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Heterosexuality Across the Twentieth Century

In seeking to get at how the practice of heterosexuality might change – and the implications of particular changes for the institution itself – a cross-generational approach provides comparative material with which to work. As Foucault argues, the past is of interest not simply for itself, but in its capacity to provide us with a history of the present (cited in Weeks, 2000: 118). In addition, however, cross-generational material allows work on heterosexuality to contribute to a feminist theorisation of gender and ageing. As Arber and Ginn (1995) argued, feminism has not prioritised ageing as a basis from which to theorise difference. Historical time, then, constitutes a core feature throughout this book, along with biographical time representing a key contextual variable within the heterosexual lives discussed here – as already demonstrated in the case of Jean Brown (Chapter 3). Thus we highlight the critical periods against which participants mapped their biographies, the two often being intricately interwoven. As Morgan notes in describing the particular slant he has given to the concept of ‘practices’, these ‘constitute major links between history and biography . . . are historically constituted and the linkages and tensions or contradictions between practices are historically shaped. At the same time practices are woven into and constituted from elements of individual biographies’ (1996: 190).

We begin by reiterating that although we have argued that ‘heterosexuality’ is about more than simply sexual practices, ‘sex’ was often the lens through which participants themselves understood and interpreted their identities as ‘heterosexual’ men and women. In response, this chapter highlights those historical changes within hegemonic heterosexuality which pertain to discussion of sex and sexuality within our data. What this chapter provides, then, is an overview of the key historical moments which, our data suggest, have impacted upon participants’
lives. Although we offer a broader historical perspective, however, we also interweave accounts constructed from the perspective of individuals who lived through them. Our concern with interviewees’ recollections of various moments in history and their experiences of these events means that memory emerges as an important consideration, since what our participants told us represents the past as refracted through the beliefs and values of the present. Indeed, it is a relational past. As Jackson points out: ‘rather than the past (or childhood) determining the present (or adulthood), the present significantly shapes the past in that we are constantly reconstructing memories and our understanding of who and what we are through the stories we tell to ourselves and others’ (1999: 24). The present, reflexive self – as she envisages it – is not, however, an essential or pre-social ‘I’; rather it is constituted through cultural resources which are historically specific. As women and men review their heterosexual lives, therefore, they are reflecting upon their experiences through the cultural resource of heterosexuality itself. Yet this does not imply a self-sealed circularity since, as Jackson says, the self ‘is not a fixed structure but is always “in process” by virtue of its constant reflexivity’ (1995: 24). So our data testify to the memories of particular women and men – yet, as Misztal stresses, ‘individual remembering takes place in the social context – it is prompted by social cues, employed for social purposes, ruled and ordered by socially structured norms and patterns, and therefore contains much that is social’ (2003: 5). Uncoupled from both objectivist and subjectivist positions, remembering, ‘while far from being absolutely objective, nonetheless transcends our subjectivity and is shared by others around us’ (Zerubavel, 1997 cited in Misztal, 2003: 6). Of the social acquisition of memory, Smart (2006) points out that although memories are personal, the social context in which they are produced also implies that they are value-laden. She also observes that – as our data evidence – families provide an important context in which memories are created, and also forgotten.

The recollections we present here speak to age-based, generationally located identities as much as they illuminate the historically specific experience of the past. How these personal testimonies might relate to official histories is, however, far from straightforward. As Steedman argues ‘[p]ersonal interpretations of past time – the stories that people tell themselves in order to explain how they got to the places they currently inhabit – are often in deep and ambiguous conflict with the official interpretive devices of a culture’ (1986: 6). Thus when Steedman seeks to make sense of her ‘working-class childhood’, she finds the analytic devices of patriarchy and social class difficult to operationalise