Negotiating the reproduction imperative in late modernity:
How do young women make decisions about if and when to have children?

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BA (Hons)

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Statement of originality

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Abstract

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the reproduction imperative has taken centre stage in Australia in response to declining and delayed childbearing and the resulting below replacement fertility levels. The personal and political costs associated with these demographic trends, including unintended childlessness and the economic repercussions of a ‘greying’ population, have situated the discussion within a social framework that questions the degree of agency involved in reproductive decision-making.

This thesis examines the extent to which young women (aged 18-32) are experiencing reproductive choice in Australia in late modernity. An interpretivist and broadly feminist approach investigates if and when women would like to have children and whether these desires are being achieved. The mixed method three-component research design was qualitatively driven and comprised: seven hundred and eighty existing qualitative written comments from the 1973-78 cohort of the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women’s Health (ALSWH); seven focus group discussions with a community sample; and fifty semi-structured telephone interviews with a sub-sample of the ALSWH. Quantitative survey data provided a detailed demographic profile for each sample.

The findings draw predominantly on the experiences of educated, urban, partnered, childless women who were around the age of 30 years old, and emphasise the complexity of reproductive decision-making for this group. Issues of identity and timing frequently compromised the women’s desired childbearing plan. Motherhood was felt to be undervalued, at odds with a society that privileges individual success, and in conflict with aspirations for, and the practical accomplishment of, paid work and other life goals. These perceptions created significant uncertainty toward the role and a strong belief in the need to achieve certain criteria prior to having children. The women described attempting to align their ideal childbearing circumstances with their views about ideal childbearing age in a delicate balance between attaining “security”, “stability” and “readiness” on the one hand, and fears of age-related infertility and the need for youthful energy to mother on the other. The research highlights the normative use of reproductive technology in an effort to achieve this balancing act and manage biological “chance”, such as unplanned pregnancy and infertility.
The trend toward delayed childbearing that resulted for many of these women is, therefore, usually a side-effect of their reproductive decision-making as opposed to a desired goal, with the technologies of contraception and assisted reproductive technology found to support as opposed to direct childbearing plans. In a culture of individualism and risk the women described an ambivalent relationship with the multitude of choices facing them. Many feared that motherhood could be continually delayed in an attempt to find the “right time”.