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## Generation and memories of sex and reproduction in mid-century Britain

Angela Davis

### Introduction

You've probably noticed with your generation, I mean, what do your generation say about their parents' [attitudes towards sex], because if I asked my children, they wouldn't tell me.

*That's an interesting question. I don't know...<sup>1</sup>*

As the above quote illustrates, the respective ages of the interviewer and interviewee in an oral history interview, shape that encounter. Hermione, the interviewee in this encounter, saw me, her interviewer, as a representative of the younger generation to compare herself against and, indeed, to set up the construct of generational change, or even generational conflict. The dynamic was also influenced by the topic of the conversation – attitudes towards sex – because it has been characterized within popular understanding as an area of generational change, but also as a subject people are reticent to discuss. Hermione wanted to find out how my generation viewed the generation of our parents. My reply was one of avoidance – it displays my reluctance to engage in a discussion about my views, a subject which I did not think was a necessary part of the

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<sup>1</sup> Hermione, NO15, 4.

interview – whilst also not wishing to offend my interviewee. It is interesting that Hermione did think it was an important point of discussion, whilst also alluding to the reluctance of her children to talk about sex with her. The exchange between Hermoine and I highlighted the role played by generational difference in the relationship between interviewer and interviewee, the sensitivity of sex as a topic of conversation, and the influence of age on people’s memories of sex.

In this chapter I will explore influence of generation in the interview encounter in a small number of interviews taken from a larger body of 166 interviews I conducted with women from Oxfordshire and Berkshire who were born between the 1910s and early 1960s. The women selected were from a range of class and educational backgrounds and lived in urban, rural and suburban areas. While a small number had been born abroad, most could be described as ethnically white British.<sup>2</sup> The interviews were conducted during the mid and late 2000s. At the time of the interviews I was a graduate student in

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<sup>2</sup> Interviewees ranged from those who had left education at fourteen with the end of compulsory schooling to those who held postgraduate qualifications. Due to the difficulties of defining women’s class background through employment (because their class could be different if determined by their father’s, husband’s and their own occupation), interviewees were asked to give their class of origin. In order to find interviewees from the different areas considered in the Oxfordshire case study advertisements for participants were made in local newspapers and appeals for participants were made on local radio. To preserve the anonymity of the interviewees pseudonyms have been used. Interviewees are referenced by identifying codes. The codes are formed of the first two letters of the locality from which the interviewee came and an identifying number: BA = 24 square miles of north Oxfordshire near Banbury covered by the 1944 Country Planning survey; BE = Benson; CO = Cowley; CR = Crowthorne; EW = Ewelme; OX = Oxford city centre; SA = Sandhurst; SO = graduates of Somerville College, Oxford; NO = North Oxford; TH = Thame; WY = Wychwood villages. The sample was limited firstly, in that it only contained women who had stayed in the case-study areas, and secondly because it relied on volunteers. As Anna Sheftel notes, The Achilles’ heel of oral history is that we only hear the stories of the people who are willing to speak to us; we can never learn about the full range of experiences and memories within a given community because there will always be some who will not speak.’ Anna Sheftel, “‘I don’t fancy history very much’: Reflections on Interviewee Recruitment and Refusal in Bosnia-Herzegovina.” In *Oral History off the Record: Toward an Ethnography of Practice*, edited by Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki, 255-71. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 256. Recordings and transcripts are held by the author.

my twenties, single and childless. In some ways I had insider status as a woman interviewing other women about their lives. I had first-hand knowledge of growing up as girl and of being a daughter, both subjects which we discussed in the interviews. I was also living in Oxford, and grew up in Berkshire, so I was local to the area being studied. However, I was not a mother and all my interviewees were, and in the wider project I was asking them about their experiences of motherhood. In addition, while we were of the same gender we were not always of the same class. Some of the interviewees were university graduates and therefore of a similar status to me, but others were from working-class backgrounds. Finally, the interviewees and I were always of a different generation. Many of the interviewees' children or grandchildren (depending on their own age) were a similar life stage to me and our interactions were framed by this generational difference. Several of the older interviewees told me that their only other experience of an oral history interview was when their grandchildren had interviewed them for school history projects, so they understood the oral history encounter as taking place between different generations.

The subject matter of the interviews also stimulated this focus on generational difference. In order to encourage interviewees to reflect upon their own lives in comparison with those of their parents' and children's generations, interviews were based upon the life cycle.<sup>3</sup> The model allowed the women interviewed to tell their own stories whilst also enabling some comparability between the interviews as they all covered the same key

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<sup>3</sup> Isabelle Bertaux-Wiame, "The Life History Approach to Internal Migration: How Men and Women Came to Paris between the Wars," in *Our Common History: The Transformations of Europe*, ed. Paul Thompson (London: Polity Press, 1982), 186-200; Susan Geiger, "Women's Life Histories," *Signs*, 11 (1986), 334-51.

themes.<sup>4</sup> However, it also imposed my idea that their life stories should be told in a chronological manner, and that they should think of their own lives within a framework of change over time. The interviews were typically about ninety minutes in duration although some were shorter and others considerably longer. They were often accompanied by tea and biscuits, and sometimes with a break for refreshments. They usually took place in the interviewee's own home at a time of the interviewee's choosing. I had met many of the interviewees before the interview, and had spoken to almost all by telephone to arrange the meeting (in other cases the interview had been arranged through a third party). Most interviews were one-on-one, but sometimes they were conducted with small groups. On occasions interviewees' husbands were also present for all or part of the interview. My agenda as the interviewer was ever present in shaping my interviewees' narratives. Explicitly, my questions led them to focus upon certain areas of their lives, and implicitly their desire to be useful to me meant they tried to tell me what they thought I wanted to hear.

The interviews were undertaken as part of a wider project on motherhood in postwar Britain.<sup>5</sup> Change in women's reproductive lives over the second half of the twentieth century was a central theme in the interviews, and alongside this, changing attitudes towards sexuality and the relationship between men and women. There were many points when the subject of sex could come up in the interviews. At the beginning of the

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<sup>4</sup> The interviews were semi-structured, following the model described by Penny Summerfield. Penny Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 1-42.

<sup>5</sup> This research originates from two principal projects: firstly, my doctoral thesis which was entitled "Motherhood in Oxfordshire, c. 1945-1970: A Study of Attitudes, Experiences and Ideals;" and secondly a follow-up study conducted as a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow entitled "Motherhood, c. 1970-1990: An Oral History."

interviews when we were talking about their growing up, I would ask questions about sex education (both that they received in school and in the home). Later, in the interviews, when I asked how they met their partners (usually husbands), we often talked about sex again, and we also returned to the theme when discussing family planning. However, what was interesting, was that they frequently returned to the subject of sex when I asked interviewees more general questions about the differences between their own childhoods and those of their children's and about their approaches to parenting.

On and off the record, many interviewees discussed with me the shifting aspirations of, and opportunities available to, women of our different generations. The changes in women's lives over the course of the second half of the twentieth century, and how this had determined our own lives, was a theme running throughout the interviews. Attitudes towards sexuality and women's ability to control their reproductive lives were central tenets of this revolution, and while the interviewees talked about change as having occurred across the twentieth century, they particularly focused on those changes that had occurred during the last decades of the century. We often spent a considerable time discussing the position of women and girls in the early twenty-first century, and the positives and negatives for women that these changes had brought with them.

In this chapter I will examine how the women interviewed told their stories of gaining sexual knowledge, at home and at school, and my influence as the interviewer in determining what was said. I will pay special attention to the theme of generational

difference, both as the interviewees way of structuring their accounts, and the influence of mine and my interviewees respective ages in shaping the interview encounter.

### **Oral history interviewing about childhood and sex**

As Jay Mechling has shown, oral history interviews with adults about their childhood experiences raise some methodological concerns. An adult woman reflecting today upon her childhood fifty or more years before “will be perceiving and interpreting that childhood through her adult, learned categories – from adult notions of propriety to the special vocabularies of popularized psychology.”<sup>6</sup> Her memories will also be influenced by the powerful cultural narratives of childhood given widespread expression in popular culture, for example as the best of days of your life or the days of innocence and simple times.<sup>7</sup> Personal autobiographical memory is therefore functionally and structurally related to cultural myths and social narratives.<sup>8</sup> Women construct their narratives of childhood both in the context of cultural representations, which are specific to their generation, and in relation to the experiences of others, such as their children and grandchildren.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Jay Mechling, “Oral Evidence and the History of American Children’s Lives.” *The Journal of American History* 74 (1987): 579-586, 580-581.

<sup>7</sup> Katie Wright and Julie McLeod. “Public Memories and Private Meanings: Representing the ‘Happy Childhood’ Narrative in Oral Histories of Adolescence and Schooling in Australia, 1930s-1950s. *Oral History Forum d’histoire orale* 32 (2012): 1-19, 15.

<sup>8</sup> Katherine Nelson, “Self and Social Function: Individual Autobiographical Memory and Collective Narrative,” *Memory*, 11 (2003): 125-136, 125, 133; Carla Pascoe, “Be Home by Dark: Childhood Freedoms and Adult Fears in 1950s Victoria,” *Australian Historical Studies*, 40 (2009): 215-231, 231.

<sup>9</sup> Wright and McLeod, “Public Memories and Private Meanings,” 15.

As well as recognising the complexities of interviewing adults about childhood experiences, oral historians have also commented upon the intricacies of interviewing respondents about sex. Summing up the problem Sally Alexander has asserted: “Sexual knowledge is difficult to historicise. Constituted through fantasy, emotion and the mother’s body it belongs to the realm of the imaginary.”<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, in their exploration of sexual knowledge and practices among heterosexual couples in the first half of the twentieth century, Kate Fisher and Simon Szreter found that despite the importance of privacy for their respondents, many were prepared to discuss sex, marriage and intimacy.<sup>11</sup> Fisher and Szreter also challenged the idea that the construction of interview narratives about sex broke a taboo. Instead they posit that, “in response to skilled interviewing, respondents chose what aspects of their life histories to reveal and discuss on their own terms, and for their own reasons.”<sup>12</sup>

People’s accounts of their past sexual knowledge and experience are of course coloured by their present lives. Fisher and Szreter found that the present had a strong impact on many of their interviewees with some respondents holding different and more permissive views on sex than they had in the past.<sup>13</sup> Yet this difference in attitude was not necessarily problematic as many respondents were fully aware of the ways in which their own views had been challenged and altered. Indeed they used the interview process to

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<sup>10</sup> Sally Alexander, “The Mysteries and Secrets of Women’s Bodies: Sexual Knowledge in the First Half of the Twentieth Century,” in *Modern Times: Reflections on a Century of English Modernity*, eds. Mica Nava and Alan O’Shea (London: Routledge, 1996), 161-175, 171.

<sup>11</sup> Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher, *Sex before the Sexual Revolution: Intimate Lives in England 1918-1963* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 3.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.



reflect constructively and informatively on such changes: “For interviewees the very perception that sexual attitudes had been transformed during recent debates provided both a justification and an inspiration to talk. Many wished to discuss and debate such changes with interviewers, who were seen as representatives of a younger generation with different attitudes.”<sup>14</sup>

I also found that our respective ages shaped the interview with the women that I interviewed. On their part, interviewees modified their testimonies in accordance with their reading of my understanding of the subjects under discussion, based on my age. On my part, my age underlay my assumptions about understandings and experiences of sex in the past and determined the questions that I asked. The age of the interviewer therefore shapes both the narrative created during the oral history interview and how they interpret what is said. Sally Chandler has reflected that, “oral historians in different life stages may tend to perceive subjects’ self-representations in terms of the functions attached to their own current life stage, rather than those of the speaker.” As such, “without reflective awareness of how their own life-stage and generational identity may shape their perceptions and representations, interviewers may tend to organize and understand experiences in terms of narratives and issues connected to their own life stage.”<sup>15</sup> This reading may have been heightened in the case of my interviews, as I was asking the interviewees to recall their childhood and early adulthood. The focus of the interview was a period in their lives which was closer to my current life stage. In analysing these

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Sally Chandler, “Oral History across Generations: Age, Generational Identity and Oral Testimony, Oral History,” *Memory Work*, 33 (2005): 48-56, 54-55.

women's accounts of their childhood memories of sex it is therefore crucial to consider how the inter-subjectivity of the oral history interview and how the identities of the interviewee and the interviewer shaped the women's decisions when composing their narratives.

### **Learning about sex in mid-twentieth century Britain**

Fisher and Szreter have described British society and popular culture during the first half of the twentieth century as being constructed to as far as possible exclude all explicit references to sexual intercourse both publicly and even privately within the family.<sup>16</sup> Sex education was absent from most school curricula and many parents were too embarrassed to tell their children much.<sup>17</sup> Alexander argues that the effect of this silence was to reinforce feelings of shame about sexuality.<sup>18</sup> Women were also expected to know less than men. Szreter has highlighted the "profound ignorance of reproductive biology at marriage, absence of the most rudimentary instruction from their own mothers, and often innocence of, fear and distaste at their own bodies' sexual functionings ... emanating from the sources of direct testimony from women of all classes".<sup>19</sup> Alexander explains that this generation's accounts of sex are therefore coloured by the secrecy and mystery that surrounded sex and childbirth, with these feelings given outlet in humour and self-mockery.<sup>20</sup> Fisher found that these cultural beliefs had a long legacy and that over half a

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>17</sup> Penny Summerfield, "An Oral History of Schooling in Lancashire 1900-1950: Gender, Class and Education," *Oral History*, 15 (1987): 19-31, 27.

<sup>18</sup> Alexander, "The Mysteries and Secrets of Women's Bodies," 164.

<sup>19</sup> Simon Szreter, *Fertility, Class and Gender in Britain, 1860-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 425.

<sup>20</sup> Alexander, "The Mysteries and Secrets of Women's Bodies," 164.

century later the vast majority of women she interviewed were keen to emphasize their general ignorance of all sexual and reproductive matters.<sup>21</sup> She explains: “Professions of bewilderment formed, for example, part of a narrative in which respondents contrasted their innocence with the perceived excesses of sexual knowledge amongst contemporary youth ... regardless of the actual extent of women’s knowledge, it was and is important for women to maintain their ignorance.”<sup>22</sup>

In her account of working-class attitudes towards sex in Lancashire based on interviews conducted with respondents born between the 1880s and 1940s, Lucinda McCray Beier concluded that attitudes and communication about sex changed dramatically between those interviewees born before 1930 and those born after 1930.<sup>23</sup> However, when I asked my interviewees what they had learnt about sex and reproduction in the home, I found that there was much individual variation and there were also different responses to whether their thought increased sexual knowledge was a good thing. My questioning may have elicited these personal responses. Because I used a life-cycle model of interviewing I was asking my interviewees to focus on themselves as individuals and their own immediate families, rather than thinking about their communities or wider society.<sup>24</sup> This can be seen in my conversation with Harriet, who was born in Taplow in 1955 and brought up her twin boys, born in 1986, in Crowthorne, Berkshire, about her approach to

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<sup>21</sup> Fisher, “She Was Quite Satisfied with the Arrangements I Made,” 168.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>23</sup> Lucinda McCray Beier, “‘We Were Green as Grass’: Learning about Sex and Reproduction in Three Working-Class Lancashire Communities, 1900-1970,” *Social History of Medicine*, 16 (2003): 461-80, 475.

<sup>24</sup> See Sherna Berger Gluck for criticisms of the individual life history approach. Sherna Berger Gluck, “From California to Kufr Nameh and Back: Reflections on 40 Years of Feminist Oral History.” In *Oral History off the Record: Toward an Ethnography of Practice*, edited by Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki, 25-42. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 39.

parenting. Discussing the practices she thought were important to do with her own children, such as sitting round the table, I asked her whether this was something she had done with her Mum and Dad. She replied, “Yes. Absolutely”, but then added, “my parents’ attitudes were quite different ... my sister and I were always expected to be the good little girls who went along with everything that Mum and Dad decided was going to be the right thing to do. If anything came up on the television of a dubious nature – violence, something of a sexual nature – my parents would always turn the television off. But there would never be a discussion about it.”<sup>25</sup> In contrasting the ‘generation gap’ between her and her parents, Harriet presented their differing attitudes towards sex as important area of divergence despite their other shared values. Wider societal changes in attitudes towards sex were seen through the prism of the intimate life of the family.

As my respondents knew my research was focused on motherhood (they had been informed in advance of the interview that I was conducting research into motherhood and interested in learning about their experiences of both being mothered and mothers), it is not surprising that the mother-daughter relationship also featured prominently in several accounts of their acquisition of sexual knowledge (or lack of it).<sup>26</sup> In this way my research agenda shaped the narratives of the women I interviewed. However their relationship with their mothers was often a subject my interviewees were keen to talk about. A central theme of Tara’s interview was the differences between her and her mother in respect to their understanding of the role of women – such as their thoughts about work outside the home and attitudes to marriage and divorce. Tara was born in

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<sup>25</sup> Harriet, CR8, 13.

<sup>26</sup> See Sheftel, this volume, for an extensive treatment of this point.

1954 in India and brought up in London. She thought her mother was old-fashioned and conservative which led to conflict with her more progressive views. Sex was another area of contention between them. Tara explained her mother “never told me anything about sex because she just felt so inhibited.”<sup>27</sup> As in many areas of her life Tara said she tried to be different than her mother: “And when my children were sixteen I gave them those little information leaflets you get from the doctor about how to get family planning services and everything ... I think that they felt much less guilt but also because they knew quite a bit about it they didn’t feel they had to rush into anything.”<sup>28</sup> Throughout her interview Tara tried to contrast the way she and her mother parented, and recounting their different attitudes towards passing on knowledge about sex was another way for Tara to demonstrate this to me, her audience.

Bet’s relationship with her mother also underpinned her narrative. She had been born in London in 1943. Her parents were shopkeepers. An only child, she thought the intense bond between her parents had caused difficulties for her in her relationships with them. We had been discussing her childhood and her relationship with her parents when she was growing up before a break for tea. When we returned, Bet changed the subject away from my questions about who helped her with her children when they were young to return to the subject of her own childhood and her mother’s attitude towards sex. This moment exemplified how the interview is a negotiation between interviewer and interviewee. Interviewees did not always allow themselves to be led by my questioning and they also had topics that they thought were important to cover. In contrast to Tara,

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<sup>27</sup> Tara, SO15, 11.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 30-1.

Bet spoke positively about her mother's approach towards sex. She said, "But I've thought in our break, it may seem as though I sort of run my mother down which I do to be honest, but one thing she did for me, she gave me a very happy picture of sex ... so I had no inhibitions and no inbuilt fears, so that's helped me all through my life, whereas I'm sure some of your other interviewees perhaps have had a different aspect because perhaps their mothers wouldn't talk to them or were themselves overburdened with children and frightened, so that's one thing my mother really has done for me."<sup>29</sup> It is noteworthy that Bet thought her experience was unusual and not representative of her generation. The contrast between Tara and Bet's experiences does indicate the complexity of individual families' attitudes towards the transmission of knowledge about sex, and challenge the idea that there was a watershed moment, whether posited as being World War Two or the 1960s, when a general change in beliefs and behavior took place. Their desire to talk about their relationships with their mothers also showed that while I may have tried to influence the conversation through my questioning, my interviewees were also making decisions about what was important to them.

Although my questions tended to focus on their own individual experiences, some interviewees were happier talking in more generalised terms about generational changes. Sharon started to reflect upon attitudes towards sex when talking about her childhood. She thought the silence about sex, which was a feature of her childhood, was a positive thing. Sharon was born in 1944 and grew up in Liverpool. She raised her own children, born in the early 1970s, in Ewelme, a small village in South Oxfordshire. I asked her

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<sup>29</sup> Bet, CO1, 17.

about her childhood and her relationship with her parents. She presented herself as growing up in a more innocent and hence happier time, with a less sexualised climate being an important feature of this. She said, “And also you were allowed to be children. Rather than a precocious little eleven year old being sexy before they need to be. You know, sex is fine in its place but not when you’re eleven I don’t think. So I think childhood is being lost for lots of children, you know, you can’t get it back, it’s gone.”<sup>30</sup>

In contrast, while Emily, who was born 1938, also thought women of her generation were ignorant on matters of sex, she thought young people’s increased knowledge was a good thing. Asked about her childhood she told me that “the fifties was a miserable generation, a decade to be brought up in, really horrible, because there wasn’t the pill. So if you were brought up by a respectable family ... the one thing you would not be allowed to do would be to step over any kind of sexual taboos anything like that ... I just think they locked us up and hoped for the best I think until we were eighteen.”<sup>31</sup> She believed the 1960s were a turning point: ‘I think the Kinsey Report and you know all the stuff about [how] sex was invented in 1960, [like Philip] Larkin ... all those kind of things are absolutely completely spot on. We could do nothing.’<sup>32</sup> Emily’s comments indicate how the publication of the Kinsey Report and ‘Annus Mirabilis’ are associated in popular memory

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<sup>30</sup> Sharon, EW9, 3.

<sup>31</sup> Emily, NO8, 3-4.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 4. The Kinsey Reports were two books on human sexual behavior: *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953), written by the American zoologist Alfred Kinsey, Wardell Pomeroy and others. The findings, based on personal interviews, caused shock and outrage, both because they challenged conventional beliefs about sexuality and because they discussed subjects that had previously been taboo. In his poem ‘Annus Mirabilis’, Philip Larkin, the English poet, wrote that sexual intercourse began in 1963.

with a shift in attitudes towards sexuality. Graham Dawson coined the term “cultural imaginaries” to describe the “vast networks of interlinking discursive themes, images, motifs and narrative forms” that are available to people when constructing their life stories. Emily employed “cultural imaginaries” of the 1960s when relating her account of these years.<sup>33</sup>

The idea of the 1960s as bringing about a sexual revolution is commonly held and as Nancy Janovicek has argued, ‘there is an assumption that people who were young in the 1960s shape their narratives according to the popularized tropes of the period.’ This supposition, Janovicek has shown, is erroneous.<sup>34</sup> I found that it was often those women such as Emily who grow up before the 1960s that considered the decade as being a turning point rather than those who were actually children in the 1960s. It was interesting that among my interviewees it was Mary’s account of the shame and secrecy surrounding sex in her childhood that most closely resembled the picture painted by historians for the first half of the century, despite the fact she was born in 1959 and was one of the youngest respondents. Mary’s account was characterized by continuity with older attitudes rather than indicating that the 1960s marked a break. She said she was completely ignorant about sex and the female body due to her mother’s silence on the subject, and explained that her mother had been similarly brought up. In particular, she recalled the trauma of her first period for which she was completely unprepared. She had

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<sup>33</sup> Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London: Routledge, 1994), 48-52.

<sup>34</sup> Nancy Janovicek, “‘If you’d told me you wanted to talk about the ’60s, I wouldn’t have called you back’: Reflections on Collective Memory and the Practice of Oral History.” In *Oral History off the Record: Toward an Ethnography of Practice*, edited by Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki, 185-99. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 195.



been determined not to repeat her mother's reticence with her own children, born in the early 1980s, and told me she had "the most well informed daughter about periods and things by the time she was about nine that ever lived in Thame, I think, because I was so terrified that the same thing would happen to her. And yet my mum seemed to find it absolutely impossible to even broach the subject."<sup>35</sup>

Mary placed her own individual experience within a context of generational change, with the transformation coming for her children's generation rather than her own. In part, this resulted from me, as the interviewer, specifically asking her to think about changes over the generations. However, it was also reflective of the trope of childhood as being an innocent time, and that younger generations were more experienced in matters of sex, compared to less worldly previous ones. Mary was one of a small group of women from Thame that I interviewed together about their experiences of motherhood. In the interview, the women discussed at length the knowledge about sex and reproduction they had gained in the home and in school when they were children. In this instance, the dynamic of a group interview among women who had known each for several years, fostered an environment where they felt comfortable to talk about these issues, perhaps more so than if I had interviewed them each alone. However it could have also encouraged them to emphasise their lack of knowledge for rhetorical effect as they created a shared narrative of the ignorance of girls of their generation compared to young women of the early twenty-first century.

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<sup>35</sup> Mary, TH5, 15-17.

The women I interviewed from Thame also told many anecdotes about their limited school sex education and were almost trying to outdo one another with their stories of its deficiency, using humour in a similar fashion to Alexander had found for her respondents earlier in the century.<sup>36</sup> Josie explained that as a grammar school girl in the 1960s, her sixth-form class had asked the head mistress for a talk on contraception. The head mistress replied that none of her girls should know about ‘that’ until they got married.<sup>37</sup> Alma responded that when she attended a Catholic convent school in the 1960s the sex education provided by the nuns amounted to being told that it was a sin to sit on a man’s knee without a phone book between the and that it was a sin to sit with a man in a car with the ignition off.<sup>38</sup> School sex education, or the lack of it, was an important theme throughout my interviews, perhaps reflecting how it was an issue of contemporary concern as well as of generational difference.<sup>39</sup> Lesley Hall has demonstrated how a more active approach to sex education for children in schools developed from the 1940s, with Jane Pilcher surmising that between the 1940s and 1960s sex moved from a position of absence to one of pre-eminent concern within official guidance on health education.<sup>40</sup> However, this change should not be overstated. In her survey of sex education in the early 1970s Christine Farrell found that, “A number of young people also based criticisms of their sex education lessons on the fact that they had only been told about animal

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<sup>36</sup> Alexander, “The Mysteries and Secrets of Women’s Bodies,” 164.

<sup>37</sup> Josie, TH6, pp. 13–14.

<sup>38</sup> Alma, TH7, p. 14.

<sup>39</sup> For a fuller discussion of the history of sex education see Davis, ““Oh no, nothing, we didn’t learn anything.””

<sup>40</sup> Lesley Hall, “Birds, Bees and General Embarrassment: Sex Education in Britain from Social Purity to Section 28,” in *Public or Private Education?: Lessons from History*, ed. Richard Aldrich (London: Routledge Falmer, 2004), 98–115; Jane Pilcher, “School Sex Education in England 1870-2000,” *Sex Education*, 5 (2005): 153-70, 162.

reproduction and nothing else”.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, the increasing provision of sex education in schools seen in the second half of the twentieth century was deeply influential on society. Fisher and Szreter posit that the higher levels of sex education given to secondary school children after 1944 was probably a key factor in accounting for changed attitudes towards communication about sex.<sup>42</sup>

I asked all the women interviewed about the sex education they had received in school. Usually they replied that they had learnt very little, and then went on to describe how they believed this had changed for later generations. Bobbie highlighted the difference between her experiences and those of her granddaughter. Bobbie was born in 1921 and grew up in Milton-under-Wychwood, a small village in West Oxfordshire, where she had remained ever since. She had married in 1948 and had two children born in 1955 and 1959. When I asked her whether there had been any sex education when she had been at school in the 1930s and early 1940s she replied: “Not in my day, nothing like that, we never knew anything about it.” She compared this with the situation for her granddaughter in the early 2000s, adding “Because actually you see our adopted granddaughter, she’s just started her periods about three months ago and of course she knew all about it, well I started at eleven years old and I didn’t know a thing about it, you were never told anything like that in those days. Very, very different today.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Christine Farrell, *My Mother Said... The Way Young People Learn About Sex and Birth Control* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 124.

<sup>42</sup> Lucinda McCray Beier, *For Their Own Good: The Transformation of English Working-Class Health Culture, 1880-1970* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2008), 236-9.

<sup>43</sup> Bobbie, WY7, 15.

Megan was of a different generation and social background to Bobbie. She had been born in 1944 in London to middle-class parents and had attended St Hilda's College Oxford. She was married to an Oxford academic and had her own children in Oxford in the early 1970s. However, when asked about sex education when she was at school, she also used this as an opportunity to compare her generation's knowledge about sex with that of subsequent generations, saying her that she and her peers were "fairly uninformed" in comparison with her daughter.<sup>44</sup> Tara attended grammar school in the 1960s and felt her generation benefitted from the sex education they received in school, which while still basic, had not been provided at all to previous generations. She also felt that things had continued to improve for her own children, who were the same age as me, and Tara thought our generation had received very good sex education.<sup>45</sup>

Hermione, born in 1948, grew up in a middle-class London family. She also thought the 1960s were a watershed and in the interview she defined the experience of her generation as against mine. She described herself as part of the 1960s generation and asked me how my generation, the children of the 1960s generation, viewed their parents. She felt it must be hard to be (like me) the children of the 1960s generation because "there wasn't much you could do [to shock]. There was a lot I could do to shock my parents, a huge amount. Because ... in the 1960s we thought we'd invented sex and all that, sex, drugs and rock and roll."<sup>46</sup> In our interview, Hermione asked me many questions about my life. She was as interested in hearing about my opinions experiences as I was in hers. Hermione's

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<sup>44</sup> Megan, OX11, 2.

<sup>45</sup> Tara, SO15, 29.

<sup>46</sup> Hermione, NO15, 4.

narrative reveals the complex interplay of shared cultural memories, personal life histories and the interviewee-interviewer dynamic which is at work when interviewees 'compose' their narratives.<sup>47</sup>

An interesting feature of the interviews was that sex often entered the discussion at the end of the interview when I asked the question: "Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you can remember as being important?" Theresa was born in 1925 in Lincolnshire as her mother who lived in North Oxfordshire had returned to her own home for the birth. Theresa had lived all her life in the villages around Banbury and had four children between 1948 and 1963. When asked at the end of the interview if there was anything we had not talked about that she felt I should know, she replied, "Well probably there's a lot of things that weren't discussed. You never heard anybody talk about sex or anything like that, coz it was kept very quiet. If anybody had a child or got pregnant and weren't married that was really bad, and we had quite a few children that probably I've heard about now they're grown up, they grew up thinking that their grandmother was their mother and their mother was a big sister, I think that was more done in those days. It was never discussed." I then asked her whether she thought it was an improvement that it was more open today and she answered, "I think a lot of things have gone too far the other way."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Developing an analysis which linked Melanie Klein's theory of psychic composure with cultural theories of narrative Graham Dawson used the term 'composure' to describe the process through which stories of the personal past are fashioned. Dawson, *Soldier Heroes*, 22-3.

<sup>48</sup> Theresa, BA10, 19.

Elaine, born in 1936 in London, and Tilly, born in 1924 in Scotland, had both lived in Crowthorne in Berkshire when their children were growing up in the 1950s and 1960s and were interviewed together. At the end of the interview I asked whether there was anything we had not discussed that they remembered as being important. Tilly answered, “I imagine the sort of dread about sex must have come into it. Because, nowadays, it strikes me that anything goes. People live with each other. Perfectly alright. But...in my day, that was filled with horror.” Elaine added, “Your parents would have strung you up.” Tilly then continued, “Any indulgence in premarital sex, might result in a pregnancy.” Elaine concluded, “It was the best contraceptive in the world. It really was. Fear.”<sup>49</sup> Changing attitudes towards sexual knowledge was obviously an important subject to these interviewees as it was one they wanted to return to. For them, it was emblematic of the change they thought had occurred for women over the course of the twentieth century and was of itself transformative. It is also revealing that they thought the topic was more important than I had, and it was them who directed me back to the subject. While I had perhaps unconsciously tried to play down the subjects of sex and sexuality in my interviews through my own embarrassment or reluctance to embarrass my interviewees, they thought it was an issue that needed to be discussed.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has reflected upon the practice of interviewing adults about their childhood knowledge of sex and how our different ages influenced what was discussed in the course

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<sup>49</sup> Tilly, CR12, 30; Elaine, CR11, 30.

of the interview and the ways in which it was spoken. While I would argue the respondents did offer information about their childhood selves, the interviews were deeply shaped by the dialogue between people's past and present and selves, and between the interviewer and interviewee, and this was crystalized as a conversation between different generations. My approach to interviewing, which based the interviews around the lifecycle, promoted this. I asked the women I interviewed to think about generational change and in consequence this was the dominant structure of their narratives.

However, as well as overtly setting the agenda for the interviews through my questioning, my role as interviewer shaped what was said in more subtle ways. My position as someone of a younger generation than the interviewees – their daughters' and sometimes granddaughter's generation – also affected what was said. As Szreter and Fisher had found, the difference the interviewees were most keen to discuss was that between their generation and young people today. I was a representative of this younger generation, being in my twenties at the time of the interviews, and of a similar age to the children, or grandchildren of the interviewees, depending on their own age. It led them to explain the changes that had occurred over the century and invited them to consider the differences between their generation and my generation. I did not find a strong class or educational-background difference in how the interviewees responded towards me, perhaps reflecting the power and pervasiveness of cultural myths and their homogenizing effect, although this would be something worth exploring in more detail.

The interviews did clearly indicate attitudes towards sex had altered over time, but in complex ways. I found that my respondents' accounts did not centre around one watershed moment as some oral historians have found, although they did focus on the changes seen in the latter decades of the twentieth and early twenty first centuries. I found that, whatever age they were, women compared their own experiences with young people today and presented themselves as having grown up in a more innocent time. This difference could result from a number of factors: my interviewees were typically of a younger generation than those questioned by Beier, Fisher and Szreter; from the south of the country rather than the north (and therefore a different, economic, geographical and socio-cultural context); or from my position as a younger woman interviewing older women which encouraged them to construct their accounts in this way. My research supports Fisher's findings that irrespective of their actual levels of knowledge women characterised themselves as being more naive than contemporary children. The diversity amongst the women over whether they thought the increased visibility of sex was a beneficial development indicates their reminiscences about the past were not simply an exercise in nostalgia, but rather they were actively engaged in weighing up what they saw as the positive and negatives changes that had occurred over the past half century.

However, reflecting upon the interviews over ten years since they took place in order to write this chapter, I now see that through my own agenda for the interviews I had steered women into discussing how they had acquired sexual knowledge rather than their perhaps more complex attitudes towards their own sexuality which largely went undiscussed. The lifecycle model that I employed in my interviews was designed to encourage interviewees



to reflect upon continuity and change over the generations. My own inhibitions as an interviewer and reluctance to embarrass my interviewees, whom I had assumed, as older women would be less willing to discuss sex and sexuality, meant that I focused on what seemed 'safer' topics such as learning about sex and family planning as a means of opening up conversations about sex, but this approach held limitations. The interview structure really encouraged my interviewees to think of themselves within the framework of their family, rather than to delve into their own subjective experiences. In this way our age difference was also influential upon me as the interviewer. I made assumptions that sex would not be a subject that women of older generations would want to discuss with me, in a way I would not have done with women who were of the same age as myself.

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