

**The Politics of Choice:  
Difficult Freedoms for Young Women in Late Modernity**

Thesis submitted by  
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December 2005

For the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
In the School of Social Work and Community Welfare  
James Cook University

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## **Declaration on ethics**

The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted within the James Cook University Statement and Guidelines on research Practice (2001). The proposed research methodology received clearance from the James Cook University Ethics Review Committee (Human Ethics Sub-Committee) (Approval Number H1610).

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## Acknowledgements

The young women who were involved in this research deserve the biggest thanks. Their willing participation makes this kind of study possible, their frankness and openness gives it its integrity. The energy, humour and dignity that characterised their stories were – to use their words – truly awesome!

Doing a PhD is commonly regarded as a quintessentially solitary and independent activity. Whilst there were certainly many hours of secluded work, I was surrounded by numerous supportive people who all played a part in helping me navigate this path. It is hard to envisage my post-graduate journey without my supervisor, Professor Ros Thorpe, at my side and on my side. Her unwavering support and belief in my ability provided the foundations from which I felt able to venture into the terrifying and exhilarating territory of PhD research. Ros has made an invaluable contribution to my career and has my sincere regard and affection.

I have had two workplaces during the course of this PhD. My colleagues and friends at the North Queensland Domestic Violence Resource Service and the School of Social Work and Community Welfare at James Cook University have provided encouragement, practical help and a lot of wisdom, and I would like to give particular thanks and recognition to Pauline Woodbridge, Tony McMahon, Jane Thomson and Nola Alloway. Kim Cleverly has been endlessly patient, reassuring and made me laugh. Nonie Harris and Deb Miles have provided a powerful sense of solidarity and been really generous with their time and feedback.

Madge Scerha, Betty McLellan, Coralie McLean and Chantal Oxenham, my wise feminist friends, have been enthusiastic and loving supporters. My family have always been encouraging and thrilled with whatever I have achieved.

My partner and best friend Tim has experienced this PhD at close quarters. This has involved listening to me when I have been absorbed and excited and encouraging me when my energy has flagged. His genuine interest in and understanding of this endeavour has been precious and deeply appreciated.

## **Abstract**

This thesis reports on a study of young women's experiences, aspirations and relationship to feminism in the contemporary socio-political context. It brings a feminist analysis to new social theories about late modernity by exploring the particular relationship that young women have to the social and psychological processes that are associated with this reconfigured climate and the prevailing ideology of neo-liberalism.

A feminist theoretical framework informs all features of the research. It underpins the justification and context for the area of inquiry, the choice of methodology, the use of methods and the analytical lens for the interpretation of literature and data. The research employs a qualitative methodology. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with fifty five young women aged between eighteen and twenty five. The participants all resided in the Townsville/Thuringowa area and represented diversity in terms of race, class, sexuality, parenting status and education.

The growing influence of neo-liberalism and its dovetailing with feminism has ushered in the concept of a modernised, assertive and liberated femininity which celebrates the democratic opening up of choices and unprecedented options for girls and women, particularly in the areas of education and employment. The findings presented in this thesis identify that being female in these conditions is not to experience a simple and unproblematic expansion of choice or liberation from previous constraint, rather that they entail 'difficult freedoms'. Whilst the vast majority of participants report the benefits of these changes and a belief in meritocracy, their experiences and opportunities are strongly mediated by race, class and educational experience, and significantly complicated by primary responsibility for parenting and domestic work. The research found the continuation of many material barriers and circumscriptions in the areas of education, occupational preference, mothering and domesticity and a high incidence of male violence in intimate relationships and family backgrounds. Inequalities that are generated socially are overwhelmingly understood by young women through a 'politics of choice'. A punitive interpretive framework of individualism is strongly endorsed and this is reflected in their assessment of feminism. This study identifies subjective adjustments to this epistemological leaning which include techniques of discounting or distancing themselves from negative interpretations of their own

disadvantage or adversity and the relational consequences of resentment and a chilling of empathy towards others in hardship.

The thesis concludes that young women are located in a changed context of power. The hegemonic operation of neo-liberalism allows subordination to occur covertly within a framework of ostensible commitment to equality, the valorisation of choice and through seductive incitements to individual responsibility and self-management. Liberating processes which are supposed to be freeing for women are actually involved in re-inscribing their subordinate status. The research contributes to contemporary feminist theory and activism and to social policy and welfare practice by restating the relevance of structural perspectives and signalling the necessity of incorporating knowledge of the epistemological and subjective dispositions outlined in this research.



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