Nurses and constructions of motherhood: 'scientific motherhood' and the rise of child welfare services in Tasmania 1918 - 1930

submitted by

Sheryl Brennan RN, RM, BA

A minor thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Nursing.

Tasmanian School of Nursing
University of Tasmania
Launceston, Tasmania, Australia 7250

February 1995
Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment 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 where due reference is not made in the text.

Sheryl Brennan
Abstract

Motherhood is a momentous life-change for women. While commonalities of experience exist between women, each woman's experience is unique. Social constructions define motherhood in particular ways and in doing so tend to deny the range and complexity of individual experience. In recent decades a wide body of feminist and other literature has developed which analyses the way motherhood has been historically constructed and what this means for women. This thesis concentrates upon the ways in which early twentieth century Australians, in common with their counterparts in North America, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, constructed 'scientific motherhood'.

The perspective and method of history are used in this work to explore the construction of scientific motherhood. In particular, the establishment of the Tasmanian Child Welfare Service is examined, for the origins of this service are closely linked to the requirement that information be disseminated throughout the population about modern 'scientific' mothering. Therefore, this thesis looks at the historical development of this service, at how it grew out of a late 19th century veneration of science as well as concerns regarding population and the position of women in society. It shows the influences lying behind the construction of motherhood as a science and outlines the part played by child health services in bringing this new, as it was perceived at the time, view of rational and efficient mothering to women.
Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge the support and assistance given me by Professor Mary P Magennis and Dr Dan Huon, who read my many drafts and offered constructive feedback during the preparation of this thesis. Other colleagues and friends have supported me in various ways during the writing of this work, in particular Judy Sankey and Margaret Fulton. I offer my thanks to them for their care and friendship. I must also acknowledge the patience and support of my family during this time. Ian Campbell, who spent many hours sorting through parliamentary papers, also deserves my thanks.
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