

<b>Institution:</b> University of Cambridge
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> UoA30
<b>Title of case study:</b> Sex Before the Sexual Revolution
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Research undertaken by Professor Simon Szreter on sexual attitudes and behaviour between 1918 and 1963 was published as a co-authored monograph by Cambridge University Press. The book attracted significant policy and media attention, including features on popular Radio 4 programmes and in the national broadsheet and tabloid daily press. It was also long-listed for a major national literary prize. The success of the book and views expressed by the journalists in their reviews indicate that the book's novel findings and challenging interpretations have had an important influence in changing widely-held stereotyped attitudes towards older generations and their sex lives.</p>
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Professor Simon Szreter has been a History Faculty lecturer since 1984 and since 2010 Professor of History and Public Policy at the University of Cambridge. He was the Principal Investigator on a 3-year (1996-1999) ESRC-funded research project which conducted a pioneering oral history investigation into the sexuality in marriage among the cohort born 1900-30. Subsequent analysis and composition of several preliminary articles and the major monograph, <i>Sex before the Sexual Revolution</i>, were also in part funded by grants from ESRC, Wellcome Trust and AHRC.</p> <p>The new evidence presented in the book was drawn from approximately 90 semi-structured in-depth interviews with married men and women of both middle and working classes in two contrasting communities: Blackburn, Lancashire and Harpenden, Hertfordshire. The co-author, Kate Fisher, was the principal research officer on the original ESRC project and Szreter and Fisher conducted interviews, analysed the material and co-wrote the book collaboratively. Subjects addressed focused on intimacy within marriages, including personal details of sexual attitudes and behaviour, placed within the context of the respondents' wider aims, interests and life-courses from childhood onwards.</p> <p>Important original and revisionist findings were presented in every chapter. It was shown that this generation did not see themselves as sexually repressed or oppressed nor as blindly ignorant. Both sexes valued notions of innocence, spontaneity, naturalness and privacy where sex was concerned and insisted that married love was its only proper context. The shunning of explicit sexual knowledge was a deliberate strategy by respectable females while males were permitted to be more inquisitive about sexual knowledge as an innocent game. A key class difference was that, for secondary-educated middle-class females, innocence could encompass book knowledge of reproduction. This enabled middle-class girls to police sex play in courtship more effectively than working-class girls, leading to the paradoxical finding that although pre-marital intercourse and pregnancy were more common among working-class respondents, mutual pre-marital sexual gratification was in fact more commonly indulged among the middle-class. It was also important in that middle-class women were more likely to actively choose a birth control method with their partner at the commencement of their marriage whereas exclusively male responsibility for contraception was a ubiquitous assumption among the working-classes. In fact the male method of withdrawal was more popular than any other contraceptive method among the northern working-class respondents from the 1930s until the 1950s when it had previously been assumed that condoms must have become the norm. Similarly it was found that abstinence was widely reported by half of respondents. Among the working classes this was associated with moderation of conjugal rights by male partners in loving deference to female partners' wishes whereas among some middle-class female respondents abstinence was associated with breakdown of a loving relationship and a male partner's refusal to take responsibility for contraception or moderate sexual demands. A much more nuanced picture emerges than the simple rise of companionate marriage</p>

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championed by contemporary middle-class ideologists. Interviewees were also critical of contemporary public sexual culture as both loveless and lacking the 'adventure' of spontaneous private discovery they portrayed in their own marriages.

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

*Sex Before the Sexual Revolution. Intimate Life in England 1918-1963*, co-authored with Kate Fisher (Cambridge University Press hardback and paperback 2010; paperback reprinted 2011)

Other publications (all peer reviewed):

"They prefer withdrawal": the choice of birth control method in Britain, 1918-1950' (with Kate Fisher), *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 34, 2 (2003), 263-91.

'Love and authority in mid-twentieth century marriages: sharing and caring' (with Kate Fisher), in L. Delap, B. Griffin, and A. Wills, eds, *The Politics of Domestic Authority in Britain since 1800* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 32-54.

"We weren't the sort that wanted intimacy every night": Birth control and abstinence in England 1930-60' (with Kate Fisher), *The History of The Family* 15,2 (2010), 139-60.

#### Grants

1996-99: £112,195, Professor Simon Szreter, 3-year ESRC project grant, 'Marriage, fertility & sexuality, 1900-50: an oral history', Grant Number R000236621

2000-02: £156,057, Professor Simon Szreter, 3-year personal ESRC Fellowship, Grant Number R000271041

2006: £18,500, Professor Simon Szreter, AHRC Research Leave for one term (3 month award)

### 4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

*Sex before the Sexual Revolution* was published simultaneously as a hardback and paperback by Cambridge University Press in October 2010 priced at £19.99 paperback and £55 hardback. It subsequently attracted reviews in both the national broadsheet and tabloid daily press. It was featured as 'Book of the Week' in *The Guardian* (280,000 circulation in 2011), where it was reviewed by Simon Callow (5a). It was also reviewed as a 2-page 'spread' by Virginia Blackburn in the *Daily Express* (640,000 circulation in 2011) (5b); and in the *Daily Mail* (2.14 million circulation in 2011) (5c), where the agony aunt Bel Mooney reviewed it also across two pages in place of her regular advice column. It has also attracted media attention in Eire with a review in the *Irish Independent* (5f).

Before this book was published, the wider public tended to rely on the polarised stereotypes that viewed the earlier twentieth-century as subject to a hangover of 'Victorianism', religious inhibition and ignorance, where sexuality was concerned. The 1950s and 1960s youth and sexual revolutions were seen as ushering in a superior era of sexual liberation and happiness. As the reviews by Blackburn, Callow and Mooney attest, this book has demonstrated that the generation who courted, married and reared their children between 1918 and 1963 may have had a very different set of sensual and sexual values, but they were not simply the negative inverse of today's norms. They had their own positive attitudes, revolving around values of privacy, natural spontaneity and placing sex in the context of marital love.

Bel Mooney wrote in the *Daily Mail* that this book 'provides the first rounded, first-hand account of sexuality in marriage in the years 1918-1963. ... This book made me reflect just how much the young generation patronise the older generation. I suggest perhaps that generation were far more sensible about passion and partnerships than we give them credit for. They might not have had sex education but that did not stop them learning how to love.' In the online Mail her article is

followed by 49 comments from members of the public, demonstrating a level of engagement with the issues raised. Simon Callow wrote in the *Guardian*, 'I can scarcely recall reading a book which gives a richer, more comprehensive – and, ultimately, more deeply moving – account of the human experience, or at least those parts of it that are central for so many of us. It is also, in its way, radical, and subversive of a great deal of received thinking about sexual experience.' The newspaper articles and other reviews were reposted on a number of blogs (e.g. 'Family Edge', 'The Grand Narrative', 'The Thinking Housewife', 'The Second Pass', 'Sex Is Social').

The authors were also invited in Oct 2010 for interview with Jenni Murray on BBC Radio 4's 'Woman's Hour' Programme (3 million listeners in early 2011) **(5d)** and were also interviewed on 16 Feb. 2011 by Laurie Taylor on Radio 4's 'Thinking Allowed' Programme **(5e)**. Simon Szreter was consequently invited again for interview by Jane Garvey on 'Woman's Hour' on 26 Mar. 2012 to discuss the history of marriage, demonstrating the book's establishment of a public profile for its authors **(5i)**.

In 2011 the book became the first ever published by Cambridge University Press to be long-listed for the BBC Samuel Johnson Prize, the nation's major non-fiction prize; and the paperback was reprinted.

Given the mass media exposure the main impact beneficiaries are the large numbers of the general public reached through these mainstream mass media print and radio reviews. For the first time the public has been able to replace stereotypes with a rich and diverse body of comparative first-hand testimony about sex, love and marriage among this previous generation.

*Sex before the Sexual Revolution* has also achieved international public policy impact. It has been the subject of a lengthy review in the premier development policy journal, *Population and Development Review*, by the world's leading family planning practitioner, Professor Malcolm H. Potts, Fred H. Bixby Chair in Population and Family Planning in the School of Public Health, Berkeley University, and first Medical Director of the International Planned Parenthood Federation. Potts' review included these policy conclusions: 'one clear message of this oral history is that withdrawal is a valid and often effective method of family planning that should not be denigrated in textbooks or during training of health professionals...it would be extremely valuable to have similar studies from North America, China, India' because 'Oral history captures variables that surveys with formal questions usually miss' **(5g, 5h)**.

#### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- a. Simon Callow, *The Guardian* Book of the Week, 12 March 2011: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/mar/12/sexual-revolution-england-szreter-fisher-review>
- b. Virginia Blackburn, *Daily Express*, 1 April, pp.36-7: <http://www.express.co.uk/posts/view/237935/The-secret-side-of-sex>
- c. Bel Mooney, *Daily Mail*, 25 June 2011, pp.46-47: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2007970/When-love-come-sex-New-book-reveals-couples-thought-sex-years-Sixties-sexual-revolution.html>
- d. Radio 4, Woman's Hour, 20 Oct 2010: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00vcpl0>
- e. Radio 4, Thinking Allowed, 16 Feb 2011: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00yjicnt>
- f. Review in the *Irish Independent* 24 Sept 2013 <http://www.independent.ie/entertainment/books-arts/review-sex-before-the-sexual-revolution-intimate-life-in-england-19181963-by-simon-szreter-and-kate-fisher-26721947.html>
- g. Malcolm Potts' review in *Population and Development Review* 37 (September 2011), 587-90.

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- h. notice of the book and summary of its policy implications on the History and Policy website: 'Reflections by Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher on their new book *Sex before the Sexual Revolution*', [http://www.historyandpolicy.org/research/new-books/newbook\\_1.html](http://www.historyandpolicy.org/research/new-books/newbook_1.html)
- i. Radio 4, Woman's Hour, 26 Mar. 2012: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00qftxq> .