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Caesarean section in the absence of clinical
indications: Discourses constituting choice in
childbirth

By

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Abstract

This poststructuralist qualitative study explored the discourses constructing women's choice for a caesarean section in the absence of clinical indications, in the talk and texts of women, midwives, an obstetrician, professional journals and the media publications. The study affirms inscriptions surrounding choice in childbirth are shaped discursively through a multiplicity of discourses underpinned by social and institutional practices. With advances in technology, childbearing women have a greater variety of options from which to choose. Controversial, is the option of a caesarean section, regardless of clinical need. The issue is depicted in both professional and popular discourse as contentious, complex and contradictory. Its momentum into the 21st century, as a new object of obstetric discourse, has been played out on a number of platforms.

In this thesis I draw from the theoretical ideas of French philosopher Michel Foucault, to examine this complex debate. I argue there is a volatile moment in the history of childbirth in which an explosion of discourses have sculptured choice for a caesarean, in the absence of clinical indications, out of a repartee of autonomy, convenience, desire, fear and risk. In this precarious moment, new meanings joust with the old on a shifting terrain awash with rhetoric that co-opts, competes, and contradicts to bring about a caché of mutable 'truths'.

Whether caesarean, as an optional extra, can be explained in terms of a libertarian imperative, an embodiment of lifestyle, the satiation of desire, the attenuation of fear or the avoidance of risk, the democratisation of this choice has exposed a pathologising paradox, whereupon the normal emerges as the abnormal, and the abnormal emerges as the normal. The deconstruction of choice through a poststructuralist lens has enabled insight into how contradiction and contest befall the 'order of things' and in so doing, provides new openings for contemplating the discursive positioning of women through the competing discourses of childbirth.

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Table 2.1.

Caesarean, Normal Births & Operative Deliveries: Aotearoa New Zealand37

Glossary and abbreviations.

Glossary.

Aotearoa	Aotearoa is the name for the land tenured by Maori before a it was named New Zealand by a Dutch explorer. The dualism of Aotearoa New Zealand recognises the co-existence of “two realities in one land”. (Reid & Cram, 2005, p. 35).
Caesarean section.	An incision into the abdomen and uterus through which the babies are extracted. Various referred to as <i>cesarean</i> (absent ‘a’ denotes its American idiom) or its shortened version c-section. In the current study the British vernacular - <i>Caesarean</i> is used.
Cattlehorn caesarean section,	Caesareans attained by the having an infuriated animal tear open a woman’s pregnant uterus (King, 1895, in Frazer, 1987, p. 74). Cattlehorn lacerations were speculated by some as preferable to the surgical operation.
Craniotomy	An opening into the cranium of the skull. A destructive technique once used to crush babies skulls to enable its passage through the birth canal.
Elective caesarean	A general term given to a caesarean prior to the onset of labour.
Iatrogenic	A disorder brought about by the effect of medical intervention.
Maori	The indigenous, ‘first’ peoples, of Aotearoa New Zealand.
Medicalisation	In relation to women, “...the process whereby western medicine turns its gaze toward aspects of women’s lives and bodies renders

them problematic and focuses attention on treatment to achieve a cure.” (Carryer, 1997, p. 152).

Multigravida	The term designated to a woman who has one or more pregnancies.
Multiparous	The term designated to a woman who has given birth to more than one baby.
Nulliparous	The designated term for a women who has never given birth.
Pakeha	A person of European decent living in Aotearoa New Zealand.
Primigravida	The term for a woman who in her first pregnancy.
Primiparous	The term for a woman who has given birth for the first time.
Pubiotomy	An opening of the symphysis pubis joint of the pelvic bones to increase the size of the birth canal.
Tangata whenua	The Maori name for the people of the land, in reference to the ‘first’ peoples in Aotearoa New Zealand.
Te Tiriti of Waitangi	The name given to the Maori translation of the founding document of Aotearoa New Zealand. Also refrrred to by its English translation, as the Treaty of Waitangi.

Abbreviations.

ACOG	American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists.
ACNM	American College of Nurse-Midwives

BOH	Board of Health
DHB	District Health Board
DOH	Department of Health
FIGO	Federation of International Gynecologists and Obstetricians
HFA	Health Funding Authority
ICM	International Confederation of midwives
IVF	In vitro fertilization
MOH	Ministry of Health
NICE	National Institute for Clinical Excellence
NHC	National Health Committee
LMC	Lead Maternity Carer
Midwife's talk	A broad term to describe the discussion from midwives as a whole group.
Women's talk	The term as above to describe the women's focus group as a whole.
Tom	Pseudonym given to the specialist obstetrician who took part in an individual interview.
MWFGSE	Midwives focus group – self employed midwives
MFGDHB	Midwives focus group -District Health Board or hospital midwives
WFG1	Women's focus group 1 – The first focus group held for childbearing women participants
WFG2	A second separate focus group of women.

MWFGm1	Midwives focus group member (m) 1. The designation of the first midwife in a sequence of an interaction.
MWFGm2	Second midwife speaking in an interaction.
WFG1m1	The first member in the first women's focus group 1 speaking in a sequence of an interaction.
WFG2m3	The third member of women's focus group 2 in a sequence in the same interaction.
Use of brackets such as (dis)enabling;	Brackets interposed within words denotes the fluid nature of language and thought. Appropriated from Surtees ideas around 'nomadic border crossings (2003, p. 12) in that I blur the boundaries between states symbolised through bracketing . I also draw from Lupton's (1999, p. 133) discussion of liminality to allude to a state of flux in meaning.