AUSTRALIAN GENERATION YS: READING THEIR FUTURES THROUGH A NEOLIBERAL LENS

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Abstract. This paper investigates the ways in which Generation Ys engage with, and take up, neoliberal discourse in considering their futures. It draws upon survey data completed by Year 12 students in a range of schools across the State of Queensland, Australia, and uses it to illuminate the power and pervasiveness of neoliberal discourse, and the 'willingness' of Gen Ys to embrace neoliberalism and its imperative of individualisation. It also employs this data as a means of demonstrating the young people's take-up of equal opportunity rhetoric. Furthermore, it illustrates the ways in which these young people come to exhibit the traits regularly associated with Gen Ys. Finally, the paper explores the implications of such research findings for these and other young people and signals considerations for those concerned with the education and well being of youth.

Keywords: Generation Y, Neoliberalism, Aspirations, Individualisation

1   Introduction

This paper examines the ways in which young people, and more specifically those categorised as Generation Y, come to take up neoliberal discourse in considering their future lives, their aspirations for the future. Drawing upon survey data, it demonstrates the 'willingness' of these young people to buy into this discourse and its imperative of individualism, and their 'choice' to take up the position of author of their own life's biography and to construct their lives as an enterprise. So, too, this paper demonstrates the young people's take-up of equal opportunity rhetoric and illustrates the ways in which they – through their engagement with neoliberal discourse and equal opportunity rhetoric in part – exhibit the qualities commonly associated with Gen Ys. Upon presenting the data, the paper investigates the implications of the emergent findings and considers what these might come to mean for young people and their endeavours to construct and enact their 'imagined' future lives. In view of this, the paper flags points of consideration for those involved with the education and welfare of young people.

2   The Australian Research Landscape: A Contextual Framework

Research regarding young people's aspirations and expectations for the future, has long been on the Australian national, and international, agenda. In general terms, this research has focused on their hopes and plans for the future and most notably their educational and employment futures. Australian research – as relating to the various factors that are seen to generally affect the formation of aspirations and expectations of young people – has identified the following broad categories: experiences of schooling (Alloway, Dalley, Patterson, Walker & Lenoy, 2004; Alloway, Gilbert, Gilbert & Muspratt, 2004), families (Abbott-Chapman, 2000; Bryce & Anderson, 2008; Mercurio & Clayton, 2001) ethnicity and race (Kenyon, Sercombe, Black & Lhuede, 2001; Mercurio & Clayton, 2001) gender (Collins, Kenway & MacLeod, 2000; Dwyer, Harwood & Tyler, 1998; Patton & Creed, 2007) and socio-economic factors (Collins et al., 2000). Additionally, Marks, Fleming, Long and McMillan (2000) have also shown that the role of attitudes, motivations and aspirations is just as influential (see also Dusseldorp Skills Forum, 2006a, 2006b).

Research has reported that "young people's future thinking combines ideas about 'destinations' (what sort of job I would like) and desires about being and becoming a certain type of person", and advocates that "these are not neatly separable orientations" (McLeod & Yates, 2006, p. 104; see also Yates & McLeod, 2007). So, too, research has indicated that young people make the transition from their schooling lives to their post-schooling lives in a variety of ways: that the transition to adult life is not necessarily linear or predictable (Dwyer et al, 1998); that many young people do not necessarily aspire to move directly from school to further education or training or employment. Rather, a complex mix of work, study and leisure constitutes young people's lives as they negotiate and navigate their way through a rapidly changing set of social, personal and employment conditions typical of the 21st Century – the "New Times" (Wyn, 2004; see also White & Wyn, 2008; Wyn & Woodman, 2006). Significantly, this marks out a change

from 'traditional' post-school trajectories – and is indicative of young people's response to the changing social and economic world within which they now live out their lives.

Further, and in relation to the influence of gender upon young people's aspirations and expectations for the future, research by Dwyer et al (1998) indicated that gender remained a key factor in determining education and career choices. These strongly gendered differences in aspirations for the future were also identified in young people's schooling lives. As Collins et al (2000, p. 2) have noted, "there are indeed major gender differences in educational participation, performance and outcomes" for young Australians.

Research undertaken by McLeod and Yates (2006) also drew attention to difference around the 'marker' of gender. They reported that many girls spoke about their "ambitions for independence and excitement" (McLeod & Yates, 2006, p. 225). So, too, they noted elsewhere, that many of the girls were aware of the "new possibilities of work and education" and engaged in "making clear plans for work and further study" (Yates & McLeod, 2007, p. 61). Further, they indicated that many of the girls were "planning their careers in careful and strategic ways" and also had "'fall-back' positions" (Yates & McLeod, 2007, p. 61). In the case of boys, Yates and McLeod (2007, p. 62) noted that there was "less evidence of their relating to changes when it came to their sense of their pathways and jobs". Also, there existed amongst boys, "a relatively unshaken continuing belief that 'males are just normal'" – that "male experiences are the norm" (McLeod & Yates, 2006, p. 226).

Additionally, and in view of their research findings, Yates and McLeod (2007, p. 57) reported that most students – both boys and girls – were "quick to tell us that boys and girls today have 'equal opportunities'", were "very conversant" with the language of equal opportunity rhetoric, could "identify practices or ideas that they thought were sexist", could "easily label comments as 'sexist'", and knew about "sexual harassment and gender equality". That noted, they also, reported that:

> Overall we found gender reform and feminist ideas have had an uneven impact on the young people in our study. Equal opportunity language is now seen as the norm – but there is also an assumption that different things are 'normal' for girls and for boys (Yates & McLeod, 2007, p. 57).

Furthermore, they also argue that:

> ... the impact of feminism and associated gender and social changes appears to have had a much stronger effect on girls than boys. Additionally, recent social changes and expectations that individuals need to change, to become flexible and to adapt to new circumstances, appear also to have had a stronger impact on girls' sense of their futures. The cultural imperatives to remake oneself, to reflexively construct a biography, to "be your own person" register differently for women and men, and intersect with feminist calls for women to make new choices (McLeod & Yates, 2006, pp. 196-197).

It is the case that a substantial amount of the research detailed above has focused on the future aspirations and expectations of those young people commonly categorised as Generation Y. And while variations exist in the literature marking the beginning and end of a generational epoch, there is general consensus that Generation Y (Gen Y) encapsulates those born between 1982 and 2003 (Wyn & Woodman, 2006). It is this generation who are singled out by their "broad sense of self-reliance" (Muller, 2006, p. 2) – their engagement with neo-liberalist discourses and the notion of individualisation that underpins such a discursive network. Gen Y is typically characterised as being: techno savvy, connected...24/7, self confident, optimistic, hopeful, independent, comfortably self-reliant, determined, goal oriented, success driven, lifestyle centred, diverse, inclusive, service oriented, entrepreneurial, and global-, civic- and community-minded (Deloitte Development, 2006).

Evidence from focus group research conducted among Gen Ys (more specifically two cohorts comprised of young people aged 16 to 19 years of age and those aged 20-24 years) for the Dusseldorp Skills Forum in July 2006 indicates that Gen Y:
* have grown up understanding and accepting that the future of work is all about mobility, adaptability and change;
* have little or no expectations of a "job for life", thinking it a form of imprisonment;
* have not a trace of awareness about the convulsive social and economic changes wrought by globalisation and the information revolution over the past 20 years;
* regard the changed social and economic landscape as completely normal;
* have no fear of an economic downturn;

- robustly believe their future is in their own hands (Muller, 2006, p. 1).

As noted above, Generation Ys are marked out by their engagement with neoliberalist discourses and the notion of individualisation (see Beck, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) that underpins such a discursive network. Such engagement with neoliberal discourse may well be expected, for there is, as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001, p. 22) advocate, "hardly a desire more widespread in the West today than to lead 'a life of your own'". They elaborate upon this notion, suggesting that:

> The ethic of individual self-fulfilment and achievement is the most powerful current in modern society. The choosing, deciding, shaping human being who aspires to be the author of his or her own life, the creator of an individual identity, is the central character of our time (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001, pp. 22-23).

Explicating the phenomenon of individualisation, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001, p. 2) state:

> It is simply, that in modern societies new demands, controls and constraints are being imposed on individuals ... people are tied into a network of regulations, conditions and provisos.
> ... The decisive feature of these modern regulations or guidelines is that, far more than earlier, individuals must, in part, supply them for themselves, import them into their biographies through their own actions (see also Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1996).

In line with this, Rose (1996a, p. 302) advocates, that:

> Identity is no longer experienced as a natural, coherent and unchanging attribute of the individual, but as the uncertain and fractured result of personal decisions and plans. Biography and identity become self-reflexive, to be constructed, worked upon, the outcome of choices ... in which the individual himself or herself is the self-conscious centre of action.

Essentially, neoliberalism (re)casts the modern subject – the individual. Constitution of the self as a rational, autonomous, responsible and active Subject – a subject identifiable as the entrepreneurial self – is prioritised within neoliberal discourse (Bauman, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001; Fitzsimmons, 2002; Harris, 2004; Kelly, 2006; O'Malley, 1996; Rose, 1992, 1996a, 1996b). Every human being is positioned as "an entrepreneur managing their own life, and should act as such" (Fitzsimmons, 2002, p. 3); are positioned as "active individuals seeking to "enterprise themselves", to maximize their quality of life through acts of choice, according their life a meaning and value to the extent that it can be rationalized as the outcome of choices made or choices to be made" (Rose, 1996b, p. 57; see also Rose, 1992, 1996a).

Additionally, individuals are, as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001, pp. 2-3) claim, "peremptorily invited to constitute themselves as individuals: to plan, understand, design themselves and act as individuals – or, should they 'fail', to lie as individuals on the bed they have made for themselves". So, too, do they advocate:

> One of the most decisive features of individualization processes, then, is that they not only permit but they also demand an active contribution by individuals.
> ... If they are not to fail, individuals must be able to plan for the long term and adapt to change; they must organize and improvise, set goals, recognize obstacles, accept defeats and attempt new starts. They need initiative, tenacity, flexibility and tolerance of frustration (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001, p. 4; see also Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1996).

In view of this, the individual has to be understood as being "the author of his or her own life" (Beck & Beck-Gersheim, 2002, p. 23). Further as, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001, p. 3) argue, "the normal biography thus becomes the 'elective biography', the 'reflexive biography', the 'do-it-yourself' biography'" and that "this does not necessarily happen by choice, neither does it necessarily succeed". Rather – and as advocated here, serving as a cautionary tale – they suggest that, "the do-it-yourself biography is always a 'risk biography', indeed a tightrope biography', a state of permanent (partly overt, partly concealed) endangerment" and that "the do-it-yourself biography can swiftly become the breakdown biography" (see also Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1996). In light of this, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001, p. 16) suggest that, "individualization has a double face: 'precarious freedoms'". Further, and in light of this, Beck, Bons & Lau, (2003, p. 24) suggest it is the case that "the agents of individualisation are also its victims".

Bearing this in mind, it is within this discursive construct of a contemporary world – one constituted by and within neoliberal discourse and its imperative of individualisation, and the complexities at play in such discourse and the act of constructing the self – that young people come to live out their lives. Of interest in this paper, are the ways

in which young people, and more specifically those categorised as Generation Y, come to imagine their future lives in these neoliberal times. That is, how they come to (or 'fail' to) draw upon the available cultural scripts of the time to build (or 'fail' to build) a portfolio of identities, to author (or not) their own biographies – their biographies of the self.

3   METHODOLOGY

This paper draws upon 623 surveys completed by Year 12 students – those typically 17 years of age and in their final year of secondary school – in 9 schools across the State of Queensland, Australia. These surveys were administered and collated as part of a larger Australian Research Council (ARC) project.

The ARC project, conducted over a period of three years, involved the collection of a range of data sources, including: surveys, focus group and individual interviews, response to stimulus writing and biography writing. The surveys under review here were administered in the initial phase of this research undertaking. Further, a research team member personally administered the surveys in school time to maximise the return rate.

The project employed the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA) (Department of Health and Aged Care, 2001) – the scale used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics as a standard classification and index of remoteness – in selecting school sites to ensure breadth of sampling in relation to location. These bands are estimated in relation to a location's accessibility to a range of goods, services and opportunities for social interaction: ARIA 1 – Highly Accessible, ARIA 2 – Accessible, ARIA 3 – Moderately Accessible, ARIA 4 – Remote, ARIA 5 – Very Remote.

The surveys under discussion in this paper comprise a sample representative of all five ARIA categories. So, too, are they representative of a gender mix – both across individual school sites and the broader ARIA band. The number of surveys completed within and across the 5 ARIA bands and the gender of respondents in each ARIA band is as follows: ARIA 1 (58 males, 92 females), ARIA 2 (90 males, 84 females), ARIA 3 (81 males, 76 females), ARIA 4/5 (67 males, 75 females).

4   DISCUSSION

Having examined the responses to the surveys completed by the Year 12 students – those categorised as Gen Y – and conducting a detailed analysis of the emergent data, it became overwhelmingly apparent that those surveyed had tapped into neoliberal discourse. It was the case that they had bought into the dominant imperative of the individual as actor, of individualisation. Furthermore, in doing so, they demonstrated a firm familiarity with equal opportunity rhetoric. Moreover, their responses typified many of the qualities that are commonly associated with Gen Y.

For the purpose of this paper, the young people's responses to 2 survey questions serve as the focal point. These questions are:
1. What is the future like for girls who live here? [Question 13 on original survey]
2. What is the future like for boys who live here? [Question 14 on original survey]

And while the variables of gender and geography per se – as embedded in these questions – are not the focus of this paper, it is the case that the responses to these questions operate in such a way as to elucidate how these young people took up the neoliberal position, and likewise, how they did so in imagining and making (or in contemplation of such making) choices about their futures – their desired futures.

As evidenced in the data presented here, it became apparent that these Gen Ys perceived that nothing should affect them in planning for and enacting their futures. They were firm in their belief that this was so, and that extraneous influences were to have no influence upon the narrative of their futures. Rather, they were to be the authors – and indeed individual authors – of their own biographies. So, too, did their responses also typify the characteristics commonly attributed to Gen Ys, that is, they presented as, for example, optimistic, hopeful and independent (Deloitte Development, 2006). These young people saw themselves as being in charge of their own lives, as being responsible for making choices, and for planning and doing the 'work' required to fulfil their dreams. One young woman powerfully encapsulated the individualist position, suggesting: "I believe that we are the deciders of our future. Your future is how you plan and live it. If you choose to waste your talents then you are planning to fail." (ARIA 3 Female)

Student comments clearly demonstrated their engagement with neoliberal discourses and, more specifically, of tapping into the notion of 'self as driving force'. As evidenced in the quotations below, the students were adamant that their future life trajectories lay in their individual hands – each individual was to be the 'architect' of her/his own destiny. And in this way, their comments are also representative of Gen Ys robust belief that their future is in their own hands (Muller, 2006).

It depends mostly on what THEY choose. [original capitalisation] (ARIA 1 Female)

The future is what you make it whether you're male or female. If you want something bad enough you will push yourself to get it. (ARIA 1 Male)

I think it depends on what they make it ... Again, it depends on how willing they are to strive for achievement – the opportunities are there. They must be willing to take them. (ARIA 2 Female)

They can choose their own future. (ARIA 2 Male)

They do what they like, they follow their dreams. (ARIA 3 Female)

Depends on their choices I believe. (ARIA 3 Male)

It really depends on the plans of that person. (ARIA 4/5 Female)

You make your future. (ARIA 4/5 Male)

In conjunction with their take-up of neoliberal discourses and, more specifically, its imperative of individualisation, the students demonstrated a firm familiarity with equal opportunity rhetoric. These young people were highly conversant with the language of such rhetoric and most saw boys and girls as having equal opportunities today (see Yates & McLeod, 2007).

Gender – and any influence it might serve to bear on their futures – was viewed to be irrelevant, and particularly so given the (perceived) climate of equal opportunity. As evidenced in the data presented here, these young people engaged with equal opportunity rhetoric and firmly embraced neoliberal discourse in doing so.

I think that girls are already branching out to careers that females weren't really pictured for being in and I think our society promotes that you can do whatever you like no matter what gender you are. (ARIA 1 Female)

[Girls] have exactly the same opportunities as boys. ...[Boys have] the same as for girls. You go to uni, finish a degree, get a job and earn money. (ARIA 1 Male)

[The future for girls is] the same as boys, what does gender have to do with it. (ARIA 2 Female)

Equal opportunity. (ARIA 2 Male)

Equal opportunities are available for both genders. (ARIA 3 Female)

Girls have the same opportunity as boys. I don't believe it is any different. (ARIA 4/5 Female)

Finally, so strong was their engagement with equal opportunity rhetoric that some students appeared dismayed – and indeed miffed – by the very existence of survey questions which implied that gender may in any way influence their future lives. Two males were particularly strident in their view with regard to this issue. The first of these two young men responded in such a way as to question the researchers and to label them as "idiots": "What are you talking about, idiots?" (ARIA 4/5 Male) The second, commenting on what he perceived to be sexism on the part of the researchers, took the researchers to task: "Shut the fuck up about this sexist shit. It is the same if we treat them the same. This is quite invasive, in my opinion." (ARIA 4/5 Male)

5 CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the data presented here illustrates that the Gen Ys surveyed had, overwhelmingly, taken up a neoliberal position. They had bought into the dominant imperative of individualisation. In this way, they had positioned themselves as – or indeed aspired to be positioned as – the actor(s) of their own lives, the author(s) of their own biographies. It was the case that they sought to construct themselves as active individuals who were the subjects of choice and aspiration, and to "enterprise themselves" (Fitzsimmons, 2002, p. 3). In doing so, they demonstrated many of the qualities commonly associated with Gen Y, and in particular, the robust belief that their futures lay in their own

– individual – hands. Furthermore, they were highly conversant with equal opportunity rhetoric and appeared to buy into the principles espoused by such rhetoric.

And while there is much to rejoice in about a generation of young people who demonstrate a robust belief that their futures are in their own hands, and who are seemingly ready to 'take on the world' in these new neoliberal times, it is also important to acknowledge the uncertain nature of such an undertaking – particularly as it comes to be played out in these unstable new times. For those concerned with and responsible for the well-being of young people, and indeed those charged with the brief of guiding them in mapping out their future life trajectories, it is important to recognise that the "'do-it-yourself biography' is always a 'risk biography' ... and one that can quickly become a 'breakdown biography'" (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001, p. 4) and the implications of this for young people need be considered and imparted to them.

Further, it would appear that all involved in the education of young people in these new times have a vital role to play in equipping them with the skills and attributes required for success in such times. And it is the case that Gen Y, and indeed those who will follow them, must demonstrate the capacity to plan for and adapt to changing, unstable times; to organise, set goals and improvise; to recognise obstacles, overcome defeat and try again; and to demonstrate initiative, tenacity and flexibility (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001). Such are the demands of these neoliberal times – these times marked out by the precarious freedoms they offer – in which young people live. And these young people will indeed need to be robust if they are to avoid becoming the victims of the very individualism which they have seemingly so strongly committed themselves to.

Finally, while we may be buoyed by the young people's take-up of equal opportunity rhetoric, and their understanding that males and females have equal rights today (in law at least), their dismissal of the possible influence of gender upon their lives may nonetheless give cause for concern. For if the theories regarding the impact of neoliberalism on lives – as connected to life trajectories – as purported by prominent researchers such as Beck, Beck-Gernsheim and Rose are found to be correct, then these young people, in all their unrelenting optimism, may be seen to have underestimated the extent to which the 'biography-of-possibility' is constrained in very real ways by structural factors such as gender. They may have taken up the rhetoric of equality but, in doing so, under-considered that this rhetoric is most often not supported by a reshaping of social practice and that, as such, social inequalities persist between men and women and may impact upon their lives in tangible ways (Beck & Beck Gernsheim, 2002). Clearly, there is a role to play as educators and others concerned with the welfare of youth in alerting young people to the continued existence of such inequalities and the impact these may come to bear upon their imagined – and desired – futures.

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