

Feminism and the ‘Woman Equals Mother’
Discourse in Reproductive Politics
in Australia

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of
Philosophy in the Discipline of Gender, Work and Social Inquiry

School of Social Sciences

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

University of Adelaide

April 2012

Angella Duvnjak
BA(Hons) (Adelaide University)
BSW (Flinders University)

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	iii
Abstract	v
Declaration	vii
Acknowledgments	viii
Chapter 1 Introduction	1
1.1 Background: The journey to ‘here’	1
1.2 Time, Context and Structure of the Thesis	5
1.2.1 Situating the research questions	7
1.2.2 Research questions	11
1.3 Research approach: methodology and theoretical orientation	15
1.4 On taking a feminist approach	23
1.5 Chapter outlines	25
Chapter 2 Setting the scene: feminism and reproductive politics	28
2.1 Introduction	28
2.2 The liberal legacy and the current neo-liberal context: ‘choice’, ‘control’ and ‘rights’	34
2.2.1 Assisted reproductive technologies	40
2.2.2 Nature versus culture – feminists against reproductive technologies	42
2.2.3 Technology as a resource for feminist goals in reproductive politics	46
2.3 Abortion and ART	48
2.4 Concluding remarks	52
Chapter 3 Feminism, health/medical and bioethics discourses	54
3.1 Introduction	54
3.2 Abortion and the Women’s Health Movement	59
3.3 Assisted reproductive technologies (ART)	64
3.3.1 Defining and ‘treating’ infertility: feminist engagement with medical discourses	65
3.3.2 Who are the infertile? Constructing infertility as a health issue	66
3.3.3 Infertility treatments: producing and reproducing the dominant family	70
3.3.4 Desire and agency: constructing women’s ‘choice’ and experience in feminist debates	75
3.4 Feminist and health/medical discourses	79
3.5 Reproductive ‘dilemmas’ and the development of bioethical inquiry	83
3.6 The role of bioethics	87
3.6.1 Abortion, infertility treatments and bioethics	88
3.7 Developing feminist bioethics	92
3.7.1 The pregnant body	94
3.7.2 Crisis and context: feminist incursions into bioethics	95
3.8 Summary	96
Chapter 4 Feminist moral discourses on abortion	98
4.1 Introduction	98
4.2 Leslie Cannold and Naomi Wolf on abortion: the new politics of morality in the pro-choice movement?	100
4.3 Feminist moral thought: mothering, responsibility and care	103
4.4 ‘Killing from care’: some problems with feminist moral discourses	106
4.4.1 Women and moral responsibility	111
4.5 The language of motherhood – a common ground?	115
4.6 Contextualising feminist moral discourses	118
4.7 The importance of a feminist political analysis for abortion moral discourses	121
4.8 Concluding remarks	123
Chapter 5 Analysing public discourses	129
5.1 Introduction	129
5.2 Public discourses and the media as a site of political contest	129
5.3 The social context of media debate on abortion and access to ART in Australia 2000-2007	134
5.3.1 Abortion in the Australian media 2000-2007	137
5.3.2 Pronatalism and the fertility ‘crisis’ in Australia	140
5.3.3 Families, fertility and public policy	144
5.3.4 Populate or perish: race, fertility and ‘family values’	147
5.4 Women and the changing social and political context in Australia	149

5.5	Contextualising media discourse: implications for abortion and ART debate in Australia	152
Chapter 6	Lesbian and single women’s access to infertility treatment: media debates in Australia...	155
6.1	Introduction	155
6.1.1	Newsprint media coverage of reproductive technologies 2000-2007.....	159
6.2	ART: the Australian context	162
6.3	Debating ART in the Australian media: the McBain/Meldrum case	164
6.3.1	Creating ‘ideal’ families: The ‘best interests of the child’ versus the ‘rights of women’	167
6.3.2	‘Choice’ and legitimate claims to utilise the ‘miracle’ of fertility treatment	171
6.3.3	ART: choice, responsibility, and blame.....	178
6.3.4	Defining infertility and the rights of the doctor	180
6.4	Feminist voices in the ART media debate	184
6.5	Concluding remarks	187
Conclusion	189
Bibliography	195

Abstract

This thesis explores the persistence of a ‘woman equals mother’ discourse within the terrain of reproductive politics in Australia. It finds that women are reduced to an essentialised maternal subjectivity through the deployment of an underlying ‘woman equals mother’ discourse across a range of feminist, medical/health and media discourses in Australia. Using abortion and assisted reproductive technologies (ART) as case studies, this thesis suggests that dominant feminist and mainstream discourses on abortion and ART remain located within three main frameworks, those of ‘rights/choice’, ‘moral/ethical’ and ‘health/medical’. All three discourses privilege a view of maternal subjectivity as essential to normative womanhood. While abortion and ART are often situated as separate or even opposing areas of reproductive politics, examining these two sites of reproductive practice alongside one another draws attention to the connections between these two seemingly disparate fields of reproductive practice. Specifically it enables us to identify the strength and persistence of a ‘woman equals mother’ discourse across these realms of reproductive practice. This thesis analyses the contributing factors behind the persistence of this discourse.

The first three chapters in the thesis examine key feminist approaches towards abortion and ART in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, focusing in particular on the liberal philosophical tradition, the neo-liberal context and its influence upon feminist and mainstream approaches in these areas. These chapters explore the shift within some feminist arguments toward a ‘moral’ defence of abortion, based upon values arising from mothering and motherhood. The last two chapters examine the theoretical dilemmas and contradictions arising out of the approaches examined in the first part of the thesis in relation to two specific debates surrounding abortion and ART that took place in Australia between 2000

and 2007. They examine public discourses contained within newsprint media coverage of debates concerning lesbian and single women's access to ART.

Utilising a feminist discourse analysis approach and drawing upon the work of Ferree, Gerhards, Gamson and Rucht (2002) and their concept of *discursive opportunity structure*, the thesis explores how particular meanings and social problem definitions come to be privileged within public discourse. It is argued that the combination of a strong liberal legacy within feminist arguments combined with particular elements of the social-political context in Australia in the period under consideration reinforced a 'woman equals mother' discourse in reproductive politics. Central to this discourse are ideas centred on notions of 'good', 'bad', 'deserving' and 'undeserving' women based upon essentialised notions of (heterosexual) women as mothers and informed by an increasing 'moralisation of health'. The pregnant body and, by extension, women's bodies are reduced to those of 'mothers', 'potential mothers' or 'non-mothers' within these debates. This thesis considers the implications of these understandings for alternative feminist accounts of women, reproduction and 'family' within reproductive politics in Australia.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief, it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the conditions of the *Copyright Act* 1968.

I also give permission for the digital version of my thesis to be made available on the web, via the University's digital research repository, the library catalogue, the Australasian Digital Theses Program (ADTP) and also through the web search engines, unless permission has been granted by the university to restrict access for a period of time.

Chapter 4 contains part of a paper that appeared in the Proceedings of the Fourth Australian Annual Women's Health Conference, Adelaide 2003.

Angella Duvnjak

Date

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the many women with whom I have worked in the area of women's health, especially during my time as a social worker at the Pregnancy Advisory Centre (PAC) in South Australia. I am indebted to the significant mentorship, inspiration and above all, friendship of Dr Barbara Buttfield with whom I worked at the PAC and who initially encouraged me to pursue this topic of research. Her commitment to reproductive freedom for women and social justice in general has been a constant source of inspiration to me over the years.

This thesis has been a long time in the making and as a result has often required those around me to go beyond the 'call of duty' in their support for me during the process of completion. My supervisor Dr Margie Ripper provided not only intellectual guidance and stimulation but demonstrated faith in me and my abilities at times when faith in my own felt very fragile. I have been most fortunate to have a supervisor whose passion, commitment and expertise in the area of reproductive politics and feminism meant that each and every one of our conversations inspired further reflection and development of my ideas.

I began this thesis in the Gender Studies Department at Adelaide University (now the Department of Gender, Work and Social Inquiry) with the support of an Australian Research Council Scholarship. The department provided a supportive and stimulating environment within which to hone my research and teaching skills. The regular seminars and informal conversations with fellow post-graduate students and staff were central to this. I would also like to thank Dr Chris Beasley from the Discipline of Politics at Adelaide University who came on board for a short time as a co-supervisor assisting me in the process of refining the focus of this thesis.

In the final stages of completing this thesis I have had the great fortune of working within the School of Social and Policy Studies at Flinders University. This has proven to be a collegial and stimulating environment. I am grateful to Dr Joanne Baker who read and provided feedback on an earlier draft of this thesis. Mary Lyons provided assistance with formatting and editing in regard to ‘completeness and consistency’. I am most grateful for her contribution. I would also like to thank Dr Heather Fraser for her friendship, political/intellectual rigour and commitment to feminism and social justice, not to mention her laugh. I would also like to thank a woman who helped me start this journey when I sat in her undergraduate lectures and was inspired to pursue feminist scholarship. She supervised my honours degree in Politics and subsequently helped me finish this PhD thesis many years later when I needed somebody to step in and assist with final supervision duties. Thank you Professor Carol Lee Bacchi.

Finally I would like to thank my family. Firstly, to the non-human animals I have shared my life with over the years. They have made a significant contribution to my well-being and sanity. So ‘thank you’ buddy boy (Rasta), Lucy, Smeddy (Eddie), Taylor, Thelma and my current companions Louise and Pippy. Also to my mother Carol who has always supported me no matter what pathway I have chosen in life and my father Milan who (much to his dismay) planted the seeds of political thought and activism in me at a very young age.

This thesis is dedicated to my sister Leeanne who has been a constant support for me throughout my life. She knows more than anyone what has gone into the production of this thesis and words cannot express the gratitude I have for her unfailing faith in me (not to mention her patience!). She is by far the most inspirational, compassionate and intelligent woman I have ever met. Thank you Leeanne.