



28 August 2023

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RE: Assessment of Aleksandra Sokalska-Bennett's Ph.D. Dissertation

Thank you for the opportunity to review the thesis presented by Ms Aleksandra Sokalska-Bennett, entitled '(Re-) Constructing femininity, motherhood and bereavement in miscarriage narratives: A discourse analytic study.' The thesis is organized as a monograph comprised of five chapters, plus a conclusion. The chapter organization is a bit different from the conventions used in the United States (Introduction, Literature Review, Methods, Findings, Discussion, Conclusion). The chapter titles for this thesis are as follows: 1) Discourse analysis; 2) Social and discursive constructions of femininity; 3) Social and discursive constructions of motherhood; 4) Theoretical and discursive approaches to bereavement; and 5) Femininity, motherhood and bereavement in women's accounts of miscarriage: Case studies.

The thesis content is 321 pages long, of which nearly half (130 pages) are dedicated to the theoretical and conceptual framework and methodological foundations of the study. Chapter 5, which presents the methods, researcher reflexivity and the findings, is 178 pages in length, with the conclusions presented separately in a 12-page section.

The thesis is framed to answer five research questions (page 6) using three discourse analysis methods (conversation analysis, membership categorization analysis and discursive psychology). The stated goal of the study is to illustrate the discursive and social links between femininity, bereavement and miscarriage and to show how these discourses serve to silence and disenfranchise the experience. The researcher's goal is to demystify these discourses in order to help others understand the experience.

*Strengths of the manuscript:*

The manuscript is very well-written and was a great pleasure to read. The researcher's focus on establishing the rationale for the methodological and theoretical foundations utilized in the study was refreshingly detailed and comprehensive. The progression from chapter one on discourse analysis to chapters two through four which focus on discursive constructions of the key concepts in the study (femininity, motherhood and bereavement) is logical and well-supported. These first four chapters are an impressively deep and comprehensive treatment of the varieties of discourse analysis, social construction of knowledge theory, gender studies, identity theories, constructions of motherhood, and construction of grief.

Chapter five contains some attention to the data collection and analysis methods (more on that below) and then moves into an in-depth presentation of findings, with a re-working of the analysis as is appropriate in discourse studies, related to each of the seven participants. The analysis is sophisticated and reflects a clear understanding of and ability to apply discourse analysis methods. I especially appreciated the short summary that was provided at the end of each case, pulling together the analysis for each. Chapter five ends with a focus on the stable and transient categories within the membership categorization device 'miscarriage'.

The findings are quite rich and the description and analysis of each case is quite compelling and moving. It is clear that great attention and care and time was spent with the data by the researcher to honor each participant's

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decision to participate in this study. I greatly appreciated the conclusion section, which specifically focused on tying the findings from chapter five back to answering the research questions and making the important connections *across* the seven participants. This, to me, is the most powerful and important section of the thesis, and my recommendations below are focused on bringing this section into greater focus for the reader with an eye to publication.

*Critical commentary and areas for improvement:*

As an outside examiner based in the United States university system, I offer these comments in the spirit of illustrating what surprised me as an outside reader and ideas for what might make the manuscript tighter and more focused with an eye to publication. (I acknowledge that the norms and conventions for thesis organization may be quite different from country to country so I defer any final decisions to examiners more familiar with the system.)

I noticed that there does not seem to be a dedicated literature review structured to identify previous research studies that have addressed the topic of miscarriage, highlight what is not yet known from these previous studies, and framing this study in a way that shows how the findings will contribute to a larger discipline or field. What is the significance of this study to the larger scholarly community? While I greatly appreciated the attention that was paid to researcher reflexivity on pages 144 and following, I was left wondering why this specific topic was chosen to be studied at this specific time by this researcher. Is it because the researcher noted a gap in the existing research in a particular field that this specific study would address? Articulating this more clearly will help point to some practical implications of the findings that should appear at the end the thesis.

*Theoretical and methodological foundations (Chapters 1-4)*

- The comprehensive discussions on methodology and theoretical underpinnings in the first four chapters were quite impressive, but also were a bit overwhelming for the reader, particularly when these concepts were not integral to the research study at hand. For example, speech act theory, systemic functional linguistics, communities of practice theory and/or discursive constructions of gendered identities in educational settings (just to name a few sections) are not directly related to *this* study. In my view, there is no need to include these in the thesis, otherwise, the reader is expecting that specific ties will be made between the findings and these theories, methods and approaches by the end of the manuscript. I recommend that these chapters be revisited with an eye to which theories and concepts are directly related to this research and condensed to include and focus only on those that are relevant.
- For the same reason, more attention could be paid to the key concepts of femininity (only in section 2.4.1 as of now) and how it is being framed as distinct (or not) from discourses of motherhood and womanhood, since this is a key argument and direction of the research. Throughout, femininity was consistently emphasized, but it wasn't clear to me how this was being defined and made distinct from the other two concepts throughout the study.
- Similarly, more attention could be paid to discussing and framing the importance of membership category devices as an analytic construct (it currently only is introduced in section 1.3.2), since this concept turns out to be integral to the way findings are represented and seems to be the main focus by the end of chapter 5. I found this focus on MCD surprising as I did not expect this to be the primary framing of the findings given the variety and extensive attention given to other discursive approaches and devices.

*Methods section (Chapter 5)*

- A statement that ethics review board approval was given for this study would be helpful/reassuring given the sensitive nature of the topic.
- I am curious about the “yes/no” framing of the research questions and the interview questions, and the rationale for the order of interview questions. Some of the questions can be interpreted as biased and even leading (i.e. “do you think that miscarriage is a taboo topic?”), so I would love to hear more about how the interview protocol was developed and piloted.
- A rationale as to why participants were recruited from the UK and not from Poland or another country

would be helpful.

- A participant demographic table may be useful for the reader – for example, that provides the pseudonym, race/ethnic/national identity, age-range, location of the interview, and duration of the interview for each of the seven participants.
- It may also be useful to include the total number of prospective interviewees who were contacted but did not respond or declined to participate. I appreciated the narrative discussion of the participant recruitment journey and do find seven participants to be adequate for the study; including the number of people contacted can only serve to strengthen this discussion as well as make visible for future researchers the challenges involved in qualitative interview recruitment on topics that are sensitive and painful.
- I would love to hear more about the choice of case study as a framing device and which methodological scholars were the source of the decision to define each participant as a separate ‘case’. There is only one source of data for each participant (the interview). Typically, case studies (e.g. Yin and Stake) by their nature draw upon multiple sources of data. Given the attention to narrative in the opening chapters, could each participants’ analysis be framed as ‘narratives’ rather than ‘case studies?’ This may be more consistent with how the research is being presented and with discourse analysis as a methodology.

#### Presentation of findings (Chapter 5)

- At the start of Chapter 5, it may be useful to re-state the overall research design, research questions, purpose and significance of this particular study to re-orient the reader back from the theoretical foundations to the methods and presentation of findings.
- There is variation in how the cases are being analyzed and organized. Some cases have only headings, some have headings and sub-headings (see table below). Some cases are given much more attention than others. To clarify this, some introductory text as to how the findings are being presented would be useful.
- I noticed overlap between the headings/subheadings across the cases (see color coding in the table). Some of these ‘themes’ are indeed noted in the conclusion section. The overall findings could be strengthened, in my view, by organizing the findings by the *themes* instead of by the *case/participant*. It is quite easy to lose the forest for the trees in the way that the findings are currently organized. Some of the overlap in themes are indicated in the color coding in the table. These could include:
  - o Constructions of womanhood and motherhood
  - o Miscarriage as feminine experience vs men and grief
  - o Taboo vs. not-taboo
  - o Making sense of the loss
  - o Self-blame
  - o Coping
  - o Pressure
  - o Body
  - o Continuing bonds with the baby as person

Lauren	Sarah	Marianne	Eve	Hannah	Lilian	Joslyn
Constructions of motherhood	Womanhood tied to motherhood	Coping	Meaning of loss	Miscarriage as taboo	Womanhood and motherhood	Miscarriage not as taboo
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Category woman tied symbolically to motherhood</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Body</li> </ul>	Meaning of pregnancy and loss	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Patient/doctor perspective</li> </ul>	Accounting for the pregnancy	Hospital care	Accounting for reaction post loss
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Existing outside the category mother</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pressure</li> </ul>	Pressure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reactions to loss</li> </ul>	Loss and validation of the pregnancy	Lack of support	Men and grief
Miscarriage as feminine experience	Making sense of loss	Blame	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Symbolic meaning of miscarriage</li> </ul>	Family	Guilt	Grief after miscarriage
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Body</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Coping</li> </ul>	Grieving and social status of perinatal loss	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Losing a baby</li> </ul>	'Foetus', 'baby', 'person'	Men and grief	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Self blame</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Meaning of loss</li> </ul>		Miscarriage as a feminine experience	Childlessness	Middle son's reaction	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Husband as supporter</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continuing bonds</li> </ul>		Self-blame	Menopause	Continuing bonds	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expectations towards family and friends</li> </ul>	Men and grief					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Friends</li> </ul>						
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Family</li> </ul>						
Emotions						
Grieving						

- Some of these themes/overlapping in participant experiences are briefly discussed in the Conclusion, but it takes some time to get there and the connections do not tie back as cleanly to the findings/analysis as they could.
- Even with the findings organized as they are now by case, it would be helpful to start each case with a preview of the main themes that were identified with the themes written in full sentence form. The one-word titles are useful for the analyst, but the reader does not know how to interpret them – for example, for 'coping' and 'body' and 'pressure' it is not clear whose body, whose coping, what kind of pressure is being discussed. It would also be helpful to have transitions between each section of the findings for each case to show the relationship – before we get to the conclusion section.
- As mentioned earlier, it is surprising to then move into a section on MCD devices/categories:
  - woman, pregnancy, baby, mother
  - man/husband, family/friends, medical professionals
Why is this the analytic tool that is emphasized when there are so many possible directions (see table above) that could have been explored further?

Finally, a concluding section that includes both practical implications and also validation strategies that were used would be useful. That is, what measures were taken to ensure that the findings were trustworthy, authentic and valid? One such criteria is that something about the findings should be surprising (not obvious) and also resonate with the reader. What surprised you about the findings? What did you find that you were not expecting to find?

**Despite the critical commentary, this dissertation has earned a positive assessment from me and, in my view, the PhD candidate can proceed to the final stages towards earning a PhD title.**

Again, thank you for the opportunity to read this manuscript. I greatly enjoyed it.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at paulust@etsu.edu.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Trena M. Paulus', written in a cursive style.

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