

Teaching Gender: Australian First-Year University Student Views of “Ms.”

Edgar Burns, Ian Tulloch, and Ardel Shamsullah
La Trobe University

Negative “push-back” from a group of first-year undergraduate sociology students during a class discussion of gender and feminism included rejecting personal use of the title Ms. Teaching team members asked themselves: how general is this response among other student groups in the same one-semester subject? A short in-class survey checked personal attitudes towards Ms. that might reflect shifting views towards feminism and gender among contemporary Australian “middle-town” students. Results showed this to be a specific dissenting cluster of students. The survey indicated some generational changes towards using Ms., but responses to Ms. were more complex than lack of student knowledge or interest, part of socio-cultural changes in play for these students and society generally.

This teacher reflection investigated student objections to using Ms. to check our understanding of current attitudes and potentially improve our classroom practices teaching gender inequality to students at this point in historic time. Rural undergraduate sociology students’ survey responses about using Ms. provided insights into how their perception of this title bears on their own present-day positioning and locality in the second decade into a new century (McRobbie, 2004; Woodward & Woodward, 2009). Conscious or unconscious shifts from second-wave feminism can sometimes be traced to specific sites of conflict or practices. Non-metropolitan parts of society may respond to gendered cultural change in different ways than urbanized populations. This discussion of Australian undergraduate students concerns an English-speaking Western context, recognizing that in other cultural settings—France for instance—implications of gender titles like “mademoiselle” sit differently (Symons, 2012).

The Class Challenges the Instructor

From a first-year sociology class exploring gender inequalities, one teaching team member reported eighteen-year-old women students, just post-high-school, insisted that their school teachers told them the rule on using Ms. was that it indicated not married, in contrast to Mrs., which meant married. If a person had been married, Ms. meant that she was now divorced: that is, single or unmarried again. Students were firm and clear in this view, rejecting the instructor’s countering idea that Ms. simply meant woman, without indicating her marital or partnered status—in the same way as Mr. does not identify a man’s marital or partnered status. These students did not acknowledge this rationale for adopting Ms. by women, or that it had been around since the 1970s. Furthermore, these students described Ms. as a kind of “loser” term for aunts, un-married and older women, having out-of-date connotations they did not want to be identified with. Definitely Ms. should only be used when a woman was

divorced or widowed, or perhaps in some high-up government or organizational position.

Ms. in Time and Place

These students come mostly from towns and farming communities across the northern part of the Australian state of Victoria. The interaction of traditional gendered rural workforce roles and normativity with second-wave feminism’s emphasis on equality of opportunity and self-representation is an interesting space to identify shifts or resistance to changing cultural practices (Bock, 2014; Kleinman, Copp, & Sandstrom, 2006). Double-checking what high-school teachers in this Australian setting think they said or meant in such conversations is a separate question and not pursued here.

The perceptions and beliefs now held by these beginning university students, however formed, constituted the basis of reflection on teaching practice. This teaching experience raised questions for the teaching team barely one-third of the way through the semester. First and foremost, how widespread were such strongly held views among the present student cohort? What does this “push back” in classes that are otherwise running well tell us since, as Titus (2000) shows, there are both conceptual and consequential aspects here? (McCabe, 2013). Do student responses to using Ms. show themes from their lived locality in terms of Donkersloot’s (2011) concept of the “gendered nature of rural space and place?”

Ms. Themes in the Literature

The use of Ms. is only one thread in a broader cultural literature about changing feminisms and changing responses to feminist ideas (Charles, 2010; Genz & Brabon, 2009; Harris, 2004; Ringrose, 2007; Robinson, 2011). We have not tried to explicate the rich academic enterprise—seen across most humanities and social science disciplines—investigating these societal

shifts. Terms like post-feminism, third-wave feminism and Girl Power contest this theoretic space. Delight in these new cultural forms, by some scholars vies with a sense of loss, even pastoral worry, among other experienced feminist scholars or teachers. The underlying argument in this analysis of student views about the term Ms. is teacher responsiveness to gender identities as a cultural practice and the implications of this in the classroom. Four strands from the literature framed our reflection on student responses to Ms. as a personal title: agency, stereotypes, generational shifts, and changed visibility in post-feminist society.

Ms. Demonstrating Agency

Using Ms. as a neutral term avoiding the asymmetrical specification of marital status for women, since it is not disclosed for men by Mr., is a basic contention of feminist theory. Pauwels (1996) discusses this with analysis of gendering effects of male and female names and using endearments even in professional settings (p. 255). She cites Spender’s (1980) statement from a third of a century ago:

The practice of labelling women as married or single also serves supremely sexist ends. There is a tension between the representation of women as sex objects and the male ownership rights over women and this has been resolved by an explicit and most visible device designating the married status of women (p. 27).

Pauwels (1996, p. 256-257) describes Ms. as one of three possible strategies to restore linguistic gender fairness. This discussion centers on present-day generational understandings of second-wave feminism’s advocacy of Ms. as a public, repeating, site for contesting traditional gender norms.

Ms. Viewed Stereotypically

In the intensely contested social changes of second-wave feminism, the rhetorical project of personal titles helped crystallize the argument that gender-asymmetric titling was inappropriate in the modern day and age: dragging all sorts of past gender assumptions, implications, and familial gendered relations into modern contexts where they were no longer relevant. Dion and Cota (1991) explain their assertion that the “origins of the Ms. stereotype deserve consideration”:

Why is it that women who prefer Ms. as their title of address elicit stronger attributions of agentic qualities and weaker attributions of expressive qualities than women who prefer traditional titles of address for themselves? One answer is that from

a social role perspective... career-oriented women are more likely to prefer Ms. as their title of address, whereas women choosing to be housewives are more apt to select a traditional title of address for themselves (p. 409).

Tracing origins provides one key for understanding social, organizational, or political processes, but what about other ongoing responses in the social context of the feminist movement, for the inheritors of progress made?

Generationally Changing Titles

Atkins-Sayre (2005) describes the importance of Ms. emerging during the 1970s, since it “illustrated the rhetorical importance of naming and language in general” (p. 15). She summarizes her work as follows:

Feminists argued that “Mrs.” and “Miss” divided women into unnecessary categories. “Ms.,” they argued, would create a new woman, defined as an independent human being. This essay traces out the emergence of the term as a political issue and discusses the rhetorical importance of “Ms.” It concludes that the history of the successful introduction of this language change is important both as part of the history of second-wave feminism and because of implications for future language issues (p. 15).

Atkins-Sayre’s (2005) detailed historical review from a linguistic perspective concludes, “Just the ability to use the term was cause for celebration for women. There were certainly larger wins for the feminist movement—for women in general—but the debates that happened over Ms. indicate the importance of this feat. Women claimed a right to define themselves through this title, to be known as individuals, and to be more than a Miss or a Mrs.” (p. 15). Ms. has been a highly symbolic aspect of second-wave feminist action.

Is Ms. Invisible in Post-Feminist Society?

Using the idea of assimilation, Crawford, Stark and Renner (1998) observe, “When Ms. was first introduced as an alternative to Miss or Mrs., it was perceived as a radical feminist innovation. Today, its use is unremarkable, even normative” (p. 197). The very “edginess” of contesting definitions of appropriate usage made Ms. very visible, as it was intended to be. These authors refer to opprobrium heaped on women using Ms. They comment, “The idea that there should be a term of address for women that paralleled Mr. in being neutral with respect to marital status was a matter of great controversy” (p. 197). Over several decades the

shift to more “common usage,” plus changing expectations about freedom to decide for oneself, has shifted the visibility of the term. In the same time period, however, new spaces for covert denigration of individual feminine identities not fitting some traditional model have developed, including discourses around the term Ms.

Dion and Cota (1991), writing at the start of the 1990s, refer to the catch-22 effect (Faludi, 1991) that occurs for women using the title Ms., imploding women’s motivations back on them over the mere choice of the term. Dion and Cota note that this resistance to change was seen in “accumulating evidence that a woman’s preference for title of address is a stereotypic cue for perceivers.” (p. 408). Earlier imputations of personal agency are thus paradoxically coupled with negative stereotypic portrayals of women (Feather, O’Driscoll & Nagel, 1979). Lawton, Blakemore, and Vartanian (2003) investigated the conjunction over time of age and Ms./Miss: single but too old for Miss, then use Ms. Further, normalizing achievements of feminism, coupled with individualizing discourses of choice, render Ms. less visible with the passage of time.

Ms. thus intersects multiple discourses around gender roles and feminism. As teachers engaging students in gender fairness discussions, this strongly voiced student reaction challenged these new choices. However, seeing Ms. as a polysemic term sensitized us as researchers to different spaces people occupy and from which they make or affirm changing meanings. Our aim has been to emulate Karlyn (2011) in Levine’s (2011) words as we reflect on our teaching task, contributing “crucial insights to our understandings of this ongoing cultural moment and offer a perspective both sympathetic and critical,” in placing our reflections within “respectful cultural criticism” (p. 912).

Method

A simple survey sheet asked students about their views of changes to gender norms and their use/opinions about the personal title Ms. This allowed us to explore how widespread student anti-Ms. sentiment was, testing our concerns that a broader cohort of students was dismissive of Ms. as a personal title. Anonymously completed surveys from 125 (93%) students were returned from eight classes in the survey week (71% of 177 students enrolled in this subject). Women outnumbered men 4:1 (79.2 to 20.8%), and nearly three-quarters of participants (71.2%) were 20 years or younger. The university campus is in a provincial city of 100,000 people drawing from surrounding rural regions and small town communities. It is a mid-tier university in Australian tertiary rankings, about 1-2 hours from a major metropolitan center.

These demographic details situate this cohort as being within a typical band of rural Australian students. They are not used in the exploratory nature of the findings below to describe views or make claims beyond this context. An important distinction can be made between the limits to generalization of one local study, on the one hand, and the broad interest in western cultural changes in attitudes—or not—to gender equality and the roles of men and women in professions in the past half-century, on the other.

A bank of thirteen Likert items asked students for, “Your opinions about the use of the title Ms.” Most items were presented in pairs, the second item reversing order to cross-check answers by response-pattern interruption for students inclined to simply enter a response towards one end or the other of the “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree” check-boxes. For instance, the contrasting pair of, “I associate it with old-style feminism,” is followed by, “I associate it with today’s feminism,” which invited respondents to check their views a second time.

Students were also asked an open question: “How would you sum up in a sentence or two your opinion on the use of Ms.?” Students were given two lines of full page-width to respond. Ten students (3 men and 7 women—8.0% of all women, all but one under 21 years) chose not to respond to this question. The other 115 students made a range of comments helpful to our reflective intent as teachers, and these are presented as a series of themes. Demographic and Likert data was prepared using PASW-18 (formerly SPSS) for frequencies, cross-tables, and percentages (Tables 1-3). The open-ended question was coded using Microsoft Excel and consolidated into themes grouping student responses (Tables 4-6). Findings are divided into two parts: first discussion of student responses to the Likert items, and second, consideration of the open-ended question about Ms.

Findings 1: Likert Questions about Using Ms.

Tables 1, 2, and 3 present data from the survey rating the strength of students views around the use of Ms.

Ms. Use Patterns

Students were asked, “What title do you use for yourself?” and offered four choices (Table 1). Women respondents identified their use of possible personal titles Miss, Ms., Mrs., as follows: 84 women (67.2%) used the personal title Miss, 9 (7.2%) use Ms., and 5 (4.0%) used Mrs. All 26 men in the survey used the title Mr. (100.0%), and one woman respondent also selected Mr. Given the focus on alternative title usages women may choose, and discursive meanings around such

decisions, we were interested in whether women in the study were making different choices by age.

Two-thirds (67.2%) of all the students (both male and female) were young women aged under 21 years, and this same cohort constituted nearly three quarters (72.5%) of the women student group. Table 1 shows an unambiguous difference by age in the choice of personal title. Younger women less than 21 years almost completely chose Miss; adding the ten students aged 21-29 years to the 71 students less than 21 years gives 81 out of 84 or 96.4% of women using this title. The three remaining respondents using Miss were under 40 years, in the 30-39 year cohort. The age pattern for students using the personal title Ms. was the reverse, although the number of older students was much smaller.

Nine women reported using Ms.: only one was in the under-21 age-group, one in the 21-29 age-group, and one was in the 30-39 age-group. Two thirds of these students (6 of 9) were over forty years of age. For the third personal title option, three of the five students using Mrs. were in their thirties, one was in her twenties, and one was over forty. An interesting question that follows from this is: what do these personal preferences for Miss in the case of young women students translate to on a broader front? Are they somewhat, a lot, or not-at-all, well-disposed to the wider implications of gender labelling and feminist ideas about feminine identity? In a series of more specific questions, all students were invited to select one choice for each line of thirteen Likert items. In either agreement or disagreement about each statement, using five standard categories from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree.

The Starting Question

How general were the views of that initial group who claimed high school teachers advised them against using Ms.? Students rated contrasting statements which asked: “My school recommended me using it,” and, “My school said it was inappropriate for me to use it.” In contrast to the initial class conversation with which this article began, only ten women (10.5% of women) strongly agreed or agreed that their school said Ms. was inappropriate for them to use as a title. Just over one quarter of women gave neutral answers to both the “recommended” and “inappropriate” items. Conversely, two-thirds (66.0%) of women students disagreed or strongly disagreed that their schools had either recommended Ms. or advised them it was inappropriate for them to use Ms. Apparently the class disputants were a specific group who had concretized their interpretation of their high school conversations, or they perhaps merged them with religious or other traditional cultural beliefs, because in this further inspection over

90% of students were either neutral or disagreed with these propositions.

Repositioning Gender Identity and Labelling

The literature above spoke about generational change as not being a sell-out of feminist ideas and ideals despite concerns of leaving a collective project. The complex revising process for present-generation young women can be seen in contrasting student answers. How did individuals feel about using Ms. themselves, or wider Ms. usage? Table 2 shows age cohorts of women respondents. In broad terms, a third of responses for women under 29 years fall into each of the agreement (28.9%), neutral (33.7%), and disagreement (37.4%) categories. Is the neutral category a “Don’t know” response, or is it covert avoidance of answering? If the larger proportion that would not use the title Ms. is read with the ambiguous neutral category, it appears likely more than half prefer not to use Ms. There is, however, a spectrum of responses rather than uniformity of views.

Personal preferences segue into opinions about other use of Ms. Would peers think using Ms. “uncool?” In the case of under-21 year students, only 13.8% agreed that they would, with the majority disagreeing (58.9%). Did students think their mothers “would be okay” using Ms.? The under-21 age cohort responded agree and strongly agree 35.8%, neutral 25.0%, and disagree 29.2%. Asked to estimate their mothers’ attitudes to students’ own use of the term, these young women felt free to agree more definitely (13.9% strongly agreed, and 43.1% agreed), with a third neutral and under 8.0% disagreeing. Thus, these students can discern a social space of permissible—even approved—use as a separate factor, distinct from their own inclination to do so.

Ms. and Older or New Feminisms

It appears that shifting generational cohorts have steadily reconstituted feminist ideas in relation to other cultural values and ideas. This makes age an important variable to consider, even when it may be contingent rather than constitutive in why and how such adaptation is occurring. One of the things apparent in the open comments below is some young women making clear associations between feminism and an older (mother) generation. Hence, positioned as young women who are newly adult, they feel it is not their “business” insofar as they inherit a world with significant legislative and other gender in/equality changes. That is, stereotypic representations of feminists in negative terms may stem in part from the generational shift leading to avoiding activism on this issue.

Another partial reading is that care about using Ms. can also be understood as part of a wider backlash phenomenon, even if this, too, is changing and may not be expressed in the ways Faludi (1991) talked about it over two decades ago. For instance, responding to the contrasting item (paired with, “I associate it with today’s feminism”) about using Ms., “I associate it with old-style feminism,” a fifth of under-21 women (19.5%) agreed or strongly agreed, half were less sure and checked a neutral response (52.8%), and just over a quarter disagreed—two of these strongly disagreed, a response no older age-group members selected. For this item then, as indeed of other items, it remains an open question whether there is a flight to neutral responses from a sharper item asking them to be definite in a way their generalized views have not been questioned before. Perhaps a sense of dismissal seems rather blunt to them as their response, so that retreating to neutral is less contentious or at odds with other values they hold such as the right for others to have different opinions.

Students were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the view that, “Professional women use it [Ms.],” and also whether they thought, “Professional women should use it.” Half of under-21 year women (51.4%) agreed or strongly agreed that professional women use Ms., with a small core of 16.7% disagreeing. This proportion remained steady across age bands, dropping a few percentage points for women in their twenties. Only one woman under 21 strongly disagreed out of all women, and of the total of 14 who disagreed, only three were over 21 years. Adding the normative element “should” into the item—“Professional women should use it”—led to the contrasting agree and disagree responses; for the under-21 women cohort agreement dropped to 15.3%, and similarly for older ages. The disagreement categories collapsed the most, with over half of respondents (58.2%) avoiding the “should” about others’ conduct, and choosing neutral.

Ms. Marking Marital Status

Two Likert items invited reactions about student perception of Ms. in relation to marital status: “Only divorced women should use it,” and, “Single women can use it.” All who agreed only divorced women should use Ms. were in their teens or twenties. At the other end of the opinion scale, about half of all women disagreed or strongly disagreed (25.5 and 19.4%) that Ms. should be only used by divorced women. Once more, these opposite opinions show plurality if not mobility in views, and again the one-third (33.7%) of women respondents selecting neutral suggests resistance or uncertainty about the normative “should” in the item to which they are being asked to respond, but about which they may have reflected relatively little. Three-quarters of women under 21 years affirmed

single women can use Ms., two-thirds of women (65.3%) agreeing, and a further 9.3% strongly agreeing.

So this groups’ overwhelming preference—even with distinct differing opinions among them—is to use Miss to show some combination of their own youth and single identity, they also affirm single women’s right to use Ms. A small pocket of respondents disagreed: 8 of 9 of these were under 30 years, the solitary strong disagree respondent being under 21 years. How Ms. usage speaks to questions of disclosing, or not, partnered or married status is revisited in discussing the open-ended answers.

A final comment from the tabulated responses builds on reactions to the item, “On my values, it’s a bad term.” For both older and younger students, only 5.6% agreed or strongly agreed; no-one over 20 years strongly agreed. In contrast, about two-thirds of older and younger students disagreed, a higher proportion of older students more strongly disagreed. Here too, there are substantial neutral categories in student responses: nearly a third. Whether, when pushed to comment, limits to students’ knowledge or opinions became apparent to them, or perhaps in some instances they avoided an actual answer in light of prevailing social norms such as respecting others’ choices, cannot be determined here. The neutral responses, then, in considering these findings are significant even while they appear to soften the clarity of the data.

Findings 2: Student Open Question Themes about Ms.

Responses to the open question inviting student opinion about the use of Ms. are summarized here in Tables 4, 5 and 6 and explored in terms of themes identified. Each of these themes is not a simple category, but involves the interplay of changing socio-cultural discourses of how gender is performed and labelled today. In this way these qualitative results deepen Findings 1 exploration. The numerical data are thus explicated, and potential lines of pedagogical action are identified.

Theme 1: Distance as Lack of Knowledge, Neutral Views

Two dozen comments either remarked on students’ own lack of knowledge, e.g., “Don’t quite see the relevance of title in the first instance. Ms. as relevant as any,” or indifference or neutrality about the subject, e.g., “I think it is fine. I don’t understand what it means exactly.” Often these had a vaguely positive spin, e.g., “It has no real strong relevance to me. I don’t believe it is inappropriate to use it,” or a vaguely negative spin, “I have little opinion about Ms. I wouldn’t use it myself, but I don’t have a problem with others using it.” Three

comments claimed use of titles was not useful today. The association with age in these responses of lack of knowledge about Ms. are seen more fully than the above comments show with generational change below.

It is, nevertheless, a part answer to the question of use and relevance to younger men and women of the title Ms. Clearly, if it was a personally important or pressing issue, many more of them would have developed specific ideas and reasons why, when, and how Ms. should be used or is appropriate than this general lack of viewpoint in being invited to engage with these questions. Their relative lack of sophistication, for some, showed in their unawareness of the use of common, even though not universal, use of Ms. in professional and corporate settings. Only three comments were made showing some knowledge of application of Ms.:

“Professional women use it—so they are not categorized as someone’s wife.” (Female, 21+)

“I was taught that Ms. was a title used by high-up, professional women and/or divorcees.” (Male, 21+)

“Can be used as professional.” (Male, <21)

Two of these comments refer to marital status and could also be placed in the final table. They are interesting in reflecting a wider contemporary usage than most in this student group identified.

Theme 2: Choice—Individual or Personal Preference

A second strong theme, again suggesting an underlying generational construction of attitude to and use of Ms., overlapped with lack of knowledge and general neutrality in responses (Table 5). Almost the same number of responses, but from different students, emphasized that use of Ms. was an individual choice.

Is this change in personal titles half-accomplished, change resisted, or perhaps multiple strands of both? An interesting question that cannot be answered here is, how much displacement from the first theme is occurring here? It may be a socially acceptable response to not know, in case a response causes friction; it may reflect a more negative underlying view or indicate a preference for a more traditional view. However, at the same time these responses correspond to shifts in second-wave feminism from a collective project with political goals to individualized personal projects which Currie, Kelly and Pomerantz (2009), and others have identified with the neoliberal subject in this gendered and individualized form.

Theme 3: Marital Status and Identity

There is no simple conjunction between the use of Ms. and a particular gender/marital status positioning

expressed in these student responses (Table 6). The presence of a number of clear statements similar to those described in the opening paragraphs of this article do not, by that simple fact, mean this is the only or dominant view, as noted earlier. Again, however, the generational themes repeatedly come through in the content of the comments themselves, even before assessing these comments in terms of respondents’ age or gender. A substantial number of comments were identified under this theme, and again it may help readers to see the raw responses showing similarities but also variations and nuances in how first-year students expressed their views about Ms.

These comments demonstrate a consolidation over a number of years of the usage of Ms. around divorce and separation rather than the original idea, also identified here, that Ms. should obscure marital status for women in the same way Mr. does for men. In Mannheim’s generational terms (Stevenson, Everingham & Robinson, 2011), the cohort significance of the concept of Ms. in terms of evolving divorce, separation, and partnering patterns—then new experiences as widespread social phenomena—was an historic conjunction.

The symbolic attachment for Ms. to these older generations, when viewed today at a juncture several decades later by newly adult student cohorts, becomes much more explicable. Attitudes about feminism and Ms. ineluctably commingle with attitudes about generations and generational change. It is possible to see that when Australian divorce laws were relaxed in the 1970s, that still-new second-wave feminism offered a way of labelling oneself. Such titling contrasted traditional unequal gender categorizing on various ideologically or religious grounds. It also differed for people who did not have to ask this question of continuing relationships. Ms. thus became a different thread of challenging resistance to such social change, but not without links to the backlash Faludi (1991) described.

Theme 4: Gender Socialization

The generational dialectic just described interacts with other gender socialization patterns and expectations. Although this theme is not as explicit or developed as the others identified here, brief comment is useful in tracing the social learning mechanisms and broader reproduction of conventional gender role binaries. In Table 6 quite a number of the comments are prefaced with comments such as: “I always assumed...,” “I’ve always believed it was a term...,” “I was always taught that you called...,” “I typically was taught to use Ms. for a divorced woman,” and other similar phrases.

Most of the later quotations in Table 6 use similar introductory phrases to qualify their understanding of

Ms. usage, allowing that they might be mistaken. To observe this is not to say anything newly profound, but to restate the obvious fact that individuals learn their gender expectations and rules, as for other things in life, from families, peers, schools, and other socializing influences. Since these institutions are deeply embedded in the hybrid shifts that social change and generational cycles represent, the cultural significance of Ms. and surrounding gender labelling and expectations will draw on and try and reassert past rules, as well as at various points acquire new elements. Statements such as, “I’ve always believed...,” can thus be read as expressing learned values, but also as acknowledging other ideas might be possible.

Theme 5: Generational Shift

The interleaved process of generational change does not, however, fully mask the sense among this group of students as mostly new emerging adults that they would not use Ms., because of generational meanings of Ms. in their eyes at present. This is not at this point in their lives a single universal view, but this generational positioning of Ms. usage is the clearest theme in these findings. It does not need to be universal to be significant in sociocultural terms or to have important consequences for how gender is approached as a topic for discussion in the classroom. In some ways this takes us back to the simplicity of Table 1: most women students under thirty use the term Miss.

Today, however, this is not the simple naming matrix of centuries ago about miss and master being the youthful matching binaries to Mrs. and Mr. This is an assertion of Miss in both its new strengths, and in potential negatives of re-inscription of gender inequalities. It occurs relative to recent reconstituted gender relations in society via legislative and discursive frameworks affecting many things such as marriage and divorce, reproduction, workplace, professions, and government. It is not helpful to construe it as simply an assertion of individual Girl Power or Third-Wave feminist gender self-identity, or rejection per se of feminism. These students draw on local and mediatized available discourses of gender politics, including contested shifts in all aspects of society and including gendered dimensions of cultural change.

Almost no comments identified the flow of time. However, here is one that did, from a woman in her thirties: “For me the use of Ms. became prevalent in the late 1990s. It was never explained what it meant, so I used Miss. Not knowing the meaning, it still doesn’t faze me.” The vaguer references noted earlier suggest generally absorbing recent cultural framing and stereotypes. However, in contrast to this response from someone in her twenties or late teens in the 1990s, the bulk of this group of students aged around 18 years

were born in 1993, becoming teenagers in 2005. They have nevertheless—or perhaps because of this—a distinct sense of difference from what feminism and the use of Ms. means to them in generational and discursive terms (Lawton et al., 2003).

These students have only a minimal sense of historical change, seeing feminism generationally and the use of Ms. in only their own generational terms. This is their historic theoretical framing of the issue, thus, “I think it is used in older times,” from one, and from another, “I think the use of Ms. is completely fine. In my opinion it is just a title for a mature-aged woman who is not married or is independent. It shows female strength.” Some, such as in the preceding comment, viewed use of Ms. positively, but others viewed it negatively, as in this comment: “It is old fashioned and irrelevant to use in today’s society.” If the term Ms. is not formally framed using words like “generational,” this does not mean a lack of generational awareness.

Responses of younger women in this cohort articulate what they deem gender-appropriate usage of Ms. in terms of age and passage of generations. This appears almost entirely framed in perceived differences from older women to their own sense of identity. Specifically, many young women operationalize this as an age horizon on appropriate usage of Ms.: “Ms. is an inappropriate term for younger women to use,” but, “For unmarried and single elders the term seems to be fairly fitting.” From a late-teen perspective there is a definite age threshold: “I would find it strange if used by someone under 30,” and in another instance having specified Ms. for older single women, the boundary line of Miss/Ms. is clear: “It [Ms.] may also be used for single women who are older than 25 years of age.”

Theme 6: Synthesising Ideas

These responses are not unsophisticated—we do not want to over-claim on the evidence. The challenge of Pomerantz and Raby (2011) in their Canadian study of sixteen-year-old smart high-school women is that such people in fact have their own feminist or gendered nuances, paradoxes, and dangers with which they are dealing, just not the same, nor in the same format, as previous generations. If we are assuming that they have simply missed the point, then even more than our students we are locked into our own time-specific academic teacher cohort.

Quotations and evidence presented above draw from the whole body of responses to avoid making the data lean one way or another, and this helps avoid over-generalizing. Many of the comments show combinations of one or more idea with another, not in the same way or with the same valuation by students. By no means do all students think the same as the vocal group remonstrating with their class instructor in this

article’s introduction. It is not possible to fully summarize the variety of views, but it is useful to see responses are as much about age or generation as they are about feminism. For instance, this quite comprehensive comment identifies the key feminist contention, but then submits a generational reason for not using the term, distinguishing between “young” and “single,” and concluding with normative neutrality:

It is a valid term since women used to have titles based on whether they were married and therefore how they were linked to men. I don’t usually use it as today I think “Miss” relates to being young, not single, but I don’t really mind.

This young woman respondent “gets” the initial feminist intent, but she also succinctly states that for her today preferring Miss to Ms. is about, “being young, not single.” She also shows the de-politicized and individualized language of, “I don’t really mind,” of younger generations about gender. In the space available to write, she does not comment on the theme that many respondents wrote about, that Ms. is today their term for divorced or separated older women.

The responses thus show limitations—lack of understanding about professional roles, ignorance of the history of second-wave feminism and of Ms., the conflation of somewhat stereotyped negative views about feminism with an older age-grouping—but they also affirm a different set of understandings and conjunction of gender with terms surrounding gender discourse. Some of this may be a retreat from the insights of feminism, but some is simply occupying the space that feminism created in verbal protocols like Ms. and in activism more generally. As such it cannot be that their feminism, their doing gender, is the same as second-wave feminism. They live in a different time and set of opportunities. Sure, risks of gender recidivism are present and active in society, but understanding differences rather than judgment on the emerging generation has been our purpose here as reflective practitioners seeking ways to enhance our teaching and our students’ best learning.

Final Reflections

The study shows generational shifts in this group of rural Australian students, but it does not confirm that widespread rejection of Ms. exists in this non-metropolitan cohort. Usages and preferences surrounding Ms. emerged from second-wave feminism in the early stages of the movement, but with the passage of time these sit differently in a number of ways. As Woodward and Woodward (2009) observe, “The second wave, although sometimes characterized by oversimplification and over-enthusiasm, was marked

by engagement with inextricable links between the personal and political, a key construction” (p. 3). Inevitably each generation develops its own understanding and expression. Giffort’s (2001) study of empowering young women at rock music camps reshaped her intentional feminist agenda, developing the concept of “implicit feminism”:

I define implicit feminism as a strategy practiced by feminist activists within organizations that are operating in an anti- and postfeminist environment in which they conceal feminist identities and ideas while emphasizing the more socially acceptable angles of their efforts (p. 569).

For some this feels like a “sell-out,” but it is essential to engage with students’ current views: otherwise students are unwilling to “hear” or believe what is being said to them. This still begs fuller elaboration of what insights or viewpoints best achieve students’ learning. This teaching challenge provided an opportunity to investigate and then reflect further on current teaching practice. The data does not reveal a distinct rural response in this cohort of rural and country-town students.

This reflective exercise shows the need to continually assess teaching strategies beyond urging the importance of second-wave feminism challenges to gender inequality, since this new generation barely understands the reconfiguration of which they are a part. Two specific pedagogical applications are identified arising from this exploration. The first is the possibility of using this short survey form, or a similar one, as an intentional class exercise around which to base student learning around. Student opinion, then, is grounded in the brief history of gender and Ms. usage. Extensions, such as getting students to observe forms of address used in various media for women and men, would make this engage with the contemporary working world. Second, we have begun innovating in other classes with thumbnail sketches of feminist history (lecture slides or hand-outs) as direct inputs for class discussion (rather than starting with unformed opinions), so students quickly learn about the contestations in second-wave feminism and gains made (and unfinished) in gender inequality. This is proving beneficial in removing blame for not somehow “holding the candle” for a previous generation but providing information on the dominant inequalities in earning, status, and right to control one’s own body.

New generational attitudes towards Ms. of acceptance (professional titles) and resistance (young adult personal partnering) within ideas about gender and feminism in the present data and classroom invite continuing teacher experimentation. Doing so respects the insights of feminist challenge and also the resituated

lives of a new generational cohort of undergraduate women students.

References

- Atkins-Sayre, W. (2005). Naming women: The emergence of “MS.” as a liberatory title. *Women and Language*, 28(1), 8-16.
- Bock, B. B. (2014). Gender mainstreaming and rural development policy: The trivialisation of rural gender issues. *Gender, Place and Culture*, 22(5), 731-745. doi:10.1080/0966369X.2013.879105
- Charles, C. E. (2010). Supergirl scorned: Lessons about young femininity in an Australian television satire. *Critical Studies in Education*, 51(3), 265-276. doi:10.1080/17508487.2010.508803
- Crawford, M., Stark, A. C., & Renner, C. H. (1998). The meaning of Ms.: Social assimilation of a gender concept. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 22(2), 197-208. doi:10.1111/j.1471-6402.1998.tb00150.x
- Currie, D. H., Kelly, D. M., & Pomerantz, S. (2009). “Girl power”: *Girls reinventing girlhood*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Dion, K. L., & Cota, A. A. (1991). The MS. stereotype. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 15(3), 403-410. doi:10.1111/j.1471-6402.1991.tb00416.x
- Donkersloot, R. (2011). Gendered and generational experiences of place and power in the rural Irish landscape. *Gender, Place and Culture*, 19(5), 578-599. doi:10.1080/0966369X.2011.610095
- Faludi, S. (1991). *Backlash: The undeclared war against women*. London, UK: Chatto and Windus.
- Feather, N. T., O’Driscoll, M. P., & Nagel, T. (1979). Conservatism, sex-typing, and the use of titles: Miss, Mrs., or Ms.? *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 9(4), 419-426. doi:10.1002/ejsp.2420090407.
- Genz, S., & Brabon, B. A. (2009). *Postfeminism: Cultural texts and theories*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press.
- Giffort, D. M. (2011). Show or tell? Feminist dilemmas and implicit feminism at girls’ rock camp. *Gender and Society*, 25(5), 569-588. doi:10.1177/0891243211415978
- Harris, A. (Ed.). (2004). *All about the girl: Culture, power and identity*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Karlynn, K. R. (2011). *Unruly girls, unrepentant mothers: Redefining feminism on screen*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Kleinman, S., Copp, M., & Sandstrom, K. (2006). Making sexism visible: Birdcages, Martians, and pregnant men. *Teaching Sociology*, 34(2), 126-142. doi:10.1177/0092055X0603400203
- Lawton, C. A., Blakemore, J. E., & Vartanian, L. R. (2003). The new meaning of MS.: Single, but too old for miss. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 27(3), 215-220. doi:10.1111/1471-6402.00101
- Levine, E. (2011). Review—Unruly girls, unrepentant mothers: Redefining feminism on screen. *The Journal of American History*, 98(3), 912-912. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jar395
- McCabe, J. (2013). Making theory relevant: The gender attitude and belief inventory. *Teaching Sociology*, 41(3), 282-293. doi:10.1177/0092055X13480153
- McRobbie, A. (2004). Post-feminism and popular culture. *Feminist Media Studies*, 4(3), 255-264. doi:10.1080/1468077042000309937
- Pauwels, A. (1996). Feminist language planning and titles for women: Some crosslinguistic perspectives. In M. Hellinger & U. Ammon (Eds.), *Contrastive Sociolinguistics* (pp. 251-269). Berlin, DE: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Pomerantz, S., & Raby, R. (2011). “Oh, she’s so smart”: Girls’ complex engagements with post/feminist narratives of academic success. *Gender and Education*, 23(5), 549-564. doi:10.1080/09540253.2010.538014
- Ringrose, J. (2007). Successful girls? Complicating post-feminist, neoliberal discourses of educational achievement and gender equality. *Gender and Education*, 19(4), 471-489. doi:10.1080/09540250701442666
- Robinson, P. (2011). Mobilizing postfeminism: Young Australian women discuss *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives*. *Continuum: Media and cultural studies*, 25(1), 111-124. doi:10.1080/10304312.2011.538469.
- Spender, D. (1980). *Man-made language*. London, UK: Pandora Press.
- Stevenson, D., Everingham, C., & Robinson, P. (2011). Choices and life chances: Feminism and the politics of generational change. *Social Politics*, 18(1), 125-145.
- Symons, E. (2012, January 21). Mademoiselle, battlecry of the French feminist. *Weekend Australian Inquirer*. Retrieved from <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/features/>
- Titus, J. J. (2000). Engaging student resistance to feminism: “How is this stuff going to make us better teachers?” *Gender and Education*, 12(1), 21-37. doi:10.1080/09540250020382
- Woodward, K., & Woodward, S. (2009). *Why feminism matters: Feminism lost and found*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

EDGAR A BURNS, PhD is sociology lecturer in the College of Arts, Social Sciences and Commerce at La Trobe University in Victoria, Australia. His current projects include a text on theorizing professions and an historical project on settler occupations in nineteenth

century New Zealand. He regularly publishes or presents on reflective teaching and research methods.

IAN TULLOCH is an Honorary Associate in the College of Arts, Social Sciences and Commerce at La Trobe University in Victoria, Australia. His current project is a history of water politics of the vast Murray Darling Basin in Australia. He has taught politics and sociology over many years including environmental

socio-political issues. He is regularly interviewed on local radio stations about Australian politics.

ARDEL SHAMSULLAH, PhD, has retired from teaching politics and sociology at La Trobe University, Victoria Australia. His specialist teaching area was Victorian state politics and processes when he was an active staff member of the School of Social Sciences for many years.