THE EFFECTS OF IDEOLOGICAL DECISION MAKING ON THE
MATERIALLY OF WOMEN'S LIVES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF
CHILD CARE SUBSIDY POLICIES AND SERVICES IN AUSTRALIA AND
CALIFORNIA

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DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma at any university or other institution of tertiary education. Information derived from the published or unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and a list of references is given.

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STATEMENT ON THE CONTRIBUTION OF OTHERS INCLUDING
FINANCIAL AND EDITORIAL HELP

Supervision: Professor Anthony McMahon
Editorial Assistance: June Tonnoir and Glenda Darville
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ABSTRACT

The intention of this thesis is to use a critical feminist theoretical framework to explore the relationship between government ideology, child care subsidy policies and services and the materialities of women’s lives. This exploration is undertaken by:

• Comparing child care subsidy policies and services in California and Australia.
• Focusing on the experiences and accounts of women service users in California and Australia.

These aims are consistent with feminist literature that encourages researchers to look for emerging representations of child care, and also to position child care issues in a range of gender equity and social justice discourses.

Critical feminist theory informs all aspects of the study. It provides the context for framing the topic, choosing the methodology, and the analytical lens used for the interpretation of the literature and the data. The methodology is micro-level, cross-national comparative and qualitative. This study relies on in-depth interviewing as the primary data gathering method.

Qualitative, cross-national comparative research that values feminist theorising provides a unique opportunity to explore child care policy. This study demonstrated that the ideologies that benefit patriarchy are embedded in subsidised child care policies and are active cross-nationally. In this study the impact of these ideologies differed only in degree, not in the patriarchal intent of the policies.

The women’s material lives were shaped in different ways by their respective subsidy contexts. For the Californian women, accessing a scarce residual service required them to be highly resourceful. They were not able to choose the child care they preferred, change their child care arrangements if dissatisfied with the quality, or pursue employment advancement because the additional income would preclude subsidy access. The Australian women saw their semi-universal subsidy service as an entitlement. The higher levels of subsidy meant they were more able than the Californian women to choose the care arrangement they preferred. In reality, though, infant and community based child care were difficult to access, the cost of care was a significant issue for middle-income women, and the women spent a substantial amount of time and effort locating quality care they could afford.

The women’s lives were also shaped by their experiences of poverty, racism, individualism and sexism. Their vulnerability to these forms of oppression was increased by the use of subsidy services. The Californian women recognised their disadvantage due to class and race and
actively resisted the construction of themselves implicit in these forms of oppression. The Australian women did not identify class and race as forms of oppression related to their use of subsidy. However, the semi-universal nature of child care subsidy provided the Australian women with the illusion of choice and obscured aspects of the system that reinforced conservative roles for women. Whilst the residual Californian subsidy service foregrounded oppression based on race and class, it obscured the respondents’ ability to conceptualise their experiences as gendered. For both groups of women their gendered disadvantage was rendered invisible by neo-liberal individualism and therefore difficult to identify and actively resist. Nevertheless and despite these barriers, both groups of women recognised that child care subsidy services were not provided to meet the needs of women. They believed policy makers were selfishly motivated and concerned with maintaining their own positions of power and privilege.

This study reinforces the value of critical feminist theorising that identifies the ideologies embedded in social policies. Placing women’s experience at the centre of this policy analysis revealed the effects of ideological decision making on the materiality of women’s lives. This thesis provides a strong endorsement for the engagement of feminist policy makers and members of the women’s movement with child care policy. Without this feminist engagement the mechanisms of patriarchal power, implicit in social policy, will remain obscured and unchallenged.
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