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

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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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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 Sceriha, 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.
Table of contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Declarations</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of contents</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Introduction

- The conception of the research                          1
- The focus and aims of the research                       2
- The title and structure of the thesis                    4
- Chapter summary and conclusion                           7

2. Literature review

- Introduction                                           8
- Conceptualising current times: Late modernity and post-modernism 8
- The feminisation thesis and female individualisation    12
- Liberalism and neo-liberalism                          17
  - Individualism and rationality                         18
    - Neo-classical and free market economics              20
- Feminist critiques of neo-liberalism                    22
- Understanding young people’s lives in late modernity    26
- Girls’ studies: Writing by and about girls and young women 30
- Girl power: Cultural fascination with female success and achievement 31
- (Girl) power failure: Too little self esteem and too much aggression 35
- Cautionary tales                                        37
- Young women and the undoing of feminism                 38
- From things to words to a third wave and popular feminism 40
- Chapter summary and conclusion                           44
3. Theory and methodology

- Introduction 46
- Note about terminology 46
- The epistemological choice of feminist research 47
- A feminist theoretical framework 51
- Background to the research focus 53
- The participants in the research: Recruitment and diversity 54
- Interview procedures 58
- Ethical procedures, dilemmas and considerations 64
- Research, safety and helping 69
- Managing and analysing the data 71
- Chapter summary and conclusion 73

4. Motherhood and domesticity

- Introduction 75
- Feminist critiques of mothering 75
- Demographics of the mothers and their children 77
- The circumstances of pregnancy 78
- Positive descriptions of mothering: “It was the biggest goal in my whole life” 80
- Physical, emotional and social costs of mothering: “I’m not the same person I used to be” 83
- Occluding self interest: Children come first 86
- Fathering: “He just likes the whole play experience” 90
- Parenting and physical violence: “What am I meant to tell my kids?” 94
- Surveillance, scrutiny and unwanted advice: “People are looking down their nose at you” 98
- Children as a source of resilience: “The only reason why I’m probably here today” 101
- Criticism of the ‘other’ mother: “People like that shouldn’t be having them” 102
- Parenting aspirations: “I just don’t want to rush into it” 105
- Expectations of domesticity: “I just want equality” 110
- The practice of domesticity: “He does a lot of the yard work” 111
- Chapter summary and conclusion 115
5. Education and employment

- Introduction
- Educational and employment demographics
- The intersection of parenting, education and employment
- Damned if you do, don’t or can’t: Young mothers, employment and studying
- Future parenting and employment: “I’d want to be around as much as I could”
- Identification of constraints: Speed bumps ahead?
- The parameters and problems of choice
  - Attitudes to education and training: “I just always thought, you leave school, you go to uni”
  - Occupational Preferences: “Making a difference”
  - Moderating ambitions: “Out of the window” and “down the drain”
  - Navigating masculinised occupations: “I don’t want to become arrogant or anything like that”
- Chapter summary and conclusion

6. Relationships

- Introduction
- Marriage: “one day”
- Experience and trepidation of boys’ and men’s violence
- Relational commitment versus autonomy
- Explanations for relationship problems
- Equality between women: A hierarchy of liberation
- Women can do anything: “It’s up to you to make things happen”
- Friendships with boys and men: “So we’re equal because we’re friends”
- Chapter summary and conclusion

7. Politics

- Introduction
- The achievement of equality (just about)
- Ways of inquiring about feminism
- Feminism and privilege
• Can feminists be women? 181
• Free to choose? Barriers to feminism 183
• Just a bit of fun: Disparaging feminism through humour 186
• Avoiding victimhood: “I can handle it” 189
• Acceptable (liberal) feminism: “To a certain extent” 190
• The problem of labels 193
• Feminism and women’s studies in a neo-liberal climate 195
• Chapter summary and conclusion 196

8. Neo-liberalism and the burdens of liberty
• Introduction 198
• Subjects of choice 198
• Contingency and reluctant adulthood 205
• Reflective and managing subjects: You are what you make yourself 207
• Upward mobility and hybridity 209
• A culture of victimhood? Making meaning in difficult times 212
  Perplexing optimism and unrealistic ambition 213
  Volitional imperative 214
  Pragmatic fatalism 215
  Strength and learning through adversity 216
  Comparative adversity 217
• An atypical case: Not denying disadvantage 217
• A chilling of empathy 220
• A politics of resentment 221
• Resilience, structure and social welfare practice 223
• Chapter summary and conclusion 226

9. Make your own way there: Social policy and the neo-liberal agenda
• Introduction 228
• Individual choice and post-feminist social policy 228
• The requirement for anti-dependency rhetoric 230
• Making your own way there in education and employment 233
• Having children and achieving a work/life balance 235
• A home of one’s own 241
• Violence against women: Australia says no? 241
• Chapter summary and conclusion 244

10. Discussion and conclusion

• A review of the findings 246
• Neo-liberalism as hegemony 249
• Choosing choice 251
• Feminism and the ethics of interdependence 253
• Future research 255
• Chapter summary and thesis conclusion 256

Bibliography 258

Appendices

Appendix A: Participant recruitment flyer 290
Appendix B: Participant information form 291
Appendix C: Informed consent form 292
Appendix D: Interview schedule 293
List of Figures

Figure 3.1 Distribution of age of participants 56
Figure 3.2 Distribution of race/ethnicity of participants 57
Figure 3.3 Distribution of primary occupation of participants 58

List of Tables

Table 5.1 Educational levels attained by young mothers and young women without children 117
Table 6.1 Young women’s experience of types of violence 149
Table 6.2 Young women’s multiple experience of violence 150