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EMOTION, BODIES, SEXUALITY, AND SEX EDUCATION IN EDWARDIAN ENGLAND*

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ABSTRACT. *The history of emotion has focused on cognition and social construction, largely disregarding the centrality of the body to emotional experience. This case-study reveals that a focus on corporeal experience and emotion enables a deeper understanding of cultural mores and of transmission to the next generation, which is fundamental to the process of change. In 1914, parents in Dronfield, Derbyshire, attempted to get the headmistress of their school removed because she had taught their daughters sex education. Why did sex education arouse such intense distress in the mothers, born mainly in the 1870s? Examination of their embodied, sensory, and cognitive experience of reproduction and sexuality reveals the rational, experiential basis to their emotional responses. Their own socialization as children informed how they trained their ‘innocent’ children to be sexually reticent. Experience of birth and new ideas relating disease to hygiene reinforced their fears. The resulting negative conception of sexuality explains why the mothers embraced the suppression of sexuality and believed their children should be protected from sexual knowledge. As material pressures lessened, women’s emotional responses lightened over decades. The focus on emotion reveals changes that are hard to trace in other evidence.*

In 1913, working-class parents in Dronfield, a small English town, discovered that their daughters had received ‘sex instruction’ from Miss Outram, the head teacher of the council school for girls. She had told her pupils, ‘now girls, you must not go home and make mischief of what I have told you’.¹ Eleven-year-old Beatrice Bradwell told her older sister, who told her aunt, who told Beatrice’s parents.² On 14 January 1914, her father, Jacob Bradwell, a publican, complained to a meeting of the Dronfield council school managers:

Miss Outram is teaching that...when you see your mothers with large stomachs they are in the family way and it is all toffee that the Doctor or Nurse is bringing

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¹ Signed declaration, Winifred Milnes, 5 Mar. 1914, The National Archives (TNA)/ED/150/185; transcript from shorthand note of proceedings at meeting of the Dronfield council school managers (hereafter DCSM) 14 Jan. 1914, p. 14, TNA/NA/ED/150/185.

² DCSM 14 Jan. 1914, p. 4.

a baby; [telling] ... a girl of 11 years of age [this] ... is most disgusting and abominable.³

The parents believed the sex education had caused 'mental deterioration' in their children, while their accounts of reproduction were revealed to be 'all toffee' and their parental authority undermined.⁴ Outram had promised the school management committee that she would not teach any further controversial subjects in 1911, following their censure of her for teaching 'suffragette doctrines'.⁵ The 14 January 1914 meeting passed a resolution calling on the Derbyshire county education committee to dismiss Outram.⁶ The committee refused. A second meeting, held on 27 January, was attended by the girls' distressed and angry mothers.

Supported by the school managers, the parents sent a petition to their MP and held a public meeting in February, attended by around 500 people, including numerous journalists and press photographers. The layers of urban authority above the managers – first the county, then the national board of education – still refused to dismiss the teacher.⁷ The class had contained thirty-six girls, aged between eleven and thirteen years old. Over two-thirds were said to have been withdrawn by their parents. Outram's replies to the school managers were disingenuous. She claimed she had merely read out two stories received, unsolicited, from the USA, and answered questions raised by pupils in Scripture and 'domestic economy – home management' lessons.⁸ Signed declarations, taken from eight girls in March, revealed that the questions had covered considerably more ground than the stories. In April, a second, smaller public meeting was held, and, in June, twenty-six parents were threatened with prosecution for their daughters' non-attendance at school. Eleven parents appeared in court, defended by a lawyer who made much of the suffrage teaching. The magistrates were sympathetic and adjourned the cases in order that the county education committee should find a solution.⁹ Nothing more is known, except that Outram survived the attempt to remove her.

Eighteen families can be identified in the sources. Three-quarters of the mothers were born in the 1870s and another 20 per cent in the 1850s and 1860s. The duration of the parents' marriages ranged from thirteen to forty years, and the number of children born in each family ranged from sixteen to none (where there was an adopted child).¹⁰ Dronfield was a town of nearly 4,000 people, located in north-east Derbyshire. Mining and foundries provided the bulk of employment, and the husbands, who worked as miners, artisans, and

³ Ibid. 14 Jan. 1914, p. 2; *Manchester Guardian*, 4 Feb., 23 June 1914; *Derbyshire Times*, 25 Apr., 27 June 1914.

⁴ DCSM clerk, letter, Dronfield to board of education, 6 Mar. 1914.

⁵ DCSM 14 Jan. 1914, p. 9.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 5, 7.

⁷ F. Mort places this event in the context of official attempts to regulate sexuality: *Dangerous sexualities: medico-moral politics in England since 1830* (London, 1987), pp. 153–63.

⁸ The two stories are reprinted in *ibid.*, pp. 153–6.

⁹ *Derbyshire Times*, 27 June 1914.

¹⁰ Census of England and Wales, 1911.

small business owners, were among the more affluent members of the working class, with the exception of one iron foundry labourer and the middle-class owner of a large foundry.¹¹ Of the parents, 85 per cent had been born in Dronfield or elsewhere in Derbyshire, while the rest were born within a 100-mile radius. Oral history testimony reveals that sexual constraint and the inhibition of expression of feeling were stronger in the north of England than in London and the south-east.¹² The school managers were middle-class professionals, including doctors, and businessmen. All those who expressed ambivalence about the protest were middle class, which is consistent with other evidence indicating growing support for sex education among the Edwardian middle classes. Outram herself had been born in Dronfield and had joined the school in 1892. This may be why those opposed to the sex education do not make any reference to a specific moral geography associated with this small provincial town, nor is the source of the 'pollution' located in an urban or metropolitan setting.

The sexual beliefs of both the parents and Outram have been described by Frank Mort in the same terms, as part of a 'negative and emotive' 'purity' discourse.¹³ The head teacher was an adherent of the middle-class social purity movement; she believed that girls needed knowledge of reproduction and sexuality.¹⁴ More importantly, perhaps, she modelled discussion of sexuality for the girls. Outram's teaching practice, and the content of her lessons, appear to be closer to that proposed by sex reformers, and implemented on a limited scale in the interwar period, than to the negative warnings about the risks of sex usually associated with the social purity movement. The Dronfield mothers, supported by their husbands, were raising their daughters in the state of extreme sexual ignorance in which they had been brought up. They were intensely distressed to learn their daughters had been told about gestation and birth (nothing that would now be called a sexual act was included).

The emotions and ideas of respectable Edwardian working-class women who believed that the repression of sexuality was morally right and necessary are difficult to reconstruct. Emotion is here both a heuristic device focusing discussion of the mothers' subjectivities and interactions with their daughters and evidence of change. Historians of emotion in modern Britain have largely focused on discreet emotions or questions of English identity.¹⁵ Psychoanalytic

¹¹ DCSM clerk, letter, Dronfield to board of education, 6 Mar. 1914.

¹² P. Thompson, *The Edwardians: the remaking of British society* (London, 1975), p. 63.

¹³ Mort, *Dangerous sexualities*, pp. 156, 160.

¹⁴ S. Morgan, "'Wild oats or acorns?'" Social purity, sexual politics and the response of the late-Victorian church', *Journal of Religious History*, 31 (2007), pp. 151–68, at p. 154; E. Bristow, *Vice and vigilance: purity movements in Britain since 1700* (Dublin, 1977), ch. 6.

¹⁵ E.g. C. Langhamer, 'Love and courtship in mid-twentieth-century England', *Historical Journal*, 50 (2007), pp. 173–96; A. Light, *Forever England: femininity, literature and conservatism between the wars* (London, 1991); M. Francis, 'Tears, tantrums, and bared teeth: the emotional economy of three Conservative prime ministers, 1951–1963', *Journal of British Studies*, 41 (2002), pp. 354–87.

methodology is becoming more flexible and responsive to the historical situation, but considerable problems specific to the history of sexuality remain. Michael Roper acknowledged his conceptual discomfort at discovering that the soldiers and their families whose early twentieth-century letters he studied 'often did not draw ... sharp distinctions between maternal and romantic love in the way we do now'.¹⁶ Roper comments on the introduction of Freudian ideas as a historically specific event in this context:

In an era when Freud's ideas were yet to become commonplace... it was not necessarily felt as shameful to confess physical desire for a mother. On the contrary, these mothers and sons revelled in the physical aspects of their adoration which, as far as they were concerned, could not have been more pure in its origins.¹⁷

The implication of this passage is that, as far as post-Freudians are concerned, this purity cannot exist, but, with great sensitivity, Roper manages to convey both his perspective and that of his historical subjects. These middle-class mothers and sons were of the same generation as those in Dronfield and a similar issue arises in relation to the latter's sexual subjectivity. Definitions of sexual desire are crucial. Freud conflated all situations in which both physical sensual experience and emotional need for another were present with erotic/sexual desire.¹⁸ If, however, sexual desire is defined as genital excitation or sexual fantasy, recognized as such by the individual, then an absence of sexual desire, even in the presence of intense emotional needs, is entirely credible. This is an appropriate definition to bring to analysis of the subjectivities of these late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century mothers.

Engagement with neuroscience by historians is challenging, but thus far the impact is similar to that of the earlier rejection of biological essentialism, though cognition rather than just language is presented as the basis for the downplaying of embodied experience.¹⁹ Embodiment, or corporeal being, has been peripheral to the history of emotion. Sociologist Chris Shilling argues, however, that

People's experiences of... social structures are shaped by their *sensory* and *sensual* selves. These... exert an important impact on whether people *feel* at ease with, and tend to reproduce, the 'rules' and 'resources' most readily accessible to them, or sensorily experience these 'structures' as unpleasant, undesirable and worthy of transformation.²⁰

¹⁶ M. Roper, *The secret battle: emotional survival in the Great War* (Manchester, 2009), p. 227.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 229.

¹⁸ F. J. Sulloway, *Freud, biologist of the mind: beyond the psychoanalytic legend* (New York, NY, 1979, 1983), chs. 5 and 6; N. J. Chodorow, foreword to S. Freud, *On sexuality: three essays on the theory of sexuality and other works* (New York, NY, 2000 (1962, 1905)), p. xvi.

¹⁹ J. Plamper, 'The history of emotions: an interview with William Reddy, Barbara Rosenwein, and Peter Stearns', *History and Theory*, 49 (2010), pp. 237–65.

²⁰ C. Shilling, 'Embodiment, structuration theory and modernity: mind/body dualism and the repression of sensuality', *Body and Society*, 2 (1996), pp. 1–15, at p. 2.

Embodied emotional and sensory experience can thus enable us to understand why these women felt at ease with rigid sexual mores. Phenomenology proposes that the basis of human thought is the body and its accumulated actions, which position the person in relation to the world. Philosophical anthropologist Maxine Sheets-Johnstone argues, further, that consideration of how an actual body is lived is crucial to making talk of embodiment into 'an experienced fact'.²¹ This can be combined with the model of emotions as intentional. Philosophers have argued that intentionality is central to emotions. That is, emotions always have an object: I love somebody or something; I cannot love in the abstract. The emotion contains a reference to the person feeling the emotion: there must be an 'I' to do the loving, and, hence, the emotion contains a reference to that person's perspective, to their desires and wants, their view of the world, and their beliefs about the object.²² Writing about the lived, embodied experience of emotion enables the historian to describe beliefs, events, and situations from the perspective of those whose emotions are being described: hence the description of emotion as a heuristic device.

Juxtaposing different sources enables the emotional and intellectual subjectivity of these mothers to be placed in relation to their embodied experience, revealing how they understood and managed their sexuality, and the ways in which they endeavoured to inculcate these attitudes in their children. The Dronfield sources reveal the mothers' ideas and attitudes. *Maternity* (1915), the well-known collection of letters from the Women's Co-operative Guild, makes it possible to place these in the context of working-class women's embodied and emotional experience of reproductive labour.²³ The management of sexuality/reproduction in their daily lives is described using oral history evidence from the same birth cohort as the younger four-fifths of the mothers in Dronfield, that is between 1870 and the mid-1880s. This is drawn from the projects described below and findings from other projects are also referred to where appropriate. Testimony from women born between 1895 and 1905 provides the perspective of their daughters, born between 1901 and 1903. This use of oral histories to examine the experience of specific generations makes a methodological break from oral historians' previous practice, but testimony has now been collected over five decades and changes, as well as continuities, in sexual mores are apparent.

Starting in the 1970s, oral historians transformed understanding of late Victorian and Edwardian working-class sexuality. The first major project,

²¹ M. Sheets-Johnstone, *The roots of power: animate form and gendered bodies* (Chicago, IL, 1994), pp. 59, 72; see also J. C. Spurlock and C. A. Magistro, "'Dreams never to be realised': emotional culture and the phenomenology of emotion', *Journal of Social History*, 28 (1994), pp. 295–310; I. Burkitt, 'The shifting concept of the self', *History of the Human Sciences*, 7 (1994), pp. 7–28.

²² P. Goldie, *The emotions: a philosophical exploration* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 16–27.

²³ M. Llewelyn Davies, *Maternity: letters from working women collected by the Women's Co-operative Guild* (London: 1978 (1915)).

Family life and work experience before 1918, 1870–1973 (hereafter FLWE1870–1918), began interviews in 1968 and the completed data set consisted of over 450 interviews.²⁴ The majority of the interviewees did not discuss their sexual and reproductive activity. Sexual inhibitions remained strong and the interviewers were not encouraged to press for such information. In the mid-1970s, Elizabeth Roberts began interviewing for a new project on women in three northern towns and set out to collect material on sexual attitudes and experience.²⁵ Not only were her interviewees intensely reticent, but, when one respondent (born in 1888) described the consequences of a cousin's adulterous affair and her own pre-marital pregnancy, the typist initially omitted these extracts from the transcript because she felt they were 'too personal'.²⁶ Outside the metropolitan middle classes, sexual reticence remained a strong force in British culture into the early 1980s, and the failure to obtain more sexual testimony must be ascribed to this and not to lack of skill on the part of interviewers.²⁷ By the mid-1980s, few among the Victorian generation were still alive and sexual mores had relaxed considerably; since then, projects have collected considerably more sexual testimony.²⁸

The first oral history project to focus on sexuality was not undertaken until the 2000s.²⁹ As its authors, Kate Fisher and Simon Szreter, explain, their respondents were born 'too late to be Victorians or even Edwardians' thus their valuable findings about class and sexuality apply only to mid-twentieth-century experience. There is an overlap between the oldest of their respondents and the pupils at school in Dronfield, which highlights a major difference in interpretation of the evidence concerning sexual reticence and ignorance. Scepticism is inherent in the language used in Szreter and Fisher whenever any 'assertions about taboo and secrecy' are made.³⁰ Such language is absent from analysis of testimony from mid-century young women such as middle-class Joan (born 1914) daughter of a bank manager who 'learned about birth control from her school friends'.³¹ Women, such as her, who knew about sexuality have

²⁴ P. Thompson and T. Lummis, *Family life and work experience before 1918, 1870–1973*, 7th edn, Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive, May 2009, SN: 2000 (hereafter FLWE1870–1918). The occupations are comparable to those of the Dronfield sample.

²⁵ E. Roberts, *A woman's place: an oral history of working-class women, 1890–1940* (Oxford, 1984) : on interviewing, see pp. 16–17. See also L. Beier, "'We were green as grass": learning about sex and reproduction in three working-class Lancashire communities, 1900–1970', *Social History of Medicine*, 16 (2003), pp. 461–80.

²⁶ Transcript of Mrs B1L, born 1888, Barrow, Elizabeth Roberts Archive, Centre for North-West Regional Studies, University of Lancaster, UK (hereafter ERA-CNWR).

²⁷ S. Szreter and K. Fisher, *Sex before the sexual revolution: intimate life in England, 1918–1963* (Cambridge, 2010), p. 3.

²⁸ See e.g. C. Chinn, *They worked all their lives: women of the urban poor in England, 1880–1939* (Manchester, 1988); L. Jamieson, 'Theories of family development and the experience of being brought up', *Sociology*, 21 (1987), pp. 591–607; N. Leap and B. Hunter, *The midwife's tale: an oral history from handywoman to professional midwife* (London, 1993).

²⁹ Szreter and Fisher, *Sex*, p. 31.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

experiences that are described to the interviewer. In contrast, women's recollections of absence of knowledge are consistently defined as discursive claims: 'By claiming they were ignorant, working class women like Clare (1912) ... effectively placed themselves in a respectable category.'³² Discourse analysis is gently let fall when the experience described conforms to the authors' preconceptions: 'Despite carefully reading this text, [middle-class Joanna and Mark] did not specifically take any of its advice and sought instead to develop a relationship by themselves uninformed by outside views.'³³ The credulity revealed in the acceptance that this middle-class couple could read the text (a sex manual) carefully but remain 'uninformed by outside views' contrasts with the presentation of working-class women who are said merely to 'portray' difficulties with formal book knowledge.³⁴ Fisher and Szreter argue that working-class girls accepted that they should not actively seek out sexual information, therefore they were not ignorant, rather they were constructing a 'narrative of innocence'.³⁵ Limits on the knowledge available in the interwar period are noted, as is parental authority over girls, but agency does not reside with the community that attempted to prevent young women from learning, instead young women are endowed with a spurious discursive agency. These claims about subjectivity enable distress and other negative emotions to be both acknowledged and excluded from the interpretation of mid-twentieth-century sexual culture.

Oral testimony about sexual ignorance challenges common-sense assumptions that sexual knowledge is self-evident rather than learned, usually by the child, from those around them. Fisher and Szreter gave the example of Maria, born in 1917:

[She was] comfortable relating how she indulged her future husband in sex before marriage at all times of the day ... Yet ... when it came to questions of her own attitudes towards sex, pregnancy and birth control, she indignantly protested her innocence. Childbirth was 'the shock of me life'.³⁶

Oral testimony from midwives, and contemporary sources, reveal that absence of knowledge about childbirth had been 'common' in women facing their first birth even in the early 1920s. Such ignorance had become unusual around 1940 when Maria had her first birth and probably reflects her non-respectable background which is also evident in her lack of sexual restraint.³⁷ Fisher and Szreter interpret Maria's indignant protestations of ignorance about childbirth (and contraception) as an assertion of respectability. The information Maria gave about her sexual activity reveals, however, that she was not claiming to be innocent; she was explaining that she had been ignorant. Her protestations appear to be the defensive response of a person who was aware her audience

³² *Ibid.*, p. 96.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 354.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 93-4.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 64, 78.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

³⁷ Leap and Hunter, *Midwife's tale*, pp. 78-81.

assumed that once a woman knew about sexual intercourse, she must, ipso facto, know about the process of birth.

Maria's emotional shock on the occasion of this birth, as with that of girls who did not know why they were bleeding when they experienced their first period, is important. Sheets-Johnstone points out that 'basic features of animate form resonate experientially and behaviourally in sex- and ultimately gender-specific ways... we must interrogate male and female bodies as specific forms of liveability in the world.'³⁸ When the sexual body pushes into consciousness at puberty, it is with very different gendered consequences: for girls the physical experience of bleeding is at best neutral, and often painful, reaffirming the highly negative messages they received in this culture, whereas the pleasure boys found in their disobedient erections encouraged them to disregard anti-masturbation propaganda.³⁹ The minor pain of menstruation and first sexual intercourse is often unimportant and the pain of childbirth results in much-loved children, but women's emotional responses were not irrational.⁴⁰ As explained above, emotion must have an object, and therefore an emotional response contains a reference to a person's beliefs about the world and their wants. Disregard of emotion, which may involve the assumption that emotion has no consequences, entails disregard of the culturally constructed meaning the event has for the person. Barbara Duden has written of women in the early eighteenth century that 'the sense of existence, which their recorded [medical] complaints express, is foreign to the bodily identity as a woman which I have been taught to "have"'.⁴¹ Historicizing the sexuality of the Dronfield mothers born in the Victorian period, and that of their Edwardian daughters, involves connecting bodies with emotions and ideas, and focusing on difference, rather than assuming a shared culture. In the following three sections, this article looks at the sexual subjectivity of these Edwardian mothers, their beliefs about their embodied sexuality and reproduction; the approaches they took to the management of reproductive and sexual activity in the presence of their children; at how and why they denied their children sexual knowledge; and their experience of bringing their children into the world.

I

At the second meeting of the Dronfield school management committee on 27 January 1914, one of the mothers, a Mrs Milnes, recounted what her daughter had told her of the lesson:

She started on about nature, then about laying eggs, got as far as lions, and said they could not lay eggs because there was no protection for them; there was something

³⁸ Sheets-Johnstone, *The roots*, p. 72.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 149–55.

⁴⁰ H. Cook, *The long sexual revolution: English women, sex, and revolution, 1800–1975* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 171–2.

⁴¹ B. Duden, 'A repertory of body history', in M. Feher, R. Naddaff, and N. Tazi, eds., *Fragments for a history of the human body* (New York, NY, 1989), p. 471.

put in a little nest, and that was the same with women. She did not like to tell me anything further, but I pressed her and she then went on that at the nine months end a little door was opened and a little baby came ('Disgusting' from several voices of the parents) . . . It is too disgusting for the children to know; they have not the same respect for their parents when they know that (Weeping).⁴²

This woman felt shame at the exposure of something internal and central to her body and her identity as a mother: babies were carried inside the mother's body and they came out of her body into the world. Her shame and guilt was not caused by her behaviour; it was intrinsic to her being in the world. It was central to her identity as a mother, as the process by which she became a mother had to be concealed from her children. If her daughter knew about reproductive processes, such as pregnancy and birth, she would not respect her mother because the mother had participated in a process that the mother herself found disgusting.⁴³ These beliefs meant that there was an unavoidable and natural divide between acceptable public knowledge (being a mother) and private sexual/reproductive knowledge (how she became a mother) that had to be hidden because it was perceived to be disgusting. These mothers were not either repudiating participating in sex or rejecting sexuality. The feelings of disgust and the necessary acceptance of the disgusting (and of pleasure where this was part of the experience) existed side by side, and so long as the feelings, the events, and the body were kept private – that is, they were concealed – the guilt they produced was incorporated into daily life.⁴⁴ This was not hypocrisy, which is the promotion of beliefs in public while engaging in, or tolerating, practices that contradict those beliefs in private. Rather, there were embodied practices and events that were necessary and therefore acceptable, provided they were kept private, even within the home, and other practices (being a mother) that were public.

Children born around 1900, the age of Outram's pupils, unsurprisingly responded as their mothers had taught them to, as Mrs Milne feared when her daughter's gaze was turned upon her. A middle-class woman, born in 1889, described her emotional response to contact with the belly of a pregnant woman around 1904, when she was aged fifteen:

I can remember . . . seeing a poor relation of ours . . . she was going to have a baby and I remember sitting at her feet, remember it plain as anything, and putting my head on her lap and feeling the baby move and being so repulsed. Sort of nasty feeling, so repulsed that I always – that I really – I – I think I was frightened more than anything looking back on it.⁴⁵

This girl's mother was unusually open and they had talked about pregnancy; nonetheless, the girl was still upset. This suggests that, while inhibition was a

⁴² DCSM 27 Jan. 1914, p. 4.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴⁴ See Cook, *The long sexual revolution*, pp. 104–21.

⁴⁵ FLWE1870–1918, interview 178, born 1889, father, manager.

strong force, these reproductive processes were concealed because they were disgusting and not disgusting because they were concealed. Thus, for these generations, bringing such processes out into the open, as sex reformers wished to do, would not remove 'morbid' emotions and make sex healthy, clean, and good.⁴⁶ The girl's feelings of fear and repulsion may have been intensified by the class of her 'poor relation', but the association between poverty, loose sexual morals, and dirtiness was also made by the respectable working class.⁴⁷ For these generations, disgust was a normal response to evidence of embodied sexuality. This emotion serves to defend the self against psychological and physical contamination, and use of the word 'disgusting' reflects the belief that sexuality was powerfully polluting.⁴⁸ Concealment of sexual and reproductive processes was already usual in the early modern period.⁴⁹ Thus, it is not concern for concealment that makes attitudes around 1900 distinctive, but the intensity of disgust.

In this period, sexual reticence, which included not speaking about sexuality or presenting oneself as sexually desirous, was central to the identity of conventional and respectable women of all classes. The response of Mrs Milne, and of other mothers in Dronfield, to the discovery that their children had received sex education makes it evident that they belonged to what Barbara Rosenwein has described as an emotional community with shared norms of emotional expression. Rosenwein's proposal that, because emotions are accessible to us only in the form of 'social signals', the 'expressions of emotions should . . . be read as social interactions', however, reinstates existing historical practice and limits what can be learned from including emotion in history.⁵⁰ The concealment of reproductive/sexual events and processes by women has been constructed by historians as arising from the importance of reputation.⁵¹ This positions the person within their community and implies that the issues at stake for them are those described by Erving Goffman as 'impression

⁴⁶ For a related point, see L. England, 'Little Kinsey', in L. Stanley, ed., *Sex surveyed, 1949–1994: from Mass-Observation's 'Little Kinsey' to the national survey and the Hite reports* (London, 1995), pp. 84–5; H. Ellis, *The task of social hygiene* (London, 1912), p. 254; J. Kerr, *The fundamentals of school health* (London, 1926), pp. 377–8; T. Tucker and M. Pout, *Sex education in schools: an experiment in elementary instruction* (London, 1933), p. 13.

⁴⁷ M. Tebbutt, "'You couldn't help but know': public and private space in the lives of working-class women, 1918–1939", *Manchester Region History Review*, 6 (1992), pp. 72–9, at p. 76.

⁴⁸ See M. Douglas, *Purity and danger: an analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo* (London, 1966); P. Rozin, J. Haidt, and C. MacCauley, 'Disgust', in M. Lewis and J. Haviland, eds., *Handbook of emotions* (New York, NY, 1993), pp. 757–76.

⁴⁹ L. Gowing, *Common bodies: women, touch, and power in seventeenth-century England* (New Haven, CT, 2003), p. 83; V. Smith, *Clean: a history of personal hygiene and purity* (Oxford, 2007), p. 200.

⁵⁰ B. H. Rosenwein, 'Problems and methods in the history of emotions', *Passions in Context*, 1 (2010), pp. 1–32, at p. 21.

⁵¹ Beier, 'We were green as grass', p. 463; M. Tebbutt, *Women's talk? A social history of gossip in working-class neighbourhoods, 1880–1960* (London, 1995), p. 77.

management'.⁵² In this context, the question of their subjectivity does not arise, encouraging a common-sense belief that these women's highly restricted sexuality is a product of performance and that, within themselves, or perhaps in the supposed privacy of their own home, there is a 'back region' or 'off-stage' area in which they express their 'real' emotions.

Concealment of sexual desires certainly existed, and reputation was undoubtedly important to women, but this concern does not explain the distress or embarrassment these parents experienced in relation to sex education. The distress the Dronfield mothers expressed did not arise primarily from concerns about how others in their community might see them, but from the construction of the self and how they understood their embodied experience. As Mrs Milne said, 'It is too disgusting for the children to know; they have not the same respect for their parents when they know that (Weeping)'.⁵³ She is explaining that a child will lose respect for their mother if the mother (her body and acts) is revealed as disgusting. There are many accounts of such emotional responses among those who wanted to give their children sex education. The intense embarrassment felt by mid-twentieth-century progressive middle-class parents who blamed themselves for their inability to talk to their children, and whose reputation would be damaged, if at all, by failure to speak to, not openness with, their children, confirms that these emotions arise from a source other than concern for reputation.⁵⁴ Such feelings of guilt and shame primarily related to how a woman felt about herself, rather than how others might feel about her. After all, every mother engaged in sexual acts and knowledge of her participation in them could hardly be a revelation to the community.

Late nineteenth- and twentieth-century sex reformers emphasized the centrality of guilt and fear regarding sexuality in Christianity in arguments for sex education.⁵⁵ There are few references to religion in the Dronfield sources, and all were made by middle-class people. The middle-class deployment of Christianity may help explain the absence of recourse to religious justification by the mainly working-class parents, as around 40 per cent of mothers in Derbyshire were reported to have been churchgoers in FLWE 1870–1918.⁵⁶ The sex/reproduction teaching took place in Scripture classes. Had Outram's teaching stayed within the parents' desired limits, however, her class would have been unable to understand the biblical verse set by the county education

⁵² For these concepts see E. Goffman, *The presentation of self in life* (Harmondsworth, 1956).

⁵³ DCSM 27 Jan. 1914, p. 4.

⁵⁴ See e.g. J. Ablett, 'Co-education', *Westminster Review*, 153 (1900), p. 25; FLWE1870–1918, interview 143, 1886, teacher, Yorkshire; H. Cook, 'Getting "foolishly hot and bothered"? Parents, teachers and sex education in the 1940s', *Sex Education*, forthcoming.

⁵⁵ H. Ellis, *Sex in relation to society* (New York, NY, 1910), pp. v–vi; B. Russell, *Education and the social order* (London, 1932), pp. 126–8; J. Weeks, *Sex, politics and society: the regulation of sexuality since 1800* (London, 1981), pp. 21–2.

⁵⁶ H. McLeod, 'New perspectives on Victorian working-class religion: the oral evidence', *Oral History*, 14 (1986), p. 33.

committee. Luke 1:57 concerns God's gift of a child to Elisabeth, who is past the age of childbearing, and the impregnation of the Virgin Mary.⁵⁷ In their signed declarations, the girls revealed that Outram's teaching had included definitions of words used in the verse such as barren, womb, terms (menstruation), and, worst of all, circumcision.⁵⁸ The Bible did not provide support for extreme reticence about reproduction and sexuality.⁵⁹ Notwithstanding the historic condemnation of sexuality within Christianity, this was an invented tradition.

Cleanliness, which was strongly associated with Christianity, was central to working-class dignity and respectability.⁶⁰ Existing historiography suggests that, between the 1870s and the First World War, this belief was transformed from a concern with outward appearance to an awareness of the importance of personal hygiene for health.⁶¹ Anxiety about infectious diseases, including venereal diseases, linking sex to hygiene, was rising internationally and locally; around 1890, there had been serious epidemics of smallpox and Russian influenza in Sheffield, which was only seven miles from Dronfield.⁶² Given the link between disgust and sexuality, it is probable that anxieties about hygiene provided these mothers with a more potent ideological reinforcement for sexual reticence than Christianity.

New beliefs about hygiene also reinforced attitudes to the control of personal smell.⁶³ Commonly encountered levels of body smells, such as sweat, semen, and rotten teeth, would have been far higher in all classes at this time.⁶⁴ For working-class oral history respondents, cleanliness already had a moral/emotional valence. The oldest respondent in the FLWE1870–1918 oral history project, born in February 1870, said of his wife: 'She was a very good woman, she was clean.'⁶⁵ By the late nineteenth century, strong unpleasant smells were not usual in respectable working-class households. A powerful smell was, like

⁵⁷ DCSM 27 Jan. 1914, p. 5.

⁵⁸ Signed declarations, TNA/ED/150/185.

⁵⁹ England, 'Little Kinsey', pp. 76–7; J. Rose, *The intellectual life of the British working classes* (New Haven, CT, and London, 2001), pp. 207–9.

⁶⁰ K. Thomas, 'Cleanliness and godliness in early modern England', in A. Fletcher and P. Roberts, eds., *Religion, culture and society in early modern Britain* (Cambridge, 1995).

⁶¹ S. Sheard, 'Profit is a dirty word: the development of public baths and wash-houses in Britain, 1847–1915', *Social History of Medicine*, 13 (2000), pp. 63–85, at pp. 83–4; Cook, *The long sexual revolution*, pp. 144–55; Smith, *Clean*, chs. 9 and 10.

⁶² M. Honigsbaum, 'The great dread: cultural and psychological impacts and responses to the "Russian" influenza in the United Kingdom, 1889–1893', *Social History of Medicine*, 23 (2010), pp. 299–319, at pp. 306–7.

⁶³ C. Classen, D. Howes, and A. Synnott, *Aroma: the cultural history of smell* (London, 1994), pp. 166–7; M. M. Smith, *Sensing the past: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching in history* (Berkeley, CA, 2007), pp. 66–7; Smith, *Clean*, pp. 288–91.

⁶⁴ See e.g. Cook, *The long sexual revolution*, pp. 145–7; A. Corbin, *The foul and the fragrant: odor and the French social imagination* (Cambridge, MA, 1986), pp. 182–3.

⁶⁵ FLWE1870–1918, interview 343, born 1870, London, father, barber.

absence of sexual control, a sign of rough families and substantial disorder.⁶⁶ New concerns with hygiene would, however, have made women's reproductive processes harder to manage and contributed to feelings of disgust.⁶⁷

II

The following discussion of the approaches mothers took to the management of reproductive and sexual activity in the presence of their children involves analysis of two generations: the Dronfield mothers, born in the 1870s and 1880s, who rejected sex education; and their children, born between 1900 and 1903, who received sex education. Several mothers complained about the impact of sex education on their daily lives; one was reported to have said at the second public meeting, 'the younger children learnt [about the sex education] from the older, and that the position of the mother with observant children around her was intolerable'.⁶⁸ This woman was saying that once children knew about reproduction they watched their mother, preventing concealment of, for example, the washing of menstrual cloths. Another mother said, 'It makes it very difficult for a mother to meet with the child's questions.'⁶⁹ This cohort of mothers was having children during a period in which adherence to respectable standards was increasing among the working classes and prohibitions on sexuality and reproduction peaked. Historians have shown that respectability was 'a complex and multilayered category', which was negotiated and defined on a day-to-day basis within communities.⁷⁰ Contemporary observers noted that respectable working-class women were less vibrant and expressive than the 'rough' poor.⁷¹ Prohibitions on sexuality were only one aspect of the shift towards more ordered ways of living.

The intensification of sexual reticence in the decades around 1900 was partly a consequence of other changes taking place. FLWE1870–1918 included seventeen interviews about their daily life with women and men who were born between 1870 and 1881, as were 80 per cent of the Dronfield parents. They described taking the same approach to their children's upbringing as had their mid-Victorian parents, but family size was declining sharply by the early 1900s and smaller families made concealment easier. Observing adults, and sharing information among siblings and other children, were the main means by which

⁶⁶ R. Roberts, *The classic slum: Salford life in the first quarter of the century* (London, 1971), p. 49; M. Jenner, 'Follow your nose? Smell, smelling, and their histories', *American Historical Review*, 116 (2011), pp. 335–51, at p. 340.

⁶⁷ Roberts, *A woman's place*, p. 18; Llewelyn Davies, *Maternity*, p. 32.

⁶⁸ *Manchester Guardian*, 4 Feb. 1914.

⁶⁹ DCSM 27 Jan. 1914, p. 5.

⁷⁰ A. Davies, *Leisure, gender and poverty: working-class culture in Salford and Manchester, 1900–1939* (Milton Keynes, 1992), p. 61; E. Ross, "'Not the sort that would sit on the doorstep': respectability in pre-World War I London neighbourhoods', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 27 (1985), pp. 39–59.

⁷¹ M. Pember Reeves, *Round about a pound a week* (London, 1913), pp. 3–4, cf. pp. 117–64; F. Bell, *At the works: a study of a manufacturing town* (London, 1907), p. 229.

children acquired understanding of sexuality. In the mid-Victorian period, many mothers had babies or miscarriages with greater frequency. This enabled older children to work out what was taking place and they had then shared this knowledge. Children had also observed non-respectable, disorganized households in which concealment was less efficient.⁷² The FLWE1870–1918 interviews show that, by 1900, such contact was diminishing. Maintaining extreme sexual reticence was possible because the goal of concealing sexuality was widely accepted.

In respectable households, a liminal zone was created around the genitals and sexual acts. Even children were expected to conceal their whole body from the other sex, regardless of their age, while being bathed, changing clothes, and sleeping.⁷³ The constant effort that prevented visual or tactile contact with naked bodies did not relate in any simple or direct fashion to concerns about explicit sexual activity, such as incest; rather, it was part of fine-grained and diffuse restraints on contact between the sexes. Bodies were accorded significance as things that must be hidden, and this significance was gendered because it was from the other sex that they had to be concealed. Children and parents slept among the noises of others. Shared rooms, and thin walls between rooms, were usual. Noises from sexual intercourse were impossible to conceal fully, but there was little to see or hear.⁷⁴ What there was could not be interpreted as sexual intercourse by small children without any additional knowledge, although they might reinterpret such memories later in life.⁷⁵

Pregnancy was considered shameful and women concealed their state from their own and other children, as well as from the wider community.⁷⁶ Children were told that babies came into the house with the doctor, or similar ‘old fables’, and that their mother was unwell.⁷⁷ A Barrow woman, born in 1900, recalled her mother’s response to an unknowing comment: ‘When she got up, I remember saying to her, “Oh mother, you must have been poorly.” She looked at me. I said “Well, you’ve gone so thin.” Well, I didn’t know it was the baby. “You know far too much, get yourself out.”’⁷⁸

⁷² Mrs Elsie Oman, born 1904, interviewed in 1974 as part of the Manchester domestic service project, quoted in Tebbutt, “You couldn’t help but know”, p. 79.

⁷³ Roberts, *A woman’s place*, pp. 15, 132.

⁷⁴ Cook, *The long sexual revolution*, p. 205; C. Gurney, ‘Transgressing private–public boundaries in the home: a sociological analysis of the coital noise taboo’, *Venerology*, 13 (2000), pp. 39–46.

⁷⁵ E.g. Leap and Hunter, *Midwife’s tale*, p. 39; W. Woodruff, *The road to Nab End: an extraordinary northern childhood* (London, 2000), p. 12; Tebbutt, “You couldn’t help but know”, p. 77.

⁷⁶ B. Gittins, *Fair sex: family size and structure, 1930–1939* (London, 1982), p. 90; Roberts, *A woman’s place*, p. 104; L. Beier, ‘Expertise and control: childbearing in three twentieth-century working-class Lancashire communities’, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 78 (2004), p. 395.

⁷⁷ *Derbyshire Times*, 27 June 1914; Beier, ‘Expertise and control’, pp. 403–4; FLWE1870–1918, interview 125, born 1878, Barking, Essex, father, shipwright.

⁷⁸ Transcript of Mrs W1B, born 1900, Barrow, father, moulder, ERA–CNWR.

Children who unintentionally commented or asked unacceptable questions were greeted with irritation and brisk dismissal, as in this case.⁷⁹ Overt curiosity was strongly discouraged. It was impossible completely to hide the evidence of sexual activity and its reproductive consequences, but concealment ensured that hints that were seen were fragmented and devoid of meaning to children, as was much else in the adult world. The events and information necessary to make sense of what they saw were kept private or, when this was impossible, presented to children as shameful and disgusting, something from which to look away. Effectively, Outram had explained to her pupils what they were looking at, and thus what to look for. The Dronfield mothers explained to the meeting that their children's knowledge ensured their mothers' attempts to conceal evidence of reproduction/sexuality were no longer successful. From the mothers' perspective, this left them exposed and shamed before their children.

The parents felt that sexual knowledge damaged their children. Mrs Grocock, the wife of the local Anglican vicar, was sitting on the school management committee at the second meeting. She commented about her daughter: 'It is time enough when you see they are curious about these things. I have a child of 11, who is as innocent as a child of 2. Do you think I should say anything to her on the subject?'⁸⁰ Including both being unknowing and lacking in curiosity, this mother's definition of innocence is based on a pre-Freudian conception of infancy and childhood. The historiography of childhood innocence has been written from a Freudian perspective, whereby children are held to feel sexual desire from infancy, and thus the concept of childhood innocence is a myth and those who hold such beliefs are naïve and sentimental. The result has been a history of representations and a lack of interest in what people meant when they used 'innocence' in relation to actual children.⁸¹

In 1910, the sex reformer Havelock Ellis questioned Freud's emphasis on the inevitability of sexual desires in early childhood:

Precocious sexual impulses are generally vague, occasional and more or less innocent. A case of rare and pronounced character [was reported], in which a child, a boy, from the age of two had been sexually attracted to girls and women, and directed all his thoughts and actions to sexual attempts on them.⁸²

⁷⁹ Roberts, *A woman's place*, p. 13; Thompson, *The Edwardians*, p. 57.

⁸⁰ DCMS 27 Jan. 1914, p. 8.

⁸¹ The historiographical discussion of childhood innocence was initiated by P. Aries in *Centuries of childhood: a social history of family life* (New York, NY, 1962), pp. 100–33. Influential works focused on representations of children and sexuality include J. R. Kincaid, *Child-loving: the erotic child and Victorian culture* (New York, NY, 1992), and A. Higonnet, *Pictures of innocence: the history and crisis of ideal childhood* (London, 1998); recent work includes R. D. Egan and D. Hawkes, *Theorizing the sexual child in modernity* (London, 2010), and introduction, in L. Sauerteig and R. Davidson, eds., *Shaping sexual knowledge: a cultural history of sex education in twentieth century Europe* (London, 2008).

⁸² Ellis, *Sex in relation to society*, p. 35 (citing a case described by Herbert Rich in *Alienist and Neurologist*, Nov. 1905).

This example contrasts ‘more or less innocent’ impulses with the case of a toddler who actively desires others (is ‘sexually attracted’) and attempts to satisfy his desire. Mrs Grocock’s understanding of innocence as a state of being both unknowing and lacking curiosity implies the lack of desire to which Ellis draws attention. Perhaps the most important dimension of childhood innocence is revealed in another use of the word. A mother born in 1883 and interviewed for FLWE1870–1918 described an occasion when her five-year-old twins ate all the strawberries intended for jam:

[They said] We haven’t—we didn’t eat them all... mummy, we didn’t eat them all—we only ate one and one and one. So I could picture them, these two little girls running in and out taking one and taking another one. They didn’t realize that they’d all gone. It was the innocence of ’em saying you see, that they’d only taken one and one.⁸³

The word ‘innocence’ is used by this woman to describe doing something ‘bad’ without understanding what is being done. For these generations, sexual acts and feelings were inherently bad. Children who were innocent did not understand when they were doing something bad. The overlap between, for example, sexual touching and affectionate cuddles, or holding the penis to urinate and to masturbate, necessitated the distinction and meant that it had to be subjective; only the person having the feelings could know what they felt.

One of the school managers commented about the impact of Outram’s story on a particular pupil: ‘the very effect of reading that was knowledge to the girl’.⁸⁴ This comment was his confirmation of the wrong that Outram had done. Promoters of sex education in the social purity movement claimed that sexual knowledge would keep young people pure by arming them against abusers.⁸⁵ But the Dronfield parents who resisted sex education believed that sexual knowledge was fundamentally corrupting. Historians have shown that girls (and boys) who were sexually abused were seen as ‘corrupted’ by their knowledge. They were separated from their peers as they could corrupt other, as yet unknowing, children.⁸⁶ Knowing was, however, on a continuum with desiring and acting. No clear boundaries existed between these things because talking—passing on knowledge—about sexuality was perceived as, and was, an act that could arouse desire and thus a sexual act. This was as much a reinforcing loop as a linear path from one stage to the next. Discourses on the sexually abused child present the knowing child as different from the ordinary child. In the context of

⁸³ FLWE1870–1918, interview 085, born 1883, Middlesex, husband, basket-making business.

⁸⁴ DCSM 14 Jan. 1914, p. 6.

⁸⁵ See e.g. *Manchester Guardian*, 13 Nov. 1924; Bristow, *Vice and vigilance: purity movements in Britain since 1700*, ch. 6.

⁸⁶ L. Jackson, “Singing birds as well as soap suds”: the Salvation Army’s work with sexually abused girls in Edwardian England’, *Gender and History*, 12 (2000), pp. 115–18; C. Smart, ‘A history of ambivalence and conflict in the discursive construction of the “child victim” of sexual abuse’, *Social and Legal Studies*, 8 (1999), pp. 391–401, at p. 403.

these beliefs, the consequences of giving girls such knowledge were potentially devastating for them and for their parents.

Outram refused to tell the school management committee which girls had asked questions. Had she done so, the parents might well have blamed the girls for their active participation in the sex education. Girls over the age of six or seven who were sexually harassed or abused were frequently treated as having done something wrong.⁸⁷ A child was expected to be responsible and to take care of herself, just as we now expect a child of that age to look before crossing the road. The extent to which the car driver is culpable in the event of an accident is highly contentious, as was then the case with male sex abusers.⁸⁸ Socializing children to look away from sexuality prepared girls and women to be wary of adult men.

III

Pregnancy and birth are not included within the current conception of sexuality, but for the Dronfield mothers reproduction was another liminal zone, wherein concealment meant the prohibitions on sexuality expanded to encompass whole areas of experience. There is no evidence of the Dronfield mothers' feelings about their reproductive experience, but it is possible to reconstruct the number of their births. In 1911, among the eighteen families identified over one in ten of the children born had died. All but one of the deaths had occurred in families with over seven births.⁸⁹ This experience is comparable with that described in the collection of letters, published in 1915, by 'wives of better paid manual workers who were or had been officials of the Women's Co-operative Guild'.⁹⁰ The reproductive histories in these letters suggest that the writers ranged in age from around thirty to seventy years and included a greater proportion of mothers with large families than either the Dronfield mothers, or the FLWE1870–1918 birth cohort. The guild women's experiences of reproductive labour were ordinary; for their generation, it was writing or speaking about them that was unusual.⁹¹ They were still close in time to the events described and this proximity is reflected in the emotional intensity of the letters compared to oral history interviews.

Victorian and Edwardian working-class mothers could afford little contact with doctors, anatomical images were censored, and they rarely encountered scientific medical discourses. When they had children, the reproductive body was still experienced subjectively and understood primarily in terms of

⁸⁷ Transcript of Mrs R1B, born 1889, Barrow, father, sea captain, ERA-CNWR.

⁸⁸ C. A. Conley, 'Rape and justice in Victorian England', *Victorian Studies*, 29 (1986), pp. 519–36.

⁸⁹ Census of England and Wales, 1911.

⁹⁰ Llewelyn Davies, *Maternity*, p. 191; G. Scott, *Feminism and the politics of working women: the Women's Co-operative Guild, 1880s to the Second World War* (London, 1998).

⁹¹ Llewelyn Davies, *Maternity*, pp. 2–3; C. M. Tilghman, 'Autobiography as dissidence: subjectivity, sexuality, and the Women's Co-operative Guild', *Biography*, 26 (2003), pp. 585–6.

knowledge based on experience. These women had to interpret what was happening in their bodies in terms of their own sensations. Their pregnancies were still confirmed by quickening, the movement of the baby in the womb. Estimates of the due date were based on missed periods and other embodied signs. The mother was expected to know when labour had begun and to inform the midwife, and, if she could afford one, her doctor, often seeing him for the first time at the birth. Medicine could not yet replace women's own awareness of their reproductive bodies.⁹²

Much of the guild women's experience was shaped by the attitudes to sexuality so fervently espoused by the Dronfield mothers. It is evident from their letters that a young woman's mother was the only person she could rightly expect to tell her about pregnancy and childbirth, and that this knowledge was usually passed on only once the daughter was pregnant.⁹³ Many mothers did not do so even then: 'My mother being one of the "old school", thought it wrong to talk to any of her girls of such things, and it always made us feel shy of asking her anything.'⁹⁴ If a daughter had no mother or had moved away from her, she might try other female relatives or a 'lady friend', but several guild writers recalled being too reticent to ask strangers, including doctors, when problems arose.⁹⁵ The upbringing described in the previous section ensured that for these women reproduction/sexuality was an emotionally charged subject to be discussed only at an appropriate time and with the 'right' person, if at all.

The consequences for daughters of the absence of their mother's sexual/reproductive knowledge could be considerable. One woman described being left alone while in labour by her midwife from 2.30pm on Thursday until late Saturday night, with 'not the slightest idea of where or how the child would come into the world'. She still felt it: 'the horror... makes me shiver when I write about it'.⁹⁶ Other women reported that, as first-time mothers, they were not told what to expect during their first pregnancy, including the levels of discomfort and pain they should expect to endure, when they should seek help or limit their activity, and how to prepare for the birth and the post-natal period. This knowledge was denied to them because of the association of reproductive processes with sexuality. One woman without a mother 'went about with an ulcerated stomach' during her pregnancy. Even where mothers and daughters communicated with each other, reticence inhibited the ongoing development of shared knowledge between them and with other women in their communities. A woman wrote: 'quite by accident I learned that other mothers I met were not suffering the same'.⁹⁷ Thus, sexual/reproductive reticence denied

⁹² For Edwardian obstetrics, see I. Loudon's magisterial *Death in childbirth* (Oxford, 1992), and M. A. Crowther and M. W. Dupree, *Medical lives in the age of surgical revolution* (Cambridge, 2007); for morbidity estimates, see Cook, *The long sexual revolution*, pp. 135–6.

⁹³ Llewelyn Davies, *Maternity*, pp. 21, 30, 51, 12, 114, 127, 160, 182.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 106, 112, 114, 182.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

many women the experiential knowledge of their own and previous generations.

Though the Edwardian period was one of intense gender conflict, aroused in part by disputes over fertility control, there are descriptions of fulfilled romantic love, and veiled mentions of sexual desire, in these sources.⁹⁸ Respectable girls and women learned about sexuality through tactile and experiential modes. They experienced their bodies by feeling, rather than by looking: they rarely undressed fully and even small mirrors were prized luxuries.⁹⁹ Historians have argued that a shift occurred away from hearing, tasting, and feeling/touching (aural, oral, and tactile) modes of perception to visual modes, such as print, in the early modern period. This claim that the other senses declined in sensitivity and importance has been rejected; nonetheless, vision, especially in the form of reading, is now central to academic and popular understanding of how learning takes place.¹⁰⁰ Reticence placed female sexuality outside this trajectory of change. Literacy became the norm for working-class people in this period, but these women came to corporeal sexual acts through touching and feeling rather than looking and reading. Havelock Ellis believed that touch is, of all the senses, the most profoundly emotional. In 1905, he quoted the Victorian psychologist Alexander Bain, who 'insisted on the special significance in this connection of "tenderness" – a characteristic emotional quality of affection which is directly founded on sensations of touch'.¹⁰¹ This is a reminder that touch has the potential for an emotional intensity to which vision, or texts, are irrelevant. Women did not have to 'know' about sexuality in order to express love and enjoy erotic pleasure.

IV

The embodied and cognitive emotional experience underlying the conflict at Dronfield reveals what was at stake for their mothers. The crucial historical change is that sex education is now categorized as ethically good sexuality, which exists as a separate category from unethical sexuality. For these nineteenth-century mothers, the category of ethically good sex was minimal and hedged with qualifications: pre-marital cuddling or coitus with an intended spouse, and marital coitus, was the most that would usually be included. Some women, especially in London, enjoyed the highly euphemistic 'knowingness' of music hall humour, or erotic postcards, but regional variation was important.

⁹⁸ Cook, *The long sexual revolution*, pp. 110–21.

⁹⁹ Reeves, *Round about a pound a week*, p. 53. Lady F. Bell's *The way the money goes: a play in three acts* (London, 1910) revolves around the purchase of a mirror by a working-class wife.

¹⁰⁰ Smith, *Sensing the past*, pp. 19–33; A. Corbin, 'Charting the cultural history of the senses', in D. Howes, ed., *Empire of the senses: the sensual culture reader* (Oxford and New York, NY, 2005).

¹⁰¹ H. Ellis, *Studies in the psychology of sex*, 1, part 3: *Sexual selection in man* (New York, 1905 (1942)), p. 6, citing A. Bain, *The emotions and the will* (London, 1859); C. Classen, ed., *The book of touch* (Berg, 2005).

Such pleasures were more likely to be rejected in the midlands and the north, and were harder to come by in small towns.¹⁰² Sexuality might well be a source of pleasure, but it was associated with shame, physical suffering, and amorphous threats that had continuously to be guarded against. Constant vigilance was required to maintain the boundaries that protected innocent and unknowing children from pollution by adults because sexuality was not limited to specific acts or sites, or even to desire.

Events in Dronfield reveal a desire for change among the younger generation. Mothers, born in the 1870s or earlier, trained their children to feel and think about sexuality in terms of reticence, but the daughters, when given the choice, chose to remain in the classes on sex education and many eagerly shared their knowledge with other children.¹⁰³ They gaze confidently out of press photographs, often wearing grins of excitement and interest. Not just in the Edwardian period but up until the 1950s, humour is almost invariably treated as dangerous and inappropriate in the context of sex education. This arose when the Dronfield parents were in court for withdrawing their daughters from school. During cross examination, Mr Neal, the lawyer defending the parents, asked the school attendance officer: 'Have you heard that some of the children used to "giggle" when this sort of teaching was going on?', to which the latter replied 'If it had occurred in the school I think I should have known of it, Mr Neal. I think you have been misinformed.'¹⁰⁴ The attendance officer's response confirms that this was a grave accusation. The exchange came at the end of several questions, including ones about the suffrage teaching, to which he had replied merely 'I didn't know that' or 'I don't know [whether that occurred].' Sexual humour was associated with male homosociability or assent to sexual activity. An innocent woman – the teacher – and the girls risked being polluted by the association if this claim was not refuted.

Oral historians have emphasized continuities in sexual mores up to the 1940s, and even, according to Szreter and Fisher, up until the sexual revolution. The Dronfield daughters, born in 1901–3, came of age during and after the war. In their adult lives, they witnessed major changes, including a new visibility of women's bodies, growing use of birth control, and widening of female employment and leisure opportunities. Claims of an accompanying continuity in sexual mores rest on the disregard of emotion. During the first half of the twentieth century, beliefs about sexuality, and, therefore, the content of people's testimony, do not alter substantially but the emotional tone lightens very considerably. Comparing the intense emotional language used by the guild

¹⁰² P. Bailey, *Popular culture and performance in the Victorian city* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 128–50; L. Z. Sigel, 'Filth in the wrong people's hands: postcards and the expansion of pornography in Britain and the Atlantic world, 1880–1814', *Journal of Social History*, 33 (2000), pp. 859–85. Among the FLWE1870–1918 interviewees of the mothers' generation, few went to the music hall.

¹⁰³ *Manchester Guardian*, 4 Feb. 1914; DCSM 27 Jan. 1914, pp. 1, 2, 6; signed declaration, N. Gilbert, 4 Mar. 1914, TNA/ED/150/185.

¹⁰⁴ *Derbyshire Times*, 27 June 1914.

woman who ‘still shivered with horror’ at the memory of going into labour, and Maria’s (born in 1917) use of a colloquial phrase the ‘shock of me life’ to describe her discovery of what birth entailed reveals the relaxation of anxiety about sexual experience by the 1940s.¹⁰⁵ A similar transition is evident in the shift from the distress expressed by the weeping Dronfield mothers to intense embarrassment in mid-twentieth-century parents’ response to sex education.¹⁰⁶ This difference can be seen in the oral testimony. The interview quotations in Szreter and Fisher, as well as in the latter’s previous publications, are punctuated with ‘laughs’ and ‘giggles’, whereas in the early oral testimony, laughter at sex is almost never described.¹⁰⁷ The lightening of the emotional tone reflects the relaxation of tension and increase in the capacity to find pleasure in sexuality, which came from material improvements, including knowledge of birth control, that diminished the risks associated with reproduction/sexuality and from new positive ideas about sexuality.

Children have been largely absent from the history of sexuality; even the history of sex education has been a history of what adults tell children. Yet the transmission of ideas, emotional responses, and behaviour is central to the development, maintenance, and change of any culture. This article explores interactions between the generations and considers how women and children thought and felt and learned. Exploration of subjective understandings and interpretations of emotional and embodied sexual experience produces an explanation of why and how Edwardian working-class women maintained repressive approaches to their own sexuality and to the education of their daughters and how their daughters responded. A focus on emotion exposes the costs of the existing approaches and reveals the change taking place.

¹⁰⁵ Leap and Hunter, *Midwife’s tale*, p. 78.

¹⁰⁶ Cook, ‘Getting “foolishly hot and bothered”?’.

¹⁰⁷ E.g. K. Fisher, *Birth control, sex and marriage in Britain, 1918–1960* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 37, 41, 44, 177, 211; Szreter and Fisher, *Sex*, pp. 93, 97, 136. See also V. Robinson, J. Hockey, and A. Meah, ‘“What I used to do... on my mother’s settee”: spatial and emotional aspects of heterosexuality in England’, *Gender, Place and Culture*, 11 (2004), pp. 417–35, at pp. 425–6.