



Good mothers and responsible citizens: Analysis of public support for the extension of paid parental leave



Clare Mariskind

Institute of Education, Massey University, Private Bag 11-222, Palmerston North 4412, New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

Debates about parental leave and the negotiation of work and childrearing are shaped by the discursive production of caregiver and worker subjectivities. This paper analyses online comments that support extending paid parental leave in New Zealand to 26 weeks. Treating these comments as texts, a feminist poststructural lens is employed to investigate how they produce 'good mother' and 'responsible citizen' subject positions, and how they allocate responsibility for the care of infants. It finds that the comments are framed by gendered discourses that valorise motherhood and economic discourses that construct the primary role of citizens as engagement in paid work, and they construct a version of the social contract that both enables and resists dominant citizen-worker subjectivities. The comments do not substantially contest existing gender relations, and this paper argues that a gender equity discourse is needed to address this inequality.

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Introduction

The negotiation of work and childrearing in New Zealand (as in many other countries) remains a concern for women and a topic for feminist theorising. Despite participation in paid employment, women continue to be disproportionately responsible for unpaid domestic and caring work. In particular, mothers in New Zealand undertake the majority of parental care for children under five years old and are less likely to be in the full-time workforce (Statistics New Zealand, 2011). Many countries have some form of state-funded financial assistance available for caregivers in order to facilitate time away from paid employment to care for babies. Such schemes vary in availability, duration and financial contribution, and in New Zealand, recent debates on the state-funded paid parental leave scheme have focused on the length of provision, with many arguing for the scheme to be extended to provide 26 weeks' financial assistance for the primary caregiver.

Debates around paid parental leave are shaped by discourses of mothering and childhood, constructions of the private and public realms, and expectations of the roles of the state and its citizens. Within such debates, there are various ways that parental leave schemes are discursively constructed with particular subject positions offered to mothers which they may take up or resist. This has been investigated by analyses of parental leave policies and practices (e.g. Baird, 2004; Dreyfus, 2013; Lanfranconi & Valarino, 2014; Ravenswood & Kennedy, 2012), research with mothers who are subject to such policies and practices (e.g. Buzzanell & Liu, 2005), and analyses of media texts (e.g.

Ainsworth & Cutcher, 2008). This paper contributes to the literature through an investigation of one form of public support for the extension of state-funded paid parental leave in New Zealand, online comments posted on the '26 for Babies' website.

In this paper, I investigate how online comments in support of extending New Zealand's Paid Parental Leave scheme construct maternal subjectivities, in particular, the 'good mother' and the 'responsible citizen.' Reading the online comments as texts, I employ a feminist discursive lens to consider what purposes these texts accomplish, including how these texts position, and allocate responsibility to, mothers, others, and the State. This analysis finds that the website comments weave together various discourses in constructing arguments for extending paid parental leave in ways that negotiate rather than challenge dominant maternal subjectivities and neoliberal notions of responsibility. The comments reveal how women take up 'good mother' and 'committed worker' subject positions and construct a version of the social contract that both enables and resists responsibilised neoliberal subjectivities. This paper finds that unequal gendered relations are reinforced rather than challenged by these comments. The paper does not argue against women being primary caregivers of babies and the importance of opportunities that enable women to undertake this, rather it is concerned with the ways that maternal care is discursively constructed and how this acts to resist or reproduce gendered inequality.

The paper is also a response to Buzzanell and Liu's (2005) call for "empirical analyses that continue to display ways in which discourses and practices are simultaneously reproductive and transformative, disempowering and empowering, within specific contexts" (p. 19). A feminist, discursive lens enables an investigation of how the power of language and representation operate (Ramazonoğlu & Holland, 2002).

E-mail address: c.j.mariskind@massey.ac.nz.

It is through language that forms of social organization are defined and contested (Weedon, 1997), and gendered relations of power are (re)produced and contested (Lazar, 2005). Discourses are particular ways of constituting knowledge, subjectivity and social practices, and are always partial and contested. Debates about parental leave are sites where various discursive meanings and subjectivities are deployed, and this paper considers how parental leave discourses “constitute, reproduce and contest gender power relations” (Weedon, 1997, p. vi) and how these simultaneously enact resistance and complicity to dominant conceptualizations of gender (Buzzanell & Liu, 2005).

Background

A brief introduction to paid parental leave in New Zealand

Paid parental leave is a form of income replacement to compensate for leave from paid employment around the birth of a child. Paid parental leave was first introduced in New Zealand in 2004 (Ravenswood & Kennedy, 2012). Prior to this, unpaid maternity leave for women had been available from 1980 for 26 weeks, and increased in 1987 to 12 months which could be shared between both parents. By 2002, a skills and labour shortage, combined with women's increased participation in the workforce, provided a strong rationale for keeping women in jobs (Ravenswood & Kennedy, 2012). While business interests and employment rights discourses were prominent in supporting the case for paid parental leave, discourses of maternal care and bonding with babies in order to create healthy children and maintain families were also influential. 12 weeks of parental leave paid for by the state was instituted at a rate similar to the minimum wage at the time, and unpaid leave could also be taken to a total of 52 weeks. The eligibility criteria were progressively extended to enable more working mothers to access paid parental leave (Families Commission, 2010). The length of paid leave was extended to 14 weeks in 2005, and fathers/partners could take up to 2 weeks unpaid paternity leave. Between 2002 and 2005, 40% of those who took parental leave (mostly mothers) returned to work within six months of taking leave and 76% returned within 12 months (Crighton, 2008).

In April 2012, a campaign to extend paid parental leave to 26 weeks began with the introduction of *The Parental Leave and Employment Protection (Six Months' Paid Leave) Amendment Bill*, but this bill has not been passed into law. The government did not support the bill, arguing that the cost of such a scheme is too high. However it has since responded to public pressure and agreed to extend paid parental leave from 14 to 18 weeks and relax the rules for working during paid parental leave (Rutherford, 2014). While this has been welcomed, there is still public support for the scheme's extension to 26 weeks.

Information on eligibility for parental leave in New Zealand states that “paid parental leave is available to female employees who give birth to a child, or to either parent where a couple has assumed the care of a child under six they intend to jointly adopt” (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, 2016). All or part of this paid parental leave can be transferred to eligible spouses or partners. Changes coming into effect in 2016 will extend entitlement to other primary caregivers such as grandparents. However, paid parental leave has mostly been taken up by mothers, and it has been rare for partners or spouses to take any of the paid parental leave allocation (Crighton, 2008; Department of Labour, 2007). In Australia, paid parental leave was introduced in 2010, and while the language used in policy documents is mostly gender-neutral, the recipients have overwhelmingly been birth mothers (Dreyfus, 2013). This use of gender-neutral language acts to constitute and reinforce a worker-parent subjectivity and to conceal women's identity and practice as mothers.

Political context: from citizen mother to citizen worker

Debates about state-funded parental leave take place within political contexts that shape what it means to be a citizen and how responsibility is allocated. Since the 1980s, neoliberal governance in New Zealand has attempted to reduce the role of the State through increased marketization and privatization, deregulation of the labour market and increased flexibility in employment, and decreased expenditure on welfare and other social goods and services. Neoliberalism, as a “set of ideals and practices” (Trnka & Trundle, 2014, p. 138), emphasizes the values of freedom and choice, and positions individuals as autonomous self-sustaining agents who assess the costs and benefits of options for action (Shamir, 2008). The withdrawal of the state, particularly in the area of social welfare, means that citizens must take up these responsibilities as individuals and groups (Clarke, 2005). Responsibility is thus privatized through a shift from dependency on public resources to self-reliance and consumer choice (Ilcan, 2009). Parents are expected to protect their children from risk and maximise their potential by drawing on expert knowledge to make the right decisions in the care and education of their children, but this responsibility for children's behaviour and future success assumes that parents have a great deal of control over their children's outcomes (Wall, 2013). Parents, especially mothers, are thus responsible for managing their own lives through being economically productive and for the next generation through managing their children's outcomes and (re)producing the responsible citizens of the future.

During much of the twentieth century, the social contract between the state and its citizens was “articulated in the language of social responsibilities and social welfare” (Rose, 1998, p. 164). The individual's needs would be met socially when necessary and in return, individuals would meet their political, civil and social obligations and duties. As neoliberal notions of individual freedom, initiative and personal choice have become the norm in market economies, this has changed the understanding of the relations between the citizen and the state. Citizens should be active individuals rather than passive and dependent, and citizenship is linked to the exercise of personal choice (Rose, 1998). A shift from the male breadwinner family model, in which mothers meet their citizenship responsibilities through unpaid familial caregiving, to one of citizen-workers, in which participation in paid work is positioned as the key responsibility of citizens (Blaxland, 2010; Kahu & Morgan, 2007), conceals the gendered nature of the neoliberal social contract. When active citizenship means that participation in paid work is central to social inclusion (Larner, 2000, p. 244) and mothers are required to be employees first and carers only secondarily (Pulkingham, Fuller, & Kershaw, 2010), women may struggle to meet “the demands of the ideal, unencumbered worker in the public sphere and their family obligations in the private sphere” (Hallstein, 2010, p. 13). Dreyfus (2013), referring to the Australian context, notes that although historical factors and contemporary social norms have constructed the ‘ideal worker’ who is “available for long hours without home and care responsibilities” (p. 107), this does not represent the increasingly diverse workforce. It is in this context of individual responsabilisation and the discursive shift from citizen mothers to citizen workers that debates about paid parental leave are constructed.

Discursive construction of parental leave schemes

Parental leave schemes that provide paid or unpaid leave for a parent to care for young children exist in a variety of forms in a number of countries. These are not neutral organizing processes (Buzzanell & Liu, 2005) but social practices that are bound up with various competing meanings. Four broad frameworks can be gleaned from the literature: traditional gender discourses; economic discourses; employment rights discourses; and gender equity discourses. Parental leave schemes can be construed in terms of traditional gender discourses of women as mothers and caregivers. Underpinned by concerns for children's health

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