Chapter 9
Social Forces Shaping Life Chances and Life Choices

Image 9.1 Intergenerational family and friend celebration for Baby Boomer bithday, Adelaide, 2012 (Source: J. Dixon)

One of the hallmarks of modern societies is their capacity to provide their citizens with an overwhelming sense of choice, agency, or freedom to select from many alternatives: how to use their individual talents, how they identify in terms of religion, politics and other social status attributes, or what goods and services they can buy. The narrative that brings these alternatives together promotes the idea that anyone can be whatever they want. A favoured mass media trope which celebrates this cultural characteristic is the millionaire who comes from a 'humble background',

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the paraplegic who excels at physical feats, the cancer victim who 'beats' the disease, the high school drop-out who becomes a High Court judge. According to these narratives, life choices trump life chances.

Thus, success is especially admired when the individual is considered to have overcome their destiny. These days, people of normal weight are viewed as successful: they have made healthy choices in the face of the overwhelming odds of succumbing to the many temptations that comprise the obesogenic environment. Descriptive epidemiology supports this view: in a near majority of OECD countries and an increasing number of Asian and Middle Eastern countries, the person who is normal weight is exceptional (Finucane et al. 2011; Sassi 2010).

However, our concern is to explain the unequal, and often unwelcome, choices and chances that are buried in obesity trend averages. More than six decades ago, Mills (1959/2000) called attention to problems in which public issues and personal troubles are intimately connected. Mills could have been discussing obesity when he said, "Nowadays men [and women] often feel that their private lives are a series of traps. They sense that within their everyday worlds, they cannot overcome their troubles, and in this feeling, they are often quite correct" (Mills 1959/2000, p. 3). One way of releasing the trap, according to Mills, is to "grasp history and biography and the relations between the two in society" (p. 4). Our research design is informed by an approach in sociology that operates at the intersection of the impersonal, remote transformations at the societal level and the intimate features of the self.

Here, we adopt Mills' argument to reconsider some of our data. 'The personal troubles of the milieu' are an individual's experience of his or her social setting, "and to some extent his [or her] willful activity" (p. 8); they are akin to the notion of life choices available to each cohort. This is the realm of biographical agency, of personal actions and rationales. Chapters 3 through 8 provide the accounts of 160 socially situated individuals, with each chapter focusing on the way particular socio-cultural dynamics influence life chances and life choices. These chapters bring together social environmental history and biography.

In them, readers can glimpse the extent to which individuals act in concert with the ebb and flow of the four obesogenic socio-cultural trends that were the focus of this book, and whether they feel they can resist the trend's undertow. They capture the 'personal troubles' or struggles to do what feels both personally correct and socially appropriate, which may be contradictory. Here is a brief overview of our major findings from those chapters.

9.1 How Socio-Cultural Trends Have Affected Diet and Physical Activity Over Three Generations

Chapter 3 shows that a shift has occurred from a rather restricted menu of foods and meals eaten at regular times and in a weekly pattern (during the Luckies' childhood) to today's easy access to a wide variety of foods and eating habits. The importance of eating with the family is diminishing, not because this is considered unenjoyable, but because solitary eating is an imperfect solution to the need to be flexible to

accommodate the scheduling of other activities including: socialising with friends, paid work, study, house work, shopping, caring, physical activity. An important facilitator of flexible eating is the marketplace of convenience foods and the growing legitimacy of consuming them.

Convenience foods are often criticised for their calorie-rich nature, but it must be remembered that our Lucky Generation regularly ate high-calorie desserts. Whether recipes have changed so that marketplace offerings are more calorific, whether the portion sizes were more modest (in keeping with household budgets or social norms) is not known. Chapter 4 indicates that a home-made sweet daily in the context of a 'meat and three veg' meal and simple lunch does not appear to have been harmful. The question that is raised is whether health harms are the result of this routinised, home-based approach to meals and snacks being bypassed in favour of the extensive range of commercially prepared deserts, cakes, biscuits, ice cream and other sweets that are now widely available.

Chapter 5 offers two starkly different scenarios between the physical activity routines and experiences of the Lucky and Y generations. It documents how the incidental exercise of daily life coupled with social sports enjoyed by the Lucky Generation have given way to programmed physical exertion which competes with other activities like jobs and study. Like their Lucky Generation parents, adult Baby Boomers recognise the pleasures afforded by unstructured leisure social activity and hobbies but along with their Gen Y children, they struggle to juggle being physical in a context of work, family and community commitments. Further, as a national ethos of excellence in sport has been consolidated, people of all ages and capacities (witness the Masters Games, Paralympics) are encouraged to identify as 'sporty' or 'not sporty'. Those who are sporty spend considerable time and money in keeping fit, sports training, performing and attending to injuries. The social aspects of their endeavours become less important than personal and team achievements; and for Gen Y, parental support can add a layer of expectation.

Chapter 6 elaborates on the escalating expectations regarding being accomplished in physical activity. It describes how the physical activity dispositions of Gen Y are in stark contrast to their grandparents, who also valued staying fit but in a way that met other objectives, namely enjoyment and companionship. This chapter illustrates how fitness commodity cultures—in this case, the gym and aerobics culture—re-educate or reorient individual behaviours. They structure the chances of becoming physically active when other choices are denied because of higher-order structuring trends, especially labour force participation and transport systems that privilege the private automobile.

The material in Chaps. 3, 4, 5, and 6 leads us to the conclusion that food consumption and leisure-related physical activity practices have both become underpinned by processes of individualisation and commodification over the last 50 years. Furthermore, they are enmeshed and should no longer be considered discrete practices, as we have argued elsewhere. Food and car use have become increasingly intertwined (Hinde and Dixon 2005). For example, in the last few years, large supermarket chains have begun to collaborate with petrol retailers in co-promotion of their products (Evans 2003). Practices such as 'eating on the run' are facilitated by petrol stations that sell food, drive-thru fast food and gadgets that facilitate eating

while travelling. A US study of driver practices revealed that 70% of drivers eat or drink while using their motor vehicles (Stutts et al. 2005). To complicate matters, in a car-reliant society, access to healthy food depends on access to an automobile. Our ethnographic research describes the intersection between the automobile and the food system and in particular the different roles of transport in procuring fast food and slow food. Fast food is accessible to people who travel by all modes of transport, but the purchase of slow food tends to rely more heavily on the consumer having access to automobile transport (Banwell et al. 2006).

The potent influence of commodity cultures on population behaviours reappears in Chap. 7. From being virtually non-existent when our Lucky Generation were children, car reliance is a ubiquitous feature of living 80 years later. It facilitates the relatively speedy movement across considerable distances which are a feature of Australian suburbs. Life without a car is deemed unimaginable, because the car allows the complex scheduling of daily life. Considered by some to be a labour-saving device, especially when they reflected on how earlier generations shopped, it can also be thought of as a 'time machine': a socio-technical system for organising society's movement and routines. The importance of the auto manufacturing sector to the Australian economy has made car ownership something akin to a civic duty until recently.

Chapter 8 approaches time from a sociological perspective, specifically examining how people had experienced the way time is socially organised and constructed. It is a matter of academic debate whether people are now busier because of increases in "obligated" time to work and caring demands, or whether they are attempting to fit more activities into their day. All three generations thought that the Baby Boomers and Gen Y were likely to be more time-pressured than the Lucky Generation had been at the same ages. Certainly, the need to manage and schedule multiple, diverse and time incompatible commitments, and to coordinate the travel and timetables of several family members, are key dynamics fostering acceptance of the social changes documented in the five previous chapters.

9.2 Emergent Socio-Cultural Trends

Re-reading the data that underpins Chaps. 3 through 8, we have identified three additional socio-cultural trends: the rise of health consciousness; the changing nature of family dynamics from a more hierarchical, patriarchal structure to a more child-centred structure; and the attenuation of habits and the embrace of cultural change. We explain what we found in general terms about these trends, before illustrating them through vignettes from one particular three-generation family.

9.2.1 The Rise in Health Consciousness

Over the three generations, health concerns ceased to be products of advancing age and ill health, and became a pervasive aspect of culture, regardless of age or health

status. For the Lucky Generation, a focus on health arose most prominently in their 60s onwards, as specific problems (such as heart disease or arthritis) prevented them from undertaking their preferred activities. The Baby Boomers became aware of health linked to wellbeing in their young adult years. The younger generation, however, has always been aware of the health implications of physical activity and diet. Indeed, the duty to exercise and eat 'healthy food' seems to appear at younger ages with each successive generation. Perhaps because of this state of heightened reflexivity, being physical in particular has lost its positive connotations with freedom and enjoyment. This increasing awareness and concern for health maintenance is part of what has been described as the development of normative healthy citizenship (Cockerham 2007). It has arisen over the course of the twentieth century as chronic diseases associated with individual lifestyle health risks have replaced infectious diseases as the main causes of morbidity and mortality.

Perhaps surprisingly, one aspect of the growing health *zeitgeist* derives from an understanding of a genetic predisposition to health risks. Biomedical research shows the relevance of a genetic component to some chronic diseases, including those that are associated with obesity such as heart disease, high cholesterol and Type 2 diabetes. These are interrelated diseases in which family history is considered to play an important role. While individuals cannot change their genes or family history, many health promotion campaigns attempt to persuade people to modify their lifestyle to reduce their inherited risk. Such ideas have been widely promoted in Australia and have been adopted by study participants. Through this understanding of risk, a common familial approach to diet and physical activity over several generations of family members is promoted. One Baby Boomer said *I live in a family of cancer people.* In another family, the father had major heart problems at an early age and his children are aware that heart problems have a genetic component so they monitor their health and health-related activities. Karen, a Baby Boomer, explained that the effect of her father's diabetes diagnosis (considered genetic) had "trickled down" so that she and her sister were careful about their diets. Her statement below illustrates the difficulties individuals and families have in absorbing and acting upon health messages from a range of sources.

> *He was diagnosed in 1995 and he was so wounded by that because he had been so disciplined. He had this idea that people who have diabetes are obese. You watch….. The media would have you believe and I know most people are, they have eaten themselves into diabetes. But dad's is just genetic, his mother was diabetic. So he was perfectly well and he went to the doctors one day and he said "I'll just give you a little check up"—diabetic. And that has changed their [parents'] lives and it's trickled down. If you go to your parents for dinner and the whole conversation is "have you read the back of this product?" And if you go shopping with mum and she says "You know it all ideally has to be under 10, the sugars and fats have to be under 10". And they are so savvy about all of that it has trickled into [us]… it has to really. And my sister is fanatic, she is a vegetarian. She is obsessed and fanatical and it has permeated my mind set a little bit I think.*

Nicolette, a Gen Y member, explained about her partner: *His dad's got some heart problems, and I think he's getting a bit of a sort of shock that he needs to actually do something about his own health, so he doesn't end up like his father.*

The rise in health consciousness is part of a broader transition in values (at the societal culture level) between generations (Inglehart and Baker 2000). As societies become

wealthier and institute social protection policies, concerns for economic and physical security are displaced by valuing wellbeing and quality of life. Being 'freed' from constant vigilance over personal income permits people to focus on the other aspects of their daily lives. This cultural transition has become dominant in advanced industrial societies over the last 35 years; and at the same time, life expectancy has risen substantially.

9.2.2 A Shift to Child-Centred Parenting

Chapters 3 and 5 show how parental involvement with children has swung from comparatively low to high levels of engagement. They also reveal a simultaneous growth in children and young people dictating new food consumption patterns and leisure routines for the whole family. These dynamics become particularly marked in the high degree of parental involvement of the Baby Boomers in the lives of their children. There are numerous reasons for this shift (Banwell et al. 2007, 2010), but in part it coincides with a general tendency for the post-Lucky generations to value winning, excelling, triumphing and general reflexivity regarding personal performance.

Rather than children's activities having to fit in with household needs and routines, Chaps. 3 and 5 also indicate that Gen Y children are having an impact on Baby Boomer activities, with some parents adopting particular physical activities so that they can do them with their children and altering meal times to fit around their children's activities. One family vividly illustrates the rise in adult involvement in children's activities over the generations. When she was young, Lucky Generation Alice was a good enough runner to be asked by a trainer to participate in serious training. Her father gave permission but would not transport her to training sessions so she could not accept the offer, something she has since regretted. By contrast, as her Baby Boomer daughter, Catherine, explains, their family holidays are now organised around Alice's grandchild's sporting activities.

> *My daughter plays hockey for Victoria and every year they are in a different state [hockey championships]. So we used to go to a different state to follow her. So we went to Perth about five years ago. And we went to Canberra as well, Darwin, Sydney, Adelaide. We have been every year following her around. That's our family holiday, we all go off and watch her play hockey.*

In this family, it isn't just family schedules that are adapted to accommodate the child's interest; even family holidays are planned around attending Gen Y elite sporting events.

9.2.3 The Attenuation of Habits and Embrace of Cultural Change

Participants attributed family patterns that persisted across several generations to force of habit from childhood, to a family characteristic such as being a sporty family,

or to a genetic predisposition that led family members to attempt to modify their health risks through lifestyle changes. What we observe is that the 'habitus of habits' which characterised the Lucky Generation way of life (see Chap. 8) is less entrenched among the Baby Boomers and is certainly absent for their children.

The notion of family habits was relatively strong between the two earlier generations especially in relation to diets, and was offered by a few as a primary explanation for why people ate in the way they did even down to the third and fourth generations. Nicolette (Gen Y) illustrates the way in which family food preferences are replicated across generations, including with her own daughter. Nicolette's grandmother grew up on an orchard and members of all three generations talked about the importance of fruit in their diets.

> *So just yeah, mostly my mum and what she fed us, we eat fairly similar things, I think really, to what mum fed us. And I guess what [partner] does have a say, and it's a bit about what his mum fed him and that sort of thing, and he… he doesn't eat any fruit…And I think that's… he doesn't like it, but his mum doesn't like fruit, and so she probably didn't give it to him nearly as much as… as she would've if she'd liked it. And maybe that's been an influence. I love fruit, and I give it to my daughter, so hopefully she won't inherit his dislike of fruit.*

Nicolette's aunt has expert dietary knowledge and she referred to her aunt's active influence over their attitudes to food.

> *I think diet's important… very important, I think mum, and the food she fed us is the major influence, and I've got an auntie who's a dietician, and she's always talking about good things to eat.*

Nicolette's mother suggested that the influence went back another generation to her own mother.

> *…oh my mother, my mother is an influence, she probably influenced me during my training as well. She always told us you've got to eat this because it's got vitamin A and things like that, and this is good for your brain and is full of B vitamins and calcium.…*

Familial attitudes to diet extended to, and were interwoven with, their attitudes to body size. As Baby Boomer Karen said:

> *It's that really subtle influence of your family. You just couldn't end up the size of a house and be part of my family [laughter].*

She went on to explain that her mother has always promoted the idea of moderation and restraint in food consumption:

> *We wouldn't be the sort of family at Christmas lunch where there were prawns piled [high]. We would think that was very tasteless.*

Here we see confirmation of the proposition that the unconscious or semi-conscious daily practices of individuals—including diet and physical activity—are socialised during childhood and are maintained to a greater or lesser degree in adult life. Many families were physically active and often the parents introduced their children to their own preferred activities, a point reinforced in Chap. 5. For example, Baby Boomer sisters Lynette and Margaret joined Girl Guides because their mother was a Girl Guide leader. When talking about her grandchildren, Joyce (Lucky Generation) said:

Their father played hockey and their mother played hockey and their father rode for Victoria, played hockey for Victoria and was captain of the lacrosse team, so it's no wonder they're sporty.

However we also found the instigation of new habits. Karen, a Baby Boomer, describes the force of childhood socialisation that occurred during family meals in terms that evoke the Bourdieuian notion of habitus, but she no longer replicates it with her own children.

I think I tried, either consciously or unconsciously, to replicate the same thing [as the family meal she had when young]. When they [the children] were young we sat down to a set table and sat around and chatted. Because that is just my expectation. We don't do it now.

The Baby Boomer Generation is renowned for its embrace of change. The term the 'Generation Gap' came into use in the 1960s to refer to a pronounced shift in values and behaviours from the Lucky to Baby Boomer generations. The Baby Boomers, who were reaching young adulthood in the 1970s, led the country in adopting political, social and economic change introduced by the Australian Labor Party under leader Gough Whitlam. These perspectives are still evident among them. Recent American research shows that among internet users the adoption of social media is dramatic among the 50–65 year olds (http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Older-Adults-and-Social-Media.aspx). Because there are so many of them, the Baby Boomers can influence trends because marketers cannot afford to ignore their demographic weight. Another characteristic of the Baby Boomers has been their resistance to ageing in its many forms. As they have grown older, sayings like "50 is the new 40" have multiplied. Baby Boomers have tended to downplay the influence of their life stage in their adoption of new social trends, sometimes leading to paradoxical pressures in their lives. Thus Baby Boomer women have borne the brunt of time pressures as they have attempted to apply intensive, child-centred mothering practices while also participating in the workforce. Another example is their ready adoption of culinary novelty, diversity and abundance as well as labour- and time-saving devices, such as cars. Despite their resistance to the physical signs of ageing they have become fatter at an earlier age than the Lucky Generation (Allman-Farinelli et al. 2008). Their interviews are full of examples of rejection of the frugality and predictability of their parents' food habits. The Generation Gap of the 1960s still exists for the Baby Boomers who are more likely to identify with the lifestyles of their own children rather than those of their parents. If they return to the mores and practices of the Lucky Generation, it is often couched in new language or revolutionary phrases. So, riding a bike or catching public transport are not seen as a continuation of a Lucky Generation habit but rather as a revolutionary act against climate change or an attempt to resist the ageing process.

With successive generations, participants increasingly became subject to influences beyond their immediate family: from families they married into, work mates, friendship groups and others with whom they identified. Chapter 5 notes the rising importance of social networks as conduits for new behaviours. More broadly, the proliferation of internet activities alongside older forms of media like newspapers, magazines and television multiplies the array of possible choices for any individual.

As teenagers and young adults, Gen Y has grown up with the fast-moving social and technological change encouraged by the Baby Boomers. They are exposed to almost 52 h of media per week (Shoebridge 2011). High levels of media engagement are all they know; and because of their youth, they cannot judge it in the context of a long lifecourse. And yet in terms of obesity, the multiple and complex effects of social trends and generational shifts in values that we have identified have come to rest in their bodies. While individual Gen Y participants in this study may or may not be heavier than their parents, research shows that as a generation they are indeed heavier than earlier generations at the same age and they are more likely to become overweight at an earlier age (Allman-Farinelli et al. 2008).

9.3 Do Cultural Change and Attenuation of Habits Mean Life Choices Are Trumping Life Chances?

The study contains seven three-generation families. By reading down the generations (in contrast to reading across them), we find individuals within families who follow the family trajectory while others choose to depart from 'the family culture'. Some Baby Boomer and Gen Y participants had deliberately endeavoured to break away from family patterns of eating or exercising, sometimes because they either wanted to be different in terms of their behaviours or their identity or both. Thus within the family setting, there are instances where individual behaviours illustrate choice trumping the life chance that is associated with the family into which an individual is born. That is, individuals follow a way of life that may be different in terms of their education or career, for example, that is very different to the rest of their family, or perhaps choose to eat or exercise in a different way.

In Chap. 3 we observed that culinary habits have become attenuated as recent generations have embraced choice. In recent times the notion that we all have choices is a powerful mantra. Our findings do not readily support this line of reasoning. Even when families attempted to maintain habits such as a shared family meal or healthy eating, they were often unable to. As Gen Y children got older, the evening family meal became increasingly difficult in the face of multiple schedules built around different employment, study and other activities. Not only do these schedules make it difficult for the families to eat together, people must mobilise complex planning and organisation to maintain a healthy diet and adequate physical activity, and they experience all sorts of psycho-social pressures when they cannot bring their numerous life domains together in a desired way.

Here we report on the food practices of the Williams family, a family which is unique in our sample, in the extent to which all members apparently regularly eat healthily and exercise in line with health expert advice. However, it is not unique in exemplifying what we heard throughout the research: there are tensions in managing life choices, or the extent of being able to both capitalise on and modulate the socio-cultural trends, given other life chances including employment policies, the structure of transport systems and educational opportunities (Fig. 9.1).

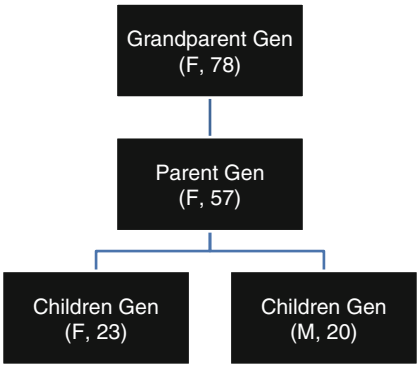

Fig. 9.1 The Williams family

The Williams family is close-knit. Members of the three generations regularly visit each other and dine together. As a family they are all passionate about their chosen sport and have a long-term commitment to it. They appear to fit their physical activity into their lives easily, and continue to do so across their lifecourse. They all identified themselves as 'middle class' even though some men in the family are blue collar workers. Two women members work in the service sector. All three generations attended Catholic secondary schools.

Alice's account of childhood meals was typical of her era. Her family was poor, but her grandfather had a market garden so they had fresh veggies in season. She can't remember going hungry. A typical evening meal was when the family sat down together to eat corned beef with cabbage, carrots and spuds and sometimes a rhubarb pie or something similar. Now in old age, she now eats many meals without meat. She is health conscious or *very good* about her diet. She cuts the fat off meat and does not use commercially prepared foods. She sometimes uses the microwave to cook, and often makes stir fry and pasta. She no longer eats sweets or desserts.

Her daughter Catherine remembers her childhood evening meals as *old traditional meat and two or three veggies*. The family ate around 6 pm. *We always used to sit with the family around the table*. Alice cooked the meals and Catherine and her sister helped dry the dishes. However, *Friday night was fish and chip night… I think we occasionally had Chinese. If we went out for a meal we used to go to the local Chinese place… maybe once a month, not very often*. For snacks she had fruit, and remembers eating Twisties, and bread and vegemite.

Catherine observed that food seemed to change around the time that she married and she became *a bit more adventurous.* She and her husband went out quite a bit to cheap restaurants. They ate with their extended family once a week. Home-cooked meals were more varied than in the past and the family ate less red meat. She observed that there had been a rise in health consciousness and *people [had] became more aware about diet.* Personally, she was health conscious and made an effort to make sure that the family ate well by cooking and freezing food so that she did not resort to *short cuts* when *stressed.*

Rebecca, Catherine's daughter, remembers that when she was young the family would often have pasta once a week, veggies and sometimes chips. *We'd had either like a steak and veggies or chops and veggies, it was pretty healthy…probably had takeaway once a week.* Evening meals were usually at a set time but as the children got older the family sometimes ate sitting around the television. Once she reached her mid-teens she started cooking for herself because her sporting activities conflicted with the usual family meal times.

Now that she is an adult, Rebecca dines with her family quite often even though she has left home. She often goes to her grandmother's place on Sunday for a roast dinner with the family. Sometimes she eats out with friends. She tries not to have take away too often but she does when she's tired and she doesn't have time to cook. She often shops for food late at night or after sporting practice. She takes her own lunch to work; this often includes fruit, a sandwich, or leftovers. Like her mother she cooks and freezes food in preparation for busy times. Lack of time influences her diet. *If you want something more healthy then it's you know, it takes more time, you have to cook it yourself.*

Daniel, Catherine's son, reported eating the same sort of food when he was young. As a young adult (still living at home), he eats with his family unless he is working late. He also has meals at local cafés with his girlfriend and gets takeaway at least weekly. He has started cooking regularly with his girlfriend. *I cook every Monday night. My girlfriend comes over and we both cook together. So that's our night to cook*. W*e're building our own recipe book. We've got a couple of pasta dishes and some chicken dishes that we do*. Like his sister, he sees take-away food as a solution to a busy life.

The three generations of the Williams family show an increasing rise in health consciousness concerning their diets, a desire to eat healthily and to resist the pressures coming from work and sporting demands to take what they see as unhealthy short cuts, such as packet foods or takeaway foods. They are fortunate because they reinforce one another's healthy food dispositions. Nevertheless, the two Gen Y children demonstrate the difficulty of maintaining these standards in the face of competing time pressures and demands. Family culture and the personal choice to preserve it must buck the headwinds of socio-cultural change.

9.4 Social Forces Across the Twentieth Century

The bulk of our material lends support to the sociological canon: that life chances constrain life choices, sometimes radically. The generation into which one is born and the social position and geographical space that one inhabits can act to anchor or liberate life chances. These factors structure opportunity and constraint, aided and abetted by the socio-cultural trends prevailing at the time.

All seven of our three-generation family narratives elicit similar tensions, begging the question as to the sources of the predictability in life chances and the way chances circumscribe choices. Instead of common expressions of individual choice-making, we regularly heard about choices foregone. People would express a

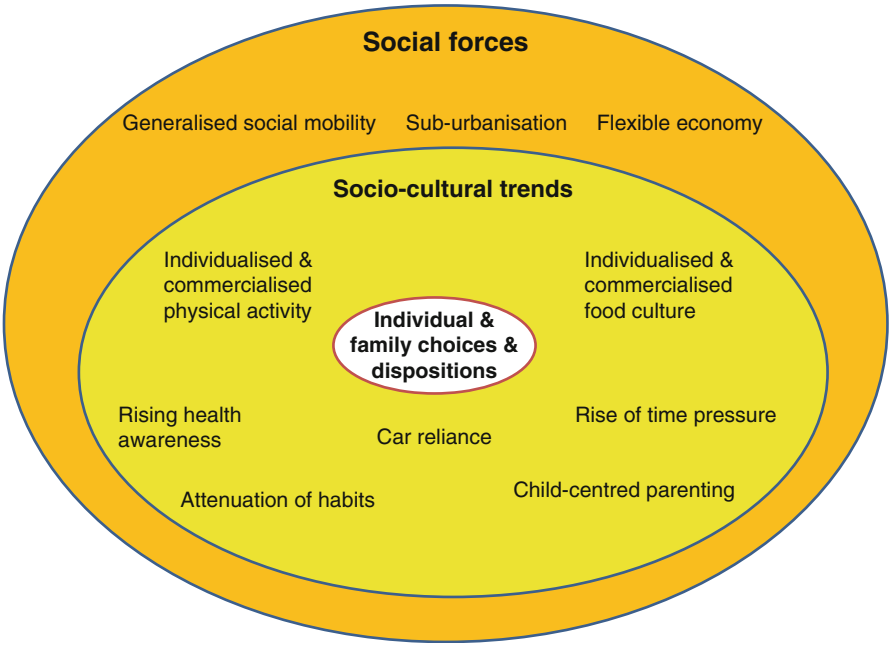

Fig. 9.2 Social forces, life chances and life choices

desire to make changes to their behaviours and quickly follow with a list of reasons why change would be too difficult given the financial, temporal and social demands of work, study and travel. It is these people who are quickly labelled by some media commentators and politicians as passive, indolent or irresponsible.

Thus, the remainder of this chapter is concerned with addressing our second research question: What are the social forces that infuse the socio-cultural trends with their potency? A combination of re-analysing the interviews plus examinations of social and economic histories of Australia over the last eight decades elicited three social forces which have given rise to one of Mills' public issues of twentieth century social structure, namely, obesity as the new statistical norm in body weight. The social forces are: generalised social mobility, flexible economy and suburbanisation.

Figure 9.2 illustrates the relationship of the social forces to the seven socio-cultural trends described in this book.

The first social force concerns a generalised social mobility due to an overall rise in income and educational and employment status. This is best illustrated by looking at social mobility within the seven families. As Baby Boomer Nicole observed, reflecting on differences between her own and her parents' financial position:

> *I think we probably have more money than either of them did, either side did when we were growing… I think we're pretty lucky, but I'm working, so that's one of the reasons we have more money.*

When we considered the data collected from the seven three-generation families, a clear trend towards increasing levels of education is evident. Most of

the Lucky Generation women had limited secondary education, and one had attended primary school only. That this group of women had lower education levels than their children and grandchildren conforms to the social expectations of the time that militated against women gaining a tertiary education. When they were in their teens and twenties, the social norm was that they would become wives and mothers and therefore did not require further education. Furthermore, during the Depression and World War II when many families were struggling financially, the young women of the family often left school to get a job so that they could contribute to the family income until they got married. A further disincentive to higher education and career was that reliable contraception was not available at this time (before the 1960s), and whatever their preference, women lived with the possibility of a pregnancy for most of their adult lives. Most of the Lucky Generation began their childbearing in their early 20s while their Baby Boomer daughters often had their first children in their mid- to late 20s. During the infrequent times when they were employed (usually during or after the hours when their children attended school), Lucky Generation women worked mainly in clerical or sales jobs.

Within the three generation families, eight of the ten Baby Boomer children (nine of them women) had either undergraduate or post-graduate education and were employed as professionals. Their careers as teachers and nurses were quite typical for the time. This rise in women's educational and employment status illustrates the social changes that occurred in the 1950s and 1960s, including the so-called sexual revolution, enabled by the invention of the contraceptive pill and the rise of feminism, that saw women further their education and enter the workforce in increasing numbers. Furthermore, a democratisation of education occurred as tertiary education in Australia became free in the 1970s to those who gained a scholarship to university. At the time of our research, nine of the 12 Gen Y participants were either secondary school graduates or university undergraduates. One was employed in a professional category, while two were undertaking PhDs.

As the Lucky Generation grandparents were all retired when they were interviewed, it is difficult to gauge their income during their working years. Three Baby Boomers had household incomes below $50,000 and two had incomes above $100,000. Nine of the Gen Y grandchildren lived at home although four had independent incomes as well. One lived away from the family with a household income over $70,000.

Participants were not recruited on the basis of their class identification, although all participants were asked to identify where they sat on a five-point scale of class ranging from working class to upper class. The Lucky Generation family members declared themselves to be in the working to middle-class categories, with several displaying some signs of discomfort with this question. All their Baby Boomer children declared themselves to be lower-middle to middle class; while with the exception of one family the Gen Ys stated that they were middle to upper-middle class. Thus, the families' understanding of their social position points to a gradual upward mobility over the three generations while there is little class or other socio-demographic variation between the families.

Occasionally a participant hinted at class-associated behaviours. For example, a Baby Boomer on a limited income who described herself as coming from lower-middle

class background emphasised that when she was young her family meals were plain and repetitious. In her adult life she had deviated from this approach slightly by expanding her menus.

> *The repertoire is a bit more colourful than my upbringing, it's a wider selection but it's not very wide. I keep nutrition in mind and I have a repertoire of about six things.*

She also described how when she was struggling financially (because she was a single mother) and her children were young she filled them up on bread, a strategy akin to her parents' generation in straitened circumstances. According to Coveney (2004), a limited dietary repertoire accords with a working-class emphasis on the functional aspects of food rather than a middle class use of food to display knowledge, taste or distinction. Coveney argues that the use of technical language emphasising the importance of nutrition indicates a middle-class attitude to and knowledge about food. In contrast, working-class parents were more likely to judge their children's diet on the basis of children's appearance and healthiness. The statement (above) about meals thus illustrates a transition from the generally working-class Lucky Generation to the Baby Boomers' more middle-class attitude to food.

Yet, another family displayed some signs of middle to upper-class upbringing. The Lucky Generation grandmother went to boarding school. She adopted the upper-class English habit of feeding young children before the adults, serving food cooked specifically for them and then dining with her husband later in the evening. Whether she was aware that these are class-based practices from the UK is not clear, as she explained that she adopted this practice because her husband came home late. However, it is likely that the time at which the evening meal was held followed class-based distinctions since men employed in blue collar jobs often finished work before five, making it easier for the whole family to eat together. She gave up university to marry, and her children and one of two grandchildren are professionals. Across the three generations this family shows a great concern about managing weight through careful eating and physical activity. As one of her Gen Y grandchildren explained: *we've always grown up that we should be fit, and we should be healthy, kind of what we are, I guess.*

In our fairly homogeneous sample, behavioural differences based on social class have probably been swamped by the successive waves of socio-cultural and economic change in which each generation grew up. Because of incremental upward social mobility, all classes became subject to the same socio-cultural trends permeating modern life, including those that pose health risks.

The material in Chaps. 3 through 8 provides ample evidence for distinctive generational behavioural patterns which followed from the diffusion of new commodities and conditions of paid employment. The generational dietary trends included a shift from a basic, repetitive, and inexpensive diet for the Lucky Generation to one for the Baby Boomers and Gen Y that is increasingly diversified and individualised in terms of food styles and ingredients, more industrialised, and partially or fully prepared outside the home. Similarly in terms of physical activities, there was a move from activity performed for sociability, pleasure or the requirement to move from one place to another, to an emphasis on activity for health and for competition with an

increasing role for the market in the provision of activity opportunities. Even the experience of time pressure is widespread across and increasing among the younger age groups. This is despite, or perhaps in part because of, time-saving and energy-saving devices—cars, electronic home entertainments, washing machines, freezers—rapidly becoming part of the Australian domestic scene from the 1950s onwards. The car which was used for an occasional outing by the most privileged in the 1930s is now a daily essential of household life for close to 100% of the adult population. Much of the dominance of these socio-cultural trends arises from their increasing affordability and accessibility (assisted by an aggressive marketing to make them acceptable) of the commodities which underpin them over the second half of the twentieth century; so that by the 1980s only the very disadvantaged and marginalised had not been able to adopt convenience foods, car reliance and or purchased home entertainments. Rarely, did we hear, for instance, Baby Boomers and Gen Y members bemoan the economic costs of gyms or DVDs.

In this regard Australia has been a forerunner among both developed and middle-income countries. It has been comparatively affluent with low levels of inequality for decades, although inequality has begun to grow in the last 20 years. Based on a survey of over 400 Australians conducted in 1996–1997, sociologist Michael Pusey explained that "the new capitalism's insistence on 'flexibility'" had led middle Australia to view economic reform with a mix of moral anxiety and anger. He argued that "citizens are being asked to deliver themselves, their savings and their future, into a so-called global economy….that coordinates markets for goods and services over our heads and without reference to social meanings, intentions, and consequences" (Pusey 2003, p. 174). It is this disconnect between daily life and social meaning that the Baby Boomers expressed as they described the frustrations in their daily lives.

The second and related social force can be encapsulated in terms of a flexible economy, built on twin bases in the last 50 years: government policies regarding flexible labour markets and widened opportunities for all but the most marginal groups to embrace commodity consumption.

In the past 30 years, when the rise in obesity has been most pronounced, Australians have become familiar with the notion of a deregulated economic system. Most Baby Boomers and their offspring have experienced this system as employees and household members who have a variety of working conditions and household routines. Indeed, domestic arrangements are often instigated to accommodate the spread of hours and tasks demanded by the flexibilised economy. A deregulated economy, promoted by governments and corporations as unleashing resources and talents previously locked away by bureaucratic regulations and customs, has delivered significant innovation in firms, products and services. The entrepreneurial spirit has created myriad consumption possibilities and liberation from what some might consider stultifying guiding authorities, including ruling class mores. Australian producers and consumers are repeatedly told that 'anything is possible'.

While there is no denying that the flexibilised economy and culture open up choices and opportunities, the evidence in this book indicates that Gen Y's shift work and casual employment along with 24/7 access to goods and services means

that the scheduling of basic household activities (what used to be called social reproduction) has become destabilised, undermined or eroded. They find that choice is a promise that is often not fully realised. Spasmodic around-the-clock engagements, or the practices of pointillism, make it very hard to be as self-reliant in terms of food preparation and active transport as in the past. Thus, family meals or 'sitting down to eat' according to Christopher (Gen Y) must sometimes be sacrificed.

> *Yeah. If I'm at work or if I'm organising stuff like the car or anything I usually just grab whatever I can eat while I'm driving or whatever yeah.*

Alternatively, the family struggles to co-ordinate multiple members' various schedules and people. According to a Baby Boomer Peter,

> *Well we still try to achieve (sitting together). We try to know who's coming and whether partners are coming. And we try to time the meals so we can sit down together. But we don't get bent out of shape over that if that doesn't happen… But it doesn't matter if you are wanting to eat around 6.30 and one isn't here. We will keep some aside for him. That's the thing there can be anything from three of us to six or seven of us. And thank god for SMS. About 5 pm [we'll ask] are you home for tea. Yes I'm bringing [friend] Ok we need enough for five.*

Variegated lifestyles are the new norm, but they all lack "traditional signposts" (Giddens 1991, p. 82), with few or no limitations on possibilities. As Polanyi (1944) and Mingione (1991) noted some time ago, "a market regulated economy means the subordination of society to market laws" (p. 22). With each generation there has been an earlier reliance on the market for goods and services, setting up the conditions for the development and sedimentation of a more commodifed way of life. This is the world in which the Baby Boomers and especially Gen Y have grown up, with ramifications for future social changes. As Inglehart and Welzel (2005 p. 99) have argued, "if younger generations are socialized under significantly different conditions from those that shaped earlier generations, the values of the entire society will gradually change through intergenerational replacement".

However, resentment appears to be growing, according to a highly regarded survey of Australian values. In the most recent report Being Australian, focus group participants were quoted as saying: "Big business undermines our way of life"; "Your weekend isn't your weekend any more"; "They get to decide when your weekend is and your time with your family". Reflecting on Australia's social policy history, one person told the researchers, "Big business has made shops open longer and, even though we might be part-time, our week is stretched out a lot more because they can make the hours any time they like and we have to fit our lifestyle around it. So your whole weekend is wrecked" (West 2011, p. 17). A few respondents were similarly jaundiced in their view of business. As one member of the Lucky Generation commented:

> *Of course, big business … they are out to make money. They are not interested in the health or lifestyle of the people, as long as they can sell their product and make a profit for their investors.*

Despite the veneer that people have greater opportunities to express their individuality through how and what they consume, we find extraordinary uniformity in the choices that individuals are making. This extends to widespread acceptance of a

pervasive, but not necessarily welcome, culture of choice. As Giddens has noted, late modernity has ushered in lifestyles based on the assumption that "we have no choice but to choose" (1991, p. 81). This social practice of constrained choice-making has become a social structure in its own right, a life chance of limited choice.

Suburbanisation or the spread of low to medium density suburbs is the third social force relevant to Australia, one that is shared with other 'young' and large countries where the car became entrenched early (Canada, US, New Zealand). We heard about the importance of this form of spatial organisation through the intergenerational accounts of changing physical activity patterns, car reliance and the time it takes to cross the city attending appointments and ferrying children to their many activities. Harvey (1990) has described the necessary relations between the emergence of more flexible modes of capital accumulation, the rise of postmodernist cultural forms, and a new round of space-time compression in the organisation of capitalism. In other words, where dynamic capitalism and a culture of choice operate, there are requirements to make the temporal and spatial demands of daily living accord with their processes. However, contradictory forces also operate. In Australia it is common for people living in the suburbs to manage their lives over considerable geographic distances and to travel at all times of the day and night. At least one car per family is the solution that most Australian families turn to, even though commuting times for car drivers living in the outer suburbs of major cities can take up to several hours (Flood and Barbarto 2005).

Suburbanisation receives less attention than the process of urbanisation, which is mostly portrayed in positive tones because it describes an increase in population density and diversity and the incubation and diffusion of new opportunities and ways of life. Australia is now identified as the most urban nation on earth, with 85% of the population living in cities and towns (Capon 2007). In reality though, Australian cities are not nearly as densely populated as most, and Melbourne, where we conducted the research, is no exception. It has few geographic or topographical impediments to curb residential settlement expansion, and possibly for this reason is growing faster than Sydney or Brisbane. The combination of new housing estates and infill in older inner suburbs taking over pockets of scrub and parklands was noted by the Lucky Generation and Baby Boomers when they reflected on their physical activities as children, reported in Chap. 5.

In a chapter entitled 'Australia as suburb', social historian Hugh Stretton noted that as the Baby Boomers were being born, "Most Australians choose to live in suburbs, in reach of city centres and also of beaches or countryside" (Stretton 1975, p. 7). At the same time as this choice was being made, he describes the books, plays, poems and intellectual critiques of the 1960s which questioned the value of the Australian way of life lived in the suburbs. The suburbs were seen by many to be dull and conformist, robbing their residents of money through high mortgages and of time due to commuting, denying people freedom to be different. In short, the suburbs were portrayed in some quarters as the antithesis of what city living was all about.

Yet this was a decision that our Lucky Generation and their Baby Boomer offspring were making, with the encouragement of the government of the day. We heard very little criticism of the way of life afforded by suburbanisation from

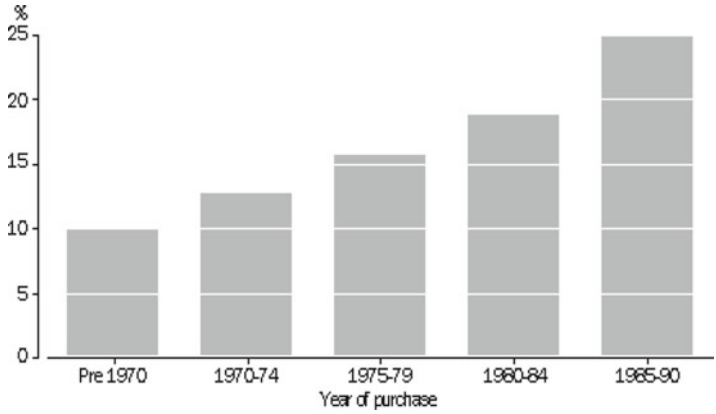

Fig. 9.3 Proportion of income spent on housing by home purchasers, 1970–1990 (Source: ABS 1994)

the Lucky Generation, although some women did reflect on the fact that high mortgages required two incomes. This sometimes forced them into paid employment, which robbed them of time with their children. Still, during the 1950s, house prices were comparatively low when Lucky Generation participants were buying or building their houses in the suburbs. Moreover, for many decades houses were being erected on quarter-acre blocks, and there was still enough space within the suburbs in backyards and public places for children to play freely. *You play a bit of cricket with the boys down the paddock—you know?* The relatively car-free nature of suburban roads was a common refrain prior to the 1950s. Members of the Lucky Generation told how they would play in the middle of the bitumen road.

Housing became less affordable for the Baby Boomers. Between 1975 and 1990, when the Baby Boomers were becoming house purchasers, the proportion of income spent on housing by couples with dependent children rose from 15 to 21%. Low-income families, however, were spending 50% of their incomes on home purchases while high-income families were spending half of that (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1994). The rise in the proportion of incomes spent by all home purchasers prior to the 1970s, when the Lucky Generation was buying, was around 10%, as Fig. 9.3 shows.

Baby Boomer women's participation in the labour force from the 1970s on is often attributed to the liberating effects of the second wave of the Women's Movement. These figures suggest that economic forces were pivotal if the Great Australian Dream of home ownership was to be kept alive. Since 1990, housing affordability has fluctuated in line with interest rates. By 2006, when Gen Y could have been considering buying a home, affordability was worse than in the 1980s when interest rates were higher and mainly due to rapid rises in house prices in the cities (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2010). It is not surprising that nine of the 12 Gen Ys were living with parents, as they struggled with the costs of higher education and finding consistent, well-paid employment.

With the increasing density of housing in suburban areas, the loss of paddocks and unclaimed land, and the heightened role of the car, physical activity options had changed by the time of the Gen Y childhood. Baby Boomer mothers told us that because they were working, their children's after-school activities were dictated by their availability to chauffer them around. There was little reference to them 'running wild' or neighbourhood play. It is hard to know whether the home-based leisure was a response to homework demands or parental guidelines to stay close to home due to 'stranger danger' and car traffic danger (Timperio et al. 2004).

Joyce from the Lucky Generation described playing *ball games and racing up and down the street, because we could play on the road. It wasn't a big deal. You'd just stop while a car went by and then… I don't know, we just went out and did things.* In contrast, when asked about what she did when she wasn't at school, her granddaughter talked about organised physical activities several afternoons after school as well as school-based sports.

Some Gen Y men described childhoods that included outside play and a fair amount of freedom, whereas others did not proffer such descriptions, leaving us wondering if they did not think such things worth mentioning. We surmise however, that the combination of suburbanisation, supported by the socio-cultural trends of car-reliance, commercialised (including the plethora of screen based alternatives) and competitive physical activities, and child-centred parenting, precluded children from this kind of play.

Due to low population density and "newness" in urban form in comparison with relatively prosperous European nations, spatial constraints on the spread of the socio-cultural trends have been minimal. In particular, Australian houses have been built to accommodate labour saving devices, while urban landscapes have been constructed around cars. Stretton points out that during the 1960s, very few of the many government plans for vibrant city centres in Victoria were being realised in the new suburbs and even when they were, their access and amenity were radically compromised by roads and car parks. While Melbourne is the only city to have maintained an extensive network of tramlines, and has well-established train and bus networks, it has become a highly car-centric city as Chap. 7 showed. To get access to employment and entertainment opportunities and to reduce their car reliance, Chap. 7 also reported that a few Gen Y were hoping to be able to move close into the city where there is good mass transport.

A century ago, the public health and town planning fields were championing suburban living: wide open spaces, clean air, better housing stock and waste disposal possibilities. Now both fields are advocating high-density urban living on grounds of environmental sustainability and promoting physical activity (Capon et al. 2011). Planners now have evidence that suburban sprawl is related to high levels of commuting and mortgage stress, which in turn exacerbate parental absence and family breakdown (Head 2011). There is belated acknowledgement that maintaining and building active and mass transit systems is too expensive outside cities, and yet unless people have alternative transport systems, life without a car will continue to seem unimaginable.

9.5 Conclusion

Which generation an individual is born into constitutes a life chance, and this chapter consolidates our view about the importance of one form of 'life chance'—historical time features—to particular socio-cultural exposures and subsequent behaviours. Indeed, this chapter indicates that broad social forces operating across the twentieth century hold greater potency in relation to dietary and activity practices than do cohort specific and family habits. Although the occasional hint of class-based influences appears in within-family patterns related to food and physical activity, these are far outweighed by upward class mobility for the three generations across the time period under discussion and by the lack of strong class differences between the families within each generation. Furthermore, the socio-cultural trends under discussion in the book, and which we argue have contributed to increasing obesity over time, have become affordable, accessible and acceptable for all but the most disadvantaged.

In regard to the choice-chance conundrum, we typically observed situations where the older Lucky Generation cohort who had lived through some marked cultural shifts continued to practice habituated behaviours, largely ignoring the new approaches. Whether this can be called 'exercising choice' is debateable. As Bourdieu (1984) has pointed out, habitus mainly operates at a sub-conscious level, so making major alterations to daily practices would be too hard to contemplate and maybe impractical. We also had a few instances, like Alice Williams, who had intentionally modified her diet in line with contemporary health advice.

For all of the participants who displayed independent or idiosyncratic behaviours, more of them told us that their behavioural 'choices'—the ability to 'freely' or independently decide when and what to eat and exercise—are heavily circumscribed by their life chances as they operate at the societal and family levels. Thus it is not surprising that we observed marked within-generation similarities and across-generation differences in approaches to 'being physical' and diet.

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