In Australia, the need for “a national family policy” was first discussed in the 1970s and has continuously been part of political agendas. Since the very beginning of the 1980s, both major political parties have implemented the “family” as a key element of their political campaigns, announcing a set of broad programs as policy for families with (young) children. Through those steps, the family has been designated as a “fundamental social institution,” especially in the light of its caregiving. This logic has principally supported the development of family policy, including the whole process of family policy discussion and implementation.

This dissertation analysed debates on family policies in Australia, aiming to identify the “interpretive and conceptual schemas” (Bacchi 2005), or discourses, which determine the arrangement of the discursive space and the policies themselves. It covered not only family income support policies (family payments), but also maternity leave and maternity payments, sole parent pensions, family support services policies, and a policy which aimed at controlling spending of those family (and welfare) payments by the certain recipients. Focusing on the discursive construction of policy problems and the politics of categories in the debates, this study scrutinised power relations in Australian society. In particular, it attempted to examine politics of family and inclusion/exclusion through the development of family policy. Politics of family, in this study, indicated (re)construction of family categories, role allocations within the family as well as social norms functioning in those processes. The latter, on the other hand, demarcated “deserving” and “undeserving” of state/social support.

To meet these objectives, this dissertation particularly focused on problem representations and politics of categories. Through a methodological review of policy research, Chapter 1 suggested the effectiveness of the social constructionist approach and analysis of family policy as discourses. Drawing from social constructionism, discourse analysis, the sociology of social problems (or social problems theory) and feminism, Carol Lee Bacchi (1999, 2009) has introduced an approach of looking at “problem representation” to capture “how problems are described, implied causations and the implications which follow.” Reflecting on her theoretical
works as well as social constructionist theory, this study took the approach of analysing “institutionally supported and culturally influenced interpretive and conceptual schemas (discourses) that produce particular understandings of issues and events” within the text (Bacchi 2005: 199), as well as politics of categories. The politics of categories, in this study, included construction of categories, imputation of meanings and distribution of attributions to those categories, correlation of those categories with other concepts and categories, exclusion from those categorisations, as well as their reconstruction, redefinition, and relocation. Considering that the increased attention to family policy since the 1970s derived from family changes and coincided with criticisms of the standard analytical unit on the basis of the conventional family, the social constructionist approach and analysis of discourses seem appropriate to analyse family policy. Analysis of discourses, as a methodological pillar of social constructionism (Akagawa 2006), enables policy studies to reflect on whole process of knowledge production, illustrating historical development of the debates and the hegemonic discourses on family policy and (re)construction of gender relations.

Although there have been some previous studies on Australian family policy which have explicitly labelled themselves as discourse analysis (e.g. Pinkney 1995; Stewart 1999), most of those studies basically remain historical analyses of the changing “family” definition in Australian politics. An analysis of family definitions is significant and can be conducted as a part of the policy analysis, but it cannot be the whole analysis since it does not explain the comprehensive development process of Australian family policy.

Chapters 2 and 3 examined debates on family income support and work-family balance policies in Australia. The debates on family income support policies or family payments since the 1970s have been battles over problem constructions: the issue of gender equity encountering the issue of “balancing” between single and double income families. Since the 1970s, feminist scholars in Australia have problematised the Australian welfare state for the “institutionalisation” of the male breadwinner model of family. As gender studies of social policies began to become an active area of research, cash social benefits delivered to the “primary carers,” typified by family allowances, were constructed as progressive measures which reflected gender equity, awarding women’s unpaid work. Feminists have continuously lobbied for the cash benefits as a means of achieving the intra-family equity or gender equity and the Hawke-Keating Labor Government in particular proactively engaged feminists, including Anne Summers and Bettina Cass, in the review and development of social policy, leading family payments to be directed to the primary caregivers on a regular basis.
On the other hand, since the 1980s, especially after John Howard became the leader of the Liberal Party, the Liberal-National Coalition Party has argued that single income families are being discriminated against in taxation and social security policies. This has led to a series of new policy initiatives. For instance, John Howard insisted on a system of income-splitting, which allows a shift of taxable income from the higher income earner, usually the father, to the lower (or no) income earner, usually the mother, in order to reduce the overall income tax imposed on the family (cf. Howard 1994). After taking power, the Howard Liberal-National Coalition Government introduced a Family Tax Benefit which consisted of Part A and B. The Family Tax Benefit Part B provided extra payments for single income families, moving closer to a system of income-splitting. The Family Tax Benefit (and the Howard Government) was subject to particularly bitter criticisms that it had reinstated the male-breadwinner model and favoured families based on the “traditional gender-based divisions of labour” (Yeend 2008: 94-95) because its payments were assessed on the basis of the “secondary earner’s income,” creating substantial disincentives for women to return to work. Despite the criticisms, the succeeding Rudd and Gillard Labor Governments have continuously upheld this regime while finally phasing out the Dependent Spouse Tax Offset (Rebate) for couples without children.

The debates on family payments have been continuously constructed as a matter of gender relations. Although the Howard Government stressed the gender-neutrality of their family policy, using the “secondary earner” as a category cannot be “gender-neutral” since it is coupled with the “primary earner” category, and by the reference to Australian gender norms, the latter category would be soon linked with male breadwinner, which makes the “secondary earner” mothers. The category of “primary carer” is consistently linked with mothers as well, which made the system actually reflect “gender equity” or “inter-family equity,” defined as the provision of “child income support to mothers” (Cass 1986: 3). Family policy debates in Australia have never been free from the norm of motherhood.

Gender relations in Australian society became more explicit in the analysis of the work-family balance policies in Chapter 2. Australia’s first Paid Parental Leave scheme was introduced in January 2011. Under this scheme, “working parents,” usually the mothers, on leave or not working after becoming the primary caregivers of newborn or recently adopted children, are eligible for an 18-week government-funded Parental Leave Pay. At the other end of the leave, there is another scheme called a Baby Bonus which is paid to parents following the birth or adoption of children. The Baby Bonus, or formerly called Maternity Payment, had been launched in 2004, long before the Parental Leave Pay.
Paid parental leave and the baby bonus have been assumed to be mutually exclusive in contemporary Australian politics due to the categorisation of mothers as well as the dichotomous family types which has regularised and dominated the whole debate on measures to address the issues of work-family balance and child care. Debates on these schemes were based on the categorisation of mothers as working mothers or stay-at-home mothers. Under that categorisation, paid parental leave and the baby bonus were connected as a set of alternative policies, distributing payments to each category of women. At the same time, the categorisation of mothers was associated with the two related categories of families, namely single income families and double income families. Recent debates on paid paternity payment or the Dad and Partner Pay, which will start from January 2013, were still based on the assumption of the women’s role as primary caregivers, although its introduction would likely to encourage eligible persons, basically fathers, to actively take the caregiving role. It is also worth noting that this socially constructed “motherhood” (based on working or not working) is affecting women by taking deep root in their self-identifications (Pocock 2003).

The pillar of the debates on Australian family policy has been the “social value” of children and family as a social institution providing care and raising them. This logic has been shared irrespective of an individual’s position on the political spectrum. At the same time, two related family categories linked with categories of mothers revealed that the notion of “family” has been grounded on two-heterosexual-parent families with young children, in which mothers are assumed to fulfil parental responsibilities of caregiving, whether they work or not. As David Cheal (2008) suggested, “[t]o be recognized as living in a family is to have one’s lifestyle socially validated and socially supported.” The notion of family constructed in the debates on Australian family policy entails risks that those families/individuals which do not fit it will be excluded from the sufficient provision of support, although they tend to be the ones who actually need it the most.

While stereotyped gender role allocations and a certain notion of the family were reinforced, social arrangements which differ from that notion, including women-headed sole parent families and other “disadvantaged” or “vulnerable” families, have been exempted from the category of “deserving.” Especially since the 1980s, welfare dependency has been problematised as the Australian welfare state experienced a significant transformation from a unique model called the “wage earners’ welfare state” to a liberal regime taking what Gosta Esping-Andersen (1996) called “the neo-liberal route,” and state support for marginal families has been rolled back, as well as becoming more conditional, through the techniques of contractual arrangements.
Sole parent families, especially those headed by single mothers, have been the major target of those welfare reforms: based on a close examination of the debates on the income support system for sole parents, Chapter 4 suggested that single motherhood has been the primary factor dictating their eligibility. Through the debates, single motherhood along with mothers’ support system, have been constantly represented as “problems.” Before the introduction of the Supporting Mother’s Benefit, unmarried mothers along with those who had left the relationship themselves were excluded from state assistance, while widows had the Widows Pensions. Although they came under governmental assistance with the introduction of the Supporting Mother’s Benefit in 1973 following the advocacy of a single mothers’ self-help group, it was continuously identified with the negative image of single mothers, something which did not change despite a name change and extension of the target to include supporting fathers in 1977. Even after the integration of a two-tier system for widows and supporting parents in 1989 and the removal of the term “sole parent” from the name of the payment in 1999, sole parent pensioners have been continuously subject to normative evaluation in terms of motherhood. With the problematisation of welfare dependency, the concept of “jobless families” has been easily connected again with single mothers. This concept enabled the governments to question single mothers’ parental responsibility and effects of joblessness on their children. Categorised as “jobless,” single parents were assumed to be failing to fulfil the parental obligation of employment and of having negative impacts on their children, while the choice to stay at home which allegedly must be given to parents was rejected. “Motherhood” in relation to sole parents has not been determined solely by the existence of children but also by their “failure” in the “normal” life event, marriage, and the latter factor has been more effective and a greater defining feature of their “motherhood.”

As was apparent in the scrutiny of debates on sole parent pensions, problematisation of welfare dependency has justified welfare reforms which emphasise the obligations and responsibilities of welfare recipients to cut welfare costs. This shift from entitlement to obligation expanded under the Howard, Rudd and Gillard Governments, and as its prime example along with some focus on family support services policies, Chapter 5 analysed the development of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (“The Strategy”) under the Howard Government as well as further developments to its initiatives under the Rudd-Gillard Government.
As a means of promoting welfare reform under the name of mutual obligation, the Howard Government had connected the concepts of “families” and “communities” in the context of social coalition, expecting them to be self-reliant. Social coalition meant a partnership of individuals, families, business, government, and welfare and charitable organisations. The Government was attempting to manage social welfare based on self-reliance of families and communities supported by partnerships with social institutions. A symbolic measure was introduced in 2000 and renewed in 2004, called the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy. It was explained as “a major shift from more traditional social policy,” rearranging the public and private provision of welfare. Targeting “disadvantaged” families and communities in particular as a place-based measure, the Strategy aimed at helping them to be stronger and to “have less need for crisis services and welfare support” (Emerson 2000: 66-8), or more precisely, less dependence on welfare. The Strategy was a part of the Howard Government’s neo-liberal welfare reform, strengthening “families” to be self-reliant. Its key notion of mutual obligation applied to those who were identified as “disadvantaged” through the Strategy. The analysis of interviews related to organisations funded by the (renewed) Strategy in the Melbourne area also revealed the problems of the limited and project-based funding, which may result in difficulties in achieving sustainability and maintaining the quality of the services. The continuation of the main initiative of the Strategy as “a key plank” of the Labor Government which inherited the core principles of “prevention and early intervention” and social coalition (although the Government does not use that specific term) may represent the continuation of further welfare reforms under the current Government, as becomes more apparent with the analysis of income management.

Chapter 6 focused on a recent development of “income management,” a measure which aims at controlling over recipients of certain family and welfare payments by quarantining those payments and restricting their usage only for the “priority needs” including foods, clothing, housing, and education. Through this measure, Aboriginal parents in specific Indigenous communities and other non-indigenous “bad parents” have been partly excluded from the category of “deserving.”

Since at least 2007, Australia has linked welfare and family payments with “socially responsible behaviour” of parents, particularly through income management. First introduced as a part of the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) under the Howard Coalition Government, it was extended beyond the NT Intervention and was even represented as “a key tool” in the Rudd-Gillard Labor Government welfare reforms, indicating the importance of analysing it not just with respect to Indigenous Affairs but also in the context of welfare and
family policies. Through the examinations of debates on income management measures, Chapter 6 illustrated the process through which governmental management of welfare payments has become a prominent feature of welfare reforms and revealed that parenthood has been the core element by connecting normative parental behaviour with provision of welfare and family payments. Much like the repetitive disputes over welfare reforms since the 1980s, the development of income management has been a process of problematising welfare dependency, and then constructing and justifying income management as the requisite response. The Howard measure introduced as a part of the NTER was actually a scheme to advance the Government’s welfare reform based on the principle of “mutual obligation” by urging parents’ responsibility for the care and education of children. While supporting the NTER and echoing the Howard Government’s arguments on parental responsibilities, the Rudd and Gillard Governments have more obviously referred to income management as a significant welfare reform scheme and attempted its broader application, not only to the Aboriginal communities but also to non-Indigenous Australians. Unconditional income support without any responsibilities has been identified as a problem which leads to welfare dependency and an intergenerational cycle. “Jobless” parents depending on welfare are assumed to be lacking responsibility, namely with respect to parental responsibilities, and in general, being high risks with respect to the spending of welfare and family payments on undesirable things, failing to send their children to schools, or even neglecting or abusing their children. People depending on welfare are referred to as “bad parents” who behave “against normal community standards,” raising social costs by generating the risk of future welfare dependents. Income management is a further extension of the obligation-based welfare reforms, or “conditional welfare” in the words of Terry Carney (2012), with more emphasis on parental responsibilities. At the same time, as illustrated in the recent change in the Family Tax Benefit Part A Supplement to require certain income support recipients with a child turning 4 years old to take him/her for a health check, the technique of linking normative parental behaviour with welfare and family payments is expanding beyond income management.

The current trend of conditional and place-based welfare has been underpinned by the problematisation of (passive) welfare dependency with particular references to parenthood (or motherhood). Responsibilities of recipients, especially parents, were often mentioned to justify the welfare reforms, labelling them as irresponsible parents falling outside “normal community standards” or ideal parenthood and allowing the government to roll back the payments or make them conditional. To be called welfare dependent leads to the assumption of being irresponsible
parents and to being excluded from sufficient state support. At the same time, the vagueness of
the term “welfare dependency” itself as well as the ambiguity of those notions used for welfare
reform justification must have actually made them extremely useful for the governments.

Furthermore, the close examination of the sole parent pensions and income management in
particular revealed the possible importance of attributes such as family, gender, ethnicity, and
class strata for the welfare dependency label. Reforms targeting specific welfare payments seem
to result in calling the particular groups of people who receive those payments “welfare
dependent.”

This dissertation examined the hegemonic discourses on family and family policy to
understand dynamics of power/gender relations in Australia, covering a range of polices for
Australian families: family payments, maternity leave and maternity payments, sole parent
pensions, family support services policies, and a policy in an attempt to control those family and
welfare payments after they were given. Broadening the family policy debates beyond gender
and incorporating “men’s role as care givers into existing policy frameworks and initiatives”
(HREOC 2007: 27) are significant to change current family policy discourses as well as the
policies themselves. Furthermore, although conditional welfare can be found in other states
categorised as having “liberal regimes,” including Great Britain and the United States, the
trend of the welfare reforms does not have to be unidirectional especially if we take special
notice of the results of this dissertation: certain groups of people are unfairly labelled welfare
dependent, and conditional welfare tends to hit those groups actually most in need. This
comprehensive examination of Australian family policy focusing on policy discourses, which has
rarely been undertaken before, contributes to the sociological study of the Australian family and
social policies, as well as to policy developments themselves in Australia. Furthermore, by
revealing the reproduction of the asymmetrical power relations, this dissertation may serve as a
step forward for a change.

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