economic sustainability, life-work balance, and well being. This analysis focuses on the first two as being most relevant to women's choices around work and family.

The eleven women in the focus groups were recruited through Plunket and Playcentre SPACE, local parenting organisations, and snowballing. Through self-selection the women were a homogenous group: all were of European descent, were in stable heterosexual partnerships, and had been in professional or clerical work prior to the birth of their children. One woman's husband was full-time caregiving while she had returned to full-time work, and the remainder were on either paid or unpaid parental leave. One participant had decided to return to her full-time teaching job while the others were either planning part-time work or had yet to decide what they would do when their leave ended.

The two texts were analysed separately and are reported elsewhere (Kahu & Morgan, 2007a, 2007b). This paper draws together the strands that emerged from these two phases of analysis in order to consider the following questions: What are the similarities and differences between how the government and women construct the objects and subjects of interest to this research: motherhood, paid work, women, and children? What are the social consequences of the deployment of those discourses? Who is best served by the key discourses and which social institutions are strengthened and supported by their use?

Similarities and Differences

Constructing Motherhood

At some point, motherhood is a core element in most New Zealand women's lives and identities. One of the most striking differences between the Action Plan and the women's talk was how they constructed motherhood. Within the Action Plan, the word 'mother' is noticeable by its absence and not one of the over 20 photographs of women of different ages and ethnicities participating in a range of work, leisure, and social activities depicts a woman in a maternal role. The Action Plan's vision states the importance of "valuing women's contribution to society" (p. 3); a phrase our analysis identified as referring to women's traditional roles as caregivers and volunteers:

> In considering improvements to work-life balance, the contributions to unpaid work in the community made by women, including voluntary work and care of dependants, must be taken into account. (p. 13)

However, by rendering motherhood as all but invisible, the Action Plan itself fails to value this aspect of women's identities. In contrast to paid work, which is constructed as actively participating in society, mothering is constructed as a passive activity undertaken from outside society. When it is alluded to caregiving including mothering is constructed as a demand on women's time, a burden that must be managed in order to free women to undertake more paid work. At the same time, as is discussed shortly, women are positioned as needing to provide financially for their dependants, therefore constructing 'mother' as identical to 'father', as full-time breadwinner.

In contrast, for the women in the focus groups there could be no doubt that their main focus and priority was their new role as mothers. They drew strongly on what previous researchers have termed the 'intensive mother' discourse (Hays, 1996). This discourse was constructed from several interlinked elements: the maternal bond as powerful and amazing, women as the natural caregivers of children because of biological differences between the sexes, mothering and fathering as qualitatively different, and children, especially babies, as needing to be in parental rather than institutional care with a special need for maternal love (Kahu & Morgan, 2007b). In the following extract, Donna, who has returned to work full-time while her husband cares for their child, talks of how mothers are different to fathers:

> Donna: Even though it is [my husband] at home I still worry that you know, it's my baby and is [my husband] doing enough for him. Just because of the difference between Mums and Dads really.

> Donna: Don't get me wrong, [my husband] is a very affectionate man and he loves his son to pieces and you can see that when you see him with him, but yeah, he's not, he's not the Mum.

Women's traditional role as caregiver is promoted and valued within this discourse. This acts as a powerful constraint upon women's choices; their construction of a good mother and their sense of themselves as attached to their babies, renders some actions impossible:

> Debra: I'm the kind of person that, well you have a baby, you don't stick them in daycare. You know, you have your baby to hang out with them.

> Lisa: I took six months [leave] and I was adamant I was going to go back at six months (laughs) but I just can't leave her.

However, discourses are multiple, and contradictions and variability are often signs of discursive shifts. In contrast to the valuing of motherhood within the intensive mother discourse, the women drew on another construction which more closely paralleled the Action Plan's rendering of mothering as invisible: motherhood as nothing. Within this discourse, mothering, particularly as a full-time role, is constructed as doing nothing, not in the sense of not being busy but in the sense of not doing anything worthwhile. 'Full-time mother' within this discourse is an undesirable role and not sufficient for a successful woman as the following extracts illustrate:

> Vic: I think the reality of it, for me to actually just stay home and do nothing; I don't think I could ever, just do nothing.

> Donna: I wanted to be everything my mother wasn't. Because my Mum was the traditional, you know, spat out five children from the age of 18

> and so she bound herself to home… She has no expect– well it is to say, no expectations of herself, to better herself really. Like she did the Mum thing.

The contrast between these two competing realities is stark. Within the intensive mother discourse, women are positioned as needing to be home with their babies and so drawing on this discourse enables and promotes staying out of the workforce. In direct contrast, the mothering as nothing discourse positions women who stay home as inadequate, and therefore exerts pressure on women to be more than 'just' mothers, thus promoting returning to the paid workforce.

In previous research with first time mothers in Australia, the United States, and Britain, researchers have argued that a newer construction of motherhood, the independent mother, is gaining dominance (Hays, 1996; Lupton & Schmied, 2002). Within this discourse, a good mother is one who does not devote herself exclusively to her children, but who meets her own need for fulfilment through paid work. The women in the focus groups deployed this discourse to resist the pressure of the intensive mother discourse and to justify time away from their babies, in part-time work or other activities.

> Lisa: I feel it makes you a better mother too. I feel like if I can go away for a few hours and leave [my daughter], when I come back I'm far more refreshed and, kind of like I've missed her while I'm away so I'm refreshed and probably just better at it.

Constructing Paid Work

Both similarities and differences were evident in the constructions of paid work within the Action Plan and the women's talk. Deploying an economic rationalist discourse that privileges financial measures of well-being above all others, the Action Plan holds up the male norm of full-time paid work as the ideal towards which women should strive. Within this discourse, women are positioned as workers first and foremost, and full-time participation in the labour force is constructed as necessary for a multitude of reasons. Firstly, the Action Plan deploys an economic independence discourse which argues that all individuals have a social responsibility to support themselves, and in addition, women need to earn sufficient income to provide for their children now and in the future. Secondly, paid work is constructed as being necessary for self-fulfilment, a construction which is increasingly common in government rhetoric (Kahu & Morgan, 2007a). Finally, women need to be in the labour force in order to contribute to the economy, and so fulfil their obligations as good citizens. This is reflected in the definition of economic sustainability, the first of the Action Plan's key themes:

> Economic sustainability: To improve women's economic independence and ability to contribute to the New Zealand economy. (p. 6)

This shift, from the traditional ideology of father as breadwinner and mother as caregiver towards a dual breadwinner model, was not strongly evident in the women's talk with only one couple planning to have both parents in full-time work in the near future. However, the discourses of paid work as essential were apparent, with most of the women's current position, out of the workforce and financially dependent upon their partners, seen as undesirable and a source of guilt:

> Rita: He basically said it's really up to me but I sort of feel a bit guilty about not going back with the money side of things.

> Diane: I will feel guilty about living on just [my partner's] wage. I've had my own money for such a long time that I find it really difficult to not have it.

As well as constructing work as necessary for financial reasons, both pragmatic and psychological, the women talked of work as being an important source of social contact and respect. For some, their role in the paid workforce was central to their sense of self and leaving work was therefore experienced as a loss.

Making Choices: Managing the Identities of Mother and Worker

Having briefly examined the individual discourses of motherhood and work, we now explore the interface between those discourses to look at how the Action Plan and the women constructed the choices that women have for managing their roles in the private and public spheres. While both the Action Plan and the women talk of the importance of individual choice, they had different priorities.

The Action Plan draws upon well established discourses of feminism and individualism using the valued Western tenets of freedom, equity, and choice to warrant its vision for New Zealand women. On the surface the Action Plan does not appear to be dictating how women should live their lives and the Action Plan's vision argues that all women need to have the "opportunity to choose and pursue a life path" (p. 3). However, within the Action Plan the different life paths are not equally valued and as already discussed, mothering is rendered invisible while paid work is valorised. Statistics are used to demonstrate that women are different from men, particularly in labour force participation rates, and these differences are constructed as a problem that the Action Plan aims to resolve by helping women to become more like men. Women therefore are positioned as needing more paid work and their choice to do so is seen to be constrained by family demands which should be resolved through outsourcing the caregiving. To this end, the themes and actions of the Action Plan are primarily focussed on the goal of increasing women's participation in the labour force. For all its talk of choice, the choice to be in full-time paid work is constructed as the only valued one.

In contrast, the women constructed women's and men's roles as different. While the labour force decision was made jointly by both parents, with only one exception the decision was about what the mother would do; the father's traditional role as primary breadwinner was unquestioned. The one woman who was in what can be described as a role reversal situation constructed this as an undesirable choice driven by money:

> Donna: I earn in excess of $70,000 a year and he earns $30,000 a year. So you do the math. It's just not viable for me not to be at work. Unfortunately.
>
> Interviewer: How is that for you?
>
> Donna: It sucks.

However, although the women were still positioned as the primary caregivers, the feminine ideal has shifted so that it incorporates both mother and worker. Recent Australian research also noted this blending of identities: "the roles of 'mother' and 'worker' are not understood by this generation of young women as separate, but enmeshed" (Everingham, Stevenson, & Warner-Smith, 2007, p. 427). In that study, as with this one, the women were not choosing whether they would re-enter the paid workforce, but when and to what degree. In this, the Action Plan and the women constructed the feminine identity in similar terms: as both

caregivers and workers. The difference lay in the priorities. Whereas the Action Plan constructed caregiving as something to be managed around paid work, the women were deciding how to weave some paid work into their dominant identity as caregiver to their children. The women's maternal role was already integral to their sense of self, and in light of dominant discourses of what makes a good mother, their overwhelming desire to prioritise their children makes sense.

Hughes (2002) suggests women who put their child's needs first are subsuming their own needs and this is often portrayed negatively. But in a differently constructed world, putting someone else's needs ahead of your own would be valued, praised, and rewarded. It is only in light of the competitive individualist and economic rationalist discourses that the Action Plan deploys that this decision is seen to be negative; only in a world where financial wealth is the sole measure of quality of life and the basis of a healthy identity, and where economic independence is based on the individual rather than the family is it problematic. For these women, and we do not aim to generalise beyond these women, this was not a bad situation. They may have (temporarily) lost an aspect of their identity through this transition but they had also gained one which they valued highly for all the discursive tension around motherhood.

Equally however, we are not implying that the women constructed their choices as simple and clear. As in all discursive work into women's decision-making around family and paid work, the women in the focus groups struggled with the inherent contradiction between the dominant discourses of intensive mother and successful woman. On the one hand, they saw their role of mother as one which required them to be the full-time caregiver of their child. On the other hand, they felt guilty for not earning money and experienced a loss of independence and identity through moving out of the workforce.

> Lisa: I just want the best of both worlds really and I can't have it.

The Influences of Feminism and Capitalism on Women's Identities

Examining the consequence of deploying certain discourses is important in critical discourse analysis: who benefits, and, in this instance, which discourses better serve the needs of women. The intensive mother discourse, founded in the traditional divide between the public and private spheres, evolved as a support for capitalism. Women were needed in the home to undertake the reproductive roles so that men were free to undertake the productive work in the marketplace. Hence, the intensive mother discourse promotes a family structure of breadwinning father and caregiving mother. According to Marx, this oppressed both men and women: while women were domestic slaves in the home, men were wage slaves in the market (Eisenstein, 1979). However, the increasing dominance of individualism alongside economic rationalist discourses, which value only that which is done for money, has meant that not just material wealth but also power is accorded only to those in the public sphere. For the women in this research, this discursive context continues to exert its oppressive force: maternal care is essential to the well-being of children, care means presence, and therefore choosing full-time work is difficult. At the same time paid work is the only means to achieve success, well-being, and personal fulfilment. Within this picture, the intensive mother discourse can only fail women in their striving for equality.

Feminists agree on the need for women to gain equal power, but they do not agree on how best to achieve that goal. While liberal feminists argue that women need to move out of the home and into the workplace, difference or communitarian feminists argue for a revaluing of the private sphere (Guerrina, 2001). For them, the problem lays not with the intensive mother discourse, but with the low value that society places on caregiving. We now consider

where the Action Plan and the women's talk are located within this key feminist debate and therefore how they construct the solutions to women's inequality.

On the surface, the Action Plan's vision attempts to deploy both sides of the debate with its aims of both increasing women's participation in the public sphere and valuing women's traditional contributions to society. However, as discussed, the analysis reveals the latter as token rhetoric: Mothering is obscured and just a single specific action in the Action Plan aims to increase the value of women's traditional roles while 15 actions explicitly aim to either support women in paid work or enable more women to take up paid work.

Valuing care was more evident in the women's talk. As discussed, the intensive mother discourse, which constructs care as vital, was dominant and the women prioritised their caregiving and maternal identity. In addition, they used a more specific discursive strategy in which motherhood was constructed as an important job.

> Helen: I mean it should be like, when they look at the most important jobs, Mum should definitely be on the top before anything else.

> Kirsten: I've got a full, more than a full-time job I'm doing so he's bringing in the money.

This reflects the classic feminist slogan 'every mother is a working mother', developed by women as a response to the dichotomising of mothers into working mothers and stay-at-home mothers. The strategy has a dual effect: Firstly describing motherhood as a job, or as work, aims to accord the role the same high value which is automatically bestowed upon roles in the paid workforce. Secondly, as reflected in Kirsten's comment above, it serves to justify a decision to be at home. Bailey (2000), however, makes the critical point that in many ways this discourse simply validates the valorisation of paid work: It is only through constructing mothering as work that it can be accorded the same respect and value, and therefore this construction still values work above care.

Liberal feminism, with its aim of women gaining equality through becoming like men, is the most dominant strategy in the Action Plan and is also evident in the women's talk although to a lesser degree. Women in New Zealand and other industrialised countries have moved into the workforce in ever increasing numbers (Alexander & Genç, 2005; van der Lippe & van Dijk, 2001). The Action Plan constructs this trend as an advance for women and aims to continue it, promoting a dual breadwinner family structure and proposing actions which outsource the caregiving of children. The women too saw paid work as an ongoing part of their lives, but as new mothers this was not their central concern and most of the couples were envisaging a one-and-a-half breadwinner model while the children were young.

When looked at in the context of New Zealand's capitalist society, this dominance of liberal feminism is not surprising. Nolan (2000), in her analysis of the relationship between women and the state in New Zealand, argues that historically the state has been ambiguous with regards to women's role in the home versus the workplace because policy has been subject to conflicting pressures from the interest groups of capitalist patriarchy and feminism. However, we would suggest that capitalism and liberal feminism are not necessarily in conflict. In the past, when the single wage was no longer sufficient to sustain a family, the feminist movement encouraged women into the workforce and thus sustained the capitalist economy. The current economic situation is similar: Low unemployment, concerns over increasing labour shortages, and the need for increased productivity to sustain economic growth have combined to ensure that more women are needed in the labour force. This is explicitly stated within the government's Employment Strategy (Department of Labour, 2005a). In addition the Prime Minister, in a statement to parliament, described her

government's goal of increasing women's labour force participation rates: "[it's] a worthwhile objective and at this time of labour shortage, it's a good time to be pursuing it" (Clark, 2005). That two of the Action Plan's key themes, economic sustainability and work-life balance, are driven by such economic needs is evident from the text:

> Economic Sustainability: to improve women's economic independence and ability to contribute to the New Zealand economy. (p. 6)

> New Zealand has an ageing population and, in the future, there will be fewer working age people available to sustain the economy. Improved work-life balance policies and practices will enable more people to enter the workforce by taking into account the responsibilities and activities people have outside work. (p. 12)

Both liberal feminism and economic rationalism privilege the individual over the social, and both construct economic independence as the key to responsible citizenship. This commonality allows the Action Plan to draw on feminist discourses to warrant capitalist goals of increasing women's participation in the labour force. Thus it can be suggested that the dominance of liberal feminism and the lack of true valuing of care arise ultimately from concerns for the state of the economy rather than concerns for the equality of women.

Discourses of economic rationalism and individualism certainly promote women moving into the public sphere, but is this achieving the equality that liberal feminists hoped? More importantly, has it freed women from oppression and given them the choice which Western societies and all feminists value so highly? Do the newer evolving discourses of independent mother and dual breadwinner position women in more highly valued ways?

The Lived Consequences for Women, Children, and Men

Although discourses are neither inherently good nor bad, it is easy to assume that recent discourses are an improvement: Western societies tend to construct change as progress. By this account, independent mother is an improvement on intensive mother, and certainly the independent mother discourse has the potential for positive benefits for women in that it frees them from exclusively occupying the private realm and opens a door to the public. It also however risks closing the door to the private realm and simply constraining women in different ways. The independent mother, founded in liberal feminism, attempts to merge the good mother discourse with the requirements of capitalism. If paid work is necessary for individual happiness and only happy mothers make good mothers, then logically speaking a good mother is one in paid employment. Because the independent mother discourse retains the key element of the intensive mother discourse that good mothers do what is best for their child, it serves to promote mothers moving into the workforce. But how does this ideological shift influence people's lives? Not just women, but also children and men?

For women, rather than freeing them from oppression, the drawing together of these discourses has added further to their constraints. Participation in the workforce is constructed not as a choice, but as a moral and social obligation. As the women in the groups articulate:

> Helen: Society makes you feel like you need to go back to work.

> Debra: Yeah.

> Sarah: Yeah, it does doesn't it?

In order to be a good citizen, a worthwhile person, and a success, a woman must have paid work. In addition, women's increased participation in the labour force has not been matched by an equal reduction in women's traditional roles. As the Action Plan makes clear, women still carry most of the responsibility for caregiving. The result therefore is the double burden. It would appear that women are now both domestic and wage slaves with the multiple responsibilities of providing the emotional, practical, and financial care for their families. Is this the freedom that feminism aspires to? The irony of this is well captured by an Australian focus group of young working-class women who "blamed 'feminism' for their perceived lack of choice *not* to work when they had children" (Everingham et al., 2007, p. 431).

While the women in this research were attempting a 'best of both worlds' solution, structural barriers continue to make it difficult to successfully combine motherhood and paid work. The women talked of the lack of flexibility by employers, the low value placed on part-time work, and the limitations within the childcare sector (Kahu & Morgan, 2007b). This parallels the findings of McPherson (2006) who concluded that while part-time work may be the ideal for most New Zealand mothers, institutional and structural factors such as workplace and childcare inflexibility often make that ideal difficult.

The effect of these discourses on the positioning of children also needs careful examination. Previous discursive research has suggested that children are increasingly positioned as being best served by time in childcare (called 'early childhood education' in NZ); needing to be away from their mothers in order to be autonomous, independent individuals (Blair-Loy, 2003; Hays, 1996). For the most part, the women in the current research did not deploy this discourse, instead constructing full-time care/education as bad for the child. However, the fact that one woman did suggest some children are better off in childcare/education indicates that the discourse, while marginal, is available.

> Jo: I've just got this thing in my mind that I don't know what he's going to need. What's going to be best for him? You know, you hear some people say it was definitely best for the child to be at daycare, you know, it's what he needed. He was far better at daycare than being at home on his own.

Most of the women in the focus groups talked of how time in care/education services would be beneficial for social interaction when the babies were older. In contrast to the current study, which looked solely at first time mothers with children under six months old, McPherson (2006) interviewed a range of mothers with older children and found the same pattern: that some time in early childhood education was viewed as positive from age three, but that parental care, preferably maternal, was preferred in the first year.

There is evidence in other texts, particularly government rhetoric on early childhood education, which supports the view that this reconstruction of children as needing to be in childcare is desirable to Western governments because of the link between perceptions of children's needs and maternal behaviour. If a good mother continues to be constructed as one who puts her child's needs first, this shift in what children are seen to need is essential if women are to be moved from full-time caregiving. Policy analysts in Britain and the United States have explicitly stated that a focus on the benefits of childcare for children is needed in order to encourage women into the workforce (Barlow, Duncan, & James, 2002; Hartmann, 2004; Himmelweit & Sigala, 2004). In New Zealand, the recent discursive blending of childcare with early childhood education can be seen as part of such a move. Previously, early childhood education was constructed as a different institution to childcare, with the former aimed at meeting children's educational needs from aged three and the latter aimed at meeting parental needs to return to the workforce. Now they are blended into "early childhood education and care" and there is an increasing emphasis on trained experts as the

best people to provide that service. This constructs care as education, and positions all children, with little or no differentiation by age, as benefiting from time in a childcare setting, with trained teachers, to be educated. For mothers, this makes choosing to be in paid work the most accessible option. After all, within this reality, a mother who stays at home with her child, and who is financially dependent on her partner or the state, is not only unsuccessful herself and not fulfilling her obligations as a citizen, but she is also not doing the best for her child. The reconstruction of children to serve the needs of the capitalist economy in this way needs careful consideration.

We also suggest that men are not well served by economic rationalist discourses that devalue caring and elevate paid work to the status of essential to personal well-being. Capitalist societies have long privileged production over reproduction and the workplace continues to be structured around the assumption that reproduction happens elsewhere and is someone else's responsibility (Acker, 1992). The public/private divide is founded on a time when the inherent tension between the spheres was managed by the gender division of roles within the family. One of the key ways that the gendering of such institutions is hidden is through the abstraction of a person such as the ideal worker (Acker, 1992). Although the gender of the ideal worker is undefined, it is an inherently masculine figure: wage slave, full-time worker and breadwinner; willing and able to put his work ahead of his family and all other aspects of life, supported in the home by the unpaid labour of his wife. It is only with such support that it is possible to combine that level of commitment to paid work with a family but the move of women into the workforce means that the support is increasingly not available.

In New Zealand, the increasing demands of the workplace have pushed the requirements of the ideal worker to an even further extreme, with 35 percent of employed men working in excess of 50 hours per week, one of the highest levels in the OECD (Callister, 2004). As well as working longer, men are realising they are missing out on their families: A large survey found that 80 percent of New Zealanders believe that men should be more involved in their children's lives (Gendall, 2003). The demands of the paternal identity as breadwinner therefore result in an excessive burden on men and at the same time denies them the opportunity to take a more active role in the family, to experience the pleasures and rewards of caring.

Creating Solutions: The Meaning of Work and the Value of Care

In saying that the current discourses do not serve women, children, or men well, we are not advocating a return to the traditional discourses of the past which limited both women and men to a single sphere. Lister (2002) talks of the problems of pendulum politics and the dangers of swinging from the work obsessed equality model towards politics based on gender difference. Neither equality nor difference alone is sufficient. Instead, what is required is a more complete breakdown of the public/private divide and a society which values care as much, if not more, than it values money: A society in which both women and men are enabled to lead more balanced lives which incorporate both caring and working. Lister (2002) describes such a model as "a gender inclusive citizen-worker-carer model" (p. 529) whereby caring and working are both constructed as obligations and rewards of citizenship. This requires two important changes: a shift in the meaning of work and a shift in the value of care.

As Garey (1999) says: "as a society, we should expect work life and family life to be compatible" (p. 200). In order for that to happen, however, the workplace needs to be reconstructed, and in particular we need to break down the image of the ideal worker. As outlined above, with the increasing expectation that women will be in paid work, even when

their families are young, neither men nor women benefit from such a construction: Women are constrained because as mothers they can never be the ideal worker and men are constrained because the demands of the ideal worker exclude them from caring roles. However, instead of starting from the premise that it is women who are deficient, that we need to "enhance women's ability to retain attachment to the paid workforce" (Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2004, p. 14) as per the Action Plan, we need to focus more on the deficiencies within the marketplace.

To date, "family friendly workplace" remains at the level of talk, an ideal rather than a reality. Although surveys such as that done by the EEO Trust (2006) are starting to show increases in the number of businesses with work-life policies and practices, the women in this study and in McPherson's (2006) are still experiencing very real barriers. Garey (1999) argues that as long as work and family automatically conflict, as long as the ideal worker is one who must work in excess of forty hours per week, men will not expect to share the family work load and women will not be seen as proper workers. However, we need to exercise caution with such statements as in many ways they reinforce the problem by constructing work as the desirable sphere from which women are excluded and family as the undesirable burden which men need to step up and share. Truly valuing care is a necessary part of the solution.

Hays (1996) reminds us that although it can be argued that the intensive mother discourse has served to oppress women, it also stands as a resistance to, and a rejection of, the ever increasing competitive and materialistic individualism of the capitalist society. This analysis showed that for all the pressure of economic rationalism, the women in the focus groups continue to privilege their family over their work. Even the women who were returning to full-time work were planning to do so in ways which would allow them some degree of intensive parenting: to be with their child in the way that they wanted. They continue to value care above all else. Even more important was the slight but noticeable shift towards a more egalitarian construction of parenting. Although maternal care was still valued more highly, the women often talked in gender neutral terms of children needing parental love and time. This shift, from intensive mothering to intensive parenting, is a necessary one as it values care, but does not position just women as the carers. Government policy needs to recognise and support this shift.

Ideally, both parents should be able to both work and care, they should be entitled to raise their children in the way that they see as best, including being able to choose to take time out from the labour force or reduce their hours. Currently the focus is on supporting women who wish to participate in the labour force but feel they are prevented by lack of childcare. Policy neglects to recognise the parallel problem, that there are women, and men, who are working more hours outside the home than they desire and who would wish to spend more time with their children. For example, according to a Ministry of Social Development survey (2006), 35% of families with both parents in paid work would prefer one partner was at home. Government fails to consider that while children may benefit from education within an institution, they also benefit from time at home with loving parents. One possible solution is an income that is not constructed as dependency. The construction of government funded payments matters. The women in the focus groups distinguished clearly between money from paid parental leave, a rightful wage, and money from government supplements, a handout engendering guilt (Kahu & Morgan, 2007b). Yet both are tax payer funded and it can be argued that both make it possible for a parent to reduce their working time in order to be with their child. If the vision for New Zealand women is truly "opportunity to choose and pursue a life path" (Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2004, p. 3) as the Action Plan says, then government policy needs to give that choice to the families through subsidised childcare for

parents who want to work and an income for those who want to be at home. The women in McPherson's (2006) study also argued that if women were to truly have choice then the government should offer assistance to women who choose to care for their children themselves. This would come closer to enabling choice than current policy.

Even more important than legislation is how government policy constructs care and parenting in its rhetoric. For example, positioning the issue of care in the policy for women, and describing caregiving as women's contribution to society, reinforces the view that this is only women's role. Valuing care needs to be a central policy issue for all. As a society, New Zealand needs to recognise that raising children is both a valued social act and an individual pleasure. As long as care is undervalued by society, men will be unlikely to rush forward to play a greater part and those that do will not be valued for it. As Aveling (2002) says, when we reconstructed girls to do anything, we failed to reconstruct boys in the same way. As a society we tend to focus on that which we measure and so for change to occur we need to develop and place greater emphasis on measures of well-being for both the nation and individuals that go beyond economic growth and financial wealth. Related to this need for new and different measures, is the need for new and different research.

All research is by its very nature limited. This project is but a tiny moment in the bigger goal of exploring current understandings of motherhood in order to open up new ways of being. The findings presented here do not stand as a definitive truth about motherhood and paid work in New Zealand and more is needed to broaden our understandings of what it means to be a mother in this time and place.

What we research reflects what we as a society think is important. Government policy is underpinned by the research which government departments commission. The Department of Labour (2005b) recently commissioned a qualitative research project that aims to "increase understanding about the decision men and women who have caring responsibilities make about whether, how, when and why they participate in paid work" (p. 2). The request for tender document sets out the rationale for the research and talks of the importance of "removing barriers to labour market participation and enhancing real choice in employment decisions for women and men" (p. 3). Once again, as in the Action Plan, caring responsibilities are constructed as a hindrance to paid work, a barrier that prevents "real choice". In order to value care and reconstruct the problem of family/work conflict as one that belongs not just to women but to society, and as one that is caused in part by deficiencies in the workplace, the research focus needs to be broadened. Simply adjusting it from mothers' decision-making to parents' decision-making is not enough. Instead, for example, research is needed on what hinders parents, and in particular fathers, from being more involved with their children. For example, Riley (2003), researching fathers in the United Kingdom, concluded that the male provider role defines status and success for men and is still the dominant construction of masculinity. As part of the project of valuing care we need to explore other constructions that legitimate care as a valid and necessary component of manhood. In addition, we need to examine how employers construct the ideal worker and how part-time work or other more flexible models are constructed. Through exploring current dominant constructions we can identify alternative discourses that are marginalised, but which have the potential to effect change.

Finally, one of the strengths of the current research is the dual focus on policy and personal texts of lived experience. More research is required to examine how other government talk constructs people's lives and choices. The government is a powerful institution which influences lives through legislation and through ideology. In light of the findings of this research, one area which would be of particular interest is early childhood: how do the

government, researchers, educators, and parents construct the needs of children and what are the effects of those constructions? This is by no means a definitive list of research questions/foci which would contribute to an increased understanding of the complex relationships between family and paid work.

Conclusion

The key aim of this research was to explore and make visible the relationship between policy and experience through the critical analysis of the dominant and marginalised discourses which construct motherhood and paid work. This paper has compared and contrasted the reality constructed in the government policy document with that constructed by a group of first time mothers. Both similarities and differences have been identified. We have argued that although the more recent discourse of independent mother has potential benefits for women in that it enables a more comfortable weaving together of the identities of mother and worker, it is a mistake to see this as the ultimate solution to the conflict. The analysis of both the Action Plan and the women's talk reveals the ever increasing dominance of discourses of economic rationalism and capitalism which elevate market work to the status of essential and diminish the importance of reproduction and care. The result is that women increasingly bear a double burden of wage slave and domestic slave; men's role as wage slave has become even more demanding and they are still prevented from experiencing the pleasure of fully participating in their children's lives; and the needs of the children are subsumed to the needs of the economy. We need to find new ways. We need to debate the meanings of citizenship such that we can break down the public/private divide to create a society whereby care and work are equally valued as rights and responsibilities of both women and men. It seems appropriate to end not with our own words but with those of one of the women who contributed to the research; a vision of her ideal, but unattainable, world:

> Donna: We would be sharing the care of our son 50/50 and I would be working half the week and he'd be working the other half.

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