Positively Promising: Women's Decision Making
Pregnancy and Health Promotion

Jennifer Dodd

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work, which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

Jennifer Dodd.
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Abstract

This thesis explores the ways in which health promotion campaigns presuppose the pregnant subject and how main stream health promoters construct theories and practices of empowerment, health literacy and rationality.

Two Western Australian main stream health promotion campaigns directed at pregnant women in the period 1996 to 1997 (the time of interviewing) and still current at time of writing, will be analysed and comparisons made with the development of health promotion theory and practice generally. The normalisation of medical/scientific approaches toward pregnancy care and behaviour will be illustrated by providing examples from health promotion literature, medical and health journals, popular pregnancy books, magazines and newspaper stories. The assumption that health literacy is the major attribute necessary to enable empowerment is interrogated and the limitations of this perspective illustrated.

The second part of the thesis deals more directly with the interview material and illustrates how the women interviewed related to, and engaged with, main stream health information. The diversity within the group of middle class women interviewed is highlighted, and the different philosophical positions they occupy in relation to main stream health information explored. The complexity and contextual situatedness of women’s decision making in relation to notions about health literacy, rationality and empowerment is outlined. The concluding chapters of the thesis discuss the most recent developments in main stream health promotion theory, examining the limitations of social capital theory, social
marketing and other health promotion strategies. The conclusion imagines the possible benefits for women as health subjects and main stream health promoters as experts, in re-thinking rationality and re-supposing women as positive health subjects that are promising rather than permanently risky and in need of improvement.