

Sex Before the Sexual Revolution: Intimate Life in England 1918-1963

Review Number:

1182

Publish date:

Thursday, 1 December, 2011

Author:

Simon Szreter

Kate Fisher

ISBN:

9780521760041

Date of Publication:

2010

Price:

£55.00

Pages:

466pp.

Publisher:

Cambridge University Press

Place of Publication:

Cambridge

Reviewer:

Paul Atkinson

This readable and accessible book has secured an impact beyond the academic world, becoming the *Guardian* book of the week in March 2011 and drawing positive reviews in both the academic and non-academic press. *Sex Before the Sexual Revolution* uses oral history to explore sex and love among married couples in the two generations before the oral contraceptive pill became available in Britain. It democratises the discourse about sexual behaviour, challenging previous accounts which have rested too much on the writings of contemporary experts who claimed that they brought sexual liberation to a sexually repressed population. By letting unknown voices be heard, Szreter and Fisher, in the best traditions of oral history, not only counter the universalising tendency of a dominant narrative, but also correct the narrative itself.

They acknowledge that their own evidence confirms the existence of a tradition stressing restraint, duty, and an absence of communication about sex, a culture which often left women dissatisfied and fearful of pregnancy. However, Szreter and Fisher's findings qualify this familiar picture significantly. The authors want us to abandon the Whiggish view of a simple modernisation of sexual behaviour from patriarchal, repressed attitudes to egalitarian, open ones. Instead, they argue that a gradual dispelling of ignorance about sex during the 20th century did not undermine the link between a woman's respectability and her claim to sexual innocence. Privacy remained a key value for couples. A further important revision which Szreter and Fisher propose is to stop viewing sexual pleasure and reticence as irreconcilable opposites. Their witnesses told them that patterns of behaviour involving abstinence and restraint strengthened the bond between couples: half of them said that 'sex should be an expression of caring love in the marriage, not of sensual

individualist self-indulgence' (p. 386). While some regarded aspects of sex as 'dirty', exactly this preoccupation with hygiene let other couples enjoy a sense of the cleanliness and purity of each other's bodies. All in all, the culture of restraint and privacy could be a source of fulfilment as well as of frustration.

The argument which Szreter and Fisher construct on the basis of their oral history evidence is a sophisticated one, and merits a more detailed summary. Their discussion of their findings begins, logically, with knowledge about sex. Their witnesses confirmed, of course, the euphemistic and restricted public culture of references to sex. This, and the way 'your parents didn't tell you anything' (p. 75), meant that children and young adults found out for themselves. They did so in a strongly gendered way. Witnesses of all backgrounds said that female innocence was valued, and should be ended only by encounter with a future husband. Boys and young men, on the other hand, were expected to be curious. There was an important element of complying with expectations here, about which Fisher has previously written.⁽¹⁾ The expected female role was to be innocent of sexual activity, but this was consistent with (reticent) knowledge, more so in middle-class witnesses; the male role was to be knowledgeable, but male witnesses, similarly, stressed that they combined this with virginity before marriage.

In practice, different kinds of intimacy before marriage had to be negotiated. Szreter and Fisher find a divergence between a middle-class tendency to more communication about sexual matters, and a working-class one towards less, in which female ignorance could play a part. While this meant that premarital sex was more common among their working-class witnesses, Szreter and Fisher are wise to avoid viewing its incidence as the most important element of a couple's behaviour. It was this more complex context of communication which affected premarital relationships most.

In part two of the book Szreter and Fisher's attention turns to the meanings of love in courtship and marriage. Part of this debate involves people's responses to public discourse, in literature for example, about 'romantic' or 'pragmatic' marriages. Was marriage a search for sexual fulfilment or for stability and respectability? Many saw courtship as a time for enjoyment before the serious hard work of life, including domestic life, began. Gracie Fields' mockery of the sentimental idea, illustrated in a song like *Walter, Walter, Lead Me to the Altar* (1928) struck a chord. This did not make the typical marriage reported by Szreter and Fisher's witnesses a bleak one, though they uncover the kinds of marital unhappiness one would expect. Instead, marriages shaped by social and economic pressure, or parental expectations, could lead to deep emotional bonds. This theme is developed further in a later chapter on attitudes to the body, in which it emerges that physical attractiveness was constructed mostly in terms of cleanliness and health, rather than in an eroticised body image.

Chapter five features a significant comparison between the witnesses' descriptions of married life and the much-used model of the 'companionate marriage' characterised by intimacy and equality. Szreter and Fisher's paraphrase of this model as 'caring and sharing' is not a completely happy one, since their analysis of what people were actually doing quickly illustrates how these two categories blend until meaningful distinction becomes difficult. There is however, a very valuable discussion of witnesses' real life models of marriage, none of which aspired directly to be 'companionate'. The amount of class similarity is interesting: neither class showed an interest in strict equality, both wanted each partner to make a 'fair' contribution by fulfilling roles that were strongly gendered. There was much negotiation and not a little conflict, and no evidence, contrary to what some contemporary literature claimed, that this was better managed by the middle class. It appears that middle-class wives received less domestic help from husbands than working-class ones, as paid outside help was a more likely option.

For the authors, whose hinterland is principally in the study of fertility and family limitation, part three is the core of the book, since it deals with the sexual behaviour of married couples. Szreter has elsewhere drawn attention to the importance for fertility of the way sex is constructed by couples: behaviour which the demographer and population historian interpret as oriented towards fertility control was sometimes more a product of particular ways of thinking about sex.⁽²⁾ Chapter six, on birth control, sex and abstinence, provides confirmation of the recent consensus on couples' choices in this area. The use of abstinence and withdrawal as birth control methods was persistent over time, but there were both class and geographical

differences. Working-class couples in the northern location, Blackburn, were more likely to use withdrawal, whereas the acceptance of condoms was much greater in working-class Hertfordshire. In both locations, middle-class couples were more likely to use barrier methods of contraception than working-class couples, reflecting cultures which had more space for discussion about sexual preferences.

For working-class couples, the practice of withdrawal was often seen as part of regarding sex as spontaneous and natural rather than a subject for detached discussion. The sex experts of the family planning movement counselled against the use of withdrawal as a technique, it being much less reliable than barrier methods. But, as Szreter and Fisher know, part of the culture of naturalness and spontaneity was that many working-class couples were not aiming at a target family size but at family limitation in a more general sense. I have seen evidence of this in the testimony of the pioneering Shipley midwife and family planning advisor Nellie Whiteley, who recalled of the 1920s that ‘it wasn’t that they didn’t want any children, they wanted children but they only wanted one or two, maybe three, but they didn’t want great big families’.(3)

Abstinence was practised to avoid pregnancy for a variety of reasons, this time, interestingly, with no marked class difference in frequency. Scholars including Hera Cook and Wally Secombe have commented on how abstinence was liable to produce marital tension. Their understanding was that while women had the main incentives to limit family size, reliance on abstinence gave men most of the control. It needs to be recalled, however, that most couples preferred the husband to take the lead, so this was not automatically a source of disagreement. It seems to have been the middle-class couples in which abstinence was more often the result of disagreement about who should take this responsibility. While Szreter and Fisher have certainly found evidence of tension about abstinence, they also heard testimony that abstinence indicated ‘the strength of the loving relationship, in which both partners were sensitive to each other’s feelings and desires’ (p. 235).

Chapters eight and nine report how the oral history witnesses thought about their sexual relationships with their partners, and how they reflected on the differences between the pre-1960s period and today in the light of their understandings of present-day sexual mores. It is here that the strength of their beliefs about sex as something spontaneous and ‘natural’ is most clearly seen. Couples’ emphasis on privacy, the respect paid to female innocence, and a reluctance to discuss sex meant that many had no clear picture of what made up ‘normal’ sexual behaviour for a married couple. They invented it for themselves. Some had happier experiences than others, and different experiences left witnesses with contrasting views of the so-called sexual revolution since the 1960s. Some couples did experience the frustrations and miseries which the experts assumed they would, and were more likely to say: ‘I would’ve been more adventurous if I was young now’ (p. 377).

Others found great pleasure within a culture of privacy and described their experiences as natural and wholesome. Some of these, when they came to think about modern Britain, moved beyond well-worn conservative discourses about promiscuity. There was sympathy for modern women who, in the witnesses’ view, were under greater pressure for unwelcome sex (p. 364). Some said too that the availability of so much information and imagery about sex removed some of the mystery and excitement, a view consistent with critiques that claim sex, like so much else, is in this way turned into a commodity. Harry Cocks, in a recent review, cautions against letting this recovery of positive assessments about pre-1960s cultures turn into a nostalgic critique of the liberated present, without suggesting Szreter and Fisher have done this.(4) I agree: in treating their sources with a proper respect, with all their varied viewpoints, they have not tried to replace one simple paradigm with another but to do something more interesting and nuanced.

The result is a well-balanced one, but I was inclined to think that in one area Szreter and Fisher underplayed the criticism which their witnesses voiced for past attitudes. While they often acknowledge the difficulty many had in talking about sex, their own evidence seems to me to suggest that embarrassment was a stronger factor in this than they acknowledge (pp. 348; 368–9, 373–4). The broad seam of sexual embarrassment in 20th-century British comedy, for example, suggests that embarrassment was an important influence restraining many people from putting ideas into words. Perhaps Szreter and Fisher’s positive language about couples and privacy gives insufficient emphasis to this.

Not all historians are equally enthusiastic about oral history. In *Sex Before the Sexual Revolution* we see a fine example of what it can achieve. There would be no other way of unlocking the sort of evidence which bears on the big questions of family formation, gender roles and the formation of identities which are examined here. 50 people were interviewed in Blackburn, 38 in Hertfordshire, all born between 1901 and 1931 and all of whom had been married. The authors made a check that their experiences of family formation were not untypical of wider populations. Critics of oral history have a tendency to discuss representativeness in a way which is not employed when narrative evidence from official or elite sources is being examined: Szreter and Fisher are statistically informed scholars who are well aware of the limits of what can be claimed for their materials. What is offered here is a rich seam of testimony from a group of people whose characteristics are carefully tabulated. An attempt to match the characteristics of the English population in detail, next to impossible in any case, is superfluous. Szreter and Fisher also confine statistical discussion of their material to simple frequency analysis, since the sample is too small to establish correlations, for example. The heart of this work is not in the numbers but in the sensitive interpretations they offer for the words they have captured.

The position of this book in the specialist historiography will be secure for some time to come. Cambridge University Press have done the wider reading public a service in making this accessible account available in paperback. Those who study and teach 20th-century British history will find it the obvious starting point for thinking about married sexual life, combining as it does a compelling argument with a wealth of reference to the secondary literature. *Sex and the Sexual Revolution* is also that unusual thing, a history book which earns the respect of the profession and appeals to the intelligent reader beyond academia.

Notes

1. Kate Fisher, "'She was quite satisfied with the arrangements I made': gender and birth control in Britain, 1920-1950', *Past and Present*, 169 (2000), 161-93; *Birth Control, Sex and Marriage in Britain, 1918-1960* (Oxford, 2006). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Simon Szreter, 'Theories and heuristics: how best to approach the study of historic fertility declines?', *Historical Social Research* 36, 2 (2011), 65-98 (here at pp. 81-3). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Paul Atkinson, 'Cultural causes of the nineteenth-century fertility decline: a study of three Yorkshire towns', <<http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/10290/> [2]> [accessed 16 November 2011], pp. 34-35. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Harry Cocks, "'Oh, it was different then". Marriage, sexuality and the body before the sixties', *Twentieth Century British History*, 22, 1 (2011), 114-19. [Back to \(4\)](#)

The authors are happy to accept this review and do not wish to comment further.

Other reviews:

Guardian

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/mar/12/sexual-revolution-england-szreter-fisher-review> [3]

Times Higher Education

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp> [4]

Independent

<http://www.independent.ie/entertainment/books/review-sex-before-the-sexual-revolution-intimate-life-in-england-19181963-by-simon-szreter-and-kate-fisher-2614689.html> [5]

Daily Mail

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2007970/When-love-come-sex-New-book-reveals-couples-thought-sex-years-Sixties-sexual-revolution.html> [6]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1182>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/7838>

[2] <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/10290/>

[3] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/mar/12/sexual-revolution-england-szreter-fisher-review>

[4] <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=414793>

[5] <http://www.independent.ie/entertainment/books/review-sex-before-the-sexual-revolution-intimate-life-in-england-19181963-by-simon-szreter-and-kate-fisher-2614689.html>

[6] <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2007970/When-love-come-sex-New-book-reveals-couples-thought-sex-years-Sixties-sexual-revolution.html>