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# 8 Narrating Heterosexual Identities: Recollections, Omissions and Contradictions

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## **Abstract**

This paper draws on narratives of heterosexual identity gathered from among the members of different generations within extended families in East Yorkshire. Within single life history interviews we therefore have data which constitute memories of the past and narrative accounts of the present. What we explore in this paper are the contradictions and omissions evident in our material. Thus, for example, some interviewees recall the value they placed on freedom to explore their sexuality during their adolescence yet, speaking as parents, emphasise the importance of regulating their children's sexual experience. Others attribute chastity, monogamy and sexual restraint with an unquestionably high moral status, yet openly endorse the vagaries of sexual practice between particular individuals, including themselves. In some cases these contradictions become apparent to the interviewee and we therefore explore their reflections on this kind of dissonance. In others contradictions are apparent only to the researcher. We analyse these narratives as aspects of the ways in which heterosexuality, as an institution, is produced and reproduced. Of particular interest are the continuities of heterosexual strategy which may underpin apparently disparate practices. In addition we concern ourselves with the ways in which individuals evaluate the 'givens' of heterosexuality, amending, resisting or transforming the practices through which it is constituted.

## **Introduction**

This paper examines families narratives of heterosexuality. Its data come from an ESRC funded project on the making of heterosexual relationships which uses a narrative life history approach in interviewing representatives from three different generations of adults within the same extended family, each member providing personal narratives in the context of both narratives of community and those embedded in cultural and historical context (Milnes and

Horrocks, 2003). With a total sample of 22 families, each of our 72 respondents were asked about their first awareness of the opposite sex, of physical attraction, their first encounters - and how these contributed to subsequent heterosexual relationships. With people of different ages, therefore, similar themes were discussed, so allowing historical comparison between the generations. An additional focus is the influence of different generations upon one another.

Many of our respondents revealed some experiences which were not discussed between family members, while others alluded to those which were not ordinarily discussed *outside* the family. Indeed, in some cases, respondents 'groomed' each other prior to interviews: for example, one woman in her late 70s told us: '[My daughter] *hasn't told you about her first marriage, she said she didn't want to talk about it. Well I suppose I shouldn't either*'.<sup>(1)</sup> These data - their silences, exclusions and competing accounts - together represent families' narratives of heterosexuality. Rather than a single, rigid account, these are dynamic, indeed strategic examples of storytelling.

Here we examine their texture and fluidity. They describe what is revealed *and* hidden within families, so enabling us to work empirically with the category 'heterosexuality', to expose the contours of hegemonic heterosexuality (Richardson, 1996, VanEvery, 1996): the profile of heterosexuality as-it-ought-to-be, as feared to be, as found wanting, as resisted. The focus of our investigation is therefore the gaps or silences between the words. Respondents not infrequently told us what they were *not* told and later found out, what they could *not* tell or what other family members kept *from* one another. We ask about the nature of what was left unsaid, why and what it tells us about heterosexuality as imagined, remembered and lived.

### **Continuity and Change in Families Narratives of Heterosexuality**

The family discussed in this paper originate in East Yorkshire and have a working class background. They are grandmother Marion, aged 85, her daughter, Elaine, aged 54, and 33 year old granddaughter, Michelle. Marion was widowed after 35 years of marriage, Elaine after 25 years of marriage, while daughter, Michelle's, first marriage ended in divorce. She has subsequently remarried. As was the case with many of the families we interviewed, direct contact with male members was not readily forthcoming. This in itself can be seen as revealing, in that women saw themselves as emotional spokespeople for their families - their male relatives being represented as either unwilling or unable to engage with our project.

As with many of the women we interviewed who grew up between or during the two World Wars, Marion presented a dominant cultural narrative of silence regarding sexual matters (Milnes and Horrocks, 2003). What she

remembers is not what she was told, but - like many of the women cited in the Little Kinsey Reports (Stanley, 1995) - the powerful feeling of ignorance when she went to work in a pharmaceutical company at the age of 14, with no idea of what sanitary products were for - and no knowledge of sex or pregnancy: "A lot of the girls ... they all thought I was absolutely green and stupid, because I didn't know anything about it, and I didn't". Within her community, sex out of (appropriate) time and place was shameful, silenced and made invisible. Thus, when Marion's older sister became pregnant by a married man, nothing was said to her mother until the baby was born. The reasoning behind this decision can, perhaps, be explained by the consequences once the child was born: the older sister was sent away and Marion forbidden contact with her. However, being less "hard" than their mother, Marion's father *did* visit her sister and gave her money, but without his wife's knowledge. These silences reveal a living out of heterosexuality which required extreme vigilance. So narrow was the range of acceptable 'performances' of heterosexuality and so all-encompassing the power of those positioned to define them, that many aspects of sexual knowledge and practice became outlawed - pregnancy outside marriage, with an already attached partner, and endorsed by a parent. As a consequence of her sister's 'misdemeanour', Marion's contact with boys was then scrutinised exhaustively. Her first romantic relationships were terminated or questioned by her mother for the following reasons: the young men were fishermen and, therefore, beneath her; they were in the armed services and had made another girl pregnant. However, Marion did side-step this scrutiny by seeing boys illicitly. She says: "I used to go out with, well, never used to tell her who I was going with, used to go with different people, and she never, you know, never used to ask me". Although managing to exercise agency in some instances, her sister's transgression of the sexual codes of the time returned to haunt Marion even when she did manage to find a boyfriend who was acceptable to her mother as he attended the same chapel. On this occasion the relationship was curtailed when *his* parents became aware of the sister's pregnancy. Powerless to override their edict, Marion still offered some resistance by refusing to go to chapel. Unequivocally bitter, she nonetheless consents to the dominant model of hegemonic heterosexuality by describing her sister's pregnancy as "a real shameful thing". Thus, the pregnancy had both direct consequences through the ostracism initiated by her mother, *and* an indirect effect on Marion, whose relationships became subject to her mother's scrutiny. Moreover, the family's 'reputation' within their community (both real and imagined) undermined the prospect of Marion acquiring an 'appropriate' heterosexual identity.

Marriage within a particular social class and the maintenance of an acceptable sexual reputation within the community were thus essential to the living out of the institution of heterosexuality (Richardson, 1996, 2000; VanEvery, 1996). Silence ensured ignorance which was designed to inhibit

deviation from an appropriate heterosexual life style. Should other choices be made - for example, the sister who “*got herself into trouble*” - their management required silence or invisibility. On one level, the range of options were foreclosed in that they were not made apparent; on another those silences were eloquent. Marion’s experience of feeling “*green*” was powerful. Though partly obscured, that which was not to be known about or chosen nonetheless made itself felt. As a result, the boundaries of hegemonic heterosexuality were defined and redefined.

Do these data help us to understand the institution of heterosexuality currently being lived out, or are the experiences which Marion describes historically and culturally specific? For Marion, parental control is perceived as oppressive in a narrative which resonates with contemporary constructions of early twentieth century social and sexual mores as riven with shame, stigma, secrecy and embarrassment. If Marion’s narrative reflects the quality of experience at *that* time, what changes might we anticipate within more contemporary experience?

While social memory often operates via fractures and juxtapositions - then and now - our data form more integrated family narratives which reveal both change *and* continuity (Connerton, 1989; Fentress and Wickham, 1992). For example, Marion’s 54 year old daughter, Elaine, grew up in the 1950s and like her mother she learned nothing about menstruation or sexual practice at home. Like her mother she became wary of boys, for example, by being made to return the sixpence a boy gave her and refused permission to play with boys when menstruating, although no explanation was given for either instruction. While Elaine states that she saw boys as nothing more than ‘friends’, these early prohibitions resonate with theoretical work on heterosexuality which highlight the centrality of *difference* to this institution (Richardson, 1996, 2000). If heterosexuality is a socially constructed arrangement - rather than the outcome of ‘natural’ desire - then we might reflect on how *difference* is constructed during upbringing, how boys are ‘othered’, made unapproachable or dangerous. Silences and exclusions both delimit the boundaries of heterosexuality *and* ensure its basis in difference.

As with her mother, Elaine’s narrative describes the use of silence to sequester experience which fails to conform to hegemonic heterosexuality; for example, secrecy surrounded her sexual experience with her husband, prior to their marriage. Interestingly, Marion voices her suspicion that her daughter married in haste because she was pregnant, yet Elaine never admits to this, stating only that she became pregnant early in the marriage and miscarried. However, Elaine does acknowledge that a taboo on sex outside marriage *did* exist for young people in the early 1960s and this is reflected in the spatial constraints on sexual practice; for example, public space in hotels could only be rented by married couples. The silence, secrecy and, indeed, shame which featured during Elaine’s youth is something which she sustains into the present

by still concealing her pre-marital pregnancy, despite the contemporary relaxation of stigma around sex before marriage. In relation to her current heterosexual relationship, the pattern of secrecy persists. Here, it is her emotional unhappiness in this relationship which delegitimizes it and she rarely speaks of it with friends or family. Indeed, despite Marion's concerns about the relationship, she says that her daughter will not reveal its failure to conform to hegemonic heterosexuality.

### **Heterosexual Love as 'Cultural Script'**

The narrative offered by Elaine's daughter, Michelle, contains yet more continuities with those of her mother and grandmother. Not only is the profile of *desirable* heterosexuality made explicit via the same language but, again, the gaps between words are revealing. When mother and daughter recall meeting the man they later marry, both describe an instant recognition which resonates with popular constructions of 'love at first sight'. For example, as a 16 year old, Elaine first met her husband, Andrew, at work. She recalls thinking: "*I'm going to marry him. I'm definitely going to marry him*". Similarly, after a failed marriage, her daughter also met her second husband at work. She says: "*I knew that I was going to get married to him and have a relationship. I knew that he was the one for me for the rest of my life*". Michelle's whole narrative can be seen as reaffirming Brunt's (1988) assertion that falling in love is like 'getting to star in your own movie' (1988: 19). The cultural script of love drawn upon by Elaine is transmitted across the generations to her daughter (Jackson, 1998). Thus, in describing the key to a successful relationship, both women draw upon similar terminology, producing what appears to be a rehearsed family narrative. Elaine says: "*I think you have to love somebody, I think you have to love them ... with Andrew, it was just love, he could have done whatever ... and I just loved him and felt he did me*". Likewise, Michelle affirms: "*The main thing is obviously, has got to be that you really love each other ... not just love, but love each other, you know, very deeply ... then you'll be alright*". For women of both generations, their children are seen as manifestations of this love. Speaking of her son, Elaine says: "*I can remember thinking, he's only here because I love Andrew so much, ... you know, that's the reason he is here, because I love him so much*". And Michelle, in turn, says of her daughter: "*we've got Jessica because we love each other*". Jackson (1993, 1999) argues that women like Elaine and Michelle are responding to the cultural traditions which supply us with narrative forms through which we learn what 'love' is (1993: 46). For Michelle, these cultural traditions include not only popular culture, but her parents' relationship which directly contributes to the way in which she frames her own narrative of heterosexual love. Indeed, as Jackson observes: 'We constantly tell stories to ourselves and

others and we continually construct and reconstruct our own biographies in narrative form' (1993: 46). Within this family, then, there is a blurring between whose narrative we are engaging with: that of mother or daughter.

If the three narratives are viewed alongside each other, it is interesting to explore how, in relation to particular themes, the women's stories converge across time. For example, like her mother and grandmother, Michelle learns about menstruation and sex from peers, not parents. Like Marion's reference to her own ignorance, Michelle, born fifty years later, says: "*I had a really naïve upbringing, 'cause we lived in this little village*". The learning of difference also features within Michelle's experience. At 12/13 she says: "*I did start mixing with boys as friends ... but I never looked on them as anything else but friends*". The realisation of difference which comes with the onset of puberty was then carefully paced. She says of her parents:

They were strict in the way that they would never let me wear make-up and I had to have boys' style shoes for school ... I was never allowed to have heels for school ... I was never allowed to look older than I was.

Michelle rationalises her mother's silence about sexual knowledge as a conscious 'need to know' strategy of disclosure; rules of behaviour imposed without explanation, like her mother had experienced before her. However Michelle also cites embarrassment as a source of her mother's silence about the mechanics of sex: hegemonic heterosexuality is more easily reproduced via a romanticised language of love - one which sequesters aspects of the embodied experience of heterosexuality.

Where Michelle's narrative departs from that of her mother and her grandmother is in her failure to maintain the silence about sexual practice which fell outside marriage. Hegemonic heterosexuality had different contours when Michelle grew up in the 1980s, namely that sex had been uncoupled from marriage and reproduction (Hawkes, 1996: 105), and she took sexual activity for granted. When she went out with someone sexually experienced, she says: "*I remember thinking 'I'm going to be expected to have sex now'*". She told her mother: "*'I need to go on the pill'. I felt it was better to have permission in a way. I wanted her to know about it. I felt as if I wanted her to know that I was being sensible and thinking about it*". Hegemonic heterosexuality required not abstinence or secrecy, but 'being sensible'. Yet Michelle never told her parents that she shared her boyfriend's bedroom at his parents' house, in *their* knowledge: "*I used to say that I slept downstairs or something like that*". Though contradictory, given her openness about contraception, issues of the social boundaries of secrecy appear to be in play. What can be made explicit between mother and daughter in the 1980s, still cannot be made visible within the community. If Elaine became aware that the boyfriend's parents knew that her daughter was sexually active, she would no longer control her daughter's

sexual reputation; and open sexual practice prior to marriage still jeopardises that reputation.

As we have already noted, women place themselves centre-stage with regard to the emotional history of their family's lives. This orientation also finds expression in the way men are excluded from information about their daughter's heterosexual practices, development and identity. For example, when Michelle started her period, she said: "*but don't tell my dad*"; when she tells her mother she needs contraception, she repeats the request. And *Marion's* father only maintains his relationship with his ostracised daughter through silence. While Michelle felt close to her father, he only expresses his views about her relationships with men when he is dying - and then advises her to leave an unhappy partnership because time is short and "*you have to make the most of your life*". If boys are made 'other' in relation to girls, that difference which is constitutive of heterosexuality, is then sustained through an emotional division of labour. Women appear to feel obliged to take responsibility for the emotional well-being of others, a strategy which effectively excludes men from their daughter's sex lives - and is achieved through silences.

## **Conclusion**

In examining the narratives through which each of these women have represented their heterosexual life stories, we have engaged not only with those experiences which have been given voice through individual narratives, but have also examined what is left unsaid within subsequent cross-generational relationships. A collective family 'narrative', constituted through silences and omissions, thereby becomes evident. Our historical data allow the living out of heterosexuality across time to be interrogated. With the family as our focus, and by working cross-generationally, we discover continuities *and* changes. What we emphasise here is the role of silence or exclusion in defining the contours of hegemonic heterosexuality. This confirms Jackson's observation that personal narratives are not simply a 'transparent record of women's experiences, but also a source for understanding how women make sense of their experience' (1998: 47). Indeed, agency is evident in all three accounts, different interpretative frameworks becoming available to each woman at different points during the historical period in question. What constitutes desirable heterosexuality has changed; for example, *Marion's* mother forcibly directs her 'choice' of partner; Michelle asks her mother's permission to go on the pill. What is reproduced, however, is these women's *engagement* with heterosexual practice. Its contours clearly reflect and shape the empirical reality of these women's lives, yet when the match is found to be less than perfect, this critical lack of fit is sutured through silence. Thus it is through exclusion - whether deliberate, unwitting or unquestioned - that the institution



of heterosexuality is socially constructed. If we ask *how* the institution of heterosexuality is both reproduced and inhabited, we therefore need to investigate narratives of this kind.

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### **Notes**

1. All names used are pseudonyms and all data were gathered with the informed consent of participants.

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