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What's sex got to do with it? A family-based investigation of growing up heterosexual during the twentieth century

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Abstract

This paper explores findings from a cross-generational study of the making of heterosexual relationships in East Yorkshire, which has interviewed women and men within extended families. Using a feminist perspective, it examines the relationship between heterosexuality and adulthood, focussing on sexual attraction, courtship, first kisses, first love and first sex, as mediated within family relationships, and at different historical moments. In this way, the contemporary experiences of young people growing up are compared and contrasted with those of mid-lifers and older adults who formed heterosexual relationships within the context of the changing social and sexual mores of the 1960s/1970s, and the upheavals of World War Two.

Keywords: generation, adulthood, gender, sexuality, family, heterosexuality

## What's sex got to do with it? A family-based investigation of growing up heterosexual during the twentieth century

This paper explores the intersection of sexuality and ageing, focussing on the institution of heterosexuality and the experience of growing up. The question we pose is how does heteronormativity, ‘the normative status of heterosexuality which renders any alternative sexualities “other” and marginal’ (Jackson, 1999: 163), relate to modernist regulatory discourses which use age to differentiate between ‘normal’ and ‘deviant’ sexualities (Hockey and James, 2003:143). We argue that within a society where ‘the absence of sexual feelings, and most particularly sexual practice, is constituted as core to notions of childhood innocence’ (Hockey and James, 2003: 142), *becoming* sexual signals a transition to adulthood. However, it is growing up into the privileged category of *heterosexual* adulthood – rather than simply becoming sexual – which shores up the age-based social marginalisation that undermines the personhood and citizenship rights of children (and indeed older adults) (Hockey and James, 1993). Conversely, ‘growing up’, as a positively-valued life course transition, helps sustain a heterosexual hegemony (Wilton, 1996:127). Langhamer makes a related point in her study of love in mid-twentieth-century England: ‘Courtship, within the context of near universal marriage ... constituted an important rite of passage which offered bounded opportunities to perform and refine gender roles, whilst simultaneously permitting the re-negotiation of social status and identity’ (2007:176).

Data from an empirical study<sup>1</sup> provide an historical context within which to explore the question of how the intersection of ageing and heterosexuality contributes to relations of power. As detailed below, life course interviews were carried out with

representatives from different generations within 22 East Yorkshire families. They were asked to describe growing up during either the interwar period, the 1960s/70s, or the late twentieth century. By comparing these age cohorts, we expose heterosexuality to scrutiny as a socially constructed category (Jackson, 1999:164; Smart, 1996:170). In that our study is cross-generational, data which describe ‘family practices’ (Morgan, 1996) throw light upon the processes through which heterosexuality is both reproduced and re-framed across time. The paper therefore combines: (1) discussion of historically-specific, structural aspects of everyday life with (2) individual accounts of the lived experiences which help sustain or amend these structures. Via the notion of ‘family practices’ we engage with the routine activities and utterances through which individuals ‘deal in some way with ideas of parenthood, kinship and marriage’ (Morgan,1996:11). These can simultaneously be ‘gender practices’; they concern bodily matters – birth, sexuality, death and ageing; and are both ‘historically constituted’ yet ‘woven into and constituted from elements of individual biographies’ (Morgan,1996:190). As Jackson argues, ‘heterosexuality is ... perpetuated by the regulation of marriage and family life’(1996:26) For *all* these reasons, the concept of ‘family practices’ allows us to ask what our data reveal about the intersection of ageing and heterosexuality and its contribution to relations of power - as manifested in both practice and as *gendered* identity (Jackson, 1996:30).

We now go on to discuss the relationship between (hetero)sex and heterosexuality; and the project from which data are drawn and its methodological implications. The main body of the paper draws upon two case study families and divides into two halves. The first highlights differences between family members by locating them

within specific age cohorts. Against this historical background, the second half then examines the way individuals ‘practice family’ in terms of growing up heterosexual.

‘Just sex, sex, sex’

As argued, becoming sexual does not in itself help secure adult status. It is growing up *heterosexual* which allows access to this privileged, age-based category. This raises the question: ‘What’s sex got to do with it?’ for in Jackson’s view heterosexuality is an ‘institution’ as well as ‘a practice, experience and identity’ (1996:30; 1999:164). Nonetheless our data revealed *popular* understandings of heterosexuality as a term referring to gendered sexual preferences (see Hockey, Meah and Robinson, 2007). And indeed, older participants described younger heterosexual people as concerned only with ‘sex, sex, sex’. What Wilton argues is that ‘sex’ is a term which conflates gender with the erotic (see Wilton, 1996:125). ‘Having’ heterosexual sex therefore incorporates assumptions about not only gendered desires but also gendered identities. As the broad term ‘institution’ suggests, heterosexuality has implications for what Butler describes as ‘the compulsory order of sex/gender/desire’ (1990:6). Indeed, as Butler argues, heterosexuality is ‘a specific mode of sexual production and exchange that works to maintain the stability of gender, the heterosexuality of desire, and the naturalization of the family’ (Butler, 1998, cited in Evans, 2003:17). Referring to this view, Skeggs stresses that the familial identities which heterosexuality naturalises - mother, wife, girlfriend – are ‘defined and institutionalised through a process of iterability, a regularised and constrained repetition of norms’ (1997:120).

Accounts of young people growing up *do* describe early ‘sexual’ experiences: from sexual attraction, to courtship, first kisses, first love, and first sex. Yet as Holland et al. suggest, ‘the moment of “first sex” is not the only constitutive moment of heterosexuality. Becoming heterosexual occurs at different levels of social activity, from the most grounded meeting of bodies to the most abstracted level of institutionalisation’ (1996:144).

This broader theoretical and empirical landscape therefore informs our analysis of our data. It is an arena which Lees’ (1993) unpacks in her work on adolescent girls’ sexuality where she notes that whilst terms such as ‘slag’ apparently refer to indiscriminate sexual activity, they in fact ‘often bear no relation to a girl’s actual sexual behaviour’ (1993:21). Moreover, girls who have nothing to do with boys, and girls who enjoy sex with them, are *both* at risk of verbal abuse, either as ‘tight bitches’ or as ‘slags’. Crucially, what Lees highlights is that ‘[t]he only security girls have against bad reputations is to confine themselves to the “protection” of one partner. Yet such a resolution involves dependency and loss of autonomy precisely because women’s position in the family is subordinate and unequal’ (1993:29). These data suggest that institutionalised heterosexuality contextualises *all* sexual practice and indeed its absence. This is shown, for example, in the heterosexist assumption that lesbians adopt the gendered roles of butch or femme (Richardson, 1996). ‘First sex’, therefore, as Holland et al. (1996:144-5) argue, constitutes young women’s induction into heterosexuality, but not in terms of the complementarity of masculinity and femininity. Rather, young women learn to accommodate to the norms of *masculinity*, managing their bodies in ways which conform to this apparently ‘natural’ mode of being adult (Holland et al., 1996: 144-5). Such accommodations are not restricted to

sexual practice *per se* but incorporate the entire assemblage of ‘beliefs, values, ideologies, discourses, identities and social relationships through which people become socially heterosexual and practice heterosexuality’ (Holland et al., 1996:144). So this assemblage constitutes the broader landscape which is explored here. Asking ‘what sex has to do with growing up?’, it becomes clear that the implications of ‘sex’ extend beyond erotic desire and pleasure. This point is echoed in Langhamer’s (2007) work on love and courtship in mid-twentieth-century England where she draws on Mass-Observation data to argue that the under-researched category of courtship can shed light on much broader issues such as gender, generation and social status.

### Methodological Issues

Key changes within the institution of heterosexuality across the last eighty years cannot be viewed in isolation from shifts in both gendered identities and family practices. While historically-documented beliefs and practices are evidenced in our data, they represent the past as *refracted* through present-day beliefs and values. As Jackson highlights, ‘rather than the past (or childhood) determining the present (or adulthood), the present significantly shapes the past in that we are constantly reconstructing our memories, and our understanding of who and what we are through the stories we tell to ourselves and others’ (Jackson, 1995:24). The reflexive self is not, however, a pre-social ‘I’; rather it is constituted through historically-specific cultural resources. As interviewees describe growing up heterosexual, therefore, their reflections are enabled through the cultural resource of heterosexuality itself. Yet this does not imply a self-sealed circularity since the self ‘is not a fixed structure but always “in process” by virtue of its constant reflexivity’ (Jackson, 1995:24).

Discussing the relationship between experience, subjectivity and agency, Brah

suggests that ‘to think of experience and subject formation as processes is to reformulate the question of agency’ (1996:117). Rather than conceiving of the intentional ‘I’ as a ‘unified, fixed, already existing entity’ (Brah, 1996:117), the contradictory and inevitably incomplete process of identity formation within which agency manifests itself must be acknowledged.

Our data therefore testify to individual memories, yet as Misztal stresses, ‘individual remembering takes place in the social context – it is prompted by social cues, employed for social purposes, ruled and ordered by socially structured norms and patterns, and therefore contains much that is social’ (2003:5). Uncoupled from both objectivist and subjectivist positions, remembering ‘while far from being absolutely objective, nonetheless transcends our subjectivity and is shared by others around us’ (Zerubavel, 1997, cited in Misztal, 2003:6). The memories presented here, then, speak to particular, generationally-located identities as much as they illuminate the historically-located experience of the past. Yet the relationship between official histories and personal testimonies is complex since, as Steedman argues, ‘[p]ersonal interpretations of past time – the stories that people tell themselves in order to explain how they got to the places they currently inhabit – are often in deep and ambiguous conflict with the official interpretive devices of a culture’ (1986:6) For Steedman, seeking to understand her ‘working-class childhood’, the analytic devices of patriarchy and social class prove cumbersome and her complex (auto)biographical account challenges the ‘psychological simplicity in the lives lived out in Hoggart’s endless streets of little houses’ (1986:7).

### The Study

To find out whether, and how, growing up heterosexual might have represented a privileged transition to adulthood at different historical moments, qualitative life history interviews were carried out. Participants were recruited from three different generations in 22 East Yorkshire families. Alongside 25 young people over the age of 15, we interviewed 23 people from their parental generation and another 23 from their grandparental generation. Where it was difficult to recruit direct linear relations, we included other extended family members such as great aunts and uncles. This meant that, in addition to comparing the experience of growing up heterosexual among three different age cohorts, we were also, potentially, able to gather perspectives on a particular family event or practice from members of up to three generations.

Recruitment occurred via a Women's Institute Conference and other voluntary organisations; media advertising, including institutional email lists; and snowballing. Variation in education and employment across generations within a single family makes it difficult to assign families to an unequivocal class position, the most consistent structural difference being between the six families from rural locations and sixteen from urban environments. For those growing up in the country, issues of privacy and of freedom to access urban environments were key features of becoming heterosexual. The sensitivity of our topic also meant that volunteers might be unable to recruit other family members, particularly male relatives. This reflects Morgan's argument that, despite being mutable, oppositional relationships between public and private, rationality and emotion, and men and women retain their currency and 'family becomes a special sphere for women' (1996:81), by virtue of their 'emotional

labour' (Hochschild, 1983). The emotive focus of our project and its use of familial and personal narratives (see Meah, Hockey and Robinson, 2004) meant that men constituted only 12 of our overall sample of 72 interviewees. This preponderance of women is reflected in the data presented here.

As indicated above, this paper uses a case study approach, drawing on interviews from two families who contrast with one another in terms of both social class location and the family practices through which heterosexual sex, as knowledge and experience, is managed. While the paper begins by disaggregating the families in order to locate individual members within historically-specific age cohorts, the relationship between history and biography comes into focus in the second half of the paper. Here, a case study approach allows cross-generational connections and continuities between family members to be explored, so revealing the family practices through which different individuals grow up heterosexual.

### 1. Between the wars

While the 1930s have been described as the beginning of a 'golden age of courtship' (Langhamer, 2007:178), it belonged to a period marked by complex changes in public representations of sexuality. These had implications for inter-war heterosexual life, as Weeks (1989) argues – and our data evidence. While World War One disrupted both the belief systems and marriage prospects of women (Elliot, 1991), the Roaring Twenties' moral panic about sexual promiscuity unfolded in parallel with the emerging emancipation of middle class women, later to be overshadowed by mass unemployment in the 1930s. Young people were expected to respect adult authority and family ties, to conform to traditional gendered roles, and to at least be mindful of

injunctions against pre-marital sex (Humphries, 1988: 9). Plummer (1995) compares taboos around sexuality between the wars with the contemporary growth of sexual story-telling and Weeks agrees, citing the *Evening News* in 1920: ‘There are certain forms of crime prosecutions which are never reported in the newspapers and of which most decent women are ignorant and would prefer to remain ignorant’ (1989:200). Though mutual sexual pleasure was prioritised within ‘companionate marriage’, as represented in 1920s literature (Finch and Summerfield, 1999), Weeks notes ‘a fear of going too far’ in the late 1930s (1989:205). The magazine *Home Chat* responded thus to a reader’s enquiry: ‘I am sorry I cannot answer so intimate a question through these columns and I am rather amazed at your ignorance about the facts of life. Ask an older friend to tell you’ (Weeks, 1989:206).

Interviewees described this period as ‘*so different from [.] nowadays. You see, people didn’t talk about things like that*’. Jean Brown<sup>ii</sup>, a 75 year old interviewee, said: ‘*We didn’t have sex. We made love*’ and others used terms such as ‘*sexy*’, ‘*sleeping with*’ and ‘*consummating*’. Young women *were* sexually active (see Humphries, 1988) and Jean described premarital teenage sex in her parents’ home, pointing out that ‘*I enjoyed it too much to feel guilty*’. Even during the 1950s, Joan Davis, a 70 year-old former nurse, remembered 10 o’clock curfews and no male visitors to nurses’ homes. Of a colleague’s pregnancy she said: ‘*she wasn’t shunned, but ... her apron got tighter and tighter and ... it just didn’t happen then, did it?*’ Female premarital ignorance and celibacy were thus values held in place via the stigma and secrecy surrounding young women’s sexual practice – and many interviewees remained evasive about this area. Among working class men during the 1930s ‘[r]esponsiveness in their wives was hardly expected, and there was some suggestion that where the wife was more

sensually disposed than her husband, her “hot nature” was disapproved, and even feared’ (Weeks, 1989:209). This perspective was echoed by female interviewees for whom sex was described as simply another ‘chore’. Whether their sexual practice was subjectively lacking in pleasure, or whether its contribution to a heterosexual identity was different, is unclear. If sex was absent from public discourses of heterosexuality, could interviewees realistically recall and describe it in the present?

The concept of mutual sexual pleasure was nonetheless evident within the notion of companionate marriage. However, it drew on nineteenth century medicalised notions of male sexual drives and female reproductive energy (Jordanova, 1989) and had implications for heterosexual gendered identities. Female virginity and male *experience* on marrying was key to van de Velde’s *Ideal Marriage*, a manual widely read between 1926 and 1932 - and echoed in Ellis and Stopes’ concern with sex as a learned practice (cited in Weeks, 1989:206-7). This perspective was evidenced by Joan Davis (70) who described boys doing ‘*the running*’. Of her first kiss she said: ‘*Yes, I think he was probably keen, but I wasn't, so, he kissed me, rather than we kissed*’. Speaking evasively of first sex saved for her wedding night, she saw it as something of an anti-climax:

AM<sup>iii</sup>    *What did you expect?*  
 Joan    *[..] Don't know, burst of sunlight or heavens open, or, no I don't suppose it was that, but both of us pretty, fumbling, or, um [..].*

And she affirmed that: ‘*I think you do always expect men to take the lead, to be the, to be the authority on things, (...) I think [....] I can't remember, um [..] no, I really can't remember*’.

Maggie Finch (83) gave an account of first sex which shows how ‘the present significantly shapes the past in that we are constantly reconstructing our memories, and our understanding of who and what we are’ (Jackson, 1995:24). ‘*I suppose you would call it date rape these days*’, she said, a perception she had only recently shared with anyone other than her husband, explaining:

*‘I didn’t enjoy it [...] at all ... he, sort of ... kept me ... had me hands together, you know ... you don’t think that men are so much stronger than women, but they are’.*

Despite the heteronormativity of marriage, Maggie avoided men for ten years, until she met her husband at the age of 26. Sex became enjoyable only after her children were born. She said: ‘*I think that that first [...] contact with the other man [...] made a deeper impression than I thought*’. Maggie’s difficulty in nonetheless categorising this as ‘rape’ reflects the pervasive view that men as more easily sexually aroused than women.

While interviewees’ agency within heterosexual relationships might seem limited to saying ‘no’, Weeks (1989) notes that *forms* of control over women’s sexuality relaxed: for example, the decline of chaperonage during World War One; new employment opportunities for women; and the establishment of mixed leisure venues, such as cinemas and dance halls. Terms such as ‘monkey walk’, ‘monkey-running’ and ‘monkey rack’ refer to young women and men’s practice of taking an evening walk, independently of parents or chaperones, in order to find heterosexual partners (Langhamer, 2007). Both Maggie and Joan’s accounts described their independence in early life as both left home for careers in nursing. And Joan recalled

hitching to the South of France with a friend at 18, despite it being: *'unheard of in those days'*.

## 2. The permissive society?

While talk of sexuality was seen as taboo between the wars, sexual story-telling emerged during the post war period, accelerated by mass consumerism (Plummer, 1995). Yet Weeks argues that the term 'permissive society' was not embraced by individuals seeking personal freedom, but instead helped mobilise a moral panic which generated 'mass support for authoritarian solutions' (1989:249) to later social problems during the 1980s. Nonetheless, post 1960s state support for greater sexual freedom provided the context for family life (Hawkes, 1996: 107), along with the 1970s' women's movement and the implications of HIV/AIDS for sexual mores in the 1980s. Plummer (1995:38) links these with the feminisation of sex, the democratisation of intimacy and a shedding of taboos around sexuality.

Thus many areas of social life underwent change: 'from class relations to moral attitudes and family life, leading to the emergence of new social opportunities, new sub-classes, changed political allegiances, significant modifications in the relations between the sexes, an explosion of youth cultures, the fragmentation of the moral consensus – and in the end, acute social tensions (Weeks, 1989: 250). Interviewees described leaving home whilst single, like young women in the previous age cohort, yet this move facilitated sexual practice for them, albeit in ways which remained in tension with their heterosexual aspirations. Such tensions surface in Langhamer's (2007) study of courtship at this time. Here, cross-class attraction is cited as one of the risks incurred by individuals seeking to draw sexual attraction into line with

heterosexual goals; data reveal ‘a tangible sense of missed chances, lost opportunities, and unmet desires stemming from the initial choices made in courtship’ (2007:186).

In the case of Sarah Davis (43) and Jayne Finch (50), these women both left home as teenagers. Sarah had confounded stereotypes of femininity by becoming a tomboy.

Unlike the previous age cohort of women, she described her (hetero)sexual practices in detail: kissing her first ‘serious boyfriend’ at a disco during the 1970s, wooed by his air-guitar emulation of Status Quo. She said: *‘I think my knees felt weak ... it was a very strange sensation, but certainly, yes my knees felt weak I’m sure’*. Their 18 month relationship included planned first sex at a friend’s house, in her parents’ absence, and she recalled her friend having first ‘turn’ with her own boyfriend, upstairs in the bedroom:

*‘I know we were in the living room listening to music and drinking coffee ... we could hear the bed creaking upstairs and we tried very hard not to make any comments and, you know, concentrate very hard on the music ... we were very much aware ... I suppose then that it would be my turn next’*.

Though Sarah felt empowered to make this choice, her language still reflects the notion that boys do ‘the running’: while ‘we’ listened to the couple upstairs, ‘I’ was aware that it would be ‘my’ turn next. Sarah, rather than her boyfriend, was about to have ‘first sex’. So alongside new-found freedoms, traditional heterosexual practice persisted: marriage was more popular than ever, the 1911 figures of 552 women in every 1,000 aged between 21 and 39 being married, comparing with 96% of women under the age of 45 having been married by the mid 1960s (see Weeks, 1989). ‘Marriage more than ever was “an inevitable step in the transition to adult life”’ argues Weeks (1989:257). Langhamer stresses that this was particularly the case for working class girls who were

expected to ‘make a satisfactory marriage and to be reasonably quick about it’ (Jephcott, cited in Langhamer, 2007:179). With a middle-class upbringing, however, Sarah travelled the world in the merchant navy and married later, albeit with sufficient sexual experience to exercise agency within their sexual relationship.

Jayne Finch describes the sexual opportunities she discovered on leaving home to take up seasonal hotel work in 1970s Cornwall. She said:

*‘I loved it. I looked round and there were boys, there were chefs, there were waiters, there were these dolly girls, they were all young, I was eighteen, and ...I thought ‘This is it!’ ... I’d landed in my own group ...’*

Surrounded by people doing drugs and ‘*sleeping around*’, Jayne felt free to have first sex at 18. However, her choice of an older man - a 34 year old middle-eastern chef – reflects the assumption that men, rather than women, are sexually experienced agents, even though ignorance and celibacy had become less central to femininity at that time. Like Sarah, Jayne described his first kiss: ‘*I nearly collapsed, it was just fabulous (...) it was heaven*’.

Like our data, historical records reveal changes in the framing of heterosexual sex, yet continuities remain. Indeed, among young people growing up in the late 1980s, ‘conceptions of first intercourse as about women’s pleasure, performance or achievement of adult status are strikingly absent’ (Holland et al, 1996:153). Although Weeks describes a ‘legal acceptance of moral pluralism’ (1989: 273), Hawkes’ (1996) views heterosexual practice as resilient to change, persisting within liberalising discourses under the guise of new lifestyle ‘choices’ for women. Yet our data do evidence ‘a growing interest in less orthodox sexualities’ during the 1970s,

including ‘the social exploration of lesbianism’ (Weeks, 1989:263). Jayne, for example, cohabited with a woman for two years, the relationship ending only because her friend would not ‘come out’ out as a lesbian, for fear of parental distress. Jayne’s adult identity as heterosexual was not therefore an inevitability, but partly the outcome of choice, although not entirely her own.

### 3. Forever young

From the 1960s, boundaries between child and adulthood began to blur. Girls experienced menarche on average at 13-14, compared with 16-17 a century earlier; and boys were reaching full growth and sexual potential on average at 17, compared with 23 at the beginning of the century (Weeks, 1989:252). Yet economic and legislative changes paradoxically curbed scope for independence: for example, the raising of the school leaving age and the growth of unemployment from the 1970s onwards. By the turn of the twentieth century adolescence had extended, with markers of adulthood - leaving home, marriage and transitions to parenthood - being deferred (Brannen and Nilsen, 2002: 515). Among the youngest cohort interviewed, dependency upon parents combined with greater sexual license – something which appeared to disrupt the relationship between heterosexual identification and adulthood. Thus, while interviewees’ language could be sexually explicit, they would examine their experiences critically, struggling to find a correspondence with adult heterosexuality-as-imagined. Abigail Davis (17), referred to below, spoke of being ‘*fingered*’; a 15 year old girl said a boy of her age had asked if he could ‘*knob*’ her. And a 21 year-old man referred to ‘*anal*’, ‘*tit-wanks*’ and wanting to ‘*come over*’ his partner’s face. Whilst referring to (hetero)sexual *practice*, the use of these terms did not signify heterosexual adulthood. Indeed stark references to the body and its parts could

discredit the romantic language/discourse through which both young men and young women framed desired heterosexuality.

Claire Finch (23) exemplifies the trend towards extended economic dependency, having only recently considered leaving home, despite two years in a stable heterosexual relationship. During her teens she felt sexually unattractive and developed a crush on *'the first bloke that ever showed any interest in me, so I was besotted straightaway'*. Grateful for 'heterosexual' attention, she undertook sexual liaisons with other men, yet found these inadequate as bases for heterosexual identification. One young man made her keep their activities secret because he was seeing other girls, so for her first sex was not part of an openly 'couple-type' relationship. As VanEvery argues, heterosexuality is an institution which 'encompasses much more than sexual desire or sexual acts' (1996: 41).

Unlike Claire, Abigail Davis (17) was preparing to leave home for university, although when interviewed she remained tied to rural family life, dependent on family members for transport. In secret she was sexually active, as noted above, but like Claire, she distinguished (hetero)sex from a desirable heterosexual identity. For her, a *'serious'* boyfriend, involved more than *'holding hands and messing about'*: sexual desire alone did not constitute the assemblage of beliefs and relationships 'through which people become socially heterosexual and practice heterosexuality' (Holland et al, 1996:144). So, for example, Abigail expressed dissatisfaction with *'getting off'* with boys at parties:

*Yeah, he was [...] a young farmer guy, and we were like, we went to a party and I'd be with him, and he'd be with me, but nothing would happen in between ... in the end I just decided that ... if I wanted a boyfriend I'd get*

*someone that would be there all the time not just when I was drunk at a party [emphasis added].*

Members of the youngest cohort thus discovered the contours of hegemonic heterosexuality via sexual experiences which displayed a ‘critical lack of fit’ (Hockey and James, 2003). Abigail, for example, described risking her heterosexual status: ‘*I was stupidly drunk and there was just [...] a guy there that I think is absolutely minging ...and I started kissing him, and my mum was there and that’s like, how embarrassing [LAUGHS]’.*

Clear about what they do not want, therefore, Claire and Abigail understood that (hetero)sex and the institution of heterosexuality were not the same thing. Claire, for example, saw heterosexual coupledness encompassing *intimacy*, and described how her current boyfriend:

*... wants to be with me as much as I want to be with him ...he’s the first (person), he respects me, and he listens to me, and he’s not after anything, you know, like (the others) were just after one thing, they just wanted somebody to get their end away.*

### Family Practices

Out of discussions of the reproduction of heterosexuality across time which showed how broader historical data relate to our interviewees’ memories, the issue of agency, whether exercised or denied, emerges as a core focus. Constituting ‘major links between history and biography’, family practices can be seen as ‘historically constituted and the linkages and tensions or contradictions between practices are historically shaped. At the same time practices are woven into and constituted from elements of individual biographies’ (Morgan, 1996:190). For an empirically-based

understanding of agency, then, we now consider data which describe cross-generational familial relationships – and therefore family practices.

From among the diversity of voices represented within our data set, here we focus on two of the 22 families interviewed. These encompass individuals who addressed the more sensitive or emotive aspects of growing up heterosexual. Moreover, across the generations, members of each of these two families showed a marked consistency in their engagement with sexual issues. In the first case, the maintenance of sexual secrecy raises questions about its wider implications for cross-generational heterosexual family life. In the second, an explicit policy of openness around sexual matters was described, one which younger family members saw as rooted in the grandparental generation. Their frankness reinforces Steedman's argument that '[p]ersonal interpretations of past time ... are often in deep and ambiguous conflict with the official interpretive devices of a culture' (1986:6),

In social and economic terms, class membership was particularly consistent across different generations within these two families, men from the middle and oldest generation of the Davis family having their own businesses, Abigail and Helen from the youngest generation being about to leave for university. By contrast the Finches who have struggled financially across the generations, Claire and Ryan from the youngest generation being employed, respectively, in clerical work and telephone engineering. While empirical work on the links between heterosexuality and social class is relatively limited, Skeggs has explored their relationship with femininity. Drawing attention to the class-based notion of 'respectability', she argues that it is:

one way in which sexual practice is evaluated, distinctions drawn, legitimated and maintained between groups. This means that heterosexuality is not occupied equally precisely because it is mediated by respectability and some women are, by class and race location, already categorised as non-respectable... (1997: 118).

As a result, for working class women, ‘sexual practice and respectability seem to be at odds with each other’ (Skeggs, 1997: 124). Within our own data it was for the middle class women we interviewed that respectability seemed to be an important aspect of growing up heterosexual, a status which was *achieved* rather than assumed – and indeed within Davis family we find transgressions of hegemonic or ‘respectable’ heterosexuality being consistently concealed.

Figure 1 shows the names, ages and relationship status of members of the two families.

Figure 1. The Two Families – about here.

### 1. The Davis Family

Sarah and Richard Davis and their four teenage children lived in a rural hamlet, their large untidy house encircled by extensive gardens. With her husband working away, Sarah (43) managed a business, home *and* family, including Abigail (17) and Helen (18). At the village school, Abigail received sex education at 11, her mother simply providing a book of similar information. Her elder sister, Helen, confirmed that sex had ‘*just never been an open subject in our house, never*’. While Helen added that ‘*Maybe it’s something that’s a good thing, but, hasn’t bothered me at all*’ she felt that, as the elder sister, ‘*I never get anything passed down to me*’ and felt ‘*really naïve*’ when she went to secondary school.

Abigail described Helen as too *'quiet'* to pass on sexual information, yet she confided in her sister, rather than her mother, when menstruation began. Similarly, when Abigail drank too much, Helen looked after her. Rather than a supportive sisterly relationship, however, they shared a family life where sexual information resourced power struggles; for example, by attracting unwelcome teasing. Only among Abigail's *close* friends did it foster intimacy. And it was in secret that Abigail broke her parents' rules about going out, even though she knew that her mother *'finds out everything ... I don't know how, she just ... even things you don't mean to tell her, she finds out anyway'*. Her sister, Helen, described how a Valentine's Day rose had potentially exposed her own romantic relationship with a longstanding friend. To forestall enquiries, Helen showed her mother the rose while she was pre-occupied with parking the car. Their father also intruded, *'taking the mickey'* about boyfriends; *'a nightmare,'* says Helen, who avoided bringing anyone home. Information about heterosexual relationships thus featured in power struggles, both between, but also *within* generations. While the girls buffered one another from their parents, they could also be conduits of information. Rather than sharing their crushes, they spied on each other. A pact ensured that if one exposed information about the other to the parents, retaliation would occur.

A generation earlier, Sarah also experienced an upbringing where sex was not talked about. When she naively referred to Tampax over a meal, her father went *'very very purple in the face'* and her mother, Joan, said, *'We don't talk about that at the tea table'*. He was *'quite a Victorian'*, strict with his children yet involved in secret, long term affairs. Her mother told Sarah that *'We wouldn't expect you to do anything to let*

*us down*', implying that pregnancy would be a '*mess*' which Sarah would have to deal with herself.

Sarah's relationship with her parents appeared to be intense. For example, her account of her '*wild*' elder sister's early teenage sexual activities seems filtered through parental perceptions: '*I could see the mistakes Kate [sister] was making*' she said, along with her parents' disquiet with her life style, her too rapid '*growing up*'. Her sister was '*desperate to grow up ...*', she said, '*she seemed very old to me*'. Age, adult status and heterosexuality are thus convergent aspirations.

If sex was not talked about, sexual relationships nonetheless flourished, even though age and marital status were bases for outlawing those which failed to conform to hegemonic or '*respectable*' heterosexuality. Sarah's '*tomboy*' identity, adopted to avoid competition with her attractive younger sister, left her parents '*always a bit worried about me*'. Yet when she became sexually active, this too was censured since Sarah was unmarried. She described her mother, Joan, as '*absolutely wooden faced and she cut me dead ... didn't talk to me for several months*' after her sister '*spragged*' on her for sleeping with her boyfriend. '*You've fallen off your pedestal now, haven't you*', Joan had said. Only after marriage was Sarah allowed to sleep with her partner in her parents' home.

Among the Davises, then, digressions from growing up into heterosexual adulthood were managed through secretive relationships which either remained intense, or eventually ruptured. During her turbulent adolescent years, Sarah's elder sister, Kate, went to live with her grandmother, and now Kate's teenage daughter has moved into

local authority care. Similarly, while Sarah remained closely tied to her parents, with Joan, her mother now living nearby, Sarah did leave them in young adulthood for a life in the merchant navy, her eventual married life being conducted sporadically when home on leave. In many respects then, hegemonic heterosexuality was lived out among the Davises, through the creation and maintenance of strategic distances between generations and indeed heterosexual partners, Sarah's husband now frequently going away on business. Sarah's parents eventually divorced in their mid-sixties and her daughters, Abigail and Helen, avoid his new wife.

Joan, Sarah's mother, described achieving hegemonic heterosexuality through a similar family culture. She received no sexual information from *her* mother, other than a newspaper cutting which had been passed down, in turn, from her grandmother. Joan simply said that '*you just have to trust your children*', and thought it unlikely that they would have felt able to ask her questions. The tea table which her daughter, Sarah, had disrupted by mentioning Tampax was, for Joan, the core of family life: '*We were very much a family. We all had meals together*', she said. Here at the heart of heterosexual family life, therefore, talk of the body's sexual functioning was silenced.

It was thus through two generations of parental monitoring and intervention in children's lives that the institution of heterosexuality was reproduced within this family. Failure to adhere to hegemonic models brought admonitions, silences or exclusions into play. While Joan was rendered sexually passive through the mores of her time, Sarah and her sister's historical moment involved scope for agency which was incompatible with their family style. For Helen and Abigail, a family culture of

highly regulated growing up involved intrusiveness and teasing, rather than explicit control. While the merchant navy allowed Sarah to distance herself from her parents and so conform to the sexual mores of her time, her more dependent daughters use strategic, defensive silences to create intergenerational boundaries.

While Skeggs' work on heterosexuality and social class links respectability with forms of femininity which are 'never a given' for working class women (1997:99), these data also show the importance of respectability within a middle class family where hegemonic heterosexuality is the outcome of intensive strategies of monitoring between generations and across genders, rather than a taken-for-granted set of privileges.

## 2. The Finch Family

For the Finches, growing up heterosexual was managed through a selective cross-generational openness which was unusual within our sample – yet still resulted in relationships which, in many respects, conformed to hegemonic heterosexuality.

When interviewed, Claire (23) had been in a monogamous heterosexual relationship for two years. Within her close relationships with friends and family, personal information about sexuality and emotionality did not resource power struggles, as was the case for Abigail and Helen Davis. Claire said: *'I would tell, ask my mum any questions and tell her anything that was going on. She'd be the person I would go to to find out'*. Her father, however, kept an embarrassed distance: *'when we were younger ...if he went to the toilet, he ... wouldn't have any clothes on, that type ... but as we got older, then he would put a towel on ... if you talk about sex ... puts his fingers in his ears'*. The gender differences intrinsic to hegemonic heterosexuality

(Richardson, 1996:6) were thus made evident in this cross-generational creation of *distance* within a family culture of openness.

In addition, Claire Finch recognised the status associated with growing up into heterosexual adulthood and welcomed adolescent bodily changes as markers of this social transition: *'I was desperate to start my period, 'cos everybody else had started at eleven'*. Unlike Abigail, Claire talked to mother who said: *'don't panic about it, you'll be glad when you realise, when you finally get them'*. Claire noted her mother's late onset of menstruation and assumed she was *'following in her footsteps'*.

Also, like her mother, Claire saw herself as sexually unattractive. This similarity brought parental support in the 'project' of growing up heterosexual. Thus Jayne, her mother, told Claire: *"not to rush anything, somebody will come along, there is somebody for everybody" ... I don't think she wanted me to rush my childhood really'*. While both Claire and Abigail sought adult heterosexual status, their parents *shaped* this process, whether through control or comforting encouragement. Among the Finches, sexual practice was far less concealed and both Claire and her brother, Ryan, had partners to stay over. Of her mother, Claire said: *'I wouldn't have come in and said, "oh yes, we had sex tonight", but ... yeah, I would have told her ... 'cos I'd be on cloud nine, wouldn't I, because I'd lost my virginity'*. Jayne, in turn, said: *'the first time she (Claire) had sex she came home and said "why didn't you tell me it was so good?!" [LAUGHS] "I've wasted all these years!"'*

Despite her acceptance, Jayne still saw a mismatch between first sex outside of a relationship and institutionalised heterosexuality. Claire said: *'she (Jayne) was*

*disappointed because ... we weren't a couple as such ... but she never let on ...*'. Her data suggest an awareness that, from Jayne's point of view, marriage remained *the* career for working class women (see Langhamer, 2007) – even though Jayne endeavoured to remain silent on this issue. To what extent, then, *was* heterosexuality either imposed or policed within the Finch family? Claire said: *'I tell mum everything, I can't think of anything I've not told her'* and valued her capacity to simply listen, yet this exchange of confidences does help reproduce the institution of heterosexuality. Jayne had told her, for example, that *'there is somebody for everybody'*, implicitly underscoring the notion that sexual practice belongs within a 'couple' relationship.

Claire's brother, Ryan (25), similarly described how Jayne had given him a book about the '*mechanics*' of sex - though Ryan also talked to her easily: *'I once got like a lump on the side of my foreskin... and I talked to mum about it ...I have spoken to my mum about sexual things, and not felt embarrassed. I wouldn't do to my dad ...My dad's more like, you know, lad, "get out there and shag"'*.

To what extent, then, did this family culture result in sexual practice which was compatible with a particular kind of heterosexuality? Ryan described how Jayne would rent 'porn videos' which gave him an entrée into a group of local boys. However, in enabling Ryan's heterosexual identity, Jayne also shaped it. Ryan said: *'because I went with my mum, I couldn't exactly get what I really wanted ... I think she was quite willing, ... 'cause she ... could sort of vet ...'*. And Jayne sustained this role: after an inconclusive break-up with a girlfriend, Ryan avoided taking her home

because *'she'd (Jayne) have told me off, saying, "look Ryan ... it's somebody's emotions that you're playing with"'*.

Jayne's relationship with her mother, Maggie, was similarly close. Maggie said, *'if you want to know anything, ask me'*, with the result that if Jayne heard unfamiliar words among schoolmates, she would say, *"mum, if I'm not supposed to know don't tell me but, what do these words mean?"* ... *'I could say to her they'd said "fuck", "shag", whatever, and she told me the meaning of all the words'*. Like her daughter, Claire, Jayne began to menstruate late – and was similarly eager for the associated adult status: *'oh and I knicker gazed [.] for months, years ... I was desperate'*.

The value which Jayne placed upon her children's freedom and privacy echoed her parents' approach to these matters. She said: *'I could ask me dad' ... (he) used to say to me "don't ever let anybody do anything that you're unhappy with"'*. He provided similar guidance for Ryan and Claire. Maggie, her mother, she said, had *'always been independent ... regardless of my dad. She's always felt she's had the right to go her own way ... and she expects other people to do the same, she hasn't put restrictions on what you do ...'* Maggie bore this out: *'I was reasonable, and they were reasonable with me ... I trusted them to be [...] I didn't make rules at all'*.

Nonetheless, the openness described is selective: Maggie said *'I was straight, you know ... there were no secrets ... well there were, they did all sorts of things I didn't know about'*.

Thus, when Jayne, her daughter, became sexually active after leaving home for hotel work at 18, her letters home described the sexual freedom and drugs which

surrounded her, yet kept her lesbian relationship secret. When she later had a baby with no inkling that she was pregnant, her parents believed it had resulted from one-off bad luck. This apparently radical break between openness about sex in the abstract, and secrecy around sexual practice, potentially reflects Jayne's insecurity about her appearance and her willingness to uncouple sex from romance, her 'failed' heterosexual project. Now, Jayne *reassures* her daughter, Claire, by showing her memorabilia from these early sexual liaisons: *'I said to her ... "just enjoy it, you're not hurting anybody, he hasn't got any other girlfriends, you just enjoy"'*. Parental responsibility for shaping children's passage into heterosexual adulthood via regulation and control is something which Jayne is aware of – and feels concerned that she may be shirking. In the absence of her daughter, Jayne is no longer silent on the topic of marriage. In her interview she says:

*'you always feel, you're a mum, that [...] it might be better to wait [LAUGHS] double standards altogether ... it was just to help Claire ... come to terms with what she was doing ... when ... you've been [...] taught what's right, what's wrong and maybe you should wait 'til you get married 'cos that's comes from [...] your mum and dad, um, well, you assume that's what you did ... I know me mum had sex before she was married but I didn't know that when I was growing up as a child ... that's come through since [...] I was older and probably married'.*

When Jayne eventually married John, Claire and Ryan's father, her mother, Maggie: *'wasn't happy with it, she accepted it [...] and it's the same I've said to my children "I don't like the things you do but they're the things you do" ... but you're accepting of them because you love your children ...'*. Jayne felt that her mother's belief in her celibacy was because: *'she (Maggie) hadn't had the same in her relationship with my dad as I've had with John'*. Sex, for her mother, was *'only once a flood ... only when they (men) want it, she doesn't think that her daughter is just [...] waiting to go to bed [LAUGHS] and she wants to have sex'*.

Maggie, the youngest of five children, grew up without the sexual openness her daughter and grandchildren share. She said farm animals demonstrated (hetero)sexual functioning, *'I didn't get any conversation at home'*, suicides and mental illness dominating a relatively fragmented family life. Maggie's in-laws supported her after marriage and while her husband desired an active sexual relationship, her earlier date rape delayed her eventual sexual satisfaction. After Jayne was born, Maggie suffered post-natal depression and connected this with her father's suicidal despair.

In comparison with the Davises, therefore, cross-generational communication about sexual practice was more open among the Finches - yet growing up heterosexual was still *managed*. Both families contained hidden sexual relationships and, until recently, Maggie's date rape was shared only with her husband. When Maggie broached it with Jayne, and grand-daughter, Claire, it was over a meal in a pub and Claire said, *'... you know, prawn cocktail and, she's never mentioned it since, and I wouldn't ask her'*. Restraint therefore filters cross-generational openness, even among the Finches.

### Reflections

The comparative data presented here suggest a radical shift in sexual practice during the late 1960s and the 1970s. While data from the inter-war period describe boys pursuing passive, sexually ignorant girls, the 1970s saw greater agency among young women, along with changed scope for exercising it as young men acquired cars, and motorbikes. Yet achieving heterosexual adulthood requires more than simply participation in (hetero)sex, as evidenced by women's judgements that particular

relationships or practices were inadequate bases for heterosexual identification. While heterosex potentially fulfils private bodily or emotional needs, young people's strategic choices demonstrate the *social* nature of heterosexuality as 'practice, experience and identity' (Jackson, 1996:30), a status which must be both negotiated and sustained. Again, this point is underscored in the Mass-Observation data on love which Langhamer (2007) draws upon to demonstrate the role of courtship in securing particular, socially-located transitions to adulthood.

Via both choices and exclusions, then, the institution of heterosexuality is made to emerge, here as a set of (family) practices which are irreducible to heterosexual sex. Among the oldest generation, many said they had few sexual expectations – or that their expectations had been too high. In contrast, the mid-life cohort would express disappointment in their relationships – but highlighted emotional rather than bodily or material issues. As gender relations and sexual mores changed, the 1960s cohort had both the knowledge and experience to identify disappointments, as well as the agency and opportunity to challenge them. Yet despite their youthful efforts to resist adult control and re-negotiate their heterosexual identities, these attempts were later transformed into strategies which served to *regulate* their children's heterosexual futures, whether through control or care. What appears as a contradiction when different periods of the life course are compared, in fact reflects a continuity of practice across time. Both as children and as parents, individuals engage in the strategic pursuit and regulation of institutionalised heterosexuality. It is via their agency across the generations that the institution is both reproduced and refashioned.

It is, therefore, within family-based relations of power and inequality that heterosexuality comes to mesh with transitions to adulthood. As the data presented in this paper indicate, possessing knowledge about sex, engaging in new embodied practices, experiencing bodily changes, and creating physical distance between oneself and the parental home operated as markers of young people's claims to adult status. As such, they also carry intimate associations with heterosexuality, an institution which therefore, in turn, helps shore up a particular distribution of power across the life course. The young people who participated in our project were not only eager to access the social status of adulthood, but also followed a particular, heterosexual trajectory in so doing. Parental responses, however, reflect concerns with hegemonic heterosexuality – and as members of a more powerful age-based social category, they sought to define the nature of a heterosexualised boundary between youth and adulthood. For some young women, in particular, both secrecy and considerable geographical distance were the mechanisms needed to adequately contest parental control of that boundary. While data suggest that the young male participant was encouraged to make a much speedier transition to heterosexual adulthood, as members of an older and more powerful generation, his parents' gendered interventions nonetheless served to shape that passage in particular ways.

Clearly a ragged match between sexual desire/practice and the institution of heterosexuality has persisted over the last eighty years. What our data make clear, however, is that the institution of heterosexuality has never been reducible to (hetero)sex during this period. Within the context of cross-generational family relationships, women *and* men grow up into a 'whole package', complete with expectations of emotional exchange, longevity and parenthood.

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<sup>ii</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

<sup>iii</sup> AM refers to Angela Meah who carried out all the interviews

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### **Figure 1. The Two Families**

#### **Davis**

**Joan (70)**  
**Grand/mother**  
Divorced

#### **Finch**

**Maggie (83)**  
**Grand/mother**  
Widowed

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**Sarah (43)**  
**Mother**  
Married to Richard  
for 20 years

**Jayne (50)**  
**Mother**  
Married to John  
for 25 years

**Abigail (17)**  
**Grand/daughter**  
Single

**Claire (23)**  
**Grand/daughter**  
Boyfriend of 2 years

**Middle class**  
**Rural**

**Working class**  
**Urban**  
**Originate outside**  
**East Yorkshire.**