A Cross-generational Investigation of the Making of Heterosexual Relationships

Methodology

The data is drawn from focus group discussions and oral life history interviews carried out between March 2002 and July 2003. The focus group discussions were originally planned to facilitate recruitment, and to sensitise the investigators to generational and gender issues in discussing sensitive information about relationships.

Each of the 6 groups were presented with a series of comments made about relationships by individuals at different points over the last 65 years. Participants were invited to respond to these comments, indicating how they perceived them to be indicative of age and gender etc. Discussion was generated around these perceptions and how they compared with the reality once this was revealed. Two of the groups were men only, two were women only and two were mixed. Four of the groups were exclusively comprised of older people, while one was made up of young men under the age of 35, while the ages of the women in another group ranged between mid-30s to late-70s.

None of the participants volunteered to take part in the family study.

Via local publicity and through a process of snowballing, 22 extended families – each with three generations of volunteers - were recruited to the family study. Having established a principal contact in each family, information about the project and the informed consent document was circulated to each potential participant before interviews were undertaken with the family. In many cases, follow up calls were made to confirm that each person understood what the study involved. Each person received the informed consent statement prior to their interview and the researcher then went through this with them again prior to commencing the interview. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed in full. Names and locations have been changed, but occupations have not been changed as this would alter the meaning of the data.

The interview schedule represented a loose topic guide which facilitated a reflection on each participants’ life course. Topics ranged from learning about puberty; the acquisition of sexual knowledge through talk and practice; courtship, weddings and home-making; parenthood, work and family life; separation and divorce; redundancy and retirement; death, dying and bereavement. Some of the issues raised were extremely sensitive and many participants became upset. In such cases, breaks were taken and the researcher offered to suspend the interview. No one took up this offer. In one case, the researcher made enquiries about counselling services on behalf of one participant. Most people said that they had valued the experience of talking about things which they had not talked about before or did not usually discuss.

Subsequent coding of the data was carried out around descriptive themes; for example the acquisition of sexual knowledge, emotionality, a range of heterosexual 'practices', space/time and reflections. Thematic coding has subsequently taken place which explores
issues such as masculinity, femininity and identity; structure and agency and cross-generational cultural transmission.
I, ___________________________________________, agree to participate in this research project on ‘A Cross Generational Investigation of the Making of Couple Relationships’ that is being conducted by Dr Angela Meah and Dr Jenny Hockey of the University of Hull.

I understand that the purpose of this study is to hold a series of interviews with different members of the same family to find out about patterns of continuity and change in relationships between couples of different generations. During these, I will have the opportunity to discuss my experiences of family life. This might include: sharing opinions about marriage and the alternatives to it, what I see as the significant influences on my relationships, how my experiences may differ from my expectations, what I regard as the significant events in my life and what I see as the recipe for a good relationship.

I understand that the interview that will last for as long as I deem necessary and will be audiotaped. The tape will then be transcribed and destroyed. All names will be changed so that participants cannot be identified.

I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and that if I wish to withdraw from the study or to stop the interview, I may do so at any time, and that I do not need to give any reasons or explanations for doing so.

I also understand that all the information I give will be anonymised in any publications and that what I say will not be shared with other members of my family.

I understand that I may not receive any direct benefit from participating in this study, but that my participation may help others in the future.

The members of the research team have offered to answer any questions I might have about the study and what I am expected to do.

I have read and understand this information and I agree to take part in the study.

___________________________          _____________________________________
Date         Signature

If you have any concerns about this study, please contact either: Dr Angela Meah, Tel: 01482 466621 or Dr Jenny Hockey, Tel: 01482 465928 or write to us at C.A.S.S., University of Hull, HU6 7RX.
23 October 2003

Dear Emma

We refer you to your involvement in our study looking at relationships and family life in Hull and East Yorkshire. You will note from the letter head that our team has moved to the University of Sheffield, but the work nonetheless continues.

We hope that you are well and would again like to thank you for your unique and very important contribution to our research project which could not have taken place without the support of so many enthusiastic volunteers. We have presented some of our findings at various academic conferences and people have always commented on the richness of the data which we have presented from our interviews.

As we come to the end of our study, we have been asked if we will submit the transcripts of the interviews to a national data archive. This will not be accessible to members of the general public, but only to genuine academic researchers on a restricted basis. Given the time and effort that each of you contributed in making our study successful, this presents an opportunity for you to make a more lasting contribution to this area of research. As was promised at the time of your interview, all names have been changed within the interview transcripts, as have locations and street names etc, although people’s occupations have not.

We would be extremely grateful if you could indicate on the reply slip enclosed whether or not you give permission for your interview transcript to be held in the UK Data Archive and return it in the prepaid envelope. If you have any concerns, questions or queries, do not hesitate to contact us.

Once again, we thank you for your invaluable contribution to our study.

Yours sincerely

Dr Angela Meah
Professor Jenny Hockey
Dear Angela and Jenny,

I have read and understood the information that you have provided about confidentiality and anonymity and

☐ give permission

☐ do not give permission

for my interview transcript to be held in the UK Data Archive which I realise will be accessible to only to academics involved in related areas of research and not to members of the general public.

Name (print):

Signature:

Date:
Interview Schedule

• How did you find out about ‘sex’/periods etc? Do you think that boys/girls were treated differently?
  PROBE AROUND SOURCES OF SEXUAL KNOWLEDGE

• When did you first notice/become ‘interested’ in boys/girls?

• What was/is courtship like for people of your generation? What do/did you get up to?
  ACTIVITIES: CINEMA, MEALS, OUTINGS, CLUBS, DANCING, HOLIDAYS, SEX?

• How did you know when you’d found what you thought was the ‘right one’? What was ‘right’ about them?

• The first time you slept together/were intimate together, was it a) what you expected? b) what your partner expected? (Was this on your wedding night or some other time or place?)
  PROBE AROUND LOCATIONS

• IF EXPERIENCED WITH MORE THAN ONE PARTNER:
  Do/did you find yourself comparing other partners to your ‘true love’? How have earlier or subsequent partners compared with this person sexually, emotionally etc?

• Tell me about your wedding day. How did he/she propose? What was planning for it like – was it a big event or low key? How did you feel? What are your enduring memories of your wedding day(s)?

• How did your courtship compare with day to day life after you decided to set up home together? Think about having to share each other’s physical, psychological and emotional space and also sharing them with other people (in-laws, children etc)?

• What impact did the arrival of children have on your relationship? Do you feel that you became less of a partner/husband/wife and more of a parent? Was there an ‘identity’ shift? What was the impact on your sexual relationship?

• How did you make your choices about how to socialise your children? Did you replicate or reject existing family models? Do you feel that you treat your sons and daughters the same, or do/did you have different rules for the girls/boys? (E.g. re. sex and social lives – going out etc.)

• How do/did you feel about the possibility of your children being sexually active in your home? OR Do/did your parents let your partners stay over?

• How do you feel about the possibility that your parents are still sexually active, or that they are while you’re in the house?

• As you’ve got older, do you think that your relationship has become less physical and more emotional/companionship etc? If so, do you think that the latter has been a compensation for a waning sex life? How has your sex life changed from when you were younger, if at all? OR Do you think imagine that sex will hold the same place for you as you get older? When do you think that it might change?

• Are there other moments that had a significant impact on your relationships - either by testing it/them or bringing you closer together? For example, starting or leaving work, changing body image/confidence, taking up an ‘interest’, children leaving home, moving house, becoming a grandparent, separation, divorce, loss, retirement?

INVITE EXAMPLES IN EACH CASE. ASK HOW GRAND/PARENTS/CHILDREN VIEWED THEIR DECISIONS /ACTIONS IN PARTICULAR INSTANCES.
Interview Schedule

• What were the best and worst moments in your relationships? How did you and your partner(s) respond when difficulties arise?

• How important is talking through things with your partner?

• Who do you talk to when you’re having problems or, share the good times with? Partner, parent, sibling, friend, grandparents etc?

• What is okay to take outside the relationship? ‘Bedroom moments’, emotional or sexual difficulties etc?

• How did/do your experiences of relationships compare with the expectations you had when you first started discovering men/women?

• How have your relationships with your partners differed to those with your friends? What do you get from one and not the other?

• What do you see as the key ingredients for a successful relationship?
Knowledge

Growing Up

Family
- Parents
- Siblings
- Grandparents

Non-family
- Friends
- School
- Partners

Inanimate objects
- Nature
- Media etc

Ignorance

Adulthood

Partners
- Friends
- Media etc

To children
Practice

Heterosexual Practice
- Courtship
- Cohabiting
- Weddings
- Parenting
- Conflict
- Separation/loss

Sexual Practice
- Growing up
- Adulthood

Growing up
Adulthood
Emotions
Difference

- Gender
- Generational
- Attraction/desire
- Other (class, ethnicity, religion, culture, sexuality etc.)
Executive Summary

This project aimed to provide an empirical account of how women and men lived out heterosexual lives during the twentieth century. Across the last thirty years feminist theorizing has focused on different aspects of heterosexuality - as an institution, an identity, a practice and an experience, yet relevant empirical data has remained relatively scant. The proposed project therefore carried out indepth qualitative interviews within 22 families, asking people of three different generations what it meant to grow up and live out a heterosexual life. Thus, while it explored areas which have been a focus for sociological interest – such as marriage and the family, theoretically it viewed these as social arrangements organized according to the principles of heterosexuality. What it revealed is that while the family came to be seen as the appropriate environment for sexuality from the late nineteenth century onwards, it appeared to be a difficult setting within which to either find out about or indeed engage in heterosexual sex. This contradiction can be explained as follows. First, people in families have multiple identities. A grandson can be a son, a husband and a father. While sexual knowledge and practice is thought to be the prerogative of the ‘adult’ generation, age is experienced not just chronologically but also relationally. So even though adults can legitimately be sexual, grown-up grandsons and indeed sons may feel required to mask their sexual identities and practices when in the proximity of older generations. Second, explicit reference to sexual matters can contravene conceptions of ‘respectability’. It can therefore be difficult for families to adhere to class-based conceptions of appropriately respectable behaviour whilst engaging in parental or marital roles in relation to sexuality.

While sexual knowledge and practice sat uneasily within the confines of the family, the environment where they nonetheless legitimately belong, heterosexuality was revealed as an institution which encompassed far more than sexual relationships between people of different genders. Instead it could be seen as a principle which governed the organization of many aspects of everyday life, yet was rarely questioned or made explicit. Being seen as a ‘natural instinct’, heterosexuality underpinned a way of managing social life which was taken for granted and difficult to address or change. Thus, we found, for example, that bodily changes which suggested a developing sexual identity were sought after as status symbols by young people keen to grow up into adulthood. Girls competed to start menstruating. Initiating relationships with members of the opposite sex also meant demonstrating an appropriate grown-up heterosexual identity and again, acquiring social status. If sexuality is a matter of status rather than simply a biological drive, then similarly the arrangements through which that identity is lived out be seen as constructed along heterosexual principles. The allocation of space in the home, the arrangement of ‘couples’ seats in the cinema, the gendered nature of gift-giving to wedding guests, all these reflect the principle of heterosexuality at work – yet none are directly connected to sexual practice.

If we examine the data which describes young people growing up we find a similar rendering of heterosexuality. In other words individuals make choices not simply on the basis not of sexual attraction or sexual pleasure. Rather they form heterosexual relationships according to models of what heterosexual relationships should be like and
what characteristics they should have. Here class and reputation are important.

While these data describe contemporary experiences, when we survey the generations we find both continuities and changes. Older people were often told little about growing up and making sexual relationships. This may have been a strategy to inhibit illegitimate sexual activity – and if pregnancies took place outside marriage, then families could be split as daughters were sent away and siblings forbidden contact. The ramifications of such events were far-reaching, families’ reputations within their local communities suffering and younger sisters having difficulties attracting boyfriends. While the youngest generation we interviewed clearly expected to be sexually active before forming permanent relationships, the silencing of the sexual remained a familiar experience and many had received little parental guidance.

One aspect of a study across generations was that although the same questions were asked of people who had grown up at different times, straightforward comparisons between their answers could not be made. When older people described ‘making love’ and ‘being intimate’, we cannot assume they were engaged in something different from what younger people referred to as ‘knobbing’ and ‘fingering’. Instead we must ask whether expectations and patterns of behaviour were in fact different; whether individuals thought and spoke about them differently – or whether they were simply using language they thought appropriate when interviewed by a thirty year-old university researcher. This illustrates the fact that our data are not simply an account of remembered experience; they are an interpretation of the past, but one nonetheless informed by heterosexual beliefs and values.

This raises a final issue, the question of what is told and what is withheld. One key point of comparison is the changing constraints on what can be articulated about heterosexual experience. If the institution is a model of how life should be lived within opposite sex couples, then empirical research gets at aspects of everyday life which fail to conform to that model. Sometimes they are evident in the silences or evasions which occur within interviews; sometimes they form a primary focus, an issue which had long troubled a participant and one they were keen to discuss. Among older people, the body was often felt to be at odds with the requirements of heterosexuality and bodily matters had remained at best a mystery, at worst a source of pain. By comparison, younger people reflected on their emotional lives and often felt that these failed to conform to a model of how heterosexuality should be lived out. In sum, the pervasiveness of heterosexuality as an organizing principle accounts for its robustness as an institution not easily problematised. Yet persistent mismatches provide the turning point of change as aspirations are made to bend to experience.
Full Report on Research Activities and Results

Background
This project builds on the investigators’ research in the separate fields of heterosexuality and masculinity (Robinson, 1996, 1997, 2003a, 2003b, forthcoming a, b), and ageing and the life course (Hockey and James, 1993, 2003). Its unique combination of perspectives allowed the investigation of competing identities, and brought an historical approach to the diversity of heterosexual practices. Its starting point was evidence of increasing reflexivity around heterosexual social arrangements such as the family and marriage (Jagger & Wright, 1998, Silva and Smart, 1999). This raised questions as to whether policy initiatives designed to reinforce traditional family values (Land, 1999), and private uncertainties about heterosexual living arrangements, were a product of social change such as the weakening of stigma around cohabitation, lone parenthood and divorce, and new gendered patterns of employment. Could they be interpreted, in Giddens’ (1992) terms, as aspects of the ‘riskiness’ engendered by a loss of overarching metanarratives and the resulting ontological insecurity of individuals without the cultural resources to integrate their environment into personal narratives of self identity? Were heterosexual social arrangements and gendered identities more taken for granted during the first half of the twentieth century? Equally the contemporary robustness of marriage as a heterosexual social arrangement, where 40% of marriages are re-marriages (Family Policy Studies Centre Report, Guardian, 27.3.00), suggested the persistence of powerful biases in its favour.

The project addressed these questions via a cross-generational comparison of individuals’ experiences of growing up heterosexual at different times during the twentieth century. By locating them within a family context the project also explored the extent to which both the persistence of heterosexual social arrangements such as marriage, and the uncertainties which currently surround them, were outcomes of cross generational cultural transmission.

Feminist theory treats heterosexuality as institution, practice, identity and experience (Jackson, 1996). Yet Smart (1996) expresses concern at the limited empirical base of such theorizing and argues for a more grounded focus on heterosexualities which would refine understandings of how women and men experience the institution. Our lack of evidence as to how a ‘compulsory’ institution is actually re-constructed and practiced is testimony to the power of heteronormativity. Yet to view it as simply monolithic amounts to political nihilism (Davis, 1991:82 ). The project therefore provided a more nuanced account of feminist scholarship’s ‘grand’ theoretical preoccupations with Heterosexuality, Patriarchy, Pleasure and Subordination by locating itself within contexts ‘homely enough to take the capital letters off them’ (Geertz, 1975:21).

We have responded to Smart’s (1996) contention that there is no single ‘heterosexuality’ by comparing the experiences of different age cohorts to find out whether the twentieth century comprises a diversity of heterosexualities. Equally the
location of the project within the extended family has allowed investigation of its robustness as an institution across time. Here continuities of language are salient, with terms such as ‘love’, ‘attraction’, ‘understanding’ and ‘effort’ eliciting a positive response, whilst remaining highly ambiguous (Cohen, 1985). As such, these terms bind different individuals to a single institution, with significant differences between them remaining obscured. Focus group data, for example, revealed men in their late 70s and late 20s asking the question ‘what is love?’ with equal urgency.

**Aims and Objectives**

1) to investigate the processes of intra-familial cross-generation cultural transmission in the area of heterosexual relationship
2) to find out whether heterosexuality now encompasses more diverse options than at the beginning of the twentieth century and whether this is experienced as empowering or as a source of risk and uncertainty
3) to examine links between heterosexual relationships and changing femininities and masculinities
4) to explore the emotional narratives available to women and men living in western society
5) to make an innovative theoretical contribution by combining the currently separate literatures on ageing and the life course and feminist perspectives on heterosexuality.

Our first objective was met through interview questions which asked how participants learned about their own sexuality and how they were expected to relate to the opposite sex. Not just older people, but also those growing up in the late twentieth century, might receive little explicit information. Taboos on sexual knowledge seem not have been eroded. However, the culture of the family was influential so that whatever openness was possible within today’s families could be traced to the grandparental generation. In addition a lack of information could not be seen as neutral when it came to the making of heterosexual relationship since it was often coupled with an implicit sense of threat which potentially oriented young people, especially women, in their thinking about heterosexual relations.

Our second objective was met by using the same interview guide with all participants, a strategy which ensured comparable data across all three generations. Interviewees were encouraged to provide a chronologised account of their life course with maximum attention paid to transitional periods. Heterosexuality now appeared to be lived out via a broader, more fluid range of social arrangements, yet conceptions of appropriate heterosexual coupling continued to inform choices as to which relationships to pursue or abandon.

Our third objective was met through combining interviews with the innovation of focus groups. All-male focus groups suggested that men resisted traditional masculinities and valued emotional openness. Within a mixed gender environment, however, they felt their voices were marginalized, a view potentially connected with female participants’ difficulties in recruiting male relatives to the project. Again a life
course approach revealed gendered identities as always in process, individual agency being manifested through processes of adaptation and negotiation (Brah, 1996:117). For example, data showed older women taking on the breadwinner role after a male partner’s redundancy, and older men adapting to job loss and depression – and taking on domestic work.

Our fourth objective was met by extending the time budget for each interview. This allowed participants to explore their feelings and to be encouraged to expand fully upon points they were making. Analysis showed that narratives tended to use either a ‘language of love’ or a ‘language of the body’. Among the youngest participants a language of the body was evident, suggesting that despite some awareness of the technicalities of sexual practice, they had not become sensitized to the emotional implications of heterosexual relationships.

Our fifth objective was met through our analysis of the difficulties of expressing sexual knowledge and desire within the family context. Here we drew on work which explores the overlap of relational and age-based identities (Morgan, 1996; Hockey and James, 2003: 157-177) to show the tension individuals might experience between being, for example, a mother, a daughter and a sexually active 55 year old. This combining of feminist and life course perspectives also helped make sense of contradictions within the data where people in mid-life would speak positively of the ‘freedom’ they enjoyed as young people, yet also describe seeking to control their children’s sexuality.

Methods
The study was conducted in East Yorkshire with the original aim of undertaking between 80 and 120 interviews with heterosexual couples from three generations within 20 extended families. Given the sensitive nature of research into relationships and sexuality, coupled with its siting within the extended family, access to both participants and their stories became an ongoing challenge. As one middle generation female participant said: ‘No, I don’t want you talking to my mother. She thought I was doing loads of bad things when I was young, but I wasn’t’.

Access: participants and data
Access to participants was secured via a display stand and presentation to over 300 women at the East Yorkshire Federation Women’s Institute Conference, local press and radio, mailings and visits to local voluntary organizations, email advertising among staff and students at Hull University, and a display stand on campus. Responses were initially limited and while one family member might express interest, many had difficulty recruiting partners or relatives from different generations. Typically women of the middle generation were an initial point of contact. The theoretical implications of this response are addressed below.

To expand recruitment six focus groups were conducted within existing local organizations. A church group and an Adult Education group gave access to middle class participants, while the two day centre groups, a women’s group and a young
men’s group drew working class participants. Four groups were single sex, with two made up of older adults and one of younger men. Access to data was enabled by a quiz comprising statements about marriage, divorce and sex made by people of different ages and at different periods of the twentieth century. Asked to guess who said what and when, focus group participants were then encouraged to review their assumptions about marital and sexual mores among different age cohorts and to begin exploring their own experiences and attitudes. Given that the project sought to fill gaps in the empirical bases of feminist theories of heterosexuality, this method provided an important opportunity to refine research questions which had hitherto been more theoretically derived.

On completion of focus groups, recruitment activities were sustained, alongside interviewing. These activities yielded five families. Snowballing and the use of personal contacts then provided the remaining 17. Interviews were carried out with representatives of all three generations in each family, making a total of 72 interviews. This was fewer than anticipated (80 – 120) and reflects the lack of ‘couples’ available to us. This factor stems from a) participants’ difficulties in recruiting other family members and b) the preponderance of widowed, divorced and separated participants. Nonetheless, as referees for the original proposal suggested, while an over emphasis on married couples might have restricted access to innovative interpretations of heterosexuality, divorce and bereavement were ruptures which could expose the best and worst aspects of a heterosexual relationship.

When interviews had been set up, data were accessed via a biographical approach, participants being asked initially about how they found out about sexuality and relationships. Successive questions followed the chronology of the life course, with the research associate encouraging participants not to move forwards until discussion of a particular period of the life course had been exhausted. While we had intended using timeline diagrams to focus interviews and highlight life course transitions, this device proved clumsy to administer when establishing the rapport necessary for discussion of sensitive issues. In addition, participants often had difficulty remembering dates and their sequence. However, the strategy of adhering rigorously to the chronology of the life course meant that all key transitions were discussed as fully as the participant felt able – and often provided accounts of transitions which focused on the private or domestic, rather than public or institutional sphere. In addition, rather than making an overview of the life course their starting point, participants were encouraged to recall one period at a time, an approach which yielded fine-grain accounts of events which may have taken place many years previously. These allowed us to understand how the institution of heterosexuality is reproduced at the level of everyday life, via more sensory or embodied memories of wedding bouquets, items of clothing, meals consumed. As interviews drew to a close, participants were asked to review their experience in its entirety and focus on their most positive and negative experiences, and the attitudes and practices they felt contributed most to the making of ‘successful’ heterosexual relationships.

**Sampling**
Among the 22 families within which interviewing took place, six were from rural locations in the East Yorkshire Wolds and 16 from urban environments, predominantly the city of Hull. Five families were unequivocally ‘middle class’, the rest having a more working-class background. As anticipated in the original proposal, class variation was found across successive generations, making it difficult to unambiguously assign an extended family to a particular class location.

For the reasons noted above, only three couples were interviewed although 48% of participants were either married (40%) or cohabiting (8%). This left 37% not currently in relationships, most of whom were widowed, slightly fewer remaining single and a small proportion who were divorced. 15% of the total were in non-cohabiting relationships and 21% had been divorced as some point.

Linked with the difficulty of accessing couples is the imbalance between women and men, men making up only 17% of the sample. This may reflect women’s roles as self-defined guardians of their families’ emotional lives. Towards the end of the project we had more success recruiting men and once rapport had been established it was via these men that snowballing among their male contacts produced our final number. Research in this area may therefore require access to men via other men, an approach we will be developing in our current, linked project on masculinities.

**Coding and analysis**

In addition to data from six focus groups, interviews of between one and five hours yielded transcripts of between 14 and 68 single-spaced A4 pages. Drawing on discussion with Advisory Group members, the data-sets have been coded under the broad categories of: knowledge, space/time, emotion, practice, reflections, difference, demography. The volume of data is therefore considerable, yet as the original proposal indicated, the project was not designed to provide an empirically generalisable account of beliefs and practices among different age cohorts in East Yorkshire. Instead these *theoretically* generalisable data allow key explanatory factors and elements (Mason, 1996:154), to be teased out via cross generational analysis. By accumulating a considerable body of individual and familial heterosexual life histories (see Hockey, Meah and Robinson, forthcoming), the processes and negotiations which constitute heterosexuality among women and men of different generations have been made available for scrutiny.

**Ethical Issues**

Where necessary interviewees who became distressed were offered information about support services – who in turn had been informed about the project. In a minority of cases, interviewees were contacted by phone after the interview to offer specific help in securing that support. A sample of participants were invited to provide feedback at the project’s Dissemination Workshop and described finding the interviews ‘therapeutic’ or ‘cathartic’. Angela Meah, who undertook the interviews, was not unaffected by their content, and mechanisms were in place to provide her with support and mentoring: by the co-investigators and members of the Advisory Group. Successful teamwork practices were developed via co-presentation and co-authoring.
of the project’s outputs, an achievement which has attracted positive feedback at Advisory Group meetings, the dissemination workshop and at conferences. These ethical issues also informed a reflexive methodological paper presented at the ESA conference in Murcia, in 2003.

Results
Concern was expressed in referees’ comments on the original proposal that it might replicate earlier studies of marriage and the family. While these social arrangements were indeed an empirical focus since, as VanEvery argues, ‘the hegemonic form of heterosexuality is marriage’ (1996:40), our analytic focus was the institution of heterosexuality, an approach exemplified in the headings used to present our results.

Heterosexuality and its cultural transmission within the family (objective 1)
The project aimed to find out how the reproduction of heterosexuality took place at the site of the family. A key question was how information about social and physiological processes of growing up heterosexual was passed on. We found that very little was said and sexuality itself was treated as a reproductive rather than emotional or social matter. Women from the oldest generation were often told nothing at all, but even the middle and youngest generations said that such things were not talked about in their families. Often the degree of silence was repeated across generations within the same family. This avoidance of referring to sexual matters is at odds with the shift towards containing both sexuality and emotionality within the family from the late nineteenth century onwards. We identified a felt contradiction between the belief that sexual information should be made available and a family’s sense of its respectability. Prior to his interview, for example, one young man had been told by his mother to ‘keep it clean’. In the view of a man from the middle generation, there was an expectation that men would find out ‘off the street’. The undermining of ‘respectability’ by articulating sexual information was evidenced when he spoke despairingly of his father’s ‘contribution to his sex education’ when he was ten. When his father asked ‘Have you found out your cock’s got lead in it yet?’, his mother told him to be quiet – to which his father responded, ‘I was bouncing lasses’ arses off the nettles at his age. He’s bleeding old enough to know’. ‘And that was it, basically’, said the man.

Heterosexuality as a narrative resource? (objective 4)
The lack of explicit communication about sex raises the question of available narratives and how these might frame heterosexuality. Data reveal silences about aspects of everyday life which are at odds with ‘hegemonic heterosexuality’, lived out as participants believed it ought to be. Within the narratives of older participants, silence about sexual matters could be extended in social strategies which bracketed the ‘mismanaged’ body: for example, illegitimate pregnancies could rupture entire networks of family relationships. For participants born after World War Two, emphasis on regulating the body gradually yields to narratives which emphasise emotional fulfillment and intimacy. Even the inability to express feelings can cause emotional upheaval, troubles which individuals may determinedly conceal from other family members. In general, narratives of heterosexuality tended to bifurcate along
the lines of a western body/emotion dualism. When older participants drew on the language of the emotions to refer to ‘making love’ and ‘being intimate’, the body slipped into obscurity. By contrast when younger people referred to ‘knobbing’, ‘fingering’ and ‘titwanks’, this language of the body seemed cut adrift from emotional connectedness. Comparison between generations thus reveals contrasting, historically specific narratives. Continuities were nonetheless evident, particularly within individual families. Thus silence about sexual matters could pervade successive generations and in one case it was paralleled by a remarkably sustained ‘language of love’: both mother and daughter described falling fatefuly in love at first sight with someone who ‘I am definitely going to marry’ (mother) and ‘I knew that I was going to get married to him’ (daughter). For both women, their children were ‘only here because I love A. so much’ (mother) and ‘we’ve got J. because we love each other’ (daughter). The data-set as a whole revealed a narrative of desirable heterosexual coupling which exceeded sexual relationships and informed the strategic choices of the youngest generation and the attempts by their parents to regulate their behaviour.

**Heterosexuality as an organizing principle: time, space and the body (objective 3)**

Data suggest that the institution of heterosexuality exceeds the categories of sexuality and can therefore be seen as an organizing principle which ‘encodes and structures everyday life’ (Richardson, 1996:1). We found that, for example, that the temporal experience of ‘growing up’ was heterosexualised, young people competing for the status accrued from menstruation, first date, and increasing bodily intimacy with the opposite sex: a mid-life woman spoke of ‘knicker-gazing’ for ‘months, years’ in anticipation of adult status; an older women recalled a kiss behind the bike sheds at 12 from the most attractive boy in the class and feeling like ‘cock of the north’; and mid-life women recalled a points scale which ranged from a ‘snog’, through to ‘touching your boobs’, ‘fingering’ and ‘full blown sex’. Space as well as time was organized according to the principles of heterosexuality: home space divided into environments of legitimate and illegitimate heterosexual practice according to marital status; public space marked out, for example, in the provision of double seats for (heterosexual) courting couples in cinemas.

**Age cohort stereotypes and personal experiences (objectives 2, 4)**

Our data revealed many continuities of experience across the generations. As a woman in her mid seventies said, ‘We weren’t all virgins that walked down the aisle’, pointing out that ‘it happened with most of my friends, but you didn’t talk about it’. Yet focus groups, particularly, exposed cross-generational stereotypes which were not born out in personal experience. Older people perceived the young as feckless. Their supposedly transitory heterosexual relationships were thought to be ‘to do with women going out to work and having money to be independent ... they go into situations of temptation’. Yet if discussion concerned a family member the emphasis shifted: ‘it’s hard for women, any road today because you can’t do anything right ... there’s always something judging you ... pressurizing you’. Sexual improprieties were softened through reference to individuals: ‘a very, very nice girl, she was a lovely girl ... never been with anybody, didn’t want to, but then she gave in and
became pregnant … brought shame on her family’.

**The intersection of history and biography (objectives 2, 3)**
The method used allowed us to examine life course transitions common to all three generations, which had occurred during different historical periods. Participants referred to the concept of ‘our time’ to indicate a golden age of making heterosexual relationships, yet while, for example, the 1940s were relished by older women, for younger men they were devoid of activity compared with the 1960s rock and roll era when ‘you can get all dressed up and dance the night away’. The transition to heterosexual adulthood is a life course transition which members of the three generations experienced differently, older women describing a more passive experience of pursuit by boys, while mid-life women often left home before marriage and took the initiative in securing sexual experience. The youngest generation, by contrast, often remained at home into their twenties and deferred permanent heterosexual coupling. War-time weddings were recalled in immense detail, yet the traditional pattern of gifts, reception and honeymoon was replicated only with difficulty. The decision to marry was itself shaped by historical circumstances, the deaths of young men in two world wars creating what was felt to be restricted choice; yet the expansion of women’s employment opportunities from the 1970s onwards was seen as a very different reason for not marrying readily.

**Contribution to feminist scholarship**
The project set out to provide an empirical account of heterosexualities across the twentieth century which might inform contemporary feminist theorizing. Three areas exemplify its contribution: the embodied relationship between agency and structure; the theorizing of older women’s experiences; and the contribution of age as well as class-based differences to the production of data. First, as researchers we have been faced with the challenge of employing a late twentieth century theoretical framework to make sense of the lives of women at the beginning of that century. Thus when older women described actively seeking out apparently conventional heterosexual lives we had to engage with issues of structure and agency, identifying the ways in which they had resisted as well as reinforced traditional social arrangements. Data revealed contradictory orientations, for example when older women spoke of wanting more than just conversations about babies in their lives, yet adhered to a traditional gendered division of emotional labour. As noted, a life course approach reveals the processes of identity formation and the many negotiations which this involves (Brah 1996). Second, these data contribute to the relatively neglected area of feminist theories of later life. They show a capacity to be reflexive among older women, one which could incorporate contemporary feminist insights. One older woman, for example, described forced sex with an early boyfriend and said ‘I suppose you would call it date rape these days’. They also challenge younger women’s stereotypes of older women’s conformity to patriarchal norms and reveal a capacity for agency and sexual experimentation, albeit within different conditions to those available to mid-life women. Third, we view data as not completely transparent, yet acknowledge a relationship between experience and ambiguous representation (Hollway and Jefferson 2000). This has required us to investigate the intersubjective processes of
data collection. We ask whether older people’s experience of heterosexuality was actually different, whether they drew on different discourses to conceptualise it, or whether their response to an interviewer in her early thirties was inhibited. In addition we note the effects of class and the issue of respectability. For example, our research associate had to give younger male participants permission (Holland and Ramazanoglu 94), before they would communicate via their customary narratives of heterosexuality. Reflexivity led us to view ‘sex’ as the product of layers of negotiations. When the interviewer asks whether something was ‘making love’ or ‘a shag’, participants’ responses are filtered by age and gender and class. ‘Sex’ is therefore produced during the interview and may indeed feed back into practice.

**Activities**

**Conference papers** presented at: BSA Annual Conferences (Leicester University 2002 and York University 2004); Lancaster University ‘Emotional Geographies’ conference (2002); BSA Study Group on Youth (Southampton University 2003); Huddersfield University ‘Narratives’ conference (2003); ESA conference (Murcia University, Spain, 2003); Leeds University Centre for Research on Family, Kinship and Childhood workshop on intergenerational research (2004).

**Seminar papers** presented at: Department of Sociology, University of Manchester, (2002); Department of Sociology, University of Newcastle, (2003); Department of Sociological Studies, University of Sheffield, (2003).

**Research methods lecture** delivered to social work students at the University of Sheffield using the example of this project. Lectures on the project and its contribution to a theory of heterosexualities delivered at University of Newcastle to MA Gender Studies and BA Sociology students.

**Dissemination Workshop** at Sheffield University (December 2003). 48 practitioner and academic delegates participated in a national workshop, along with a panel of interviewees and members of the Advisory Board.

**Membership of Advisory Group** for parallel ESRC funded project: ‘Continuity and Change in Parent-Child Relations over Three Generations’ (Centre for Research on Family, Kinship and Childhood, Leeds University)

**Outputs**

All publications and plans for future dissemination are listed in the end of award report.

**Impacts**

There is little scope for the commercial exploitation of research such as this. However it has attracted considerable national interest among academic researchers and practitioners with parallel interests in cross-generational and relationship issues (for example, the Centre for Research on Family, Kinship and Childhood, Leeds University; The Mother’s Union; the Association for Family Therapy and the UK
Council for Psychotherapy; Relate). The project’s Dissemination Workshop was extremely well-attended with close on fifty participants from institutions and organizations throughout the UK. Of particular interest was the innovation of including research participants in this part of the dissemination process. A platform was provided for six individuals to describe their involvement in the project, their motivations for taking part and their experiences of being interviewed.

**Future Research Priorities**

Three aspects of the present project have highlighted the need for further research which makes men and masculinities its focus. First, findings from interviews with male participants suggested that certain workplace cultures jeopardized men’s capacity to sustain a relationship with a heterosexual partner. Second, the slow recruitment of men to the project was resolved only when men themselves, rather than women, sought to secure other men’s interest. Third, men in focus groups felt their voices were discredited when discussing issues of emotion in mixed gender settings. Together, these aspects suggested a need for a project which examined the relationship between men’s paid work and domestic lives, made emotionally difficult periods of transition its focus, and drew on participant observation within men’s occupational environments as a means of securing their involvement in the project. A project on masculinities in transition was devised. It has now been funded by the ESRC and is currently being undertaken. This new research will benefit from the continuity of the co-investigator, Victoria Robinson, who is senior research fellow for this project.

**References**


