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“We weren’t the sort that wanted intimacy every night”: Birth control and abstinence in England, c.1930–60

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Abstract

This article presents an exploration of qualitative evidence on the relationship between birth control and abstinence from an oral history project, which interviewed middle and working-class English men and women, who had married between the late 1920s and the early 1950s. Among the working classes the assumption that men were responsible for birth control choices and the disadvantages that contraceptive methods of all types posed, combined with the fear of pregnancy, acted as a disincentive to have sex and resulted in forms of partial abstinence. Among the middle classes, women had much more access to birth control information and as a consequence a greater range of methods was used, including more female methods. However, the reluctance of couples to discuss sexual matters, and some continued preference for male methods meant that while condoms were the most regularly used middle-class male method, both withdrawal and abstinence were also in evidence. Moreover, although partners were more likely to discuss birth control at the start of their marriages, they were less likely to agree that contraception was a male responsibility and there was greater potential for conflict over contraceptive methods, not infrequently resulting in abstinence. The evidence suggests that sexual and contraceptive practices in marriages in England at the end of the secular fertility decline do not present a picture which straightforwardly correlates with the assumptions represented by the popular thesis that this period of increased fertility control was closely associated with the rise of companionate marriage.

Keywords

Birth control; Abstinence; Oral history; Twentieth century Britain; Working class; Middle class; Companionate marriage; sexuality

1. Introduction

The dramatic reduction in average family size from the late nineteenth century through to the mid-twentieth century has dominated historical and demographic study of marital relationships during this period.¹ At this time, not only did family sizes fall and the small

family norm embed itself (permanently) in British culture, but so, too, did public discussion of contraception: birth control clinics were set up, the birth-rate was discussed, sex and marriage manuals provided information about methods, technology changed (condoms altered, a range of female caps and diaphragms were produced), and general availability improved significantly.² There was a concomitant burgeoning of interwar transatlantic and European public debate on the desirability of a new model of 'companionate marriage', as being appropriate to the more democratic and gender egalitarian society of small families emerging after the Great War.³ In England Marie Stopes' manual, *Married Love*, published in 1918, has been seen as the herald of this new gospel, urging married men and women to discover loving sexual intimacy with each other, freed from the fears of unwanted pregnancy by modern contraception.⁴ By the end of the 1930s this bestseller had sold over 800,000 copies and had been joined by a host of similar marriage guidance and birth control manuals, some written by doctors and some by clergymen, guiding the reading public towards the sensual and spiritual pleasures of companionate marriage.⁵ Thus, the most recently published general interpretation of marriage and intimacy in Britain during the twentieth century has argued that this period saw the rise to a position of normative dominance by the 1960s of the ideal and practice of companionate marriage.⁶ In their rather more qualified formulation Davidoff et al. agree that the rise of companionate marriage has signified a change in sexual relations within marriage accompanying the period of secular fertility decline: 'based upon the idea of an exclusive emotionally and sexually intimate

¹Only those classified in this way to Class I or Class II have been considered 'middle class' in the discussion here.

Banks, J. A., *Prosperity and parenthood: A study of family planning among the Victorian middle classes* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954); Paul Thompson, *The Edwardians. The remaking of British society* (Weidenfeld and Nicholson 1975); Gittins, Diana, *Fair sex: Family size and structure 1900–1939* (London: Hutchinson, 1982); Roberts, Elizabeth, *A woman's place: An oral history of working-class women, 1890–1940* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984); Levine, David, *Reproducing families: The political economy of English population history* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Seccombe, Wally, *Weathering the storm, working-class families from the industrial revolution to the fertility decline* (London: Verso, 1993); E. Roberts, *Women and families. An oral history, 1940–1970* (Oxford: Blackwell 1995); Davidoff Leonore., et al, *The family story. Blood, contract and intimacy, 1830–1960* (Longman 1999).

²Fryer, Peter, *The birth controllers* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1965); Wood, Clive, and Suiters, Beryl, *The fight for acceptance: A history of contraception* (Guildford: Billing & Sons, 1970). Leathard, Audrey, *The fight for family planning* (London: Macmillan 1980); Lewis, Jane, 'The ideology and politics of birth control in inter-war England', *Women's Studies International Quarterly*, 2 (1979), 33–48; Davey, Clare, 'Birth control in Britain during the inter-war years: Evidence from the Stopes correspondence', *Journal of Family History*, 13 (1988), 329–45; McLaren, Angus, *A history of contraception from antiquity to the present day* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990); Porter, Roy, and Hall, Lesley, *The facts of life: The creation of sexual knowledge in Britain, 1650–1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), Part II; Hoggart, Lesley, 'The campaign for birth control in Britain in the 1920s', in A. Digby and J. Stewart (eds.), *Gender, health and welfare* (London: Routledge 1996), 143–66; Cook, Hera, 'The English sexual revolution: Technology and social change', *History Workshop Journal* 59 (2005), 109–128; Cook, Hera, *The long sexual revolution: English women, sex, and contraception, 1800–1975* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), Part II.

³See J. Lewis, *The end of marriage? Individualism and intimate relations* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar 2001), pp. 46–55, and 72–95, on the international dimensions to this debate. In USA socially conservative American functionalist sociologists famously proposed that marriage and the family was undergoing an epochal transformation 'from institution to relationship': Lindsey, Ben B., and Evans, Wainwright, *The companionate marriage* (New York: Boni & Liverwright, 1927); Burgess, Ernest W., and Locke, Harvey J., *The family from institution to companionship* (1945; 2nd edn. New York: American Book Company, 1960); and Blood, R.O. and Wolfe, D.M. (1960) *Husbands and wives*, Glencoe: Free Press.

⁴Ross McKibbin has provided an illuminating introduction to a new edition of the classic ideological statement of the virtues of companionate marriage, Marie Stopes' *Married Love*, published in 1918: M. Stopes, *Married love* (Oxford U.P. 2004). Her main publication on birth control was: *Contraception. Its theory, history and practice* (John Bale, Sons and Danielsson 1923). For an excellent introduction to Stopes' sequence of publications and her publishing strategy, see Alexander C.T. Geppert, 'Divine sex, happy marriage, regenerated nation: Marie Stopes' marital manual *Married Love* and the making of a best-seller, 1918–1955' *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 8 (1998), 389–433.

⁵Hera Cook (2005) has mounted a systematic examination of sex and marriage guidance manuals; see her Appendix B for Stopes' publication figures. See also Jane Lewis, 'Public institution and private relationship: Marriage and marriage guidance, 1920–1968', *Twentieth Century Brit Hist*, 1/3 (March 1, 1990), 233–63.

⁶M. Collins, *Modern love: An intimate history of men and women in twentieth-century Britain* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003), who argues for the rise of the mutualist companionate marriage to an apogee in the 1960s and 1970s.

relationship...[companionate marriage] was a powerful ideal, which stressed the importance of romantic love, sexual attraction and mutual interests, while disguising realities of gendered inequalities of power and access to resources.⁷

However, among social and demographic historians recent research has emphasized the continuation of 'traditional' methods of contraception alongside the newer appliances during the course of the fertility decline.⁸ Despite the increased use of condoms and caps during the first half of the twentieth century many also continued to turn to withdrawal, abortion and forms of abstinence. Was sex and love in marriage transformed by the rise of family planning during the era of fertility decline in quite the way envisaged by the thesis of the rise of companionate marriage? This article presents some new evidence from an oral history investigation, the first conducted in Britain specifically to interview both women and men on issues of birth control and sexuality.⁹ It explores the differences in attitudes among the interviewees to various methods and how contraceptive use was negotiated between partners in relation to their sexual relationship. Just under 90 men and women from both working class and middle classes were interviewed in two contrasting locations, Blackburn in the heart of industrial south Lancashire and Harpenden in affluent semi-rural west Hertfordshire, just north-west of London (for more details see Appendix A). In particular, we will explore reported abstinence and variability in coital frequency and the links drawn by respondents of all classes between levels of sexual activity and periods of stress, marital conflict or contraceptive anxiety.

2. 'We weren't the sort that wanted intimacy every night'

Almost all interviewees used some form of birth control to regulate their family size. Overall 58% used withdrawal and 58% used condoms, 10% used female pessaries, 17% female caps or diaphragms and 16% tried to abort. That these figures add to more than 100% reflects the fact that many individuals used a range of methods: partly dissatisfaction with one method led to a switch; partly changing motivation to avoid pregnancy led individuals to adopt methods seen as more reliable; but a number continued to use various methods as the mood took them. There were, however, differences in methods used in Hertfordshire and in Blackburn and also between social classes. Withdrawal was rather less used by the middle classes in both regions. Among the Hertfordshire working classes higher condom use was found alongside less reliance on withdrawal than among the Blackburn working class.¹⁰ Indeed, there was more widespread use of appliance methods (condoms, caps, diaphragms

⁷Davidoff et al. (1999), p.190; See also Gillis, John R., *For better, for worse: British marriages, 1600 to the present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), ch.11; J. Finch and P. Summerfield, 'Social reconstruction and the emergence of companionate marriage, 1945–59', in David Clark (ed.), *Marriage, domestic life and social change* (London: Routledge, 1991), 7–32; J. Reibstein and M.P.M Richards, *Sexual arrangements. Marriage, monogamy and affairs* (William Heinemann 1992), ch.1.

⁸Brookes, *Abortion in England 1900–1967*; Santow, Gigi, 'Coitus interruptus in the twentieth century', *Population and Development Review*, 19 (1993), 767–92; Szreter, *Fertility, class and gender*, ch.8; Cook, *The long sexual revolution*; Fisher, *Birth Control*. 2006.

⁹The collection of oral histories took place between 1998 and 2001 and was funded by an ESRC grant to Simon Szreter, Grant Number R000236621. Kate Fisher was the project's Research Officer. Any names of respondents appearing have been changed. See Appendix A for a summary description of the oral history sample and Appendix B for the social class allocation. An extensive interpretation of this qualitative evidence will be presented in S. Szreter and K. Fisher, *Sex before the Sexual Revolution. Private life in England 1918–1965* (forthcoming Cambridge University Press 2010), where methodological issues are addressed in Ch.1 For a related methodological discussion see K Fisher (2006), ch.1.

¹⁰For an earlier analysis of birth control among the Blackburn working-class respondents, only, see K. Fisher and S. Szreter, "'They prefer withdrawal": The choice of birth control method in Britain, 1918–1950' *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 34, 2 (2003), 263–91.

and pessaries) in general among those interviewed in both classes in Hertfordshire. Among the middle classes in Hertfordshire this also extended to considerable use of female methods, which was largely absent from the testimony of the northern middle-class interviewees or the working classes in either north or south. Reportage of preparedness to countenance abortion was also most likely among southern middle-class interviewees. Finally, in both Hertfordshire and in Blackburn, among both the middle-classes and the working-classes forms of abstinence were generally important, though for very different reasons.

If abstinence is defined rigidly, as did the Royal Commission on Population of 1944–9, as complete avoidance of sexual intercourse on a permanent basis and lasting for a period of at least 6 months,¹¹ the number of respondents in Blackburn and Harpenden definitely recalling such abstinence in their marriages would be somewhat under one in ten.¹² But much more important than these cases of absolute abstinence is the testimony which many respondents gave to various forms of partial and more temporary abstinence or reduced coital frequency. This occurred in testimony relating to almost half of the marriages.¹³ This was for a range of reasons relating in one way or another to the desire not to risk a pregnancy and, interestingly, there was no pronounced class difference in the general prevalence of these instances of partial and temporary abstinence.¹⁴ Not uncommonly, low sexual frequency was combined with the use of some other contraceptive method, such as withdrawal.

As most scholars acknowledge, defining, counting or assessing abstinence is conceptually fraught. As Harry Cocks explores in his review of Hera Cook's book — which argues that for many men and women during the first half of the twentieth century, 'abstinence' was a positive response to the range of available birth control methods which chimed with

¹¹On the shortcomings of this investigation's methodology and its questioning procedure in relation to partial abstinence, see: Langford, C.M., 'Birth control practice in Great Britain: A review of the evidence from cross-sectional surveys', in M. Murphy and J. Hobcraft (eds), *Population research in Britain*, Supplement to *Population Studies*. XLV (1991), 49–68; Szreter, *Fertility, class and gender*, 398–405. Fisher, Birth control sex and marriage, 111–113.

¹²Terence msfssrs/bl/#15; Hubert msfki/ht/#32; Bernard and Diana msf/j/bl/#45; Penny msf/ssrs/ht/#20 (temporarily after birth of third daughter); Eva bl/#9; Eleanor bl/#11. That is six marriages out of a total of 71 for which detailed birth control information was given (see next footnote).

¹³There are a total of 71 marriages represented in the transcripts, where the respondents talked in detail about their birth control practices. In as many as 33 of these 71 marriages (46%), they mention one of the forms of abstinence discussed here. The oral history interviews with 88 married individuals relate to a total of 83 different marriages (because some individuals were interviewed as couples representing the same marriage), 48 from Blackburn and 35 from Harpenden. Only 71 of these 83 marriages are counted-in here because in 12 cases the respondents gave no detailed information on the kinds of birth control used. In 4 cases this was because the known sub-fertility of the marriage precluded the respondent making any relevant statements: Alistair msf/kf/bl/#33; Phyllis msf/kfbl/#5; Mildred msf/kf/bl/#41; Dennis msf/kf/ht/#15. The other 8 cases of absent information, several simply because of reticence or professed ignorance, were: Hilda msf/kf/bl/#50 (2nd marriage); Rebecca msf/kf/ht/#6; Clare msf/kf/ht/#8 (two marriages); Monica msf/kfht/#11; Maud msf/kfbl/#18; Rose msf/kf/bl/#21; Enid msf/kfbl/#49. Additionally in a number of other marriages coital frequency was reported to have reduced significantly after menopause or in older age but these cases are not counted here among these 33 cases as relating to birth control, though they do attest to the wider general prevalence and variety of forms of abstinence in marriage at this time; nor, of course is customary abstinence during the menstrual period counted as 'abstinence' here, though it was almost universally observed, given respondents' concerns over bodily hygiene and disease.

¹⁴Among the Blackburn working-class: Lyn msf/kf/bl/#1; Olive msf/jm/bl/#44, Colin msf/kf/bl/#36, Terence msf/ssrs/bl/#15, Sarah msf/kf/bl/#30, Lorna msf/kf/bl/#25, Eleanor msf/kf/bl/#11, Frank msf/ssrs/bl/#16, Glynnis msf/kf/bl/#4, Marilyn msf/kf/bl/#7, Arthur msf/ssrs/bl/#24, Doreen and Larry msf/kf/bl/#20, Jake and Dorris msf/ssrs/bl/#22, Peter msf/kfbl/#26 (second marriage), Sally msf/kf/bl/#31, Eva msf/kf/bl/#9, Molly msf/ssrs/bl/#17, Christopher msf/kf/bl/#34, Daphne msf/jm/bl/#38; among the Blackburn middle class: Bernard and Diana msf/j/bl/#45, Hilda msf/kf/bl/#50 (first marriage), Felicity msf/kf/bl/#37; among the Harpenden working-class: Penny msf/ssrs/ht/#20, Edmund msf/kf/ht/#23, Bryan msf/kf/ht/#25, Vera msf/kf/ht/#34; and finally among the Harpenden middle-class: Gerald and Esme msf/kf/ht/#9 Pru msf/kf/ht/#12, Antonia msf/kf/ht/#35, Hubert msf/kf/ht/#32, Sam msf/ssrs/ht/#28; Humphrey msf/kf/ht/#26, William msf/kf/ht/#24.

women's attitudes towards sex and pregnancy — it is problematic to make 'a priori' decisions about "normal" rates of coitus based on present notions of what that is. The past appears "repressed" to us perhaps, but for those in the past, how much sex was enough, or too much? Would this question even make sense...?'¹⁵ Moreover we do not really know what 'normal' sexual frequency was for any period during the twentieth or twenty-first century, and have no potential bench mark against which to assess coital frequency or patterns of 'abstinence'.¹⁶ Asking respondents whether or not sex was avoided in order to reduce the chance of pregnancy produced a range of oblique and inconclusive answers; in general the majority did not claim to have deliberately avoided sex in order to reduce the chance of pregnancy. However, on the other hand, a considerable number of interviewees pointed out that they thought their sexual frequency was relatively low and some linked periods during which their ardour waned with fertility issues (the effect of contraception on sexual pleasure; the burdens of a large family; health worries about pregnancy and so on). The oral history testimony uncovers many of these kinds of complex versions of abstinence, where narratives of low sexual frequency and modified sexual desire combined with discussion of the pressure to use birth control and ambiguous responses to methods of contraception.

Lorna was typical of this: her version of abstinence linked low sexual frequency to the pressures of working hard while bringing-up children. Her husband was a valve-tester at Mullards factory in Blackburn, whose childhood rheumatic fever excused him from military service. They had married in 1939 and she worked as a busy weaver throughout the period they brought up her two children, born in 1942 and 1945. In this extract Lorna distinguishes between the importance of sex in a loving marriage when young, and how other things take its place later — looking after children together, working and bringing in money — and a notion that a different form of sexual love emerges — one focused on spontaneity which is sensitive to tiredness and other burdens. She emphasises how her marriage was a loving one because sex wasn't performed regularly, to order, as part of a husband's 'conjugal rights'. She sees her marriage as a loving relationship in which sex was spontaneous but flexible and took account of her and the other pressures she was under, her need to sleep after work and look after children. This is a testimony about the caring and sharing balance required in a loving marriage¹⁷ and the way in which a considerate and moderate form of male sexuality expresses that love.

Lorna Well, when you were younger it's [sex] part of a loving life but as I say two children, we're both working, plenty housework, go out to work all day, come home manage children and meals so ... you get you were tired at night. And then you see when the war came er it was shift work ... as I said I had 6 looms and coming home, running a home, I were tired, so really it just were one of them things that wasn't essential..., it wasn't a thing as either of us were in, in, indulged in, you know as I said it was spontaneous....

¹⁵H.G. Cocks, 'Review of Hera Cook, the long sexual revolution: English women, sex and contraception, 1800–1975', *H-Albion, H-Net Reviews*, December, 2005. URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=164411141759612>.

¹⁶V. Call, S. Sprecher, and P. Schwartz, 'The incidence and frequency of marital sex in a national sample', *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 57/3(1995), 639–52.

¹⁷See S. Szreter and K. Fisher, 'Love and authority in mid-twentieth century marriages: Sharing and caring' in L. Delap, B. Griffin, and A. Wills, eds, *The politics of domestic authority in Britain since 1800* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2009), 32–54.

During that time you were having sex, how many times a week or a month would you be having sex at that time?

Well, i.it wasn't every day, every night, you know, um if it were once a week it would probably be a picnic, you know. But um but no it wasn't er.... Maybe when we were first married you know but then wh.when Paul were born we were would um.... He never bothered all that much and then after Karen as as I said as Dr, Dr Howarth said no more babies. So that were when he were extra special careful and and it was less.

So did you reduce the amount of sex in order to reduce the chance of pregnancy? {repeats question}

Well, we really weren't interested in it all that much. We had g.... he, he, he was, he was 5 years older than I was but as I said m,men are stimulated more than women even till we're about 90. But um, no he he he respected me really and he knew my fears so he controlled his, and er he was a controlled man.¹⁸

After motivation to avoid pregnancy increased, following a doctor's warning, a version of 'abstinence' was described, which linked withdrawal and abstinence: they were both 'extra' careful and rarely felt like bothering with sex at all. 'Abstinence' was thus conceptualised and presented by interviewees as a natural, spontaneous and temporally specific response to the pressure and challenges of their busy lives, not something that was deliberate, explicit or worked out. It was a response that was indicative of the strength of the relationship, in which both partners were sensitive to each other's feelings and desires.

In a little under one half (13) of the 33 cases in which some form of abstinence was described the degree of abstinence practised was represented, as here, as being by mutual agreement of the two partners.¹⁹ In almost exactly one-half of cases (16) it was portrayed as something primarily imposed, or proposed unilaterally by the wife.²⁰ In the remaining four cases it was the husband who was presented as the principal instigator.²¹ Several interviewees, like Lorna, stated that abstinence was adopted following a difficult confinement, often accompanied by medical advice that a further pregnancy would be unadvisable. Indeed, this was a consideration in about one-fifth of the marriages where it was reported that abstinence was adopted — abstinence was typically part of the response of couples in those cases to a compelling medical warning.²²

¹⁸Lorna, msf/kf/bl/#25.

¹⁹Lyn msf/kf/bl/#1; Olive msf/jm/bl/#44, Colin msf/kf/bl/#36, Terence msf/ssrs/bl/#15, Sarah msf/kf/bl/#30, Lorna msf/kf/bl/#25, Eleanor msf/kf/bl/#11, Frank msf/ssrs/bl/#16; Bernard and Diana msf/jm/bl/#45; Penny msf/ssrs/ht/#20, Edmund msf/kf/ht/#23; Esme and Gerald msf/kf/ht/#9; Daphne msf/jm/bl/#38.

²⁰Glynnis msf/kf/bl/#4, Marilyn msf/kf/bl/#7, Sally msf/kf/bl/#31, Eva msf/kf/bl/#9, Arthur msf/ssrs/bl/#24, Larry and Doreen msf/kf/bl/#20, Jake and Dorris msf/ssrs/bl/#22, Peter msf/kf/bl/#26 (second marriage), Hilda msf/kf/bl/#50; Pru msf/kf/ht/#12, Antonia msf/kf/ht/#35, Hubert msf/kf/ht/#32, Sam msf/ssrs/ht/#28, Humphrey msf/kf/ht/#26; Vera msf/kf/ht/#34; William msf/kf/ht/#24.

²¹Molly msf/ssrs/bl/#17, Christopher msf/kf/bl/#34, Bryan msf/kf/ht/#25, Felicity msf/kf/bl/#37.

²²This was reported in just over 10% (8) of marriages: Lyn msf/kf/bl/#1 (see below note 26); Lorna msf/kf/bl/#25 (see above); Eleanor msf/kf/bl/#11; Molly msf/ssrs/bl/#17 between her first and second birth; Frank msf/ssrs/bl/#; Penny ht#20 (see below note 40); Gerald and Esme msf/kf/ht/#9; and Humphrey's wife msf/kf/ht/#26. In addition Iris msf/kf/bl/#2 was sterilised after a third birth by caesarean at age 35 on medical advice because of the dangers to her of a further pregnancy; as was Molly msf/ssrs/bl/#17 after her second birth; Lily msf/kf/ht/#14 probably also had an operation to prevent conception.

3. 'You made sure you didn't have the full intercourse': working-class respondents

Among the working-class respondents, particularly those interviewed in Blackburn, French letters, female caps and female pessaries were less frequently used than among the middle-class respondents. In part, this was because of the greater ignorance of sexual matters among the working classes, in part, this reflected the difficulties husband and wife had in discussing sex, which extended to the discussion of birth control strategies, and in part because, as we have shown elsewhere, withdrawal, though not without its own risks and difficulties, was perceived to be more 'natural' and spontaneous, so that many of those who experimented with condoms or caps either rejected them outright in favour of withdrawal or only used them from time to time alongside withdrawal.²³ This was also the case among several working-class informants interviewed in Hertfordshire, such as Agatha (born 1910 and married to a gardener in a stately home) and Grace (born 1922 and married to a part-owner of a small motor-car business):

And you said sometimes you used French letters?

Agatha Yes.

And sometimes he withdrew?

Agatha Yes.²⁴

When you, when you said that you were practising contraception with condoms, a[nd got] pregnant twice in fact.

Grace Mm.

Did that mean that you then changed method....

What did you change to?

Grace Withdrawal.

Withdrawal. And, so how many years were you practising with condoms and then withdrawal?

Grace Not very many [years] because it wasn't satisfactory for Colin.

What, which wasn't?

²³See Fisher and Szreter 2003; K. Fisher, *Birth control, sex and marriage in Britain 1918–1960* (Oxford 2006). A considerable number of Blackburn working-class interviewees (5) claimed to have used condoms at least once, but only for a very short period, having then rejected them in favour of the practice of withdrawal: once only: Merlin, msf/kf/bl/#35, Lucy, msf/kf/bl/#10, Doreen and Larry, msf/kf/bl/#20; for a short period: Eleanor msf/kf/bl/#11; Frank msf/ssrs/bl/#16. Additionally, 7 others started to use condoms but also continued to practise withdrawal at times, as well: Sarah msf/kf/bl/#30; Iris msf/kf/bl/#2; Marilyn msf/kf/bl/#7; Emily msf/kf/bl/#13; Ed msf/ssrs/bl/#23; Terence msf/ssrs/bl/#15; Christopher msf/kf/bl/#34.

²⁴Agatha msf/kf/ht/#7.

Grace The condoms.

They weren't satisfactory?

Grace Well neither, neither was really.²⁵

However, as will be shown here many, perhaps especially among those who used withdrawal, were also disinclined to have sex, when highly motivated to avoid pregnancy. This was particularly true for some women, but some men also responded to this disinclination sympathetically and sought to care for their wives by modifying their desire; sometimes such moderation of libido was sustained by their own dissatisfactions with alternative birth control methods.

As has been shown elsewhere working-class respondents invariably presented birth control as something women usually relied on men to provide.²⁶ Among the Blackburn working-classes men generally chose withdrawal.

A working-class husband, such as Eileen's (they were both born in Blackburn in 1913 and married in 1943), who worked at a fuse factory, was expected to 'provide' this form of contraception for his 'innocent' wife:

And you said you were careful, what does that mean?

Eileen Well I don't know you're we were really too scared to have any more really, we didn't want any more.

So how did you make sure you didn't have any more?

Well you don't go all the way, that's what they say isn't it, so I don't know really.

And how did you find out about that?

Well I suppose he knew all that, knew more than me cos he were older than me, you know. I'm a er bit innocent on that part.²⁷

Jennie, a lifelong Blackburnite born in 1908, was a weaver before she married a sawmill factory worker a year older than herself in 1930, the same year her one child was born.

Jennie We didn't use er what they use today, we didn't use them. You just had to rely on them being er being good...he would be careful...the men knew what to do, didn't need telling.²⁸

Sally, daughter of an engineering fitter, was also a working-class Blackburnite born in 1908 and married to man a year older. Her testimony demonstrates how this convention of relying

²⁵Grace msf/srss/ht/#38.

²⁶K. Fisher, "'She was quite satisfied with the arrangements I made': Gender and birth control in Britain 1930–1950", *Past and Present*, 169 (2000), 161–3; Fisher and Szreter (2003); Fisher (2006).

²⁷Eileen msf/kfbl/12.

²⁸Jennie bl#27.

on the husband and his typical choice of withdrawal extended across the spectrum of working-class cultures in Blackburn. Her husband was from the upper working classes, having taken over his father's small business (a painting and decorating firm) several years before their marriage in 1934. Their one child was born in 1945 after an initial miscarriage. Sally portrayed herself as very much involved in decisions to delay having a baby at the beginning of the marriage,

I didn't want to be married and have a baby. And then we couldn't have one for 5 years, we'd been married 5 years and we'd decided to go in for a child and we didn't get one for another 5 years.

But when it came to birth control methods, she was entirely in her husband's hands. Indeed his care for her in practising withdrawal was something she much appreciated:

So did he sometimes not manage to get off at Mill Hill?

Sally No. No, he was very careful. He was very good, he was very patient.

So would you say that every time you had sex he would get off at Mill Hill?

Umm, always.²⁹

By contrast, working-class respondents interviewed in Hertfordshire were more likely to recall the use of condoms by husbands. But they shared in common with working-class interviewees elsewhere their portrayal of wives as too innocent and shy to be taking the initiative where contraception was concerned. Dora and Joe married in 1945 and had two children. He was a car mechanic. She was religiously active and had attended a mission throughout her youth in Bethnal Green.

Erm did you, did you use contraception at any point? Did you, did you need to use birth control?

Dora [overlapping] I think Joe did because I didn't want to [pause]³⁰

Both men and women were motivated to reduce the amount they had sex at particular times during a marriage and either consciously or unconsciously said they found themselves disinclined to have sex at those times. Such periods could include immediately after marriage as a couple struggled to set up house together or during the final fertile decades when the desired family size had been reached. For both men and women, fear of pregnancy was a powerful disincentive. Many respondents linked lulls in sexual frequency with particular periods of their marriages when a pregnancy was deemed risky, dangerous, financially unsustainable or emotionally impossible.

²⁹Sally msf/kf/bl#31. Mill Hill was the last suburban stop before the central station on the railway line in to Blackburn. The metaphor of getting off at the penultimate stop on the line was a widely used local working class idiom to refer to the practice of withdrawal, as other researchers have found. See, for instance, M. Williamson, 'Getting off at Loftus': Sex and the working-class woman, 1920–1960', *Family and Community History*, 3/12000, 5–18.

³⁰Dora msf/srss/ht/38.

During self-employed decorator Terence's wife's early and prolonged menopause, which began at age 41, the fear of a further pregnancy resulted in more or less total abstinence:

Terence Well, just laid off, just laid off.....you didn't bother because as I say the fear, fear of er making her pregnant again stopped you. The fear it stopped you.³¹

While others in similar situations continued to have sex, this was frequently combined with a partial form of abstinence. Eleanor and her husband- she married in 1934 a mechanic the same age as herself- were 'very careful' when warned not to have another child after an operation, following her late third child, which she had aged 42 in 1949:

Eleanor Oh I didn't want no more than three, oh no, I didn't want no more than three ... but when I've 'ad, when I 'ad that operation they told me never to 'ave another baby ... so you see after that, we were very careful,...

This version of being 'very careful;' involved a reduction in coital frequency:

Eleanor ...'e didn't want another and I 'ad, I didn't want another ... so eh, like, we didn't, didn't bother doin' that much,....³²

In these circumstances, the likelihood that an avoidance of contraceptive risk-taking would lead to periods of sexual abstinence, or low sexual frequency was compounded and increased by the relationship between female sexual pleasure and fear of pregnancy. For those women for whom the desire not to become pregnant had an adverse effect on their ability to enjoy sex, the incentive to resist making-love or to reject their husband's overtures was high.

It is therefore not surprising to find that women who were especially anxious to avoid pregnancy found themselves reluctant to have sex, especially given the awareness that contraceptive methods were fallible and that withdrawal in particular might not be adequately or skilfully employed.³³ For Lyn, born in 1907 and married in 1931 to a teacher in a mill a couple of years younger, the fear of pregnancy, combined with the frustration of using withdrawal, made sex a less pleasurable experience that was consequently practiced less often. She had a very happy marriage, and they only had one child born in 1932, although they subsequently discovered that contraception was unnecessary as she was unable to conceive again:

Lyn I had a very, very difficult confinement and something went wrong, in fact, I nearly lost my life and the baby's you see...but we were so afraid afterwards another baby coming, ... and we didn't know nothing about contraceptives so...we just had to er, practice self-control, yourself, you know. You made sure you didn't have the full intercourse...the man would have to withdraw before he reached a climax, ... as you've got older you realise the

³¹Terence msf/srss/bl/15.

³²Eleanor msfkf/bl/#11.

³³Hera Cook, *The long sexual revolution: English women, sex, and contraception 1800–1975* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) xiii, 412 p, Hera Cook, 'Sexuality and contraception in modern England: Doing the history of reproductive sexuality', *Journal of Social History*, 40(42007), 915–32.

frustration and that as it would er, probably cause in your married life, really. You're not even aware of it then, that particular time, I don't suppose, but um, later on you realise that it, it wasn't a help to having a real happy intimate relationship, you see. So, the, that was what you had to do...[or] deliberately trying to avoid having intercourse, which I think you very often did, you see, especially I think more on behalf, my part, than, er, my husband's, you know. Tired, or deliberately not doing because of, um, that fear was utmost in your mind.³⁴

Most working-class respondents did not recall overt conflict between partners concerning contraceptive practice. This is not, however, to suggest that, unlike middle-class interviewees outlined below, approaches to family building were entirely consensual or harmonious. The imperative to keep discussion of sexual matters to a minimum, combined with a generally accepted gender division of responsibilities towards birth control meant that working-class relationships were full of implicit tensions and silent consensus. Women did not necessarily passively accept male contraceptive decision-making and there were of course times when working-class men and women's contraceptive aims differed.³⁵ In such instances sexual frequency was often reduced at the instigation of one partner or the other. Despite the fact that most women accepted the notion that a husband had a right to regular intercourse, in times of contraceptive conflict periods of abstinence might be engineered. For Doreen, married in 1946 at age 24 to a man five years older, sex was frequently painful and difficult. She developed a range of non-confrontational strategies to avoid having sex too often:

Did you talk about when to have sex?

Doreen No, just if the mood came over him. If it came over two nights together I was late to bed the night after (laughs) because I've always been sore, you see...you try to go to bed a bit later than them and hope they're asleep. There's no arguments, there's no debates and if they waken up, well, it doesn't last long then. Or, use loads of cream inside, that's all. But he's never been a demanding person.³⁶

The avoidance of sex (without open conflict or argument) increased at times when the marriage was under considerable strain. Larry, a foreman bricklayer, was adamant that Doreen should not go out to work after the children started school, which she resented. She had a poor upbringing, but middle-class relatives and was independent, intelligent and ambitious. Larry apparently feared that she thought herself superior to him and wanted to be recognized as a sole breadwinner able to support his wife alone. Whereas for her employment was an expression of her talents, for Larry a wife who worked signified his financial failure. Although she initially rejected the idea that her frustrations affected their sex life, and stressed the ways in which she silently put up with her situation, it was clear

³⁴Lyn msf/kf/bl/#1.

³⁵Kate Fisher, *Birth control, sex and marriage in Britain, 1918–1960* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) vi, 294 p. at 221–27. Ellen Ross has contrasted the 'peaceful and co-operative marital arrangements' in working-class communities in areas of the UK, such as the textile districts of Lancashire with the more openly confrontational strategies employed by Cockney women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. E. Ross, *Love and toil: Motherhood in outcast London, 1870–1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 58.

³⁶Doreen and Larry msf/kf/bl/#20.

that avoiding sex was one of the weapons she used to demonstrate her annoyance. In particular, she found his willingness to apologize in bed and to make up through sex, before the cycle started over again, particularly infuriating. She began to see sex less as an expression of his care or love for her and rather as a new element of his selfishness. If sex was merely something he desired for his own pleasure, then she was less inclined to provide sexual access:

Doreen I used to keep quiet, used to keep quiet. Well, I thought all men were alike.

And how did the arguments between you and Harry affect your sex life?

Doreen Er, erm, well, I don't know that it did really in a way. It was a case of er, er we still slept together...he'd go all sorry...And then er, he would start again the day after. So, what I used to then was stay up late and save any arguments...I put sanitary pads on to tell him I was, I was like that when I wasn't.³⁷ {laughs} It was the only way. I made him go hungry... got to shake hands with it himself. {laughs} I've been a bit mischievous. Do you not think so? we didn't have a lot of rows....I'd go quiet.....I gave over bothering, was easier than arguments because he can argue for a long time.

Finally, Doreen's unsatisfactory experiences of withdrawal provided her with further incentives to refuse sex, resulting in a regime of partial abstinence:

Doreen I've forgotten now because we got used to it. He didn't, he didn't finish...he could have help. It's the woman that can't have help...accept what you get — half measures. Half a cup of tea instead of a full 'un.³⁸

Men's attitudes towards sexual frequency were formed in a silent dialogue with their wives' views. Many men were concerned that their wives enjoyed sex. They were thus determined to choose a method of birth control which suited their spouse. Merlin (born 1908), a bus and tram driver, who had 7 siblings but only one child himself, used withdrawal, despite the fact that he thought withdrawal interfered more with his own personal pleasure, because his wife hated French letters:

What about things like French letters, did you know about them?

Merlin Of course, I knew about them, yeah, they've been going donkey's years, girl!

And did you ever use them?

Once, and she didn't like them, "Don't use those again, Merlin, its horrible!"

Did she tell you why she didn't like it?

No, if she says she didn't like it, she didn't like it.

³⁷For similar examples see Maureen Sutton, *We didn't know aught: Study of sexuality, superstition and death in women's lives in Lincolnshire During the 1930's, 40's and 50's* (Stamford: P. Watkins, 1992) p. 27–8.

³⁸Doreen and Larry msfkf/bl/#20.

Yep.

So we never used them again.

And how did you feel about using them, did you prefer them to withdrawal?

Well, it was more satisfaction to me, won't it?

With a French letter, it was more satisfaction?

Yeah, of course.

So did you mind that she didn't like it?

No...

Was that a disappointment?

...if she didn't want it, she didn't want it, that was it.³⁹

Similarly, Lucy, a weaver, and her husband, a grocer in Blackburn, who had one child in 1937, used withdrawal because they didn't enjoy sex using 'rubber things'.

Lucy Well, what the man puts on. I never tried anything but there's things for women today isn't there. No, no, we didn't like these rubber things, we never, no. Didn't like em, tried em once or twice, didn't like em.

Why didn't you like them?

I don't know...we didn't seem to enjoy...We never used anything. We were just very careful...when 'e at the ending up sort of thing, well 'e must have come out.⁴⁰

However, men who recognized the effect that fear of pregnancy had on their wives, might in addition to regularly and conscientiously employing a method of birth control, also choose to approach her less often. The values of showing consideration in a loving marriage meant that few men objected when their wives resisted their sexual advances but rather sought to match their expressions of desire with that of their wives'. Abstinence, or moderation of frequency of intercourse, can therefore, be understood as part of a caring and loving husband's consideration for his wife's feelings and pleasure; and not only as part of his birth control technique, (in that respondents understood that reduced frequency of sex helped to minimise the chance of an unwanted conception). A lot of women said they enjoyed sex, but many also observed that they hadn't wanted it quite as often as their partners had seemed to, such as Penny, interviewed in Harpenden:

Penny I was nowhere near as sexy as he was. I mean I enjoyed sex but...I didn't have it every time it was offered I would say no, sorry I can't be bothered but he wasn't over, I

³⁹Merlin msf/kf/bl/#35.

⁴⁰Lucy, msf/kf/bl/#10.

don't mean he was oversexed, he didn't want it every night or every day or anything like that.⁴¹

Thus, deliberate reduction in frequency of intercourse by husbands among the working class could be both to reduce the risk of unwanted conception and because considerate and 'caring' husbands reacted to signals from their wives and the experience of being refused at times, so as to suit their wives better by initiating sex less frequently than they might otherwise have been inclined to.

Agatha I think I was terrible to him really... saying oh I yer know 'I'm tired', excuse, {laughing}, I was never one for sex really to tell you the truth... 'I didn't feel very well', that was the best one.

And how often would you make these excuses?

Oh, every now and again, not too often, but I bet you it was night after night many times, {laughing}, he was very, very kind and very thoughtful, I was very lucky there, very lucky, couldn't have wished for anyone nicer really, thoughtful, yer know what I mean.⁴²

Finally, many working-class men also had their own reasons for avoiding sex; many found problems of dissatisfactions with birth control had a negative effect on their own sexual desires. Frank, who had a range of jobs in Blackburn, spending his longest periods as an ambulance driver attendant, disliked condoms, and chose to use withdrawal most of the time:

Sheaths...did you use them occasionally?

Frank At the beginning you know how it were, er yes but very occasionally and then er as I say you got more er experienced they just went by the board.

Right. I see, so you were using them at the start because you weren't sure about being able to control yourself?

Exactly, yeah, I should put it that, yeah.

And as you became....

Yeah but not, well I wouldn't say, I wouldn't say on a regular basis. Er, no I would say on a regular basis but er we er er I did use them.

And did you find them satisfactory?

Er, well er er we, well if I can go back that far but er let's say it it dulled the sensation. Er, I don't know whether you've ever used them or what but er er that, that, that's, that's as, er as

⁴¹Penny ht#20. Early on in their marriage Penny feared that she might be unable to have children, as her husband had lost a testicle as a baby. After ten years of marriage however she fell pregnant and they had three children in three years in 1947, 1949 and 1950. Warned not to get pregnant again, the period of the early 1950s was additionally a fraught time in their marriage when Penny felt isolated and exhausted.

⁴²Agatha, msf/kf/ht/#7.

far as I can go er yes it it achieved the main object but it's er, it it doesn't er, er there's nothing like nature.⁴³

Although withdrawal was the preferred option among both men and women of the Blackburn working class, many interviewees like Frank, did not perceive it to be unproblematic. Although contraception was a high priority for Frank, as following two miscarriages in the early 1940s, his wife had been told that pregnancy was dangerous for her health, he preferred withdrawal to condoms.

So did, you practised withdrawal?

Frank Oh yes, oh aye. Well, you had, you had to do, yes...naturally it was a, it was a problem but er er you just had to be careful, that's all, you know...you didn't er er get the fuller the full satisfaction, you know what I mean, you'd to, you'd to er cut it kind of thing.

Frank explained that to be practised properly and 'carefully', withdrawal required a 'performance' from the husband.

Didn't you ever find yourself tempted to er hang on a bit too long and...?

Frank Oh, oh yes, oh yes. Well, you see this is where er this is where you know it got really er you'd to, you'd to really perform and, and get it, you know get it exact. But to be, to be on the safe side you had to withdraw before anything like that happened. Because at back of your mind you knew that er you didn't want, you didn't want her to be expecting.

This meant that, given the perceived limitations as to the sexual satisfactions it offered, even a man like Frank, proud of his mastery of the technique, would 'forget it' and 'rather have a drink' at times:

So afterwards when you had to be careful, when you had to withdraw and you didn't want to get your wife pregnant and so on, I mean would you say that you'd be, I mean could you say how often you would ma, have sex, would it be every week or every month or what,

...

Frank Very, very, no very, very irregular.

...

A few times a year, you mean?

Well, no, not, not as far apart as that but certainly er not er not more than what, twice a month...

Right...

⁴³Frank msf/srss/bl#16.

at that. But er this rate you see as I say it were it were never, it were never an important thing.

...

I suppose there were times when er as I say I'd rather have a drink or, or go to bed and you know er forget it. It were never, it were never uppermost in me mind.⁴⁴

Thus, many working-class respondents talked of partial or total abstinence featuring in their marriages at various points, some of it by mutual agreement, some unilaterally imposed and some of it closely associated with the general ethos that good husbands should be considerate and patient, careful and not greedy. Some men and women found the two main methods of birth control available to them, withdrawal and condoms, less than satisfactory. Consequently, often without explicitly discussing the matter, many women discouraged husbands from sex. Most men respected their wives' wishes; and this was one of several reasons they expressed for moderating their sexual activity.

4. 'The fires got damped down rather': middle-class interviewees

By contrast with working-class interviewees, many middle-class respondents claimed that wives, as well as husbands, had had knowledge of birth control methods around the time they got married. That it was acceptable for young middle-class women to have some knowledge of birth control was revealed by the cases of parents or relatives actively providing information and support. In 1942 Gill (born 1920), who was studying for a Certificate in Social Administration at Manchester University and was engaged to a young army major, reported being given a marriage guidance manual by her mother:

Gill Oh my mother gave me a book before I was married, Ma...Mary Stops, think it was, Stops was she called, Stops, Stopes?... I read that...and er, er she did an enormous amount of good because it was not a subject that was discussed er, anywhere.⁴⁵

By contrast, no working-class women reported receiving such a gift from a family member at this stage in their lives; nor did they recall consulting such books in this way to assess birth control options in their marriages, despite the well-documented efforts of the nascent birth control clinics and some early marriage guidance manuals to propagate this information among the working classes.⁴⁶ Among some middle-class couples, in complete contrast with all working-class testimony, women took the initiative and sorted out birth

⁴⁴Frank msf/srss/bl#16.

⁴⁵Gill msfkf/bl/48.

⁴⁶On the interwar birth control movement and its clinics, see Fryer, Peter, *The birth controllers* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1965); Wood, Clive, and Suiters, Beryl, *The fight for acceptance: A history of contraception* (Guildford: Billing & Sons, 1970). Leathard, Audrey, *The fight for family planning* (London: Macmillan 1980); Lewis, Jane, 'The ideology and politics of birth control in inter-war England', *Women's Studies International Quarterly*, 2 (1979), 33–48; Davey, Clare, 'Birth control in Britain during the inter-war years: Evidence from the Stopes correspondence', *Journal of Family History*, 13 (1988), 329–45; McLaren, Angus, *A history of contraception from antiquity to the present day* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990); Porter, Roy, and Hall, Lesley, *The facts of life: The creation of sexual knowledge in Britain, 1650–1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), Part II; Hoggart, Lesley, 'The campaign for birth control in Britain in the 1920s', in A. Digby and J. Stewart (eds.), *Gender, health and welfare* (London: Routledge 1996), 143–66; Cook, Hera, 'The English Sexual Revolution: Technology and social change', *History Workshop Journal* 59 (2005), 109–128; Cook, Hera, *The long sexual revolution: English women, sex, and contraception, 1800–1975* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), Part II.

control practices from very early in the marriage. Although, most preferred male methods of contraception, and most tended not to discuss the matter subsequently during their marriages, many middle-class women were much more involved in the initial process of deciding what birth control to use than in working-class partnerships.

While middle-class women tended to know more about birth control, the expectation that husbands could be relied upon to use contraception was also strong and some women chose to avoid taking any responsibility, despite having their own independent knowledge of methods. Betty, a teacher in Brighton who married in 1948 aged 26, read *'The Woman's Medical Guide'*, which her husband Horace, who was also a teacher and seven years her senior, joked meant she had 'taught him' about birth control. She challenged this interpretation and claimed they used condoms because she 'left it to my husband to decide'.⁴⁷

When Hilda (born 1913) got married in 1947 to her second husband, owner of several cotton mills, they were fearful that a baby might inherit a mental deficiency suffered by her sister. This discussion did not extend to deliberation about what method to use; rather she saw herself as typical in leaving contraceptive matters up to her husband:

Hilda I presume he, you see, it was years before the pill, and it was just usual for the man to take precautions... You see, things are very different in the '40's... Everything was left to the men.⁴⁸

In other marriages, middle-class women were more prepared to be directly involved in contraception and as a result family limitation was initially approached as a joint problem to be solved by couples in discussion with each other. Mark and Joanna, both Quakers brought up in Hampstead, who married in their early thirties, discussed birth control before they got married in 1947 and Joanna decided to go, with a female friend, to a lady doctor (Dr Augusta Landman in Finchley) just before marriage to get advice. The doctor 'told me what he [her husband] should do'.⁴⁹ As a result they used condoms, which Mark bought by mail order.

A number of middle-class men, sought their wives' cooperation in birth control matters. Men assumed (usually accurately) that their wives were less well-informed than they were. Many thus undertook to inform them, so that they might take part more equally in the decisions made. Angela and Hugh both came from working-class backgrounds and were highly intelligent and ambitious. He became an electrician and established his own electrical contracting business soon after the war ended while Angela was employed in various clerical jobs. They married in their early twenties in Preston soon after the Second World War ended. She had carefully preserved her innocence, and she was aware that as a Catholic her mother disapproved of birth control.

⁴⁷Betty and Horace, msfkf/ht/#31.

⁴⁸Hilda, msf/kf/bl/#50.

⁴⁹Joanna and Mark ms/kf/ht#22.

Hugh She didn't know anything about it when she got married, [if] I didn't know about birth control, she wouldn't have known anything. We'd have finished up with a big family again....I had the book Marie Stopes....I bought that. It's maybe still up in the loft, I don't know. [Angela and Hugh laugh]

Angela Well, I think it probably taught me because I was very innocent.⁵⁰

Similarly, Roger (born 1910), whose naval background and experience of public school provided him with perhaps a greater exposure to sexual banter, initiated a discussion about contraception with his wife, whose father was also a naval officer, before they got married. He suggested condoms, but his wife decided she'd rather seek out a female method from a Marie Stopes clinic:

Roger When we were married, when we were engaged we had frank things, I said "Well, what about babies?", she said "Well, I don't want them immediately", so I said, "Well then", I said, "We've got to...", I used to refer to it as a raincoat {chuckle}, I said, "buy raincoats then", and she said, "Yes, I don't much like that", you see. Now that was, that was it, you see. And she said, "I'll see what I can do. I'll call in at that Marie Stopes Clinic". And she went up...to be prepared and then she was told that, as she was a virgin, I'll be quite frank with you, they couldn't do very much for her. So she'd have to wait until things had happened. So, we had to be very careful on our honeymoon and then she shot off back...⁵¹

There were also a few accounts in which it was portrayed that the wives were expected to take responsibility for contraception from the very beginning, often with assistance from female friends, or even a mother: London-born Antonia was one of the youngest interviewees. She had one sister and was boarding-school educated. Her father was a solicitor and her mother worked as a secretary in the voluntary sector.

Antonia When I first got married my mother sent me along to the doctor and said, 'Get him to fit you up with something.'... she had got both Marie Stopes books which she gave me to read...⁵²

Possibly her mother's action was prompted by the fact that Antonia left Chelsea Art College in 1949, aged 21 to marry a wealthy businessman fourteen years older, because she was pregnant.

Emma, was one of the older interviewees, born in 1909. She married in 1936 and was the sole university-educated woman among the interviewees. She had taken a degree at a northern red-brick university, where she had met her husband, who worked throughout their marriage as a biological research scientist. Despite his disciplinary training, she portrayed her partner as too cerebral and other-worldly to have been able to manage the physical details of contraception. With the assistance of a female friend, she adopted a female method:

⁵⁰Hugh and Angela msf/kf/ht/#18.

⁵¹Roger, msfkf/ht/#10.

⁵²Antonia msf/kf/ht/#35.

Emma I went to somebody who advised about the anti you know anti, whatever you call them. I had a friend and we went together I remember because she was getting married as well.⁵³

Middle-class women's generally greater knowledge of contraceptive matters and their desire to be involved in birth control discussions, combined with many men's determination to seek out their opinion on the matter, meant that a much greater range of contraceptive methods were used or experimented with, including far greater use of female methods such as pessaries and caps, than in working-class relationships. Female methods of contraception were used at some point in as many as half of middle-class marriages among those interviewed in Harpenden and were in fact the sole method used in one third of them.

However, resulting choices not infrequently remained fraught and problematic. Female methods were rarely positively embraced. A few respondents were happy using a cap, but the majority found them difficult to use and at odds with their expectation that they should play a relatively passive role in sex.

Roger Well in the end, my dear Sibyl, she said to me "I'm damn fed up", she said, "pushing this thing every time", she said, "We'll go at it without".⁵⁴

Hilda I knew about them [caps], yes, but I didn't want anything like that...I don't like being rummaged up, down there.⁵⁵

Although some middle-class women were portrayed as positively preferring to take control of the couple's contraception themselves by using female methods,⁵⁶ more frequently found was testimony from middle-class women asserting that they personally preferred to opt for male methods, conforming to the more general pattern found almost universally among working-class respondents of both sexes in the north and the south, who assumed that birth control was primarily a husband's responsibility.

Withdrawal posed similar challenges to middle-class and working-class respondents. Many more middle-class informants preferred condoms, but nevertheless a significant number chose withdrawal as their preferred method and others combined the use of withdrawal with condoms or other appliances:

June It was withdrawal all our married life.

What about French letters? Did you use those at all?

Occasionally. Yes, occasionally. But we still, er I think we used more of the the, of the withdrawal method than than er er we did try, we did use er the French letter

⁵³Emma msf/kf/ht/#37.

⁵⁴Roger, msf/kf/ht/#10.

⁵⁵Hilda, msf/kf/bl/#50.

⁵⁶In fact in only three cases did women portray themselves in this way: Emma msf/kf/ht/#37, Angela msf/kf/ht/#18 and Gill msf/kf/bl/#48 (see note 59 below). In the other cases this could have been convenient, wishful-thinking on the part of the surviving husband: Roger msf/kf/ht/#10, Reg msf/kf/ht/#36 Patrick msf/kf/ht/#16.

Why was that, why did you choose withdrawal more often than French letters?

I think it, I don't know, I ca...I can't tell you that. I don't know. We weren't er, the type of couple that er wanted intimacy every night you know...⁵⁷

June was one of the handful of middle-class Harpenden interviewees who had lived in the north for most of her life, had a very happy marriage, contracted in 1936 to a Lipton's-trained grocery manager who owned his own business in Brighouse, West Yorkshire; they had two children. Note also the hint in this last sentiment that withdrawal was appropriate for a couple with a moderate attitude towards sex and that only those who 'wanted intimacy every night' would need to use condoms, implying an association for June of condoms with lack of restraint and decorum. While middle-class respondents were far more willing to use condoms than working-class respondents, nevertheless complaints about them remained from both male and female respondents. Hubert, married in 1936 aged 26, was a director of the agricultural engineering firm established by his wife's family. They had a fraught marriage: his wife did not want to have many, if any, children. His views on French letters reflect also his anger at her resistance to embracing family life and love with him.

Hubert Very unsatisfactory. Like eating sweets with the paper on. [chuckle]...and she felt that that was something foreign introduced that was even more unpleasant. (pause) Strange isn't it?...something that you put on to have sex, which didn't seem right...Not natural. It certainly wasn't satisfactory.⁵⁸

Gill and her husband, who came from a family of mill owners, first used French letters on honeymoon in 1945, though she did not know where he got them, and assumed it was a chemists (although he had served throughout the war as a major in the army and perhaps had acquired them in military service).

Gill [French letters] are a menace, aren't they? (laughs) Well, you've got to stop and fiddle about you see, no, they're not...I mean he would use them [condoms] yes but um, because the, that's what we wanted. But not because he thought it was especially er, er...it didn't??, it doesn't make it more enjoyable.

Did it make it much less enjoyable?

Well, it's the paraphernalia, isn't it? I think that's the really the thing, you know you've got the y.y. you're not totally relaxed, got the thing on I suppose, I don't know.⁵⁹ Due to the paraphernalia she subsequently opted to use the cap which she presented as her own choice.
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In fact in middle-class relationships, in which, unlike among the working classes, there was not a widely-accepted, silent agreement to leave birth control choices up to the husband, the issue of the choice of birth control method was much more likely to be a source of

⁵⁷June, msf/kf/ht/#27.

⁵⁸Hubert ht #32.

⁵⁹Gill msf/kf/bl/#48.

⁶⁰As we have seen (note 45), in Gill's case her mother had given her a copy of Stopes before she got married and this helped resolve this dissatisfaction with condoms, as she then had herself fitted with a cap by her doctor.

resentment, tension and dispute. Although many couples might approach marriage both with a degree of shared knowledge about birth control and a determination to canvass each others' views and preferences, this did not amount to a commitment to a shared responsibility for birth control throughout their marriage. The negotiation that occurred at the commencement of the marriage over which birth control method to adopt was not necessarily the prelude to a continuing and harmonious discussion of sexual matters and birth control choices throughout the ensuing marriage. Contraception remained a difficult topic of conversation and few middle-class couples regularly discussed birth control questions or problems of family planning.

Despite the fact that both men and women in the middle classes had much greater access to books providing advice and information about birth control, this continuing difficulty with discussing the subject was partly because suspicion remained that such information was not entirely respectable. For many, Marie Stopes continued to have a morally dubious status, and even a salacious public reputation. Sam was training to be an articled clerk in the 1930s, and Roger was a chartered surveyor.

Sam There was um, yes there was 1 or 2 books went the rounds of the fellas. What we used to call 'dirty books' ...Stopes, Marie Stopes...I don't know where it turned up from. But um, that was very naughty.⁶¹

Roger ...everyone in those days, if they were sensible they got hold of Dr. Marie Stopes' book on married love, that was it, I remember that name "Married Love". ..., yes, Dr. Marie Stopes. A woman who had never been married but who knew all about it and it was referred to by one or two people I knew as a really filthy book {laugh},....⁶²

In this climate of opinion, although there was greater female awareness of birth control methods and many couples were able jointly to work out what contraception to use upon marriage, talking about sexual matters remained difficult for most. In spite (or perhaps because) of the knowledge of a range of birth control methods, many remained unsatisfied with the methods adopted. Such dissatisfaction meant that contraception frequently became an issue of tension and friction between husband and wife, and this could be difficult to resolve because of the problems many had in discussing the matter. Consequently, sexual frequency might wane, for those unsatisfied with their contraceptive choices who could not openly debate the matter with their spouse. Norman, born in working-class Islington in 1914 and married in 1944, subsequently trained as a teacher in the post-war Emergency Training Scheme and taught in a Junior and then a Secondary Modern School in Tottenham.⁶³

Norman We didn't have many conversations about it, no. [pause]...I mean, if she, if she had spoken out about it and said so-and-so-and-so I would have acted up.

So how did you feel about using French letters?

⁶¹Sam ht#28.

⁶²Roger ht#10.

⁶³Norman was a socially mobile individual. He had thoroughgoing working-class origins and a working-class employment history until he entered the Emergency Teacher Training programme in his thirties. He is nominally classified in the Appendix as 'working class' but could just as plausibly have been allocated as (lower) middle class.

Oh, a bit of a pain...when a man is, is eagerly entering into sex, he doesn't want any obstacles does he, really? I, I'm speaking generally now, when you're cool and calm you, you can do all these things, but uh, uh, there's an awful lot of sex without condoms of course.

And how about you and your wife, did you always use condoms or was it only some of the time or...

Some of the time, not always, um... if you didn't have any French letters left etceteras and uh...[pause] it wasn't like putting money in the bank and things, you know, its another item of, of uh, shopping which wasn't always easy, uh, they got pushed aside. That's all I can remember. [pause]

That never induced you then to have discussions whether or not to change method or get a cap or do something else if you weren't completely happy with the method you were using?

I can't recall any long discussions on it, no, she left it to me...And I think she was pleased to leave it to me.

Yeah...

Although she enjoyed her sex.[pause]...

So... you'd still have sex if you'd run out of condoms for example.

Well, I don't know, its probably a mixture of both. Sometimes you took a chance, and sometimes you left her before you finished. A great deal of sexual dissatisfaction, uh, at times....if it was interrupted, uh, she could perhaps finish me off easily enough, I couldn't easily always, easily finish her off....a good large family would have ruined me, would have frustrated me and stopped me and everything else, so, I expect things like that had a halting effect.⁶⁴

The absence of effective discussion between married couples can thus be closely associated with descriptions of various forms of abstinence in their marriages. Sometimes this could be presented merely as considerate behaviour on a husband's part, rather as has been shown in some working-class marriages. Gerald, for instance, who described, a joint decision to use condoms as 'the least traumatic' option, talked of 'becoming diplomats with one another', while also describing how effective his wife could be in 'chilling' his ardour. This very happy solidly middle-class marriage, contracted in 1945 when both partners were in their mid-twenties, produced three children, after which Gerald and Esme were warned not to risk another pregnancy. It was at this period, when Esme felt additionally resentful at her husband's inability to fully appreciate how difficult it was to look after three children, that he found his overtures less frequently welcomed. Moreover, three years after the birth of her third child Esme fell pregnant again. She successfully induced an abortion, but in these

⁶⁴Norman, msf/kf/ht/#17.

circumstances Gerald's consideration of his wife and the need to avoid pregnancy might have further affected their coital frequency.

Gerald Well I think we became diplomats with one another sufficiently to give indications that one's overtures were not wanted and believe me if one isn't wanted the message you get is so chilling.⁶⁵

However, several other middle-class respondents recalled difficulties with their birth control methods generating unresolved sexual dissatisfactions and resentful memories. William, one of the oldest respondents born in West London in 1902, a successful businessman, had married in 1931 a Catholic five years older than him, They had no children.

So, how did you avoid pregnancy?

William Pardon

How did you avoid pregnancy?

I don't know, I've forgotten now what we did [silence] Oh dear, Oh dear [pause] no its something I don't want to talk about.

Okay

Ssso bad mem, so unhappy memories [pause]

....

William And umm, and, and we did, I'll, I'll be, I'll be [pause] I'll confess really that once or twice I used a contraceptive but she confessed it, my wife confessed it to the priest and it made her so unhappy that we had to cut, cut it out.

That must have been very difficult.

Yeah, it was difficult, yes.

Yes

So now I've told you.⁶⁶

Both men and women had painful memories about the unsatisfactory contraceptive methods they felt they had been compelled by their partner to adopt. Three of the youngest Harpenden, middle-class women interviewed (two born in 1928 and one in 1931) were each extremely resentful that, in their view, their husbands had selfishly and unilaterally imposed the use of a female method upon them in full knowledge of their own dislike of the method. The men in these three marriages were each in the position that their considerable wealth and income meant that if their attitude led to an unusually large family (which it did in two

⁶⁵Gerald msf/kf/ht/#9.

⁶⁶William msf/kf/ht/24.

of the three cases — marriages which produced 5 and 6 children), this would not be financially crippling. Two of the three women were quite happy to go along with a large family up to a point but eventually they wanted no more, yet they found that their husbands' attitudes towards contraception did not change.

Judith Oh he didn't care less as long as I did something, he wasn't there to do it, I had to do it...

Did you ever want your husband to do anything?

Yes, I said, 'I think its time you took some responsibility.' (mocking) 'Oh don't be so silly, there's nothing I can do.' and I, I well vasectomies hadn't been invented, or at least I suppose they had for medical reasons, but n, n, not for con, contraceptive reasons so um that, that never came up at all.

What about things like French letters?

Yes, we, he couldn't be bothered with that, he didn't like that, the feeling of that. He tried them and he didn't get on with them.⁶⁷

Each of the three women felt they had been forced to use female methods because their husbands had abdicated any responsibility for birth control, making it clear that they did not see why they should compromise their personal enjoyment of sex by taking any contraceptive action.

And why was it your responsibility to deal with contraception?

Antonia Oh, because condoms were most, not only uncomfortable, but lessened your pleasure and were much more of a nuisance. Erm which is probably still what people say nowadays. Erm and he simply wouldn't have used them because he thought they were too,

[overlapping] Did you talk about them?

Er yes we did because erm I think he knew I hated what I had and so we did talk about it, but he always refused to use anything himself.

Did you try them?

No.

What about withdrawal? Did you hear about that?

We knew about that but er we didn't do it. I mean as far as he was concerned that wasn't, that wasn't er a proper result.

...

⁶⁷Judith msf/kf/ht/33.

'So the doctor fitted a er a cap for me, which I found very unpleasant and I hated using'.⁶⁸

These three middle-class husbands were, in effect, adopting completely the opposite gendered assumption about responsibility for birth control to that of the working classes, namely that birth control was a female issue, not something which men needed to be bothered with.⁶⁹ Clearly, however, their wives did not share this viewpoint, punishing them with avoidance if possible:

And did you ever avoid sex in order to avoid pregnancy?

Antonia [pause] I don't think so. [pause] Erm [pause] I [pause] except that I did avoid sex when I could manage it. I mean I was very disinclined to have it except when I really couldn't avoid it.

How would you manage to avoid it?

Well [pause] by saying 'No.' to a certain extent, but it used to make him very cross. Erm or by erm [pause] you know trying to go along with him and and really not managing to. Fighting him off at the last minute, which he used to get even crosser about, which is hardly surprising really. And I just thought I simply can't cope with this. [pause] No, it was not a good thing. And he used to go stumping off somewhere to sort things out for himself.⁷⁰

Thus, several middle-class respondents portrayed episodes of abstinence in their marriages where the partners had fallen-out over their use of contraception. Hubert, for instance, born in 1911, a director of an engineering firm whose wife had been a nurse but insisted she did not work after their marriage in 1936, was unable to shift his wife's absolute opposition to sexual relations after she felt she had been let down by the failure of the contraception he provided (withdrawal). He had known in advance that she definitely did not want the resulting third birth (and she had asked him to approach a doctor for an abortion), whereas he said that he would have been happy to have had even more children.

You say that sex was very important to your life and to your marriage?

Hubert It was, but I, it got, (pause) the fires got damped down rather. I had to just put up with it.

So how would she damp down your fires?

By not responding in any way, not encouraging me, in fact, the opposite.

How, how would she show that she wasn't interested?

(pause) Well, ju, just being like a log, not approaching, not giving me a, anything like a passionate kiss of any kind. A peck occasionally, for show, and that was it.

⁶⁸Antonia msf/kf/ht/#35.

⁶⁹The third was the husband of Gay ht#13.

⁷⁰Antonia msf/kf/ht/#35.

....

And after your third child was born, did you decide that was enough for children?

Yes. Yes. Well, then she really, sort of, drew up the drawbridge and we were very hard put to it to get on, anyway.

....

Did your sex life end completely then?

Completely.⁷¹

5. Conclusions

We have here demonstrated the ways in which diverse forms of partial abstinence formed part of many couples' responses (either consensual or not) to the desire to reduce the chances of pregnancy, alongside the adoption of a range of other birth control methods, primarily withdrawal and condoms, especially during periods of their marriage when a possible pregnancy was seen as particularly problematic or dangerous. Rather than seeing the increasing adoption of methods of contraception during the early and mid-twentieth century as reducing the need or the likelihood that a couple would avoid sex if wanting to avoid pregnancy, we have confirmed the hypothesis that withdrawal, abstinence and other methods of birth control often coexisted as part of a mixed repertoire of responses to varying circumstances, motivations and desires.⁷² Indeed, forms of abstinence figured in both working-class and middle-class responses to the desire to limit their family size or to reduce their risks of becoming pregnant, despite marked class differences in the oral testimony regarding the birth control techniques used.

With secondary education as normal among the middle classes, wives usually knew more than working-class women about human reproduction and also had significantly greater access to reliable birth control information at the time they married. Although sharing fully in this era's widespread and long-standing assumption that the initiation of sex within marriage was primarily a male role and that birth control would be provided by husbands, there was often discussion between the two partners early in the marriage and female methods were not infrequently adopted. By contrast among the working classes, there was a universal, unspoken assumption that men should provide the marriage's contraception and female methods were a rarity.

There were also interesting regional differences between the north-west and the south-east. Female methods were less in evidence among the small group of Blackburn middle-class interviewees than among the middle-class respondents who had lived mostly in the Home Counties, interviewed in Harpenden; and this may reflect significantly easier access at this

⁷¹Hubert msf/kf/ht/32.

⁷²Szreter, *Fertility, class and gender*, ch.8; Cook, 'The English sexual revolution'; see also David and Sanderson for a theoretical calculation of the considerable fertility-reducing effect of combining withdrawal with reduced coital frequency: David, P.A. and Sanderson, W.C., 'Rudimentary contraceptive methods and the American transition to marital fertility control 1855–1915', in S.L. Engerman and R.E. Gallman, (eds), *Long term factors in American economic growth* (Chicago 1986), 307–79.

time for the middle classes in the London area to confidential clinics and doctors where young women could obtain female devices. The working-class respondents interviewed in Hertfordshire, though equally as unlikely as the Blackburn working class to have used female methods, were more likely to have used condoms than withdrawal. In this they were unlike both the Blackburn working-class and the working-class samples from South Wales and Oxford, whom Fisher has interviewed separately.⁷³ Again this may partly reflect significant differences in this period between the metropolitan area and the rest of the country in ease of access to, and familiarity with condoms.

Despite the awareness of and increasing use of various methods of contraception, sexual abstinence remained an ever-present option and an integral feature of this generation's sexual attitudes and practices. Running across these class and regional differences in the birth control methods used, there was widespread testimony to various forms of sexual abstinence in marriage. The motives and contexts in which abstinence occurred were highly diverse and could be both unilaterally imposed or by mutual consent. Only in a minority of cases did this refer to prolonged, complete abstinence. More typical was partial or temporary abstinence, an acknowledged tendency to reduce sex for various reasons.

It is also evident that attitudes towards sex and contraception varied considerably during the course of their reproductive years. Among the working classes, those who were extremely strongly motivated to avoid pregnancy at various points in the marriage, particularly those who feared the health consequences of a further pregnancy, were likely to feel less inclined to have sex; the attendant pleasures tempered by anxiety. In these circumstances, abstinence was also part of the ways in which couples communicated a shared recognition that pregnancy was to be avoided. Men's deliberate and overt suppression of desire was offered as, and perceived by their partners to have been, an act of consideration and concern for his wife and the family. Among many middle-class couples, the absence of a shared consensus about appropriate birth control methods, combined with a reluctance to discuss the matter (despite a preparedness to do so earlier in their marriages on the part of some respondents) meant that abstinence could also often be the result of a subsequent breakdown in the sexual relationship. Abstinence both solved the birth control problem but at the same time could reflect tensions and resentments within the marriage. The analysis of birth control practices within marriage presented here also indicates that future research needs to take into account the ways in which a couple's strategy, and individuals' attitudes towards sex and contraception varied considerably during the course of their reproductive years. Different strategies towards sexual activity, contraception and abstinence were adopted at different times and were dependent upon the extent to which a further pregnancy was seen as undesirable.

Thus, rather than the picture that has often been purveyed of a general trend towards gradually increasing sexual freedom of expression within an increasingly companionate marriage emerging throughout society during the mid-twentieth-century decades as a cultural concomitant of the increased technical control over conception, supposedly signified

⁷³Fisher, K., and Szreter, S., "'They prefer withdrawal': The choice of birth control in Britain, 1918–1950", *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 34/2 (2003), 263–91; Fisher, K., *Birth control, sex and marriage*, ch 3.

by the secular fertility decline, the oral testimony presented here indicates a significantly more complex process of historical change. While birth rates in marriage had become tightly controlled by the 1930s and 1940s, this did not necessarily indicate an easy mastery and widespread use of the most efficient and modern techniques of contraception throughout the population. Even at the end of the secular fertility decline from the 1930s through to the early 1960s, sexual behaviour in marriage among both the middle and the working-class interviewees was characterised by much resort to self-imposed moderation and enforced abstinence. The middle-class respondents were no more likely than the working-class interviewees to see their marriages as having been ones in which the loving sexually expressive intimacy of the sort envisaged by proponents of the companionate ideal, was achieved and maintained.⁷⁴

Traditional contraceptive methods of moderation, periods of abstinence and of withdrawal were as likely to have featured in any of these marriages, including those which the respondents viewed as successful and loving, as the modern female and male barrier methods advocated in contemporary marriage guidance and birth control manuals of the period as the key to a sexually rewarding loving relationship. Nor was it necessarily the case among those interviewed here that couples abandoned traditional methods as they became more experienced or more knowledgeable about modern techniques. There were many cases where condoms were abandoned in preference for withdrawal or where condoms and withdrawal were used interchangeably during the marriage. Thus, 'modern' and 'traditional' methods, also often incorporating varying degrees of abstinence, were used in combination and in varied ways in the course of marriages. Experience and expertise or medical advice could lead to the adoption of 'modern' male or female barrier methods, but just as frequently informants reported having discarded a barrier method, either for the more 'natural' method of withdrawal or because abstinence was viewed as preferable by one or both partners. Indeed, partially abstinent moderation was seen by several respondents as part of a caring, loving companionate relationship, rather than an emphasis in their account on equating companionship or love in marriage with the greater sexual activism supposedly made possible by modern, foolproof contraceptives. The history of the rise of the ideology of companionate marriage, the history of changing contraceptive practices, and the history of love, sex and marriage in English society each need to be studied as distinct processes of historical change. Though their chronologies may be related, they should not be assumed to be identical: they are each distinct elements in a complex and socially varied history.

Appendix A: The oral history sample— summary of project design and characteristics

According to recent historical demographic research on England and Wales by Szreter (1996) and by Garrett et al. (2001), reproductive patterns during the fertility decline were extremely locally diverse, not only in terms of social class, but also community and 'place'.

⁷⁵ Before this project was initiated Kate Fisher had completed an oral history study of

⁷⁴For a fuller treatment of these issues in the oral testimony, see S. Szreter and K. Fisher, *Sex before the sexual revolution. Private life in England 1918–1965* (C.U.P. forthcoming 2010), esp. chs. 8–9.

working-class birth control in the South Wales collieries and in the city of Oxford. Therefore, two further contrasting communities were selected for this investigation and also a middle-class sample was included from each of the two new locations.⁷⁶ The textiles towns of both Lancashire and the West Riding of Yorkshire are considered to provide the greatest working-class contrast to the country's coal-mining communities, in terms of their reproductive patterns during the fertility decline. Whereas mining families recorded the highest fertility in the 1911 national census, workers in the textiles industries exhibited among the lowest fertility in the working class, as low as some sections of the middle and lower middle classes.⁷⁷ Blackburn in Lancashire was selected as a representative mill town. It had a high proportion of women weavers in the workforce and had characteristic low fertility in 1911.⁷⁸ For a further dimension of contrast, a thoroughly middle-class community was sought. Harpenden was selected as one of a cluster of affluent commuter towns in north-west Hertfordshire, just outside London, which exhibited some of the highest concentrations in England and Wales of residents in Registrar-General's Classes I and II at the 1951 census.

It was also considered important to interview representatives of both the middle and the working classes in each of the two selected communities. Garrett et al found that the fertility of middle-class couples in 1911 resident in heavily industrial communities was more like that of the working-class couples in those communities than like other middle-class couples living in predominantly middle-class environments. Similarly, working-class couples living in affluent 'white collar' residential suburbs exhibited much lower fertility than those in similar occupations living in industrial towns.⁷⁹ Therefore the attempt was made to include interviews with working-class respondents in the affluent, middle-class community of Harpenden and with middle-class respondents who had lived in or around the proletarian mill-town of Blackburn. There are, therefore, four distinct social groups, whose recollections of birth control practices are examined here, a Blackburn working-class set, a Blackburn middle-class group, a Harpenden middle-class set and a Harpenden working-class group.⁸⁰ Altogether 50 married or previously-married persons were interviewed in Blackburn and 38 in Harpenden.⁸¹

The 57 women and 31 men interviewed were all born between 1901 and 1931 (Fig. 1 shows that 90% were born between 1905 and 1924). This is predominantly the generation who came of marriageable age at the end of the national, secular fertility decline. Most

⁷⁵S. Szreter, *Fertility, class and gender in Britain 1860–1940* (Cambridge: C.U.P. 1996), chs.9–10, esp. 546–58 on 'communication communities'; E. Garrett, A. Reid, K. Schurer and S. Szreter, *Changing family size in England and Wales 1891–1911: Place, class and demography* (Cambridge 2001), chs.4–7.

⁷⁶K. Fisher, 'Uncertain aims and tacit negotiation: Birth control practices in Britain, 1925–50, *Population and Development Review* 26 (2000), 295–317. K. Fisher, *Birth, control, sex, and marriage in Britain 1918–1960* (Oxford 2006).

⁷⁷Haines, M., *Fertility and occupation. Population patterns in industrialisation* (1979); Szreter, (1996), Figure 7.1, p. 312.

⁷⁸S. Szreter and A. Hardy, 'Urban fertility and mortality patterns', ch.20 in *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain, Vol.III 1840–1950*, ed M.J. Daunton, (Cambridge University Press 2000), 629–72, Table 20.6.

⁷⁹Garrett et al. (2001).

⁸⁰See Appendix B for definitions of middle and working-class adopted for this study.

⁸¹The majority were contacted through the non-residential day-care centres of Blackburn and Harpenden. Most interviews were conducted with individual widows and widowers. Two widowers who were neighbours were interviewed partly together, partly separately and ten sets of couples were interviewed together. Interviewing was open-ended with a wide licence given to respondents to present their memoirs and stories at length in their own terms while interviewers had to hand a checklist of issues to be addressed. An average of approximately 4 hours of interviewing material was collected on each marriage, typically entailing two, and sometimes three or more visits.

respondents were first married between 1930 and 1950 (Fig. 2). The most fertile period of their marriages was from the early 1930s through to the late 1950s in most cases. This coincided both with the point at which the secular fall in fertility since the 1870s reached its lowest recorded levels in the 1930s and the immediate post-war decades when fertility, though relatively low, was buoyed up somewhat above the level of the depressed 1930s, in the context of a nation enjoying the new benefits and securities of the innovative welfare state.⁸² While two small sets of interviewees can only claim to be representative of their generation in a general sense, it is important to check that they are not clearly unrepresentative for the purposes of studying the fertility decline. The principal relevant check on this is provided by reviewing their marital fertility characteristics. As Figs. 3 and 4 confirm, the child-bearing characteristics of each of the two groups of interviewees do not exhibit any unexpected features. Marriages producing two births was the most common pattern, as would be expected for these marriage cohorts, and there was a slight tendency for those marrying after 1940 to have produced a greater number of births per marriage than those marrying before 1940, which conforms with the national pattern of higher marital fertility after World War II.

Appendix B: Note on social classification of respondents

Respondents were assigned a social class status using an adapted version of the Registrar-General's social classification of male occupations, the official scheme that was in use throughout the period 1911–1991.⁸³

The official scheme has changed little but the description and precise occupational contents of each of the six categories has gone through a number of modifications during its long existence. The descriptions below best fit the manner in which it has been used here.

Class I higher professional, administrative and managerial, those with inherited wealth

Class II lower professional, and middle administrative and managerial in large organisations

Class IIIN clerical workers

Class IIIM skilled manual workers

Class IV partly-skilled manual workers

Class V unskilled manual workers

In this study the scheme's categories have been further modified by the creation of two additional 'social classes', II/IIIM and IIIM/II. This is to deal with a well-known weakness of the R-G's scheme, in its failure to recognise the distinctive social significance of the private sector, business community. The more substantial businessmen, such as directors, financiers, managers or owners of large enterprises, can be satisfactorily classified to Class I

⁸²OPCS *Population trends* 48 (1987), p.8, Table 1 'Age-specific fertility rates and TFRs 1841–1986'.

⁸³S. Szreter, 'The genesis of the Registrar-General's social classification of occupations', *British Journal of Sociology* XXXV, 4 December 1984, pp. 522–46; S. Szreter, 'The official representation of social classes in Britain, United States and France: the professional model and "les cadres"' *Comparative Studies in Society and History* XXXV, 2 April 1993, 285–317.

or Class II, on the basis of their professional qualifications, educational and family background, and wealth. But there remains a large number of small businessmen and independent, petty bourgeois traders, for whom the official classification is inadequate, since it is misleading to place these either in Class IIIN or IIIM. Class IIIM, of course, contains a range of skilled manual workers, all of whom are subordinate, waged employees. Class IIIN are also employees, but they are non-manual salaried employees, paradigmatically junior and middling clerical and administrative office workers in the corporate sector or government. The additional Class II/IIIM has therefore been created for the small-scale retailers and artisans with their own modest fixed capital in the form of a proprietary shop or premises, such as watchmakers, car repairers or grocers; while Class IIIM/II comprises the self-employed tradesmen with no fixed capital or premises, such as builders, painters and decorators. Thus, the classification used here is as follows:

Class I higher professional, administrative and managerial, those with inherited wealth

Class II lower professional, and middle administrative and managerial in large organisations

Class IIIN clerical workers

Class II/IIIM small-scale business proprietors

Class IIIM/II self-employed tradesmen

Class IIIM skilled manual workers (employees)

Class IV partly-skilled manual workers

Class V unskilled manual workers

While occupation of husband was the principal criterion used to assign interviewees to a social class category, there are a well-known number of reservations with this method and all such classificatory exercises inevitably have an arbitrary and subjective judgement element to them. Of course many men changed occupation during the course of their working lives, so a judgement had to be made about which occupation reflected their overall social status most accurately. Also wife's occupation, both partners' social and educational origins, housing status, and educational preferences for their children were all additional criteria which were considered, at the margins, in making a classificatory judgement.

Fig. 1.
Dates of birth of Blackburn and Herts respondents.

Fig. 2.
Date of first marriage of interviewees in Blackburn and Hertfordshire.

Fig. 3.
Number of children born to Blackburn respondents' first marriages by date of marriage.

Fig. 4.
Number of children born to Herts respondents' marriages by date marriage.