Choice and its Consequences: Young Women and a Life of Choices

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Introduction

It's fascinating looking at the different choices young women of the post-1970s generation are making. Some marry, some have children, some do both, and others don't do either. Some prioritise career and travel, others pursue their education, and some do all of the above. Although we each make different choices depending on our circumstances, we all seem to work from a similar foundation. Like a level of understanding and relating represented by a common thread that weaves through our different life stories. We live a life of choices in the same times, but through different circumstances. Young women and a life of choices, a life of choices and consequences (Journal entry - 17th of July 2008).

In this paper, which emerges from my Honours research project, I will discuss the subjective constructions of a life of choices by a small group of young women aged in their 20s through the method of a focus group interview. As a young woman aged in her 20s, I am situated, reflexively, in relation to the nature of the choices young women imagine they are able to make about key elements of their lives. I am interested in exploring this life of choice under the themes of relationships/marriage, reproduction, education, career, consumption and lifestyle, through the interpretations of these young women. The theme found to be most prominent in the data was that of a life of choices and consequences; discussed predominantly in conversations about relationships. This theme will be used to briefly explore the views and experiences shared by the young women in the focus group discussion.

A life of choice? Bauman’s Liquid Life and Young Women

The past four decades have been characterised by profound cultural, economic and technological changes. The key areas of decision making in a young woman's life, it seems, are increasingly characterised by new forms of
individualised choice; accompanied by individualised responsibilities for the consequences of choices made. Prominent sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2005) suggests that these changes, choices and responsibilities can be understood through his metaphor of liquid modernity: a liquid life is one in which we are able to make choices, and in which we experience the joy, exhilaration, possibilities, anxieties and uncertainties that accompany these choices. Young women of the post-1970s generation (Wyn and Woodman 2006) – a concept that assists to develop an understanding of the lives, and life experiences of a group of young people born after 1970 through a sociological and generational consciousness – can be understood as a population that lives a life that is profoundly shaped by these choices and their consequences. In their 20s young women are involved in making choices that are highly consequential for their immediate lives, but also for their futures and the hopes and dreams they might have for them.

I have adopted Wyn and Woodman’s concept of post-1970s generation (2006) to enable a discussion of the role that the idea of generation can play in analysing the life circumstances of different groups of people. Generalisations of generation are not without their problems, but such a concept provides me with a useful means by which to explore and interpret the ‘patterns of life’ (Wyn & Woodman 2006: 495) that shape, and are constructed by, these young women through the choices they make about key elements of their lives. Recently the concept of generation has experienced a resurgence of sorts in academic, policy and media commentary. Throughout Australia, the United Kingdom and America the likes of Foot (1996), Howe and Strauss (2000), and Sheahan (2005) have referred to those born after 1970 as Generation Y and Generation X, Generation Hex, The Lost Generation and Millennials (Wyn & Woodman 2006).

For the purpose of my research, I have identified the post-1970s generation as comprising both generations X and Y (ABS 2006b: 3). Characteristically generation X has been referred to by social commentators as the ‘Options
Generation’ (Mackay 1997). Members of generation X are claimed to keep their ‘options open in all aspects of [their] lives, ‘choosing’ to postpone long-term commitment in favour of short-term goals and stop-gap measures’ (Huntley 2006: 7). Rebecca Huntley (2006: 16) argues that for generation Y ‘[f]reedom and uncertainty are the yin and yang of the Y world. Choice, options, flexibility are the buzzwords for this generation… [t]hey value difference, diversity and change in all aspects of their lives’. For many commentators, these characteristics are reflective of the social and political circumstances in which young people of the post-1970s generation are constructing their lives. Hugh Mackay (1997: 138), for example, argues that this time is ‘one of the most dramatic periods of social, cultural, economic and technological development in Australia’s history: the age of discontinuity, the age of redefinition, the age of uncertainty’.

The element of choice that I have identified as a key concept in the lives of the young women of the post-1970s generation can be understood to constitute a metanarrative in an age of ‘manufactured uncertainty’ (Giddens 1994). In the Twenty First century narratives of choice may be conceived as evidence of liberal democratic governmentality that is increasingly prevalent in processes of the ‘individualisation’ of the self (Beck 1992). Young women of the post-1970s generation are representative of Ulrich Beck’s (1992) choice making, self reflexive, self regulating, and autonomous beings, increasingly held to be responsible for their own biographical narratives.

Bauman (2005: 1-5) has developed a metaphor of liquid life to describe a life and ‘a society in which the conditions under which its members act change faster than it takes the ways of acting to consolidate into habits and routines’. Bauman argues that a ‘liquid life is a precarious life, lived under conditions of constant uncertainty’, as a consequence of the individual’s ‘freedom to choose’ and make decisions regarding every detail of their daily life. In this paper the concept of a liquid life provides a provocative framework for understanding the social context in which young women of the post-1970s generation live a life characterised by
choice. However as Bauman cautions, a liquid life, or the life of a chooser, is a mixed blessing. The ‘range of choices is wide and the volume of possible new experiences seems infinite’, but ‘[t]hat life is fraught with risks: uncertainty is bound to remain for ever a … nasty fly in the otherwise tasty ointment of free choice’ (Bauman 2000: 87).

For Bauman liquid life is ‘consuming life’ (Bauman 2005: 9) and the central character of liquid life is homo consumens: ‘[a]ll human beings are and always were consumers…’ (Bauman 2005: 82). The construction of one’s identity becomes another way of exercising an individual’s ‘consumer freedom’ (Bauman 2005) amidst the range of choices provided by a liquid life. In this respect young women of the post-1970s generation may, indeed, exemplify many of the characteristics that Bauman identifies in his figure of homo consumens.

According to Bauman (2005: 82) homo consumens is judged and evaluated in the social setting of a ‘society of consumers’, where she/he is characterised ‘mostly by their consumption-related capacities and conduct’. He argues that this is done in a liquid fashion through speed, excess and waste. Bauman (2005: 3) adopts the analogy of a running race to emphasise the pace at which individuals must ‘run… just to stay in the same place and away from the rubbish bin’ of excess waste and ‘used-by expiry dates’. In what follows I want to suggest that this analogy hints at the risks, uncertainties and consequent anxiety that young women of the post-1970s generation may experience in deciding upon key elements of their lives.

In conversation: Four young women and a focus group
The remainder of this paper will be used to introduce the focus group data and the young women who have provided it.

Liamputtong and Ezzy (2005: 2) maintain that ‘qualitative research draws on an interpretative orientation that focuses on the complex and nuanced process of
the creation and maintenance of meaning’. In the research I report on here I invited members of my personal networks aged in their 20s to participate in a semi-structured focus group interview. I relied on the trust and reciprocity that characterised existing relationships between the participants and myself, and my, imperfect, sense of the lives that these young women live, to generate rich, detailed and complex research data about the key themes (Liamputtong and Ezzy 2005).

As a young woman of the post-1970s generation who shares the theme of a life of choice with the focus group participants, I required a methodology that would enable me to incorporate my own interpretations in my research. The tradition of ethnographic enquiry was one method for doing this. Fetterman argues (cited in Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005: 165) that ‘since the ethnographer is interested in understanding and describing a social and cultural scene from the emic (an insider’s) perspective, he or she is both storyteller and scientist’. To account for the reflexive element of my position as moderator and participant in the conduct of the focus group, I have employed the method of ‘journal keeping’ as a means to represent my voice (Crang & Cook 2007; Eisenhart 2001; Hammersley & Atkinson 1989; Vickers 2007). For example, on July 15 I wrote in my journal:

*The concept of young women and a life of choice is everywhere. There’s so much talk about generations, and particularly the change in social conditions relating to women specifically. Like women having more choice regarding if they want to get married, have children, build a career, or stay at home, and women now being able to be more financially independent. Also, the theme of freedom, the idea of having the choice, the freedom to choose.*

John Law argues (2000: 28) that ‘there is room for the body, for the personal…’ in my research. His theories on ‘the role of the personal’ support my situated embodiment (see also Haraway 1991, Harding 1993) in the research discussions conducted in the focus group along with the interpretations of Kate, Lisa and Sarah.
Amy

My reflections on my experiences as a young woman of the post-1970s generation have been kept on a daily basis in my journal since April 2008. In one passage on May 1 I wrote the following to try and make explicit some of the things I was thinking/experiencing in encountering and shaping the themes that would structure my research:

*I am a young woman in her 20s who is, I feel, living a life of choices through the decisions I have made regarding, mainly, education, career and relationships. A life of choices... Young women discussing their own life of choices in general conversation. It’s a beautiful, free, yet terrifying thing. Here in this journal I record the interferences, the interactions, the complexities and the multiplicities ... It’s an almost endless list of possibilities in a life of choices. A liquid life, where every choice determines a new beginning, which leads to a succession of endings. Where nothing’s ever fixed, we’re in constant flux, a constant state of transience, constant reinvention of the Self, our reflexive Self.*

Kate

Kate has just turned 30, and in the last three years she has made the decision to raise a child on her own, move back home with her parents, and give up her independent and very social life. As a young single mother of the post-1970s generation, Kate’s circumstances may reflect aspects of the lives of other young women in Australia today. Kate’s life has taken a major turnaround since she fell pregnant 3 years ago:

*I didn’t decide to fall pregnant with Jack, he just happened to come along and I went, cool, I’ll deal with this right now. It’s been a bit of a struggle for the last 3 years, and that includes when I was pregnant.*

Lisa

Lisa was selected as a focus group participant primarily for her interpretations as a young woman in her early 20s who has chosen the traditional constructs of marriage and motherhood above other life pursuits. Lisa says:

*I find that I’m the odd one out among my peers because I was early to get married and have kids. Sometimes I think that people almost look down on me or think that I missed out on things and that it’s like well, too bad for you, you missed out on the career thing because of the choices you’ve made.*
Sarah
The youngest of the focus group participants, Sarah values her freedom to choose the kind of life she would like to live. In making decisions about key elements of her life, including relationships, children and career, Sarah is not firm about whether they are choices and decisions that she will maintain for now, or forever:

It’s not important to me now if I’m not in a relationship at 21. I kind of avoid it a little bit. Maybe part of the reason why I think about getting married later rather than earlier is the whole forever thing. I can’t imagine getting married now and it being until I’m like 90 years old or something (she says this with a look of horror on her face).

A Life of Choices and Consequences
In the remainder of this paper I want to briefly sketch a key theme that emerged from the focus group discussion. For much of the conversation we reflected on the relationship between choices and consequences.

“No choice is without consequence”, said Kate. This was a point of deliberation for all the women, whether the topic was relationships, reproduction, or clothes shopping. In making one decision, they were compelled to face another as a consequence of the choices they made. Kate agrees with “doing everything you can without causing too many drastic consequences”. It was at this point in the discussion that the idea of choice, and the consequences of their choices, became a prominent topic for the women. When comparing generations Sarah says:

Mum had a career before she met my dad. I think she gave it up to be a stay at home mum. I think she saw her place as being the mum at home, but in the end I don’t know if that was the best choice for her because of the consequences to the rest of her life.

In my own reflections, I later recounted in my journal:

Today I am particularly conscious of the choices I have made in my life, which have got me where I am now. Particularly the choices I’ve made recently, they’re
choices that I’ve been deliberating on regarding their consequences for a while. Choices and consequences, this was a theme that I felt was all encompassing in the focus group. Why? Because the other girls at first were not conscious that they were making choices all the time. When this was brought into their awareness through the focus group, they suddenly became hesitant about their choices, and making changes to these choices, given the consequences that could unfold (Journal entry – 19th of July 2008).

Guilt and uncertainty were key aspects when discussing a life of choices and consequences. Sarah admitted:

I’m saying stuff that’s a part of me now, but it might not really reflect how my life actually goes. When making choices you sort of think, should I? Shouldn’t I do this? A lot of the stuff I said isn’t really definite, and I just don’t really know.

A common theme discussed between the young women was that having children can completely change the kinds of choices you make in your life. The emotive conversations that arose from this area of choice in a young woman’s life reflected the transition from a life of choices about ‘me’, to a life of choices about ‘us’, and how this drastically alters the decision making process. However, although two of the focus group participants had chosen to have children in their 20s, they were adamant that they could still hold a career of their own, while trying to incorporate some time for themselves without any dire consequences. Lisa says:

Since deciding to have the two kids, your whole life becomes them and your focus is everything to do with them and for me it’s remembering yourself. Like you can spend all morning making sure they’ve had their breakfast and you’ve barely got time to brush your hair, which is the case more often than not. But sometimes you have to stop and think, no, hang on a minute, I’m important too.

Kate agrees:

To be quite honest I like being able to go and buy a new pair of jeans or a new pair of shoes, it actually makes me feel good about myself. I think that’s really important. I want to be comfortable and not be put into that single mother category who lives off ‘stinkylink’ (Centrelink). It’s important for me to go, well I’m successful and Jack hasn’t gone without anything by the choices I’ve made. That’s just a personal thing.
Discussion

I did not conduct this research with the purpose of using this data to prove or disprove a particular hypothesis. My aim was to explore the lives of the young women of the post-1970s generation through their individual interpretations of a life of choice. Bauman’s ideas about a liquid life provide me with a conceptual framework for thinking about the lives of these young women within their social, political and economic circumstances. What emerges from this brief analysis is a sense that Bauman’s life of a chooser is indicative of the kind of life experienced by young women in their 20s. The data generated through the focus group discussion has, I suggest, encapsulated many of the possibilities, risks and uncertainties contained in Bauman’s concept of a liquid life. Through these interpretations of a life of choice it seems that young women of the post-1970s generation may live a life of choices; but a life of choices can also constitute a life of consequences, and this can impact on the hopes and dreams they might have for their futures.
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**Recorded Focus Group Interview:**

Pseudonyms have been used to keep the identity of the participants anonymous; excluding the researcher who is identified by her original name).

SARAH – (Participant: Focus group interview, 4th July, 2008)

LISA – (Participant: Focus group interview, 4th July, 2008)

KATE – (Participant: Focus group interview, 4th July, 2008)

AMY – (Researcher/participant: Focus group interview, 4th July, 2008)