Feminism and the Generational Divide: 
An exploration of some of the debates

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Abstract:
In recent times, a generational divide has emerged within feminism with discussion often centred on the differences between Baby Boomer feminists and younger women, regularly referred to as Generation X. This paper seeks to understand the intergenerational tensions by exploring the debates as they are played out in a number of popular texts. Karl Mannheim’s theory of generation is mobilised in order to deepen our understanding of generations. His work has the potential to broaden the feminist generational debates beyond the well-worn stereotypes and offer new ways of thinking about generational discourse.

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

– Anne Summers, Letter to the Next Generation

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’.

– Helen Garner, The First Stone

Over the last decade, feminist discussion in Australia has often erupted into a generational battle, with Baby Boomers and Generation X engaging in a fierce debate, fraught with finger pointing, misunderstanding and stereotypes. The rift within feminism began to emerge in the mid-90s when well-known feminists lamented the direction young women were taking the women’s movement. Anne Summers (1993) conveyed her disappointment that the feminist struggles fought by her generation were not being carried into the future by young women, while Helen Garner (1995) in her book The First Stone, expressed her dismay towards two university students who filed sexual harassment complaints against their College Master with the police. From the other side of the generational fissure, young women responded passionately, with publications attesting to the importance of feminism in their lives and declaring what feminism means for them (Else-Mitchell and Flutter 1998; Trioli 1996; Bail 1996b). In the United States a new genre of feminist writing proclaimed the emergence of the ‘third wave’ and chronicled the different meanings of feminism for the ‘next generation’ (Baumgardner and Richards 2000; Findlen 1995; Heywood and Drake 1997; Walker 1995).

This paper explores the generational tensions as they are played out in a number of prominent texts and adopts the work of Karl Mannheim (1952 [1923]), whose theory of generations helps to contextualise the debate and gives a theoretical perspective to generational discourse within

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feminism. I explore three elements of Mannheim’s theory, arguing that they have the potential to move us beyond simplistic stereotypes towards a more complex and thorough understanding of feminist generations. I explore Mannheim’s notion that what an individual experiences in their formative years – or youth – informs their political outlook for life. In this context, it can be seen that generational disagreements are bound to arise and that they are worthy of attention. In order to draw out the intricacies of generation, I examine the concept of ‘generation as actuality’ and question whether young women are consolidated as a generation to the same extent as feminists of the Baby Boomer era. It appears as though a shift has occurred within feminism from a focus on collective action towards more individualised styles of feminism. I argue that this is a reflection of the socio-political contexts from which each generation of feminism has emerged. Following Mannheim, I show that each generation responds to the same dominant trends of their era. However, I do not wish to imply that either generation represents cohesion or unity. Quite the contrary, by utilising Mannheim’s notion of generational units, I hope to demonstrate that there is diversity within and between the generations.

For the purposes of this paper, I have defined the generations in the following way. When I talk of older feminists or the second wave, I mean women who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s, those who are commonly referred to as Baby Boomers. When I speak of younger feminists, I refer to those who came of age in the 1980s and 1990s, popularly known as Generation X and Generation Y. I acknowledge the difficulties associated with these terms and know that I tread a precarious line in using these labels while simultaneously trying to get beyond generational stereotypes.

A Brief Introduction To Mannheim

Susan Hekman (1986: 78) positions Karl Mannheim as a forerunner of anti-foundational social science who attempted to make a break from the epistemological assumptions of Enlightenment and positivist thought. Mannheim’s work concentrates on the relationship between human thought and human existence. He is concerned with locating ideologies in an historically specific context without searching for origins of social meaning. According to Kettler et al. (1984: 57) Mannheim “is not striving for causal explanations of social belief or social knowledge but for explications of such knowledge in the context of a comprehensive or ‘total’ view of the society undergoing change”. Mannheim’s essay on generations explores the relationship between personal and social change and makes up part of his broader sociology of knowledge, that is, “the theory of the social or existential conditioning of knowledge by location in a socio-historical structure” (Pilcher 1994: 482). Mannheim’s work, with its focus on locating knowledge within specific historical contexts, provides a useful lens through which to view generational shifts within feminism.

This concern with the relationship between history and the individual is seen in his attention to the formative years. Mannheim argues that the cultural landscape that every generation encounters in their youth has an impact on how they perceive the world. 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 [1923]: 298). In other words, the prevailing social and political influences of a person’s youth tend to provide the blueprint for an ongoing political outlook. According to Pilcher (1994: 486), Mannheim conceives contemporaneity “not as the co-existence of persons between two sets of dates, but as a subjective condition of having experienced the same dominant influences”. If we accept Mannheim’s position that a person’s views are predominantly shaped in their youth, then feminist generational differences become comprehensible. This paper discusses the notion of a generation gap in feminism by looking at the different social and political circumstances that
were in place for feminists of the second wave, compared with those of younger feminists.

Mannheim makes clear that not all social generations develop a collective response to their historical situation. He makes a distinction between ‘generation location’, which comprises people who happen to have been born within the same cultural context, and ‘generation as actuality’. Individuals only become “united as an actual generation in so far as they participate in the characteristic social and intellectual currents of their society and period, and in so far as they have an active or passive experience of the interactions of forces which made up the new situation” (Mannheim 1952 [1923]: 304). Furthermore, the realisation of a distinctive consciousness is linked to the tempo of social change (309). I suggest that the women’s movement of the 1960s and 70s represents a kind of ‘generation as actuality’. Mannheim’s hypothesis that some generations become collective agents of change, lends weight to the idea that Baby Boomer women, in an era of radical social transformation, were motivated to become active in pursuing the kind of world they wanted to live in.

It is important to remember, however, that generations are not homogenous entities. Second wave feminism was not a united force, but a movement comprising various goals, philosophies and strategies. In order to account for differences within a generation, Mannheim maintains that generations are stratified into ‘generational units’ who can hold differing, antagonistic views, despite being situated within the same generation location. This notion of units is useful because it makes clear that feminists who happen to share the same age do not necessarily share a similar political agenda. Moreover, it allows space for us to see that women in different age groups often embrace the same goals and attitudes, challenging the idea of a vast chasm between generations. It may seem obvious to point out women’s diversity, but the generational debate continually casts feminists into two conflicting, but homogenous groups – old and young, second and third wave – disallowing an understanding of the complexities of feminism and assuming that all women of a particular generation share identical views. In the following sections I will show how Mannheim’s concepts can be mobilised to explore the feminist generation debate.

Formative Years And A Letter To The Next Generation

A good place to begin my look at the generational divide in Australian feminism is 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 book, Damned Whores and God’s Police (1994 [1975]). It represents an important element in the generational conflict. Summers addresses her letter to young women, particularly those born after 1968, in order to alert them to the sort of gender-related obstacles that faced women in the sixties and seventies. She describes a world where married women could not be permanent government employees, “where abortion was illegal and dangerous”, and where “pregnant women could be fired” (Summers 1994 [1975]: 507). These kinds of gender issues were what mobilised many women of her generation to take action to change the world.

Positioning herself as the spokeswoman of the modern women’s movement, Summers outlines the achievements of feminist activists during this era and wonders why young women seem unwilling to continue the fight. She says, “it seemed inconceivable that young women in their early twenties would not feel as drawn to the movement to increase women’s opportunities as I had been when I was their age” (1994 [1975]: 506). She seems perplexed by the apparent lack of young feminists to whom she can pass on the feminist torch. Adopting Mannheim’s ‘formative years’ approach allows us to understand the different cultural conditions that influence generations and their perceptions of the world. The picture Summers paints of how things were in her youth goes some way towards explaining the generational divide. Women of her
generation came of age during a period of great social upheaval, the political landscape featuring the civil rights movement and anti-war protests (Summers, 1994 [1975]: 511). Mannheim’s formative years theory makes clear that an individual’s political outlook is structured by the prevailing political trends of his or her youth. In the 1960s and 70s, the socio-political landscape was dominated by new social movements concerned with social and sexual liberation. As Marilyn Lake (1999: 220) argues, in Australia “[m]any of the first recruits to Women’s Liberation had become politicised by the new left political movements associated with the protest against conscription and the war in Vietnam and with opposition to imperialist capitalism”. The “heady days of sexual and political freedom” (220) instigated by the new left gave rise to what we now call second wave feminism. In this era of radical social change, many women declared themselves women’s liberationists, feeling they could challenge the status quo and improve the lives of women. Many Baby Boomer women, excited by the political climate around them, were motivated to fight for their own freedom.

In contrast, younger women, popularly known as Generation X, growing up in subsequent decades, have benefited from the changes the second wave instilled, and perhaps do not feel the same level of urgency about women’s issues. Two vastly different socio-political contexts have influenced the types of feminism that emerged. The political climate, which resonated with collective protest in the 70s, has been replaced with the individualist rhetoric of neoliberalism. Recent studies into young women’s identification with feminism explore the possibility that today’s young women tend to espouse the neoliberal discourse of individualism and choice, while at the same time adopting some of feminism’s fundamental principles (Budgeon 2001; Rich 2005). The young women Emma Rich (2005) interviewed, “constructed narratives that emphasised the perceived increase in the importance of individual choice” (498). I suggest that the dominant cultural discourses of individualisation that are influencing young women’s perceptions, have contributed to new understandings of gender and feminism. And, feminism itself has become a pervasive discourse influencing young women’s political outlook.

Young women have opportunities available to them that previous generations did not. It is largely because of the efforts of second wave feminists that today’s young women have grown up with feminism, as self-proclaimed third wave author, Barbara Findlen (1995: xii) puts it, “entwined in the fabric of [their] lives”. Hugh Mackay, in his study of three Australian generations notes, “this is the generation for whom the women’s movement was already ‘history’ by the time they hit puberty” (1997: 138). That is not to say that feminism is not relevant or that gender constraints no longer exist, but it is important to recognise that the meaning of feminism has shifted. In fact, we should be cautious about conflating ‘the women’s movement’ with ‘feminism’. Feminism is still vibrant and important in many women’s lives, but perhaps it is no longer a movement to the same degree it once was.

Catharine Lumby (1997) raises this issue in a critique of Summers’ letter in her book entitled Bad Girls. She says that the answer to Summers’ questions about where feminism is going can be found in the letter itself: “It’s there in the confidence with which she speaks of ‘the women’s movement’ as if it were still a unified cause with universal goals. It’s there in her casual references to ‘activism’ as if the political strategies which worked in the 1970s are still appropriate and effective” (Lumby 1997: 155). Lumby goes on to outline the impact feminism has had on Australian public life since second wave activists lobbied governments for funding for facilities such as rape crisis centres. She argues that feminism has become institutionalised, in that it has become strongly entwined in public spheres – the media, academia and government (1997: 157). While Lumby acknowledges gender inequities still exist, her illustration of the way feminism itself has become an institution, helps to explain why a younger generation of women
have felt the need to define feminism in their own terms.

The perception that feminism has permeated the establishment is echoed by Kathy Bail (1996a: 4) who argues;

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.

Ann Curthoys reiterates the notion that there is a “hegemonic feminism” against which young women are rebelling (Curthoys 1997: 198). In considering the generational debates, she asks whether feminism has indeed become “a mainstream perspective, an orthodoxy” (199). Furthermore, Susan Magarey (2005: 6) suggests that it is liberal-equality feminism that has become the hegemonic form of feminism in Australia. Anne Summers, in her letter, and more recently in her book *The End of Equality* (2003) has set herself up as the authoritative voice of this successful strand of feminism. This type of feminism, which has come to symbolise the popular understanding of what feminism is, has been a dominant influence in young women’s lives.

Following Mannheim’s understanding of a person’s formative years, it is clear that the very different social contexts in which each generation came of age has influenced their understandings of what it means to be a woman and plays a crucial part in shaping their feminism. The political climate of the 80s and 90s has seen an uneasy combination of a neoliberal focus on individualism with the institutionalisation of equality feminism as a common-sense discourse. This has undoubtedly had an impact on young women’s perceptions of gender and their understandings of feminist history. For Baby Boomer women on the other hand, second wave feminism helped articulate what they were experiencing. Without suggesting that they formed a united front, I argue that the prevalent discourse of personal liberation in the 60s and 70s encouraged the women’s movement to develop, leading to what Mannheim refers to as a generation as actuality.

Does a similar movement of women exist today? Certainly feminism continues to flourish but in the following section, I propose that today’s feminism is not supported by the same collective surge of women. For people who have grown up with feminist discourse widespread in the public domain, gender issues are less likely to be considered a rallying cause. Women of Generation X and Y are less likely to understand themselves as a collective, or realise themselves as a ‘generation as actuality’ in Mannheim’s sense.

**A Generation As Actuality?**

Mannheim (1952 [1923]: 309) maintains that generations are created via people’s experiences of the social world and their participation in events of their day. A ‘generation as actuality’ is formed only when a generation develops a distinctive collective consciousness, that is, when a group of contemporaries come to realise their place in the historical process and their potential to effect social change. The consciousness of the Baby Boomer generation of women was informed by the widespread perception of gendered oppression and the growing awareness that women’s opportunities were constrained. Evidence suggests that contemporary young women do not see themselves collectively as a group who are discriminated against to the same extent that second wave feminists did (Everingham et al. Forthcoming). That is not to say young women are less politically engaged than the previous generation, but that they might not be conscious of...
themselves as a generation to the same degree as Baby Boomer feminists. Perhaps they have not become a ‘generation as actuality’.

The generational tensions within feminism have been underscored by the emergence of women in the United States calling themselves the Third Wave. Several books have been published, claiming to be the voice of the next feminist generation (Baumgardner and Richards 2000; Findlen 1995; Heywood and Drake 1997; Walker 1995). *Listen Up* (Findlen, 1995) is a collection of essays written by a diverse group of young feminists, covering an array of issues such as bisexuality, racism, body image, abortion, and AIDS. Young Australian women have also published work declaring the importance of feminism in their lives. For example *DIY Feminism* (Bail, 1996a), *Talking Up* (Else-Mitchell & Flutter, 1998) and *Generation F* (Trioli, 1996), which were published in the nineties in response to criticism from Anne Summers (1993; 1994) and Helen Garner (1995), that young women are not appropriately carrying on the feminist fight. Virginia Trioli, author of *Generation F* points out that “feminism in the hands of the next generation is alive and well, and as crucial as ever” (Trioli 1996: 164). The need to proclaim allegiance to feminism and to define it on their terms is a key theme in the young feminist literature.

Although there are many parallels between second and third wave feminisms, one theme distinguishes the two – the notion of collectivity versus individualism. A shift has occurred from the second wave’s emphasis on collective action and equality to a focus on difference and individuality (Everingham et al. Forthcoming). Chilla Bulbeck (1999: 6) characterises the two generations by pointing out that “[y]ounger feminists have a greater sense of individual rights while second wavers have an interest in the sisterly unity of a movement”. Anita Harris (2001b) argues that young feminisms cannot be neatly categorised but three elements broadly encapsulate the third wave: its diversity and multiplicity; its ability to use technology and the media; and an emphasis on a do-it-yourself approach. The best example of this approach can be found in Kathy Bail’s edited book, *DIY Feminism*. She states (1996a: 16), “now feminism is largely about individual practice and taking on personal challenges rather than group identification”. Young women are not less active or politically engaged than earlier generations. Indeed, Bail goes on to say, “The do-it-yourself spirit of this generation has changed the face of the women’s movement. It’s now ready for action on many fronts” [my emphasis] (1996a: 16). This understanding of feminism as a personal strategy, rather than a unifying cause is widespread in the third wave anthologies.

This sense of individualism is further exemplified by the contributions made to *DIY Feminism* (Bail 1996b). One author, Natasha Stott Despoja (1996), who was the youngest female politician ever elected to Australian federal parliament, claims to enact her feminism through government politics. She discusses how feminism has changed, saying, “The women of today do feminism…We live it. And we practise it in different ways from our foremothers” (1996: 103). In contrast, Janet English (1996), lead singer of the Australian rock band Spiderbait, challenges representations of women in the media not only by being a successful musician in a male-dominated industry, but by wearing homemade feminist T-shirts while she is performing. She calls it “a grassroots revolution” (1996, 62). These two successful women practise their feminist beliefs in very different ways but do not perceive themselves as part of a movement. I am arguing that changes in the social and intellectual landscape has meant that those who take on feminism as part of their identity are doing it on their own terms and not as part of a collective. In Ann Curthoys’ terms, “the sense of a common project has gone” (1997: 208). Young feminists do not see themselves as a galvanised generation, joined together to fight gender inequities – they are not, in Mannheim’s words, a ‘generation as actuality’. Yet, feminisms
cannot be easily categorised into generational pigeonholes.

**Generational Units and Feminism**

Mannheim argues that generations are stratified into ‘units’, comprised of people in a generation who, although experiencing the same historical circumstances, interpret and respond to events differently. “Thus,” as Mannheim (1952: 306) states, “within any generation there can exist a number of differentiated, antagonistic generation-units”. The notion of ‘units’ helps us to recognise that feminists hold different, sometimes opposing views, even if they happen to share the same generation location. It can also help us to recognise that similar political outlooks can stretch out across the generational divide. This more complex notion of generations helps to broaden the generational discussion beyond the rigid definitions of second and third wave feminisms.

Mannheim’s idea of ‘generational units’ can be used to explore changes and differences within feminism, without succumbing to the crude age stereotypes that punctuate much of the popular debate. I want to show how limited the debate becomes when we rely simply on age to demarcate different feminisms. Anita Harris (2001a) demonstrates that different styles of feminism can emerge from women within the same age group. In her article, Harris argues that young feminists cannot be homogenised into a single ‘wave’. Rather, she distinguishes three different strands, what we might call units: ‘third wave’, ‘DIY’ and ‘power feminism’. The Third Wave emerged in the US, where young feminists have embraced the term to designate themselves as the next stage in the history of feminism. Their writing often focuses on body politics and sexuality. ‘DIY’ feminism arose from underground publications such as (fan)zines and websites, surrounding female punk bands. This style of feminism “emphasises autonomy, sassiness and is sometimes depicted as sexy and aggressive” (Harris 2001a). A good Australian example is Kathy Bail’s edited collection, *DIY Feminism* (1996a). Harris’ discussion of the diversity of young feminisms makes it clear that each generation is comprised of what Mannheim calls units, who have “differing or opposing forms of response to the particular historical situation” (Pilcher 1994: 490).

It is important to recognise that second wave feminism was just as diverse. Susan Magarey’s (2005) essay about remembering feminism outlines the variety of approaches within the second wave. Her discussion is useful in drawing attention to the “sheer variety of political perspectives that could co-exist” within Australian feminism (Magarey 2005: 4). To illustrate her point, Magarey recounts the marked differences in approach between equality/reform feminists such as Susan Ryan – who was instrumental in passing the Sex Discrimination Act of 1984 – and the activists at Pine Gap, who “represented a socialist and anarchist dimension in feminist politics” (2005: 6). Similarly, the idea of internal disagreements is discussed by Marilyn Lake (1999: 239) who describes how two strands of the second wave, Women’s Liberation and the Women’s Electoral Lobby, often resented one another’s approaches. Clearly, second wave feminism was not unified in its objectives or tactics, but the generational debate tends to portray it in that light. As the debate plays out in popular texts, feminists are cast into two opposing but homogenous teams and the diversity of feminisms within each generation is obscured. Mannheim is valuable because he provides a multifaceted understanding of generations. His “units” can help us grasp the variety and complexity of feminism, avoiding the broad brushstrokes that so often comprise the generational debate.

By keeping in mind the existence of divergent units of feminism we remain open to the idea that similarities in perspective can often stretch out across the generation gap. This becomes particularly clear when we examine the arguments surrounding ‘victim feminism’. A number of
young authors (Denfeld 1995; Roiphe 1993; Wolf 1993) from the US blame older feminists for making feminism about victimhood. The work of these authors is often classified as third wave, but I prefer to follow Harris (2001a) in labelling their work ‘power feminism’. Their writing “focuses on women’s power rather than subordination” (Harris 2001a). However, as Imelda Whelehan (1995: 140) states, what they have to say is not new but “an improbable mixture of early second wave positions, coupled with classic anti-feminist sentiments”. They argue that mainstream (second wave) feminism is restrictive and has been reduced to a man-hating, sexual purity campaign that paints women as passive victims.

In Australia, older, second wave women such as Beatrice Faust (1994) and Helen Garner (1995) argue that it is young feminists who are responsible for perpetuating a victim mentality. Helen Garner’s (1995) book The First Stone, an account of a sexual harassment case at a college affiliated to the University of Melbourne, ignited a fierce debate in Australia when it was published in 1995. It instigated a public discussion about feminism and contributed to the intergenerational tensions. Garner is sympathetic to the Master of Ormond College, who was accused of sexual harassment and questions the women’s motives for going to the police. She is aghast that the women went to the law instead of dealing with the situation by themselves. She says (1995: 99), “this constant stress on passivity and weakness – this creation of a political position based on the virtue of helplessness – I hate it”. Mark Davis (1997: 224) argues that the refrains of Garner and Denfeld share a similar anti-feminist tone and a concern that contemporary feminism is “negative, doctrinaire, punitive”. The futility of dividing feminism neatly across age lines becomes abundantly clear when we see second wave Australian feminists echoing the victim-panic rhetoric of young American, so-called ‘power feminists’.

By delving briefly into the debates surrounding ‘victim-feminism’, we can see that it is fruitless to follow a simplistic generational model. Clearly, feminists young and old are not as polarised as the popular debate makes out. The ‘victim-feminism’ discourse is promoted by authors from both sides of the generational divide and shows us that using generation too simply can obscure the similarities of feminists from different age groups. Mannheim’s ‘units’ approach serves as an important reminder that we must be attentive to the specificities of nationality, ethnicity and sexuality. Resorting merely to age to explain changes within feminism tends to invoke a blanket generational experience, concealing the variety of feminisms that exist. The value of Mannheim’s framework, particularly his conception of ‘generational units’, is that it allows us to acknowledge the important differences between and amongst second and third wave feminisms, while avoiding simplistic bickering and age-based generalisations.

Conclusion

The concept of generation can offer a valuable framework for exploring feminism, but care needs to be taken to avoid homogenising women along generational lines. This leads to a focus on generational conflict rather than the shifts in the meaning of feminism that have occurred due to changing historical conditions. Explorations of feminist generations can illuminate the progress women have made, as well as attest to the continuing relevance of feminist thought. Mannheim’s theory – his notions of ‘formative years’, ‘generation as actuality’ and ‘generational units’ – can offer a productive way to explore the complexities of generation, one that has the potential to move us beyond fierce intergenerational tensions. By adopting Mannheim’s formative years approach, we can see that the socio-cultural contexts of a person’s youth impacts upon their politics, and can lead to the emergence of diverse feminisms. I have explored the possibility that Baby Boomer feminists have a greater sense of collectivity because they experienced their formative years in a world of great social change, and when women perceived themselves as a disadvantaged group coming up against significant cultural constraints.
Mannheim allows us to see that not all generations develop the same level of consciousness regarding their potential to change the world. I have suggested in this paper, that women of Generation X and Y have not become a generation as actuality to the same extent as Baby Boomers. In general, it appears that young women, having grown up with feminism woven into their lives, uphold more individualised styles of feminism. However, Mannheim reminds us not to over-generalise or resort to binaristic thinking. His conception of generational units leaves room to recognise both the differences within a generation, and the similarities that stretch out across the generational divide. Adopting the work of Mannheim provides a useful avenue for investigating feminist generations without succumbing to a reductive analysis where age becomes the defining characteristic of feminist difference.

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