A Postfeminist Generation:
Young Women, Feminism and Popular Culture

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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my father Philip Robinson.
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Statement of Authentication

This thesis is submitted in order to fulfil the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the School of Social Sciences at the University of Western Sydney.

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any form for another degree at this or any other institution.

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“Not completely, but sort of”: I am feminist to an extent

“Yes, I am a feminist”

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Feminism ≠ Equality?

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Synopsis

The under-theorisation of the concept of generation within feminism has led to negative and unproductive disputes. In the heated generational exchanges of the 1990s, feminists were cast according to age into opposing sides: old or young, mothers or daughters, second wave or third wave. These categories are limiting and the conflict harmful for feminist politics. In order to avoid these pitfalls, a theoretical framework is developed that draws on the work of Karl Mannheim and postfeminist cultural analyses to elucidate the significance of popular culture in marking a generation. This framework then enables an examination of the way feminist discourses are played out in popular culture and helps explain young women’s complex engagement with feminism.

This thesis brings together interviews with young Australian women and an analysis of two television programmes that exhibit postfeminist characteristics: *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives*. It examines the ways in which young women critically engage with these texts and explores popular culture as an arena where feminist discourses are contested. The era is characterised as postfeminist because of the entanglement of feminism with popular culture, but it is also marked by the intersection of equality feminism with a neoliberal emphasis on individualism. Within this context, second wave feminist discourses of equality have slipped into the rhetoric of choice, which has important implications for feminist theory. The pervasive sense of choice and opportunity circulated by these discourses obscures the structural limitations that continue to affect women’s lives and demand that women make the “right” choices, build a successful career, find a suitable long-term partner, and become a good mother.

This thesis mobilises postfeminism as a valuable analytical concept that can be used to characterise the current generation of young women, not simply because they have grown up after the height of second wave feminism, but because the prevailing discourses of this historical moment reflect both a continuity with, and a challenge to, earlier feminist debates. The mainstreaming of many feminist ideas and their reflection in popular culture provides the conditions for new forms of feminism to emerge.
Chapter One: Talkin’ About My Generation

What disturbs me most is the prospect of a generation gap emerging in our agenda.

– Anne Summers (1994)

We sat at the table howling with laughter. “It’s a dialogue between generations,” said Angela Z-, wiping away the tears.

“It’s not a dialogue,” I said, blowing my nose. “It’s a fucking war”.


Why Generation?

Contested sociological definitions, as well as popular understandings that fall easily into cliché and stereotype, make ‘generation’ a slippery term. The generational conflict that was sparked in Australia by feminist writers Anne Summers (1994) and Helen Garner (1995) in the 1990s often succumbed to finger-pointing and misunderstandings. These infamous generational debates began with Anne Summers’ “Letter to the Next Generation”, which was first published in Refracting Voices (1993) and later as a chapter in an updated edition of her celebrated feminist text Damned Whores and God’s Police (1994). She outlined her disbelief that young women “did not feel as drawn to the movement to increase women’s opportunities” as she had been (1994: 506). Her comments ignited a public debate about the meaning and relevance of contemporary feminism, young women’s engagement with it, and opened up a dialogue centred on the notion of a generation gap. In the fiery debates that ensued, second wave feminists lamented the apparent lack of young feminists or bemoaned the direction in which young women were taking feminism (Garner 1995; Faust 1994). Mark Davis (1999a: 84) argues that established Australian ‘Baby Boomer’ feminists such as Helen Garner, Beatrice Faust and Anne
Summers portrayed themselves as the mothers of feminism while declaring the unsuitability of young women to continue the feminist tradition. Young women were accused of not appropriately carrying on the feminism that the ‘Baby Boomer’ generation had established. In retaliation, young women published texts proclaiming the significance of feminism in their lives (Bail 1996b; Else-Mitchell and Flutter 1998; Trioli 1996). In the introduction to her edited collection of essays, DIY Feminism, Kathy Bail (1996a: 4) argues that “feminism, like most other ‘isms’, has become an institution ripe to challenge. It’s an ideology that has been integrated into the education system, social welfare departments and other bureaucracies. Indeed, it’s one of the most successful political movements of this century”. Her book declares that feminism is important for young women, but stresses that the meaning and appearance of feminism has changed, thus contributing to the fiery generational discussions.

Feminist circles are not the only places where the rhetoric of generation generates heated and impassioned public debate. Generational rhetoric is a tool the media like to pick up regularly. For example, in 2004 the Sydney Morning Herald published a somewhat patronising opinion piece that portrayed young people as apathetic and more interested in watching television than saving the planet (Neville 2004). In response, a twenty-three year old woman pointed out some of the reasons why young people today do not have time to protest, accusing ‘Baby Boomers’ of being greedy and blaming them for making it virtually impossible for young people to enter the property market (Persson 2004). Both articles make generalisations and blame opposing sides of the ‘generational divide’ for various social ills. Mark Davis (1999) labels this kind of negative stereotyping and conflict, “generationalism”: public debate framed by a generation gap of resentment, blame and misunderstanding. Recent Australian publications point to the ongoing prevalence of generationalism. Ryan Heath (2006) angrily pits ‘Generation Y’ against ‘Baby Boomers’, arguing that it is time for the older generation to move out of the way. Authors Rebecca Huntley (2006) and Kate Crawford (2006) have written books that, while not as irate or inflammatory as Heath’s, highlight the importance of generation as a social category. The media interest in these books attests to the ongoing attraction to generational conflict. I am reluctant to fall into the trap of generationalism, so I must spend some time outlining what it is about generation that I find interesting and worthy of
attention. Why talk about generations when it is so easy to slip into reductive analysis?

My interest in generation is threefold. My fascination with generations arose out of an examination of the feminist generational discussions that erupted in Australia, the US and the UK in the 1990s. When I began this project, I continually came across books and journal articles dealing with the idea that differently aged feminists misunderstand one another. Repeatedly, I would find texts claiming that fierce tensions divide younger and older feminists, or that a new wave of feminism was emerging. My curiosity about what women my age think about feminism is long-held, but my interest in it as a research topic was solidified when I began investigating the way feminism approached generational issues. Had women my age really forgotten about feminism, as Anne Summers (1994) suggests? Do young women “recoil in horror” (McRobbie 2004b: 258) at the thought of feminism? Or is there a ‘new generation’ of feminists – have we entered the era of third wave feminism, as claimed by publications from the US (Findlen 1995; Heywood and Drake 1997b; Walker 1995)? These questions, among others, were my “way in” to this research. While I was frustrated with the over-simplification that characterised many of the debates, there was something about generation that caught my imagination. In trying to make sense of the literature, I became more and more interested in the notion of generation. I recognised that there was something significant about generational difference and generational change that needed to be explored. Why does the concept of generation seem to cause so much friction amongst feminists? Are the tensions due to a lack of clarity surrounding the concept of generation itself?

My second motivation for entangling myself with the concept of generation came out of a desire to find a model that more usefully theorised processes of generational change. I was fascinated by why generational debates created so much heated discussion and became increasingly frustrated with the limitations in theoretical understandings of generation. I wanted to better understand the specific social and historical contexts that had led to such passionate misunderstandings between younger and older feminists. I was compelled to explore the possibilities of the concept of generation, not to categorise and stereotype people into age groups, but to
help make sense of this historically specific moment and how it might differ from other historical contexts.

Related to this point, perhaps an extension of it, my third reason for wanting to investigate generation as a concept emerged out of a realisation of the generational specificity of popular culture. While reading Tara Brabazon’s (2005) compelling book about ‘Generation X’ and pop culture, I was continually struck by how few of the texts and fads I recognised. As a member of so-called ‘Generation Y’, I am too young to remember or be nostalgic about the cultural icons and fads that Brabazon defines as belonging to ‘Generation X’.¹ Brabazon’s book highlighted for me the role that popular culture plays in shaping a generation. With these thoughts in mind, I set out to uncover the dominant discursive paradigms shaping the current generation of young women, via interviews with women aged eighteen to twenty-three and an exploration of the cultural texts that they consume. How does popular culture work to mark and reflect the present historical moment? I conducted empirical research in order to unveil and elucidate some of these issues.

The broad questions I had about generation sparked further queries about generational change. I wanted to find a way to theorise generation to better understand the way feminisms have changed and to throw light on the relevance of feminism for young women. I felt as though generation did make a difference – that growing up in a particular era would inevitably impact upon a person’s attitudes and aspirations. I became impelled to enquire whether there might be more productive ways of exploring generational difference. But I was concerned about the stereotypes and blanket generalisations that characterise much of the generational debates. As Mark Davis (1999a) claims, generationalism occurs when a particular age group are blamed for the social ills of a period. When feminist discussions become punctuated by generational metaphors, we often get caught up in reductive abstractions that obscure both the diversity of feminisms and the complexity of generational change.

By adopting the concept of generation I do not wish to categorise and stereotype

¹ In popular jargon, generations are delineated according to birth year in cohorts approximately fifteen to twenty years long. For instance, Baby Boomers are typically considered to have been born between 1945 and 1959; Generation X, 1960-79; and Generation Y, 1980-1995.
people into age groups, but to try and make sense of this historically specific moment, and how it might differ from other historical contexts. My thesis sets out to find a way to investigate generational differences within feminism and among women, without resorting to simplistic age-based stereotypes.

In declaring the importance of feminism in the lives of young women, Virginia Trioli (1996: 50) argues that the “generation above had managed to instill in young women a profound and unshakeable belief in the fundamental tenets of feminism, but they had made the tag unbearable”. The level of acceptance of the label ‘feminist’ amongst young women plays a crucial role in the feminist generational debates. Anita Harris (2004) suggests that the Australian feminist debates about the future of feminism were characterised by the argument that young women were not appropriately carrying on the feminist tradition. She argues:

it was assumed that young women were silent on key feminist issues either because they felt they already had everything, or because they were too deeply troubled to find a feminist voice. If they were perceived as articulating feminist principles, they did not express these convictions in appropriate ways, being either too absorbed in risk and victimhood or mistaking feminism for simply reversing sexual objectification and having a laugh. (Harris 2004: 135)

The generational discussions about young women and feminism have not been limited to Australia. For instance, British feminist Angela McRobbie (2004a: 258) suggests that today’s young women ritually denounce feminism, “which in turn suggests that one strategy in the disempowering of feminism includes it being historicised and generationalised and thus easily rendered out of date”. The fear of the death of feminism is a strong theme within the feminist generational literature worldwide. McRobbie’s concern about the way young women seem to disavow feminism strikes a similar chord to Anne Summers’ speculation that young women are not committed to the feminist cause.

The debates from the 1990s thus provide the backdrop to my dissertation. More recently, arising from these generational debates is a body of literature that explores
how today’s young women are negotiating their relationship with feminism (Budgeon 2001; Bulbeck 2000; Hughes 2005; Rich 2005). It is within the context of discussions about young women’s engagement with feminism that my research questions emerge. I set out to contextualise the current generation of young women via an examination of the dominant discourses they draw upon. Catharine Lumby (1997) outlines the huge impact that feminism has had on Australian public life since the second wave. She argues that feminism has become institutionalised, in that it has become strongly entwined in public spheres – the media, academia and government (1997: 157). It is within this socio-cultural climate that the young women at the centre of my study have grown up. With feminism an institution within our society, how can we theorise young women’s engagement with it? And how can we make sense of the shifts within feminism without assuming it is no longer relevant to young women? My thesis undertakes to answer these questions.

Paralleling the Australian debates, discussions in the United States about the “next wave” of feminism have emerged, framed by similar generational rhetoric. Third wave feminism is a phenomenon that arose in the US – a label for feminists born in the 1960s and 70s (Renegar and Sowards 2003: 330). In an analysis of third wave anthology Listen Up (Findlen 1995), Allison Howry and Julia Wood (2001) identify four common themes that characterise third wave feminism: “(a) Resisting negative social messages about women, (b) recognizing connections and building collective identity, (c) claiming voice, (d) continuing to invest personally in the feminist struggle” (Howry and Wood 2001: 326). They also go on to point out that in many ways third wave feminism offers a continuation of second wave politics and thought, but with more of a focus on inclusivity and multicultural issues (2001: 333). Third wave authors are often criticised for portraying the second wave rather narrowly. The third wave often depicts second wave feminists as zealous, angry and lacking in a sense of humour (Bailey 1997: 22). While third wave writers, particularly those who published in popular anthologies, have been criticised for inadequately representing the goals and practices of second wave feminism, their arguments often parallel shifts that occurred within academic feminism. Devoney Looser (1997: 35) suggests that third wave writers tend to be sceptical of the notion of universal womanhood and “purport to interrogate race, nation and sexuality more thoroughly than did the second wave”. Generational rhetoric is a significant component in the discussions of
third wave feminism. My thesis aims to contextualise the emergence of “new forms” of feminism and interrogates the usefulness of the wave metaphor to mark generational change.

I am concerned with the over-simplification that generationalism brings to bear on feminist analysis and debate. I tread a fine line between being critical of generational rhetoric and wanting to demonstrate the importance of generation. I intend to show that generational rhetoric is only limiting if we do not conceptualise it historically. Generational differences are important and real. I am proposing in this thesis that there is something significant about generational difference – about historically specific contexts – that shapes us as individuals and contributes to common understandings about gender and feminism. This thesis engages with feminist generational debates and sets out to broaden the way generation is theorised. It avoids a reductive approach towards researching generational change by applying the theoretical work of Karl Mannheim (1952b). As Everingham et al. (2007) point out, and as I have argued elsewhere (Robinson 2008) Mannheim’s work on generation can benefit feminist discussion by providing a clearer understanding of how generations operate. I propose in this thesis that generational position is significant in shaping attitudes to women’s role in society and in influencing the kinds of feminism that emerge. Drawing upon Mannheim’s theory of generation, which says that a person’s outlook is influenced by the major socio-political currents of his/her youth, my research examines how popular cultural texts might similarly mark a generation. Popular culture plays an integral role in my understanding of generation. My thesis explores how certain cultural texts come to act as markers of a generational moment and provide us with insights into the dominant discourses of an epoch.

The influence of popular culture on women’s subjectivity has been extensively explored, but my research sets out to establish a link between popular culture and feminist theorising on generational change. I adopt a two-pronged methodological approach, comprising interviews and a cultural analysis, in order to ascertain the discursive paradigms shaping this generation of women. I conducted a series of interviews with forty-one Australian women aged eighteen to twenty-three. I set out to examine young women’s beliefs about feminism and their aspirations for their futures, to gain insight into the way they are positioned generationally. I asked them
about their perceptions of feminism and about their favourite forms of popular culture. Because feminists have identified career and motherhood as key areas where gender issues are played out, my interviews involved discussions about young women’s aspirations regarding work, family and how they imagine they will combine the two. In this way I aim to uncover the ways in which this generation envisage the opportunities and limitations facing them. The interviews also examined the extent to which young women draw upon feminist discourses to make sense of their experiences and aspirations.

To complement the interviews, I carried out an analysis of two television programmes popular amongst young women: *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives*. Popular texts help illustrate this particular moment in time because they are generationally and historically specific – they can tell us something about this era and the discourses available to young women when they talk about themselves and their futures. This thesis is concerned with uncovering the dominant cultural currents that are informing the beliefs and ambitions of this generation. A discourse analysis of *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* was conducted in order to examine the ways in which feminism is negotiated in popular culture and to uncover how popular female characters might navigate the same issues and tensions facing this generation of women.

In setting out to develop a more adequate way of theorising generation, my thesis explores and develops the concept of postfeminism. I use the term to deepen our understanding of the way generational context shapes women’s lives, their aspirations, their struggles, and their perceptions of feminism. My understanding of postfeminism is twofold. I suggest that postfeminism aptly describes the socio-cultural climate that women are experiencing – a moment in history that has been strongly influenced by discourses of second wave feminism. In addition, my use of the term postfeminism encapsulates the notion that new forms of feminist theory and practice have emerged since the height of the second wave. My broadening of the definition of postfeminism offers a way to get beyond generationalism, towards a deeper understanding of the processes of social change. The concept of postfeminism gives us insights into the aspirations of the current generation of young women, their struggles and their perceptions of gender. The mobilisation of this concept enables
me to develop the central argument of my thesis that there is indeed something specific about the cultural conditions shaping the worldview of today’s young women that marks them as a generation. My analysis of key cultural texts clearly demonstrates how popular culture and feminist discourses have become intertwined, not only shaping the subjectivity, or consciousness, of young women today, but also providing the conditions for new forms of feminism to emerge.

In a thesis about generational change and women, there is something to be gained from thinking about the motif of the matryoshka doll. Without wanting to extend the mother-daughter metaphor too far, I want to briefly consider the image of these famous Russian nesting dolls, which so neatly encapsulate the concept of female generations. Matryoshka dolls reflect the overarching themes that my thesis explores – the overlapping and interconnected nature of generations of women. The dolls can symbolise mother-daughter relationships, with each doll emerging from inside its mother. But they also have broader generational significance, alluding to generations of intertwined feminisms. A row of differently sized dolls, each with a relationship to its neighbour, is an appealing analogy in a thesis about feminism and generation. The matryoshka plays a further symbolic role in my thesis, in terms of my methodology. The image of the matryoshka conjures up the unwrapping of layers, uncovering what is underneath, what is inside. The peeling away of layers, the attempt to reveal things about particular historical contexts and how they are connected, is what motivates my study.

A central concern of this thesis is establishing a framework that allows us to better understand the intricate, multi-layered ways in which postfeminism and popular culture are intertwined. According to Jane Arthurs (2003: 87), “part of the problem for academic feminism is to develop arguments that capture the complex contradictions of postfeminism in popular culture”. My dissertation attempts to develop such an argument. In doing so, my aim is to lay the foundation for a more productive and useful conceptualisation of postfeminism, one that reveals the complex ways in which postfeminist discourses shape the current generation of young women and contextualise the present historical moment. How can postfeminism help to situate the current generation of young women within a historical context? Can postfeminism be mobilised to better understand the
relationship between popular culture and feminism? Postfeminism, as a concept, helps make sense of the opportunities and contradictions facing this generation of women. Focusing on the concepts of generation and postfeminism this thesis interrogates the relationship between historical context, popular culture and understandings of feminism. It investigates the way feminism is intertwined in popular representations of women in *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* and explores how these cultural texts mark the era as postfeminist.

**Overview**

Chapter One presents the background to the research project, introduces the major themes and outlines how each chapter feeds into the thesis as a whole. Chapter Two explores the limitations of current feminist theory around the concept of generation, highlighting the prominent debates and drawing attention to the drawbacks of succumbing to generational clichés. I seek to develop a theoretical framework that moves away from the restrictive mother/daughter and second-wave/third-wave metaphors that characterise much of the feminist discussion of generation. I employ the work of Karl Mannheim (1952b) to redress this deficiency, arguing that he provides a way to broaden our theoretical understanding of generation, one that goes beyond reductive and simplistic stereotypes. Mannheim’s work on generation is influential and offers useful ways of getting around some of the pitfalls of generationalism that have beset the arguments within feminism, which often fall into a reductive ‘us versus them’ rhetoric. Following Mannheim, my conceptualisation of generation is not familial, but socio-historically constructed. I argue for the need to acknowledge differences in theoretical and political positioning as products of particular historical moments, rather than as a conflict between mothers and their daughters, or as one generation pitted against the next.

Jane Long (2001) criticises the feminist debates for invoking generation too simply as an explanatory framework. She argues that the reductive nature of the debates tends to “obscure the diversity of feminisms, and their historical fluidity”. In outlining the debates surrounding the rhetoric of “generational cleavage”, she points to “the limitations of an insufficiently contextualised generational vocabulary” (2001 website: n.p.). My thesis aims to redress the problems associated with the
generational debates within feminism by providing a richer vocabulary for explaining and exploring the workings of generation; one that is not reduced to simplistic binary divisions based on age or stereotypes. To help broaden our generational vocabulary, Chapter Three examines the contested and contradictory ways in which postfeminism is currently employed. There is no agreed upon definition of postfeminism. Rather, it is a term with multiple and diverse definitions. I point out the strengths and limitations of these definitions and establish my definition of postfeminism. Instead of simply debating the benefits and pitfalls of the concept of postfeminism, as much of the existing literature does, my thesis mobilises the term in order to explore the connections between popular culture, generation and young women’s relationship with feminism.

In Chapter Four I consider my own position as a feminist researcher and set out the methodological components of my research. I outline the motives behind my bifurcate research method, explaining my approach of bringing together interviews with women and a cultural analysis of two popular television programmes. The primary research conducted for this project involved interviewing young women about their attitudes towards feminism, and asking them about their aspirations for work and motherhood. I also questioned them about their engagement with popular culture. Feminist cultural studies literature about the significance of popular culture plays an important role in the theoretical underpinnings of my thesis. In particular, Amanda Lotz’s (2001) work on “postfeminist attributes” in cultural texts provides the starting point for my consideration of postfeminism in popular culture. Building upon the postfeminist characteristics that Lotz identifies, I develop a coherent method for analysing Sex and the City and Desperate Housewives; a method that uncovers connections between the principal themes of my interviews and the dominant discourses of the series. In analysing the popular texts I examine the feminist and postfeminist discourses that are circulated within them and look at how they relate to generational differences in understandings of feminism.

Chapters Five, Six and Seven present my empirical findings. In furthering my exploration of the way popular culture marks a generation, Chapter Five delves into an examination of popular television programmes Sex and the City and Desperate Housewives. In my analysis, I mobilise theoretical understandings of postfeminism
integrated with ethnographic material, to demonstrate the ways in which cultural representations resonate with the experiences of young women. Incorporating excerpts, quotes and descriptions of specific episodes, and drawing upon Amanda Lotz’s (2001) “postfeminist attributes” as a way of organising my empirical data, I consider the postfeminist characteristics of Sex and the City and Desperate Housewives. Yet, unlike Lotz and other postfeminist cultural researchers, I incorporate an investigation young women’s engagement with these texts in order to more deeply understand the connections between popular culture and generation, and to gain insights into young women’s relationship with feminism. In doing so, I establish popular culture as a site where feminism is circulated and contested.

In Chapter Six, I continue to outline the analysis of two popular television texts. I investigate how the texts reflect and navigate the dominant tensions and struggles facing contemporary women, further elucidating the characteristics of the postfeminist era and how they are affecting young women. My analysis reveals how young women feel about the choices, opportunities and pressures they face, compared with previous generations. In order to shed light on the relationship between popular culture and generation, I explore the ways Sex and the City and Desperate Housewives speak to the dominant experiences facing young women, reflecting as well as informing the way they see themselves and their position as women growing up in a postfeminist climate. I examine the social expectations women face and delve into the contradictions of growing up in a world where the dominant rhetoric promises limitless choice.

A strong theme in the feminist generational discussions is the question of whether young women consider themselves feminist or not. Building upon my investigation of the way socio-cultural context shapes a generation, Chapter Seven examines young women’s relationship with feminism. I explore the feminist discourses that are circulating and investigate young women’s reaction to them. I examine the extent to which young women take on, or deny, a feminist identity. Having grown up after the height of the second wave, I question how this generation imagines feminism. I examine the way generational location, historical context, as well as differences within a generation play a part in the way feminism is understood. I further elucidate the characteristics of the current era and investigate the overlapping nature of
feminism with neoliberal discourses of individualism and choice, and the way they shape this generation’s relationship with feminism.
Chapter Two: Theorising Generation – Popular Culture as a Marker of Generation

Feminism and Generation

Numerous scholars have examined the way generational tensions are enacted within feminist debates. Let me begin with an overview of the conflict that initially attracted my interest to generational issues within feminism. Astrid Henry (2004a: 3) suggests that generational discussion typified 1990s feminism. In Australia in the 1990s, a series of debates erupted between feminists of different ages. The discussions were sparked by the words of two prominent second wave feminists, Anne Summers (1994) – with her publication of a Letter to the Next Generation, and Helen Garner (1995), in her book The First Stone. In both of these texts young women are admonished for not adequately continuing the feminist tradition. Summers wonders where young feminists are, while Garner is unimpressed with the way two young women dealt with sexual harassment at their university. The publication of these texts generated heated responses from younger women who published texts defending their feminist credentials and declaring the importance of feminism in their lives (Bail 1996b; Else-Mitchell and Flutter 1998; Trioli 1996). They articulated versions of feminist praxis that they proclaimed were new and different from earlier stages of the women’s movement. These publications give voice to a diverse range of young women who claim to be the “next generation” of feminism. Anthologies such as DIY Feminism (Bail 1996b) and Talking Up (Else-Mitchell and Flutter 1998) from Australia, attested to the existence of young feminists and proclaimed that feminism had changed since the second wave women’s movement. Virginia Trioli’s (1996) book, Generation F, published in response to Helen Garner (1995) suggests that feminism is alive and well in Australia and that young activists continue to combat women’s ongoing social and economic disadvantage. An edited collection of essays, Bodyjamming (Mead 1997) explored sexual harassment and feminism in the wake of media hype surrounding Garner’s book.
Paralleling the debates in Australia, in the 1990s in the United States a number of popular texts ignited debates about “new feminism”. Anita Harris (2001) makes a distinction between three strands of the “young feminist” genre. North American authors such as Katie Roiphe (1993), Naomi Wolf (1993) and Rene Denfeld (1995), who published mainstream feminist texts in the 1990s, represent the first, categorised by Harris as “power feminism”. These authors claim that established feminism perpetuates a damaging victim discourse for women. For example, in her book *Fire with Fire*, Naomi Wolf (1993) criticises feminism for promoting a victim mentality and offers what she terms “power feminism” as a strategy to counteract victimhood. The work of these writers portrays second wave feminism as anti-sex, humourless and proscriptive, something that young women need to challenge. Although they are sometimes classified as being a part of third wave feminism, their brand of feminism is quite different from those who self-label as third-wavers. Catherine Orr (1997: 34) labels Roiphe, Wolf and Denfeld as “feminist dissenters” because they wrote books that sought to challenge the feminist status quo in the United States.

The second category outlined by Harris (2001) is “Do-It-Yourself” and “Grrrl Power” feminism, articulated in anthologies such as Kathy Bail’s (1996) *DIY Feminism* and in the dissemination of underground ‘zines’ and punk music. Contributions to Bail’s (1996) edited collection come from a diverse range of young Australian women and paint a picture of the ongoing commitment to feminist issues. The third category Harris identifies is third wave feminism, exemplified by self-proclaimed third-wavers such as Rebecca Walker (1995), Barbara Findlen (1995) and Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake (1997b). Third wave feminism is a phenomenon primarily associated with the United States, where a number of publications attest to the importance of feminism to young women. These young feminists proclaim a new kind of feminism, one that is characterised by diversity and contradiction and which builds upon previous generations of feminist work. The notion of a distinct new “wave” is more prominent in the US than in Australia, but the conflicts are not dissimilar and they necessarily bear upon the generational rhetoric that is so central to my thesis. Third wave is an ambiguous term that has been used to describe multiple approaches to feminist praxis (Kinser 2004). Despite the imprecise nature of the term, “third wave” has become a ubiquitous part of the feminist lexicon, often used interchangeably with the concept of generation. While I
am hesitant about the use of the wave metaphor, it is clear that new kinds of feminism – feminisms that young women can relate to – have emerged. According to Anita Harris (2004), in response to narratives of personal choice and responsibility that proliferate in the current climate, new forms of resistance have arisen. She points out that “new times both regulate and constrain young women in unprecedented ways, which unleashes unforeseen techniques of critique and resistance by them” (2004: 183).

Australian feminist Sarah Maddison (2003) examines contemporary feminist activism in her doctoral thesis. Her research involves case studies of two groups of young feminist activists and deals with processes of collective identity. One of Maddison’s chief arguments is that conflict within feminism is a crucial element that keeps the women’s movement alive and vibrant. Maddison’s goal is similar to my own, in that we both aim to move away from generationalism, when that means unproductive and simplistic stereotyping of feminists according to their age. Maddison’s study sheds light on the role young women play in a “broadly conceived women’s movement” and uncovers the types of activism that young women are practising. While Maddison uses social movement theory to throw light on the way young women take up feminism, my research is aimed at developing a more complex way of theorising generation itself.

Maddison’s thesis offers some parallels with mine, however we differ in our approach to understanding contemporary feminism. I am less inclined to use the terms “women’s movement” or “third wave” to define the current period or to explain feminist activism. I argue in this thesis that postfeminism is a useful way of delineating between generations and that, despite the pockets of activism, uncovered in studies like Maddison’s and my own, there is not a broad sense of a movement of women behind feminist activists. In Ann Curthoys’ (1997: 208) terms, “the sense of a common project has gone”. I approach the wave metaphor differently from Maddison. While she proposes that we are currently “between-the-waves”, I have reservations about the wave analogy, finding it restrictive and contributing to the mother/daughter, us/them mentality that besets much of the generational discussions.
Maddison suggests conflict is a necessary and productive aspect of feminist discussion. She argues that “[c]onflict in social movements is too often misunderstood as being an indication of a movement’s impending demise rather than as important, reflexive work that allows movements to renew themselves in order to maintain their relevance in changing political opportunity structures” (2004: 250). Like Maddison, I recognise the importance of dialogue and debate between feminists for challenging concepts and breaking down barriers. I understand that debate often provides the impetus for the feminist practice to continue. However, when the discussions become mired in outright conflict – a war between opposing sides – they become less than productive. Numerous feminists have highlighted the ways in which conflict can be debilitating for feminism, especially when it is mired in mother/daughter rhetoric.

The wave metaphor is problematic, according to Astrid Henry (2004a), because it bundles feminists together into one of two groups. She argues that the debate becomes reduced to dyadic generational rhetoric, under which feminists are cast as either second or third wave, which slips easily into mother or daughter. Henry’s compelling book examines the way:

the mother-daughter relationship is the central trope in depicting the relationship between the so-called second and third waves of U.S. feminism and how the employment of this metaphor – or matrophor – has far-reaching implications for contemporary feminism. (Henry 2004a: 2, original emphasis)

Henry is not alone in pointing out the problems with the mother-daughter metaphor in discussions of third wave feminism. Feminist academic attention to the third wave is abundant and diverse in its appraisal (for example: Drake 1997; Fixmer and Wood 2005; Gilley 2005; Howry and Wood 2001; Mack-Canty 2004; Orr 1997; Waring 1997; Kinser 2004). The arguments surrounding third wave feminism parallel the problems associated with the simplistic use of generation in the Australian debates. Numerous feminist authors have expressed concern about the limitations of the wave metaphor for feminism. For example, Stacy Gillis and Rebecca Munford (2004: 176) argue that feminism is paralysed by the wave paradigm because it casts generations into antagonistic categories. They suggest that the wave metaphor perpetuates the
backlash against feminism and threatens feminist progress by constructing harmful generational conflict.

Much of the criticism levelled at third wave feminism is centred on the way the debate is framed as an antagonistic clash between generations. Academic literature critiquing third wave publications is critical of the way feminist conflict operates when it is based on mother/daughter rhetoric (Detloff 1997; Bailey 2002; Spongberg 1997; Driver 2006; Siegel 1997b; Henry 2004a; Drake 1997). Deborah Siegel (1997b: 65) stresses we must get away from “narrative scripts in which the second wave necessarily becomes the bad mother and the third wave the bad child” (65) if feminism is to move forward. Stacy Gillis et al. (2004: 3) also argue that feminism mired in mother-daughter conflict disables productive and meaningful conversations. Jennifer Drake (1997) wants to move away from the binaries of mother/daughter and teacher/student that are inherent within the debate, arguing that it is counter-productive to continue with generational hostility because it disallows real feminist debate and cooperation. Drake (1997: 98) suggests:

Rather than thinking of feminist generations or waves only in terms of an age-based mother/daughter, teacher/student divide – more binary thinking – it seems productive to consider how these terms suggest feminist movements understood as changing, informed by particular locations, and specific struggles.

Here, Drake pinpoints one of the major problems with the generational debates as they have been played out so far. A lot of attention is paid to age-based differences, yet little research in the feminist generation literature adequately comes to terms with the socio-historical contexts that influence the emergence of different kinds of feminism. My study undertakes to redress this problem.

Madelyn Detloff (1997) is another scholar concerned with generational conflict within feminism, particularly within an academic context. Detloff articulates the problems associated with mother/daughter debates and argues for the need to recognise that they operate via destructive emotional processes. She delves into psychological and philosophical understandings of mother-daughter relationships to
try and make sense of the way intergenerational tensions are played out within the feminist academy. She calls for us to acknowledge the psychological structure of generational conflict, arguing that women within the feminist academy often parallel the dialectical model of mother versus daughter. A painful and complicated process of “contempt”, she argues, structures this relationship. Her essay begins with a description of generation-based debates that took place at a National Women’s Studies Association conference in the United States in the 1990s. The heated discussions mirror quite closely those that erupted in Australia – older feminists claiming that feminism is not being appropriately remembered or thanked by young women and young feminists expressing anger at being conflated with conservative backlash politics and excluded from the organisation of the conference (Detloff 1997: 77-78). These tensions highlight a familiar pattern in the generational debates.

Borrowed from work by author Alice Miller, Detloff (1997: 86) uses the term “contempt” to explore the ways in which older and younger feminists relate to one another. She argues that because each side identifies with the other, when criticised they feel personally attacked. Her work criticises the male model of individuation that exists within the academy, arguing that this perpetuates a process whereby an individual must discard the work of a predecessor in order to rise through the ranks of academia (1997: 81). Detloff suggests that this negative process of individuation, where progress within the academy is made by attacking and dismantling previous work, breeds an unhealthy power dynamic and damages intergenerational dialogue (Detloff 1997: 83). Her compelling and theoretically insightful essay points to many of the problems associated with conflicts between younger and older feminists, the way contempt structures the dynamics of feminist generational debates. She argues for the need to get beyond such emotional negativity and insists that feminists recognise this “contemptuous dynamic” and resist it in order to build a feminism not based on conflict.

Detloff’s examination of contempt between older and younger feminists is paralleled by Elspeth Probyn’s (1998) discussion of “ressentiment”. Probyn also considers the harmful effects that can arise from generational debates. Both Detloff and Probyn clearly highlight the emotional and debilitating effects associated with mother/daughter squabbling. While Probyn’s approach differs from mine, in that she
finds the concept of generation limited, her insights into the problems with generational discussions are useful for my purposes. She argues that debates based around generational metaphors are rife with conflict and searches for a way of reading the tensions. She draws upon work by Wendy Brown (1995) who examines the concept of ressentiment. Probyn (1998: 131) asserts that pitting two categories against one another is typical of the processes of ressentiment. Generational discussions within feminism become “circles of suffering and blame” (1998: 132). Ressentiment characterises the power-play and antagonism of the feminist generation debates.

Both Detlof and Probyn make clear that fierce intergenerational debates have painful effects that can become paralysing for feminist discussion. My research thus begins with the assumption that intense generational conflict is unproductive for feminism. As demonstrated above, existing feminist work on generation relies on unhelpful mother-daughter conflict, failing to adequately theorise the way socio-historical context structures women’s relationship with feminism and contributes to their understanding of gender. Rigid stereotypes and hostile encounters beset much of the existing work on feminism and generations, highlighting the need for a more rigorous theory of generation. This thesis aims to establish a way of theorising generation that can get beyond resentful discussions and unproductive in-fighting.

The work of Karl Mannheim informs my theorisation of generation. His theory allows me to demonstrate a way beyond the processes of contempt and ressentiment that Detlof and Probyn outline.

Cathryn Bailey (2002: 152) argues that feminists should “approach the table, not as mothers and daughters, but as peers with different strengths and weakness”. Familial understandings of generation are widely criticised for not allowing productive debate on actual feminist issues. Yet, little sociological or feminist work has been done on how to get beyond biological conceptions of generation and how generational position structures an individual’s perceptions and political outlook. The debates rely on age as a category worthy of discussion and pinpoint it as a site of major difference between feminists, yet more theorising needs to be done on how a person’s age affects their understanding of the world and informs their political outlook. In feminist discussion on generation, little attempt has been made to understand how
the socio-cultural atmosphere of a given historical context comes to influence the kinds of feminism that emerge. My research is concerned with providing a framework that helps clarify processes of generational change and highlights how the socio-cultural climate shapes young women’s expectations for their own lives.

**Importance of Historical Context**

In popular understandings of generations, the boundaries of each generation vary depending on which author or commentator you read. Widely used generational labels are defined in fifteen or twenty year blocks, chronologically following one another. For instance, ‘Baby Boomers’ are those born after WWII (1945-59), ‘Generation X’ are 1960-1979 and ‘Generation Y’, 1980-1995. As mentioned earlier, there are problems with this conceptualisation of generation. Obviously there are not going to be stark differences in the experiences of, for example, someone born in 1979 and someone born in 1980. The notion of generational cusp (Waring 1997: 299) is useful to keep in mind here. Like astrological star-signs, which describe personality type based on birth month, generation is often summoned in a similarly simplistic way to assign characteristics to a group of people according to birth year. Generational cusp, the idea that individuals might embody characteristics from more than one category, or fall in between generational demarcations, is a useful way of remembering that generations are not distinct, homogenous categories and that there is room for overlap.

Generation need not limit and categorise people according to their age. Indeed, I remain deeply sceptical about generational labels. However, as a way of locating individuals in a historically specific moment, generation is a theoretically useful concept. To give depth to my understanding of generation, I enlist the help of Karl Mannheim, whose essay “The Problem of Generations” (1952b) is, according to Jane Pilcher (1994), an undervalued contribution to sociology. His theory can get us beyond reductive stereotyping and cliché, and towards a more complex understanding of generational change. Mannheim’s theory is firmly focused on the importance of socio-historical climate. He argues that the dominant cultural currents in an era influence individuals, particularly during their formative years, and contribute to the formation of the consciousness of a generation. For Mannheim,
generational location acts similarly to class, in the way it connotes an individual’s location in the social structure (Pilcher 1994: 485). Contemporaneity is conceived by Mannheim as a subjective condition experienced by those who are exposed to the same dominant influences at the same age (Pilcher 1994: 486).

Jane Pilcher (1994: 483) points out that in much academic work there is confusion over the terminology of ‘generation’. The distinction between a ‘cohort’ and a ‘generation’ is often unclear. Pilcher suggests that Mannheim uses generation in the sense of cohort – that is, he is referring to “people within a delineated population who experience the same significant event within a given period of time” (Pilcher 1994: 483). Often, though, generation is used to refer to familial kinship bonds, or parent-child relationships. Kertzer (1983) also makes clear the ambiguities associated with delimiting a generation in sociological studies, outlining how different understandings of generation are often used interchangeably or simultaneously. I follow Pilcher (1994) and Everingham et al. (2007) in their adoption of Mannheim’s distinction between biological and social generations.

Mannheim acknowledges the significance of biology in the processes of generational change, but manages to avoid falling into simplistic familial categories. He elaborates a theory of generation that moves away from the genealogical. For Mannheim, “the sociological phenomenon of generations is ultimately based on the biological rhythm of birth and death. But to be based on a factor does not necessarily mean to be deducible from it, or to be implied in it…The sociological problem of generations therefore begins at that point where the sociological relevance of these biological factors is discovered” (Mannheim 1952: 290-291). Pilcher (1994) proposes the concept of “social generation” as a way of distinguishing between biological relationships, and those who happen to be born within the same socio-historical circumstances. Mannheim (1952: 290) suggests that the cultural landscape that each generation encounters in their youth shapes their perceptions of the world. He argues that individuals who “share the same year of birth, are endowed…with a common location in the historical dimension of the social process”. Mannheim’s interest in the relationship between history and the individual can be seen in this attention to the importance of the formative years. He argues that historical consciousness is shaped by the socio-political events that occur during youth and that
person’s view of the world is largely determined during their formative years; their political beliefs are shaped by the dominant social currents of the era in which they grew up (1952: 298). Life experiences in an individual’s formative years tend to combine into a natural view of the world and “all later experiences then tend to receive their meaning from the original set” (1952: 298). Individuals can and do change their views over their lifetime, but the new ways of thinking engage with conceptual framework established during youth. For Mannheim, the prevailing social and political influences of a person’s youth provide the blueprint for an ongoing political outlook.

As Vern Bengston et al. (2002: 22) note, Mannheim highlights the significance of external historical influences during the life-stage when individuals are most susceptible. His understanding of the relationship between society and the subject can therefore offer insights into the emergence of new forms of feminism that are relevant to young women who have grown up in an era when feminist discourse is well established within academia and popular culture. As Beth Schneider (1988: 13) makes clear, women who grow up in different eras are bound to experience different problems: “young women do face different problems than those of the 1960s generation since the movement has been successful in many ways; their expectations differ with regard to work, relationships, and domestic life”. The great strength of Mannheim’s approach is that it makes clear that it is not simply that the problems are different. Rather, in different eras, young women are exposed to different discourses that are available for dealing with those problems.

Another limitation of generational conflict as it plays out within feminism is that it relies on the establishment of separate, uniform categories. Mannheim’s theoretical framework for understanding generation avoids slipping into the notion that generations are discrete or homogenous entities. His conceptualisation avoids obscuring diversity by recognising and making room for differences within a generation, which he calls “units”. Mannheim argues that generations are stratified into “generation units”, comprised of people who interpret and respond to events differently, even though they experience the same historical circumstances. As Mannheim (1952b: 306) states, “within any generation there can exist a number of differentiated, antagonistic generation-units”. The notion of units is significant in
making clear that not all women of the same age will share political beliefs. Even though generational units may not share the same worldview, they form a generation because their views are formed in dialogue with one other (1952b: 307). On the surface this seems like a simple point to make, however the generational debates within feminism are fraught with age-based generalisations that characterise generations as homogenous categories. As Beth Schneider (1988: 7) suggests, “[i]n contemporary terms, Mannheim might view profeminist and antifeminist women as representing generational units, as women responding to one set of material and historical conditions in uniquely different ways”. Mannheim’s conceptualisation of units helps us to recognise that feminists hold different, sometimes opposing views, even if they happen to share the same generational location. This more complex notion of generations broadens the generational discussion beyond the rigid definitions of second-wave/third-wave or mother/daughter metaphors.

Mannheim’s conceptualisation of units is crucial for deepening our understanding of generations and recognising the diversity within them. It ensures we do not become seduced by generational rhetoric that characterises generations as undifferentiated, homogenous categories. The recognition of diversity that Mannheim’s theory of generation promotes also parallels shifts within feminist thinking. Rosemary Pringle and Sophie Watson (1992) point out that a feminist politics of difference recognises the importance of race, class, education and other elements in informing an individual’s standpoint. They argue that “[o]ur subjectivity will have been formed within a multiplicity of discourses, many of them conflicting and contradictory…Rather than seeking a politics based on ‘unity’, we can move towards one based on respect for the differences of others, and on alliances with them” (1992: 69-70). It is this recognition of difference that informs both my feminism and my understanding of generation.

It is worth remembering the gender blindness of much work in the area of generation. Previous studies drawing on Mannheim’s theory have examined the problem of generation, such as Robert Laufer and Vern Bengston (1974); David Kertzer (1983); Michael Corsten (1999). Others have focused on collective memory, for example Schuman and Scott (1989) or Larry Griffin (2004). Few studies have adopted Mannheim to address generation in relation to gender, women or feminism.
Beth Schneider (1988) and Jane Pilcher (1994, 1998) are two exceptions. Schneider (1988: 5-6) criticises the lack of scholarly work examining women in relation to political generations and argues that Mannheim’s theory of generation is particularly influential in sociology. Schneider suggests that “an examination of the ways in which distinct generations of women have come to view their lives and the contemporary women’s movement can further consideration of their collective consciousness and perhaps forge the questions necessary to redirect considerations of political change more generally” (Schneider 1988: 6). Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge, according to Pilcher (1994: 482) is a “theory of the social or existential conditioning of knowledge by location in a socio-historical structure”. Mannheim’s work makes clear that “individuals both constitute historical configurations and are constituted historically by them” (Pilcher 1994: 490). This “dialectical relationship” was a key concern of Mannheim, and is crucial to my study.

Social theorists Karl Mannheim and Michel Foucault both explore how particular human thought systems are structured in specific historical instances (Hekman 1986: 180). In showing how strands of their work can be linked, I establish the foundations of my theoretical approach to generation and discourse. This section deals briefly with the sociology of knowledge, situating Karl Mannheim (1952b) and his work on generation. I draw upon the writing of Susan Hekman (1986) in order to make clear that Mannheim’s work continues to have relevance and resonates with the work of Michel Foucault, particularly in their shared attention to how knowledge and discourses are historically specific. Both thinkers develop an anti-foundational philosophy that is concerned with the relationship between human thought and human existence. Although writing at different times and with quite different projects, both writers strive to understand how particular human thought systems are structured in specific historical instances (Hekman 1986: 180). Karl Mannheim’s (1952a) Sociology of Knowledge is concerned with locating ideologies in an historical context. Similarly, Michel Foucault’s (1972) Archaeology of Knowledge, as well as his genealogical method, aim to uncover discourses in historically specific ways. I draw their work together in order to develop a valuable framework for theorising generational and for investigating the discourses that shape a generation.
There are similarities in Mannheim’s model of ideology and Foucault’s understanding of discourse. Both theorists move away from Marxist notions of ideology. Susan Hekman (1986) argues that Mannheim breaks away from foundational conceptions of ideology. Instead of seeking to unveil our true nature as previous examinations of ideology had done, Mannheim analyses “the relationship between knowledge and social existence” (Hekman 1986: 64). Mannheim proposes two concepts of ideology: the ‘partial’ and the ‘total’. To explain the distinction, David Kettler et al. (1984) offer the example of an analyst reading a newspaper editorial. The analyst who adopts the ‘partial’ concept of ideology would try to uncover the motive behind an article “welcoming a certain measure of unemployment as an incentive to productivity” (Kettler et al. 1984: 66). A ‘total’ analysis would investigate “the ideological context which gives meaning to such concepts as ‘unemployment’ and ‘productivity’ and the social and historical roots of this ideology” (1984: 66). This understanding of a ‘total ideology’ has a lot in common with a Foucauldian discourse analysis. As Ann Brooks (1997: 49) notes, Foucault’s concept of discourse allows us to examine what is said in relation to the specific socio-historical circumstances surrounding it. A Foucauldian discourse analysis of the same editorial would be concerned with exposing discursive practices, uncovering the relations of power and knowledge that provide the circumstances for concepts like unemployment to emerge. Foucault and Mannheim then, both seek to understand how certain ideas are possible within a given historical situation. But Foucault gives us the concept of discourse to help examine the historical conditions via a discourse analysis.

Foucault argues that a discourse “is, from beginning to end, historical – a fragment of history, a unity and discontinuity in history itself, posing the problem of its own limits, its divisions, its transformations, the specific modes of its temporality rather than its sudden irruption in the midst of the complicities of time” (Foucault 1972: 117). Furthermore, he argues that a ‘discursive practice’ is not simply the act of an individual speaking, expressing an idea, but rather, it is a system of rules, governed by the period and influenced by social, economic and geographic factors (Foucault 1972: 117). In a similar way, Mannheim is concerned with understanding the way history and knowledge are intertwined. Kettler et al. (1984) argue that one of Mannheim’s unique claims is that ideologies are cognitive structures that are
productive of knowledge. Mannheim does not see ideologies “as built upon some conception of human nature; instead, he stresses their conceptions of historical development and of the relationship between knowledge and action” (Kettler et al. 1984: 61). It is here we can see strong parallels with Foucault whose genealogical method explored the connections between thought and practice. Foucault discovered “that discourse and practice form a unity that structures both knowledge and power relationships” (Hekman 1986: 175).

By drawing together aspects of work by Foucault and Mannheim, my research stresses the importance of recognising that knowledge is always historically and culturally specific. As Pilcher (1994: 492) notes, although Mannheim’s insights are theoretically useful, he does not provide guidelines for how empirically to investigate the dominant cultural currents of an era. I therefore pick up Foucault’s concept of discourse to analyse the ways in which cultural currents are shaping young women’s worldviews. However, a discourse analysis alone is not enough to analyse popular culture in relation to gender. Therefore, I also draw upon the concept of postfeminism to shape my theoretical and methodological approach. I want to explore the possibilities of postfeminism as a theoretical tool for examining the way popular texts shape a generation and inform the discourses available to young women when they discuss their lives and aspirations.

**Pop Culture as a Marker of Generation**

In conducting research for this thesis I came across an episode of *Sex and the City*\(^2\) that clearly positioned me as a twenty-something member of ‘Generation Y’, in contrast with the lead character Carrie and her ‘Generation X’ friends. The episode revolved around Carrie’s exploration of whether men in their twenties were the “new designer drug” (1998, Series 1: Episode 4). Carrie and her young date leave one of their usual bars and move to a club for people in their twenties. In an exciting moment of pop cultural recognition, when watching them enter the bar I could identify the music playing in the background. My recognition of a song by rock band the Dandy Warhols, and later a track by Australian band Morphine, marked me

\(^{2}\) An analysis of *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* is presented in Chapters Five and Six.
clearly as a member of ‘Generation Y’. I belonged to the younger crowd. The music playing in the ‘young’ bar visited by Carrie in her pursuit of younger men was my music. The crucial importance of popular culture in marking out generations suddenly became clear to me. Popular culture, along with other historical factors, is a prominent force in shaping generational consciousness.

My recognition of the importance of popular culture in shaping generation was further underscored when I read the work of Tara Brabazon (2005) who explores the significance of popular culture and Generation X and offers valuable insights into the way generation and culture are intertwined. When reading Brabazon’s book, I became intensely aware that popular culture is generational. I am not attempting to delimit a generation solely by the cultural products they consume. Rather, I am making the point that popular cultural texts can mark a generation in similar ways to other prevailing social or political currents. Tara Brabazon’s (2005) book *From Revolution to Revelation* is pertinent to my study because it makes clear how popular culture connects with real people’s lives. Her focus is on using popular culture to make sense of history and the present, an approach that resonates strongly with the goals of this thesis. Brabazon discusses how cultural studies can forge new ways of linking up with cultural history – using popular culture as a “conduit” (2005: 67). She does this via an examination of cultural texts and fashions associated with Generation X. In doing so, she provides insights into the way generation and popular culture are intimately linked. Brabazon criticises both Cultural Studies and History for neglecting to engage with one another as disciplines. She sets out a model for Popular Memory Studies, which aims to overcome the divide between the disciplinary approaches. Her discussions highlight the transience of popular culture, and made clear to me that popular culture can shape a generation, in similar ways to major socio-historical events (such as the Vietnam war, or the destruction of the World Trade Centre in September 2001). Her work opened up a way for me to amalgamate my research into generation with an analysis of cultural texts, since generations are marked by the popular culture they consumed in their youth.

Brabazon defines her Generation X in terms of a twenty-year cohort:

Those born between 1961 and 1981 have endured many (post) youth cultural
labels, from slackers to the chemical/blank generation and baby busters. Yet there has been no systematic study of the literacies and popular culture that are the basis of – and for – this imagined and imagining collectivity (2005: 2).

This notion that popular culture forms the foundations of a collectivity, a shared sense of identity, is what I aim to uncover in this thesis. Reading about the cultural icons of Brabazon’s Generation X, it became clear to me that I am a member of a different generation. I may have been born on the cusp between Gen X and Gen Y, but when Brabazon discusses the significance of Punk or Cyndi Lauper or shoulder pads for Generation X, I feel as though they are “before my time”. I might understand the references to Wham or Ray-Ban sunglasses, but I do not identify with them – I was not there. These are cultural icons of her era, not mine. When I read her work, rather than feel nostalgic, I feel young. These pop cultural moments belong to Gen X, not to Gen Y, not to me.

Discussing Gen X’s media literacy, Brabazon argues that pop culture produces a language that allows a generation to make sense of their experiences: “[t]he entertainment discourse forms a language and iconography to understand the paradoxes, unfairness and inequality emerging through a (supposedly) liberal democracy” (2005: 21). Similarly, a major concern of this thesis is exploring the ways in which popular television programmes reflect the discourses and experiences of today’s young women. My concern with generation and popular culture has similarities with Brabazon’s desire to construct a methodology or discipline that is receptive to the strengths of both cultural studies and history. One of the primary aims of Brabazon’s book is to bridge the gap between History and Cultural Studies (2005: 47). While my research is not based in, nor informed by history as a discipline, my approach (influenced by Foucault and Mannheim) is cognizant of the importance of historical specificity. Mannheim’s work makes clear that the dominant intellectual and cultural currents of a particular period shape an individual’s understanding of themselves and their world. I suggest that popular culture is also generationally important. It both reflects and influences the period in which it was created. Extending Mannheim’s theory of generation, popular texts can help us
understand the consciousness of a generation. Cultural texts are an integral part of the prevailing intellectual and socio-cultural currents that Mannheim wrote about.

Another researcher who stresses the interconnection of popular culture with generation is Jonothon Oake (2004) who argues that popular culture created the very concept of “Generation X”. He argues that Generation X, rather than a group of people, is a form of subjectivity constituted by the media. In other words, before its mediated representation, Gen X did not exist. A generation is thus defined by its relationship to popular culture. For Oake, media hysteria over the term Gen X had the effect of producing a subcultural subjectivity for Gen Xers. Films especially, were influential in disseminating what Generation X was supposed to look like. Films released in the 1990s such as Slacker, Clerks and Reality Bites, were targeted at middle-class white youth and were combined with an “alternative” music soundtrack. He suggests that traditional approaches that make a distinction between ‘subculture’ and ‘media’ is untenable in the case of Generation X.

Oake (2004: 96) positions Reality Bites as a film that was actively engaged in constituting a Gen X identity. For Oake, the accuracy of such representations is beside the point, because the film works to construct the very identity of Gen X. In other words, its characters represent what it meant to be a young adult in the 1990s, and came to typify the media stereotype of Gen X – the slacker, the apathetic anti-hero with ironic and sarcastic wit. Oake implies that the film Reality Bites represents an archetype of Generation X. I am not seeking to uncover how certain cultural texts might constitute Gen X or Gen Y in the same way that Oake does. Rather, I am concerned with examining popular culture in order to get a better sense of the discourses that are influencing young women’s perceptions and worldviews. I do not explore popular texts in order to uncover the essence, or the truth, of a generation. Instead, I am concerned with how popular culture marks, or shapes, a generation, not by portraying an authentic Gen X or Gen Y subjectivity, but by contextualising the historically specific discourses that are circulating in society.
Conclusion

This chapter has mapped the literature on generation – particularly feminist work – in order to establish how generation has been theorised. Existing feminist literature on generation is mired in mother/daughter rhetoric and lacks a rigorous theoretical framework for understanding processes of generational change. I am uninterested in dividing feminisms into discrete ‘waves’, but there are differences that need to be explored, particularly in light of conflicts that rely on generationalism – simplistic arguments, bickering and stereotypes – and which render feminist discussion ineffective and limited. As Shelley Budgeon (2001: 12) suggests, “[w]hile difference has become acknowledged as one of the most serious challenges facing an increasingly fragmented feminism, the issues of generational or age-based difference remains undertheorized”.

Karl Mannheim’s work provides a complex and theoretically useful approach to the concept of generation. His theory allows an investigation of generations without succumbing to reductive analyses based on simplistic age-based generalisations. My research engages with Mannheim’s theory to propose a new way of conceptualising generation, one that goes beyond generational hostility, to reveal why such tensions erupt and to help make sense of how cultural context contributes to generational difference. As Mannheim (1952b) argues, people of different ages encounter differing socio-political climates as they come of age, meaning the cultural currents that dominate as they grew up shape their understandings of the world and themselves. Popular culture can have a similar effect, reflecting and shaping people’s outlooks and worldviews. Mannheim provides a useful theoretical framework for exploring the concept of generation, but he does not develop a methodology. Therefore, I pick up the tools provided by poststructuralist theory, particularly Foucault’s work on discourse analysis, in order to contextualise the current historical moment. Yet, because these theorists provide little in the way of exploring gender issues my thesis develops the concept of postfeminism to fill this gap.
Chapter Three: Defining Postfeminism

Postfeminism is a controversial term, and not without its definitional uncertainties, however, I argue in this chapter that it is useful for avoiding the pitfalls of generationalism. I aim to understand generational change through an analytical framework informed by the concept of postfeminism. I want to use to the term in two ways. First, postfeminism is a way of generationally situating the women at the centre of my study and describing the current era. This sense of the term recognises that the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s has shaped the current moment in history, without the ‘post’ signifying the death of feminism. Second, my approach to postfeminism encompasses the theoretical shifts that have occurred within feminism, and more specifically, I use it to examine the entwined nature of feminism and popular culture. This approach establishes the usefulness of postfeminism as a concept for understanding both the way women’s lives have changed and how understandings of feminism have shifted. In adopting postfeminism as a theoretical tool – as a lens through which to view contemporary culture, young women and their attitudes to feminism – this chapter feeds into the overarching goal of my thesis which is to explore the significance of generation without succumbing to reductive stereotypes that so often mar feminist dialogue.

Postfeminism is a complex term with multiple, often contradictory definitions. Amanda Lotz (2001), whose work on postfeminist popular culture frames my empirical chapters, argues that “[t]he exceptional variation in understandings of postfeminism, definitions that extend beyond mere variation to opposition, illustrates the need for feminist media scholars to adopt a complicated approach in using the term, one that acknowledges the definitional nuances” (Lotz 2001: 113). This chapter maps out some of the “definitional nuances” of postfeminism in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of the value of postfeminism as a theoretical tool. In order to elaborate my understanding of postfeminism, the chapter provides an overview of the various approaches to the concept of postfeminism and illustrates
how this dissertation frames the term. Postfeminism provides me with tools for analysing specific cultural texts, but more than that, it also helps me to examine how women in this post-second-wave era are engaging with these texts. In this interaction I see a way of identifying and explaining young women’s relationship with feminism.

**Contradictory Definitions**

The multiplicity of meanings ascribed to the term postfeminism generates confusion and debate within the existing literature. As with feminism, there is no single agreed upon definition. Broadly speaking, however, the dominant approaches to postfeminism fall into two categories. Shelley Budgeon (2001) outlines the two major ways in which postfeminism is understood. In examining how young women are constructing their identity in late modern society, Budgeon frames her study within the context of feminist discussions about postfeminism. The first approach refers to authors such as Susan Faludi (1992) who define postfeminism as contributing the backlash against feminism (Budgeon 2001: 12). Budgeon argues that authors who define postfeminism as anti-feminism understand the term to mean that “equality has been achieved” and that “goals are constructed as individual problems and not political ones” (Budgeon 2001: 13). The second approach to postfeminism that Budgeon outlines, and the one she follows, is the more productive understanding of postfeminism, where the prefix does not signify the death of feminism but implies “a process of ongoing transformation” (2001: 14, original emphasis). This definition of postfeminism, she argues, constitutes “a reflexive engagement with the limitations of hegemonic forms of feminism in order to understand how feminism is shifting and evolving” (Budgeon 2001: 14).

Budgeon provides a useful discussion of the contradictory meanings assigned to postfeminism. She says that on one hand postfeminism is framed as an anti-feminist stance in which young women are seen as depoliticised and individualist. On the other hand, postfeminism is used to describe shifts within feminism and offer a critique of hegemonic styles of feminism (2001:14). My interpretation of postfeminism, my use of the term, definitely has more in common with the latter. I do not wish to use postfeminism to mean anti-feminism. However, the first position
that Budgeon outlines retains some merit – particularly regarding the notion of individualism, a discourse which is strong in the current socio-political climate and a common theme in the literature on young women’s engagement with feminism. My mobilisation of the term postfeminism includes elements from both of the positions that Budgeon highlights. Both approaches are relevant to my thesis because they inform the postfeminist discourses that are circulating within society and contribute to the ways in which feminism is understood and represented.

Jane Kalbfleisch (1997) echoes Budgeon in identifying two predominant ways in which postfeminism is positioned. The first, she argues, situates feminism and postfeminism antithetically. The second, influenced by poststructuralist thought, emerged in the 1980s and strives to escape the binary logic of the first through a tolerance of difference (1997: 250). My study is framed in large part by the second approach that Kalbfleisch and Budgeon identify. However, the effects of the first understanding of postfeminism (as anti-feminism or the death-of-feminism) retains an importance for my thesis because, as I will show, it provided the conditions for the emergence of the heated generational debates within feminism and the proliferation of texts in the 1990s that declared the importance of feminism for young women. So, while I do not define postfeminism as antithetical to feminism, I cannot ignore those who do.

Postfeminism is often used to imply the death, or at least the irrelevance, of feminism in contemporary Western society. For example, in her influential book, Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women, Susan Faludi (1992) uses the term “post-feminism”3 to explain a sentiment she describes as indifference towards feminism. She suggests that popular culture asserts a “post-feminist” attitude, which does not mean that feminist equity objectives have been achieved, rather that women today do not seem to be concerned with this agenda, “that they themselves are beyond even pretending to care” (1992: 95). Faludi’s sentiment has led feminism writers such as Shelley Budgeon (2001: 12) and Joanne Hollows (2000: 92) to comment that Susan Faludi equates “post-feminism” with anti-feminism.

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3 The terms “post-feminism” and “postfeminism” tend to be used interchangeably within the literature. I prefer the latter spelling.
Angela McRobbie (2004a; 2004b) echoes Faludi’s understanding that postfeminism represents an undermining of feminism, but she offers a “complexification” of Faludi’s (1992) backlash thesis which touches on the political implications of using the term to mean that feminism can now be taken for granted. Using the term in this way implies that the aims of feminism have been attained, making feminism redundant. As McRobbie puts it, “post-feminism positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force” (McRobbie 2004b: 255). Central to McRobbie’s exploration of the concept of postfeminism is her assertion that, at some level, feminist values have become incorporated into mainstream Western society. McRobbie (2004a) uses the phrase “taken into account” to describe the way feminist ideas have become a common sense part of our culture. For example, she suggests, “we have a field of transformation in which feminist values come to be engaged with, and to some extent incorporated across, civil society in institutional practices, in education, in the work environment, and in the media” (2004b: 5). The phrase “feminism taken into account” is a useful expression in many ways because it illuminates the extent to which feminist thought has infiltrated society and the media. However, I find McRobbie’s sense of feminism as “taken for granted” problematic. She invokes the death-of-feminism metaphor when she argues that “for feminism to be taken into account, it has to be understood as having already passed away” (2004b: 4). McRobbie suggests that the term postfeminism has inevitable negative consequences for use from a feminist perspective.

McRobbie’s approach to postfeminism appears to bridge both evaluations of postfeminism, the productive and the negative, as outlined by Kalbfleisch (1997) and Budgeon (2001). On the one hand, McRobbie (2004a: 256) speaks of “post-feminist inquiry”, referring to the shift in academic feminist theorising towards postcolonial and poststructuralist approaches. McRobbie suggests that 1990 marks a turning point in feminist work, a “moment of definitive self-critique”, when second wave feminism was challenged for its neglect of race. McRobbie also notes that this self-reflexive turn within feminist theory is marked by a shift towards a Foucauldian understanding of power as decentralised and a new focus on bodies and subjectivities.
(2004a: 256). This “emerging politics of post-feminist inquiry” McRobbie (2004a: 256) argues, occurred alongside an increased awareness and representation of feminist issues in the popular media. On the other hand, however, McRobbie talks of postfeminism as a “cultural space” wherein feminism is fervently denounced (2004a: 257). She suggests that popular cultural representations portray feminism as no longer needed, thus making a distinction between two kinds of postfeminism, one academic and one popular. I suggest that McRobbie’s dualistic understanding of postfeminism is problematic and untenable. The operations of postfeminism are more complex and interwoven than this distinction allows. Postfeminism cannot be so easily separated into categories of academic and popular. Rather, postfeminism recognises that, to a large extent, feminist discourses have infiltrated popular culture and my research challenges McRobbie’s claim that “[f]or feminism to be taken into account, it has to be understood as having passed away” (McRobbie 2003).

In an essay exploring the links between postfeminism and popular culture, McRobbie pinpoints a major problem for developing a postfeminist theoretical framework (2004b). She describes the tension that occurs when feminist discourses arguing for the liberation of women resonate with the dominant neoliberal discourses of individual choice. Even though the discourse of individual choice is prevalent in contemporary society, there remain conservative tendencies that would like to see the gains made by women eroded. Postfeminism – meaning feminism as redundant – can therefore be mobilised in support of this conservative agenda. As McRobbie (2004b) argues, postfeminism can be explored “through the double entanglement, that is, the co-existence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life…with processes of liberalization in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual, and kinship relations… and alongside this the co-existence of feminism as at some level transformed into a form of Gramscian common sense, while also fiercely repudiated” (2004b: 4). McRobbie finds postfeminism problematic because, in her understanding, it conjures up the disavowal of feminism. The relegation of feminism to history occurs, she argues, via a process whereby feminist discourse is made to seem common sense. Once feminism becomes “taken into account” in this way, it quickly becomes displaced and rendered out of date.
Entwined with McRobbie’s negative evaluation of postfeminism is her suggestion that young women are not critical in their engagement with popular representations. This raises a number of questions, which my thesis sets out to address. Like McRobbie (2004a), I recognise the influence of postfeminism and popular culture in shaping generational characteristics. However, she seems to slip into generationalism when she suggests young women absorb popular culture uncritically. In exploring the intersections between popular culture and postfeminism, McRobbie raises the spectre of generationalism when she discusses a billboard advertisement for Wonderbra in which feminist criticism of sexist representations is evoked within the image (2004a: 258). McRobbie suggests that while a young audience understands and appreciates the irony of such a politically incorrect image, they are not sufficiently angry about the inherent sexism. She goes on to propose that:

“[t]here is quietude and complicity in the manners of generationally specific notions of cool, and more precisely an uncritical relation to dominant commercially produced sexual representations which actively invoke hostility to assumed feminist positions from the past in order to endorse a new regime of sexual meanings based on female consent, equality, participation and pleasure, free of politics” (2004a: 260).

Her criticism of young women’s engagement with culture intimates that they are complicit in the undoing of feminism. It seems as though McRobbie is implying that young women’s uncritical acceptance of these images leads directly to the downfall of feminism. Her assumption that young women are not critically engaged with what they consume is problematic, not least because it paints young women as mindless dupes. It is damaging because in setting up this argument, McRobbie is guilty of establishing a generational divide. Young women, she suggests, absorb sexist images without thinking. They appreciate the irony of such representations as “cool”, but fail to adequately take up a feminist politics. One assumes then, that it is only older women who possess the ability to critically engage with popular culture and take up feminist positions without hostility. In contrast to the “generationally specific notions of cool”, we must imagine McRobbie has in mind a generationally specific understanding of proper – older and wiser – feminist criticism.
Camille Nurka (2001) provides a compelling discussion of postfeminism. Nurka establishes postfeminism as both the killer of feminism and the anatomist who dissects its dead body. She sets out to explore the “figuration of ‘feminism’ as the corpse/dead matter upon which ‘postfeminism’ performs its autopsy” (Nurka 2001: 177). Nurka’s definition of postfeminism is the popular version – the sense that there is dissatisfaction with representations of earlier feminism. According to Nurka, postfeminism defines itself against 1960s liberation feminism. She aims to expose the duality that is apparent in the construction of postfeminism. In her interesting and visceral article, Nurka explores the ways in which postfeminism defines itself in contrast to the dead body of feminism (2001: 184). Thus, Nurka extends the analogy of the death of feminism that I find troubling in McRobbie’s work.

Like McRobbie (2004a; 2004b; 2003) and others whose work I have discussed, Nurka repeats the negative evaluations of the concept of postfeminism. For example, she suggests postfeminism works to destroy feminism: “In one swift movement,” she argues, “postfeminism both operates literally upon ‘dead’ matter (by ‘killing off’ feminism through the prefix ‘post’), and figuratively kills it again through analysis and critique” (2001: 184). Rather than a killing-off of feminism, I propose that postfeminism represents both a moment in time and an intersection of feminism with other ‘posts’. I find it problematic when authors assume that post as a prefix implies death. The ‘post’ in postfeminism need not imply the demise or redundancy of feminism. I prefer to think of the post as “coming after”, without necessarily meaning that the earlier versions of feminism have been superseded or killed off.

Even though our approaches to the term postfeminism are different, in setting up “postfeminist as anatomist” (2001: 177) Nurka provides a fascinating discussion of the way the generational debates have played out. Indeed, I share some of Nurka’s criticisms of the generational bickering that have taken place within feminism. Nurka paints the picture of a particularly antagonistic strand of postfeminist debate, one that reinforces the concept of a generational chasm between young sexy daughters and their out-of-date asexual mothers. She suggests:

The strategies that postfeminism employs in its postulation of a ‘new brand’ of feminism are primarily directed against the body of 1960s and 1970s
liberation feminism. In this way, postfeminism disempowers its own critique of feminism through the problematic substitution of the ‘liberation feminist’ for the 1990s ‘bad girl’, re-creating the very same monolithic female subject that it sought to destroy. (Nurka 2002: 178)

Nurka makes clear some of the problematic ways in which the generational debates operate, especially in the way a simplistic substitution of one kind of feminism perpetuates the idea of feminism as a homogenous entity. She also highlights the problematic imagery of the mother/daughter relationship that punctuates the generational debates that I outlined in Chapter Two. Nurka suggests that “[t]he postfeminist body is posited primarily as a sexy body, in opposition to the dowdy, menopausal body of the mother” (2001: 187). She is sceptical of the way these generational debates reify age as a significant factor. Nurka makes several important points that are not antagonistic to my own position. In some instances we arrive at the same destination, but our journeys, our “thinking-through” what postfeminism means, are very different.

According to Nurka, “postfeminism and its analytical procedures become definable over and against a very particular and situated feminism” (Nurka 2001: 184). In contrast to Nurka’s approach I do not posit postfeminism as the next feminism or a new movement, that challenges earlier feminisms. Instead, I am interested in mobilising it as a concept that helps elucidate generational differences. I follow Budgeon’s (2001: 24) suggestion that “[t]he pitting of ‘old feminism’ against ‘new feminism’ and the debates about which form of politics is a more accurate representation of young women does not seem particularly relevant to the ways in which they negotiate identities that are inherently contradictory”. My use of the term postfeminism is aimed at getting beyond those old/new distinctions. In my approach postfeminism and feminism are not mutually exclusive, nor does postfeminism represent a break with what some call “older styles of feminism”. It is a term that encompasses all kinds of feminisms, and which invites the possibility of uncovering the contradictions, tensions and opportunities facing this generation of young women.
One major downfall of Nurka’s article is that she does not make clear whom she is labelling as postfeminist. The postfeminism she seems to be referring to is a small selection of online publications from self-proclaimed postfeminists. One example of a postfeminist that Nurka provides is the author of a postfeminist webzine, Susannah Breslin, who establishes a specific representation of 60s feminism as oppressive and doctrinaire; a style of feminism that restricts women’s sexuality and ability to express their femininity (Nurka 2001: 185). Nurka also quotes August Terrier from another article published online (and no longer accessible) in which feminism is depicted as earnest, uncool and un-fun. Postfeminism on the other hand, is sexy, exciting and autonomous. In these envisionings, a stark and unhelpful dichotomy is set up between feminism and postfeminism. If these accounts exemplify postfeminism, then Nurka is right to be critical. These forms of postfeminism raise the conception of generation, but in a damaging way. Antagonistic representations of one generation pitted against the other tend to paper over the social and political aspects of generation that make feminist generational change so fascinating.

In conducting its “post(feminist)mortem”, Nurka argues that postfeminism works to impose certain cultural meanings onto the dead body of feminism (2001: 186). The problem with the postfeminism as death argument is that although it acknowledges that the current generation of young women have been brought up in an era when feminism has been incorporated into mainstream institutions, it suggests, as typified by McRobbie, that feminism is no longer relevant. My formation of postfeminism meaning “after” helps to overcome this negative evaluation of the concept and allows room for an understanding of the socio-historically specific conditions that mark a generation. Postfeminism, for me, is a useful way of delineating generations, and for describing the current socio-historical climate, because it makes clear that feminism has had a lasting impact upon societal attitudes and women’s prospects.

In her book about cultural representations of rape, Sarah Projansky (2001) provides quite a thorough account of the emergence of postfeminism since the 1980s. For Projansky, postfeminist discourses are widespread within popular culture. She argues that it is important to recognise “that the way postfeminist discourse defines feminism is now part of what feminism is” (2001: 13, original emphasis). Projansky argues that the arrival of postfeminist discourses was a reflection of the feeling that
white, middle-class women had succeeded in gaining equality with men, while also a
reaction to multicultural or ‘women of colour’ feminism that was starting to address
the absence of race within much feminist theorising (2001: 15). In Projansky’s
understanding, postfeminism operates to shore up the heterosexual whiteness of
feminism. Her feminism, in contrast, seeks to transform understandings of gender
without ignoring the importance of race, class and sexuality (2001: 16).

In surveying the postfeminist climate of the last twenty years, Projansky (2001: 67)
identifies and labels five categories of postfeminist discourse. These categories help
to make sense of the diverse elements of postfeminist discourse and the way they
operate. She identifies “linear postfeminism” which paints a progressive narrative of
feminism to postfeminism (2001: 69). This is exemplified by accounts in the popular
press that pronounce the success and the death of feminism. A second category is
what she terms “backlash postfeminism” – a style of anti-feminism perpetuated by
writers such as Roiphe (1993), Denfeld (1995) and Wolf (1993). The third category
of postfeminist discourse that Projansky identifies is labelled “equality and choice
postfeminism” – in which stories of the “success” of feminism render it redundant
(2001: 67). Texts that perpetuate this type of postfeminism celebrate aspects of
feminism that have been beneficial to (white, middle-class) women, while suggesting
that it is no longer necessary (2001: 72). The fourth postfeminist discourse classified
by Projansky is “(hetero)sex-positive postfeminism” (2001: 67). This version
embraces women’s independence and individuality while condemning anti-sex
feminism. Included in this category, Projansky suggests, is a problematic celebration
of the male-gaze and the depiction of practicing femininity as a feminist choice
(2001: 80). The final category that Projansky (2001: 84-85) discusses is
“postfeminist men” – representations within the media that suggest men have been
harmed by feminism or that men can sometimes even make better feminists than
women.

Projansky highlights the fact that postfeminist discourses are varied and multiple in
their configuration. She stresses however, that despite the diversity, one thing
remains consistent within postfeminist representations, and that is that feminist
activism is no longer needed (2001: 87). Projansky paints a more complex picture of
postfeminist discourses than other scholars, yet her account falls on the side of
criticising postfeminism. While aspects of her approach are useful to keep in mind, particularly her condemnation of the whiteness of postfeminist representations, her definition of postfeminism establishes it as the co-option and depoliticisation of feminism by popular culture. In this way, her approach parallels other scholars of postfeminism who endorse a negative assessment of postfeminism. Although Projansky offers a detailed and nuanced account of postfeminist discourses – in particular, their constitutive effects – she nevertheless maintains a distinction between feminism and postfeminism, whereby the latter is seen to be the force by which the former is rendered dead, out-of-date or depoliticised. Projansky’s (2002: 20) aim is to demonstrate “how postfeminist discourses paradoxically both incorporate feminism into and purge feminism from popular culture, engaging in a depoliticisation of feminism through both hegemonic moves”. Her work highlights the significance and pervasiveness of postfeminist discourses within contemporary society, but she sees it solely as a negative force.

I consider postfeminism to mean after the height of the women’s liberation movement and the changes in society that it brought about. However, I am not trying to articulate a “style” of feminism. Rather, postfeminism offers a way of thinking through the way feminism has changed, and a way of marking and explaining a particular era – a specific generational moment. As Joanne Hollows (2006) articulates, today’s young women “have grown up in conditions that are both shaped by second-wave feminism, and which are also the product of a time that is historically post-second-wave-feminism” (Hollows 2006: 104). Avoiding the hyphenation, this is one sense in which I use the term postfeminism. It specifies the current historical moment, making clear the role cultural context plays in shaping a generation, and clarifies the extent to which feminism has impacted the lives of the current generation. The idea of “post” meaning “after” gets around the problem of envisaging it as “death”. It allows room to acknowledge that the young women today have grown up after the height of the second-wave women’s movement, in a cultural context different from their parents, that has been strongly influenced by second wave feminist discourses.
Postfeminism and Individualism

The consideration of the neoliberal rhetoric of individualism is a common thread in many postfeminist discussions. This prevalence of individualistic rhetoric in understandings of postfeminism has both positive and negative implications for furthering feminist objectives. For example, McRobbie (2004a) argues that the rhetoric of freedom and choice for young women has made feminism seem unnecessary. Postfeminism, defined as a form of individualism, is a prominent theme in the “feminist generation debates” and repeats the same problem of reflecting neoliberal hegemony at the expense of feminist discourse. Mary Vavrus (2000: 413) suggests that postfeminism is solipsistic in its tendencies and that it represents a minority of elite women. Vavrus (2000: 415) defines postfeminism as a media-constructed “middle ground, between the feminist and pre-feminist extremes...an essentialist ideology which privileges individualism and the interests of elite, white, straight women at the expense of a collective politics of diverse women’s needs”. The definition of postfeminism that Vavrus proposes touches on an issue that is widespread in the literature. Individualism is a characteristic widely attributed to the variously named ‘new feminisms’ such as ‘postfeminism’ and ‘third wave feminism’. For instance, individualist politics are proudly proclaimed by many of the contributors to Kathy Bail’s (1996b) Australian collection of essays, DIY Feminism. This version of feminist politics stresses the strength of women to combat patriarchal structures and standards on their own terms, and often in different ways to feminists of the second wave. It argues for a diversity of feminisms that does not necessarily require a collective force or united front in order to challenge patriarchy. However, Vavrus’ articulation of postfeminism as individualist shares none of Bail’s enthusiasm for a do-it-yourself style feminist politics. Vavrus argues that postfeminist culture depicts feminism as obsolete.

Although the concept of individualism is problematic because feminism is a politics that emerged from collective action, it is necessary to examine the ways in which individualist rhetoric intersects with feminist ideas and contributes to a postfeminist cultural climate. Individualism forms a significant part of the postfeminist context in which young women are growing up and needs to be examined in relation to the generation debates and the preponderance of generationalism, rather than being
dismissed as anti-feminist. There needs to be recognition of the influence of gains made by second wave feminism on young women growing up today. Shelley Budgeon’s (2001) use of postfeminism does this. Budgeon provides some useful insights into the intersection of feminist and individualist discourses. She sets out to examine how young women understand the choices available to them, particularly looking at their perceptions of gender. Budgeon interviewed women aged 16-20 in 1997 and 1998 and argues that they draw on individualistic rhetoric but also that their worldview is also strongly shaped by feminist ideals. She uncovered an “interpretive framework” that combines the ideals of equality feminism with discourses of individualism (Budgeon 2001: 20). The women at the centre of Budgeon’s study did not consider themselves the subject of feminism, however feminist discourses inform the construction of their identities as young women (2001: 24). Feminist discourses provide the framework they use to understand the world. Thus, Budgeon is able to overcome the negative assessment of postfeminism as the death or redundancy of feminism by suggesting the ways in which feminist discourses continue to be relevant to young women. Budgeon (2001: 25-26) argues that using postfeminism to make sense of young women’s lives is “productive insofar as ‘postfeminism’ is understood as being about a critical interrogation of the limits of second wave feminism and leaving open the goal of understanding the multiple ways of being a feminist”.

In her study, Emma Rich (2005) interviewed ten young women, asking them for their life stories and exploring their understanding of gender. She found that the young women navigated “discourses of gender, the self and discourses of equality in often multiple and contradictory ways” (2005: 496). Furthermore, her study revealed, like Budgeon’s, that young women draw upon the concept of individualism when framing their life narratives. Compared with previous generations, the women in her study felt as though they had the freedom to choose from a wide array of options. Throughout the interviews a recurring sense of the importance of women’s agency highlighted for Rich the extent to which young women’s lives are influenced by the rhetoric of liberal individualism, with many of the women sharing the belief that it is up to women to overcome personal obstacles (2005: 501). The studies of Budgeon and Rich both demonstrate the significance of individualism as a discourse shaping young women’s outlook. Clearly, feminist and individualist rhetoric cannot be
separated out as antithetical. In many ways they are intertwined in the life stories of young women and both contribute to the current postfeminist socio-historical moment.

Wendy Parkins (1999) argues that postfeminism is problematic because of its focus on individualism. Parkins considers authors such as Roiphe (1993), Denfeld (1995), Wolf (1993) and Lumby (1997) to be exemplars of postfeminism, and argues that these authors put forward “a libertarian form of ‘feminism’ in which female autonomy becomes synonymous with individualism” (Parkins 1999: 377-378). I prefer to follow Catherine Orr (1997) in considering Roiphe, Denfeld and Wolf to be “feminist dissenters”: young authors in the United States who have published texts that are largely anti-feminist in tone, but claim to support feminist goals. Lumby on the other hand, is an Australian feminist whose work is influenced by poststructuralist thought. Lumby and the “feminist dissenters” both offer challenges to institutionalised, hegemonic forms of feminism, but they do so from vastly different perspectives, therefore Parkins’ characterisation of them as postfeminist is troubling. Parkins’ insistence that anyone who equates female independence with individualism is automatically postfeminist and therefore anti-feminist is problematic. Her account does not allow room for the ways in which individualist and feminist discourses are often interconnected, particularly in young women’s understandings of feminism. The existence of these dissenting “feminist” voices do indeed form a part of the postfeminist landscape. While they do not exemplify my understanding of postfeminism, they contribute to the postfeminist discourses that are circulating and are significant in the emergence of the generational battles within feminism.

**Postfeminist Context: Third Wave Feminism and ‘Conservative Feminism’**

The convergence of feminist discourse with a conservative neoliberal climate, focused on individualism, has laid the foundations of the current postfeminist moment. “Third wave feminism” is a phrase perpetuated in the US, where young feminists have published texts in the popular press that proclaim the arrival of the next stage, or wave, in feminist thought and practice (Heywood and Drake 1997b;
Baumgardner and Richards 2000; Findlen 1995; Walker 1995). These have been followed by an explosion in academia of articles and books trying to make sense of the so-called “next wave” of feminism (Drake 1997; Fixmer and Wood 2005; Gilley 2005; Gillis et al. 2004; Henry 2004a; Hogeland 2001; Shugart et al. 2001; Siegel 1997b). This surge of academic interest in third wave feminism has cemented the term in the feminist lexicon. In Australia, while the term “third wave” is not as prevalent, there has been an abundance of publications, which paralleled many of the issues of the US discussions. The US and the Australian eruptions of “young feminism” were a reaction both to reports within the media that feminism had become irrelevant or was dead, as well as claims by older feminists and younger “conservative feminist dissenters” that young women renounced feminism (see Chapter One).

Alongside self-proclaimed third wave feminists, is a strand of popular publications by Roiphe (1993), Wolf (1993) and Denfeld (1995) who have been labelled “conservative feminists”, “postfeminists” and “feminist dissenters”. Deborah Siegel (1997a) argues that feminist dissenters are white, middle-class women attempting to reclaim feminism for a new generation. They do this by discrediting earlier feminism as “victim feminism” that young women are unwilling to associate themselves with (1997a: 63). Feminist dissenters set up second wave feminism as their enemy and make a troubling distinction between what they argue are old styles of feminism that are ‘bad’ for women and their own new brand which apparently reclaims feminism in the name of independence, agency and power. Siegel (1997a: 65) suggests that what is most troubling about the dissenting feminist publications is “the way in which these historiographic diatribes are marketed and received as representative of an entire generation”. In contrast to the anti-feminist tone of these authors, the 1990s saw the emergence of a different genre of “new” feminist writers – those who proclaimed themselves the third wave of feminism. Both the third wave writers and the feminist dissenters are problematic in the way they claim to represent a generation, however, the existence of all these competing versions of “next generation” feminism contributes to the cultural atmosphere that I am labelling postfeminist.
Interestingly, some third wave authors label the feminist dissenters as postfeminists, clearly highlighting the confusing and sometimes contradictory definitions of postfeminism that exist. For example, editors of an academic collection of essays, *Third Wave Agenda*, Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake (1997a) specifically state that they are third wave and *not* postfeminist. They define postfeminism as “a group of conservative feminists who explicitly define themselves against and criticize feminists of the second wave” (1997a: 1). By “conservative feminists” they describe authors, such as Roiphe, Wolf and Denfeld, who have published popular texts arguing that feminism casts women as victims. Sarah Projansky (2001: 71) labels these authors “backlash postfeminists”. Although the work of these writers is widely criticised by academic feminists, it is nevertheless significant. Its mainstream appeal and ability to stir up controversy, forms an important component of the generational debates within feminism. Their anti-feminist tone, although vastly different from those calling themselves the third wave, helps comprise the current postfeminist climate that I am exploring in this thesis.

Amber Kinser (2004) positions postfeminism antithetically to third-wave feminism, arguing that postfeminism is a discourse that depoliticises feminism and renders it out of date. For Kinser, postfeminism represents a problematic component of modern society. She argues that “[p]ostfeminist rhetoric indicates either that feminism is unnecessary, undesirable, unavoidably constricting and dogmatic, or the same as the everyday choices women are already making” (2004: 145). While Kinser’s definition of postfeminism is in stark contrast to my own, her approach to third wave feminism echoes some of the characteristics I aim to encapsulate with my definition of postfeminism. In particular, she argues for the importance of recognising third-wave feminism as a product of a particular socio-historical context. Kinser uses the term third wave “to suggest the *era of feminism rooted in and shaped by the mid ‘80s-new millennium political climate*” (2004: 132, original emphasis). Her delineation of third wave as an *era* strongly parallels my understanding of postfeminism. She claims that her understanding of second and third wave feminisms is more about differences in climate than differences in politics (2004: 132). This is an important distinction, because it makes clear that socio-historical circumstances shape particular approaches to feminism, without meaning they are incompatible or in opposition to one another.
My definition of postfeminism encompasses all these multi-faceted components of contemporary feminism – from third wave authors who are reworking feminist politics to fit their own experiences growing up after the second wave of feminism, to feminist dissenters who contribute to backlash rhetoric and conservative understandings of feminism. While these strands of feminist debate are diverse and antagonistic to one another, they nonetheless form a core component of the current socio-cultural climate that I characterise as postfeminism. It is from these publications and the debates surrounding them, that postfeminist culture is shaped. Postfeminism characterises the socio-political context that has provided the conditions for the emergence of third wave feminism in the United States and for the generational debates to erupt within Australia.

There is some merit in thinking about the wave metaphor, since it makes clear that the generational context is significant in shaping feminist outlook, however it is a term that, by definition, erects boundaries between different age groups. Third wave feminists have been criticised for failing to depict the second wave accurately; instead, characterising it as a homogenous, monolithic entity that lacked diversity (Bailey 1997: 21; Orr 1997: 32). Furthermore, as Kinser notes, third wave feminism is often depicted as a reaction to a perceived second wave dogma (Kinser 2004: 140). The concept of postfeminism I am developing in this thesis avoids the restrictive nature of the wave metaphor because it includes feminists of all ages. Third wave feminism has the tendency to demarcate itself along age lines, establishing itself as the domain of ‘young’ feminists, or those born since 1970. My use of postfeminism encompasses the concept of third wave, and the socio-cultural context that saw its emergence. Furthermore, I employ the concept of postfeminism to illuminate the ways in which new kinds of feminist theorising and action need not be considered the realm of young women only.

While it forms an important component of the feminist generational discussions, the third wave metaphor does not adequately sum up the shifts that have occurred within feminism. Further, the wave metaphor is problematic because it risks cementing feminists into one of two groups, and as I argued in Chapter Two, the analogy is troubling because it tends to reify a limiting mother/daughter discourse. My use of
the term postfeminism avoids this reductive tendency of the generational debates by not positioning postfeminism against feminism. I suggest that third wave feminism is an important component of the generational paradigm within feminism, and that it is a response to the postfeminist cultural climate we are living in. My use of postfeminism is a more valuable theoretical tool than “third wave” because it has a strong focus on historical context. Attention is paid to socio-cultural conditions (including popular culture) and the impact they have on individuals. An associated approach to generation recognises that individuals are positioned differently within a generation, depending on factors such as class, race, ethnicity and sexuality, which affect their understandings of themselves and their future prospects. Third wave discourses have emerged out of the socio-cultural landscape that I am labelling postfeminist.

**Cultural Studies and Postfeminism**

Postfeminism encapsulates the shifts that have occurred within feminist theory in recent decades. Shelley Budgeon (2001: 13) points out that “there is a body of literature that now attempts to move beyond the negative evaluation of postfeminism to framing the concept in more productive terms”. I have outlined above the understanding of postfeminism as a backlash against the women’s movement; now I want to move on to discuss the more productive approaches to the term found in the academic literature. In particular, the work of Ann Brooks (1997) has been influential in shaping recent understandings of postfeminism as the point of connection between feminism and other ‘posts’. Brooks (1997: 1) argues that postfeminism is “a useful conceptual frame of reference encompassing the intersection of feminism with a number of other anti-foundationalist movements including postmodernism, post-structuralism and post-colonialism”.

Brooks (1997) argues that postfeminism represents a moment in feminism that intersects with other theories with a ‘post’ prefix. Incorporating aspects of postmodern, postcolonial and poststructural theory, postfeminism challenges some of the assumptions made by second wave feminism, such as its claims to universalism and also its racism and heterosexism. This understanding of postfeminism suggests that the ‘post’ does not connote the death of feminism or anti-feminism, rather, it is
part of an ongoing transformation of feminism. Brooks (1997: 4) argues that postfeminism represents a:

conceptual shift within feminism from debates around equality to a focus on debates around difference. It is fundamentally about, not a depoliticisation of feminism, but a political shift in feminism’s conceptual and theoretical agenda. Postfeminism is about a critical engagement with earlier feminism political and theoretical concepts and strategies as a result of its engagement with other social movements for change.

Postfeminism represents a change in feminism, both chronological and theoretical, marking a move away from second wave equality discourses, while recognising the huge impact those discourses have had on the current era. How these discourses are played out in popular culture, and how young women engage with them is the central concern of my research.

Cultural studies feminists have done the most to broaden the definition of postfeminism, using at as way of exploring the engagement of popular culture with feminist ideas. There are, however, multiple and contradictory understandings of postfeminism within the feminist literature on popular culture. Faludi (1992) and McRobbie (2004a; 2004b) are not alone in identifying anti-feminist aspects of popular culture and labelling them postfeminist. Mary Vavrus (2000) and Laurie Ouellette (2002) echo this approach to postfeminism. For example, Mary Vavrus (2000) uses postfeminism in the same sense as Susan Faludi (1992), arguing that postfeminism represents a discourse in media texts that aims to supersede feminism. Vavrus analyses the popular 1990s television show, *Ally McBeal*, a text that is widely discussed as postfeminist. Vavrus (2000: 415) uses the term postfeminism to refer to cultural products that depict feminism as problematic. She suggests that postfeminism has solipsistic tendencies and works to promote only elite white women’s interests, at the expense of a collectivist politics that recognises women’s differences. For Vavrus, postfeminism works through mainstream media texts and promotes the notion that feminism is outdated. For example, she argues that postfeminism is represented by apolitical female characters on television, exemplified by Ally McBeal – a character she suggests is “hardly feminist at all”
(2000: 421). She articulates a disdain for the character of Ally McBeal, arguing that she cannot be feminist because she wears a mini skirt, or because, despite being a successful lawyer, she wants to get married.

Laurie Ouellette (2002) repeats Vavrus’s condemnation of *Ally McBeal* in her argument that postfeminism represents antifeminism. Ouellette suggests that *Ally McBeal* is a postfeminist text because it takes elements of second wave feminism for granted while simultaneously eschewing feminism of earlier decades as unattractive and unnecessary (2002: 317). Ouellette’s article explores *Ally McBeal* in terms of the way it portrays ideal version of postfeminist subjectivity. In Ouellette’s view, postfeminist popular culture works to erase the politicised nature of feminism, while at the same time celebrating some of the liberal feminist gains made by previous generations. While she distinguishes an academic understanding of the term, characterised as feminism that recognises the importance of diversity among women, her article focuses on popular understandings of postfeminism. The popular incarnation of postfeminism, she argues, is inflected with conservative and antifeminist sentiments. The distinction Ouellette makes between popular and academic versions of postfeminism is troubling. The media and academia intersect, both playing a role in shaping the cultural context. It is thus problematic to separate them so simply. The use of postfeminism used by Ouellette and Vavrus is troubling because of the way they negatively associate it with anti-feminism. The approach to postfeminism that they take leaves little room for positive interpretations of the role of feminism within popular culture. While they are right to criticise the dominance of white, middle-class women in mainstream media representations, the characterisation of this as a postfeminist tactic is misguided.

There is an emerging body of work exploring television via the lens of postfeminism (Moseley and Read 2002: 231). In her influential text about feminism on television, Bonnie J. Dow (1996) argues that postfeminism represents “a hegemonic negotiation of second-wave ideals, in which the presumption of equality for women in the public sphere has been retained” (Dow 1996: 88). Dow (1996: 97-98) identifies three trends in postfeminist television series from the 1980s and 1990s: female centred soap operas about domestic life and relationships; “professional serial drama” focusing on the careers of women; and “postfeminist family television”, in which a main female
character combines a successful career with an ideal family. In her analysis, Dow argues that the 1980s television comedy series *Murphy Brown*, “illustrates particularly well…the way in which popular texts gain appeal from exploiting and reworking cultural contradictions at particular historical moments” (Dow 1996: 139). An analysis of television can usefully uncover the way popular culture reflects and reworks historically specific contexts.

Moseley and Read (2002: 237) surveyed popular press responses to the television series *Ally McBeal*, outlining how a postfeminist reading of the programme positioned femininity and feminism as mutually exclusive. They argue, “if Ally McBeal is postfeminist, it is not because she represents the death of feminism, but because she represents a period that is post-1970s feminism” (2002: 237: original emphasis). Feminism is thoroughly entrenched within popular culture. As Susan Hopkins (2002: 34) points out, “patterns of evolving female power are part of our cultural wallpaper”. The very availability of feminist concepts in mainstream culture is what marks this era and this generation as postfeminist. Budgeon (2001) suggests that second wave feminism has had two significant influences on society. The first is the way feminism has brought “about changes to the social order…resulting in young women having more choices available to them than previous generations of women. The second aspect of influence is the extent to which feminism as a discourse has entered the mainstream” (Budgeon 2001: 8). This discussion points to empirical questions, which may throw light on young women’s relationship with feminism. If indeed feminist discourses have become part of the mainstream, we must find ways of investigating how young women envisage and navigate the choices and opportunities made possible because of second wave feminism. Postfeminism can be mobilised as a theoretical tool to better understand generational change and the complex incorporation of feminist discourses into the realm of the popular. As Elspeth Probyn (2001: 38) points out:

> The increasingly comfortable and knowing representation of gender in the popular media is both evidence of the success of feminism and a major point we have to address in both our teaching and in our theorizing.
In order to come to terms with the extent to which feminist ideas have infiltrated popular culture, this thesis examines the usefulness of postfeminism as a theoretical and analytical framework. The theoretical scaffold upon which I base my analysis is influenced by postfeminist cultural studies scholars such as Ann Brooks (1997), Amanda Lotz (2001), Jane Gerhard (2005) and Niall Richardson (2006) who point to the ways both feminism and culture have shifted. In an essay about postfeminist television, Amanda Lotz (2001: 106) argues for the need to reclaim postfeminism from the usual negative definitions, to see it as a useful tool in analysing popular cultural representations of women and feminism. She adopts Ann Brooks’ (1997) definition of postfeminism (mentioned earlier) that allows for the recognition of the way feminism has become interconnected with other academic discourses such as postmodernism, poststructuralism and postcolonialism (Lotz 2001: 113).

Lotz (2001) begins by tracing a history of the incorporation of feminist discourse into television representations, beginning in the 1970s with television programmes like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, which depicted the life of a single independent career woman. She points out that the 1980s saw an emergence of shows that depicted the “superwoman” – capable of combining work in the labour market with domestic life. These characters, she argues, arose in response to conservative critiques of feminism as anti-family (2001: 108). Lotz notes that conservative concerns about working women only began to apply once white middle and upper-class women started entering the work force in larger numbers. She goes on to argue, “white career women still dominate contemporary representations in a way that continues the legacy of representing feminist discourse as restricted to white, upper-middle-class characters” (2001: 109). Lotz sets out to develop a positive definition of postfeminism that contributes to feminist television criticism and demonstrates the complex nature of representations of feminism in a changed socio-cultural climate.

Lotz’s understanding of postfeminism differs slightly from mine, however. She proposes that postfeminism is one subset of third wave feminism (Lotz 2001: 117). The other two, she argues, are “women-of-colour” or “third-world feminism”, which criticise the second wave for failing to theorise race adequately, and “reactionary third-wave feminism”, characterised by authors like Katie Roiphe (1993) and Naomi Wolf (1993). Lotz positions postfeminism as the third subset of third wave feminism,
following Ann Brooks’ (1997) definition, which incorporates theory from “women-of-colour” and also other “post” epistemologies. While Lotz sees postfeminism as a strand of third wave feminism, I am inclined to view it in reverse. That is to say, I tend to understand third wave feminism as a phenomenon that has emerged out of a specific postfeminist context. Third wave feminism is largely a US-based phenomenon, arising from a number of popular publications and anthologies that attest to the importance of feminism to young women. These texts have been extensively reviewed by feminist academics (Orr 1997; Siegel 1997b; Aikau et al. 2003; Hogeland 2001; Drake 1997; Looser 1997; Heywood and Drake 1997b; Gillis et al. 2004) and they play a significant role in the feminist generational debates. I would argue that third wave feminism emerged within that context. So while my understanding of postfeminism shares much in common with Lotz, we differ on this point. I utilise aspects of Lotz’s exposition of postfeminist television criticism in order to structure the analysis of my empirical research. This approach is elaborated in more detail in the next chapter (A Postfeminist Methodology).

Some authors have explored the interconnections between queer theory and postfeminism in popular culture (see Arthurs 2003; Gerhard 2005; Richardson 2006). This work is important because it examines the postfeminist potential of *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives*. Jane Arthurs (2003: 87) argues that *Sex and the City* explores “women’s sexuality in a postmodern consumer culture”. Arthurs also considers the self-reflexive nature of the programme and its potential to question gender norms, while pointing to the limitations of a show whose target audience is white and affluent. She highlights the way in which the show combines the subversive – such as the transgression of sexual taboos – with a problematic celebration of capitalism and consumer culture (2003: 92). In pointing out that “camp irony moved from the margins to the centre”, Arthurs (2003: 91) is inclined towards suggesting that the appropriation of campness and irony signify a commodification of gay culture. Richardson (2006) and Gerhard (2005) on the other hand, argue for the subversive possibilities of camp representations and propose that they offer feminist potential.

In an article on the representations of camp in *Desperate Housewives*, Niall Richardson (2006: 157) argues that this series is one of the first to criticise
heterosexual monogamy. Through an examination of housewife par excellence, Bree van der Kamp, one of the central characters in the show, Richardson demonstrates that Bree uncovers the performative nature of femininity. In her excessive and exaggerated femininity, Bree’s character exposes gender as a performance. Camp is an ironic performance that works to uncover the constructed nature of gender; in Richardson’s words, “a camp representation will draw attention to gender roles as actually being gender roles” (2006: 159). He argues that her “use of camp can be read as critiquing heteronormativity” (2006: 167). Richardson stresses that camp offers potential as a feminist politics and that Bree’s “too perfect” persona presents a critique of idealised femininity.

Furthermore, Richardson’s article is useful because his interpretation of postfeminism incorporates the connections between camp, postmodern irony and feminist theory. For Richardson (2006: 164), postfeminism appropriates postmodern irony in its engagement with feminism. He links the subversive potential of camp to the influential theorist Judith Butler (1990), whom he describes as “the most influential of the post-modern feminists” (Richardson 2006: 164). Drawing on Butler’s critique of the sex/gender binary he demonstrates that Bree’s over-the-top performance and knowing wink to the audience emphasise the social constructedness of femininity. Richardson’s approach to postfeminism in popular culture is thus very useful for exploring the ways in which gendered representations are played out. Postfeminist scholars offer some compelling and useful analytical approaches that recognise the interconnections of feminism, queer theory and postmodernism and the importance of examining their depictions within contemporary television representations.

However, a major weakness of the existing feminist cultural studies literature on postfeminism is the scarcity of ethnographic research. My approach goes beyond the current literature because it combines an analysis of cultural texts with an investigation of the way young women speak about their own lives and the popular culture they consume. In this way I am able to build a comprehensive picture of what characterises postfeminist television and what constitutes the era as postfeminist. My research explores the way in which Sex and the City and Desperate Housewives relate to the lives of real women. By conducting ethnographic research, assessing
young women’s perceptions of popular female characters, and examining the dominant aspirations and struggles that young women are facing, my study contributes to the body of postfeminist cultural studies.

**Conclusion**

In surveying the array of feminist literature on the topic of postfeminism this chapter has established the merits of adopting postfeminism as a theoretical tool. The complexity of this concept provides an opportunity to broaden feminist theorising on generation and young women’s engagement with feminism and popular culture. A number of questions have emerged from this review of the literature. The issue of the redundancy of feminism is a common theme within discussions of postfeminism. In this chapter I have argued that the definition of postfeminism as the ‘death of feminism’ is problematic. Angela McRobbie’s (2004b: 256) assertion that postfeminism represents the dismantling of feminism warrants further investigation. While McRobbie (2004b) offers the term “taken into account” to describe the way feminism is made to seem redundant through a process in which feminism is considered common sense, she also suggests that feminism is strongly repudiated. I wish to establish my understanding of postfeminism, not in opposition, but in contrast to McRobbie’s sometimes negative evaluation of it. My adoption of the term postfeminism recognises the sense of feminism as “taken into account” without assuming feminism is dead and without falling into the trap of reinforcing the neoliberal rhetoric that assumes that feminism is no longer relevant in the lives of young women.

According to feminist researcher Anita Harris (2004: 6) “new ideologies about individual responsibility and choices also dovetail with some broad feminist notions about opportunities for young women”. In my conceptualisation of postfeminism, the influence of the neoliberal rhetoric of choice (and processes of individualisation) is acknowledged and explored in relation to young women’s engagement with feminism. Neoliberal discourses comprise part of the socio-cultural context that is encompassed by the concept of postfeminism. I suggest that postfeminism can describe the era without succumbing to the notion that feminism is dead or irrelevant. Postfeminism, in my development of the concept, enables an understanding of the
extent to which feminist discourses are widespread in contemporary society. It helps to make clear that we are living *after* the height of second wave feminism, but it does not imply that feminism has been extinguished nor superseded. I have demonstrated that this postfeminist cultural climate provided the conditions for the emergence of third wave feminist discourses. Postfeminism also usefully encompasses feminism’s intersection with other theoretical approaches that are prefixed with ‘post’. Postfeminism is an apposite term for describing recent shifts within feminism, both popular pronouncements of emerging feminist praxis, as well as developments in academic theory.

The separation of popular and academic versions of postfeminism is a problematic element in much of the existing literature. My study aims not to make a distinction between popular and academic forms of postfeminism. Instead, I explore the way they are interwoven and examine the complexity of postfeminist characteristics and the way they inhere within cultural texts. This approach allows me to shed light on how the postfeminist era is shaping the aspirations and experiences of today’s young women. Mobilising postfeminism as a useful analytical tool enables an interrogation and elucidation of young women’s generational position, their engagement with popular culture and their relationship with feminism. The next chapter outlines the theoretical and methodological approaches of the project.
Chapter Four: A Postfeminist Methodology

The previous chapters established the background, the aims and the theoretical framework underpinning my research. This chapter builds upon this theoretical structure to outline the methodological approach of the project and set out the qualitative research methods I employed. I have suggested that the generational debates within feminism tend to result in unproductive conflict and the casting of feminists into restrictive categories such as second and third wave. The existing feminist literature on generations also tends unhelpfully to position feminists as ‘mothers’ or ‘daughters’. Feminism requires a more rigorous theory for understanding generational change and the way historical and cultural contexts inform the outlook of a generation. In order to more deeply theorise generation, I adopted the work of Karl Mannheim (1952b). Mannheim provides a way of conceptualising the impact of an individual’s generational position in shaping their worldview, and stresses the importance of paying close attention to the significance of specific historical circumstances. However, as previously discussed, Mannheim does not provide a method for interrogating generation, so I turn to poststructuralist theory, particularly Foucault’s work on discourse and to feminist interpretations of it.

In this chapter I show that discourse analysis provides the means to explore the dominant discursive currents that are shaping the present generation of young women. Similarly to Mannheim, and vital to a study on generation, a poststructuralist approach recognises that knowledge is always historically specific. Feminist poststructuralist theory provides a solid basis for my research, because it allows me to investigate the dominant discourses that contribute to young women’s understanding of their lives as women and their attitudes to feminism. This theoretical approach forms the backdrop to my entire project; from my own understanding of what feminism is, to the discourse analysis I adopt to explore my empirical data. Discourse analysis, with its attention to historical context, lends itself well to an exploration of the significance of generation. Since gender is at the
foreground of my research agenda, and popular culture is a key focus in my investigation of generational context, my methodology draws feminist poststructuralism together with the concept of postfeminism. As I have outlined, postfeminism is a term with contested and contradictory meanings. A large percentage of the feminist literature paints postfeminism in negative terms, defining it as anti-feminist or suggesting that a postfeminist context implies the death of feminism. In Chapter Three I began to map out my positive interpretation of the term. In this chapter I continue to develop my mobilisation of postfeminism as an analytical tool that helps me make sense of my interview data and the cultural texts at the heart of my research.

Beverley Skeggs (1995: 2) defines methodology as “a theory of methods which informs decisions about such things as what to study, how to analyse, which theories to use, how to interpret, how to write”. A methodological chapter then, must make some attempt to address these issues. As it is important to establish the particular epistemological assumptions that underpin a study, I first explain what it is about this project that makes it ‘feminist’. I navigate the tricky terrain of methodology by examining my own feminist position in relation to my research. Further, an appraisal of my own generational bias is necessary because it comes to inform my analytical and theoretical approach. I then chart the feminist, sociological and cultural studies theories that inform my study and outline the methods I employed in pursuing my research questions.

A Feminist Methodology – What is My Feminism?

A concern with self-reflexivity is an important element of feminist research. Following Skeggs (1997: 17) I must “continually recognize how my locatedness informed my methodological decisions and ultimately the final product”. For me to be up front about my own situatedness, I must be clear about what feminism means to me. In this section, I attempt to encapsulate my feminism, before moving on to a more general discussion of the aims and epistemological assumptions of feminist research and how they influence this project. It is important to acknowledge that my own feminist understanding of the world necessarily colours my research. In highlighting why this project is feminist, I begin to address one of the fundamental
questions that, in hindsight, acted as a catalyst for this study: “What is my feminism?”. In thinking through what I should include in this methodology chapter, I realised that the basis for my original interest in this topic emerged from this very question. I have long been intrigued by why young women decide to call themselves feminists or not and to a large extent, this issue captures my imagination because I wonder why I call myself a feminist. When did I take on the label? What does feminism mean to me? What does feminism mean to women of my generation? These questions underlie my entire project.

My personal belief, the basis of my feminism, is that gender structures society in innumerable ways. My first real encounter with feminism was at university, in sociology and gender studies classes. I think I have always considered myself a feminist, but what I learned as a student was a greater appreciation of the way gender affects our lives, and a language that offers a challenge to the gendered status quo. I appreciate Chris Weedon’s (1997: 1) straightforward explanation of feminism:

Feminism is a politics. It is a politics directed at changing existing power relations between women and men in society. These power relations structure all areas of life, the family, education and welfare, the worlds of work and politics, culture and leisure. They determine who does what and for whom, what we are and what we might become.

Broadly, I understand feminist research as research that is political and concerned with social justice. Feminist research adopts methods that allow the voices of the researched to take centre stage; it is research that challenges the idea that knowledge production is neutral, recognising that factors such as gender, class and race affect the way knowledge is produced and affect how meanings are understood. According to Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002: 147) feminist research aims “to give insights into gendered social existence that would otherwise not exist”. Research can be considered feminist if it is underpinned by feminist theory with the goal of producing knowledge that will help transform gendered injustices (2002: 147). My research can be considered feminist because it is framed by a feminist ontology, which assumes gender is socially constructed and historically specific and is fuelled by a political commitment to better understand and improve the lives of women.
Feminist research has a long history of challenging male-centred knowledge production and the idea that a researcher can remain objective and distanced from the research material (Ramazonoglu and Holland 2002: 95). Feminist scholars recognise that all research is subjective, marked by the gender, race, age and sexuality of the researcher. I acknowledge the importance of reflecting on how the ‘self’ is positioned within the project, and hope to remain open and self-reflexive in this regard. According to Mary Maynard (1994: 16) reflexivity involves exploring the way certain assumptions about gender (and other factors such as class and race) are built into the project. Furthermore, it can involve an “intellectual autobiography” of the researcher – an acknowledgement that I am a subject in my own research. I have tried to remain aware of the limits of my positionality when interviewing women who did not consider themselves feminists and when analysing attitudes that I did not agree with. As a feminist researcher, I am aware that my own subjectivity cannot be removed from the process of conducting a close analysis of the language of the participants. My own position as a young, white, well-educated woman, similar in age to my participants, member of so-called ‘Generation Y’ will have had an influence on the research project. I am mindful of the fact that my own knowledge and bias necessarily affect how I posed interview questions and how I interpreted the interview data. My feminist understanding of the world impacts not only on the sorts of questions I asked, but also on how I analysed the interviews and cultural texts. Being aware of these limitations and biases is an important aspect of the research process.

Here, I must acknowledge the importance of my generational position. I am generationally situated both as a woman who was a teenager in the 1990s and whose feminist consciousness was shaped by the feminist theories that were dominant in the academy when I was an undergraduate student during the first years of the twenty-first century. In an interesting conversation with my supervisors early in my postgraduate candidature, we compared the dominant feminist influences of our lives. One of my supervisors was inspired by the existentialist feminism of Simone de Beauvoir (1981 [1949]). My second supervisor remembered the radical liberatory promise of Germaine Greer (1970) when she was growing up. I could not decide between Catharine Lumby’s (1997) book Bad Girls about sex, feminism and popular
culture or Naomi Klein’s (2001) influential anti-globalisation text, *No Logo*. Although not strictly a feminist publication, Klein’s book is a bestseller that worked in a similar way to Beauvoir’s and Greer’s texts as a consciousness-raising piece for a generation. The diverse philosophical and theoretical approaches represented by these texts are significant because they mark my supervisors and I as generationally different. I raise this conversation here because the importance of the dominant political and intellectual trends of an era in defining a generation is a crucial component of my research. It highlights clearly the central importance of generation in shaping an individual’s feminism. Furthermore, it helps to locate my own feminism. Influenced by the prevailing discourses of the era in which I came-of-age, my feminism is not the existential philosophy of Beauvoir, nor is it the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s and 70s. Instead, my feminism is shaped both by feminist and poststructural theory, particularly feminist adaptations of Foucault’s work on power, knowledge and subjectivity that I encountered at university. Furthermore, it is influenced by books that discuss the role of the media and popular culture in shaping our politics and our understanding of the world.

**Methodological Techniques**

In order to contextualise the socio-cultural climate, I set out to establish the usefulness of postfeminism as an analytical tool and a potential descriptor of the current historical moment. My research questions focus on the relationships between feminism, popular culture and generation, therefore I interviewed my participants about their favourite types of popular culture with respect to gender issues. I used their responses to locate popular texts I could analyse, with a mind to understanding the dominant discursive paradigms that might be shaping this era as postfeminist. In attempting to understand how young women engage with popular culture I asked them to discuss female celebrities and characters they admired to get a sense of their attitudes to gender issues and representation of women in the media. What sort of women do they identify as strong and autonomous? How do they relate to their favourite characters? As I will elaborate in more detail later, I then conducted a discourse analysis of the two most prominent cultural texts that were discussed in the interviews: television programmes *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives*. My
goal in combining ethnographic research with a cultural analysis was to gain a
deeper understanding of the influence of popular culture on a generation and how
young women actually engage with these programmes. I wanted to know to what
extent the lead characters in the texts paralleled the prevailing experiences and
attitudes of the young women I interviewed.

I also sought to find out how they perceive generational change. I therefore
interviewed young women about how they position themselves generationally. In
what ways do young women think their lives differ from those of their mother and
grandmothers? What kinds of opportunities and choices do they perceive as open to
them? What sorts of pressures and tensions do they experience as women? I was also
particularly interested in assessing how their attitudes to women’s role in society
may have changed in relation to the goals of second wave feminism. I therefore
posed questions aimed at uncovering information about women’s plans for
education, work and parenthood. Do young women plan to combine paid work with
motherhood? How does this generation envisage they will combine the two? As I
have already discussed, the generational debates within feminism have a strong focus
on women’s relationship to feminism. Young women are often accused of
disavowing feminism, or simply being unaware or uninterested in gender issues. A
lot of the literature on this issue suggests that young women have an “I’m not a
feminist, but” attitude. I suspected women of my generation to have a more complex
engagement with feminism that this catch phrase allows, so set out to investigate
their perceptions. I asked for their definitions of feminism and the women’s
movement, what they thought of when they heard the word feminism, and also
whether or not they consider themselves feminist. I asked these questions in order to
gain insights into young women’s relationship with feminism. What role does
generational position play in shaping feminist subjectivity? What kinds of feminist
discourses are circulating and how do young women engage with them?

To address the key questions set out above, I conducted interviews with young
Australian women and carried out an analysis of the popular culture that they
consume. This combination of qualitative methods was employed as they were felt to
be more conducive to pursuing the goals of the research than quantitative methods.
In seeking to understand the attitudes and aspirations of young women, interviews
were chosen because they allowed the participants to speak from their own perspectives, to discuss their attitudes, and to elaborate on their experiences. Traditional quantitative methods would not have allowed the voices of the participants to be explored in as much depth. The empirical research undertaken for this thesis aimed to allow this generation of women to voice their experiences and their aspirations for the future. Feminist research often begins from the point of wanting to articulate women’s experiences. However, feminist researchers have cautioned that experience in itself is problematic. They have questioned the notion that experience can give us insight into an essential truth and have pointed to the way in which experiences are always an interpretation (Scott 1991; Skeggs 1997). Joan Scott (1991) warns that we should not take “experience” for granted. She emphasises:

It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience. Experience in this definition then becomes not the origin of our explanation, not the authoritative (because seen or felt) evidence that grounds what is known, but rather that which we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced. (1991: 779-80)

In my research, although I am questioning young women about their experiences and perceptions, I am not attempting to uncover a hidden truth about their experience or trying to construct a truth about their generation. Rather, in asking them to discuss their experiences, I am aiming to gain insight into the discourses that constitute both their subjectivity and the historical moment.

**The Interviews**

A total of forty-one young women took part in the study, coming from a diverse mix of educational, socio-economic and geographical locations (see Tables 1-4). I recruited research participants through organisations where young women were members or employees, via recruitment posters distributed on public noticeboards, through two universities, and via the internet by posting notices on websites visited by women in the appropriate age group (see Appendices A and C). Respondents were asked to take part in one of three interview types: an in-depth telephone
interview, a focus group, or an open-ended email questionnaire. I decided to adopt three different types of interview techniques as a way of ensuring I was able to target a wide sample of women from different locations and backgrounds. I carried out thirteen telephone interviews, fifteen email interviews and three focus groups with women across Australia. I interviewed women from a range of socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. While I did not have a question about class position, I asked the young women to fill in a short demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B), which had a section for the occupations of their parents. This data, combined with the participants’ geographical location (the suburb or town in which they live) helps to ensure a diversity of socio-cultural locations, or “generational units” in Mannheim’s (1952b: 306) sense. The demographic form included a space for participants to write their “nationality”. In hindsight I would have worded this differently and asked for their ethnic background or their parents’ country of origin. The majority of women filled in this section “Australian”, while some mentioned their parents’ origins. I was also able to gain an insight into the diverse backgrounds of the participants throughout the interviews.

To ensure a widespread geographical response, I advertised my project on the internet, allowing women from all over Australia to register their interest in participating. In attempting to find participants, I also targeted inner and outer suburbs in Sydney and Newcastle (a regional city in New South Wales) in order to find women from a range of socio-economic situations (see Table 2). The majority of participants were engaged in some form of further education, so my research sample is biased towards well-educated women. This is partly due to the fact that I recruited two focus groups and some telephone interviews through university mailing lists. Twenty-eight out of the forty-one participants (approximately 68 per cent) were studying at university at the time of the interviews, in a range of degrees including Arts, Medicine, Education, Engineering and Commerce (see Table 3). Six participants were enrolled in TAFE4 or private college, studying courses such as dental nursing, advertising or business administration. Only seven of the participants were not enrolled in any form of study and reported that their highest level of education was the Higher School Certificate (HSC), which signifies graduation from

4 TAFE: an Australian publicly funded organisation providing post-secondary technical education.
high school in New South Wales. The high proportion of students could also be due to the nature of the study – I suspect the recruitment posters appealed to a certain type of young woman. The nature of the recruitment process, limited by university Human Research Ethics Committee, required women to contact me if they wanted to take part, meaning I was more likely to have participants who were confident and educated. Further, the inclusion of the word “feminism” as one of the research topics in the recruitment advertisements would likely pique the interest of women educated in feminist issues. One of the primary aims of this project is to uncover what young women think of feminism. Therefore, I attempted to locate some young women who specifically identified as feminists. I found these women through feminist websites (Appendix C) and the Women’s Collectives at two universities – the University of Sydney and the University of Newcastle. In reviewing my data, I acknowledge that the largely positive attitudes to feminism may not reflect the wider population of young Australian women.

The decision to interview women between the ages of eighteen and twenty-three was motivated by three main factors. First, it was to ensure the women were of legal age to consent to participate in the study, without parental approval, and at a stage in their life when they are beginning to make decisions about work, relationships and motherhood. Second, my study was part of an Australian Research Council project that examined three cohorts of Australian women\(^5\). These cohorts were divided into five-year brackets, according to year of birth. This system influenced my decision to interview women across a five-year age span (18-23). The oldest women I interviewed were born in 1982; the youngest in 1987. Third, the theoretical framework for this project, informed by the work of Karl Mannheim, had a bearing on the age of participants. As discussed in Chapter Two, Mannheim (1952b) argues that a person’s political outlook is largely determined by dominant socio-cultural trends experienced in one’s youth. Mannheim suggests that an individual’s formative

\(^5\) The ARC Discovery Project (2004-2006) was titled Women Consider Retirement: A Critical Investigation of Attitudes Towards Work, Ageing and Retirement in Three Generations of Australian Women. The chief investigators were Penny Warner-Smith, Deborah Stevenson, Christine Everingham, Julie Byles and Lynne Parkinson.
years start at around age seventeen, when one begins to question the world and experiment with life (1952b: 300). Since the project set out to investigate how cultural forms impact upon a generation, it was decided it would be beneficial to interview women who were currently experiencing their formative years.

Interviews are a widely used research method in the social sciences. The telephone interviews and focus groups adopted a semi-structured model of interview that involved a list of specific questions, but allowed a natural flow of conversation between the researcher and participants. I chose to conduct open-ended, semi-structured interviews (Minchiello et al. 1990: 92) to permit participants to raise issues that had not been anticipated. The interview schedule (Appendix D) helped to guide my interviews. However, the questions listed were a guide only, and I allowed the interview to flow freely, more like a conversation than an interview. By not following a strict order of questions, I was able to ensure that the participants felt comfortable and I could listen and respond to what they said, rather than jump from topic to topic based on a rigid questionnaire.

Focus groups were chosen as a way to test my research questions, allowing me to adjust them before conducting the one-on-one interviews. A further motivation, particularly with the focus groups and email interviews, was an attempt to lessen the effects of the power dynamics between the researcher and the researched. Sue Wilkinson (1998: 114) argues that simply because of the number of participants, a focus group interview automatically shifts the balance of power away from the researcher. The women were able to discuss issues among themselves and raise topics that I had not considered when constructing my research questions. The focus groups allowed for a cooperative discussion between the research participants and myself. Donna Luff (1999: 691) argues that it is important to engage participants in the research process. My participants were free to ask one another questions, thus making the research process interactive. In this way, the focus groups delivered some of the control of the research process into the hands of the participants. The group situation was also beneficial because it permitted a wider discussion of popular culture than was sometimes evident in the telephone interviews. Wilkinson (1998: 115) suggests that some feminist researchers have adopted focus groups in order to echo the consciousness-raising exercises of second wave feminism. The merit of
such a strategy became clear when several participants from each focus group suggested afterwards that it was good to have the chance to talk about feminist issues and that they should do it more often.

I also found merits in adopting new technology, both for recruiting participants and for conducting interviews. Using the internet to recruit and email for conducting some of the interviews allowed for a greater geographical spread of participants. I was able to contact women from a range of metropolitan, regional and rural areas from around Australia. As Granello and Wheaton (2004: 388) suggest, internet technology has the potential to reduce the response time of a survey, compared with traditional methods. The responses I received from advertising my study on the internet far surpassed those from posters on noticeboards and letters mailed to organisations (Appendix E). There was a satisfying immediacy with advertising the project on the internet. For example, on a number of occasions I received emails from interested parties within an hour of the call for participants being put online. Compared with the month long delays associated with traditional ‘snail mail’ and the posters and flyers that required participants contact me, the internet certainly proved beneficial in terms of getting in touch with a large number of people in a short timeframe. I originally intended to use the internet for locating specifically feminist groups and websites, but after discovering the benefits of recruiting on the web, I decided to try and locate more participants by contacting a wider range of websites that are visited by young women (Appendix C).

Email provides a relatively less intrusive and threatening mode of contact, so also offers the potential of broadening the sample to include women who might be shy or unwilling to contact a researcher by telephone. The email interviews involved an electronic copy of the interview schedule being sent to participants and asking them to reply with their answers. In most cases, a second email was exchanged in order to clarify the original answers or ask for more information. This asynchronous interview method was relatively non-invasive and allowed participants to reflect upon the questions and respond in their own time (Mann and Stewart 2000). Giving potential respondents the option of contacting me via email, and taking part in an email interview, proved useful in targeting a wider sample of women, in terms of geography, class and level of education. By using the internet to find participants and
conducting email interviews instead of solely face-to-face or telephone interviews, I located a greater proportion of women who did not have a university education. New technology, such as email, holds many benefits for locating and engaging with research participants (Granello and Wheaton 2004).

In conducting feminist research, Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002: 118) suggest that a certain level of reflexivity is required. They argue that reflexivity attempts “to make explicit the power relations and the exercise of power in the research process”. Ann Gray (2003: 104) argues that a feminist methodology recognises that power relations are inherent within all interviewing and data collection. I recall one instance during my telephone interviews, when towards the end I asked if the young woman had anything she would like to ask me about the study. She asked, “So, what does feminism mean for you? How do you define it?”. With this one question she flipped the roles of the interviewer and interviewee (the researcher and the researched) upside down. I stumbled for a response, my mind going blank at the scary prospect of having to summarise what feminism means. I certainly found it a difficult question and while trying to construct an intelligent response, I became aware of the position I had been putting my respondents in with my series of questions. This moment made clear for me the power relations that are at play in all research. Feminist research attempts to address these unequal power relations (Gray 2003: 104; Maynard 1994: 15). In my methods, I tried to level out the field by allowing participants to ask me questions too. Feminist research practice often attempts to break down the traditional hierarchy between the researcher and the researched (Maynard 1994: 15). One way of overcoming the hierarchical relationship between those being studied, and she who is doing the studying, is to build a genuine rapport with informants (Maynard 1994; Luff 1999). The development of trust and rapport with participants is a key feature of most feminist research (Luff 1999: 697). I attempted to develop a good rapport between the participants and myself.

In all of my interviews and focus groups I did my best to establish trust and to make my participants feel comfortable. Overall, I felt I developed good rapport with my participants. There were many moments of shared laughter, and I would sometimes share my own opinion of a cultural text or a similar experience to the one she was sharing, in order to make the participant feel relaxed and as though we were “having
a chat” rather than an interrogation. I was particularly concerned about not coming across as a “know-all” feminist researcher. I did not want them to feel as though they had to censor their answers for fear of not sounding “feminist” enough. I felt I achieved this in most cases, however, it is important to acknowledge that the power dynamics between the researcher and the researched can never be completely eradicated (Maynard 1994: 16). This can be best illustrated with an anecdote from one of my telephone interviews, when a participant told me she had used the internet before our interview to “Google for feminism”. This is a poignant example of how the research process can make participants feel uncomfortable, and serves as a reminder that the power dynamics between the researcher and the researched are always apparent. Indeed, one reason I wanted to research women of my generation was so I would be able to understand the cultural texts they mentioned. My own engagement with many of the texts that arose turned out to be useful, as I could agree with participants about a certain character, or I was familiar enough with particular films, books or television shows to be able to delve deeper into their enjoyment of them.

The interviews and focus groups covered a range of topics and were divided into five broad areas (Appendix D). The first section of questions was designed to gain an understanding of young women’s aspirations for their participation in education and paid work. I wanted to uncover what sorts of career and educational opportunities they felt they had available to them. These questions also tended to act as “ice-breakers”, as they were similar to the “what do you do?” questions that are used in everyday conversation. This allowed me to make the participant feel comfortable with talking to me, before moving on to more personal questions. The second section was designed to uncover the most popular forms of media consumed by my participants. I asked about film, books, magazines, music and television; with a focus on revealing popular female characters and celebrities. I asked participants to provide examples of their favourite texts, encouraging them to reflect on what they enjoy about them. My third and fourth area of questioning focused on areas of life that second wave feminists identified and targeted: young women’s aspirations for motherhood, their attitudes and intentions regarding relationships, and how they might combine paid work with family responsibilities. My final section of questioning was created to elicit information about women’s attitudes to feminism as
well as an understanding of their perceptions of previous generations of women. The
order of these sections varied from interview to interview, depending on issues
raised. For example, if a participant mentioned feminist issues while discussing work
and career, I tended to jump to my section of questions about feminism, rather than
ask about relationships and children.

The focus group and in-depth interview transcripts I coded and analysed manually,
by searching for keywords and common themes related to my research questions. For
the relatively small amount of interview data, I decided against using qualitative
research software (such as Nvivo or NUDIST). Instead, immersing myself in the
interview material allowed me to gain insights that can only arise from repeated,
close attention to the data. The critical approach I adopted in analysing the data is
informed by poststructuralist theory, which seeks to identify meaning circulated by
texts, and considers the social and political implications of these meanings. The
analysis involved a careful examination of the language young women used when
talking about work, relationships, motherhood, feminism and popular culture.

The Texts
As the study is concerned with exploring the ways popular culture marks a
generation, I augmented the interviews with an analysis of two prominent cultural
texts that were popular among the interviewees: Sex and the City and Desperate
Housewives. This integration of research methods ensured a strong methodological
and theoretical basis for the study. It allowed me to examine the discourses
circulating in the popular media, the ways in which they echoed the prominent
themes from the interviews, and how young women engage with popular culture.
When I began this project, I did not have particular cultural texts in mind that I
intended to analyse. Instead, I wanted the interview process to reveal what kinds of
cultural products young women were consuming. I asked my participants broadly
about books, films, television shows and magazines, trying to get a sense of what
they liked and why they liked them. The original intention was to analyse a wide
variety of texts that the young women consume. In order to narrow the focus of
discussion, I asked them specifically about favourite female characters or celebrities
they admired. This area of questioning generated a diverse mix of responses, ranging
from actors Angelina Jolie and Cate Blanchett, to female politicians such as Natasha Stott-Despoja; from independent musicians like Ani DiFranco to animated characters like the *Powerpuff Girls*; from the fictional Bridget Jones and her inspiration, Elizabeth Bennett, to the Australian “hornbags” from the comedy television programme *Kath and Kim*. I had originally proposed to conduct a wide-ranging analysis of all the texts my interviewees mentioned, adopting approaches from feminist cultural studies to investigate how women and feminism were represented. However, after realising how much interview data I had accumulated, and due to time restraints, I was required to narrow my focus.

After conducting the interviews, it became apparent that certain texts were more appropriate than others for exploring the prominent themes of the interviews and were more conducive to my research goals. While an analysis of a range of media forms would have been fruitful, it was television that ended up being discussed the most. This was especially the case in the focus groups, where long running (and importantly, currently screening) series were more likely to have been viewed, at least once, by all participants, whereas films or books were less likely to be familiar to everyone. I did not have questions tailored specifically about *Sex and the City* nor *Desperate Housewives*. These programmes arose in the interviews in response to questions about favourite female characters and female role models. The mainstream popularity of *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* is important, since my interest is in popular culture and the way broadly consumed culture helps to frame a generation.

Deciding upon *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* as the texts to explore for this project was a difficult task. Countless interesting texts were discussed during my interviews making it hard to reduce them – particularly when many seemed pertinent to my research questions. I eventually narrowed the field by disregarding all the texts that were mentioned infrequently in the interviews. During the process of elimination two television programmes, *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* emerged as the most commonly talked about cultural texts in my interviews. The nature of ongoing television serials meant that even if some of the women in my study were not avid fans, they had seen or heard enough about the shows to offer an opinion. The popularity of these programmes among my interviewees echoes the huge
success they achieved in Australia and internationally. In 2005, while I was conducting my interviews, the first season of Desperate Housewives was the most watched television programme in Australia, attracting an average 2.2 million viewers each week (Warneke 2005). In 2008 Desperate Housewives screened its fourth season on Australian television. Sex and the City was first broadcast on Australian television in 1998. It ran for six series, concluding on free-to-air television in 2004. At the time of my interviews, it was screening on Foxtel, an Australian PayTV channel and occasional repeat episodes were being played late at night on free-to-air television. In June 2008 a film version of Sex and the City was released, surrounded by much media attention and excitement at the box office. In New York, the setting of the film and the television show, tickets to preview screenings sold for as much as $US620 (Munro 2008). In Sydney, tickets to the premiere sold out and cinemas reported unprecedented levels of online ticket sales (Harvey 2008), clearly proving the ongoing popularity of the series.

Sex and the City and Desperate Housewives, as well as being incredibly popular amongst my interviewees and the wider population, became obvious choices to settle upon, because of the way they parallel one another. While the former is about the tribulations of being a single woman in the city, the latter explores the frustrations of married life in suburbia. Both programmes use voice-over as a narrative tool. Carrie’s narration in Sex and the City is meant to represent her “thinking out loud” as she writes her weekly sex column for a newspaper. She describes the activities and dilemmas of her friends, each week exploring a particular theme that the episode is arranged around. In Desperate Housewives, narration is carried out by a voice from the dead – Mary-Alice – who commits suicide in the first episode, providing the central mystery of the series. Both narrators outline the story arc for us, revealing insights and secrets about the main characters, while simultaneously providing witty aphorisms and commenting on the action. They both feature four strong females as their leading characters and use humour, irony and satire in their story telling. Most importantly, especially in regards to this study, both programmes portray women’s lives in a way that young women can relate to. Indeed, part of the process narrowing the long list of cultural texts that were mentioned in the interviews involved deciding which of them best resonated with the women I interviewed. As I will demonstrate in the chapters to follow, the eight characters from both programmes (Carrie, Miranda,
Samantha, Charlotte from *Sex and the City*; Susan, Bree, Gabrielle, Lynette from *Desperate Housewives*) resonate with the experiences of women in my study, facing the same tensions, opportunities and pressures.

**Poststructuralism and Generation**

My interest in exploring generation is bound up with desire to uncover discursive patterns in the historical present. Elspeth Probyn (1993) points to the concern with historic specificity inherent in Foucault’s work. His project is historical because “it allow[s] people to see that the ways in which they live, the concepts by which they organize their thoughts and feelings, the ‘habitual order that they enjoy or suffer under – that all of these things are the results of ‘very precise historical changes’. In other words, the relations that individuals maintain in society, and the interdictions that hold us, can be ‘de-naturalized’, their historicity shown” (Probyn 1993: 132).

While Probyn uses Foucault in arguing that care of the self is crucial for developing new ways of theorising and writing the self in feminist research, it is the historicity of Foucault’s approach that concerns me in this thesis. As Probyn points out, Foucault demonstrates that any attempt to understand the way people live or the ideas that structure their attitudes and behaviours must pay attention to the particular historical conditions that shape them. My mobilisation of Foucault’s (and indeed Mannheim’s) work is to better understand the discourses of this historically specific moment, as well as to appreciate the way social change necessarily impacts upon individuals, their aspirations and their beliefs. An examination of “generation” can provide insights into the historical and cultural contexts that construct identities and practices.

According to Gavin Kendall and Gary Wickham (1999) Foucault’s use of history does not assume a progress narrative. Foucault is “not seeking to find out how the present has emerged from the past. Rather the point is to use history as a way of diagnosing the present” (Kendall and Wickham 1999: 4). In investigating how things have changed for women, generationally, I must ensure I do not presuppose a story of feminist progress. I do not want to try to find out how current feminism might have replaced or superseded past feminisms, but rather I want to explore how the women’s movement of the past has influenced the present. I am examining the
present, but trying to fit it into a generational context, which by its nature, is an
historical task. Foucault establishes two methods for investigating the social world –
what he termed archaeology and genealogy. Archaeology is “the process of
investigating the archives of discourse” (Kendall and Wickham 1999: 25). A
genealogy is Foucault’s method for examining history via a discourse analysis. It
traces patterns of power, how it is exercised and how it produces knowledge (Brooks
1997: 51). A genealogy is similar to archaeology but “Foucault added to it a new
concern with the analysis of power, a concern which manifests itself in the ‘history
of the present’” (Kendall and Wickham 1999: 29). I have always enjoyed the image
of an archaeological dig through discourse, cutting through a cross-section of society
in an attempt to understand how the pieces all fit together, but I am equally interested
in a Foucauldian genealogy. There is something about a “history of the present”,
which strikes me as useful, particularly when discussing generations of feminism.
What comes to mind instead of the grid of an archaeological dig, is a diagram of a
family-tree, with intersect lines signifying relationships and connections. For a
project centred on the notion of generation, a genealogical approach seems more than
apt.

For Foucault (1972) discourses are composed of networks of statements. Discourse
analysis in my project, is concerned with uncovering statements to try and
understand how discourses operate, how they are linked, how power operates within
discourses, and how particular knowledges are formed. Using a Foucauldian
genealogical approach, I identified discursive fragments (statements) by undertaking
a detailed reading of the interview transcriptions. Then I was able to draw links
between these statements to come to an understanding about the discursive contexts
that are marking this generation of women. In this way, my analysis highlights how
particular discourses frame young women’s attitudes towards feminism and their
expectations for their futures.

Many feminist authors have often outlined the usefulness of the work of Foucault for
feminism. His focus on power, knowledge, subjectivity and the body have proven
very influential on feminist thought and practice. Books exploring the tensions
involved when feminists adopt or adapt Foucauldian theory attest to the importance
of his ideas for feminism (Hekman 1996; McNay 1992; Ramazanoglu 1993; Barrett
and Phillips 1992; Cain 1993; Sawicki 1991). As Brooks (1997) discusses, Foucault subverts concepts of truth intrinsic to Western liberal humanism, from which feminism derived many of its assumptions. In this way, Foucault offers a challenge to some aspects of feminist thinking (Brooks 1997: 53). For Foucault, power is positive and productive (in the sense that it produces knowledge) and this is sometimes seen as at odds with the feminist view of male power as repressive (Brooks 1997: 57). Jana Sawicki (1991) argues that Foucault offers a valuable alternative to feminist accounts that construct monolithic notions of male power over women. Foucault’s work opens up ways of understanding the operation of power, and possibilities of resistance, at the micro-level of everyday life. According to Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002: 96), Foucault’s genealogical method “explores not who has power, but rather the patterns of the exercise of power through the interplay of discourses”. He traces examples of how power is made legitimate within particular historical moments, examining the way both knowledge and power are constituted. His genealogical method influences my approach, in that I too am seeking to uncover how particular dominant forms of knowledge are shaping the current generation.

As well as offering new ways of understanding power relations, many feminists adopt his work because it complements feminist investigations into the social construction of gender and sexuality (Brooks 1997: 55). However, feminist theorists warn us not to appropriate Foucault’s theory uncritically, particularly because he paid insufficient attention to gender (Brooks 1997: 56). Foucault has been criticised by feminists for providing an androcentric account, and not making space for understanding the unequal power relationship between men and women (McLaren 1997: 115; Soper 1993: 29). He has been challenged for not providing the means for understanding why power constitutes some ‘truths’ as more authoritative than others (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002: 101). I intend to use his work with caution. I appreciate the analogy of theory as a “box of tools” (Foucault and Deleuze 1977). Gilles Deleuze, in a discussion with Foucault, described theory as a toolkit, as a box of tools that can be used to help understand the social world (1977: 208). Theory then is not just a tool. Rather, it is a collection of tools from which one can select for different needs. Certain tools can be lifted from the box and used for various tasks, perhaps different tasks than the original theorist intended. Therefore, I intend to
understand poststructural theory as a collection of implements that I can appropriate to meet my own purposes. In this thesis I draw from the feminist poststructuralist toolbox and the feminist cultural studies toolbox in order to craft the theoretical and analytical approaches that are most useful.

As Brooks (1997: 68) argues, while Foucault is significant for feminism on many levels, because he does not provide a means “to fully reflect the diversity of women’s lives and experiences, it is important to retain the capacity to identify the structural contradictions ‘in difference’. The nature of such contradictions cannot be accounted for in discursive analysis alone”. It is because of this lack of attention to gender that my methodology employs the concept of postfeminism in order to structure my empirical analysis. My version of postfeminism incorporates aspects of Foucault’s poststructuralist thinking, but with a closer attention to the specificities of gender. My approach is informed by feminist poststructuralist theory and recent cultural studies research that has explored the connections between postfeminism and popular culture. Ann Brooks’ (1997) book, Postfeminisms, offers new ways of understanding the significance and usefulness of the concept of postfeminism. As discussed earlier, she defines postfeminism as the critical engagement of feminism with other theoretical and philosophical strands such as postcolonialism, postmodernism and poststructuralism. Her book details the way feminist thought has been transformed by these “posts”, outlining how they offer a challenge to some of second wave feminism’s epistemological assumptions. For Brooks (1997: 1) postfeminism is not the negation of feminism, but rather it represents a process of ongoing change within feminist theory and politics. Her conceptualisation of postfeminism, particularly its relationship with poststructuralism, provides the backdrop to my consideration of the productive connotations of the term.

Feminism has a complicated relationship with poststructuralist thought. My theoretical and methodological approach, grounded in feminist poststructuralism, is strongly influenced by the work of Chris Weedon (1997) and Nicola Gavey (1989). The writing of these theorists informs my understanding of feminism, while their approach to Foucauldian notions of discourse frames my interpretive agenda. Poststructuralist feminism informed by the work of Foucault is concerned with locating knowledge within particular historical conditions. Undergirding my thesis is
a desire to understand the socio-historical climate that young women have grown up in and the discourses young women are drawing upon to make sense of their lives. Poststructuralist thought rejects the idea that there is an absolute truth. Therefore my research is not intended to discover the ‘truth’ or the ‘reality’ of young women’s attitudes, but rather it seeks to understand the discursive frameworks that shape their attitudes. For poststructuralists, knowledges are discursively produced through language. Therefore, the language used by the participants in my project was closely examined to understand how their knowledges had been shaped by dominant discourses. This poststructural approach enabled me to explore the complexities and contradictions inherent in the interview data.

Chris Weedon provides a clear account of the possibilities of feminist poststructuralism, arguing that it opens up ways to analyse the operation of power in specific historic instances and explore opportunities of resistance to it (Weedon 1997: 40). She argues that feminist poststructuralism points to the “discursive production of conflicting and competing meanings” within particular social and historical contexts (Weedon 1997: 82). This theoretical understanding of the importance of discourse in shaping meaning and knowledge forms the starting point of my definition of postfeminism. Meanings are not ahistorical. My intention in developing postfeminism as a theoretical and analytical tool is to establish it in such a way that recognises the importance of historical specificity. This is particularly important with regard to my interest in generation. Generations are historically specific.

The methodological approach I adopt in analysing and interpreting my empirical data was informed by Nicola Gavey’s (1989) influential feminist poststructuralist work on discourse analysis. For her, discourse analysis is concerned with uncovering the social and cultural discourses that women and men are able to draw upon in any historically specific moment in time. She argues that these discourses constitute subject positions and can work to challenge or reify existing gender norms (1989: 466). According to Gavey, a discourse analysis pays close attention to the socio-historical context of language and its relationship to configurations of power. A discourse analysis is more than an exploration of language. Poststructuralist discourse analysis is concerned with exposing the way discourses construct social
knowledge and shape the practices and subjectivities of individuals. Gavey (1989) defines discourse analysis as a close examination of texts:

[w]ith a view to discerning discursive patterns of meaning, contradictions, and inconsistencies. It is an approach that identifies and names language processes people use to constitute their own and others’ understanding of personal and social phenomena. These processes are related to the reproduction of or challenge to the distribution of power between social groups and within institutions. (1989: 467)

In order to make sense of my interview material and in order to scrutinise Sex and the City and Desperate Housewives, I carried out a close examination of the texts. I began with the interview data, carefully dissecting the language my participants used and uncovering dominant themes and patterns. I manually searched for recurring subjects and discourses, and classified (or coded) them under headings such as “independence”, “equality”, “choices and opportunities”, “individualism”, and so on. Through careful examination of the language used by participants, I could trace consistencies across the different interviews and the dominant discursive patterns within the data began to become clear.

**Connecting the Interviews and Texts: A Postfeminist Approach**

Feminism’s “turn to culture” is one important element in the theoretical and political shift in contemporary feminism, and thus, significant in my understanding of postfeminism. Relatedly, the incorporation of feminist sensibilities into the popular is a key concern for much recent (post)feminist scholarship (Hollows 2006: 104). My thesis arrives at a juncture whereby these dual processes (i.e. the shift within feminism and the complex portrayal of it in the media) can be understood within a generational paradigm: a paradigm that I am labelling postfeminist. As already indicated, my empirical research involved a two-pronged method – interviews with women aged 18-23 and a textual analysis of two popular television programmes. Negotiating the links between my interview data and the cultural texts was perhaps the most difficult aspect of this project. As I became immersed in my interview data, I realised that what I wanted to do with the cultural texts was use them as a way of
illuminating the dominant themes arising in my discussions with young women. This led me to think about how popular cultural icons tend to become generationally significant. Certain texts and media moments come to signify particular periods in human history. Instead of focusing on how women were represented in these texts, like other feminist cultural studies work, I use them to help highlight aspects of this generation.

Thus, my motivation for incorporating an analysis of popular culture into my research is twofold. First, I am better able to illustrate the prominent themes from my interviews by examining how popular female television characters navigate similar issues. Second, at a broader level, it allows me to explore the relationships between popular culture and young women’s engagement with feminism. Through a detailed examination of the discourses the young women draw upon when discussing their favourite shows and female characters I am able to knit together the ethnographic data with the cultural analysis. In the empirical chapters to follow, the themes from the interviews and the texts are interwoven to illustrate the prominent feminist discourses of this specific socio-historical moment that make this era postfeminist.

Feminist media and cultural studies has a long history of researching the connections between female audiences and the texts they consume. For example, Press and Livingstone (2006) outline how media ethnography posed a challenge to earlier audience studies, which tended to view an audience as a passive, homogenous entity (2006: 177). They suggest that ethnographic audience research was pioneered by feminist researchers such as Janice Radway (1987) and Ien Ang (1985), who sought to understand how audiences engaged with and interpreted certain cultural texts. No doubt Radway’s (1987) study of romance fiction readers, and Ang’s (1985) research into the television soap-opera Dallas are pioneering works in ethnographic media studies. Janice Radway’s (1987) book, Reading the Romance, was a groundbreaking study in the field of popular culture and feminism. Radway investigated the ways in which a group of women read and understood romance fiction. According to Joanne Hollows, Radway “combined methods of textual analysis from literary studies with ‘ethnographic’ methods from the social sciences which attempt to understand the meanings people bring to their cultural practices” (Hollows 2000: 77). My combination of ethnographic fieldwork and textual analysis is in some ways
analogous to Radway’s approach. However, I am not trying to uncover the meanings audiences bring to the texts they consume. Rather, I am merging the ethnographic with an analysis of popular television in order to explore the way feminist discourses are played out in popular culture and how young women engage with them.

Charlotte Brunsdon (2005: 113) argues that in recent feminist television criticism many authors reclaim the pleasures of watching female characters by distancing themselves from earlier second wave criticisms of popular culture. They do this, she suggests, by first establishing an ‘obvious’ feminist interpretation wherein characters or programmes are criticised for being too feminine or for being obsessed with finding a man, and then setting up an oppositional reading. The second interpretation makes space for the complex ways in which the heroine navigates her life without dismissing the text for not being ‘feminist’ enough. I am not aiming to establish Sex and the City or Desperate Housewives in opposition to second wave feminism, nor am I mobilising my own engagement with the programmes to reclaim them as feminist (although my own enjoyment of the texts inevitably plays a role in the way I interpret them). Instead, I am investigating young women’s engagements with these shows in order to examine how feminism is contested in popular culture and to better understand how this generation of women position themselves in relation to feminism.

In outlining the work of influential cultural theorist, Stuart Hall, Joanne Hollows (2000) defines four ways in which pop culture is defined. She points out that in Hall’s estimation, popular culture is:

a site of struggle, a place where conflicts between dominant and subordinate groups are played out, and distinctions between the cultures of these groups are continually constructed and reconstructed...Such an approach makes central three key ideas: that the analysis of popular culture is always the analysis of power relations; that these struggles, and what is at stake in them, must always be studied historically; and that subjectivity – or our sense of who we are – must also be studied historically. (Hollows 2000: 25)
This cultural studies approach, with its attention to historical context, is the approach that my thesis adopts. I see popular culture as an arena for the circulation of dominant discourses, including feminist discourses. It is also a site where dominant discourses can be challenged. Young women’s engagement with these discourses makes popular culture a site where feminism is contested. I therefore examine the way young women engage with popular texts in order to better understand this generation’s relationship with feminism. I mobilise postfeminism as a way to explore the discourses in popular television series and how they correlate with the current socio-cultural climate. I use “postfeminist characteristics” that have been identified within the feminist literature to structure my analysis of the texts and develop my argument that this era can be characterised as postfeminist.

**Postfeminist Characteristics in Television**

Feminist researchers have begun to map the complicated ways in which feminism and popular culture are intertwined. In an essay examining postfeminism in television, Amanda Lotz (2001) surveys the contested definitions of postfeminism and argues for its reclamation as a valuable tool for examining television programmes. She suggests that postfeminism “can provide a useful theoretical framework for understanding discourse in contemporary series, some recent character representations, and the corresponding cultural atmosphere” (2001: 106). Lotz (2001) provides an excellent account of the contested definitions of postfeminism and stresses the importance of television criticism for understanding the contemporary socio-cultural context:

Feminist theory is beginning to offer tools for understanding the complexity of living feminism in a world full of tangled issues and priorities for women with many different opportunities and privileges. Likewise, the characters and ideas appearing in the widely shared stories offered as television texts also indicate this complexity. Examining the intricacy of these images provides a much more productive route for feminist media criticism than simple categorization of new characters and series as anti-feminist because of character flaws or moments of conservative ideology. Especially when series and characters resonate with audiences to the degree that many recently have,
we must explore what is in these texts with an eye to their complexity instead of quickly dismissing them as part of a hegemonic, patriarchal, capitalist system. (Lotz 2001: 114)

Lotz’s justification for examining media images with an analysis of them as feminist, rather than antifeminist is significant for my project. Lotz’s argument provides ample validation of my choice to conduct a discourse analysis of popular television texts. Her characterisation of postfeminist television is a useful starting point for my analysis of *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives*. In her essay, Lotz (2001: 115-116) identifies four postfeminist attributes, or characteristics, which help to structure my analysis of the television programmes. Other scholars have positioned *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* as postfeminist (Gerhard 2005; Arthurs 2003; Engel 2007; Richardson 2006). The goal of my research is to use these texts as a way of illuminating the connections between popular culture, generation and feminism and to highlight what is postfeminist about the *era*.

Scholars differ in their approach to postfeminism and cultural texts. For example, Moseley and Read (2002) express reservations about Lotz’s (2001) essay. They suggest that Lotz draws an untenable distinction between theoretical/authentic forms and popular understandings of feminism and postfeminism (2002: 234). They argue that Lotz’s project sets out to concoct a theoretical version of postfeminism that can then be “mapped on to popular forms” (2002: 234). I too would be sceptical of such a move. However, my reading of Lotz differs from that of Moseley and Read. Lotz (2001) aims to expand postfeminist criticism but not by mapping postfeminist theory onto the popular. Rather, she is demonstrating that certain characteristics of contemporary television programmes highlight “an underlying postfeminist perspective” (2001: 114). My project is similarly concerned with identifying and understanding what it is about the current socio-cultural climate that can be considered postfeminist. I am using Lotz’s work selectively and cautiously and as a starting point. Her four attributes, as she mentions herself, are not exhaustive (2001: 114) but they provide a useful way of structuring my analysis.

The first postfeminist characteristic that Lotz discusses is television that explores the “diverse relations to power women inhabit” (2001: 115). Series that exhibit this
attribute may depict characters that represent diverse perspectives on female experience and which highlight that Woman is not a universal category. Diversity among women, and their differing relationship to patriarchy and capitalism is a key concern of postfeminist theory. This awareness of the limitations of white liberal feminism alerts us to the ways in which feminism has shifted. I examine the extent to which *Desperate Housewives* and *Sex and the City* exhibit this characteristic, in the process teasing out the complex ways in which my interview participants engaged with the female characters. The second of Lotz’s attributes is found in television programmes that “depict varied feminist solutions” (2001: 116). In highlighting the postfeminist nature of contemporary culture, I investigate the sorts of feminist critiques these texts offer in order to uncover the ways in which popular culture is a site of feminist debate.

According to Lotz (2001: 116), a third postfeminist attribute is evident in texts that offer a challenge to “binary categories of gender and sexuality” (Lotz 2001: 116). I examine how *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* can be seen to subvert dominant understandings of sex and gender, but in addition, I examine the way young women adopt feminist language when they are critiquing the texts. Lotz’s fourth postfeminist attribute occurs in television that illustrates “contemporary struggles faced by women and feminists” (Lotz 2001: 116). Chapters Five and Six are dedicated to a discussion of this postfeminist characteristic. In conducting my analysis of both the interviews and the cultural texts, I uncover parallels between the pressures and tensions experienced by today’s young women and those portrayed by the television characters. In doing so, I am able to shed light on the ways in which the current historical moment can be characterised as postfeminist.

While the postfeminist attributes that Lotz identifies provide a useful way to structure my analysis of the programmes, my project is different from hers. I use Lotz’s four postfeminist attributes as a way of organising my empirical data. However, unlike Lotz and other feminist researchers I have outlined, I am not solely interested in whether or not the texts may be considered feminist or postfeminist. Rather, my goal is to establish postfeminism as a valuable concept that characterises the socio-cultural climate. An analysis of popular texts, coupled with interviews with young women, enables me to illuminate the current era and the way it shapes the
generation of young women who have grown up in it. Rather than simply identifying postfeminist characteristics exhibited in the texts, I use them to demonstrate how popular culture is a site of feminist contestation and to explain why this era can be considered postfeminist.

As I have argued in previous chapters, popular culture is generationally significant – both shaping and reflecting the dominant socio-cultural currents of a period. Popular texts reveal the omnipresence of feminist discourses in mainstream culture, and uncover societal attitudes towards – and expectations of – women in this postfeminist era. Building upon recent cultural studies approaches to postfeminism, I have outlined the usefulness of developing the concept of postfeminism for examining and elucidating the current socio-cultural climate. In the following chapters I reveal the connections between this generation of women and the cultural texts they are consuming. I examine the ways in which contemporary television series rework the tensions and paradoxes that are facing young women in the current historical moment. I seek to unveil features of the postfeminist era; focusing particularly on the way the characters in these texts navigate the same pressures and experiences as the women I interviewed. In this way, my analysis uncovers how pop culture can help us understand generational contexts. What I reveal is how these texts become sites of feminist struggles via the way young women engage with them. This then enables me to explore the complex relationships that this generation has with feminism.
Chapter Five: Postfeminism in Popular Culture

In developing my argument that popular culture acts as a marker of generation, this chapter draws together the ethnographic component of my research with a discourse analysis of *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives*. These popular television series can tell us something about *now* – about the current times and the current generation of young women. I am not concerned simply with labelling certain texts as postfeminist or not. Rather, my focus is to demonstrate how the popular texts resonate with women and how they navigate feminist discourses. In teasing out the consistencies between the texts and the lives of young women, I demonstrate that just as popular television can be characterised as postfeminist, so too can the historical climate in which these shows are created and consumed. My analysis reveals the processes by which postfeminist texts are shaping attitudes to feminism and providing an arena for feminist contestation. Popular culture provides opportunities for women to draw upon feminist discourses, as well as dominant discourses of the era; thus creating a space where feminist struggles are played out and where relationships with feminism are negotiated.

In some ways, *Desperate Housewives* represents the flipside of *Sex and the City*. After its release *Desperate Housewives* was commonly heralded as *Sex and the City* for married women. On the surface, the women in *Desperate Housewives* have achieved the ideal – the house, the husband, the family – the sorts of goals that Carrie and Charlotte from *Sex and the City* long for. However, in Wisteria Lane, the fictional suburban street where *Desperate Housewives* is set, nothing is ideal. The programme makes clear that home and family life is not always as it seems; that suburbia has a dark side and is sometimes a sad and sinister place. The single women (*Sex and the City*) and the married women (*Desperate Housewives*) all experience problems. Neither state is held up as ideal, but as I will demonstrate, both programmes feature strong female characters whose struggles to live up to societal expectations strike a chord with young women.
“Everyone relates to at least one character”

In order to examine the postfeminist nature of the current historical moment my cultural analysis focuses on *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives*. The characters in both series resonate strongly with the women I interviewed for this project, making them ideal for an exploration of the dominant concerns of this generation. This chapter demonstrates how these texts navigate feminist discourses and negotiate some of the dominant issues and tensions that are facing contemporary women. My analysis reveals the processes by which postfeminist texts are shaping attitudes to feminism and providing an arena for feminist contestation. I reveal the connections between the fictional lives of the television characters and the real lives of young women in order to illuminate the significance of popular culture in marking a generation. Young women can identify with the imperfections, insecurities and contradictions experienced by the lead characters in these popular television programmes. The ability to identify with them is explained by one of my focus group participants, Natalie, when she is discussing why she enjoys *Sex and the City*:

I think everyone relates to at least one character or aspires to be one of the characters. Doesn’t matter who it is, whether it be the morality of Charlotte or the work ethic of Miranda or the kinda carefree kind of feminist woman of Carrie, or the sex-side of Samantha. I don’t know. I think everyone has, like, parts of the characters that they aspire to have, or that they aspire to be, and I don’t think that’s such a bad thing. (Natalie, 19, suburban focus group)

Natalie’s suggestion that “everyone relates to at least one character” points to the popularity of *Sex and the City* with women. She identifies four diverse personality types in the characters of *Sex and the City*. As Kim Akass and Janet McCabe (2004: 184) note, the four leads are typically seen to represent four different types of women: “the unabashed Samantha, the analytical Carrie, the cynical Miranda, and the optimist Charlotte”. Indeed, much of the humour in the show comes from the conflicting opinions that each woman brings to their discussions. Natalie suggests that these female representations are positive for young women. She finds the diversity of characters appealing, and suggests that they can aspire to be like more
than one of them, picking and choosing “parts of the characters” that they identify with.

Similarly, April talks about how she and her friends recognise aspects of their own behaviour and relate it to certain characters in the show:

Yeah, and we do stuff, like, we’ll be like, “Ah, that’s such a Miranda thing to say”. Like, we have friends who’re like, “You are so Charlotte!” or whatever.

(April, 19, suburban focus group)

Clearly, popular culture is important in structuring some young women’s understandings of their own lives. April and her friends compare one another to the characters in *Sex and the City* when analysing their own experiences. April goes on to examine why the characters can be seen as good role models, particularly in the way they discuss issues that affect women.

For those of us who can [relate to *Sex and the City*], I think they kind of enable us to see lots of people on the screen, because it’s presented on the screen...because they talk about body image and that kind of stuff on there, and they talk about problems in the workforce, and yeah, if they show problems like that in a positive way, then I think it’s a good thing.

(April, 19, suburban focus group)

April and Natalie both agree that it is positive to see diverse female characters on television and to watch them deal with problems that women face. April likes the fact that *Sex and the City* broaches topics such as “body image” issues and “problems in the workforce”. Her recognition of the benefits to women of seeing gender issues being addressed on television, points to one of the key features of my characterisation of the postfeminist cultural climate: the extent to which feminist discourses have permeated the mainstream. Similarly, *Desperate Housewives* resonates with young women because of the issues it deals with. In discussing why she loves the series, Katrina talks about the way she can relate to it:

I just love it! I don’t know. I think it’s just because it’s so, kind of, I don’t
know. I just kind of like that dirty laundry sort of – realising that no-one’s perfect and that we all have our little secrets and fetishes and stuff to hide away. And it’s just funny. I think the characters are really good. (Katrina, 22, telephone interview, regional city)

Aside from enjoying the humour and the strong characters in the show, Katrina appreciates *Desperate Housewives* for the way it demonstrates that we all have secrets and that “no-one’s perfect”. In the following sections I continue to elucidate the way characters in *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* correspond with the experiences of young women. I mobilise Amanda Lotz’s (2001) essay on postfeminist television criticism as a way of organising my empirical data and structuring my discussion.

**Postfeminist Attribute One: disparate perspectives on female experience**

Amanda Lotz’s (2001) understanding of postfeminism, like my own, is based upon Ann Brooks’ (1997) definition, which strives to encapsulate the “conceptual shift within feminism from debates around equality to debates around difference” (Brooks 1997: 4). Incorporating aspects of postmodern, poststructural and postcolonial theory, postfeminism challenges some of the assumptions made by second wave feminism, such as its claims to universalism and also its racism and heterosexism (Brooks 1997: 1). Lotz argues that the first guideline for recognising postfeminist television are storylines “that explore the diverse relations to power women inhabit” (2001: 115, original emphasis). Lotz (2001: 115) suggests that television programmes that exhibit this characteristic might “construct female characters who are complex and distinct from one another despite the commonality of womanhood”. Postfeminism incorporates theory from women-of-colour feminists in challenging liberal feminist notions of universal sisterhood (Lotz 2001: 115). *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* challenge notions of uniform womanhood through their representation of diversity among the main characters.
The divergent opinions expressed by the lead characters in *Sex and the City*, are demonstrated in their response to Carrie’s experience in the episode, “The Power of Female Sex” (Series 1: Episode 5). This episode explores issues of female power and sexuality from a number of different angles. Revealed here is the frightening extent of Carrie’s shoe addiction, when her excessive consumption results in her credit card being destroyed by the sales assistant. Carrie’s acquaintance, Amalita, steps in to help. Amalita is an Italian woman who uses her sexuality to fund an extravagant global lifestyle. Or, as Carrie points out, Amalita does not work for a living but has “a dizzying sexual power that she exploit[s] to her full advantage”. Amalita buys the shoes for Carrie as a gift. Carrie is drawn into a world of sex, money and power when Amalita sets her up on a date with a handsome French fellow, Gille. We see Carrie on her date, which involves a romantic walk in the park accompanied by an accordion soundtrack. Carrie is sufficiently swept off her feet with the romance of it all because we are then told that she spends the night with him. Carrie wakes the next morning to discover that not only has Gille left the hotel, he has left one-thousand dollars on the bedside table with a ‘thank you’ note. Carrie is so confused by this occurrence that she invites her girlfriends to the hotel to help her make sense of it — and to share a room service brunch. Carrie does not know whether to be flattered or insulted that Gille paid her money for their night together. As Susan Zieger (2004: 105) puts it, Carrie, Miranda and Samantha “debate whether keeping it makes her a whore”. Each of the friends offers a different opinion, as they characteristically dissect the experience and share their wisdom. Miranda and Samantha disagree about the trading of money for sex:

Samantha: Money is power. Sex is power. Therefore, getting money for sex is an exchange in power.

Miranda: Don’t listen to the dime store Camille Paglia.

This brief interchange highlights that the women in *Sex and the City* bring “disparate perspectives” (Lotz 2001: 115) to their frank discussions of sexuality. They do not all react in the same way to this unusual situation, suggesting it is a complex issue that they interpret differently. Lotz’s first postfeminist attribute stresses the importance of diversity among women, making clear that women “experience their subjectivity differently and dependent on context” (2001: 115). *Sex and the City* is a programme
not afraid to portray diverse perspectives on the complexities of power and sex. While Samantha sees no problem in Carrie spending the money that the Frenchman leaves after a fun evening together, Miranda argues that Samantha’s attitude is harmful to women. Miranda contends that that kind of logic has been used to exploit women throughout the ages. Clearly, *Sex and the City*, with its exploration of the contradictions surrounding women, sex and power, can be considered postfeminist. It shows characters working through the tensions and challenges of this era. Congruent with Lotz’s first attribute, the characters in *Sex and the City* represent diverse women with distinct and varied outlooks. Furthermore, the characters are not only familiar with feminist discourses, as evidenced by Miranda’s reference to Camille Paglia, but they have debates about these issues while discussing their own sex lives. This demonstrates the extent to which feminism is entwined in popular culture, a key feature of postfeminism.

*Desperate Housewives* also features four diverse female characters. Despite their hardships, each woman in this series finds her own way of coping. In “There Won’t be Trumpets” (Series 1: Episode 17), the lead characters are portrayed as strong, self-reliant and powerful in their own way. For example, Gabrielle proves she can survive independently by returning to modelling work while her husband, Carlos, is under house arrest after being charged with fraud. She also successfully negotiates a large compensation sum from the hospital. Susan is a single mother, raising a teenage daughter and handling the emotional aftermath of a divorce. Lynette does not always feel as though she is handling motherhood well, but she is consistently portrayed as doing the best she can, valiantly running a household full of children, when her area of expertise is the business world. Bree too, is depicted as strong – attempting to keep her family together and uphold an image of perfection, even as her husband is threatening to leave her. When Mary-Alice, the narrator, ties the threads of the story together at the end of the episode, she says, “We all honour heroes for different reasons...But mostly we honour heroes because at one point or another, we all dream of being rescued. Of course, if the right hero doesn’t come along, sometimes we just have to rescue ourselves” (Series 1: Episode 17). This episode demonstrates that *Desperate Housewives* complies with Lotz’s first postfeminist attribute, in that it depicts “female characters who are complex and distinct from one another” (2001: 115) and who inhabit differing relations to power. *Desperate Housewives* highlights
that the ‘happily ever after’ fairytale does not always eventuate, but when it doesn’t, the main characters are resourceful and powerful women. The young women in my study admire the characters for these reasons. The four lead women in this series exhibit diverse experiences and understandings of womanhood, dealing with their problems in unique ways and expressing divergent perspectives on issues surrounding sex and power.

“Power to women”

Overwhelmingly, the young women in my study identified the characters in *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* as strong, powerful and independent. My respondents suggested that the television series positively represent the power women possess, the opportunities women have available and their agency in achieving their hopes and dreams. For example, in discussing her favourite television shows, Kim nominates the characters in *Sex and the City* as positive role models for women:

All time favourite is *Sex and the City* – it represents how much power women really have! (Kim, 23, email interview, regional city)

Suzy echoes Kim’s suggestion that *Sex and the City* symbolises women’s power, arguing that it depicts a positive representation of powerful women that young women can draw upon:

I think for possibly our age, being 19 and older, it’s a good, it’s possibly a good role model just for the fact that we can all be open and powerful. (Suzy, 19, suburban focus group)

In her response to my question about female role models, Alana mentioned characters from *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives*:

The green Powerpuff girl, Sam from *Sex and the City*…They all know what they want and go get it! And Susan from *Desperate Housewives* and my mum! They’re both adorable. (Alana, 20, email interview, rural)
Alana talked about the characters’ ability to get what they want out of life as an admirable trait. Natalie repeats her praise for the representation of determined women:

Yeah, yeah I think realistically, if you’re a woman and you want to get somewhere in life, you’ve gotta take on some of that power to women attitude and I think that the show [Sex and the City] is a good indication, you know, of ways that you can do that and still be different. (Natalie, 19, suburban focus group)

Natalie relates the strength of the fictional characters to real women, arguing that television provides opportunities for women to adopt a “power to women attitude”. Not only has Natalie recognised the feminist themes of the programme, revealing the widespread incorporation of feminist discourses into popular culture, she has unwittingly echoed ‘power feminism’, a discourse promoted by so-called ‘conservative feminists’. Natalie’s argument that women must “take on some of that power to women” if they want to get ahead, resembles arguments put forward by Naomi Wolf (1993). According to Catharine Orr (1997: 15), Wolf’s “solution is to seize power – economic, political and sexual power – and throw off the yoke of victimization”. As previously discussed, I am critical of this version of feminism, agreeing with Orr (1997) in categorising conservative authors Naomi Wolf (1993), Katie Roiphe (1993), and Rene Denfeld (1995) as “feminist dissenters” (Orr 1997: 34). Orr makes a useful distinction between these authors and the more progressive third wave feminists, typified by anthologies such as those edited by Barbara Findlen (1995) and Rebecca Walker (1995). However, the very existence of these diverse kinds of feminism is crucial to my understanding of postfeminism. The feminist dissenters and third wave writers have emerged out of the socio-cultural climate that I am labelling postfeminist. As I argued in Chapter Three, postfeminism has provided the conditions for the emergence of diverse (often contradictory) feminist perspectives. As my interview participant, Natalie, parallels the feminist dissenters in her claims about “power to women” and as Samantha in Sex and the City echoes the arguments of Camille Paglia, we can see that a key characteristic of postfeminism is its diversity. There is more than one way to be a powerful woman; more than one
way to be a feminist. Furthermore, the postfeminist climate is revealed in the extent to which feminist discourses are entwined in the mainstream – reflected not only in pop cultural texts, but unveiled in the complex way young women engage with these shows.

A further example of the way feminist discourse is entangled in the popular imagination is evident in the way many young women perceive female autonomy in a positive light. Being autonomous was certainly hailed as a favourable attribute among the young women I interviewed. The characters they admire are those who retain a high level of autonomy and they look up to women who celebrate being single. For example, Naomi is pleased with the way *Sex and the City* depicts single women as being free and happy:

*Sex and the City* because it is liberating and funny to watch as a single independent female. Even though I am not their age yet, I can identify with many of the characters and it portrays being single as fun & liberating rather than just lonely. (Naomi, 21, email interview, metropolitan)

Jennifer also recognised the importance of portraying female autonomy in a positive light, even though she does not aspire to be like Carrie and her friends:

Well, ah, I guess *Sex and the City* was positive because it did kind of totally transform the way people viewed being a single woman. But they’re not really people I would aspire to personally. Just because they’re a little bit shallow and you know, they’re just looking for sex really. And that’s fine for them, but I guess I can appreciate that they are quite revolutionary female role models. (Jennifer, 19, telephone interview, regional city)

Peta shares their optimism regarding depictions of single, independent women, who do not require a male partner to feel fulfilled. She suggests that *Desperate Housewives* recognises that modern women can get by without a man:

I just think with all, like, the media portraying all these, you know, *Desperate Housewives*, that shows that women can be independent and they don’t need
a man, and that type of thing. They don’t need a guy to get through life. There’s a lot more social awareness that you know, you can get through life without men. I think there’s not as much pressure. (Peta, 18, telephone interview, metropolitan)

Rachael shares Peta’s enthusiasm for depictions of women who are self-reliant. She suggests that the women in *Sex and the City* are good role models not only because they have professional careers but because they do not need to depend upon men.

Um, well just because they’re professionals. They’re kind of not dependent on any man for emotional, financial or any other kind of social support. I guess in terms of female role models, yeah, I think they’re good. Maybe on a broader scale, maybe they could be a bit more politically aware of things, but yeah, I think that they’re good. (Rachael, 19, telephone interview, metropolitan)

While Rachael applauds *Sex and the City* for portraying independent career women, she remains somewhat critical of the female representations. The young women in my study do not just accept characters, they actively engage with them and reflect upon them. Rachael criticises the characters for their lack of politics while praising them for their independence from men. Her engagement with feminist discourses is a crucial characteristic of the postfeminist era I am highlighting in this thesis.

**Postfeminist Attribute Two: varied feminist solutions**

The categories of postfeminist characteristics that Lotz (2001) outlines overlap with one another. The second attribute is related to the first in the way it stresses that women experience oppressions from multiple sites. She suggests that television series might address this via “depictions of varied feminist solutions and loose organizations of activism” (2001: 116, original emphasis). This criterion for assessing postfeminist television, can be found in the progressive way in which *Sex and the City* offers alternative kinds of family. In particular, the portrayal of “varied feminist solutions” (2001: 116) is evident in the programme’s celebration of female companionship as a source of strength for women. According to Nelson (2006: 91),
“Carrie and her friends create new networks of support, redefining the notion of family”. A number of authors have also pointed to the importance of female friendship in this series (Ross 2005: 120; Henry 2004b; Jermyn 2004; Gerhard 2005; Arthurs 2003: 87). Sharon Marie Ross suggests that Sex and the City offers “female friendship as a potential site for contesting gender-role ideologies that are linked to sexuality” (Ross 2005: 120), while Jane Arthurs (2003: 87) argues that their friendship provides an alternative to dependence upon men.

Sex and the City fits Lotz’s second postfeminist criterion in the way it portrays women negotiating and sharing the problems they face. The close bond between the women is an empowering force in their lives. Their conversations represent “loose organizations of activism” (Lotz 2001: 116) as they share and dissect their experiences. The circle of friends “measure themselves against each other, listening in sympathy or outrage to how one of their friends might handle the same situation” (Gerhard 2005: 43). Their frank discussions of sex and relationships work similarly to second wave feminist consciousness-raising (Gerhard 2005: 45). As Akass and McCabe (2004: 187) note, the characters “engage in a confirmation process that grants legitimacy to, and confers meaning on, each other’s stories and experiences”. It is for this reason, too, that women are drawn to these characters. The friends receive from one another the kinds of emotional support and connection that their failed heterosexual relationships do not provide them. In her article on the relationship between postfeminism, queerness and popular culture, Jane Gerhard (2005: 43) argues that Carrie’s close relationships with her female friends offer alternatives to heterosexual monogamy. The intimate friendships between the female characters are consistently portrayed as being more reliable and lasting than their relationships with men. While Gerhard does not suggest that the characters are gay, she argues that the friends offer one another an alternative family, one that differs from traditional heterosexual monogamy (Gerhard 2005: 44).

Sex and the City offers a challenge to the institution of marriage in “The Turtle and the Hare” (Series 1: Episode 9). This episode features Carrie and her gay male friend, Stanford, discussing the possibility of marrying one another. Carrie begins to ponder her desire to get married after she discovers that Mr Big (her on-off love interest in every season) does not ever plan on getting married. Stanford will only inherit his
grandmother’s fortune if he is legally married, so he proposes to Carrie, suggesting they will both gain from such a union. “Who else will keep you in shoes and encourage you to cheat?” quips Stanford. It is mostly a light-hearted proposal, but it does begin to question the limitations of heterosexual monogamy. When Carrie ponders the financial benefits associated with such a marriage – not least, her enhanced ability to purchase expensive shoes – matrimony is clearly defined as being connected with women’s economic security. At first, Stanford’s offer seems compelling. Carrie would be financially stable and still able to pursue love affairs. While, in the end, Carrie decides to reject Stanford’s proposal, her brief consideration of a marriage of convenience (and wealth) points to the ways in which Sex and the City offers challenges to the traditional romantic narrative. As Sharon Ross argues, the programme “reveals an ideological contestation over such issues, specifically about what realms love, marriage and sexual pleasure ‘belong’ in and, indeed, whether love and commitment must be equated with each other” (Ross 2005: 114). It is in this way that Sex and the City offers “varied feminist outlooks” (Lotz 2001: 116). Although Carrie eventually decides that she does not want to settle for such a marriage, the fact that the prospect of such an unconventional union was raised, is evidence of the series’ postfeminist sensibility. Furthermore, the continuing heterosexist nature of matrimony, and society in general, is thrown into sharp relief when Stanford is unable to claim his inheritance because of his sexuality.

The entire episode centres on the question of whether men are necessary in women’s lives. While Carrie and Charlotte, the more romantic of the characters, long for the traditional heterosexual marriage, the other characters remind us that fairytale romances are a fiction. Miranda and Samantha are much more cynical about love and relationships. One of their discussions in this episode demonstrates that they are more concerned with sexual pleasure than finding the right man. In her usual sarcastic way, Miranda remarks:

Miranda: What’s the big deal? In 50 years men are going to be obsolete anyway. Already, you can’t talk to them, you don’t need them to have sex with anymore as I’ve pleasantly discovered.
Miranda goes on to reveal that she has experienced the ultimate in vibrators, a model of sex-toy named “The Rabbit”. Later, we see Charlotte and Carrie shopping for one. In typical *Sex and the City* fashion, this episode explores the liberatory potential of masturbation. As Akass and McCabe (2004) suggest, the women’s frank discussion of sex uncovers and challenges sexual taboos (2004: 188). In this case, the women’s conversation about the use of sex-toys, and the potential for sexual satisfaction they promise, offers continuity from second wave feminist discourses that stress the need for women to get in touch with their bodies. Moreover, the suggestion that men are not fundamental to women’s lives – neither financially, nor sexually – works to denaturalise patriarchal myths, unveiling, as Akass and McCabe put it, “the constructed-ness of the fairy tales” (2004: 185). The episode’s focus on female sexual pleasure and its critique of heterosexual matrimony, demonstrates that the programme offers diverse feminist responses to patriarchal discourses.

As Lotz (2001) points out, postfeminist texts in popular culture feature the portrayal of diverse forms of feminist praxis. My research shows that another key postfeminist sensibility is demonstrated in the way young women actively draw upon feminist discourses when discussing popular culture. I am not just using postfeminism as a way to categorise various forms of culture. Rather, my findings highlight that it is the entanglement of feminist discourses in popular culture and young women’s engagement with them that marks the era as postfeminist. The extent to which feminist discourses are part of mainstream consciousness was reflected in my interviews with young women. For example, in discussing *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives*, April reveals her awareness of feminist debates surrounding popular culture:

I think that there’s positives…they represent, you know, very different but equally important roles of women in society. Um, I think it – I mean, I love it, I’m not going to knock it. But I think if you’re going to analyse it as far as its impact on society, it’s fairly narrow. I mean they’re all relatively middle class, white women, and they’re all successful and educated and that kind of

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6 This episode was responsible for a worldwide increase in sales of this model of vibrator (Arthurs 2003).
thing. So it doesn’t embrace everyone, you know. And there are probably people who couldn’t relate to it. (April, 19, suburban focus group)

April echoes feminist literature in her criticism of television shows. For example, Astrid Henry (2004b: 70) also notes that *Sex and the City’s* “version of female empowerment is severely limited by the fact that all four of its protagonists are white, heterosexual, thin, conventionally attractive and, importantly, economically well off”. Henry is not alone in conveying doubts about the privileged class and racial positions of popular television characters (see also: Lotz 2001: 109; Ouellette 2002: 317; Vavrus 2000: 425; Stevenson 2003: 139). Indeed, Henry is joined in expressing reservation about the characters, by another of my interview respondents, Jasmine:

I didn’t see much of it, but I don’t find it particularly empowering, or liberating, or even interesting, but that’s just me. I also get really frustrated at the video shop. Because everything is a heterosexual romance. And, you know, it’s really hard to find stuff with women with women, or with strong women. And I always stand in the aisle for ages. (Jasmine, 23, regional city focus group)

Jasmine, who identified herself as a lesbian during the course of the focus group, talked about the frustration she experiences in not being able to find films or television shows that portray same-sex relationships. She expresses dissatisfaction with the way “everything is a heterosexual romance”. Jennifer also reveals her annoyance at the persistence of heterosexual narratives in popular culture:

Yeah, well it kind of pisses me off that a lot of the time, even if things that are supposedly supposed to be about girl power in the end they end up, you know, skinny and married anyway. [laughs] Or you know, something along those lines. I don’t like that female happiness is always defined by whether or not they’ve got, you know, they’re having some kind of a relationship with a man. (Jennifer, 19, telephone interview, regional city)

The points April, Jasmine and Jennifer make about the limitations of these female
representations, particularly the narrow depiction of white, heterosexual, middle class women is extremely important. These are significant and important criticisms of *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives*. However, what is crucial here, for the purposes of this thesis, is that the young women I interviewed recognise these limitations. The fact that these women appreciate that these texts might not adequately reflect diversity in race, class or sexuality is fundamental to my understanding of the postfeminist era. Young women are critically engaged with popular culture, challenging it, questioning it and drawing upon (post)feminist discourses as they do. Popular culture is thus an arena of feminist contestation. Many recognise that these cultural texts are limited, paralleling recent developments in feminist theory and echoing young feminist challenges to the racist and classist assumptions of some second wave feminism. Accordingly, we can characterise this generation as postfeminist – not simply because they have grown up ‘after’ the height of second wave feminism, but because the prevailing discourses of the current historical moment reflect both a continuity with – and a challenge to – earlier feminist debates. The acceptance of key feminist discourses into mainstream society (and their reflection in popular culture) provides the conditions for new relationships with feminism to emerge.

**Postfeminist Attribute Three: the deconstruction of binary categories of sex and gender**

Amanda Lotz contends that a third characteristic of postfeminist television is exhibited in series that “*deconstruct binary categories of gender and sexuality, instead viewing these categories as flexible and indistinct*” (2001: 116, original emphasis). She argues that this aspect of postfeminism draws upon poststructural theory in demonstrating the constructed nature of gender and suggests that in television it appears in the form of “playing” with gender roles and making aware the performative nature of gender. *Desperate Housewives* opens up possibilities for the questioning and deconstructing of gender binaries. As Linnell Secomb (2007: 56) points out, the characters work because they “establish and then challenge our conventional categorisations, prejudices and assumptions”. The character of Bree van der Kamp in particular, can be seen to challenge gendered roles. For example, as
Niall Richardson (2006) convincingly argues, Bree, one of the lead characters in *Desperate Housewives*, challenges idealised notions of femininity through her camp performance. According to Richardson (2006: 159) “a camp representation will draw attention to gender roles as actually being gender roles. In camp, both masculinity and femininity, through hyperbole, exaggeration, parody or irony, are represented as constructs or performances”. Bree van der Kamp is perfectly dressed and made-up, typifying and exaggerating an old fashioned ideal feminine domesticity. Secomb (2007: 47) describes Bree as “the uptight anachronistic 1950s white-picket-fence wife”. She represents the ideal housewife and mother who bakes muffins for her neighbours and is adept at keeping her garden manicured. Her obsession with upholding an image of perfection, complete with her twin-set, pearls and apron, clearly highlight the artifice of gender roles. Richardson argues that “camp is an ironic performance of gender” (2006: 159) and suggests that Bree’s “spectacular performance of idealised femininity” (2006: 170) works to draw attention to the constructed nature of gender. Richardson argues that Bree’s “campiness can be read as a queer agenda, critiquing the heteronormative relations, by exposing the performative nature of gender and therefore challenging heteroerotics” (2006: 169). Bree van der Kamp’s character offers feminist potential – her camp tongue-in-cheek performance making obvious the constrictive, and constructed, nature of gender roles.

Some academics have argued that *Sex and the City* is limited in its examination of gender and sexuality. For example, David Greven (2004) argues that *Sex and the City*’s portrayal of male “freaks” uncovers homophobic and misogynistic tendencies. Greven argues that when Carrie has a problem with her current partner’s bisexuality, to the extent that she describes bisexual people as confused, it is “an explicit statement about this show’s tortured queer politics, in which non-normative sexuality is ultimately the true aberration” (2004: 45). Mandy Merck (2004) also takes issue with the limited nature of *Sex and the City*’s examination of sexuality, questioning Carrie’s horror at being kissed by another woman. Merck argues that this incident “underlines the series’ abjection of female homoeroticism” (2004: 54). However, in contrast, other writers have argued that *Sex and the City* signals a celebration of queer politics and an opening up of heterosexual possibilities. For example, Astrid Henry (2004b: 78) suggests that the programme “participates in the redefinition of
heterosexuality called for by feminist and queer theorists”. Jane Gerhard (2005: 43) echoes this sentiment, stressing that the “entanglement of postfeminism and queerness” are key features of *Sex and the City*.

Like *Desperate Housewives*, *Sex and the City* offers storylines and characters that work to question the constructed nature of gender. An episode titled “Boy, Girl, Boy Girl” (Series 3, Episode 4) is worth mentioning here because of the way it deals with gender binaries. In this episode, Charlotte’s art gallery hosts an exhibition about drag kings. Charlotte is invited to pose dressed in masculine drag for the artist. As the characters peruse the photographs of the drag kings in the exhibition, they discuss the notion that “gender is an illusion”, surely a reference to Judith Butler’s (1990) concept of performativity. Butler’s influential theory of the way gender is constructed through repeated stylised performances is evident in the way Charlotte plays around with gender norms. When Charlotte takes part in the drag king show, dressing up in a man’s suit, slicking back her hair and donning a moustache, *Sex and the City* clearly marks itself as postfeminist. The series incorporates recent feminist theory, addressing and popularising the notion that gendered categories are socially constructed.

When elements of academic theory become bound up in representations of sex and gender on popular television, the extent to which feminist thought has entered the mainstream becomes clear. When Charlotte plays around with performing masculinity and her friends discuss the illusory concept of gender, or when Bree’s campness draws attention to the performative nature of femininity, then it becomes obvious that these texts are postfeminist as categorised by Lotz (2001). Both television programmes offer themes that are concerned with the deconstruction of binaries of sex and gender. While I do not mean to suggest that these programmes represent some kind of feminist or queer utopia, their exploration of gender and sexuality define them as postfeminist texts. Not only do they challenge traditional sex and gender roles in the way they negotiate sexual categories and representations of female sexuality, but they are postfeminist because of the way they actively draw upon recent gender theory. While there may be reservations about how open the characters are to deconstructing gendered categories, both programmes represent an important postfeminist moment in television. Further, they point to the usefulness of
the concept of postfeminism for describing the current era. What makes the era postfeminist are the processes by which these postfeminist texts are defining and shaping attitudes to feminism and the fact that audiences engage with these texts using feminist discourses.

Lotz’s (2001) third postfeminist attribute considers the extent to which television attempts to deconstruct binaries of sex and gender. Many of my participants believed that Sex and the City and Desperate Housewives work to challenge gender norms and confront sexual stereotypes. In the following sections, I demonstrate that young women find these programmes positive because of the way they reverse gender roles and subvert stereotypes. In elucidating the feminist discourses my respondents draw upon when engaging with popular culture, I show the current socio-historical context can be considered a postfeminist era.

"It breaks the traditional stereotype"

Many of the participants in my study acknowledged the subversive potential of Sex and the City, praising it for its frank portrayal and discussion of sex, and suggesting it goes some way towards breaking down sexual stereotypes. Most respondents admired the sexual confidence of the characters, arguing that the depiction of women enjoying sex on their own terms was refreshing. For example, Suzy is impressed with the way the characters are comfortable in their sexuality. Interestingly, her friends in the focus group laughed when she admitted she could relate to the characters. She immediately clarified that it was not Samantha (the most overtly promiscuous character) with whom she identifies.

Suzy: Yeah, I loved it. I could relate to it. [laughter from the group]

Me: How do you relate to it? [more laughter]

Suzy: No, I, in terms of relating to them, I don’t like relate to Sam. I relate to the fact that they’re out there and comfortable with what they’re doing, and I like that. But you don’t need to sort of anymore… It’s always guys who sort of brag about sex and all that stuff. This is the first time girls are sort of
getting out there, you know, and saying it. (Suzy, 19, suburban focus group)

Suzy is impressed with the progressive nature of the programme, arguing that it is new and positive to see women being comfortable and confident in their sexuality. She likes the fact that the characters are not shy about their desire to have sex and are keen not only to “get out there”, but also to talk about it afterwards. In this way, Sex and the City offers challenges to stereotypical understandings of women and sex. Naomi, too, admires Sex and the City for the way it portrays women’s enjoyment of sex. She appreciates that the show deals with sex from a woman’s point of view, exploring its pleasures, without condemning women for enjoying it.

It also treats sex differently from a female perspective & shows that women too can enjoy themselves and do not need to be categorized as sluts for that. (Naomi, 21, email interview, metropolitan)

Katrina, who articulates a compelling re-working of the concept of ‘slut’, also expresses this understanding of Sex and the City as sexually progressive and positive for women:

I think, actually, Sex and the City comes to mind, because I think it’s Samantha, and although, I mean you know, she’s a self-proclaimed slut, I think the difference is that she wasn’t a slut because men loved her. She was a slut because she loved sex. And I think that’s the difference. So she pursued that and she wanted that. It wasn’t that men would take an interest in her so she’d feel obliged to have sex with them. She was, she had a very kind of rich sexuality and wanted to go for it. And I kind of like that about her. And that she was a powerful successful career person as well. So she wasn’t defined by her sexuality, but was very comfortable with it. (Katrina, 22, telephone interview, regional city)

Katrina admires the frank manner in which Samantha proclaims her sexuality. She’s comfortable with it and not afraid to say that she enjoys sex. It seems as though Samantha is living out the ideal of sexual liberation that second wave feminism fought for. Not only is Samantha successful in the business world, but also she seeks
out sexual pleasure on her own terms, thus challenging stereotypical notions of women. Samantha and the other women in *Sex and the City* echo third wave feminism’s celebration of sexual pleasure. As Astrid Henry notes, “from its inception the show has addressed many of the key issues and themes discussed by third wave writers. In many ways, *Sex and the City* has functioned as a forum about women’s sexuality as it has been shaped by the feminist movement of the last 30 years” (2004b: 66). According to Henry (2004b: 75), third wave authors celebrate those elements of the second wave that focused on women’s sexual freedom and pleasure. As I have argued earlier, in Chapter Three, postfeminism epitomizes the current socio-cultural climate. Emerging from this historical context are new forms of feminism, including those feminists who identify themselves as third wave. It is clear that television characters are also involved in navigating the changed conditions resulting from second wave feminism. Popular culture forms a significant aspect of this postfeminist era because it provides an arena where young women engage with feminist discourses.

From the opening scene of the pilot episode of *Sex and the City*, discussions of how gender roles can be reversed are underway. Carrie is introduced as a “sexual anthropologist” whose research for this week’s column will involve investigating whether it is possible for a woman to “have sex like a man” (Series 1: Episode 1) or as Henry (2004b: 77) would put it, “as an active agent in pursuit of pleasure”. In this episode, as part of her research, we see Carrie get in contact with an old lover who she remembers was good in bed. She receives oral sex from him and after she climaxes, she leaves without returning the favour, claiming that she feels powerful, like she “owns the city” (Series 1: Episode 1). In “Valley of the Twenty-something Guys” (Series 1: Episode 4), Carrie’s sexual agency is again depicted. The episode features Carrie pondering the benefits and pitfalls of dating men in their twenties. In one scene, the young men in a bar fall under the objectifying gaze of Carrie. She alerts us to the fact that she is perving; her narration praising, and the camera following, the attractive “butt” of one particular young man. This episode is also useful for spelling out the way *Sex and the City* plays around with sex and gender roles. While Jasmine is not a fan of the show, she acknowledges the significance of the gender role reversals that are portrayed in the series:
I’ve seen snippets. The only thing that I could say was semi-remarkable is that it maybe inverts that idea that men use women for sex. It’s actually putting women in the position where women are using men for sex. And you know, to see the response when that happens is kind of funny. (Jasmine, 23, regional city focus group)

As Jasmine mentions, *Sex and the City* inverts dominant cultural expectations about women and sex. Consequently, the series challenges notions of female sexual submissiveness, breaking down sex and gender constructions. Amy, whose favourite character is Samantha, also recognises the role reversals portrayed in *Sex and the City*:

Me: What do you like about her?

Amy: She, I think she breaks the traditional stereotype completely.

Me: Ok, what sort of stereotypes are they?

Amy: I think that she is just like the traditional kind of male, know what I mean? Like, just, like sleeps around - that kind of thing. I just think that she kind of changes the role, and I think it’s just funny. It’s not as if I aspire to be like that or anything, it’s just a funny reversal, I suppose. (Amy, 18, telephone interview, rural)

Amy critically appraises the series, arguing that what she admires about Samantha is the way she manages to break down stereotypes. The character appeals to her because it offers new possibilities, suggests a change in women’s role and celebrates female sexual agency.

“All they talk about is love”

When discussing *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives*, the young women I interviewed for this study raised the concept of independence again and again. They offered contradictory interpretations of the lead characters and their level of personal
autonomy. Deborah Jermyn (2004) conducted small focus groups with fans of *Sex and the City* in order to understand why it had become so popular among twenty- and thirty-something women. She found that her participants had the “capacity to take a critical approach to the programme, even while they engage with it and celebrate it in other ways” (2004: 216). Similarly, the young women in my study tended to have mixed reactions to the show. On one hand, many praised the show for presenting being single as acceptable and enjoyable, while on the other hand remaining critical of some of the show’s limitations.

Some felt that *Sex and the City* was positive, reflecting how wonderful it is being single and financially independent. Not all respondents, however, reacted positively to the television series. Others expressed the opinion that the programme was not progressive enough, or suggested that the characters relied too much on men for their sense of worth. Some participants conveyed a mixed reaction to the television series, acknowledging the feminist potential of the programmes, while remaining sceptical about their failure to depict a variety of race, class and sexuality. Others expressed a concern that the characters in *Sex and the City* become caught up in trying to find a man. For example, Anne begins by praising *Sex and the City* for its representation of a successful career woman but then changed her mind to express concern that the series became too focused on whether or not Carrie was married.

I guess the lead role [of *Sex and the City*] is quite a successful person, who in the end, does follow her heart, and doesn’t fall prey to “oh, I’ve gotta get married”. Well, she almost did. I think I’ve seen the first episode and the last. And she got married to the guy she loved, but she was about to marry someone she didn’t love just because she thought she was getting old and needed to get married. But he was rich so it felt right. (Anne, 19, regional city focus group)

Indeed, much feminist criticism of *Sex and the City* is concerned with the complicated ways in which the lead characters are negotiating the search for “Mr Right” (Akass and McCabe 2004: 179; Di Mattia 2004; Nelson 2004). Joanna Di Mattia (2004: 19) argues, however, that even though the quest for romance is the “driving narrative force” in *Sex and the City* the traditional romantic story is
continually challenged. In her essay, Di Mattia outlines the two major relationships in Carrie’s life, arguing that they represent competing archetypes of masculinity. Carrie’s ongoing affair with Big represents a romantic archetype signified by seduction and passionate sexual encounters. For Carrie, Big is intoxicating, but her romantic fantasies are dashed when Big cannot commit to her. In contrast, argues Di Mattia, Aidan epitomizes a different kind of romantic hero, one who promises security and dependability. As Di Mattia stresses, “Carrie’s paradoxical desires remind us that no one archetype can fulfil both classic rescue or seduction fantasies” (2004: 31). Di Mattia argues that Sex and the City works to deconstruct the romantic quest by questioning the notion of “Mr Right”. Akass and McCabe (2004: 180) also point out the ambiguous nature of the lead characters’ quest for the perfect man, suggesting that they are “aware of the social constructedness of being female, and educated to know better that Prince Charming is nothing more than a cultural myth”.

In outlining the history of feminist cultural criticism, Joanne Hollows (2000) argues that in many early feminist cultural studies “romantic love [was] blamed for the ways in which feminine identity was predicated on a loss of self through idealisation of, and dependence on, men” (Hollows 2000: 72). Some of my respondents actually echoed this typical feminist objection to cultural representations. A number of participants scoffed that Carrie and her friends were “all about trying to find a man”, thus epitomising my argument that feminist discourse is widespread in young women’s understanding of culture and the position of women. Many of the participants in my study who had reservations about Sex and the City were concerned with the way it portrayed women’s reliance on men for happiness. For example, Laura articulates her revulsion about the extent to which the Manhattan women talk about men and marriage:

Oh, I can’t watch that. I hate that show. The fact that there’s a whole, however many series of a bunch of women – oh it’s pretty good though, that it shows all the different types of new age women. But I just think it’s so gross, that there’s a show like that about women who all they talk about is love and who they’re going to marry, and whether they’ll marry this person. Oh, is he marriage material? Like, it’s just a waste of time, watching something like that, I think. (Laura, 20, regional city focus group)
Whilst she admits that it is good to see a show reflecting diverse women, Laura argues that *Sex and the City* is “gross” and “a waste of time” because the characters’ lives revolve around the search for men and their daily discussions are all about potential marriage partners. Amy expresses a mixed opinion about the show. She appreciates the carefree, “fun” lifestyles of the lead characters, and suggests that they are good role models because they seem to be in control of their lives. However, she feels that the celebration of single independent womanhood became lost as the series progressed.

Well, I think they are [good role models] because they’ve started taking charge of their own life, and they, sometimes they’re not in control, but sometimes they seem to be in control. But I think that it started out as being something that – Oh wow, look at these ladies they’re having heaps of fun, you know. They’re single and they’re still having fun and they don’t need to be married but then in the end they all became coupled, in the end. (Amy, 18, telephone interview, rural)

It is my contention that a principal characteristic of the postfeminist era is the broad extent to which feminist discourses have penetrated popular culture. The plots of *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* are inflected with feminist (and postfeminist) themes. Additionally, the influence of feminism and the integration of feminist ideas into the mainstream is evident in the way young women adopt feminist perspectives when engaging with popular culture. Young women accept many of the values and criticisms of second wave feminism. Indeed, they actively draw upon feminist discourses when talking about their lives and the cultural products they consume.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has demonstrated that *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* can be regarded as postfeminist texts. More significantly, congruent with my central research aims, by drawing parallels between my interview material and an analysis of the television texts, I have shown that it is precisely because of the availability of
feminist discourses in popular culture that the contemporary socio-cultural moment can be described as postfeminist. I have explored how young women engage with these texts, gaining further insight into my respondents’ understanding of their position as women, as well as their relationship with feminist concepts. The value of describing the current socio-cultural era as postfeminist becomes clear when we understand the degree to which feminist discourses have infiltrated both mainstream culture and young women’s language when they engage with popular texts. By highlighting the extent to which feminist discourses are a part of mainstream society, my analysis exposes the complex way in which feminism and popular culture are intertwined. A fundamental characteristic of the current postfeminist era is the way popular culture provides new ways for women to engage with feminist discourses. In the next chapter I continue to elucidate the postfeminist nature of the contemporary era, by examining in greater detail how *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* correspond with the struggles of women and feminists. I reveal that these texts exhibit strong parallels with the dominant tensions and contradictions being experienced by the young women I interviewed.
Chapter Six: More Opportunities, More Choice, More Pressure

Russian *matryoshka* dolls symbolise an historical relationship between women. They symbolise generations. When packaged up inside one another we see an image of woman. When, instead, they are lined up from smallest to largest, the dolls represent a continuous flow from one generation of women to the next. Just like you would take out each subsequently smaller *matryoshka* doll, I aim to unpack the significance of generation in understanding young women’s lives. I investigate young women’s perceptions of their generational position as women. This chapter seeks to make sense of the present socio-historical moment by contextualising this generation using their own insights about how their lives differ from their mothers’ and grandmothers’. Again, I combine my interview material with an analysis of *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives*, in order to make clear the connections between popular culture and generation. I explore the ways in which the lead characters in these popular texts navigate the same experiences as the young women I interviewed.

Once more I draw upon the postfeminist attributes laid out by Amanda Lotz (2001). She argues that a television programme can be characterised as postfeminist “in the way situations illustrating contemporary struggles faced by women and feminists are raised and examined within series” (2001: 116, original emphasis). Building upon my argument from Chapter Five that *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* represent a postfeminist moment in television, this chapter mobilises Lotz’s fourth postfeminist characteristic to examine the ways in which both television series reflect the prevailing experiences of the current generation of women. However, I go beyond the work of Lotz because this chapter identifies the struggles that young women are facing. I use interviews with young women and an analysis of popular culture to illuminate those struggles, demonstrating that they flow from a fundamental tension that is characteristic of this postfeminist moment in history. Via
an examination of young women’s perceptions of how things have changed for women, I uncover a sense of unlimited choice and opportunity among this generation. However, alongside this perception of independence and endless options, this chapter reveals that there remains societal pressure on women to live up to certain ideals. The shift from discourses of equality to discourses of individual choice mean that the contradictions and structural limitations facing women are experienced as individual stress. What is important with regard to my overal thesis is that this overlapping of feminist and neoliberal rhetoric of choice, which is characteristic of this postfeminist context, helps to explain young women’s complex and often ambiguous relationship with feminism.

“I can be anything I want to be”

My interviews with young women demonstrate that generational context plays a significant role in a woman’s life chances. Nearly all my respondents argued that their lives were different from their mothers’ and grandmothers’ because they have many more opportunities open to them. The increased opportunities for women are largely a legacy of the second wave women’s movement. This generation can be characterised as postfeminist not because feminism is redundant, but because young women have grown up in an era that is “historically post-second-wave feminism” (Hollows and Moseley 2006: 8). They have come of age in an era when it is no longer expected that a woman’s primary role is to be a mother and housewife. Young women’s aspirations for career were varied and none expected that their futures would involve solely raising a family. Every young woman I spoke to recognised that they have more diverse prospects than previous generations of women (cf. Bulbeck 1997; Summers 2003b; Rich 2005; Everingham et al. 2007). All felt as if they could pursue further education, choose from a wide variety of jobs and become financially autonomous. They recognised that preceding generations did not have as many choices readily available. When describing the lives of their grandmothers, the young women in my study overwhelmingly detailed the restricted nature of the opportunities open to them. In comparison, they felt that an abundance of educational and career prospects was available for themselves. Indeed, most were enrolled in some form of higher education, across a diverse spectrum of vocations. For example, as Gillian suggests, “any career” is a possibility for women her age due to access to
education:

I think that it is easier now to get a good job in any career than my grandmother or my mother could because there are more study programmes for women to enter into the workforce. (Gillian, 19, email interview, metropolitan)

Jade echoes Gillian’s belief that there are “more options” available to her generation. She feels that compared to previous generations, she has more choice when it comes to the workforce:

I feel my life differs as I have so many more options to what my mother and grandmother had. I have the ability of choice… It also differs that women are now part of the workforce and are treated with respect and are heard. (Jade, 21, email interview, metropolitan)

The notion that young women have “more choices” than generations of women before them was a prominent theme in my interviews. For example, Suzy articulates the sense that choice is what typifies her generation:

Even in our generation we’ve got all the choices, well not all of the choices, but a lot more choices, and we can pretty much pave our own way now and there’s not that societal idea that you have to be the woman the homemaker; the man the worker. (Suzy, 19, suburban focus group)

Suzy argues that social attitudes have changed such that women are no longer expected to be restricted to looking after the home and family. Monica repeats Suzy’s language of “choice”, suggesting she has more prospects open to her than her grandmother did:

I probably have more choices when it comes to further education and career prospects than my grandmother did. In my grandmother’s generation, most women were expected to become either nurses or full time stay-at-home mothers. (Monica, 19, email interview, metropolitan)
April also perceived that for previous generations, it was expected that women would marry and have children, and for those who wanted to work outside the home, career options were restricted to nurse, teacher or secretary:

Like, there’s evidence of girls being all right on their own and I think that even in my mum’s generation it was always assumed that you’d be married off and you’d have babies and that’s what you did. And then you worked, but then when you had kids, then you stopped. And that’s it… You’re either a nurse or a teacher, and if you weren’t, then you’re a secretary and that was how it was. (April, 19, suburban focus group)

Monica’s and April’s recognition that career choices were limited for previous generations was strongly felt by other women I interviewed. Interestingly, when discussing the work prospects of their mothers and grandmothers, teaching and nursing were mentioned frequently as the dominant career paths for women in their mother’s generation. Indeed, a high proportion of the mothers of my respondents were employed as teachers or nurses (see Table 1). For instance, as Kristen and Amy explain when comparing their mother’s lives to their own:

My career choice is the first difference I notice. My mother basically had two choices – teacher or nurse. I can be anything I want to be. Life is more flexible for me, too. I am able to live with my partner, work and study, wear what I want and talk how I want. (Kristen, 20, email interview, metropolitan)

Um, I think that I’ve had a lot more choices and a lot more opportunities, because she kind of finished school then had to choose between being a nurse and a teacher, and just I think, yeah I have a lot more opportunities. And I think I’m a lot luckier. (Amy, 18, telephone interview, rural)

7 39 per cent of the participants in this study (16 out of 41) have mothers who are either teachers or nurses.
Young women acknowledge that it was not long ago that women had few alternatives if they wanted to pursue a career (cf. Everingham et al. 2007; Summers 2003b). In contrast, they felt as if their own career options are endless. As Kristen declares, “I can be anything I want to be”. When April talks about “girls being all right on their own” and when Suzy suggests “we can pave our own way now” they hint at the widespread discourse of independence and self-sufficiency that permeates this generation’s understanding of itself.

"We are more independent"

A key characteristic of this postfeminist era is the widespread notion that equality and independence are taken for granted. It was widely accepted amongst my interview participants that women do not require, nor desire, to be financially supported by a male partner. Not being expected to base their lives around bringing up a family means that they are more inclined to develop a career and depend upon themselves for financial security. Peta suggests this shift in society is noticeable in the differences between herself, her mother and her grandmother:

As well as feeling as though they do not need to depend upon a man financially, I think for my mother and my grandmother, they would probably be a lot more family based, like their lives. Whereas my life is a lot more independent and more for myself. (Peta, 18, telephone interview, metropolitan)

The notion of being able to support oneself financially is a major difference those in my study identified between themselves and previous generations of women. As Peta and Louise both argued, being economically self-sufficient is a major factor in women’s ability to be independent.

Yeah, I think the people are more self-sufficient these days, but it’s not necessarily a bad thing from before, the way they had it before. The way they had it before was just the way it was, and it was fine. But it’s different now, people are more independent...just everyone as well, but definitely women. Women are a lot more independent. (Louise, 19, suburban focus group)
While Louise was hesitant about saying that things are necessarily better for women today, she acknowledges that the situation for women is definitely different. Alicia, too, perceives a generational difference in the level of women’s equality:

Women are treated a lot more like equals now than they were when my mum was growing up. We have more employment options and more say in society as a whole. We are no longer seen as the “housekeepers and mothers”. We are more independent. (Alicia, 23, email interview, regional city)

Alicia makes a link between equality and women’s increased participation in public life, echoing liberal feminist discourse. Furthermore, like many of my participants, she ties female independence to increased paid work options and improved career opportunities. As I discussed in the previous chapter, young women recognise and celebrate popular female characters that display traits of independence and autonomy. When deciding whether the women in Sex and the City provide good role models, Danielle argues that confidence, self-reliance and independence are praiseworthy characteristics for women:

Ok well Carrie is very self-reliant. Miranda is very self-reliant and independent. Um, Charlotte, she was yes and no. Her drive to get married, I don’t think that’s a very good role model. And Samantha I think is good because she’s confident. She loves herself. (Danielle, 22, telephone interview, rural)

In my interviews the overarching theme of “more independence” and “more choice” is often tied to questions of motherhood. Many of my respondents suggested that the most noticeable difference between their lives and earlier generations was that they had a choice about when (or indeed, whether) to have children. As April explains:

And so now women can enter into basically any workforce they want to. It opens a lot of doors and so I think they can do whatever they want to do now. And there’s a lot more, and as a result, they’re a lot more self-sufficient, because we have the opportunity to earn our own money, whereas before it
was inevitable that you’d get married and have kids. Whereas now I think there’s an open question mark kind of lingering. (April, 19, suburban focus group)

Indeed, for this generation of women, there is a large “question mark lingering” over the question of when to have children. Nearly all the participants in my study expressed a desire to have children “one day”, but as I will show, there are many things they want to achieve before then.

“They’re having families later in life”

Contradictions within the rhetoric of choice arise when the prospect of motherhood is raised. One significant difference that women in my study identified between their lives and those of their forebears was the fact that they will most likely have children at a later age. Due to the increased opportunities for education and workforce participation, the women I spoke to, on the whole, had not planned on starting a family until they felt they had achieved a certain number of things for themselves. There was one clear exception in my study: a woman from a regional city who was in her early twenties and pregnant with her first child at the time of the interviews. Significantly, not all women have access to the same level of educational opportunities. A number of participants mentioned that their friends from rural and regional areas wanted to start a family sooner rather than later (cf. Everingham et al. 2007; Summers 2003b). However, the majority of my participants planned to follow the Australian trend of delaying parenthood until they are in their late twenties (Cannold 2005: 42). There was an overwhelming sense that the women in my study wanted to “cram in” a lot before they had children. Most notably, the things they wanted to achieve were further education, some overseas travel, and establishing a career and financial stability (cf. Summers 2003b: 34). There was certainly a perception that it will be a rush to fit it all in. As Anne explained in a focus group, women today do not have children young anymore because they are seeking self-fulfilment:

I think a big thing in the generations now is that, a lot of, say our mothers’ generation, had children young. And they got married. As opposed to what’s
happening now. Like women are career women, we’re not getting married until we’re successful in ourselves and fulfilled ourselves, which I think is really beautiful and is good. (Anne, 19, regional city focus group)

In discussing the most prominent differences between the generations, Louise argues that women are more career-focused and are therefore delaying motherhood until later:

And I also thought about how because of women in the work force, they’re, women are more career orientated, so like, they’re having families later in life. (Louise, 19, suburban focus group)

As well as reflecting on the idea that women are tending to become mothers later, many participants articulated a sense of ‘choice’. They argued that is widely acceptable now for women to choose to have children late, or not to have them at all. For example, Ella compared herself with her grandmother and notes that the most remarkable difference between them will be based on motherhood:

Well, one of my grandmothers was like, you know, a Catholic – got married around 22, and she had ten children; the whole traditional thing going on… And I don’t really want that. I don’t want to be a stay at home mum who has millions of screaming children. [laughs] Or that sort of thing. So I think it will be different in that way. (Ella, 19, inner-city focus group)

Ella here expresses distaste for the idea of being a “stay at home mum” and even finds the image of herself with lots of children funny. The fact that young women can choose not to be a full-time mother was a major theme in my discussions with them. As Caitlin suggests, there is greater choice for women who desire a career:

I think that there’s a bit of flexibility of choice as well, though. I mean, we can essentially go out there. And there are women who choose not to have children. It is something that is acceptable for women, if they want to pursue their career. (Caitlin, 20, inner-city focus group)
Katrina, too, argues that for her motherhood is a choice. She suggests that for her grandmother it was expected:

But um, yeah I think choices and stuff. Like, for me to sit here and wonder whether I’ll have children is really different from my grandmother because it wouldn’t have been a question. In her time it would have just been a given. (Katrina, 22, telephone interview, regional city)

Amy also suggests that there has been a generational shift in societal expectations of women:

I just think that attitudes have changed for the better, I think. And just, that I’m not expected to you know, have four kids and a husband and a white picket fence, kind of thing. Like, now it’s my choice whether I have that or not. I’m not expected to have that. (Amy, 18, telephone interview, rural)

Women postponing motherhood until they are settled into a career was a common subject in my interviews and is a prominent topic in Sex and the City. Although we rarely see characters from Sex and the City in their places of work, we understand they are all successful in their chosen employment. Carrie has her own magazine column, Samantha runs a PR company, Miranda is a lawyer on her way to becoming a partner in the firm and Charlotte manages an art gallery. In an episode titled, “The Baby Shower” (Series 1: Episode 10) the single city girls visit the suburbs for a friend’s baby shower where a stark dichotomy is established between those with children and those without. Sharon Ross (2005: 116) argues that this episode presents “a more complex representation of sexual fulfilment and self-fulfilment in general for women than TV typically offers. The stories told highlight the double bind...that often makes motherhood, career, and sexual agency mutually exclusive”. This episode paints a picture of women who have had to sacrifice a part of themselves to have children. We are shown a montage of mothers describing what they have had to give up, what they miss, from their lives before they became parents. Carrie’s period is late and so throughout the episode, suspecting she might be pregnant, she is weighing up what motherhood might be like, wondering if she can still be herself if she becomes a mother. In a discussion with Miranda and
Samantha, Carrie reveals that she might be pregnant but that she does not want to take the test until she knows how she will react if it is positive. This episode exemplifies the way postfeminist popular culture reflects the dominant concerns of contemporary women. Carrie and her friends are caught in a double bind between desiring motherhood and fearing that being a mother will rob them of their autonomy.

Carrie: You don’t have to lose yourself to have a kid… I know plenty of cool, hip mothers who live in the city and who still have great careers and stuff.

Miranda: Who? It’s depressing! Women can’t have it all.

Carrie attempts to remain optimistic about the ability to combine career and motherhood but Miranda, with her usual bitter tone, is straight to the point in her belief that it is virtually impossible. Carrie’s ambivalence about wanting a child is pertinent to my discussion and there is significant public discourse about the falling fertility rate in Western countries (Summers 2003b: 226-227). Miranda sums up the pressures women face – they want to ‘have it all’, indeed, they are expected to, but the reality is not so simple. As Leslie Cannold (2005: 42-43) argues, women are delaying motherhood longer than previous generations and this is largely due to lack of adequate workplace policies such as paid maternity leave and access to quality part-time work, which would make combining paid work and parenting easier to manage. Carrie and her friends in Sex and the City are typically portrayed throughout the series as proud single women going against the grain of ‘normal’ adulthood. There are numerous incidents where the lead characters are pitied for their single status or childlessness. While they frequently shrug off the criticisms and celebrate their singledom, in “The Baby Shower” episode they return to the city feeling sorry for themselves, depressed that they are not fulfilling their maternal urges. At the end of the episode Carrie reveals that her period has started – we see her walking through a park, but her expression is unclear. In her realisation that she is not in fact pregnant, it remains ambiguous as to whether Carrie is relieved or disappointed.

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8 Later in the episode, Samantha returns to her usual cynical self by deciding to host a “I’m not having a baby” party.
Clearly, despite their career success, personal and financial autonomy, the characters feel something is lacking from their lives – social expectations regarding female roles and motherhood weigh heavily on their minds. Despite more flexibility and control over when women have children, there continue to be societal norms in place, which influence young women’s options and aspirations.

When it comes to actually starting a family, the notion that young women have unlimited choices begins to come under question. My interviews attest that familial pressure plays a role in women’s understandings of their futures. Ethnicity and religious backgrounds sometimes play a part in influencing young women’s aspirations, as pressure to be married and have children is put upon them by their families. For example, Belinda, who comes from a Turkish background, explains how traditional Turkish attitudes impact on the way her parents envision her future:

Yeah, I kind of get that as well. Like, I’m definitely going to get married and I’m definitely going to have kids, right? And my parents are Turkish, so there’s a lot of family ties and that sort of – that whole family thing is really important. Like, when I went to Turkey, there was this whole emphasis on the woman being, like, a little bit less than the man. Like, you’re the housewife, that kind of thing. You’re just expected to look after the kids, etcetera, etcetera. So, it’s more accentuated over there than it is here. Um, so I have been brought up like that. That’s what they think, that’s what their mentality is. And it’s not strong. Like, they don’t keep talking about it, but there is that mention of clothes, or whatever, and “when you have kids”. (Belinda, 18, inner-city focus group)

Although Belinda says the conventional Turkish gendered roles are not as pronounced in Australia, she still gets the impression from her parents that having children is not a choice, it is expected. She says her parents often bring up “children’s clothes” and she discusses the way that her family emphasise “when you have kids”. As far as her parents are concerned, there is no question mark lingering over this option. It is “when”, not “if”. In response to Belinda, Caitlin pointed out that women from ethnic backgrounds are more likely to be expected to marry and have children:
A couple of my best friends from high school are from first generation migrant families as well, and I think there’s that implication as well. And um, especially, my friend from India and her marriage is sort of arranged. Well, more like a dating agency, she says, rather than “you have to get married to this person”. (Caitlin, 20, inner-city focus group)

My data highlights that there are significant differences within a generation that should not be ignored. Caitlin’s and Belinda’s recognition that ethnicity plays a part in societal expectations for young women is noteworthy. The existence of ethnic differences among women is significant in understanding aspirations for motherhood. It highlights the importance of diversity within a generation. As I have argued previously, my focus on generation is not aimed at finding homogenous truths about women of a certain age. Mannheim’s theory of generational units reminds us that differences within a generation are important (1952b: 304). His approach to generation makes clear that attitudes and outlooks within a generation are not uniform. The opportunities available to women are affected by factors such as class and race (Harris 2004: 9). Being aware of generational units helps us to acknowledge that factors such as ethnicity and class affect women’s life chances, and that women do not have undifferentiated responses to the historical climate.

An episode of Desperate Housewives, “Children will Listen” (Series 1: Episode 18), delves into some of the pressures upon women to become mothers. In this case, it is Gabrielle who faces pressure from her husband to have a baby. Gabrielle and her husband Carlos are the only family on Wisteria Lane marked as non-white. In fact they often perpetuate the “stereotypical Latino” couple (Wilson 2006: 148). For the entire series, Gabrielle has made it clear that she does not want children, however she is continually under pressure from her husband and mother-in-law to have a child. This episode opens with the revelation that Carlos has been secretly tampering with Gabrielle’s birth control pills. Carlos’s cruel and deceptive tactics to try and get his wife pregnant are obviously more serious than the sort of familial pressures that my interview participants Belinda and Caitlin talk about, however the insistence that Gabrielle become a mother is what interests me here. Despite the rhetoric of freedom
of choice for women, motherhood continues as a pervasive norm for women – an expected role that women should not evade.

Alongside racial and ethnic differences, my interviews suggest that opportunities for women also differ depending upon geographical location and socio-economic circumstance (cf. Summers 2003b: 30). For example, Ella, who grew up in rural New South Wales, talks of the prevalence of women in her home town having children at a young age and links it to the limited options associated with living in the country:

It’s very common in my area, well not many people go to uni or whatever, they think, we’ll pop out a few kids and have a house and a husband. See my sister’s friends are getting married and he just turned 19 and she just turned 20 this year. And one of my friends who is 17 wants to get married to her boyfriend next year. It’s like there’s no other option. It’s kind of like, you know, it’s just the attitude in the country… It’s just sort of the underlying assumption that women are there to get married and have children and help their husbands and not really do anything other than that. (Ella, 19, inner-city focus group)

Ella was studying at university but pointed out that she was one of only three people from her high school class to go on to further education after school. Furthermore, she was the only one to move to the city. She discussed the difficulties in living so far away from her family and friends, and argued that for many of her peers who stayed in the country, there is little to aspire to other than marriage and motherhood. Clearly, access to education is a major factor in women’s career prospects. Significantly, not all women of this generation have the luxury of “more choices” and “more opportunities”. As Warner-Smith and Imbruglia (2001) outline, socio-economic status plays a role in women’s job prospects and the age of first-time motherhood. According to Valerie Walkerdine (2003: 241):

women’s employment is divided between those who have education and skills to enter the professional and managerial sector and those who leave school with little or no qualifications and enter a labour market defined mostly by poorly paid, often part-time work, little job security and periods of
Participants in my study from rural and regional Australia also discussed the limited opportunities for some women (cf. Everingham et al. 2007; Summers 2003b). Danielle, from a country town in New South Wales, recognised differences in opportunities between women in the city compared with women living in regional areas. In a discussion about women having children at a young age, she raised the issue of teenage pregnancies:

Um, there were a few when I was at school. Um, one of the girls I work with is [pregnant] too. I think it happens a lot more here than in the city. (Danielle, 22, telephone interview, rural)

Another respondent, the only one in my study to be on the verge of motherhood, was Megan, who was pregnant when I interviewed her. Megan grew up in a country town in New South Wales and at the time of the interview was living in a working class suburb of Newcastle with her partner. At age 22, she is seven years younger than the average age at which Australian women first become mothers (Cannold 2005: 42). Megan had quit her job as a veterinary nurse once she became pregnant because of warnings that the work environment would not be safe for the baby. Despite her young age and geographical location, Megan appeared relatively well-off, largely due to her partner’s highly paid job in the IT industry. Together the couple had managed to buy two investment properties and they were considering building a third house. When I asked Megan about people’s reactions to her pregnancy, she told me that some people had thought it strange that she was having a baby at such a young age. However, she argued that she had been in a relationship with her partner for over seven years and they felt that the time was right to start a family. She imagined she might return to part-time work once the child was old enough, but hinted that her working was not an economic necessity for her family. Clearly, there are divergences within a generation along the lines of class, geography and ethnicity. Socio-economic status impacts upon the choices women are able to make.

Overall, the participants in my study recognised that compared to previous generations they have more opportunities available. However, it is clear that ethnic,
geographic and socio-economic factors have an impact upon young women’s choices (c.f. Everingham et al. 2007; Summers 2003b). Furthermore, as Fiona in the passage below notes, more generally there continue to be societal pressures about what it means to be a woman and ongoing pressure for women to become parents. She argues that while women of her generation have “more control” over when to have children, there are still strong expectations about motherhood:

I think there’s more control for women over children – like, family planning sort of stuff. But I still think that most people would expect the prime thing about being a woman is being a mother. And that that’s, have you fulfilled your maternal role. And there’s the Federal government too, saying “have one for the father, the mother and the country”. And, I think that’s a bit of a problem. (Fiona, 19, inner-city focus group)

Here, Fiona is referring to the notorious line from the former Australian Federal Treasurer, Peter Costello, who urged women to have three babies for the good of the nation (Costello 2004). For Fiona, the Government’s rhetoric of motherhood is problematic, and she is critical of the continuing social and political pressure on women to become mothers. Many of my participants were critical of the Federal government’s policies, particularly the “Baby Bonus”. Anne Summers (2003a: 255) has described this prevailing political rhetoric as the Government’s “breeding creed”, arguing that the Government’s policies are damaging for women’s freedom and counterproductive as a method of increasing Australia’s birth rate. Summers (2003a: 154) argues that the policy is designed to entice women away from the labour market and into the home.

“I’d like to be there for them”: being a good mother

My interviews uncovered strong discourses associated with being a good mother. Most notably was the notion of “being there” for children, with many stressing the

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9 The “Baby Bonus” is an Australian Government policy that was introduced in 2004 by the Howard Government. Women are eligible to receive a lump sum, tax-free payment after the birth of a child. In 2004 the payment was $3000. In 2007 the payment was $5000.
importance of being available at home while one’s children are young. The length of
time women plan to stay at home (removed from the paid workforce) with their
children varied across my interviews. A few expected to stay out of the labour
market completely until their children entered high school. For example, Gillian
aspired to be a “stay-at-home-mum” until her children are grown up:

    I would like to stay home look after my family and watching over my
children until they are old enough to take care of themselves. If we need a bit
of extra money then trying to find a flexible job between school hours would
be an option. (Gillian, 19, email interview, metropolitan)

Many envisaged doing part-time work, which would allow them to be available
when their children get home from school. For example, Jennifer expressed her
desire to be at home for her children when they return from school:

    Yeah, well my kids I don’t want them to come home after school and have
no-one there…I don’t want my kids to come home to an empty house and
have to just watch TV. (Jennifer, 19, telephone interview, regional city)

Like the generation of women before them, these young women envision that they
will fit work around raising children (cf. Everingham et al. 2007). Louise articulated
a mixed message of not wanting to be at home full-time, but also feeling the need to
“be at home” for her children:

    So yeah, so I probably would want to work. I wouldn’t want to be at home all
the time. But then if I were to have kids then I would like to be at home for
them. I wouldn’t want to be away. But not that I really want kids at the
moment. (Louise, 19, suburban focus group)

Her insistence that she does not really want children “at the moment” suggests that
she has not begun to plan how she will combine career and mothering. For her it is
still a long way into the future. A smaller number suggested they wished to remain
firmly in their careers after having a baby, imagining that they might take the first
few months to a year out of paid work to be with their baby, but then return to work
full-time or part-time As Jade explained, becoming a mother will have important implications for her participation in the paid workforce:

Having a child will impact on my employment as I will need to take at least 6-9 months off to raise my child. I would take time out of paid work to raise my child till the age of one. Then I would like to go back to work part-time if I need to. (Jade, 21, email interview, metropolitan)

Others were less keen to resort to part time hours, and expect they will be able to continue their careers while raising children. Belinda stressed the importance of spending time with one’s children, but argues that it is crucial that women be allowed to follow their career paths. She suggested that childcare is one solution in making working motherhood easier.

But I think childcare is a good thing. I think, yeah, the whole quality thing is important, and you’ve got to spend time with your kids – especially the first one or two years, when they’re growing up, because they grow very fast. So I’d want to be involved in that. But yeah, there’s that whole importance of... if you want to pursue a career, then, like, I would want to pursue a career, then it’s kind of important that you have the opportunity to do so. (Belinda, 18, inner-city focus group)

Quite a substantial number of my respondents, however, did not like the idea of using childcare. For example, Melissa articulated a common concern about not wanting to miss out on time with children when they are very young:

Unless you’re happy to put your kids into daycare – I certainly wouldn’t want to do that. I’d want to spend time with them in those early years. But I do want to have a career too, so I think yeah, for the moment I’ll focus on career and then I’ll think about kids later. (Melissa, 21, telephone interview, regional city)

As Suzy discussed, she finds it problematic to put her children “straight into childcare”, directly after they are born:
But yeah, I don’t think that I’d want to put, by the same token, I don’t think I’d want to put my kids straight into childcare. I’d want to, you know, I think you need a little bit of support when you’re younger, but then, I don’t want to lose my career over it. That’s maybe selfish. (Suzy, 19, suburban focus group)

Interestingly, Suzy characterises herself as “selfish” for wanting to maintain a career, thus reflecting the dominant discursive regimes surrounding work and motherhood and illustrating the sorts of judgements made about women and their decisions. Even before she has had a child, Suzy is judging herself harshly, just like the characters in Desperate Housewives, for not being appropriately “motherly”. Most of my respondents were comfortable with the idea that their partner might be the primary child carer. However it hinged on “if I was earning more than him”, or “if I earned enough to support the whole family”. Despite advances in the workplace since second wave feminism, women continue to earn less than men. As Anne Summers (2003b: 168) notes, in Australia “women’s earnings continue to lag as much as 33 per cent behind men’s”. Clearly, gender-based income discrepancies will influence young people’s decisions about who will be the primary child-carer. Interestingly, many of the young women I spoke to envisaged that both partners would take time out of the paid work force to raise children, or that both would work part-time while the children were young. For example, Suzy expressed the hope that her partner would be equally involved in raising their children:

I’d probably want to take a bit of time off. I’d hope that my partner would be actively involved too and would want to take maybe some time off. Maybe I take some time and he take some time, or something like that. (Suzy, 19, suburban focus group)

Most respondents acknowledged that motherhood is stressful. Television depictions usually paint the role as joyful, but Desperate Housewives does not obscure the difficulties of mothering. It does not portray motherhood as easy, nor a joy, but hard work – often emotionally devastating work. The show is postfeminist because it illustrates struggles that contemporary women are dealing with. The best moments of
the show are those that exemplify the pressures on women that continue to exist. For example, throughout the series, Lynette, Susan and Bree all experience feelings of guilt associated with mothering or not living up to the ideal. As Niall Richardson (2006: 160) points out, “marriage and motherhood are represented as sites of intense struggle, if not even turmoil, for the leading characters”. Susan generally has a close and friendly relationship with her teenage daughter, Julie, but there are moments when she questions her skills as a parent, particularly when she realises that as a single mother she has been treating Julie like an adult friend, relying too much on the teenager’s apparent maturity. Bree, too, continually feels as though she has let her family down, particularly after her husband asks for a divorce and her son is involved in a fatal hit-and-run car accident. Ironically, it is Bree’s constant striving for perfection that alienates her family. Lynette struggles to keep her sons under control and often feels useless, especially in comparison to her previous role as an advertising executive.

One of my interview participants, Katrina, says that the difficulties of motherhood are very evident in the character of Lynette:

Katrina: She’s the one; I think she has got four kids. I think I like her. I think she does the balance of home and work and does everything that she can, and I don’t think she really sacrifices – she kind of does, but yeah I like her.

Me: Do you think she enjoys being so stressed out with the kids?

Katrina: Um I think she does actually. I don’t know, there are times when she’s quite obviously really stressed out, but then there’s times that while she’s stressed out, she kind of sits back and looks at them and is smiling and is happy about it. So, yeah. (Katrina, 22, telephone interview, regional city)

Katrina’s reading of Lynette’s character paints her as a woman who loves her role as mother despite the stress it causes her. Katrina also suggests that Lynette cultivates a more relaxed attitude to mothering, challenging the idea that she must live up to the image of the perfect mother. The struggles associated with motherhood are a key theme in *Desperate Housewives*. Indeed, as McCabe and Akass (2006) point out, the
inspiration behind the programme according to its creator, Marc Cherry, was a news story about a woman who drowned her five young children. Cherry was so shocked by the story, he discussed it with his mother whose response was, “I’ve been there”. The hidden angst of his own mother prompted Cherry to create a series that explored the concealed despair that many women experience as mothers (McCabe and Akass 2006: 3).

Episode six of Desperate Housewives, “Running to Stand Still” (Series 1: Episode 6) explores in depth the pressures and emotional impact of motherhood. Lynette, who has given up her career to be a full time mother, is continually frustrated at not being good enough. She rarely feels like a successful parent. In this episode, she becomes so distraught that she asks one of the parents at her school how she manages to “cram it all in”. The mother confides that she occasionally pops some of her child’s ADD (attention deficit order) medication in order to cope with the never-ending tasks that she is obliged to fulfil. Later in the episode, Lynette is upset and overwhelmed – unable to cope with the additional chore of sewing costumes for a school play. In a moment of sheer desperation, she decides to take some of her son’s ADD medication too. The rest of the night is spent in a frenzy of sewing and cleaning, her house is left sparkling and for the first time she feels as though she might have become the “super-mum” she aspires to be. This episode’s mention of the “alpha-mum” unveils the pressures on women to live up to an impossible standard. A few episodes later, Lynette’s desperation finally gets the better of her. In one of the most disturbing scenes from the series, we see Lynette hallucinating. She envisions herself screaming and breaking things and then reaching out for a gun, presented by her friend Mary-Alice whose suicide provides the background mystery to the entire series. This frightening portrayal of the dark side of motherhood reveals aspects of mothering that are not usually represented in prime time television.

The young women in my study recognised motherhood as a hard job. Many suggested that they would only embark on it once they had found the right partner, who would make the task of mothering easier. Indeed, the search for “the right one” was a prominent theme in my discussions with young women. My interviews reveal that there are tensions involved between young women’s desire to be in a relationship and their desire for independence. Nearly every woman I interviewed
expressed the desire to one day be involved in a marriage or long-term, committed relationship (cf. White 2003). Peta describes marriage as “one of those things”, an aspect of life that is normal and to be expected.

Yeah, I think it would be nice. It’s one of those things. You want to have a career, you want to have children, you want to get married. It’s just one of those things. Like it’s just like a process. (Peta, 18, telephone interview, metropolitan)

Her description of the three dominant things she would like to experience in life is compelling. Young women want to be successful in a career and strive for financial autonomy, however there is also a strong urge to find the “right person”, providing a site of interesting contradiction. Finding the “right man” was in large part tied to the necessity of having someone to rely upon when embarking on parenthood.

Although not all participants in my study desired marriage, the triad of career, children and a long-term relationship was a persistent theme in my interviews. The concept of a struggle between personal autonomy and wanting to be in a relationship is an important plotline in Sex and the City. The show navigates the ambiguities of striving for independence while still desiring the romance and the fairytale ending of house, husband, and children. While characters in Sex and the City remain ambivalent about whether that ideal is really what they want, and Desperate Housewives makes clear that the happily-ever-after tale is more fiction than fact, the texts are involved in a negotiation of the competing desires and expectations. These programmes provide opportunities to explore different possibilities and solutions. The struggles of the characters in these postfeminist television shows resonate with contemporary young women. Nearly all of the participants in my study want a career or paid work: they do not want to depend on a man for economic security. Nevertheless, they aspire to being involved in a long-term romantic relationship; they too want to find “the one” and the ideals associated with being a “good mother” require that women become dependent upon a partner, at least for a short period of time. The vast majority of women in my study aspired to have children at some point in their lives. The double-bind between wanting independence and requiring some level of dependence upon a partner becomes apparent in these discussions, because
most women want to “be there” for their child, meaning they wanted to take time out of their careers in order to raise a family (cf. Lupton and Schmied 2002: 105). The length of time each woman imagined she would take out from the paid workforce differed, but most expressed the desire to spend at least the first six months with her baby. The requirement to find a suitable partner on which to depend during this time highlights a significant contradiction in women’s lives. The right partner is someone who will share the child raising duties and be willing to take time out from their own career. Young women want a partner they can rely on, but they are hesitant about becoming too dependent (Everingham et al. 2007: 428).

*Desperate Housewives* consistently portrays the problems associated with women being dependent on men, with several of the characters feeling trapped and as though they have few options. In “Children will Listen” (Series 1: Episode 18) the deception and unhappiness within Gabrielle’s marriage comes to a head. Throughout the series, Carlos has been dealing with charges of fraud and is faced with the prospect of prison. Gabrielle is angry that they might lose their house and possessions, fearing that she’ll be left with nothing if Carlos is incarcerated. In previous episodes we have seen Gabrielle secure a large compensation claim from the hospital where Carlos’ mother passed away. This is portrayed as Gabrielle attempting to assure her financial future – she keeps the money hidden from Carlos. In this episode the tension bubbling away in Gabrielle and Carlos’ marriage erupts into violence. Carlos discovers Gabrielle’s deception and he becomes enraged, smashing a vase against the wall. Later, they argue about a post-nuptial agreement that Carlos has drawn up and he physically threatens Gabrielle. The agreement means that if Gabrielle attempts to divorce Carlos while he is in prison then she will receive none of his wealth. He becomes more and more aggressive, grabbing her by the wrists. “Stop it, you’re hurting me!” she protests, but he continues to overpower her, violently forcing her to sign the papers. In the next scene, Gabrielle is back in the arms of her lover, John – the teenage gardener with whom she is having an affair. She tells him that she feels she has no options, that she is trapped in an unhappy marriage. While the young lover provides emotional support and sexual fulfilment for Gabrielle, we understand that he is just her plaything. He is not a viable alternative to Carlos, as he cannot provide a sufficient income to support Gabrielle’s expensive tastes. In a typically
humorous moment, she jokes that what makes her situation even more unbearable is that she is also unable to go shopping.

There are many more career opportunities than previous generations of women, but as the character of Gabrielle and others in *Desperate Housewives* demonstrate, once they become financially dependent on a man it is difficult to remain autonomous. While this is the first episode in which the issue of domestic violence is raised, Gabrielle’s financial dependence on Carlos is depicted as the source of her desperation. The power Carlos has over Gabrielle’s life – economically and physically – signifies Gabrielle as oppressed, isolated and miserable. Further questions of female financial dependence upon men emerge in this episode when Susan’s mother comes to visit. She too is experiencing difficulties in her relationship and tells Susan that her partner threw a book at her. This instance of violence is treated in a more light-hearted fashion than the previous. Susan seems more concerned about keeping the couple together, selfishly not wanting her mother to move in with her. Perhaps Susan does not take the situation as seriously as she ought, but the conflict brings to the fore the problems associated with women becoming financially reliant on men. In attempting to persuade her mother to stay with her partner, Susan suggests she will struggle to survive on her own with no job, no house and no alimony payments.

Despite the frightening depiction of female dependence on men in such a widely watched television programme, the majority of young women in my study aspire to be involved in a committed relationship and to raise a family. While most did not aspire to a life solely based around a husband and children, it did feature heavily in what they envisaged for their futures. They expected to be able to combine paid work and family responsibilities. However, tensions become evident when the question of children is brought into the equation. Strong ideas about what it means to be a good mother permeated the discussions. For example, the requirement that one parent “stay at home” or “be there” while their children are young was a prominent theme. The necessary time away from the paid work force, from their careers, did not seem much of a problem for most of the women I spoke to. However, they were very keen to have themselves established in a career *before* embarking on motherhood, so that once they were ready, it would be easier to come back to paid work.
Becoming established in a career and building up some financial security was a major factor cited for postponing having children (cf. Everingham et al. 2007: 428). Finding a suitable partner was another primary reason that women in my study gave for delaying motherhood. As Nicole explains, she is hesitant about having children because she wants to pursue a career as an environmental engineer. She does not think she would be able to achieve both things without a partner who was willing to share domestic duties:

Yes, well I guess that’s exactly why I’m not entirely sure about having children. [laugh] You would have to have a very… like, that’s sort of why I wouldn’t do it without a partner, because you’d have to have a very committed partner, who would do the housework and feed the kids and clean the kids, if you were working. (Nicole, 21, telephone interview, regional city)

The expectation that Nicole might share the child rearing equally with her male partner is certainly a legacy of second wave feminism. Most of the women I interviewed recognised that mothering is difficult and demanding, and while most aspire to be mothers, they were hesitant about jumping into the role too early or before they had achieved some things for themselves. There was a widespread sentiment among my respondents that they wanted to make the most of all the opportunities available to them and experience all that life had to offer. Alongside the discourses of opportunities and choice, however, another theme related to the tensions described here, which arose in my discussions with young women, was that of pressure.

“The pressure is a little scary”

The participants in my study felt as though there were a variety of pressures on women, including societal demands to pursue further education, to build a successful career, find a perfect partner and become a good mother. Anita Harris (2004) identifies two dominant paradigms that structure the way young women are envisaged in the twenty-first century. She suggests that women are positioned as either “can-do girls” or “at risk girls”. Her argument is useful for highlighting the
contradictions concerning discourses of choice in late modern society, and for
examining the way young women are compelled to negotiate competing discourses
of achievement and risk. She suggests that in this era, where many collective ties
have fallen away, young women “must develop individual strategies and take
personal responsibility for their success, happiness, and livelihood by making the
right choices in an uncertain and changeable environment” (Harris 2004: 4). There
was a sense among the young women in my study that although they have many
opportunities available to them, they also face the pressure to ‘have it all’. Many feel
as though the pressures they experience are a result of their own failure to grasp all
the opportunities available to them. A strong underlying message in both televisions
series that I examined was that women should not be so hard on themselves in trying
to live up to an impossible ideal. The participants in my study identified with the
stresses experienced by characters in Sex and the City and Desperate Housewives.
The fictional television pressures mirror the tensions faced by this generation of
women.

Overall, my interview participants viewed the seemingly endless possibilities now
available to them in a positive light. However, a few were not so pleased with their
greater number of “choices”. Indeed, a prominent theme arising from my discussions
was the sense that “too many choices” sometimes made life difficult. For instance,
Naomi discussed the problems associated with having “more opportunities”:

As women we are more independent and we are given more opportunities. However there is also more pressure for us to succeed and be independent in our own right, to study further, to better our careers etc. Because of this the pressure is a little scary! (Naomi, 21, email interview, metropolitan)

My interviews revealed that young women feel pressured to be successful, or as Ella
puts it, to “have it all”:

But it is also difficult to have it all, as they say. You know, the whole, the
career, the kids. (Ella, 19, inner-city focus group)

Alex also discussed the difficulties women face when attempting to succeed at work
and at home:

There are higher expectations of women to be successful both in the home sphere and in the workforce. As a result of this, there is a tendency in society to view women negatively regardless of how they live their lives, and this ‘judgement’ seems to be strongest among the women themselves. For example, someone who may be a full-time homemaker and not making money is seen as not having a job, while they are actually doing one of the hardest jobs of the family. A woman with a family who works full time may be seen as neglecting the family. A woman who chooses not to marry may be pitied for her single status by married people, and a woman who chooses to be sexually promiscuous may be put down for being ‘cheap’. While they may not always be accurate, shows such as Desperate Housewives and Sex and the City explore this issue thoroughly. (Alex, 23, email interview, metropolitan)

Alex points out the pressures women face in making choices about work, motherhood and family. She suggests that society sends mixed messages to women about what is appropriate behaviour, and even argues that women themselves perpetuate the worst kinds of judgements of one another. She insinuates that in lots of ways women are “damned if they do and damned if they don’t” as women will be viewed negatively no matter what choices they make. She suggests that Desperate Housewives and Sex and the City examine the pressures on women to live up to society’s difficult expectations. Alana also considers the possibility that women today face “more pressure”. In comparison to most of the women in my study, who were grateful for the greater number of career options, Alana is disappointed that, unlike her mother, she cannot “choose” to be a housewife.

There’s a lot more pressure. With my grandmother, her only option was to be a housewife. My mother got to choose whatever she wanted. But I HAVE TO have a career, whether I want one or not. It’s not possible to be a housewife anymore. Families cannot survive on just one wage. This means I won’t be able to be a full time mum. The expectations are so high, and higher still now that this whole “you’ve got to have a kid before your 30s” thing has come about. We’re still expected to do all the housewife jobs though. On the time
off from the full-time job, it’s still my job to do the dishes, the laundry, the vacuuming, the cooking, the giving birth. There’s the idea of the man helping out around the house but everyone knows that never actually happens. (Alana, 20, email interview, rural)

Alana was the only participant who vocalised a belief that women’s situation has not improved over time, however her concerns are significant because they hint at the sorts of pressures young women face and highlight that some women in this neoliberal era are vulnerable to backlash discourses. For Alana, the changes brought about by the women’s movement have made women’s lives harder. She is adamant that women’s ability to have a career just means they have more work to do. She is sceptical that male partners adequately take part in housework and child rearing. Alana’s belief that men do not equally share domestic duties is supported by recent Australian census data, reported in a metropolitan daily broadsheet, which shows that women continue to do the bulk of housework and childcare (Sydney Morning Herald 2007). Alana articulates clearly the pressures women face in this postfeminist society. She argues that there are “high expectations” to be a good career woman, a good mother and an efficient housewife. My interviews also revealed the pressures upon women to find a suitable lifelong partner who will share the load.

The pursuit of the ideal romantic partner is a prominent theme in Sex and the City. As Katrina discusses in response to a question about her favourite characters, the pressures to find a perfect romance are strong:

Um, I kind of like them. I think Charlotte may be a bit repressed. [laughs] But in a kind of fun way. I think she knows herself that she’s a bit... she’s successful, she’s just a bit – I think a lot of people can kind of identify with her because she has this ideal life in her head. And I think that’s what a lot of people kind of grow up with, you know. Like, looking at the perfect – like when you’re in high school seeing movies – and there are these perfect high school romances and everything ends happily ever after. So I think you can identify with her in that way. (Katrina, 22, telephone interview, regional city)
As I argued in the previous chapter, the current era can be characterised as postfeminist precisely because of the availability of feminist discourses in popular culture. This interview excerpt exemplifies the way in which postfeminism operates. Katrina actively draws on feminist discourses when discussing Charlotte (who is “a bit repressed”). However, Sex and the City is also postfeminist because it plays out the ambiguities facing young women and resonates with their experiences. Young women can identify with the lead characters as they navigate their way through relationships and social expectations. Katrina’s suggestion that Charlotte is repressed is balanced by her assertion that she is also successful. At first, Katrina seems to be distancing herself from Charlotte, but then is able to identify with the way Charlotte navigates the pursuit of a fairy-tale romance. Charlotte is constantly trying to live up to traditional expectations. Katrina proposes that a lot of women would be able to relate to Charlotte and the “ideal life in her head”. As Akass and McCabe (2004: 189) note, Charlotte “self-consciously plays out the role of the classic feminine ideal…remain[ing] forever optimistic that she will meet the knight in shining armour that she dreamt about as a little girl” (2004: 189). Katrina recognises that Charlotte’s romantic ideals are a social construction, as are her own, influenced by the “perfect high school romances” in teenage movies. Yet the character works precisely because Katrina can identify with Charlotte’s longing for that idyllic romance, even as she remains critical of it.

Niall Richardson argues that “Desperate Housewives does not represent people being whatever they want to be – like Carrie and her ‘queer’ friends – but instead shows ‘desperate’ people obsessed with conforming to appropriate social roles” (Richardson 2006: 169). I suggest that, in many ways, it is this desperation to conform to social expectations that young women can relate to. While none of the women in my study were mothers or housewives, the lead characters in both programmes resonate with their expectations. For example, Lynnette’s struggle to “cram it all in” to live up to an ideal image, and Bree’s constant effort to appear perfect, highlight the pressures upon women that continue to structure women’s aspirations and experiences. As the women in my study recognised, despite the abundance of opportunities, there are still social expectations and pressures facing women.
While Carrie and her friends are perhaps not obsessed as the characters in *Desperate Housewives* to conform to an ideal, they are still trying to live up to social pressures – to be sexually attractive, to be successful in their careers, and to find that “special someone”. *Sex and the City* explores well the double-bind between wanting to be financially independent, successful in the workplace and autonomous, and wanting to find “Mr Right” (Di Mattia 2004). I demonstrated in the last chapter that young women actively draw upon feminist discourses when summing up whether they find the television characters positive (and progressive) role models. As my interviews attest, and as *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* reflect, women want it all. They want career success and financial autonomy, as well as a long-term relationship and children. Moreover, there are strong social pressures to accomplish these things and to be seen to ‘have it all’.

**Conclusion**

What characterises this postfeminist moment is the extent to which feminist discourses are played out in popular culture, allowing young women a site to engage with characters that are experiencing the same dominant struggles. The legacy of second wave feminism provides women with a seemingly endless array of choices about what they can do with their lives (Harris 2004: 8). I have demonstrated in this chapter that while young women are moulded by the historical circumstances in which they have grown up, that is, they have more choice and more independence, they are still expected to conform to certain ideals. Young women experience pressure to live up to an ideal version of womanhood – they are expected to be well-educated, pursue a successful career, catch the perfect romantic partner and effortlessly combine paid work with motherhood. On one hand, women are told they have endless choices available. On the other, their options are constrained and there are expectations upon them to ‘have it all’.

Via an analysis of interview material and cultural texts, I have uncovered the dominant tensions being experienced by this generation of women. This chapter has outlined how young women negotiate the issues that flow from these fundamental tensions. Most envisage having children but are planning to delay motherhood until they are financially independent and have achieved some stability in the workforce.
As Anne Summers argues, “women today are all too often confronted with the same sorts of choices that confounded their grandmothers” (2003b: 35). Both television series studied depict women struggling to cope with heavy demands or live up to impossible social ideals. These series are postfeminist because they demonstrate that women are still faced with gender-based obstacles and that feminist discourses are relevant and necessary. They are postfeminist because they are sites of feminist contestation. This chapter demonstrates that by depicting the contradictions facing contemporary women, texts such as Desperate Housewives and Sex and the City navigate the conflicting demands women face. Despite the rhetoric of endless choice that pervades contemporary era, the structural constraints that inhibited the life choices of previous generations continue to exist, particularly when it comes to combining paid work and motherhood. The overlapping of feminist discourses of autonomy and choice with a broader neoliberal context of individualisation works to obscure some of the contradictions facing women, and often leads women to perceive them as individual pressures. This has important implications, and as I will show in the next chapter, helps to elucidate young women’s relationship with feminism.
Chapter Seven: An Unequal Equality – Young
Women’s Relationship with Feminism

There has been an ongoing discussion within feminism about the extent to which young women embrace feminist ideas. The generational debates often focus on young women’s perceived lack of interest in feminism (Bulbeck 2005: 65). For example, Anne Summers (1994) accuses young women of not adequately continuing feminist activism of the 1960s and 1970s. Angela McRobbie (2003: 133) argues that feminism is “capable of instilling dread and horror in young women”. As a young woman, I have long been puzzled by claims that a new generation of women do not care about gender issues. Part of my compulsion to investigate young women’s attitudes to feminism was to discover whether this is indeed the case. My first reaction is “of course not”, but I suspect that is generational bias – and I do not want to succumb to the attack-and-defence mindset that characterise the feminist generation debates. In fact, as stated throughout this thesis, I am trying to avoid slipping into the rhetoric of the generation war. The reason for considering my generational position here is to make clear that even though I fall on the ‘young side’ of the so-called generational divide, I too have experienced disappointment that not all women my age wholeheartedly support feminism. So, my interest in investigating young women’s attitudes to feminism is motivated by two key factors. First, it is prompted by my desire to demonstrate that feminism is not dead and buried, nor squandered to an ungrateful, apathetic generation of women. Second, my research is fuelled by a compulsion to understand the complex relationship that this generation has with feminism. Indeed, one major focus of this dissertation is the attempt to construct a paradigm for better understanding generational phenomena, for investigating the socio-historical contexts that come to shape our understandings of ourselves and, importantly for this chapter, our engagement with feminism.
In this chapter, I deal primarily with one section of my interviews that was dedicated to exploring young women’s perceptions of feminism (see Appendix D). These questions were designed to draw out two main concerns. First, I was interested in finding out whether or not the young women regarded themselves as feminist. Second, I wanted to uncover how they understood feminism, how they defined it, and what sort of issues they thought feminists should be tackling. Both of these areas of questioning were connected to my desire to understand generational change. I wanted to elicit information about the current state of feminism and whether young women found it pertinent to their lives. However, the questions were also an attempt at drawing out women’s attitudes, not just to feminism, but also to the position of women more generally. I was guided by an overarching concern with how they thought gender roles had shifted in recent decades and an interest in understanding the sorts of gender issues that they consider important in their lives.

Each section in this chapter is organised around the language the participants used in their discussions of feminism. The first half considers young women’s definitions and understandings of feminism. It delves into whether or not participants considered themselves feminist. The second half of the chapter examines the concept of equality, a term mentioned frequently during my interviews. Unlike previous studies, my goal in asking them about feminist self-identification was not to provide an assessment of why women are likely or unlikely to take on a feminist identity. Rather, it was to use a generational framework to better understand the socio-cultural context that is shaping young women’s relationship with feminism.

**Part One: Feminist Identities?**

*“Not completely, but sort of”: I am feminist to an extent*

If I had to name one phrase that I read repeatedly in the course of my research it would be this one: “I’m not a feminist, but...”. In the literature examining young women and feminism, this phrase has become the clichéd way of describing women who might not proclaim themselves a feminist but who advocate broadly feminist opinions or attitudes. Jane Pilcher (1993: 2) describes “I’m not a feminist, but” as a syndrome, summarising it as the way “women distance themselves from an
identification or association with feminism whilst, in the same breath, espousing views in sympathy with feminist perspectives”. As Alyssa Zucker (2004: 423) attests, many scholars refer to it in their work. Nancy Whittier (1995: 227) points out that polls have shown that young women support feminist goals but do not embrace a feminist identity. The literature in this area often seems to bemoan this lack of feminist identification. Christine Griffin (2001) suggests that this body of literature often casts young women and feminism into disconnected entities. She argues, “[f]eminism is constructed as irrelevant to young women, and/or young women are represented as antagonistic or apathetic towards feminism, at least in contemporary western societies” (2001: 182). I do not think it is helpful to lament the lack of women who identify as feminists. I find it much more interesting to examine their attitudes, without setting up a distinction between good self-proclaimed feminists (like ‘us’ feminist researchers) and those who may be slightly more ambivalent about the label ‘feminist’. While much has been written about the familiar catchphrase, “I’m not a feminist, but…”, my interviews with young women revealed slightly different sentiments. In contrast to previous studies that have investigated feminist self-identification, my participants were much more likely to say, “I’m not a feminist, because”, “I am a feminist”, or “I am a feminist to an extent”.

There is a vast body of feminist scholarship dedicated to investigating women’s identification with feminism (for example, Budgeon 2001; Myaskovsky and Wittig 1997; Rich 2005; Williams and Wittig 1997; Zucker 2004; Aronson 2003; Bulbeck 2005, 2000; Hughes 2005; Maddison 2004; Peltola et al. 2004; Pilcher 1993; Turnbull 1998). Williams and Wittig (1997: 886) survey the large field of literature that is concerned with measuring feminist identity. These studies are often based in the discipline of psychology and adopt quantitative measures and scales. Unlike many of the studies in this field, my main concern was not to discover predictors of feminist identification. While it is interesting to research what factors contribute to women’s self-identification as feminist, my questions regarding feminist self-labelling were designed with different aims in mind. I am not so much interested in why or why not young women take on the label of feminist, although it is an overlapping issue. As Sarah Maddison (2004: 243) points out, “whether or not a

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10 For an indication of the breadth of the literature in this field see also Zucker (2004).
young woman ever identifies as being a feminist may not be the most relevant question for the contemporary Australian women’s movement”. My questions about self-identification were asked in order to draw out the complexities of women’s engagement with feminism, not to find reasons for lack of identification. Asking if they considered themselves feminist was not to gauge how many young feminists there are, nor was it to pinpoint the factors leading to why some women reject the label. Rather, it was a technique that helped shed light on the complex, sometimes contradictory, understandings of feminism that this generation hold.

By far the most common response to the question of feminist identification was “yes and no”, “yes, to an extent” or as one respondent put it, “not completely, but sort of”. This ambivalent response raises a number of important issues, relevant to my assertion that we are living in a postfeminist age. This phrase articulates well the overarching responses I received from women when I asked them if they considered themselves a feminist. “Not completely but sort of” expresses ambivalence towards the label, but is certainly not a rejection of it. It hints at the idea that young women today accept many of the basic principles of feminism, without the negativity usually associated with the much-touted “I’m not a feminist, but” idiom that so many studies attribute to young women (Zucker 2004; Pilcher 1993; Williams and Wittig 1997). Most participants in my study generally expressed opinions congruous with feminism and overall, they considered themselves to be feminists, at least to an extent. These findings clearly dispute Angela McRobbie’s (2004: 258) claim that “young women recoil in horror at the very idea of the feminist”. However, the frequency of the hesitant “yes and no” response to this question of feminist self-identification warrants further attention. It must be acknowledged that the women participating in my study may have answered in the affirmative, knowing they were speaking to a feminist researcher. A study with a larger sample may find a higher proportion of women who express anti-feminist attitudes. Below I outline some of the dominant themes that emerged when my participants were determining whether or not the feminist label suited them.

In the following passage, Miranda adequately sums up a sentiment expressed by a large percentage of my participants when asked if they considered themselves feminists or not:
Not completely, but sort of. I strongly believe in equal rights and opportunities in society for men and women. But I don’t actively go out into society to show this, it’s not the centre of who I am, or the most important thing in my life. It’s just part of the many things that I believe is right and just. (Miranda, 23, email interview, regional city)

Miranda’s phrase “not completely, but sort of” captures well the uncertainty young women express when contemplating whether or not they would apply the term ‘feminist’ to themselves. While most participants had a favourable opinion of feminism in general, this did not always translate into feminist self-identification. Or if it did, it was with some reservation. For example:

In a way yes, as I think women have a right to be heard regardless of the issue. (Kim, 23, email interview, regional city)

Yes and no. I think there are a lot of connotations to the word. (Lucinda, 18, email interview, metropolitan)

Yes and no. Yes because I believe women should be treated equally to men & with respect. I also think it is unfair how men get paid more than women still & that top management & other positions are still dominated by men. I also think socially women are still treated as objects & when we have fun & act freely, we are labelled a slut whereas men are not. (Naomi, 21, email interview, metropolitan)

Naomi outlines a number of important feminist causes – equal opportunity and pay in the workplace, the objectification of women’s bodies and the double standards associated with female sexuality. She appreciates feminist issues even though she may not call herself a feminist. The prevalence of the “yes and no” response, the “not completely, but sort of” mentality, highlights that women have a complex engagement with feminism. Williams and Wittig (1997) make a useful distinction between “feminist social identity” and “pro-feminist orientation”. The latter are women who believe in the ideals of feminism but who do not publically take on the
label feminist. I borrow this phrase because it provides a more satisfactory category than the simplistic and over-used idiom “I’m not a feminist, but”. Pro-feminist orientation is a phrase that suits a large proportion of my participants. It aptly sums up those who neither deny feminist self-identification nor embrace it completely. It encompasses those women who fall somewhere in between. Not wholeheartedly taking on a feminist subject position does not mean that young women are rejecting feminist beliefs. Many of the women in my study expressed an awareness of gender issues and feminist debates and although not all were sympathetic to them, their familiarity with feminist discourses contributes to my assertion that the era can be considered postfeminist.

Throughout my interviews a contrast was often constructed between feminism as a belief-system or set of principles, versus feminism as action-oriented. Indeed, this seemed to be rather central to many participants’ reasons for identifying as feminist or not. For instance, if they defined feminism as a belief in equality or fairness, they were likely to say “yes I’m a feminist”. If they understood feminism as protest, activism or a movement from the 1960s or 1970s, they were less likely to associate themselves with a feminist identity. This is exemplified in the following interview excerpts. Alison makes a distinction between feminism as a belief – an ideal – and feminism as a form of action:

I don’t rally or anything like that, but I do believe in their ideals. (Alison, 18, email interview, metropolitan)

Alex, too, pointed out that she has feminist beliefs but suggests that her feminist credentials are limited because she is not an activist:

I believe women have the right to live with the same freedoms as men have, in this way I would see myself as a feminist. However, I am not an activist, so I would only act on feminist issues if they affected me personally, or a close friend or relative. (Alex, 23, email interview, metropolitan)
Katrina outlined the way her generation have been brought up with feminist principles. She argues that for previous generations of women, feminism was “more of a fight”:

I think it’s changed. I mean, we don’t need to fight for the vote now, we don’t need to fight to get into uni, we don’t need to fight to keep our name. So I think for my generation, at least, it is a belief, because we’re kind of raised with those rights. We’ve been raised kind of being allowed to do the things that the boys have been able to do. So for us it’s more of a belief system. But historically it was something to fight for. And for generations it would have been something to fight for and lose. (Katrina, 22, telephone interview, regional city)

Katrina raises generational position when discussing her relationship to feminism. She argues that her generation has been “raised with those rights”. Here, Katrina hints at the importance of generation in shaping one’s understanding of feminism. She suggests that for her generation, feminism is a belief system, something they have grown up with. This point is crucial to my understanding of the postfeminist era. This generation is characterised by the widespread acceptance, or at least knowledge, of many second wave feminist ideas. As young feminist authors Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards (2000: 17) have pointed out, “for our generation, feminism is like fluoride. We scarcely notice that we have it – it’s simply in the water”. Nicole also articulates the idea that feminism is a belief, suggesting that feminism was more of an active pursuit in the 1970s. She identifies a shift in feminism from being “pro-active” to people “believing”:

The only immediate thought would be that they’re less pro-active today, I think than in the 70s. Whereas now, I think it has sort of progressed, a lot of women... it’s more, yeah, people believing rather than being active. (Nicole, 21, telephone interview, regional city)

The association of feminism with activism as a reason for not taking on a feminist identity leads me to two significant and connected points, both of which are strongly related to generational differences in understandings of feminism. First, as my
interviews show, a young woman might strongly sympathise with feminist goals, but if she sees feminism as a form of activism and she is not involved in collective action herself, she may be reluctant to identify herself as a feminist. When being a feminist is defined predominantly as a form of activism or as being part of a movement (Summers 1994) or when authors admonish younger women for renouncing feminism (McRobbie 2004b), it immediately restricts the kinds of feminist subjectivity that are considered appropriate. Second, the linking of feminism with activism demonstrates that young women have a particular vision of what a proper feminist looks like. Often they envision someone who attends rallies or who dedicates their life to standing up for women. The image of the “proper feminist” emerges in much of the third wave literature, either in terms of wanting to live up to that role, or to rebel against it.

Cathryn Bailey (2002) argues convincingly that third wave feminist resistance to second wave feminism can be understood as a struggle “against becoming the kind of feminist subjects they thought they were supposed to become. As such, they may be offering a kind of resistance that is not immediately directed at actual feminists, but rather to an internalized version of a feminist governor” (2002: 150). Here, she is positioning second wave feminism as a type of disciplinary power in the Foucauldian sense, arguing that young feminists may have come to “internalize a judgemental feminist eye”. As discussed in Chapters One and Two, feminism does have power that can work to produce subjects who then resist. Ann Curthoys (1997: 198) supports this point, arguing that “young people see feminism as influential and powerful, and therefore something to be resisted, rebelled against”. This sense of feminism as a hegemonic force is often mentioned in the third wave literature. Many of the contributors to third wave anthologies are interested in expressing what feminism means for them, and in doing so they position themselves against what they see as a monolithic form of feminism from the second wave (Bail 1996a: 4). These kinds of debates, as I showed in Chapter Two, tend to reify the generational divide, as feminists are cast into binary categories of good or bad, mother or daughter.

Young women’s rebellion against the stereotypical image of ‘the feminist’ was occasionally mentioned in the interviews. The usual negative clichés associated with
feminists, such as hairy-legs and man-hating were mentioned. However, when these stereotypical images of the feminist were brought up they were usually recognised as a media-generated images. For example, Naomi and April both argue that there is a “stigma attached” to feminism:

I think when you tell someone you are feminist, often there is a stigma attached to it, i.e. a man hating butch person, which ruins the image of feminism. So I think although they have made good things happen, their image could been changed possibly? (Naomi, 21, email interview, metropolitan)

I think there’s a negative stigma attached to feminism. I think it’s attached to man-hating and man-bashing and that kind of thing. (April, 19, suburban focus group)

Importantly, most women in my study did not seem to accept these stereotypes. Rather than recoiling from feminism because of an unattractive connotation of what a feminist looks like or stands for, more commonly, if women in my study distanced themselves from the label ‘feminist’ it was simply because they felt the word was too restricting. Either they did not want to categorise themselves, or their understanding of ‘feminist’ did not fit with their beliefs of fairness and equality for everyone. In the following comments, popular anti-feminist sentiments are raised. For example, as April goes on to describe, she feels feminism focuses too much on women:

In regards to positive aspects of feminism, equality and fairness and egalitarianism for everyone, you know, I’d say I’m a feminist. But I’d say I’m an egalitarian for all races and all genders, not just females but you know. So if there was a word for all-encompassing pro-everyone, then I’d go that one. (April, 19, suburban focus group)

For April, the term feminism implies equality for women only, or suggests special treatment for females. Similarly, when asked if they considered themselves feminists Jade and Amy suggested that the word feminist is divisive:

No I don’t actually. Reason being is that I consider my self a human being
not a feminist. I’m one for fairness and I think feminism splits male and females into different groups. We should all be classed as one not as two separate species. (Jade, 21, email interview, metropolitan)

I think it shouldn’t just be feminism. I think it should be something that incorporates being equal for men and women. Maleism. [laughs] So I think I’m more to that way, instead of being a feminist, you know? I think it’s just an attitude that is concerned about women’s rights and that kind of thing. (Amy, 18, telephone interview, rural)

Jade does not consider herself a feminist, but attests that she is “one for fairness”. For Amy, the word feminism does not adequately encompass her belief that men and women are equal. Jade and Amy perceive the word feminism as division – suggesting it “splits males and females” or that it implies equality for women only. Neither takes on the identity of feminist because they are dissatisfied with the terminology. These comments echo a broader populist sentiment within the current neoliberal climate that suggests that political correctness has gone too far (Davis 1999b). Jane Pilcher (1993: 5-6) reveals that women in her study were often reluctant to associate with feminism because they viewed it as extremist, or ‘over the top’ or because they feel feminists are unfeminine. These discourses were sporadically raised in my interviews, for example, there was the occasional mention of how feminists sometimes “go too far”. For instance, Monica gives an example of how she thinks feminists sometimes go too far. She mocks the idea of “womyns rooms”, arguing that segregating men from women is discriminatory in itself:

I think “womyns” rooms and other areas which segregate men and women are a bit discriminatory. Also, some of the advertisements now on TV objectify men and make them look stupid or naive, which I think is sexist. Like the ad for the detergent where the woman hits the man on the head with a spanner. Actually this ad is kind of sexist both ways, as it suggests that the woman’s place is in the kitchen, while the man’s place is in the garage (Monica, 19, email interview, metropolitan)
Although the notion of feminism as divisive was occasionally raised, it was generally not cited as the primary reason for distancing oneself from the feminist label, nor did it imply a lack of awareness about feminist issues. For instance, even while Monica appears sceptical of certain feminist action that she suggests divides women and men, she clearly demonstrates knowledge of feminist discourses. Monica’s understanding of the way sexism operates is evident in her critique of a detergent commercial. Her understanding of feminism is made in reference to popular culture, providing further evidence of the way women use feminist language when engaging with the mainstream media. Responses to my question, “Do you consider yourself a feminist?” make clear that these women are growing up in a postfeminist era: an era deeply influenced by feminist ideas. Young women’s occasional indecisiveness or disinclination to embrace completely a feminist identity does not spell the death of feminism. Instead, their responses make clear that this era is strongly informed by feminist discourses. What is also clear is that these discourses operate within the broader neoliberal context. Women who happen to share the same age do not necessarily share a similar political agenda. Some women reject a feminist identity, some distance themselves from it, and some willingly embrace it. Level of education was an important factor in shaping young women’s relationship to feminism. University educated women in my study were more likely to embrace feminism as a concept and as a label to describe themselves. Moreover, the type of education seems to make a difference. Among my participants, those who studied an Arts degree at university were more likely than others to express opinions sympathetic with feminism. Mannheim’s (1952b: 306) concept of generational units is useful here because it makes clear that even within a generation, diverse understandings of feminism develop.

“Yes, I am a feminist”

While some women in my study were ambivalent about the label ‘feminist’ describing themselves, there were some who declared their feminist identity with an emphatic “yes”. As I mentioned previously in this chapter, the women in my study were more likely to say, “yes, I am a feminist” if they understood feminism as a belief. Alicia, Kristen and Monica all fall into this category, arguing that they are
feminists because they believe that men and women are equal and should be accorded equal rights and equal opportunities:

Yes. I believe all members of society should have equal rights no matter what gender or race. (Alicia, 23, email interview, regional city)

Definitely. I believe in equality of opportunity, and that a person’s gender shouldn’t influence how people regard them or their contributions to society (Kristen, 20, email interview, metropolitan)

Yes, because I believe that women and men are equal and I am angered by anyone who treats women as inferior. (Monica, 19, email interview metropolitan)

Because my study is concerned with examining what contemporary feminism looks like, a proportion of my interviews were conducted with women I thought would be likely to self-label as feminists. For example, I carried out focus groups with members of the Women’s Collective mailing lists of two universities in order to gain an understanding of the current state of feminism. Not surprisingly, most of these young women were firm in their feminist convictions – a couple of them labelling their feminism more specifically, as I will outline below. However it is important to note that some of the participants were only just beginning to consider feminist issues with their attendance at university sparking an interest in politics. These focus groups generated dynamic and lively conversations, both running over time. Often I could abandon my interview schedule, as participants talked amongst themselves. The women in these focus groups tended to have a deeper commitment to feminism and a more complex understanding of feminist history and theory than other women I interviewed. For example, Jasmine highlights that there is a diversity of feminisms, and she aligns herself with a specific strand:

I’m a radical lesbian feminist, and um, yeah, you know you come up against the stereotypes that you were talking about quite often...Men dominate society and culture. And you know, the binaries that have been set up in the past continue to exist every day, you know. Man equals culture, women
equals nature. And the question of how you understand feminism is really difficult when there’s so many different feminisms. (Jasmine, 23, regional city focus group)

It is quite clear from Jasmine’s discussion of gender binaries that she has encountered feminist theory at university. Jasmine goes on to mention that since moving to Newcastle (from Melbourne) she has noticed that the city is very male-dominated. She and her partner do not feel safe going out at night and are regularly confronted with homophobic violence.

Yeah, like, threats of having your sexuality explored with a beer bottle. All sorts of things, you know. (Jasmine, 23, regional city focus group)

When another member of the focus group reacted in shock to this statement, saying that she did not think those kinds of things happened anymore, Jasmine nodded and pointed out that you only have to “scratch the surface” to realise the ugly discrimination that continues to exist. Jasmine’s story demonstrates the importance of experience in shaping the kind of feminism a woman may identify with. Williams and Wittig (1997: 892-893) point out that previous studies into feminist identification have revealed that women are more likely to self-label as feminist if they identify discrimination in their own experience or if they have encountered a women’s studies course. Jasmine’s experiences of brutal homophobia have led her not only to call herself a feminist, but to attach the prefix “radical lesbian”. Frances, too, clarified her feminism:

I would call myself as an eco-feminist, but I’m not sure what you [addressing Jasmine] define eco-feminism as, or if it contrasts with what I have, because I see that it’s part of a bigger movement to globalise equality and justice and freedom of choice and expression, and everything. And for me it’s natural to be a woman so that’s my ecological self. That’s how I take it. (Frances, 20, regional city focus group)

Jasmine and Frances disagreed about their approaches to feminism. The adoption of specific forms of feminism that Jasmine and Frances discuss (“radical lesbian” and
“eco”) suggests both a connection with previous forms of feminism, as well as hinting at the limitations of the word ‘feminist’ to adequately describe the diversity of feminist issues and subjectivities. Caitlin, from the focus group at Sydney University also suggested that her feminism would be “qualified”:

I’d definitely call myself a feminist though. But it would be qualified if anyone asked me about it, I guess. Um, yeah, I don’t like that label that society’s got and I would like to retain the label feminist and I think everyone, to an extent, is feminist or should be. (Caitlin, 20, inner-city focus group)

Ann Curthoys (1997: 203) points to feminism’s “chequered history of naming”. She argues that many in the second wave, who preferred to call themselves women’s liberationists, rejected the term feminist. Interestingly, she suggests that the notion of equality was also considered suspect: “equality with what? men? them? no thanks!” (1997: 203). Sarah Maddison (2003: 89) in her doctoral thesis on feminist activism in Australia, also points out that the identity ‘feminist’ was shunned by many second wave activists. She says “[t]his rejection of a feminist identity is particularly interesting given that much criticism of contemporary young women is directed towards their use of the phrase ‘I’m not a feminist but...’ ” (2003: 90). In accounts of second wave activism in Australia, such as these, we are alerted to the deep importance of generational difference. When I read about how second wave women rejected the term ‘feminist’ because of the old-fashioned and dowdy connotations they associated them with, I am struck by the importance of naming in the generational squabbles. The contributors to third wave publications (Baumgardner and Richards 2000; Findlen 1995; Walker 1995) are also involved in a process of proclaiming and labelling their own feminism, making a distinction between them and the second wave. It seems there is a long history of generational tensions within feminism, with each generation keen to distance themselves in some way from the previous. To draw upon the image of the matryoshka doll again, it is as though the smallest matryoshka is repeating the same mistakes of misunderstanding as the doll before her. As my interviews show, women who take on the identity of feminist often clarify their feminism further, drawing on second wave prefixes and highlighting the multiplicity of feminist approaches. Thus, the era is marked by both
a connection with and a shift away from second wave feminism. My interviews reveal that while there are many young women who are ambivalent about labelling themselves ‘feminist’, this does not mean they are ignorant of gender issues or that they necessarily shun feminist ideas. Those women in my study who do not identify as feminists are not a testament to the lack of a feminist consciousness amongst this generation. Instead they illustrate that young women have a complex engagement with feminism. Even within a generation there are diverse relationships with feminism. Education and socio-economic background play a part in determining “generational units” in Mannheim’s sense. It is clear that women respond to the same socio-historical context differently. Women without a tertiary education seem more likely to have an antagonistic response to feminism, while those with Arts degrees, in particular, tend to be stronger in their support for feminism.

The mix of positive, negative and ambivalent attitudes towards feminism, mark this generation as postfeminist. They have grown up with feminism in their lives. Young women draw upon feminist discourses when discussing women’s position in society and thinking about their own lives. When asked how they define feminism, the overwhelming responses from the women I interviewed related to the concepts of equality, equal rights, equal opportunity, or a combination of all three. Equality is a prominent theme in young women’s understandings of feminism. An exploration of equality as a discourse goes some way in demonstrating the appropriateness of postfeminism to describe the current climate. In the following section I examine what young women say about equality in order to tease out the nuances of the rhetoric of equality. The notion of equality has become almost synonymous with feminism. Exploring the common understanding of feminism that conflates it with equality provides an insight into the generational context of the young women at the centre of this study. What I aim to explain with my generational framework is the intriguing tension I uncovered in my interviews between feeling like equality has been achieved, while still recognising that there is “more to do”. This generation is able to reflect upon second wave feminism as something from the past, but something that has impacted upon their own lives and the options open to them. These young women have grown up in an era influenced by the dominant liberal feminist discourses of the second wave. Their understanding of “feminism as equality” positions them generationally, post-second-wave. There was awareness
among the young women I interviewed that while many of the equity goals of second wave feminism have been attained, there is still more that feminism needs to accomplish, although there is evidence that some young women think feminism has gone too far (Everingham et al. 2007).

Part Two: Postfeminist Identities: An Unequal Equality

Feminism = Equality?

Equality for young women means not having their choices and opportunities restricted. Their understanding of equality is linked to notions of opportunity and the idea that their choices should not be constrained because they are female. While they understand that one of feminism’s chief aims is securing equality for women, my interviews revealed that when young women associate feminism with equality, they are actually referring to a number of other themes, or discourses, such as “rights”, “choices” and “opportunities”. Similarly to the respondents in Chilla Bulbeck’s (2005: 70) study, the “deployment of an ‘equality’ or ‘liberal’ feminist framework” points to the high support for feminism. Many women in my study defined feminism as the notion that gender should not matter; moreover, that gender should not be an obstacle to their ability to choose what they want for their lives. As I explored in Chapter Six, young women feel as though they have more choices and opportunities than previous generations of women. This perception often leads to a sense among young women that because they have choices available to them, then equality has been achieved. However, as I will demonstrate, most are acutely aware that gender does make a difference, and that inequality still exists. When explaining what feminism meant to her, Kristen linked feminism to equal opportunity for both sexes and echoes the discourses of cultural or ‘difference’ feminism which work to re-value female attributes:

I define feminism as working towards equality of opportunity for men and women. It has come to mean recognising the power and contributions that women can make to society in their sometimes unique understanding of the world – which I guess is just an extension of equality of opportunity. (Kristen, 20, email interview, metropolitan)
Cathy used the term “equal access”, arguing that feminism is about allowing women opportunities to pursue diverse goals:

I define feminism as the idea that women should have equal access to all aspects of society. Basically, it is the idea that if a female wants to go down a particular path, that path should be open to them. Whether a woman wants to become Prime Minister of Australia, an engineer, a hairdresser, or a mother, then that should be perfectly acceptable. (Cathy, 22, email interview, regional city)

Like Cathy, Belinda also conflated feminism with the concept of equality, before going on to discuss the importance of choice. She recognised there are “different types of feminism” but suggested:

It’s all about equality, I think. Like, feminists – there is…all the different views… different types of feminisms – there are so many different things that still in the end that what it boils down to is a choice for women. Women should be allowed to have the choice to do whatever they want, rather than having to be boxed into a set of society standards or rules, you know. I think that’s what it is all about. (Belinda, 18, inner-city focus group)

She suggests that feminism struggles to prevent women being “boxed in” by “society standards or rules”. At its most fundamental level, argues Belinda, feminism is about giving women choice to “do whatever they want”. In her book *The World According to Y*, Rebecca Huntley (2006: 42) suggests that Generation “Y men and women take gender equality for granted…They have been ingrained with the belief that they can do anything and be anything”. This feeling of optimism and endless possibility certainly came through in my interviews. Similarly, Virginia Trioli (1996), who entered the generation debates of the 1990s when she published her rebuttal to Helen Garner (1995), affirms the notion that today’s young women accept feminism in their lives, suggesting that it “has become a philosophical and political ethos so accepted by a younger generation of Australian women that they don’t even both to explain it” (Trioli 1996: 9). Not bothering to explain feminist beliefs is, I suggest, a defining
characteristic of this postfeminist era. It captures the attitude expressed by the women in my study that a lot of choices and opportunities are available for them now, without necessarily succumbing to the idea that feminism is no longer needed. In this postfeminist era feminism is not redundant. Rather, for this generation, feminist discourses are an accepted and common sense feature of contemporary society.

In response to my interview question, “What do you think of when you hear the word feminism?”, many participants reported that the term reminds them of images from the past, that they envisage feminist activism as a phenomenon from previous decades. For example, Alex thinks of feminism as a movement or a theory from the past:

I think of the women’s movements of the past, and how such theory has changed the way women are seen in society, both for better or worse. (Alex, 23, email interview, metropolitan)

Lucinda says that for her the term feminism conjures up images from history, particularly the 1970s:

I would probably say it makes me think of the 1970s...it’s a very stereotypical word. (Lucinda, 18, email interview, metropolitan)

Melissa suggests that many women today would not identify with the word feminism because it is reminiscent of historical protests:

Melissa: Yeah, yeah. That’s what feminist is very much seen to be, in the 40s and 50s era out in the street, that sort of thing, which is, maybe a lot of people don’t want to identify with anymore.

Me: Do you see it as something that’s more from the past?

Melissa: The word, definitely. The word for me does conjure up those images, but the concept definitely not. The concept has just evolved, to move,
to match the evolution of the society. (Melissa, 21, telephone interview, regional city)

Melissa makes a critical distinction here between the word ‘feminist’ and the concepts it represents.\textsuperscript{11} When she refers to women “out in the street” she recognises the historical stereotype that is often attached to the word feminism. However she also suggests that the meaning of feminism has transformed, or evolved with society. Like many of my participants, she is not dismissing feminism, but recognising that the socio-political climate has shifted. Among my participants there was a strong sense that gender issues are not as pressing, not as urgent, as they once were. For example, Jennifer pointed out that inequalities were more apparent for previous generations of women:

Like, women not being able to vote is immediately obvious and is, you know, women are immediately aware of the fact. And I think that is the catalyst for a lot more aggression and a lot more, you know, wanting to protest and that kind of thing. (Jennifer, 19, telephone interview, regional city)

Jennifer’s argument is that stark gender inequalities, such as not having the right to vote, would have been pressing concerns for previous generations. Katrina echoed this sentiment:

It’s not kind of out there. You know, we’re not on the news, “women win the right to this”. Because we’ve kind of got those rights. So it’s more women kind of maybe, fighting for a particular cause that is being overlooked, or something like that. (Katrina, 22, telephone interview, regional city)

\textsuperscript{11} It is important to note here that the wording of the questions in my interview schedule generated two distinct responses. I found that women reacted differently to the question “What do you think of when you hear the word feminism?” compared with “How do you define feminism?”. The former being more likely to elicit stereotypical images, while the latter allowed the participant to give a more comprehensive account of her ‘real’ opinion instead of the first image that came to mind.
She suggests that feminists fighting for a cause do not raise the same level of media coverage – “we’re not on the news” – as in previous times. Katrina stresses that feminism today is not “out there”, meaning it’s not as widespread a cause as it once because most women’s rights have been won. Amy also suggested that Australian women are better off today than they were a few decades ago:

Um, I think we’re getting there. Like, I think that, I could be easily influenced, but I think it’s a lot better than what it used to be. I think in some parts of the world it’s not, but in Australia it’s getting to be a lot better than what it was. And I think that it was just getting to the point where women just had to come out and protest about it, so that’s why it was so prevalent in the 70s I think. (Amy, 18, telephone interview, rural)

Amy also makes clear that there was urgency to women’s dissatisfaction in the 1970s, which manifested in protest. Hannah argued that stark gender differences were more prevalent for previous generations, suggesting that protests are unlikely to change things these days:

Like I was saying before, back in the days when there really were huge differences, I think you need something extreme to happen to start redressing that balance. And I guess I’m just lucky that I’m born now, where a lot of the hard work is done. And now, I think to continue taking that extreme path – like, I’m not saying there aren’t still issues – but I think, it’s kind of not appropriate now. I think it’s something people still need to be aware of. But I think a lot of the differences in how people view men and women are – I just don’t think any big campaign or anything is going to fix it now. (Hannah, 21, telephone interview, regional city)

Postfeminism is a term that helps contextualise the era and this generation of young women. For many of them, feminism is something from the past – conjuring up images of protest marches from the 1960s and 1970s. Such widespread feminist activism has not occurred during this generation’s lifetime. Having been born in the 1980s, it is not surprising that many view the women’s movement as a thing of the
past. Naomi recognised this when she discussed the idea that feminist activism was more prevalent “when gender inequality was huge”:

A historical movement that originated when gender inequality was huge, they fought for us to vote, work in certain industries, have more equal pay etc. I think it is still evolving because there is still so much gender inequality in pay, job positions etc. (Naomi, 21, email interview, metropolitan)

Although many young women in my study envisage feminism as a movement of the past, this does not mean they are not aware of, or that they are not concerned about continuing injustices based on gender. For example, as Naomi points out “there is still so much gender inequality”. Young women’s understandings of feminism are shaped by images of protest from the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s. There was definitely a perception among my participants that gender discrimination was more obvious, that inequalities were much more stark, for previous generations. In their generational study of women’s attitudes to feminism, Pia Peltola et al. (2004: 140) argue that since young women “experienced firsthand very little, if any, of its controversies and fervour, they may feel particularly distant from the feminist movement”. My study revealed that women may feel removed from the protest and excitement of the women’s movement, but this does not mean that they necessarily reject feminism or its aims. Postfeminism is a term that locates this generation as post-second-wave, without positioning them all as anti-feminist. It sums up the double process revealed in my interviews, whereby young women feel as though feminism is something that was more urgent and needed in the past, with some acknowledging that gender inequalities still exist. Growing up in an era that is historically after the height of the women’s movement means that the women in my study are positioned differently with regard to their understandings of feminism than women who lived through the 1960s and 1970s.

“Getting on with it in their own way”

The idea that gendered inequalities are not as obvious or urgent now as they once were ties in with young women’s perception that feminism is no longer a movement based on collective action. This contradiction was also uncovered in the previous
chapter where I revealed that many of the women I interviewed perceive the pressures they experience as individual stress. As Melissa explains:

I think it’s become sort of a more individual battle, perhaps. Just from what I can see. Like I’m sure there are lots of women’s groups out there, I’m not really a member of any and I don’t meet people and discuss these sorts of things but I think there’s quite a few people out there who feel in themselves that things still need to be done and they’re just getting on with it in their own way, sort of thing. (Melissa, 21, telephone interview, regional city)

Melissa suggests that there are women who recognise that “things still need to be done”, that feminism is still relevant, and that they are “getting on with it in their own way”. Suzy duplicated Melissa’s suggestion that feminism has become somewhat of an “individual battle”:

I think now, yes, maybe there are still steps, but I definitely, I think that right now we’ve got enough. Maybe not enough, but we’ve got opportunities and it’s about – I know that if I want to get somewhere I now have the avenues to get there. And I don’t, I’m not saying that we’ve – I think pretty much feminism, the movement, that’s possibly, like, done. I think that maybe it’s just now up to the individual. (Suzy, 19, suburban focus group)

Suzy argues that she knows if she wants to “get somewhere” that it is up to her. For Suzy, feminism as a movement marked by collective action is over. Ashley also intimated that it was up to individual women to take up the opportunities available to them, suggesting that “massive changes” have already been made:

I think we have reached a point where it’s like, okay, nothing but us sort of taking the opportunities is actually going to change a lot now. Like, there aren’t massive sort of changes that need to be made. Whereas I think back then, there was. And therefore a kind of – quite a drastic view of it was a required thing. (Ashley, 21, telephone interview, regional city)
This sense of individualism expressed by Melissa and Suzy echoes Kathy Bail’s (1996b) edited collection of essays in *DIY Feminism*, in which young women proclaimed they are doing feminism on their own terms and in different ways from their Baby Boomer mothers. Suzy believes that feminism might be over (“possibly, like, done”), however she makes clear that she means feminism “the movement”. Even though feminist discourses are still relevant (and prevalent), feminism is not a movement in the way it once was. As Ann Curthoys (1997: 204) points out, “we no longer talk of a women’s movement as such…since the organisational forms of a movement are lacking”. Other participants in my study echoed this sentiment, for example, when I asked Nicole if she saw feminism as a movement, she responded:

Um, no I don’t think it is. Like, in small groups perhaps, but it’s not a big thing. (Nicole, 21, telephone interview, regional city)

Similarly, Jennifer made the following point:

Well, I think that the spirit of the times is such that there’s a lot less of a collective spirit among women today. There’s not that kind of unity in their aggression because I think that…feminist issues that are around today are a little bit more esoteric, as in, you need to kind of know a few things – they’re not immediately obvious, I guess. (Jennifer, 19, telephone interview, regional city)

Nicole and Jennifer both suggest that today’s feminism is not as unified as it once was. This kind of individualistic discourse parallel a study by Sue Turnbull (1998) who asked university students in her media class to write about how they situate themselves in relation to feminism. Many did not label themselves feminist, but stressed that they believed in equality (1998: 166). For Turnbull, the responses she received from her students offered a critique of Anne Summers’ (1994) big picture feminism, where there is a “presumption of a coherent female identity and shared political agenda” (Turnbull 1998: 154-5). Turnbull’s students preferred what she calls microfeminism, “with its emphasis on the local, the immediate and the tactical” (1998: 154). This individualised form of feminism, that does not necessarily require the organised activism that characterised second wave feminism, represents one
strand that is typical the feminisms prevalent in this postfeminist era. This postfeminist climate operates within a larger cultural context in which neoliberal discourses dominate.

The current neoliberal context influences young women’s relationship with feminism. Neoliberalism is marked by processes of globalisation and economic rationalism that have led to dramatic shifts in the labour market, wherein the ideal worker/subject is someone who can constantly reinvent themselves (Harris 2004: 6; Walkerdine 2003: 240). Leslie Heywood (2008: 67) describes the way the contemporary economy is characterised by a globalised market, an increase in information technologies, an emphasis on consumption, and the shift to a service economy and “feminized” labour. As Anita Harris (2004: 3-4) demonstrates, late modernity features a shift away from state welfare, an increase in casual and temporary employment, as well as expectations that individuals make the right choices and manage their own destiny. Accompanying these changes is the disintegration of social movements and collective ties.

Mannheim suggests that generations share an interpretive framework or have a common set of reference points even if they have disagreeing or antagonistic “units”. Experiences in early adulthood are formative because they shape an individual’s understanding of the word, through which they interpret later events (Mannheim 1952b: 298). The current generation of young women have experienced their formative years in an era dominated by a neoliberal political agenda. Sociologists have documented a shift in the socio-political condition towards processes of individualisation (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991). Valerie Walkerdine (2003: 240), in an examination of upward mobility and gender, argues that there has been a shift in the way subjectivity and class are understood; that there has been “a movement from practices of policing and external regulation to technologies of self-regulation in which subjects come to understand themselves as responsible for their own regulation and the management of themselves is understood as central to a neo-liberal project” (2003: 239). In the previous chapter I showed how the structural limitations and contradictions facing young women express themselves as individual pressures. In this context, individuals are compelled to take responsibility for their life’s trajectory, to regulate and manage their own destiny (Harris 2004: 4). It is
important to recognise the impact of this historical context on the generation who have grown up within it. These dominant cultural discourses of individualisation are shaping young women’s worldview and have contributed to new understandings of gender and feminism. Furthermore, feminism itself has become a pervasive discourse influencing young women’s political outlook (Robinson 2008). Young women are constructing a sense of self informed by the neoliberal rhetoric of individualism and autonomy and shaped by feminist discourses of choice and independence. As a study by Everingham et al. (2007: 434) reveals, young women have been influenced by political conditions dominated by rhetoric of “individual choice” rather than “equal opportunity”.

On the whole, the women in my study did not identify with a collectivist style of feminism. For young women, feminism often means a do-it-yourself approach, “getting on with it in their own way”. In Ann Curthoys’ (1997: 208) terms, “the sense of a common project has gone”. Some women I interviewed exhibit individual determination to overcome gendered constraints (cf. Rich 2005: 501). This shift in understandings of gender and feminism is reflected in the proliferation of third wave and DIY feminisms, as I outlined in Chapter Three. As I have argued elsewhere (Robinson 2008: 50), the 1980s and 1990s saw an uneasy combination of a neoliberal focus on individualism with the institutionalisation of equality feminism as a common-sense discourse. This cultural context is shaping the political outlook of the generation at the centre of my study, and as I have shown, makes postfeminist cultural products an arena for feminist contestation.

Gender equality and rights for women, in many ways, have become an assumed, unquestioned reality for the women who have grown up after the second wave. As I pointed out in Chapter Three, Shelley Budgeon’s (2001) study has strong parallels to my own. Budgeon argues that second wave feminism plays a significant and complex role in young women’s lives, first, in the way it has provided more opportunities for women, compared with previous generations, and second that it has become a mainstream discourse (2001: 8). She argues that it is important to recognise that feminist discourses “provide interpretative frameworks for young women” (2001: 17) and that “many feminist ideas have become part of the common sense of our culture” (2001: 23). In examining the identities young women are
producing in relation to feminism, she found that young women articulate a “very strong expression of individualism” (2001:14). Although her participants do not engage in collective political action, she argues that individualism could be “a source of agency” in the daily lives of young women. Budgeon (2001: 18) argues, “if we examine this level of micropolitics and the ways in which young women negotiate conflicts, we find a mixture of individualism wedded to feminist ideals”. This mingling of individualist rhetoric with feminist belief was prominent in my interviews. Like the women in Budgeon’s study, my participants “use an interpretive framework that owes much of its potency to feminism” (2001: 20). Budgeon (2001: 22) argues that postfeminism “is located in between two political frameworks incorporating both emancipatory themes and ones more explicitly concerned with individual choices”. She found a merging of these two kinds of politics, “in the ways in which gender inequality is defined as a collective problem but with an individual solution” (2001: 21). The recognition that both feminist and individualist discourses are influencing young women’s understandings of the world is significant in understanding this postfeminist generational context.

“More than equality”

Chris Weedon (1997: 108) suggests that the hegemony of equality feminism is problematic:

[T]he principle of equality of opportunity for women and men in education and work, once established, has not proved any great threat to the balance of power in a society where patriarchal relations inform the very production and regulation of female and male subjects. It is possible for liberal discourses of equality to work against women’s interests and it is only by looking at a discourse in operation, in a specific historical context, that it is possible to see whose interests it serves at a particular moment.

Arising from my interviews, alongside the apparent sense of equality was a widespread feeling that there is “still more to be done”. A number of the participants pointed to “inequalities” and “inconsistencies” that they saw within society, including, the pressures on women to look a certain way, conditions for working
mothers, or the ongoing problem of domestic violence. As I demonstrated in Chapter Six, women’s choices continue to be constrained despite the widespread acceptance of the rhetoric of equality. My interviews revealed that the “taken for granted” notion of feminism presses up against the feeling that there are still things to be achieved. While “equality” was the dominant definition of feminism that arose, a number of other terms characterise what feminism means for this generation. Young women describe feminism as the pursuit of rights for women, the recognition and celebration of women’s power and the importance of giving women a voice. The following comments from respondents are illustrative:

Feminism is a will of some women to strongly, pro-actively push for women rights in society. (Miranda, 23, email interview, regional city)

Speaking out for equal rights, and taking a stand against sexism. (Monica, 19, email interview, metropolitan)

It’s about promoting female liberation and yeah, just disregarding all the differences and seeing female as having the same capacity as the male. (Frances, 20, regional city focus group)

Fiona also expresses the idea that for her feminism is not merely about equality. She argues that feminism encompasses broader gender issues:

So I think it’s about more than equality to me. It’s more – it’s a whole critique of gender and the idea of this division of male and female. So yeah, for me I think it has to go beyond equal rights. So I don’t think that that’s a view that is shared by all people, but I think that a lot of people wouldn’t think a lot about it, or realise how much gender is affecting their lives and might be open to change. (Fiona, 19, inner-city focus group)

Jennifer also pointed to the way feminism is concerned with crititiquing the way gender structures our lives:

Um, I guess feminism is different for different people. I think, ideally,
feminism should be fighting for equality. But also acknowledging the biological difference between a man and a woman, and allowing people to have a little bit more fluidity to kind of move in between the two different genders, you know. (Jennifer, 19, telephone interview, regional city)

Both Fiona and Jennifer express the idea that feminism should be about freeing people from restrictive gender roles. The women in my study who felt feminism should go beyond the attainment of equality tended to be those who had encountered sociological or feminist theory as part of their university studies. This points to the way feminism has shifted from an activist movement towards an academic critique of the way gender operates in society. That is not to say that feminist activism is dead. Rather it is to suggest that women of this generation are more likely to encounter feminism in a classroom than at a rally.

It is clear that there are contradictions inherent in the way young women speak about equality. On the one hand, many of them feel that feminist goals of equal rights and equal opportunities have been achieved. Yet they are also quick to point out that inequalities between men and women still exist. Katrina articulated this paradox and pointed out the limitations of equality discourse when faced with continuing injustices based on gender:

But I don’t know, it’s not really an equality that’s you know, “I’m not allowed to do this but he is”, kind of thing. I think it’s more an inequality in that women get raped more than men, and women are in domestic violence situations more than men. And women report sexual harassment more than men. So in that way we’re not equal because there’s still this divide in what’s acceptable to do to a woman and what is acceptable to do to a man. And so that’s unequal. But in terms of, kind of, yes we get paid equally. However women experience the glass ceiling. So yeah, it’s kind of an unequal equality, if that kind of makes sense. (Katrina, 22, telephone interview, regional city)

On the surface, Katrina’s phrase “unequal equality” is an oxymoron. However, it highlights the complexity and contradictions associated with the concept of feminism and what it means for this generation. It is an era characterised by a paradoxical
understanding of equality. The phrase expresses the sense that at some level young women believe equality between men and women has been achieved, while simultaneously acknowledging that gendered inequalities are far from over. Katrina, and a number of other participants, recognised that issues such as domestic violence, sexual harassment and barriers to women in the workplace are still important. Upon deeper inspection, the phrase “unequal equality” reveals something significant about contemporary gender relations and the state of feminism. It indicates the complex relationship that young women have with feminism, and also points to the current state of feminism, simultaneously evoking the sense that equality is achieved (and that feminist activism may no longer seem relevant to many young women), while asserting that certain inequalities based on gender continue negatively to affect the lives of women. “Unequal equality” is a phrase that neatly sums up the postfeminist sentiment highlighted in this chapter – a sentiment among my interview participants that was not always wholly supportive, nor dismissive of feminism. While many things have improved for women, there are still inconsistencies and injustices based on gender. For this generation, discourses of equality do not adequately address the pressures they face as women.

**Conclusion**

Instead of recoiling in horror at the idea of feminism, as suggested by McRobbie (2004b) and Summers (1994), young women have a nuanced relationship with feminism. In contrast to many earlier studies that suggest the mantra of young women is “I’m not a feminist, but…”, my study revealed a more complex response to the question of feminist identification. While there were some who refused a feminist identity, and some who embraced it, the majority of my participants fell somewhere in between and expressed an ambivalent “not completely, but sort of” sentiment. While it may be ambivalent, it is certainly not a rejection of feminism or its fundamental principles. Some young women are reluctant to embrace a feminist identity, but this does not mean they are unaware of gender issues. Feminist discourses permeate their lives and many take feminist beliefs as givens. Even when young women do not use the word ‘feminist’ to describe themselves, they have a complex engagement with gender issues and feminist discourses.
This generation’s complex relationship with feminism is bound up with the concept of equality. “Unequal equality”, a phrase used by one of my participants, is useful for summing up the paradox of the postfeminist era. To a large extent, many young women feel equality has been achieved – because they have a plethora of choices and opportunities available to them. Alongside this sense of opportunity and endless possibility, however, is the feeling that there is “more to be done”. The participants in my study recognise that inequalities continue to proliferate. Some young feminists argued that feminism needs to be about more than equality, towards a deeper interrogation of gender and the way it structures society. Others drew on second wave prefixes such as ‘radical lesbian’ or ‘eco’ to further define their feminism. In this way, the current era represents both a distancing from and a connection with earlier styles of feminism.

One reason some women were hesitant about labelling themselves a feminist was because, while they believed in the goals of feminism, they defined a feminist as someone who is involved in collective action. Interviewees suggested that gender inequalities were not as stark as they were for previous generations, so there is less impetus for action. Collective action is not seen as relevant or as effective anymore. Restrictive notions of what constitutes a ‘proper feminist’, the pervasive image of the feminist as activist, works to limit the kinds of feminist subjectivity that are deemed appropriate. However, the focus on feminism as an individual battle is linked with the dominant neoliberal currents that emphasise individualism. My examination of the diverse and ambiguous ways in which young women engage with feminism can be explained with reference to characteristics of the postfeminist era in which they have grown up, particularly the merging of feminist and neoliberal discourses. The overlapping of feminist and neoliberal rhetoric works to obscure the structural constraints that mean that not all women have equal access to a diverse range of choices and opportunities.

Diversity within the generation is reflected in young women differing responses to feminism, making clear that generations are not homogenous entities. The young women in my study are more likely to have a positive relationship with feminism if they have a university education. Arts students in particular are more likely to be open to feminist self-identification and tend to have a familiarity with academic
strands of feminism, the history of feminism and gender theory. Those from lower socio-economic backgrounds or with lower levels of education are more vulnerable to neoliberal and backlash discourses that position feminism as having gone too far or as being no longer relevant. Mannheim’s conception of generational units allows us to see that factors such as ethnicity, class, education and geography influence not only how women engage with feminist discourses but how they continue to play a significant role in women’s life chances.
Chapter Eight: A Postfeminist Generation

I began this thesis with an exploration of the heated debates that embroiled feminism in the 1990s. At the centre of these discussions about the shifts within feminism and the future of the women’s movement was the concept of generation. Helen Garner (1995), a key instigator of the generational debates in Australia, describes them not as a dialogue, but as a war. In doing so, she makes clear that within feminism generation is a highly contentious issue, fraught with antagonism and resentment. In examining the generational tensions it became clear that a more rigorous theoretical approach was required in order to get beyond the divisive and painful generational disagreements. Without a careful approach to theorising generation, discussions based around age have tended to resort to stereotypes and unproductive conflict. Generation is under-theorised within these feminist debates and a more sophisticated understanding of processes of generational change is needed. This thesis establishes an approach that deepens the theorisation of generation and pays attention to the historic specificity of particular understandings of feminism. It arrives at a more complex understanding of generation and processes of generational change than the recent debates within feminism have allowed.

Mobilising the concept of postfeminism and drawing upon the work of Karl Mannheim (1952b), I developed a broader theoretical framework for making sense of generational shifts. Mannheim’s work has been crucial in my exploration of feminist generations. When the discussion is moved away from personal attacks and unproductive age-based antagonisms towards a more fruitful examination of the role historical context plays in shaping generations, it becomes possible to see the usefulness of Mannheim’s approach. Using his work, I was able to examine feminist generations without succumbing to a reductive analysis where age becomes the defining characteristic of feminist difference. He reminds scholars not to over-generalise or resort to binaristic thinking. Mannheim helps us to acknowledge the significant influence of social, historical and political contexts in shaping the outlook
of a group of people experiencing their formative years at the same time. His work is useful for feminism because it alerts us to the fact that generations are not homogenous entities, but are comprised of diverse individuals with often contrasting understandings of feminism and what it means to be a woman. His concept of generational units makes it possible to recognise the differences within a generation. Differences based on factors such as class, geography and ethnicity are important and play a role in women’s life chances.

In establishing my generational paradigm, adopting Mannheim’s theory allows for an exploration of generational change and a clearer understanding of the impact that socio-cultural factors have on an individual’s worldview. I extend his theory to argue that popular culture marks a generation and that it is necessary to analyse popular culture to illuminate the dominant socio-political currents of a period. A key concern of my project has been to understand how popular culture marks a generation. Via interviews with young women and an analysis of two popular television programmes, I examined the way that popular texts and media events define and situate generations within specific contexts and provide an arena for the circulation and contestation of feminist discourses.

This dissertation has established postfeminism as a valuable instrument in conducting an analysis of popular culture and deepening our understanding of the influence of feminism on the mainstream. Meanings of postfeminism are numerous and hotly contested. The feminist literature ranges from condemning postfeminism as a phenomenon emerging from the “backlash” against feminist politics (Faludi 1992), to more productive definitions that consider the implications of the successful aspects of the feminist project. My framework for exploring the connections between postfeminism and popular culture moves away from the position that views postfeminism as inherently anti-feminist. Rather, my framework is informed by a more affirmative definition of postfeminism, which does not establish it as a disconnection from feminism, but instead explores the ways in which they are intertwined.

Postfeminism is a concept that neatly encapsulates the theoretical shift within feminist theory from debates around equality to a concern with difference, and
encompasses the convergence of feminism with other ‘post-’ philosophies such as postmodernist, poststructuralist and postcolonialist strands of thought (Brooks 1997). This thesis has developed the concept of postfeminism as a way of articulating the processes of social change that have occurred since the second wave women’s movement and which shape the lives of today’s young women. It marks both a moment in time, that Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley (2006: 7) describe as “a period that is historically post-second-wave-feminism” and it usefully contextualises the current generation of women and the era in which they have grown up.

To establish the generational context as postfeminist I combined ethnographic research with an analysis of two popular television programmes, *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives*. Following Amanda Lotz (2001: 113) who argues that “exploring the emergence of postfeminist perspectives in popular media provides a theoretical tool for exploring the complexity of recent female representations and their resonance with contemporary audiences”, the thesis has elucidated the connections between popular culture, generation and feminism. A chief characteristic of the postfeminist era is the way popular culture is strongly inflected with feminist discourse, including recent theoretical developments within feminism. *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* are postfeminist texts because their characters engage with feminist debates and the plots draw upon recent developments in feminist and gender theory. They exhibit postfeminist attributes of diversity among women, portray complex relationships between women, power and sex, and because they go a long way in deconstructing binary categories of sex and gender. Significantly, they can be considered postfeminist because of the way they depict the pressures and tensions faced by young women. The experiences of the characters resonated strongly with the women I interviewed as they navigate the same issues and contradictions. The popular texts at the centre of my research help set the scene for wider observations about the way feminism is imagined and understood by the current generation of young women. In analysing the interconnections between the texts and young women I have developed a way of identifying and explaining this generation’s engagement with feminism.

As I have shown, a crucial element in the feminist generational discussions is the question of young women’s relationship to feminism. Older feminists accuse young
women of not carrying on the women’s liberation movement appropriately (Garner 1995) or not caring about feminism enough (McRobbie 2004b; Summers 1994); while younger women declare that feminism has changed (Bail 1996a) and argue that it is still relevant and necessary (Trioli 1996). When I began research for this thesis my goal was to find out how the current generation of young women viewed feminism. I sought to clarify how generational position shapes young women’s relationship with feminism, along with their aspirations for work and parenthood and their perceptions of the opportunities available to them. The current generation has grown up post-second-wave, but my research reveals that this does not mean they are disconnected from feminist debates or unaware of gender issues.

A central finding is that young women have a sophisticated engagement with feminism. The current generation do not dismiss or reject feminism. On the contrary, many support feminist ideas and practices, and draw upon feminist discourses when talking about their lives and when engaging with pop cultural representations. Even though not all young women take on the identity ‘feminist’, they are nonetheless aware of gender inequalities and draw upon feminist discourses when discussing women’s position in society. Young women have multifaceted and sometimes contradictory responses to feminism. Feminism continues to be relevant to young women, but the meanings of feminism and the discourses shaping their worldview have altered.

Feminism is often conflated with equality in young women’s definitions, but as I have revealed, for young women equality means not having their choices and opportunities restricted. The postfeminist era is marked by a link with earlier strands of feminism, particularly aspects of liberal feminism. My interviews suggest that liberal feminism has indeed become the dominant, most recognisable strand of feminism. However, the era is also characterised by the recognition that equality discourses may not be appropriate for dealing with the issues facing this generation of women. At some level there is acceptance of liberal feminist discourse as common sense, and also a disconnection and shift away from debates around equality. When feminism is consistently imagined as synonymous with equality, feminism begins to lack relevance to the many women who feel that equality has been achieved. Equity
discourses are not as relevant to a generation of women who have grown up being
told they can ‘have it all’.

By examining young women’s perceptions of the lives of their mothers and
grandmothers I demonstrated that most feel they have infinitely more opportunities
open to them compared with previous generations. Following from their observations
that earlier generations had limited opportunities, many of the women I interviewed
perceived gender inequities as something that were more apparent and urgent in
earlier decades. For some of my participants, the word feminism conjured up images
from the past, when gender inequalities were stark. Since they grew up after the
second wave of feminism, the participants in my study have been raised with many
more educational and career opportunities than previous generations of women. The
postfeminist socio-historical climate illuminated in this thesis is marked by the
influential liberal discourses of equality and choice. Alongside the prevalent
discourses of choice and opportunity, is the dominance of neoliberal individualism
(Harris 2004: 6). Similarly to Shelley Budgeon (2001), my research found that
feminist discourses combined with individualist discourses now provide the
“interpretive frameworks” by which this generation of young women understands the
world. Individualism forms a significant part of the postfeminist context in which
young women are growing up and must continue to be examined carefully instead of
being dismissed as anti-feminist.

Fundamental to my thesis, and to my understanding of the postfeminist era, is an
exploration of the contradiction between the opportunities and choices available to
women and the social pressures they face. Despite the perception of unending
choices and possibilities, young women also encounter strong social expectations to
make the most of all the opportunities available to them. The discrepancy young
women feel between feeling like they can have it all and being pressured to have it
all is telling. They tread a fine line between desiring to make the most of all the
opportunities afforded to them and feeling overwhelmed by the pressure of cultural
expectations to make the right choices and ‘have it all’. There is time pressure
involved in young women’s life plans. Most young women I interviewed intend to
become parents, but want to achieve a lot before they embark upon motherhood. At
the top of their lists are travel, gaining a tertiary education, establishing a career and
becoming financially independent (cf. Summers 2003b). They want to squeeze as much as possible in before they ‘settle down’ and have children.

An analysis of postfeminist popular culture helped me to explore this contradiction. The female characters in *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* navigate the same pressures, tensions and experiences as the young women I interviewed. When it comes to combining work and motherhood, the same kinds of structural limitations that have existed for generations continue to exist. The lead characters in both programmes negotiate the desire for autonomy with the endeavour to find the right partner who will support them during the early stages of motherhood. Their desire for autonomy bumps up against societal expectations about what it means to be a successful career woman, a good mother, and a sexually liberated (and sexy) individual. *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* are popular because women can identify with the struggles of the lead characters, as they try to bring together feminist discourses and beliefs (for example, economic independence and sexual liberation) with patriarchal demands (such as finding a marriage partner and ‘being there’ for the children). My analysis of the texts provided a way to understand dominant cultural norms, including expectations of women in the workforce, attitudes to sex, relationships and family, and a way of understanding how popular culture has become a site of feminist contestation. In demonstrating the strong parallels between the programmes and the experiences and aspirations of the young women I interviewed, I have unveiled the ways in which both the texts and the current socio-cultural climate can be considered postfeminist.

When I look at my set of Russian *matryoshka* dolls, I imagine that the young women I interviewed for this study are the smallest of the figurines: the youngest on the scene, emerging from earlier generations. Cultural expectations about women’s roles continue to affect the way young women envision their futures. The metaphor of the *matryoshka* dolls is illuminating because we can see that even though each successive generation of women emerges from the previous into different historical circumstances, for women, the mould – the shell of the figurine – has not changed. For the smallest *matryoshka* doll, structural limitations persist, curtailing women’s choices and subjecting them to the same kinds of social pressures that existed for their mothers and grandmothers. Despite the greater availability of employment and
educational options for this generation, the matryoshka doll symbolises that women continue to try and fit a model of appropriate womanhood.

What is important for feminism is the recognition that within the same generation of young women, there are generational units – women who respond differently to the same set of socio-historic and cultural circumstances. Generations are not homogenous entities and young women who have a lack of access to education and resources are more vulnerable to neoliberal and anti-feminist rhetoric. Indeed, the women in my study who were university educated, and in particular, enrolled in an Arts degree were the most likely to fully embrace a feminist identity. Other young women were indecisive about the feminist label, expressing a “not completely, but sort of” attitude. This ambiguous relationship summarises the responses of the majority of participants in my study. A few women were antagonistic towards feminism, and in a wider study (with a higher proportion of women not educated at university) I expect there would be more who are susceptible to neoliberal and backlash rhetoric. Mannheim’s concept of generational units makes clear that generations are not monolithic, undifferentiated categories. Differences within a generation based on factors such as class, race, sexuality and geography are important to acknowledge.

Some of the women I interviewed feel as though equality between men and women has been achieved and that it is up to women as individuals to take hold of the opportunities available to them. However, alongside this apparent sense of equality was a widespread feeling among my interview participants that injustices based on gender persist. My conceptualisation of postfeminism captures this contradiction by making clear that the current era has been strongly shaped by feminist discourses, while allowing room to recognise that feminism remains pertinent and necessary. The era is characterised by an “unequal equality” – a phrase used by one of my interview participants that neatly encapsulates this dual sense of feeling as though equality has been achieved while recognising that still more needs to be done. It encompasses the contradictory nature of the postfeminist moment in which the current generation has come of age, and points to the ongoing need for feminist research and activism.
The approach to postfeminism and generation that has been developed throughout this thesis has applications beyond the scope of this research. Generation as a social category warrants further attention within sociology and cultural studies. The theoretical framework I have established stresses the significance of historical specificity and the way socio-cultural contexts shape individuals. A focus on generation, when it is sufficiently theorised, provides the means to investigate a range of social phenomena. I have outlined a theory of generation that allows an understanding of the way socio-historical context makes a difference to a person’s understanding of their world and their political beliefs. It has provided a means to explore generational differences without succumbing to unsophisticated stereotyping whereby people are herded into homogenous categories based on their year of birth. My conceptualisation of generation, informed by Karl Mannheim and feminist poststructuralism makes room for divergence within a generation, while pointing to the dominant socio-historical currents that shape individuals during their formative years.

There is an ongoing need for thorough critical engagement with cultural texts in order to better understand distinct socio-historical moments. In particular, the significance of popular culture in marking a generation would prove a fruitful avenue for further research. Feminist sociology and cultural studies must continue to delve in the world of the popular. Continued theorisation of the interconnections between feminism and popular culture is vital for future research. The approach to postfeminism that I have developed in this thesis may be applicable across a range of cultural studies and sociological research. It provides a complex and valuable framework for examining the media and their relationship to the cultural climate in which they are situated. An examination of young men’s attitudes to feminism, or an investigation of the reception of Sex and the City and Desperate Housewives by people of different ages and cultures would prove a fruitful avenue for further research in this field.

By developing a deeper theoretical approach to generation, which pays attention to the significance of socio-cultural context, this thesis enables a clearer view of the reasons behind the emergence of different feminisms. We need to be aware that generational conflicts often limit the kinds of feminist subjectivity that are
considered appropriate. The broadening of what can be considered feminist is a project that feminism must undertake. There is a complex entanglement of feminist discourses within both popular culture and mainstream society. As feminist themes and ideas are played out in popular television programmes, new forms of feminist subjectivity become possible. The framework I have developed helps to make sense of the complex relationship this generation has with feminism. My research has revealed that today’s young women, having grown up after the height of the second wave of feminism, are strongly influenced by feminist discourses and express a sophisticated engagement with feminist concepts. Popular cultural texts have become a site of struggle, an arena where dominant discourses, including feminist discourses, are circulated and contested, and where young women engage with feminism. Young women encounter feminism in popular television and they draw upon feminist concepts when talking about their own lives and aspirations. It is precisely because of this double process – the existence of postfeminist discourses and young women’s adoption of feminist language – that marks the epoch as postfeminist.

This postfeminist era represents a continuation with earlier feminist debates, yet it is also marked by the dominant neoliberal mandate of personal choice in which individuals are impelled to make the most of the choices available to them. The approach to postfeminism that I have developed acknowledges the significance of the interconnections between neoliberal and feminist discourses and the way they are shaping this generation’s relationship with feminism. The pervasive sense of choice, opportunity and empowerment perpetuated by the intersection of feminist and neoliberal discourses characterises this era as postfeminist, but it obscures the pressures upon women to make the ‘right’ choices and conceals the structural limitations that continue to affect women’s lives.
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Seidelman, Susan. 1998. “Sex and the City”, *Sex and the City*, Series One, Episode 1, HBO.


Table 1 – Level of Education

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<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
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Table 2 – Participants’ Geographical Location

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<td>Regional City</td>
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<td>Rural</td>
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Table 3 – Range of University Disciplines Studied

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<td>Science</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Education</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Nursing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Commerce / Finance</td>
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<td>Psychology / Social Work</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Engineering</td>
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<tr>
<td>Law</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>1</td>
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Table 4 – Parents’ Occupations

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<th>Occupation</th>
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<td>Clerical / Retail</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursing</td>
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<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technician / Trade</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitality</td>
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<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed / Pension</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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<tr>
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Appendices

Appendix A – Recruitment Poster
Appendix B – Demographic Information
Appendix C – List of Organisations and Websites
Appendix D – Interview Schedule
Appendix E – Letter to Organisations
Appendix F – Information for Participants
Appendix G – Email to Internet Participants
Appendix H – Consent Form
Appendix A – Recruitment Poster

WANTED
Young women
aged 18-23

Do you fit this description? If yes, we would love you to participate in our study.

WHY?
As part of my studies in Sociology at the University of Newcastle, NSW, I am currently conducting research into the attitudes and expectations of young Australian women. The study is investigating what young women think about work, relationships, children and feminism. I want to find out about the decisions young women make and expect to make with regard to career, motherhood and how they believe they will combine work and family responsibilities. This project will also be examining how popular culture shapes women’s perceptions, values and expectations.

WHAT IS INVOLVED?
If you agree to participate in the study you will be asked to take part in ONE of the following:

- A focus group discussion with 4-8 young women, which will last about one hour and a half.
- A telephone interview, which will last approximately one hour.
- An interview carried out via email, to be completed in your own time.

As a research participant, you would be asked to talk about a range of issues. For example, you may be asked to discuss what sort of job or career you have planned, if/when you plan to have children, your perceptions of feminism, how you think your life differs from previous generations, what kinds of TV shows, films, books and music you enjoy. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without explanation.

WHO TO CONTACT?
If you are interested in being involved in the study or would like further information, please contact Penelope Robinson on mobile number 0402 956 420 (call or text message) or email Penelope.Robinson@studentmail.newcastle.edu.au

This project has been approved by the University’s Human Research Ethics Committee, Approval No. H-026-0405. Should you have any concerns about your rights as a participant in this research, or if you have a complaint about the manner in which the research has been conducted, it may be given to the researcher’s supervisor Associate Professor Deborah Stevenson (Email: Deborah.Stevenson@newcastle.edu.au, Phone: 02 4921 6031). If an independent person is preferred, contact the Human Research Ethics Officer, Research Office, The Chancellery, The University of Newcastle, University Drive, Callaghan, 2308, Phone 02 4921 6333, Email Human-Ethics@newcastle.edu.au
Appendix B – Demographic Information

Feminism and Generation Y: young women’s attitudes to work, family and relationships.

Please fill in the following information:

Age:

__________________________________________

Suburb:

__________________________________________

Level of Education (eg. HSC, TAFE, University Degree):

__________________________________________

Nationality:

__________________________________________

Occupation:

__________________________________________

Parent’s occupation/s:

__________________________________________
Appendix C – List of Organisations and Websites

Technical and Further Education (TAFE)
Hamilton
Bankstown
Macquarie Fields

Youth Services
Airds/Bradbury Youth Centre
Campbelltown City Council Youth Services Unit
Newcastle PCYC (Police and Citizens Youth Club)
North Sydney PCYC
Campbelltown PCYC
Raby Youth Centre
Tantrum Theatre, Newcastle West

Gymnasiums
Howzat Newcastle
Willoughby Leisure Centre
Macquarie Fields Leisure Centre

Family Planning Australia
Newcastle
Hurstville
Chatswood

Businesses
Hunter Business Women’s Network
Advanced School of Beauty Therapy, Newcastle
Red Cross, Hunter NSW
The Body Shop
David Jones Department Store
Bi-Lo Grocery Store

Feminist Websites
http://www.livejournal.com/community/aus_feminism/
http://www.lipmag.com
http://www.donotbequiet.com/
http://www.pretty-ugly.com
http://www.geekgirl.com.au

Other Websites
http://vibewire.net
http://community.livejournal.com/indigenous_oz
Appendix D – Interview Schedule

Age:
Suburb:
Level of Education (eg. HSC, TAFE, University Degree)
Nationality:
Occupation:
Parent’s occupation/s:

Expectations of work/education:
When you were in high school, did you have a career in mind?
What sort of jobs have you had since high school?
Have you combined paid work with further education?
Where are you working now?
If you have plans for further study, what are they?
Are your jobs part of a long-term career plan?
What gives you a sense of satisfaction with your job?

Popular culture:
What are your favourite films and TV shows? What do you like about them?
What sort of books and magazines do you read? What do you like about them?
Do you have any female role models?
Which celebrities/public figures do you admire? Why?
Tell me about your favourite female characters.
How do you think the media influences your choices?

Children:
Do you want to have children?
What factors will influence whether you have children or not?
If yes, when do you intend to have them and how many would you like?
How do you think having a child will impact on your employment?
What services or government initiatives might make it easier to have children?

Relationships:
Do you aspire to be in a long-term relationship?
What do you think makes for a successful relationship?
How would your relationship status influence your choices regarding motherhood?
If you intend to have children, what qualities make for a good parent?

Women in society:
How do you think your life differs from your mother’s and grandmother’s?
What do you think of when you hear the word feminism?
How do you define feminism?
Do you consider yourself a feminist? Why or why not?
What contribution do you think feminism has made to women’s position in society?
Has it all been positive?
What do you think should be on the feminist agenda?
Appendix E – Letter to Organisations

Research Team:  
Associate Professor Deborah Stevenson  
Dr Christine Everingham (4921 6012)  
Ms Penelope Robinson (0402 956 420)  
Email: Penelope.Robinson@studentmail.newcastle.edu.au

Dear ____________,

I am writing to you to let you know about a research project that I am carrying out as part of my PhD degree in Sociology at the University of Newcastle.

For this project, I am seeking to interview young women between the ages of 18 and 23. As your organisation has members in that age group, I am interested in talking to some of them and inviting them to participate in the study.

Let me tell you a little about the project and what it would involve.

The study is investigating what young women think about work, relationships, children and feminism. We want to find out about the decisions young women make and expect to make with regard to career, motherhood and how they believe they will combine work and family responsibilities. This project will also be examining how popular culture shapes women’s perceptions, values and expectations.

In the light of growing government concern about the decline in Australia’s birth rate and the considerable media attention that has been paid to the issue of fertility, studies like this one are needed to understand young women’s intentions and expectations. The project has implications for future social policy provisions such as childcare and maternity leave.

With your permission, I would like to arrange a time, perhaps at a social function, when I could speak to members of your organisation about the study and invite them to take part. I am looking for young women who would be willing to take part in either a focus group interview or a telephone interview where they would be asked to talk about their thoughts, experiences and aspirations.

I have enclosed a copy of the Information Statement for Participants to give you a better idea of what would be required of participants.

Please consider my proposal and I will be in telephone contact with you in a few weeks to discuss this matter further. If you have any queries about the project, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisors (details above).

Yours sincerely,

Penelope Robinson, A/ Professor Deborah Stevenson, Dr Christine Everingham
Appendix F – Information for Participants

**Project Title:** Feminism and Generation Y: young women’s attitudes to work, family and relationships.

**The Research Team:**
Associate Professor Deborah Stevenson
Dr Christine Everingham
Ms Penelope Robinson
Email: Penelope.Robinson@studentmail.newcastle.edu.au
Mobile: 0402 956 420

You are invited to take part in the project identified above which is being carried out by Penelope Robinson as part of her PhD candidature at the University of Newcastle, under the supervision of Associate Professor Deborah Stevenson and Dr Christine Everingham, from the School of Social Sciences.

**Why is the research being done?**
The purpose of the study is to discover what young women (aged 18-23) think about work, relationships, children and feminism. We want to find out about the decisions young women make and expect to make with regard to career, motherhood and how they believe they will combine work and family responsibilities. This project will also be examining how popular culture shapes women’s perceptions, values and expectations. These issues are important in a country whose birth rate is falling and where women are postponing having children to older ages than in previous generations. Indeed, this project is concerned with comparing how societal expectations of women and their participation in paid work has changed over time.

**Who can participate in the research?**
We are seeking English-speaking Australian women between the ages of 18 and 23 to take part in this study.

**What would you be asked to do?**
If you agree to participate in the study you will be asked to volunteer for ONE of the following:
• A focus group discussion with 4-8 young women, which will last about one hour and a half.
• A telephone interview, which will last approximately one hour.
• An interview carried out via email, to be completed in your own time.
• As a research participant, you would be asked to talk about a range of issues. For example, you may be asked to discuss:
  o What sort of job or career you have planned.
  o If/When you plan to have children.
  o Childcare and partner arrangements.
  o Your perceptions of feminism.
  o How you think your life differs from previous generations.
  o The kinds of television programmes, films, books and music you enjoy.

The focus groups will be conducted in a location that is convenient to participants and $20 will be given to those who attend to cover the costs of things such as travel and childcare. The telephone and email interviews will be arranged at a time that suits the participant. The focus groups and interviews will be audio taped and later transcribed. You will be given the opportunity to listen to the tape and delete any part of your contribution that you wish at the end of the interview.

What choice do you have?
Participation in this study is entirely your choice. Only those who give their informed consent will be included in the project. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without explanation.

We do not expect that any one will wish to discuss illegal behaviour. However, we are obliged to tell you that if someone taking part in the focus groups or interviews were to give specific details about an illegal incident (eg. date, place, perpetrators), then the researchers might be required to report the information to the police.

How will your privacy be protected?
Your confidentiality is assured. Nobody except the research team will have access to the tapes or transcripts, and if we quote you in any published report, we will use a false name and not include any information that might identify you.
Your name will only appear on the consent form, which will not be stored with the interview data. All information will be securely stored and only accessible to the researcher and her supervisors. All data will be stored for five years and then destroyed.

How will the information collected be used?
The results of the research will be used to prepare a research thesis to be submitted for Penelope’s PhD degree. The results of the research will also be used to prepare papers for publication in professional journals and/or for presentation at conferences. Individual participants will not be identified in any reports arising from this project. If you choose to take part in this project, you will be able to obtain a summary report of the research findings by contacting Penelope Robinson.

What do you need to do to participate?
To take part in this study, please read this Information Statement and be sure you understand its contents before you consent to participate. If there is anything you do not understand, or you have questions, please call or email Penelope Robinson or her supervisors (details above).

If you would like to participate in this project, you can register your interest by phoning, emailing or sending a text message to Penelope Robinson (details above). The researchers will then contact you to arrange a convenient time for the interview or focus group.

We hope that you will agree to participate in this study and look forward to meeting and talking with you. If you have friends who you think might be interested in taking part, please pass on a copy of this information sheet to them.

Thank you for considering this invitation.
Yours sincerely,

Penelope Robinson, Associate Professor Deborah Stevenson and Dr Christine Everingham

This project has been approved by the University’s Human Research Ethics Committee, Approval No. H-026-0405. Should you have any concerns about your rights as a participant in this research, or if you have a complaint about the manner in which the research has been conducted, it may be given to the researcher’s supervisor Associate Professor Deborah Stevenson (Email: Deborah.Stevenson@newcastle.edu.au, Phone: 02 4921 6031). If an independent person is preferred, contact the Human Research Ethics Officer, Research Office, The Chancellery, The University of Newcastle, University Drive, Callaghan, 2308, Phone 02 4921 6333, Email Human-Ethics@newcastle.edu.au
Appendix G – Email to Internet Participants

Hello,

Thank you for expressing interest in my study.

Before I can start the research, I need to tell you a bit more about the project.

I have attached two Word documents that contain an Information Statement and a Consent Form. Please read over the information sheet and if you agree to take part in the study, please indicate your consent by writing YES on the Consent Form and emailing it back to me.

Once I have received your informed consent, I will be in touch again to ask you a number of questions, which you can answer in your own time and email back to me. After I receive your answers I may send you some follow-up questions.

Similarly, if you require clarification about any of my questions, you can send me an email. In this way, I hope the email interviews will be similar to an in-person interview, with both sides asking and responding to questions.

Please understand that any information you send me will remain confidential, and remember that you can withdraw from the study at any time without explanation.

If at any time, you require help with the documents, or need to clarify something, do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,
Penelope.
Appendix H – Consent Form

Consent Form for the Project: Feminism and Generation Y: young women’s attitudes to work, family and relationships.

Research Team:
Associate Professor Deborah Stevenson
Dr Christine Everingham
Ms Penelope Robinson

I agree to participate in the above research project and give my consent freely.

I understand that the project will be conducted as described in the Information Statement, a copy of which I have retained.

I understand that I can withdraw from the project at any time and do not have to give reason for withdrawing.

I consent to take part in ONE of the following: (please circle)

- Focus group discussion  Yes/No
- Telephone interview  Yes/No
- Email interview  Yes/No

I understand that my personal information will remain confidential to the researchers.

I have had the opportunity to have my questions answered to my satisfaction.

Print Name:

Phone Number:

Signature:

Date: