

How is maternal responsibility constructed and perpetuated through health discourse?



Arguments

- Medical and public health practice reinforces women's greater responsibility for child health
- Reproductive health is understood as influenced mainly by the behaviours and biology of women. This may lead to blaming and guilt for women

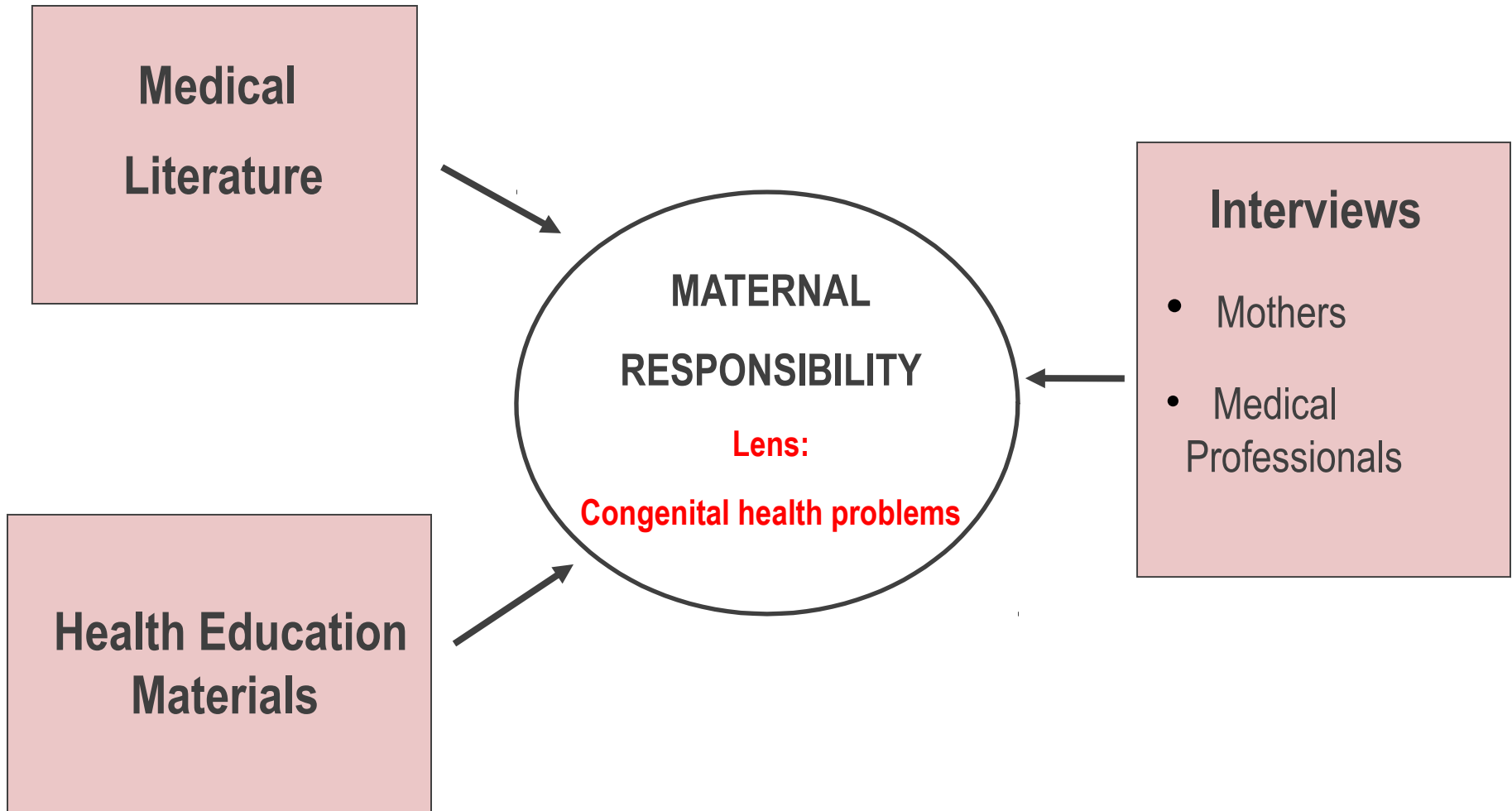


Aims of research

- To explore how maternal responsibility for child health is constructed and perpetuated through public health and medicine
- To examine the concept of maternal responsibility to highlight its construction and implications



Overview of project



Discourse

- The ways we talk about and represent women and reproduction
- Creates and reinforces dominant understandings. Therefore, discourses are also expressions of power
- **Discourse analysis** examines how language and practices construct social phenomena and produce social realities



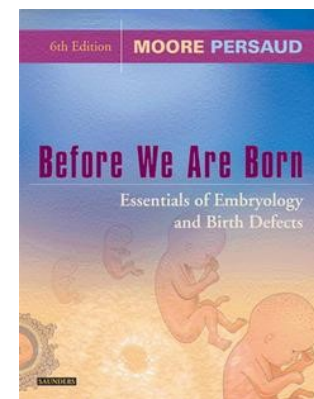
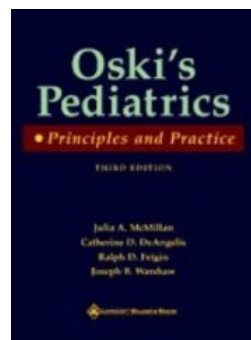
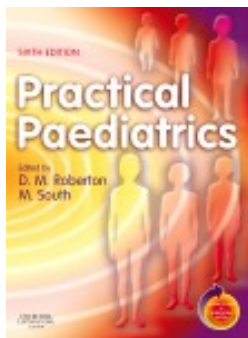
Semi-structured interviews

- 28 women who mother children with:
spina bifida, congenital heart disease and
naevus (a dermatological condition)
- 7 medical professionals:
obstetricians, neonatologists, paediatricians,
geneticists and **genetic counsellors**



Health education materials and medical literature

- 21 health education materials (e.g. pamphlets)
- 10 chapters from medical textbooks
- 15 journal articles



Male exclusion

- Lack of reproductive health advice targeted at men
- No health education materials routinely provided to men
- Male smokers receive some advice (although not routinely)
- Most advice for men is linked to **fertility** not to child health



Kath* :

Nothing. He would've got nothing. Oh no hang on....undies (laughs). I remember something to do with the undies or the boxers you know, that thing, that was the **only** thing I've ever heard to do with yeah the whole pregnancy thing.

So do you think that he was expected to be involved in helping you to keep yourself healthy during pregnancy?

No. No. I don't think so. And I felt like it was just **my job** to do sort of thing and I guess he just felt the same.

Why did you think of was your job?

Um ... just because it's **me** ... I don't know ... me looking after the little thing I guess.

(3 year old son with congenital heart disease)

**Pseudonyms used throughout presentation*



Genetic counsellor :

We've talked about women expressing feelings of responsibility or guilt, do you find that similarly with men?

I probably haven't had anywhere near the number of conversations with men. And I mean there's virtually **nothing that can affect sperm** ... we don't know of anything really that affects sperm [...] that can then affect a conception. So uh I don't think it is anywhere near the same issue for men as it is for women...



'Safe' sperm?

Correlation between sperm damage and:

- * cigarette smoking (Yauk et al., 2007; Zenzes et al., 1999)
- * air pollution (Rubes et al., 2009)
- * occupational exposures (Hsu et al., 2006)



Absence of the social



- Limited consideration of broader **social, relational** and **environmental** influences within **mainstream** discourse
- Renders reproductive health as dependent on 'correct' 'choices'
- Provides potential for individualised blame



Obstetrician:

Women do feel responsible; they do feel guilt, um ... Because **they are responsible**. I mean **they created this child**. And so some might have a pathological feeling [of guilt] to that matter which then would need to be handled. But uh ... I think that extends to other things in life too. If you have a car accident you wish you were driving 5 kilometres per hour slower, or weren't driving at all or you walked, that's life.



In the absence of a conceptual framework which extends beyond the individual, guilt is deflected 'from an externalized to an internalized moral discourse'

(Comaroff, 1982:56)

Illness is thus experienced as a private trouble

(Edwards, 1994:2)



Intensive mothering

- A dominant social ideology
- Aligns 'good' mothering with unlimited expression of resources and personal sacrifice by women
- Exposure to mainstream health discourse encourages intensive mothering
- Interview participants engaged in intensive mothering to represent themselves as 'good', credible mothers



Key points

- The absence of men and the social context reinforces women's greater responsibility beyond their biological functions
- These discourses perpetuate gendered stereotypes and reinforce the relative distance of men from children and reproduction



Practical strategies

- Routinely provide reproductive health education resources to men
- Broaden research focus
- Make clear that individual behaviour change is not effective in **all** cases



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Toni Delany

PhD Candidate

toni.delany@adelaide.edu.au

Disciplines of Gender, Work & Social Inquiry and Public Health

LIGHt Research Group

University of Adelaide

