

**BIRTH DIRT**  
**RELATIONS OF POWER IN CHILDBIRTH**

**by**  
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## **CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP**

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree, nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and in the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Candidate

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis presents the findings of a doctoral study which analysed video tapes of labouring Australian women at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, historical data from midwifery and medical textbooks, consumer material, and personal experience as a midwifery student in 1970-1971. The data analysis was achieved using discourse analysis, but was influenced by Michel Foucault together with anthropological and sociological approaches, particularly as these can be applied to visual material.

‘Dirt’ is a commonly accepted term, but it becomes difficult to define as it is so dependant on the context. Since the discovery of the germ theory in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, it is difficult for western health professionals to conceive of dirt as being anything but unaesthetic, unhygienic and pathogenic. When analysing the data from this study, it became evident that birth and dirt have a close association. The changes that have occurred in childbirth have revolved around who and what is perceived as clean, and who and what is perceived as dirty. This thesis argues that ‘birth dirt’ exists, but, its form will vary depending on the time, the place, and the culture, although it is always centred around the physical reality of birth.

Video tapes of the birthing process indicate that midwives, in their ritualised behaviours of containing, controlling and cleaning up the ‘dirt’ associated with birth, create a barrier between themselves and the women. ‘Dirt’ in this instance is the ‘contaminating’ body fluids and substances derived from the woman and her baby. The dirt relationship is a power relationship and the midwife is an essential part of its structure. The midwife is the dirty worker who maintains the cleanliness of the environment and controls the ‘dirt’ during birth. There is considerable rhetoric about midwives as being ‘with woman’, but the reality is that the midwives are more often ‘with dirt’.