

The World We Have Made? Individualisation and Personal Life in the 1950s

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WORKING PAPER No. 27

Families & Social Capital Research Group
London South Bank University
103 Borough Road
London SE1 0AA

June 2010

Published by London South Bank University

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ISBN 978-0-946-786-63-3

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1. Introduction: a revolution in personal life?

The theory of individualisation, as variously expressed by Ulrich Beck, Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, Anthony Giddens and Zygmunt Bauman, has become particularly influential in many social sciences: the traditional social structures of class, gender, religion and family are supposedly withering away, so that people no longer have pre-given life worlds and trajectories. As Beck famously put it, the family is a 'zombie category' which is 'dead and still alive' (2002: 204; see also Giddens 1992, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, Beck-Gernsheim 2002, Bauman 2003).

Not surprisingly, in these accounts such epochal changes have profound effects on our personal lives. Giddens sees this most optimistically – people will be freed from traditional constraints and obligations, hence allowing the development of equality in families, of emotional and sexual democracy, characterised by openness, involvement, reciprocity and closeness. At the other extreme Bauman sees contemporary relationships as frail and threatened, unable to offer sustaining support, and simply a site of insecurity and conflict. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim are less apocalyptic, but still see families and personal relationships as increasingly permeated by instability and uncertainty. These utopian and dystopian visions are also ideologically charged – they feed into and reflect contemporary political stances on 'choice' and the 'breakdown of the family'.

In this paper I focus on one fundamental problem with these theoretical accounts – the assumption that contemporary families and personal lives are radically new and different from those in the past. This is a particularly important issue for individualisation theories because they fundamentally depend on the idea of epochal, even revolutionary, historical change. Empirically, I will tackle this task by examining the experience of personal life in Britain in the late 1940s and early 50s (where a number of excellent sources exist) compared with today. Section 4 will look at 'improvements', focussing on the experiences of gay and lesbian people, and of heterosexual spouses, and section 5 will examine 'tradition' and individualisation', looking at ideas and experiences around extra-marital sex and divorce. Before this, however, section 2 will assess accounts of individualisation and family change, while section 3 will describe the sources used and the problems with using them.

2. Assessing individualisation and family change

What is the evidence for the profundity or otherwise of recent change in families and personal lives, and for the past power of tradition? Certainly individualisation theory has been roundly criticised for the lack of congruence between its depiction of contemporary family life and the kinds of lives represented in contemporaneous empirical studies (e.g. Jamieson, 1998, Lewis 2001, Brannen and Neilson 2005, Duncan and Smith 2006). This criticism can be made even more powerfully for the historical assertions embodied in individualisation theory. Carol Smart (2007), talking about Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, puts this well:

'While the idea of tradition is evoked, no specificity is provided ... The idea that during this vague period people slavishly followed the prevalent rules and dominant beliefs is accepted without hesitation. A special moment in history having been created, that moment can then be compared with the present which, by dint of such a contrast, looks challengingly different.

But the past in this representation is little more than a straw man devised for the sake of argument.' (ibid, 18)

This lack of historical evidence and specificity is a particularly severe failing in individualisation theories because they fundamentally depend on the idea of epochal, even revolutionary, historical change. And of course it is quite easy to find historical counter-examples. Thus Alison Mackinnion (2009) discovers 'individualizing' women, in the sense that they reflexively negotiated about life projects, in nineteenth century Quaker marriage and the careers of early twentieth century Swedish schoolteachers. These, she suggests, are just two examples from the 'countless narratives' in women's history that 'reveal the ongoing quest for individuality' (ibid, 672). Similarly, Claire Langhammer (2007) finds that in the 1930s and 40s 'courtship offered a degree of agency' to unmarried young women in Britain, even though this was a bounded agency where 'marriage was their primary business'. They 'worked within their allotted sphere of love and courtship to act as architects of their own lives and as active agents of social change' (ibid, 196).

But finding counter-examples does not necessarily invalidate theory – there will always be exceptions and in any case theory is supposed to simplify through an abstract representation of the crucial elements in the phenomenon under examination (cf Sayer 1992). In this way we cannot expect theory to mimic the empirically described 'real' world, which will be subject to all sorts of complications and contingencies – although it does get worrying as the counter examples mount up. Rather we need to ask whether the assumption of traditional, non-individualising, society is good theory, in the sense that it successfully and accurately simplifies so as to highlight the crucial elements in what must inevitably be a complex history. Or alternatively is individualisation theory a 'chaotic concept', as Andrew Sayer (ibid) uses the term, where the theoretically abstracted elements in fact have little correspondence with real experience and history and hence end up taking us down the wrong path? This question is all the more important just because individualisation theory remains so ideologically and discursively powerful, despite the conclusion that it is 'largely devoid of empirical support' (Smart 2007, 20). How far can we trust such a perfunctory theoretical device – the straw man of 'traditional family', and hence the assumption of recent revolutionary change – which lies behind this discursive power?

The British sociologist Jeffrey Weeks has no doubt that we can indeed trust this theoretical device. While distancing himself from Bauman's 'profound cultural pessimism', he nevertheless joins Giddens in welcoming a 'hopeful new world' (2007, 132):

'We are living in the midst of a long, unfinished but profound revolution that has transformed sexual and intimate life. Since 1945 there have been dramatic changes in family and marriage, erotic behaviour, sexual identities, parenting, relationships between men and women, men and men, women and women, adults and young people, as well as in laws, norms and values. These changes have remade everyday life in Britain, and in many other parts of the world' (2008, 41).

This is not just another unsupported assertion by an abstract theorist. For what makes Weeks different is that he is very much a 'grounded theorist'; he anchors the straw man in a series of historical examinations of sexuality, sexual law and politics, followed up by empirical study of contemporary same sex families, and culminating in *The World We Have Won* (2007) – a detailed but nonetheless theorised history of the 'unfinished revolution' since 1945. This allows him to counter the

arguments of a diverse set of 'continuists' – those who 'seem to believe that nothing much has changed at all' (Weeks 2008: 44, see also Weeks 2007, ch. 5).

The World We Have Won stands as a major landmark, all the more significant when it is so closely specified. Nonetheless, I think that a major slippage remains – the book elides 'improvement' with 'individualisation'. Quite possibly, as Weeks documents, personal and intimate life may have become more equal, more diverse and more open compared with previously – but this does not mean that people necessarily prioritise their own individual self-projects over commitments to others, or choose their own biographies, as individualisation theorists suppose. As empirical research has suggested, 'de-traditionalisation' does not mean individualisation, and indeed can involve 're-traditionalisation' (Williams 2004). The move from marriage to cohabitation and living apart together (LAT) is a good example, where people not only maintain 'traditional' commitments to partners and children but often appear just as traditional in their everyday lives as married spouses (see Barlow et al. 2005, Duncan and Smith 2006, Vogler 2005, Duncan and Phillips 2009). Conversely, just because people in the 1940s or 50s, or in earlier periods, lived in what appear to us to be less open, less diverse and more restrained times does not mean that they did not engage in reflexive and individualising self projects. Certainly historical research finds many examples of 'non-traditional' personal lives, especially if we delve into the hidden scripts of family secrets (Klein 2005, Smart 2007). It may well be that individualisation theory has fallen into an old trap, where variation within categories (in this case 'traditional' and 'modern' society) is actually greater than the variation between them.

Revolution also implies a complete 'turning over', and has been regularly announced for family and intimate life every decade or so since the 1920s at least (Scott 1998). When every generation seems to see itself as revolutionary, and to depict the recent past as a completely different golden or dark age, this should alert us to the possible importance of unremarked continuity and gradual change. So while Giddens (1992) announces that 'confluent love' and the 'pure relationship' are recent products of contemporary conditions, Smart can trace similar relations (if given different names, such as 'companionate marriage') back to the early 19th century with 'flashes of intensity in the 1920s and 1950s' (2007: 11/12). In fact Jacqueline Scott (op cit), looking at changing attitudes to sexual morality in Britain, the USA and other developed countries since the 1960s, finds that 'the changes have not been as revolutionary as often claimed', where 'the old proscriptions and prescriptions were still influential' (ibid, 840, 841). Scott found that the changes that did take place were more a function of 'the slow process of cohort replacement' (ibid 830) than any revolutionary turning over. Only with attitudes to pre-marital sex was there any dramatic change from normative deviance to normality, although attitudes to gay and lesbian relationships seem to be taking a similar path (cf Duncan and Phillips 2008). Indeed, often some things have to change just so that other things can remain the same (Crow 2008). Changes to divorce law, and the normalisation of divorce and separation, are good examples, for arguably these changes have allowed the 'traditional' institutions of marriage and weddings to survive.

Change may therefore be more gradual and partial than often claimed, or even act to reinforce continuity. This suggests, as Scott's results imply, that commentators may inaccurately generalise from 'headline' changes in one or two facets of personal life – like pre-marital sex or same sex relationships – to a revolution in all of everyone's personal life. Certainly, the improvements Weeks charts can be interpreted in this way. Weeks himself points out how the history he makes in WWW is also a personal history and geography, as he moved through life from the sexually narrow South Wales valleys of the 1950s, through gay liberation, to the new intimacies of inner London at turn of

the century. In this particular case, 'improvement' may well equate with 'individualisation' – but this case may well remain particular rather than general. This particularity is also evident in Weeks' contemporary study, with Brian Heaphy and Catherine Donovan, *Same Sex Intimacies* (2001) which ably demonstrates how non-heterosexuals can create 'families of choice'. On the basis of this research the authors claim that 'one of the most remarkable features of domestic change over recent years is ... the emergence of common patterns in both homosexual and heterosexual ways of life as a result of these long-term shifts in relationship patterns' (Weeks et al. 1999: 85). In this way Weeks and his colleagues empirically extend Giddens' unsupported claim that lesbians and gay men are 'pioneers' for the processes of individualization and de-traditionalization for heterosexuals as well as for themselves. Similarly Sasha Roseneil argues that we are seeing a 'queering of the family' (2000: 3.10), empirically supported by in-depth research using a small sample of singles living in 'alternative' Hebden Bridge. But how far can we trust these social and historical generalisations, based on the experiences of small samples of rather particular contemporary individuals? Duncan and Smith (2006), examining census patterns for Britain as a whole, are more dubious. Looking at same sex relationships (which are rare), cohabitant parents (widespread but who like to create 'do-it yourself' traditional marriage), and mothers' employment roles (who prefer to re-traditionalise as 'proper' mothers at home), they conclude that since:

'individualisation may be restricted to a few specific groups in a few 'alternative' areas, it raises the question of whether the whole edifice of individualisation has been erected on the specific experiences of particular minority social groups (where the theorists themselves are located). Individualisation may be important to a few but peripheral for the majority' (op. cit.: 186).

My task in the remainder this paper is to assess how far we can trust the straw man of 'traditional society', and hence the assumption of revolutionary change in personal and family lives to the present.

3. Methodology – between worlds

3.1 Approach – personal life

It may be harsh to completely blame individualisation theorists for presenting a monochrome, unspecific and unvarying account of 'traditional' family, for in turn they have taken on what Mike Savage (2007) calls a 'standard account' (see also Smart 2007). The 1950s are generally pictured as a staid, even repressed decade, marked by the dominance of traditional, all-embracing cultures, subsequently to be blown apart by youth rebellion and popular protest in the 60s, quickly followed by Thatcherism and neo-liberal consumer capitalism which, in combination, produced individualisation and de-traditionalisation. As Savage points out, this highly simplified picture largely depends on interpretations of representations from the media, literature and popular culture. What is missing is engagement with narrated experience. This would immediately change the perspective to one which emphasises the variety of life experiences, where people's lives do not simply follow social and economic structures, where they exercise degrees of choice and agency and even – cumulatively – reshape these structures. A focus on narrated experience and individual behaviour is also appropriate in any evaluation of individualisation precisely because we are interested in people's emotions and meanings in conducting their lives and what they – individually – think they are doing,

and why. All this amounts to what Carol Smart (2007) has called the 'personal life' approach; a focus on individually experienced areas of life around intimacy, family and personal relationships of various kinds, which impact closely on people and means much to them, but without assuming autonomous individuals choosing their biographies in some unfettered or socially unrelated way.

How can I take this forward practically in examining personal lives in the 1950s, and assessing their nature compared to contemporary lives? Luckily, a set of suitable sources exist which combine qualitative, autobiographical information on subjective understandings about personal life together with representative social survey information on personal attitudes and practices.

3.2 Sources

The 'reverse baseline' of contemporary conditions can be created through using the 2006 British Social Attitudes Survey (BSAS) on tradition and change in modern relationships (Duncan and Phillips 2008), together with other contemporary surveys (e.g. the 2000 National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles, Erens et al. 2003) and particular empirical studies. What sources exist to 'replicate', in some way, this material for the late 1940s and 50s? Fortunately two contemporary studies can support this – Mass Observation's (MO) material on marriage, relationships, sex and family for 1949, and Geoffrey Gorer's 1950 survey of personal life in England (2).

A central source is MO's 1949 report, colloquially known as Little Kinsey – although it considers family, friends and relationships as well as sexual behaviour. This used data from three related national surveys – a near random face to face interview 'street sample' of 2052, a postal survey of 1000 each of three sets of 'opinion leaders' (clergymen, teachers and doctors), and the results of a corresponding 'directive' of questions sent to MO's own national panel of observers with 642 responses. This was supplemented by a follow-up directive sent to the MO panel on 'Habits' (i.e. sexual behaviour) with 452 responses, and by material from earlier ethnographic research. The report includes direct quotations from respondents' returns as well as survey statistics, summary material, and interpretation, and was mostly written by Tom Harrison, one of MO's founders and leaders. It was unpublished at the time but typewritten chapter drafts were subsequently published in Liz Stanley's *Sex Surveyed* (1995). The original drafts are held in the MO archive at the University of Sussex. These include editorial comments, notes and deletion, as well as much supplementary and supporting material, including the pilot (which holds data attitudes to homosexuality not followed up in the main survey), additional survey material, field notes, respondents' original questionnaire responses – sometimes with letters attached, and additional ethnographic material. MO undertook several linked investigations, again using a mixture of survey and ethnography, on 'Teenage girls' (1949), 'The ideal family' (1949) and 'Friends and families' (1950), also held in the University of Sussex archive (3). Shortly afterwards, Geoffrey Gorer – working from a similar motivation to apply 'anthropological' research to personal life in England, but apparently unaware of MO (4) – used a questionnaire survey of *The People* (a popular newspaper) readership which after selection and weighting produced a near representative sample of 5,000. This was supplemented by a smaller and simpler face-to-face Gallup survey. Later published as *Exploring English Character* in 1955, this too uses a mixture of summary reportage, survey statistics, direct quotation from respondents, and interpretation.

Between them, these two sources cover attitudes and practices about sexual knowledge, birth control, marriage and children, divorce, sex outside marriage, prostitution, ideas about morality,

sexual behaviour, family and friends (MO 1949), and 'people and homes', friends and neighbours, growing up, love, ideas about sex, marriage, children and discipline, law and order, religion, and 'to see ourselves' (Gorer 1950). There is hence a mass of material of personal life in Britain in 1949/50 all the richer (in a way which would seem quite fashionable today) for its mixture of representative survey, first hand accounts and ethnography. Remarkably, most of the topics covered in the 2006 BSAS survey, and much else, were tackled in some way in one or both of these investigative streams. This sets the stage for comparative examination.

3.3. Problems – secondary research and re-using data

There are several problems with this research design of re-visitation of 'elderly data' through re-analysis (Gillies and Edwards 2005). Most obviously there is no possibility of direct contact with respondents, and asking them the questions we really want to. Although the modern and elderly data tackle similar issues, they ask questions in different ways and extend to different topics, so direct comparison is difficult. The data is also finite, not only is there no possibility of extending it but it was gathered under different historical and intellectual conditions. For example, neither MO nor Gorer consider solos or unmarried cohabitation as a category, although some incidental information can be gleaned. Indicatively, the 1949 MO report on 'the ideal family' was not concerned with different types of family arrangements, rather heterosexual marriage was assumed and the discussion is wholly taken up with the ideal number of children. Nor was 'individualisation' a concept informing Harrison or Gorer, although – as Smart's tracing of historical antecedents would suggest – both do discuss their findings in similar terms at times. The 1949/50 data was gathered in a time of hope and progress shortly after a devastating and disruptive world war, and the comparative modern data in the context of unprecedented but seemingly threatened prosperity, although for both periods this meant concerns about changing families. Finally, the earlier research teams never asked for informed consent in the way we now understand it, although respondents are anonymised in the reports and books and most are now dead.

For some, this gamut of problems raises issues that make secondary data difficult or even impossible to use – quite apart from practical problems, we are unable to place ourselves in the social and cultural position of the original researchers, or replicate their interactions with respondents, which would allow us to fully understand the data (see Mauthner et al. 1998, Heaton 2004). In my view this makes the mistake of somehow elevating primary research into the 'truth', where these problems somehow do not arise. Rather I view primary and secondary use of data as a continuum, both in the way it is accessed (much 'primary' data is in reality secondary and already mediated by others) and in how we can use it (Bishop 2007). Instead of seeing secondary use of original data as a problem in itself, we should rather evaluate how we can use data from any source, what they offer and how we can use it to answer research questions (Mason 2007, Savage 2007). This is what I have done here.

4. The world we have won? Same sex relationships and heterosexual marriage

4.1 Homosexuality in 1949

I start with a discussion of attitudes to, and experiences of, being homosexual in 1949. This is for two linked reasons. First, same sex relationships have been taken as the metaphor for individualisation in family life, variously demonstrating the ideal construction of families of choice and the pure

relationship (Wilson 2006). Secondly, just because same-sex relationships have been so pathologised in the past, they are most easily used as a 'marker' of change.

By 2006 there was widespread tolerance of homosexuality, although this declined somewhat for same sex relations themselves, and markedly for same sex parenting (Duncan and Phillips 2008). Thus while just 18 per cent of the BSAS sample took the view that homosexual relationships were always wrong, 32 per cent of respondents saw sex between adults of the same sex as 'always or mostly wrong', while around two in five thought that gay (42%) or lesbian parents (38%) would be less adequate parents than heterosexual couples. Legally same sex couples can replicate marriage through civil partnerships and are increasingly able to adopt children or, for lesbian parents, use donor insemination. Nonetheless, a significant public minority in 2006 – 27% -- did not accept that 'civil partners should have the same rights as married couples'. While tolerance might be widespread by 2006, acceptance as equal citizens was still ambivalent for many, while a minority remained disapproving.

This is a substantial attitudinal change from 1949. As one of the Little Kinsey authors put it 'popular feeling against it [homosexuality] is very strong' (Stanley 1995: 199). (5) This was largely based on the results of a small pilot of 58 in 'the London area' which included a question about attitudes to 'sex relations between people of the same sex' (Box 5, File A, where only 20 questionnaires appear to survive), although there is also incidental information in the main survey and the MO panel responses on 'habits'. Indicatively, this topic was dropped in the main survey for reasons of finance where there seemed little point in going further. For around a third of the pilot either did not understand what homosexuality was, or had never heard of it, and were variously dumbstruck, amazed or shocked at the question, while nearly all the remainder expressed various degrees of rejection, hostility and revulsion. Some respondents were less forceful, merely commenting that they did not agree. Others went further, regarding same sex relations as 'Disgusting' (a single female schoolteacher in Hammersmith aged 24), 'horrible, I've no other word for it' (a 25 year old female shop assistant in Harlesden), 'terrible – really, I can't describe it, it makes me feel embarrassed to be near anyone like that' (a 28 year old housewife in Shepherd's Bush), a 'terrible thing, absolutely detestable' (a 44 year old male married factory stores controller in Hammersmith), or a 'revolting idea' (an 18 year old medical student). A 48 year old manager of a coal depot, married with 2 children, was even provoked to comment:

'I shouldn't think they're human – it is done I know. I mean animals don't do it I shouldn't think'.

Only two respondents took a more liberal, medical, interpretation – a middle aged Harlesden housewife with three children believed that 'they should have medical advice. I don't think it's normal', while a 40 year old male sales manager commented that:

'That is an abnormality that most people regard with horror – but it is a disease of the mind and can be treated'.

As far as we can tell this climate of incomprehension, rejection and hostility was common to all classes, age groups and by gender, as these comments suggest. For, despite widespread public rejection, the same Little Kinsey author concluded 'There is no doubt that homosexuality of one form or another is at least not an unusual form of behaviour' (Stanley 1995:199). Indeed, about 20 per cent of the MO panel survey group had experienced some form of homosexuality, although for 8 per

cent this had only amounted to 'milder homosexual lovemaking' (MO Box 4 File F). While noting that the MO panel was 'more inclined to indulge in the sexual outlets of homosexuality, masturbation and petting to climax' than the street sample nonetheless, the researcher concluded, 'it would seem that homosexual inclinations are often sufficiently deep seated to render heterosexuality uneasy and unsatisfying' (ibid). While Gorer did not include questions about same sex relations in his 1950 survey (6), he similarly found that among the small group who said 'they are not interested in the other sex', 'quite a few volunteered the statement that they were homosexual' (Gorer 1995: 80). (7)

So what was it like to be homosexual in 1949? Here we must rely on respondents' accounts from the 'Habits' follow up questionnaire sent to the MO panel ('notoriously unrepresentative of the larger population', according to Savage 2008: 458), as well as on ethnographic material from London on 'a homosexual group' written by a participant observer 'GP' (which includes a vivid account of a joint trip to the 'queer' spaces of Brighton) (MO Box 4, File E) (8), and on 'lesbians' by 'DH', also apparently a participant observer (MO Box 15, File H) (9). To judge from this material there appear to have been two main choices – to out oneself in an isolated and self-isolating group, or private suppression.

The ethnographic material on overt homosexuality provides a colourful, if somewhat chaotic, account of sub-cultural behaviour, sexuality, attitudes, dress and codes. Two major features are important for my purpose here. First, the groups described appeared as self-referentially isolated and isolating. The male group showed an 'exclusive nature, distinctive outlook, isolationist activities, with little chance of making contacts elsewhere'. While this may have been sensible for male homosexuals, given the legal situation, the lesbian group attracted opprobrium as 'very obvious lesbians' in terms of dress, make up ('or lack of it') and behaviour, so much so that 'men dislike them intensely'. Indeed from today's perspective the behaviour of both groups approaches a less censored and rawer version of the 'queer' caricature of the 1950s 'Carry On' films. This is probably why the Little Kinsey author, wondering why a third of the street sample said they had never heard of same sex relations, concluded that 'the isolationist manner in which homosexual groups appear to function makes extensive ignorance of their existence at least a possibility' (Stanley 1995: 200). This is paralleled in the 2006 BSAS survey, which found that acceptance and tolerance of homosexuality increased as respondents personally knew, or were friends with, gay men or lesbians. Secondly, participants in both groups supported themselves in ways which allowed this group involvement. The men included a musician, a film clerk, private secretary to a prominent public figure, and a receptionist in a large London hotel; correspondingly the women appear to have had private means, sometimes through marriage. This again this appears, in today's terms, almost as caricature where one participant ('the aristocratic Tory type') was married to a much older 'pervert black sheep of a well known family', and another to a 'millionaire pervert' (the account presents evidence on the husbands' bizarre 'perversions'). On this evidence, to be out as gay or lesbian in 1949 meant being socially abnormal.

The MO panel survey, and responses to the 'Habits' follow-up, provide some glimpses of what it was like to live in what was presumably the majority position – private suppression and concealment. These accounts, although few, are usually in the form of short – sometimes impassioned – essays developing out of, or appended to, MO standard questions (Box 9; Box 12). (12) A male civil servant aged 40, from Notting Hill, supposed he was 'not normal' given the 'convention of sexual intercourse only with the opposite sex'. Nevertheless, he would like to:

'discuss further the idea that his preferences were more universal and that society should take a more understanding view of such of members of the Community who are like myself,

possessed of these so-called perversions, that more stable and permanent relationships could be fostered, so long as real affection and loyalty were guaranteed. This would make for the happiness so often denied to such persons'.

A 23 year old man seemed more tortured, perhaps reflecting on his uncle's imprisonment for homosexuality, in a long appended letter (Box 10, File B). Believing his 'homosexual tendencies' are 'congenital', he goes on:

'I do not worry about my sexual impulses. I realise there is nothing I can do to lead them into more normal channels. I am satisfied that I have done the best I can to control them, at any rate as an adult, and that I am capable of being a normal person outwardly ... I should worry if I could no longer control myself, but would probably decide to have medical interference, if necessary castration, to avoid making my life miserable'.

But what he really wanted was to be a father and:

'to have a family of my own and to direct my affection towards someone I really respect and care for ... and to share a tasteful home with such a person'.

This unnamed respondent would have been 41 in 1967, so we can hope he was able to legally fulfill at least some of his wishes after decriminalisation that year, although it seems doubtful if he could ever have become a father. By 2000, as we know, it was quite possible and practical for gay men to do all these things. So in this way we can agree with Weeks (2007) that there had been revolutionary improvement between 1949 and 2006. But does this mean individualisation? Was Michael, one of the 'homosexual group' who seemed to enjoy deliberately camping things up on the trip to Brighton, imagining 'liquid love' in his assertion that:

'queers do not abide by conventional moral standards and therefore do not bother to abide by any moral standards at all, so becoming completely promiscuous and living an almost hedonistic life ' (MO Box4, File E).

The nature of heterosexual marriage 1949/50 can provide another way to approach this question. Not only did heterosexuals have to contend with 'conventional moral standards', but in addition they amounted to the great bulk of the adult population. And marriage was seen as the normal state for adult men and women.

4.2 Heterosexual marriage in 1949/50

In 1949 marriage received overwhelming support as an institution. In the Little Kinsey 'street sample' fully 58 per cent were 'unreservedly in favour', with another 28 per cent taking the sensible option of being in favour given suitable partners (23%), or favourable material circumstances like housing or money (5%). Only 4 per cent had 'mixed feelings', with just 4 per cent unfavourable to marriage. Older unmarried people over 30 were the least favourable, citing disillusion with their own experiences or seeing marriage as not for them, but even so only 6 per cent of this group were 'entirely unfavourable' (Stanley 1995: 118). Infidelity was roundly condemned by the MO and Gorer samples alike.

While the opinions of those unfavourable are perhaps the more interesting (and as such are quoted quite extensively in Little Kinsey's chapter 5 on marriage), the reply of a 39 year old RAF engineering officer perhaps speaks better for the majority: 'Marriage is essential for a full and happy life' (ibid 114). Or as a policeman's wife put it, 'It's the natural state for all men and women to be in' (ibid 117). Not surprisingly, then, fully 3/4 of spouses in the Panel group, both men and women, reported that they were satisfied – often very satisfied – with their married lives. Only 5 per cent were definitely unsatisfied. As the Little Kinsey author observes, 'to the ordinary man (sic) marriage is an entirely practical and desirable institution' (ibid 111). Indeed, this question was so uncontentious that it was used as a 'safe' warm-up for more embarrassing questions. For 'sex' (usually taken as heterosexual intercourse) was also identified with marriage, and also with marriage and children. Hence, the MO author concluded, 'in this sense of its family setting, sex is felt to be natural and essential to happiness' and thus the 'conception of sex and family life as almost interchangeable concepts' (ibid 157). Gorer took similar conclusions from his 1950 survey, as did Slater and Woodside (1951) using their 1943-46 study of hospitalised soldiers and their wives.

However, as soon as these researchers delved into what happened within marriage, fissures emerged in the ideal, largely focussing, then as now, on sex, divisions of labour and equality. So while 82 per cent of men in MO's National Panel follow-up on 'Habits' were 'completely satisfied' with intercourse, only 61 per cent of women were (Box 4, files G-H). Indeed 70 per cent of wives, and 60 per cent of husbands, wanted 'improvement' whereby their partner would be more cooperative and passionate during love-making. Women in particular wanted better emotional satisfaction (20%, but just 4% of men). A 52 year old woman can typify this response: 'If my husband had ever said a word of love or endearment or thanks', although a 'middle aged woman' put this most starkly:

"My husband accused me of being "cold" but little knew the passionate longing I experienced. If only he had made love to me instead of using me like a chamber pot'.

Gorer also noted how much dissatisfaction arose from 'the wife's unwillingness for intercourse when the husband desires it', and men 'not troubling if wife is sexually satisfied or not' as a middle class housewife from Hove put it, which men usually referred to as 'coldness' or 'frigidity' (1955: 132/3). This interpretation could be accepted by women as well, thus a 40 year old university administrator in Oxford (from the MO Panel) considered herself 'rather frigid' as she never had 'a climax' (even though she did in dreams once a month and always with masturbation) adding 'although this is not uncommon in women and is hardly abnormal' (MO Box 9). (10)

This sexual inequality was often compounded by ignorance and lack of communication about sex and sexuality. Gorer reproduces a page of responses to this effect, noting that 'quotations with the same underlying theme could be continued over several pages' (1955: 105). For example a 37 old married woman from Barnhurst reported that 'my own husband made such a mess of it, we ceased relations after the first year' (ibid 104), while a 41 year old married woman from Walsall concluded that 'The cause of much unhappiness for myself was because my husband had no sexual experience before marriage' (ibid 105). Similarly, several divorced men blamed 'lack of sexual knowledge' and 'shyness' for their marriage breakdowns. All this led Gorer to claim that was 'a great deal of evidence' to strongly suggest that ignorance, particularly on the part of the men, is a major hazard in English marriages' (ibid).

One result of inequality, ignorance and subsequent dissatisfaction was, for some, avoidance as far as possible. A 37 year old women in the MO Panel group reported that:

'Apart from a kiss and a cuddle we have no intimate love-making. I've tried to tell him but he's so clumsy (I think through shyness) and I'd rather be left alone'.

This avoidance strategy could lead to the success of marriage being judged by the degree to which husbands' bothered' or 'interfered' with their wives, and Slater and Woodside (1951) quote extensively to this effect. One wife reported that 'He's very good – he doesn't bother me much', and conversely another considered that her husband was 'pretty bad that way'. To some, this was 'The one part of marriage I could do without' (167-8). While the husbands in their sample often 'got their way', and in that sense were more satisfied, they still expressed disappointment about their wives' apparent 'frigidity'. This sometimes led to sexual violence and what we might assume, with hindsight, to be marital rape. An unhappily married factory labourer, from MO's street sample, reported that:

'No, I can't live happily without sex, and the wife who says "Hurry up, I'm tired" wants her ears boxing ... yes, sex can be unpleasant – as I've just said when the wife is unwilling it makes a man feel like a brute' (Stanley 1995: 157).

Gorer, although also reporting high levels of agreement for the importance of sex for marriage, has a page or so of quotes on a similar theme. A middle class women from Shrewsbury for instance complained of her husband's 'Brutality (claiming their rights when a women is ill or tired)', while a separated mother of four children complained of men's 'excessive sexual demands' where 'a wife should be entitled to say no if she wants to, and not be forced' (Gorer 1955: 133).

While large majorities in MO's street sample, as in Gorer, were for 'sex' as an ideal, in that they did not see it as wrong, unpleasant and harmful, there is nonetheless an undercurrent of dislike expressed by women for the actual process (and very few women thought that sex was indispensable to happiness). An Oxford labourer's wife with 2 children admitted that:

'To tell you the truth it's very unpleasant. My husband says I'm not human. If I'd have known what it was like before I got married I would never have married' (Stanley 1995: 159),

while a middle-aged widowed shopkeeper thought that 'you would have to be very attached to someone before it would seem to be pleasant' (ibid 160). This also meant that wives saw sex as a duty, where men 'Expect women to submit to love making because it is their duty whether they like it or not' (Gorer 1955: 133), even an unfortunate necessity where 'men are like that, and we women have to put up with it in order to have children' (Stanley 1995: 159).

Perceptively, a 25 year old machinist from Manchester, married with 2 children, thought that the idea that sex is necessary for happiness (as extensively investigated by researchers of the time, including MO and Gorer) was 'a man's version of it, but I don't think it's quite the same with a woman'. She resented her husband's sexual demands ('I think I do quite all right, I don't let him go short, but I think a man wants too much of it') and overall believed that that sex 'can be cheap' (ibid 119).

This research pre-occupation in the 'necessity' of sexual happiness owed much to the influence of psychological theorising of the time (Stanley 1995). In practice however, especially in women's

accounts, sexual dissatisfaction was usually part and parcel of unhappiness about inequality in general. Thus one middle aged housewife, who described herself as a 'domestic servant in my husband's house' also thought that 'sex is a dirty and objectionable form of procreation, but cannot be helped. It is unpleasant in every way for me' (ibid 163). A 45 year old shop assistant commented 'Well men are very selfish, they ought to wash up – my husband is lazy – put that down. I work 8.30 to 6.30 and do everything in the house' (ibid 118). One of Gorer's respondents (a 29 year old lower middle class wife from Bromley) similarly complained of husbands:

'Treating their wives like servants instead of partners, and being very selfish and demanding in sexual matters' (1995: 133).

Gorer recorded pages of quotes on a similar theme, which according to him 'follow a fairly typical pattern' (ibid 132). These include complaints about the 'Unequal division of income ...' (11) as a divorced professional woman from Chesterfield simply put it. Men 'treat their wives as paid housekeepers. Not let his wife know how much money he has' (30 year old wife from Wigan), 'Spend too much on cigarettes, betting and the local when the wife needs it more for the home and the children' (29 year old lower middle class wife in Bromley). The male view was summed up by what Gorer calls 'considerable epigrammatic neatness' by 'younger men' – wives should be a 'Good cook in kitchen. Little lady in the parlour. Mistress in bedroom' (in this case a 21 year old bachelor from Stamford, ibid 133). Unfortunately, according to a 29 year old Dagenham bachelor, the converse often applied; a woman could well be 'A whore in the kitchen, a cook in bed' (ibid). 'The easiest way to wreck a marriage is for the man to let the wife provide the income, bring up the child, and nag all the time' (a divorced teacher from East Yorkshire, ibid 141).

Gorer also asked respondents to list the qualities ideally desired in spouses, and conversely the faults actually experienced. As he comments, 'The list of faults is (as might be expected) considerably longer than the list of qualities' (1955: 128). (Although he was relieved to find, in a later question about what makes for success and failure in marriage that 'Occasionally these depressing pictures are lightened by a husband or wife using the opportunity of an anonymous questionnaire not to denigrate but to praise their partner', ibid 135.) Men's most frequent complaints about wives, in rank order, were 'nagging' (45% of respondents, if we add 'hen-pecking', 'domineering', 'bossiness'), 'lack of intelligence' (24%), 'gossiping' (21%) and 'extravagance' (17%). Women expressed something of a mirror image for husbands citing 'selfishness' (a massive 56%), 'lazy' / 'won't help in house' / 'untidiness' (together 35%), 'lack of intelligence' (20%), and 'taking wife for granted' (18%).

Looking at this picture of marital relations in 1949/50, we can – at first sight – easily agree with Weeks that there has been 'a historic transition in sexual beliefs and intimate behaviour' (2007: 57) which included both a new emphasis on personal autonomy and the democratisation of intimate life. We can surely safely assume that the levels of sexual ignorance, lack of communication, and inequitable divisions of power and labour that both MO and Gorer record are a thing of the past. Women's fear of the possible consequences of unintended pregnancy – induced miscarriage, illegal abortion and, for the unmarried, social punishment (Humphries 1998) has greatly lessened. In this sense, therefore, there must have been a 'revolution' even if, as Weeks admits, this was 'messy, contradictory and haphazard' (op cit).

At second sight, however, things maybe haven't changed that much. First of all we must remember that the large majorities of respondents in the MO and Gorer surveys were happy, or at least

satisfied, with their married lives – even if, unsurprisingly, many thought improvements could be made. Nonetheless both contemporary sources, and later accounts using them make much of respondents' expressions of complaint, dissatisfaction and unhappiness, taking the position that these statements point to the actual nature of personal life at the time, rather than the expected agreement with a normative ideal (e.g. Stanley 1995). While there is much in this argument (and I use it above), we must nonetheless remember that most marriages were experienced as 'good enough' according to the expectations of the time.

And today the majority still see marriage as the ideal partnership, although in practice extended to the quasi-marriage of most cohabiting and living apart together (LAT) households (see Duncan and Phillips 2008). Nearly all are 'very happy' with their marriages, and highly satisfied with their partner (DCSF/ Cabinet Office 2008). Now as then, fidelity within couple relationships is seen as a necessity by the large majority (Erens et al. 2003). Weddings have never been more popular, ornate and expensive (Boden, 2003). But now, as then, we can point to serious deficiencies in many couples' relationships, and we can also take these as indications of the actual practice of personal life, rather than the ideal (as historically high divorce rates might indicate). Thus Jean-Claude Kaufmann (2007) exhaustively documents gripes and complaints about partners, which can become transformed into dissatisfaction, anger and disgust. I suspect any sample list of 'qualities' and 'faults' would come up with the same negative imbalance as found by Gorer. Perhaps these gripes are now expressed in a more psychologised language which chimes better with our current sensitivities than the starker expressions of the 1950s. So 'lack of reflexivity' or 'immaturity' strikes us as an improvement over 'selfishness', and 'less in touch with emotions' over 'lack of intelligence'. Certainly conflict in couples has not gone away and, as in the 1950s, this mostly concerns the triad of sex, money and household labour. Women still often find themselves performing sex as duty, while men complain of lack of enthusiasm. Trends towards gender equality are slower than often assumed (e.g. Sullivan 2006, Walters 2010), and arguably depend on structural changes in women's social position (greater access to the labour market, more state support to mothering, greater legal redress for violence, easier access to divorce), rather than on change in normative attitudes and expectations. Hence the argument often made that sexism and gender inequality are simply reproduced in different ways to before. Natasha Walters (2010) in *Living Dolls: the return of sexism* describes – with vivid and shocking detail – how women's 'empowerment' and 'liberation' has often become equated with sexual objectification, where gender stereotypes and persisting inequalities are given support through a new biological determinism. This leads to a 'creeping silence on cultural sexism and persistent political and economic inequalities'. Similarly Kate Banyard (2010) writes about the 'equality illusion' where choice and empowerment have been co-opted by the beauty and sex industries, so that women can 'choose' to look and act as men desire'. One result is 'a new glorification of the perfect wife'; the culture of domestic goddess in the kitchen and sexy partner on display is eerily similar to some male accounts in Gorer and Little Kinsey. The continuing pervasiveness of domestic violence (nearly always by men, and experienced by about a quarter of women in their lives) surely speaks to the continuing imbalance of domination and control (Hague and Melos 2003). Maybe improvement lies in the fact that inequities are now laid open, and can be challenged both socially and legally – but equally there is also a 'creeping silence' where today's hidden sexism might seem obvious from the perspective of other times (say the 1950s) or other standpoints (from a religious view perhaps). So while, like Weeks, we can argue for improvements in couples' personal lives since the 1950s, this must be seen in the context of the time, and it appears that these improvements are balanced by both continuities and deterioration. But in a way this misses the point, for to assess any outburst of

'individualisation' since the 1950s we must assess how people think about their personal lives - whether 'improved' or not; this is the task of the next section, looking at extra-marital sex and divorce.

5. Individualisation – extra-marital sex and divorce

How far did people in the 1950s simply think and act 'traditionally' in following externally dominant rules and mores? It seems that clergymen of the time thought in this way, as elucidated by the parallel MO survey in Little Kinsey of 'opinion leaders' (which included 1000 clergymen). As many as 90 per cent disapproved of pre-marital sex, and even more of extra-marital sex – but this was not on grounds of personal betrayal or abdication of trust. Rather, for them, any sort of sex unsanctioned by marriage was already defined as sinful and condemned out of hand; it was 'fornication or adultery' (Stanley 1995: 135). No allowances should be made for the 'weaker brethren' (ibid 137), and one middle aged clergyman even suggested that extra-marital relations 'should be punishable by law' (ibid 135). Not surprisingly, then, clergymen were least favourable to divorce, with just 33 per cent approving (compared to 57% of the street sample). As a 43 year old clergyman stipulated, 'For believers in Christ it is forbidden. For others it should be discouraged, except in cases of great hardship' (ibid 124). They saw marriage in religious terms of sanctity and permanency, and hence for this group remarriage also became a moral issue. So while divorce or separation might be condoned in certain cases (notably adultery), few clergymen would have allowed remarriage. As many as 60 per cent saw widespread moral decline (44% of the street sample) and clergymen were particularly sensitive to the supposed ravages of a new 'individualisation', as greater freedom and openness meant a break from true, absolute, Christian morality. As a 45 year old clergyman put it:

'The change taking place is away from morality. Sexual relations are regarded more as a matter of personal feeling and an inclination of the moment' (Stanley 1995: 170/1),

or as a 73 year old clergyman, 'regretfully' observed:

'People speak more openly about sex. Many think it is a matter of private judgement. There is no absolute standard any more' (ibid).

Only a few clergy were 'optimists', who saw the decline in furtiveness as an improvement. For one 'exceptional young clergyman' – perhaps the beginnings of the 1960s 'trendy vicar' – the breakdown of absolute, church, morality did not necessarily mean no morality at all:

'Instead of sticking to a true and lasting principle, people are in the main treating sexual morality as a matter for personal convenience and inclination. This is for the better, if sex is seen to be good in itself, nothing to feel guilty about, but for the worse of this attitude results in a loss of sense of responsibility in sexual matters' for 'freedom without responsibility is license or anarchy'.

How far was there really 'individualisation' in this sense of a pragmatic, personally derived morality as apparently observed, if usually regretfully, by the clergymen? (12) For as many as 63 per cent of the Little Kinsey street sample also disapproved of extra marital relations (which includes pre-marital sex for this sample). Age, apparently, had little independent effect once marriage was taken into account. Gorer found similar distributions, where slightly over half of men, and 2/3 of women, disapproved of

any sexual experience before marriage (although 1/3 of men, and almost 1/4 of women, were in favour). These results are strikingly similar to the 2006 BSAS in one respect where over 80 per cent of respondents disapproved of extra-marital sex (with similar proportions for cohabitation and LAT relationships); conversely, by 2006 less than 20 per cent disapproved of pre-marital sex.

However, the grounds for this general disapproval were different to those expressed by clergymen. First, even for the majority who disapproved of extra-marital sexual intercourse in any circumstances, this was mostly because they saw such relations as immoral or wrong – rather than sinful: ‘That’s wrong’, ‘I don’t agree with that’, ‘It’s filthy’, ‘Well, I think that’s awful’, ‘Oh no, that’s not done, that’s lust’, ‘It’s going like animals’ (ibid, 137). Only a few ventured into more social reasons for disapproval, citing broken homes for example. According to the Little Kinsey author, for most disapprovers regulating ‘unorthodox’ sex relations as lust was felt to be sufficient argument, control for its own sake was ‘probably right’ and marriage gave dignity to sex (ibid). People’s approach to sex in general was ‘limited’ ... ‘by their intentness on doing what is socially ‘correct’’, and ‘also by anxieties and fears about, particularly fears of transgressing, the bounds of “normality”’ (Stanley 1995: 164). Gorer (1955) delved more deeply into this argument, finding that the most popular rationalisation was that ‘Marriage should be new experience’, followed by issues – for men – around virginity and ‘purity’. Morality and religion trailed in third place, followed by a list of practical reasons (pregnancy, VD, etc). (13)

Secondly, many Little Kinsey respondents made a spontaneous response distinguishing between ‘serious’, usually pre-marital, intercourse between two people awaiting marriage, in love, engaged, or somehow unable to marry (due to housing problems for example), and more ‘casual’ forms of unmarried intercourse. Gorer records similar responses. This distinction seems to have formed the basis for the attitudes of most of the ‘non-disapprovers’; as the Little Kinsey author remarked: ‘Sex relations between unmarried people are seldom welcomed, more often condoned’ (Stanley 1995: 138). Or as a Roman Catholic ship builder put it: ‘The Church says it’s a sin, but I can see that sometimes a couple can’t help themselves’ (ibid, 139). A few respondents even put more positive arguments, for example a 37 year old steeplejack stating that ‘You can’t stop the feeling. I agree with it. It’s to try people out’ (ibid 138). Similarly, Gorer found the divorced and separated to be most in favour of extra-marital sex, often citing their own unhappy experiences. His ‘approvers’ often argued in practical terms that pre-marital sex was beneficial in avoiding ignorance and maladjustment. Others, both in the MO and Gorer samples, less enthusiastically but still positively, condoned extra-marital relations as ‘natural’ (‘It’s nature taking its course, if you ask us’, a young labourer, ibid). This could extend into double standards (also noted by Gorer), where some men thought it acceptable to have sex with women they did not intend to marry. As a 23 year old builder’s labourer argued:

‘If I’m going around just for a good time I don’t mind taking a girl; but if I was going with a girl I was wanting to marry I wouldn’t touch her’ (ibid 139).

Indeed a women’s refusal to have sex was sometimes taken as a pre-requisite for accepting her as a wife. Or as a 20 year old Londoner – who had had intercourse with 10 different women – put it: ‘When I first tried and she refused I thought she was the right girl’ (ibid). Clearly, as a group the ‘non-disapproving’ respondents were not simply following the traditional version of sinful behaviour as expressed by the clergymen, but rather formulating a more pragmatic response to circumstances.

It was with the National Panel – a group ‘below average in religious beliefs and ties, and above average in educational level and Leftish politics’ (Stanley 1995: 134), that we see this pragmatic response developed most fully. Only 24 per cent were outright ‘disapprovers’. The majority of ‘non-disapprovers’ partly reflected – like the general street sample – the ‘ifs’ and ‘buts’ of special circumstances (in love, serious obstacles to marriage etc). However, in this ‘vanguard’ (as the little Kinsey author saw them) many more - around 40 per cent – were prepared to admit the principle of extra-marital relations, generally on grounds of ‘expediency and individual satisfaction’. As an ‘elderly panel member’ stated:

‘So long as each party is sure that he or she knows what they are about, and there is no feeling of ‘guilt’, I see nothing against extra-marital relations and much for it’ (ibid 141).

It is in this group that the ‘modern’ idea of a personally derived morality, rather than externally imposed codes, is clearest. As Harrison notes, ‘The emphasis in this group is on the individual – on personal morality, individual responsibility ... and the impossibility of any absolute standards of morality’ (Stanley 1995: 141). Or as a respondent put it:

‘It’s matter of personal morality. It doesn’t really matter what they do as long as they behave in a responsible way’ (55 year old museum director).

Similarly a 37 year old agricultural researcher claimed that:

‘Extra-marital relations are quite in order. It all depends on the physical and psychological needs of the persons concerned. The present moral code makes far too little allowance for individual variation’.

Even where there was disapproval, this more often took form of worry about personal effects of sexual relations outside marriage, rather than some overall moral prescription:

‘In actual practice it doesn’t work out quite so well; quite frequently the women has to pay’ (43 year old housewife).

As Harrison presciently predicted, given the spread of education, and the drift away from the Church, and the shift from:

‘absolute Church derived morality to morality based on social and humanitarian sanctions’, ‘then the Panel group are expressing something of the general attitudes of tomorrow. If that is the case, acceptance of extra-marital relations would become less reluctant, and a majority rather than a minority attitude’ (Stanley 1995: 142).

This social practicality was more marked for attitudes around divorce. For the street sample – unlike clergymen – ‘marriage is neither a spiritual or moral, but purely mundane personal arrangement designed for people’s comfort and happiness – an arrangement, however, which is easily capable of going wrong’. While wholly desirable it was ‘studded with pitfalls for the unwary’ and at the same time as ‘an entirely practical and individual affair (ibid 115). Not surprisingly, then, the majority ‘more or less’ approved of divorce – 57 per cent of the street sample and 83 per cent the ‘vanguard’ National Panel group. Perhaps the minority (about 1/3) who disapproved of divorce could be seen as

'traditionalists' in that they echoed the 'the Christian ethic of lifelong monogamy' (ibid 128) in their reasoning, and disapproval was strongly associated with active Catholicism (69% disapproving). As a 51 year old railway guard argued:

'There never would be any divorce if I had my way. They go to Church and swear 'till death do us part' and therefore they should stick it out to the end' (ibid128).

Practical reasons for objecting to divorce were much less frequent. But for the majority who approved of divorce practical reasons were most important. As a 90 year old ex-teacher graphically put it:

'I quite agree with divorce. One comes across the idea that marriages are made in heaven. Rubbish! Often they are made in hell, and should be terminated' (ibid, 124).

One practical consideration occasionally raised was the effect on children. Some respondents were worried about the ill effects:

'Divorce is a very sad thing when there's little children. Very sad. I've seen some very sad cases' (47 year old widow, dental receptionist, ibid 129).

While others expressed the opposite view that parental conflict harms children:

'I can't see that it helps children to be brought up in a house where hatred or even indifference reigns' (middle aged housewife, ibid 130),

"What about the children? Very difficult, but it is better for them to live with one parent than in an unhappy home with two' (a 50 year old school master, ibid 131).

Thus for most of the street sample 'divorce is a necessary evil, to be avoided whenever possible, but better than unhappiness' as the Little Kinsey author concluded (ibid). Perhaps this was why only 2 per cent said that divorce should be made easier. At the same time, there was a gap between law and public opinion. Legally, divorce could only be granted on grounds of adultery, desertion, insanity or cruelty. Yet a third of street sample 'spontaneously and specifically' (ibid, 127) insisted that divorce was all right if spouses did not get on together; indeed this was the only ground that was mentioned at all often, adultery rarely and the others not at all – 'a divorce is better in every way, in my opinion, than a loveless home. If one has to make a mistake, it is better to be able to remedy it' (38 year old woman secretary, divorced, ibid 129).

Respondents from the National Panel (like the last three quoted) again took their 'vanguard role'; the morality of monogamy for its own sake was far less frequent, simple incompatibility was a major ground for divorce, and the possible effects on children was a consideration for some. For some, as a 49 year old Yorkshire housewife concluded, summarising these arguments, 'Divorce should be made as easy as marriage ... Marriage should be a civil contract' (ibid, 130).

Again, all this does not seem too far from the 2006 BSAS results; here the majority also saw divorce as a pragmatic necessity when things went wrong, and considered that it was parental conflict that harmed children, not divorce. As the Little Kinsey author presciently noted:

‘Possibly if religious beliefs continue to decline, and if divorce becomes easier as well as cheaper, and therefore more readily accessible to more than the middle class, it will become even more widely accepted than it is at present’ (ibid 131).

6. Conclusion –Traditionalists, progressives and pragmatists

Clearly there have been improvements in personal life since 1949/50. To be a gay man or lesbian, and also be ‘normal’, is now much more possible. Levels of sexual ignorance are less stark. Inequitable divisions of sexuality, power and labour between men and women have been diminished – although these may have re-appeared in new guises. But this improvement does not necessarily mean some transformation in how people think about their personal lives. In addition, many of these changes result as much from structural change ‘from above’ (e.g. in law, service provision and workplaces) than from how people think they ought to conduct their personal lives. Indeed, if we imagine a sort of ‘standardisation’ according to the debates and issues of the time, then how people thought – and the range of their thoughts – about how to conduct personal life seem similar in 1949/50 and the present day. In 1949/50 pressing issues concerned, among others, divorce and extra/pre-marital sex (birth control, not considered here, was also topical). In 2006 we might pick on the status of cohabitation, divorce (still), same sex parenting and donor insemination. While the issues are largely different, the range of opinions about how to act seem similar, even if we cannot assess distributions in a statistical sense. Figure 1 below summarises this argument.

Figure 1 The distribution of attitudes about families and relationships: 2006 and 1949

	Conservatives	Pragmatists	Vanguard
BSA 2006 Issues: Divorce, cohabitation, marriage, same sex parenting, donor insemination	Older, married and religious	The majority	Young, professional, unmarried, especially women
Little Kinsey and Gorer 1949/50 Issues: Divorce, pre-marital sex	Older, married and religious	The majority	Young, professional, especially men

The married, less educated and more religious (and this often correlates with age) were the more ‘traditional’ in 1949/50, and the young and the more professional were more ‘progressive’. This is a similar distribution of relative attitudes about family issues as revealed by the 2006 BSAS. The only difference in this distribution of relative values is that women in 1949/50 appeared a bit more traditional than men, whereas in 2006 it was women – specifically young women – who were more likely to hold liberal attitudes about families. But the bulk of both samples believed in behaving practically and pragmatically, as the account of marriage and divorce above shows well. Rather than revolution, or indeed continuity – a dualism of two equally unlikely opposites – we find pragmatism. Generally speaking we do not find, in either the 2006 or the 1949/50 samples, people who act according to in some rational, ‘individualising’ position. Nor are they simple conduits for ‘tradition’.

Rather, people generally hold pragmatic views of what is reasonably proper. For practical reasons, such as using material resources and 'social energy' more effectively, and because people like their pragmatically developed social practices to seem 'natural' and legitimate, this means bending and improvising from past practices. In this way people engage in 'bricolage' as they take whatever is at hand and re-inscribe pre-existing relations, institutions, and rules of the game. This is why the Little Kinsey author was able to make prescient predictions (as with the examples about extra-marital sex and divorce above) – not because he was some modern Nostrodamus who could foretell the future, but rather because he was a thoughtful social scientist who could analyse trends and their causes. This implies not so much revolution as development.

Notes

1. One reason is that individualisation theory appears as the sociological parallel of hegemonic, if also abstractly assumed, economic theorisations of 'rational economic man'. See Duncan et al. 2003.
2. The study by Eliot Slater and Moya Woodside, carried out between 1943 and 1946, and published as *Patterns of Marriage: A Study of Marital Relationships in the Urban Working Class* (1951), is also relevant. While also pioneering at the time, this is limited both by its sample (200 soldiers from a large London hospital and their wives, 330 in total) and its focus on a psychoanalytic explanation of neuroticism.
3. See Stanley 1995, 2008, and Savage 2007, 2008, Hubble 2005 and Kushner 2004 for the intellectual and social development of MO during its first phase (1937 to the late 1950s).
4. Gorer occasionally refers to the US Kinsey report, but never refers to the almost contemporaneous and parallel MO 'Little Kinsey'.
5. According to Stanley (1995: 199) the author of this part of the report was Len England.
6. Although in his 1969 survey Gorer undertook what he claimed was the first 'scientifically selected sample' on 'views on homosexuality in any country' (1971: 190). This indicated, two years after homosexual relations between consenting adult men were decriminalised, a substantial shift in attitudes. Only about a third of 16-45 year olds were hostile or revolted, with another third what Gorer classed as 'neutral' (expressing incomprehension, ridicule, or medical views around mental illness), while a final third were 'tolerant', variously expressed as 'pity' (most likely to be women), or 'live and let live' attitudes (most likely men). A few respondents even expressed sympathy or acceptance.
7. Unfortunately Stanley (1995: 47) misquotes this as if Gorer equated 'homosexuality' with 'uninterested in sex'.
8. The final account is replicated in Stanley 1995, although more detail is to be found in the first chapter draft on 'abnormalities' (MO Box 4, File E). The report's editors were particularly concerned to remove details of sexual behaviour and salacious quotation.
9. This is preserved as a handwritten account. Apart from this document there are only fleeting references to female same sex experience in Little Kinsey and Gorer, and male homosexuality is usually assumed.
10. Slater and Woodside (1995), ruminating on their data on sex life in marriage, noted that 'It is some ways remarkable that there is sufficient biological advantage in the female orgasm for it to be preserved ... it is partly rudimentary, and conceivably already on the way to disappearing' (175).

11. Gorer notes how financial inequality was less marked in the North-West, which fits in with what we know about geographies of gender practices, see Duncan and Smith (2002).
12. As many as 75 per cent of teachers and 65 per cent of doctors disapproved, unusual for two groups usually expressing somewhat more liberal attitudes than the street sample. The Little Kinsey author speculates that this was due to their interpretation of what was 'socially proper' for professionals faced with strong convention (Stanley 1995: 132).
13. While the street survey took no representative evidence about actual practice, Harrison assumed that at least a third of adults, 'probably more', had intercourse before or outside marriage, based on the fact that in 1939 30 per cent of first births were conceived out of wedlock (mostly with subsequent marriage). For the National Panel – where a question was posed – 58 per cent admitted to pre-marital intercourse (mostly with the future spouse) and 22 per cent to 'sex relations outside marriage'.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the British Academy for financial support and to the Trustees of Mass Observation for permission to reproduce original material.

Thanks also to seminar participants at the universities of London South Bank, Manchester, Örebro and Gothenburg for comments.

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