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S78 Sexuality and Gender

‘Courtship, birth control and sexuality in two contrasting communities in England 1930-1950’

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### Introduction and Approach

The approach taken in the project, which this paper reports on has grown directly out of the independent previous findings of the two researchers in their investigations of changing fertility and birth control practices in early twentieth-century Britain (Szreter 1996; Fisher 1997; Fisher 2000a; Fisher 2000b). These studies by Szreter and Fisher both concluded that the history of sexuality in marriage remained drastically under-researched and that the attempt to recover something of that hidden history constituted a top priority in order to further our understanding of the mysteries surrounding the fertility decline in modern British history and the emergence of birth control. It has also been demonstrated that fertility and marriage behaviour varied enormously in British society during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, not only by class but also by occupation, industry and community (Szreter 1996; Szreter and Garrett 2000). Hence a principal methodological premise in the research design of this project was to mount a comparative investigation in-depth of specific, contrasting types of community, rather than to attempt to interview a national sample of the elderly.

The first objective of the project was to develop and validate an appropriate oral history methodology for research in this novel and intimate area of inquiry. We consider that this objective had been fully and successfully achieved. Indeed, a number of important methodological lessons were learned in the course of the project which changed the shape of the initial design of the research program.

By far the most significant of these methodological discoveries has been the desirability of a much longer interview process than had been originally anticipated. The research proposal envisaged conducting approximately 90 interviews which would generate 150 hours of taped testimony, averaging 1.65 hours per interview. In the course of the field-work we have learned to re-conceptualise the whole process of acquiring information on such intimate matters. It is necessary to build a confiding relationship of trust with each respondent and this takes considerable time and often multiple visits. Most respondents' testimonies offer a sequence of successive degrees of revealing and remembering as the relationship with the interviewer develops and this is an extremely important dimension of the information uncovered on respondents' understandings of their sexuality.

This has meant that the average 'interview' has generated more than twice as much material as was originally envisaged, in that 66 separate 'interviews' (many of these comprising multiple visits) have resulted in 241 hours of recorded material, averaging 3.65 hours per interview. (Note that as 8 couples were interviewed jointly the 66 sets of interviews record information from 74 individual respondents). These interviews have been drawn from the residents of two

highly contrasting communities. Blackburn in Lancashire was selected as a representative northern, working-class town, and also one with a high female participation rate in the employed work-force. The 1951 census showed Blackburn had {50.3% of all women above age 15 were employed and over half of these employed women were married, compared to a national average in 1951 of 34.9% of all women above age 15 employed {and just over one-third of these being married women). An area of suburban Hertfordshire was chosen as the contrasting second area because the same 1951 census showed two of the communities at its core, Chorley Wood and Harpenden, to have contained very high concentrations of the upper and middle classes (Registrar-General's social class I) among their resident male working population.

Respondents have been interviewed alone, principally, but also in couples and in groups. The responses vary depending on social context, of course, and certainly the most intimate material is not typically volunteered in group discussions and would not, of course, be appropriate. The project has notably succeeded in one of its primary aims of acquiring a large proportion of its testimonies from men (50% of respondents were male in Herts and 35% male in Blackburn). Men have been conspicuous by their absence from previous oral history research on birth control and the family (see footnotes 4 and 5 below) and their testimony is critical to the reconstruction of sexual cultures. Open-ended interviewing has been the principal style adopted and wide licence given to respondents to present their memoirs and stories at length, in order to allow material of relevance to their sexual attitudes and practices to emerge as much as possible from their proper context as the respondents see it, and not from the analytical context of the interviewers' agenda. Given adherence to these guidelines, the investigative method has been found to be relatively robust with respect to the sex of the interviewer and interviewee. A comprehensive checklist of questions and issues was also developed but this was used mostly for review by the interviewer before and after interviewing, in order to monitor that all the important areas of interest were given consideration.

The primary aim of the choice of the two communities, Blackburn and suburban Hertfordshire, was to acquire contrasting evidence from a northern working-class town and a southern 'middle-class' community. Table 1, below, demonstrates that in terms of the Registrar-General's system of social classification, the two sets of samples have succeeded in their principal aim of interviewing a sample reasonably characteristic both of Blackburn's strongly working-class complexion and of this part of Hertfordshire's markedly middle-class' character.

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**Table 1: Social Class distribution of male workers (occupied and retired) at 1951 census:**

| Social Class %    | I  | II  | III | IV  | V   |
|-------------------|----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| England and Wales | 3  | 15  | 53  | 16  | 13  |
| Blackburn         | 2  | 12  | 57  | 14  | 15  |
| Blackburn sample  | 0  | 6.5 | 81  | 6.5 | 6.5 |
| Herts (CW,B,R,H)* | 10 | 21  | 47  | 13  | 9   |
| Herts sample      | 31 | 28  | 24  | 14  | 3   |

\*(Chorley Wood, Berkhamsted) Rickmansworth, Harpenden)

Sources: Census 1951, County Volumes, Hertfordshire Table 27; Lancashire Table 27.

A.M. Carr-Saunders, D. Caradog Jones and C.A. Moser *A Survey of Social Conditions in England and Wales as illustrated by statistics* (Oxford 1958), p.116.

Note to Table 1: Since there is quite a strong occupational age-selection effect, whereby persons only hold social class V occupations (unskilled manual labour) when relatively young or relatively old, the fact that we were predominantly classifying marriages according to the principal occupation held by the husband during his mature working years, approximately age 40-60 years old, would militate against the appearance of 'class V' respondents in the samples above. The same effect tended to overemphasise the number of class III respondents, especially in a strongly working-class town like Blackburn.

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It was also the aim to interview a sample of working-class couples in Blackburn who reflected this mill-town's unusual (for a working-class community) characteristic of providing plentiful work for women. In fact 97% reported that the wife in the partnership had worked before marriage, with approximately half also working after marriage for varying periods. In the Herts sample almost as many, 93%, reported work before marriage and also about half after marriage, reflecting the fact that by the inter-war period it was also becoming more commonplace and acceptable for women in middle-class communities near to London to work after marriage.

The various charts listed at the end of the report show some of the most relevant summary socio-demographic characteristics of the samples interviewed. Charts 1 and 2 show that in Blackburn most respondents came from the town itself while in Hertfordshire only a minority did so, a finding which accurately captures the well-known quite distinct social and geographical mobility properties of the working and the middle-classes.

Chart 3 shows the range of ages among the respondents interviewed, with the great preponderance of the interviewees born in four quinquennia, 1905-25. Charts 4, 5 and 6 show a propensity of the Blackburn male respondents to marry at an earlier age than those from Hertfordshire, resulting in more Blackburn marriages dating from the 1920s, though, as the birth date distributions in Chart 3 showed, the two sets of respondents were of very similar ages.

Charts 7 and 8 show the way in which marriages contracted during the inter-war decades tended to produce families of just one or two children as the norm in both communities, whereas those contracted after 1939 tended to produce as many families of three children as of two or one, along with a distinct minority of very large families. Going back further in time to the families into which the respondents themselves were born, Charts 8 and 9 indicate that they themselves came from somewhat larger families, as we would expect, with the oldest, those born before 1916, apparently born into slightly larger families, on average, than those born after 1915.

### Results:

The research has been concerned with exploring in great detail various aspects of married sexuality and fertility during the period 1900-1960. The complex dynamics of changing marital relationships are not easily summarised. There is no all encompassing thesis. This project has instead produced uniquely rich data covering a wide number of questions and issues associated with the history of the family and sexuality during this period. In this brief, illustrative report, two key areas will be focused upon (contraception and courtship) in order to provide clear illustration of the complex analyses possible with such detailed evidence. In both these areas the project has provided fresh insights on the sexual practices and cultures within Britain at a time of rapid social change.

Several key themes have emerged. Firstly, there were striking, gender, regional and class differences between respondents' testimony. Secondly, the most general conclusion is our claim that a 'culture of euphemism' significantly contributed to the wide diversity in attitude and behaviour observed. One of the central reasons behind variation in practice was due to the general ambiguity in the ways in which sexual codes norms and values were generally communicated. Sexual attitudes were euphemistically articulated leaving considerable room for individual interpretation and diversity in actual behaviour. For example, when 'Mary' was asked for her opinions on oral sex she replied: 'I don't believe in it at all. I would never let my husband kiss me with his mouth open and waggle his tongue about, no way.'<sup>1</sup> In-depth oral history interviews have thus resulted in unprecedented evidence on the details of attitudes and practices, and of the complex and various ways in which euphemistically articulated information about sex and sexual practices was interpreted. Oral history is unique in reconstructing the intricate relationship between cultural codes, norms and values and lived experience.

### **Fertility and birth control**

Questions surrounding the control of fertility during this period have been considered by many demographers and historians; nevertheless we still know remarkably little about what methods of fertility control were employed and how attitudes towards birth control related to sexual and marital relationships more generally. This research project has elucidated detailed contraceptive histories from respondents including details about all methods known about, tried, considered, rejected and the detailed dynamics of communication, negotiation and practice. A number of particularly important findings have emerged; here just two will be explored at greater length.

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<sup>1</sup> Mary, msf/kf/bl/#31. All names have been changed.

### *Gender and Birth Control*

Firstly, the research has provided overwhelming evidence of men's primary role in all areas of contraceptive use. This was particularly striking in working-class areas. Men had much greater access to birth control information and male methods of contraception (condoms and withdrawal) were far more frequently used than female methods (caps, pessaries and abortion). Moreover, male methods were largely preferred precisely because they put the onus on the husband. Women were often strikingly ignorant of basic sexual information and had little or no access to birth control information. Women played down their involvement in birth control decisions and frequently presented such action as having been 'up to their husbands'. 'Vera', for example, presented herself as entirely ignorant as to why her husband was withdrawing until recently: 'e wouldn't go right through with it. . . what 'e did it for, I know now what 'e did it for, I didn't know then, but I know now, didn't want to have any children'.<sup>2</sup>

The sexual dynamics of the marital relationships were the crucial factor in the construction of gender roles in birth control behaviour. Negotiating birth control practice involved not only issues of having children and family size but also sex and sexuality. Men had much greater access to sexual information (hence superior contraceptive knowledge), were much more at ease discussing sex (itself evidenced in interviews) and were expected to initiate all sexual encounters. Women preferred using birth control methods which left the responsibility for sexual matters to their husband and did not place them in the position of having to negotiate, anticipate or prepare for sexual activity. Alice was not prepared to use a female method, 'it's your part' because 'he was enjoying hisself, weren't he? . . . men should see to it'.<sup>3</sup>

This testimony radically challenges previous historians' understandings of the impact of gendered roles on birth control use, although in fact, closer analysis shows that it is supported by much of the existing historical evidence. Previous analyses of fertility change have been convinced that that 'women were the driving force behind family limitation'.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, studies of contraceptive behaviour have concentrated attention on the roles of women, with particular attention to women's employment patterns, women's education and women's knowledge networks.<sup>5</sup> This research thus draws attention to the crucial importance of

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<sup>2</sup> Vera, msf/kf/bl/#12.

<sup>3</sup> Alice, msf/kf/bl/#7

<sup>4</sup> Wally Seccombe, 'Starting to Stop: working-class fertility decline in Britain', *Past and Present* vol, 126, 1990, p. 173.

<sup>5</sup> See for example, Brookes, Barbara, 'Women and Reproduction 1860-1939' in Lewis, Jane, ed., *Labour and Love. Womens Experience of Home and Family, 1850-1940*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1986,149-171; Clare Davey, 'Birth Control in Britain during the Inter-War Years: Evidence from the Stopes Correspondence', *Journal of Family History*, 13,1988, 329-345; Evelyn Faulkner, "Powerless to Prevent Him". Attitudes of Married Working-Class Women in the 1920s and the Rise of Sexual Power', *Local Population Studies*, 49, 1992,51-61; Nancy Folbre, 'Of Patriarchy Born: The Political Economy of Fertility Decisions', *Feminist Studies*, 9,1983,261-284; Diana Gitrins, *Fair Sex. Family Size and Structure 1900-1939*, Hutchinson, London, 1982; Karl Ittman, *Work, Gender and Family in Victorian England*, Macmillan, Basingstoke and London, 1995; Michael Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*, OUP, Oxford, 1995; Angus McLaren, *A History of Contraception from Antiquity to the Present* Blackwell , Oxford, 1990; Elizabeth Roberts, *A Women 's Place; An Oral History of Working-Class Women, 1890-1940*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1984; Elizabeth Roberts, *Women and Families: An Oral History, 1940-1970*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1995; Ellen Ross, *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London, 1870-1918*, OUP, Oxford, 1993; Wally Seccombe, *Weathering the Storm, Working-Class Families from the Industrial Revolution to the Family Decline*. Verso, London and New York, 1993; Wally Seccombe, 'Starting to Stop', 151-88; Daniel Scott Smith, 'Family Limitation, Sexual Control and Domestic Feminism in Victorian America', *Feminist Studies*, 1, 1973, 40-57; Susan Cotts Watkins, and AD. Danzi, 'Women's Gossip and Social Change. Childbirth and Fertility Control among Italian and Jewish Women in me United States, 1920-1940', *Gender and Society*, 9, 1995, 469-490. Joseph and Olive Banks' influential account is the exception. They explicitly reject the idea that women played a role in family planning processes and argue that the desire for small families reflects economic pressures on middle class men and the increased social pressure on them to invest sufficiently in their children, especially in the education of their sons. While the Bankses' studies have been fairly criticised for an account which dismisses women's roles and feminism too categorically, we should not make the inverse mistake in focusing too exclusively on women. J.A. Banks, *Prosperity and Parenthood. A Study of Family Planning among the Victorian Middle Classes*, (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1954);J.A and Olive Banks, *Feminism and family*

examining men's worlds: their occupations, male cultures and environments where information, ideas and expectations about marital relationships, family size, sex and contraception were communicated.

There is a central class element to this finding also. It is striking that middle-class respondents from Hertfordshire (and not the working-class respondents from Hertfordshire) revealed greater female knowledge of both sex and contraception and a greater willingness to take an active role in talking about birth control with a husband or in articulating what should be done. However, again a male culture of contraception was largely maintained. 'Jean' heard about clinics 'from other girls but didn't have any reason for going' as she 'thought the man would do the necessary'.<sup>6</sup> Many middle-class wives continued to rely on their husbands to use contraception and did this in preference to using female methods which were frequently rejected in favour of withdrawal or condoms.

### *A Culture of Abstinence ?*

The research set out to explore the hypothesis that a 'culture of abstinence' pervaded sexual relations during this period. In exploring this question the importance of understanding the culture of euphemism has been crucial. While, indeed, a great deal of testimony frowned on sexual indulgence and many respondents were more concerned to point out the factors that impeded the frequency of their sexual activity than to boast about their libido, ardour or passion, a close analysis of respondent testimony suggests that there was considerable variation in the ways in which 'continence' was defined or translated into practice.<sup>7</sup> 'Mary' felt that those who 'didn't want a family should learn to behave themselves' but added that she and her husband had sex 'normally. . .once or twice a week' using withdrawal. Normal sexual relations were defined as moderate but the boundaries of what was considered moderate and what was excessive varied considerably and were interpreted differently by many individuals. The codes of continence were thus plastic, ambiguous and euphemistic enough to allow a wide variation in interpretation.

## **Courtship**

### *Romance and the choice of spouse*

Historians argue that there was a new conception of married love emerging between the 1920s and the 1950s which focused on finding the one perfect partner. This notion is seen as having affected middle class groups sometime during the late nineteenth century and as having infiltrated working-class society as a result of increased leisure opportunities and due to the influence of the highly romantic notions which pervaded working-class society through the cinema and dance halls.

This research suggests that the divide between pragmatic choices of a suitable partner and highly romanticised ones are too sharply drawn and that, as well as interesting class dimensions to the notion of romance as a basis for marriage, there were regional variations. It is striking that in Blackburn, a working class community, in a predominately working class town, this romantic notion of love as a basis for choosing a spouse was explicitly rejected.

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*planning in Victorian England* (Liverpool, 1964); J. A Banks, *Victorian Values, Secularism and the Size of Families*, (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1981); Angus McLaren, 'Review of J. A Banks, *Victorian Values: Secularism and the Size of Families*', *Victorian Studies*, (vol. 26, 1983), p. 234-35.

<sup>6</sup> Jean,msf/kf/ht/#1.

<sup>7</sup> Of course, a perception of a highly sexed contemporary society in the 1990s was the bench mark used by respondents here, however, this type of testimony is in accordance with much contemporary evidence and is likely to reflect more than retrospective bias.

Yet, working-class respondents in southern towns did express this romantic ideal, did look for a heady romantic attachment to their spouse. This maybe connected to the predominant middle class notion of courtship we found in our interviews in the south which also stressed the importance of romance.

Among the working-class interviewees in Blackburn, in contrast to middle-class respondents interviewed in Hertfordshire, it was striking how many rejected a romantic model of courtship and stressed the social constraints on their choices of marriage partner.<sup>8</sup> 'Ada' was indifferent to her husband: 'if 'e'd a stopped coming I wouldn't 'ave bothered' but got married because 'me mother liked 'im' and 'because everybody else were getting married'. She didn't 'fall in love with him' she 'wasn't romantic', she didn't like being 'fussed over'.<sup>9</sup> Central here was not whether or not one loved one's spouse or not but the singling out of the chosen partner as unique: There was nothing special I don't think really, I don't know, just sort of happened.<sup>10</sup>

This ambivalent, equivocal, complex depiction of the reasons why a particular spouse was chosen were not generally echoed in the interviews in Hertfordshire, where instead, highly romanticised love stories framed the narratives of both middle class and working-class respondents. 'Catherine' and her boyfriend (later spouse), who was in a class I occupation in banking, 'just did nothing but look and stare at each other and talk about the weather and then he'd rush out in the garden and pick a rose and bring it back for me.'<sup>11</sup> 'Jenny', who was courting a milkman, echoed this idea of perfect o romance stressing that love entailed the adoration of the other.

Int.        What did you like about him?  
Jenny      Everything, I wouldn't ave married him if I 'and't.....  
Int.        And what did he like about you?  
Jenny      What did he, everything, he used to say I was a, an angel {both  
                 laughing} that's what he used to say, you're a little angel.<sup>12</sup>

The central point is that both 'middle-class' and 'working-class' sexual codes were significantly influenced by local cultures and the implication is that class differences have to be analysed within a geographical context.

### *Sex and Courtship*

The argument that romantic ideals diffused from the middle to the working classes during the first half of the twentieth century, is often accompanied by an argument that courtship became increasingly sexualised. It is the contention of this research that too much emphasis has been placed on ascertaining the proportion of those surveyed in any survey who had sex before marriage as a blunt statistic. Without exploring the context and situations in which people consented to sex before marriage the significance of finding an increase in the amount of pre-marital sexual activity is obscured.

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<sup>8</sup> Judy Giles interviews with working-class women who grew up in the 1920s and 30s in Britain revealed a similarly non-romantic approach to marriage and courtship. Judy Giles, 'Playing Hard to Get': working-class women, sexuality and respectability. in Britain, 1918-1940', *Women's History Review*, vol.1, no.2, 1992, p.248.

<sup>9</sup> Ada, msf/kf/bl/#11

<sup>10</sup> Gladys, msf/kf/bl/18

<sup>11</sup> Catherine, msf/kf/ht/#12

<sup>12</sup> Jenny, msf/kf/ht/#8

This research has revealed that men and women had very different roles during courtship. The standard interpretation is that men had few social constraints on retaining their virginity and were frequently under peer pressure to obtain some experience, while women's role was to police their relationships and preserve their virginity and reputation. Certainly, many women resisted the sexual advances of their boyfriends. After going to a dance in Accrington Louisa's boyfriend, 'got hold of me and started fiddling about and I said, "I don't like being mauled". Yet there were plenty of contexts in which it was important for women both to feel that their boyfriend wanted to have sex and to consent. Later, Louisa, felt they 'belonged' and then 'he didn't have to persuade me...he asked, you see, he didn't do any forcing'.<sup>13</sup> That men judged women according to the degree of sexual licence allowed was also clear and 'letting 'the hand wander' until 'it was "Stop it!"<sup>14</sup>, was one of the ways in which men tested the suitability of women: 'there were some were just out for a good time, others were very reserved, and wife...she were very reserved like'.<sup>15</sup> However, male sexual roles were not so simply focused on obtaining sexual experience when possible. Nick who would 'go out with a condom in my pocket if I felt optimistic' found one girlfriend to be 'very lovey-dovey'. In such circumstances Nick's position changed: 'I thought to myself, "I don't know, I don't know, I don't know. She's so forward, what does it mean?' He realised that there were dangers for men as well as women in pre-marital sexual activity. 'Has she been with someone and is already pregnant?'. You see there were no bloodtests in those days, you know? And that was all the thing that stopped me dead'.<sup>16</sup> In particular the negotiation of physical intimacy was central to the men's and women's evaluation of each other as potential spouses. Both men and women appeared to have been engaged in very complex strategies in which seduction and resistance were used to test the suitability of a potential spouse.

Finally, the culture of euphemism has a strong impact on our understanding of the nature of physical activity prior to marriage. It was widely understood that 'sex', interpreted as penetrative intercourse, had a particular set of rules attached to its practice and was indulged in certain defined circumstances (such as after engagement) and only by about 50% of respondents. On the other hand, what degree of intimacy and physical sex play was 'permissible' during courtship was very ambiguously defined. The euphemistic culture resulted in widespread postponement of sexual intercourse but wide variety in the extent of non-penetrative sexual acts indulged in. Catherine, for example, made love in a 'mild' 'decent' way before marriage during which 'they'd sort of put their arms around you and squeeze you and press up against you' until he had to 'rush off because he 'had satisfaction'.<sup>17</sup> Similarly for Nick and his wife the 'marriage bed' was a 'sacrament' and so avoiding sex before marriage. Instead 'she would cuddle me tremendously and to be perfectly frank with you, she'd lift her skirt and put me between her legs, and that would ejaculate then.'<sup>18</sup> On the other hand Percy's wife interpreted 'virginity' more comprehensively. He 'never touched her'...'she would say "stop it"...kissing, that's as far as it went...she wouldn't let you. I tried'.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Louisa, msf/kf/bl/#8

<sup>14</sup> Nick, msf/kf/ht/#10

<sup>15</sup> Norman, msf/kf/bl/#26

<sup>16</sup> Nick, msf/kf/ht/#10

<sup>17</sup> Catherine, msf/kf/ht/#12

<sup>18</sup> Nick, msf/kf/ht/#10

<sup>19</sup> Percy, msf/kf/ht/#5



### *Conclusion*

This research project has resulted in the creation of new information on married sex lives during the under-researched period 1900-60. Only a few examples of results have been presented. Two general findings have been revealed from this material, alone. Firstly, there are significant differences in sexual cultures, illuminated by an understanding of differences between genders, regions and classes. Secondly, the diversity observed is in large part due to a *culture of euphemism*, in which sexual knowledge and practices were talked about extremely indirectly creating widespread confusion and diversity in understandings.

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Chart 1: Place of birth of respondents - Blackburn

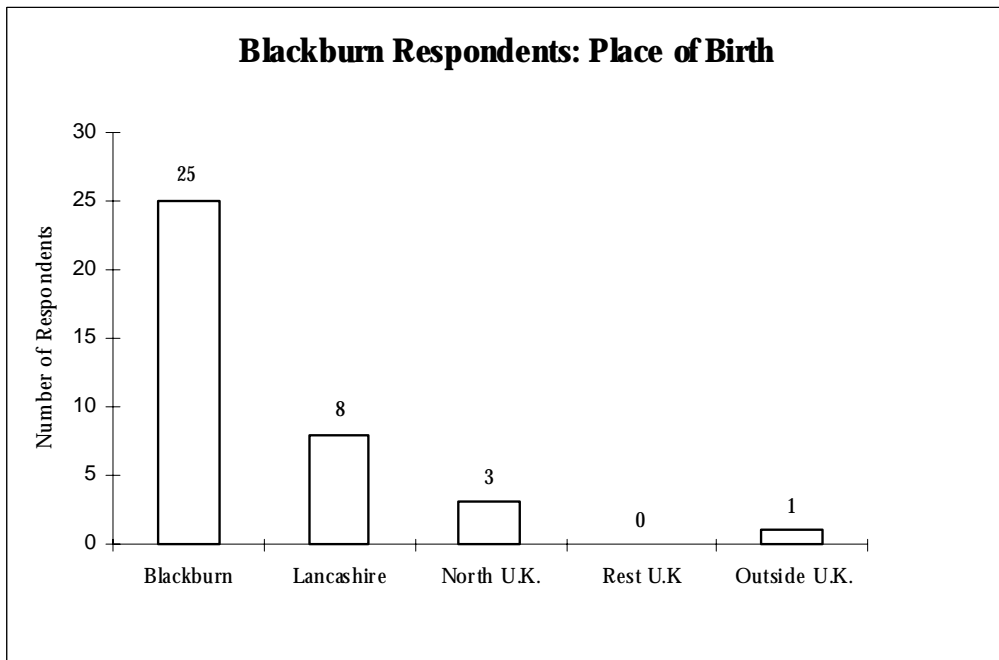


Chart 2: Place of birth of respondents – Hertfordshire

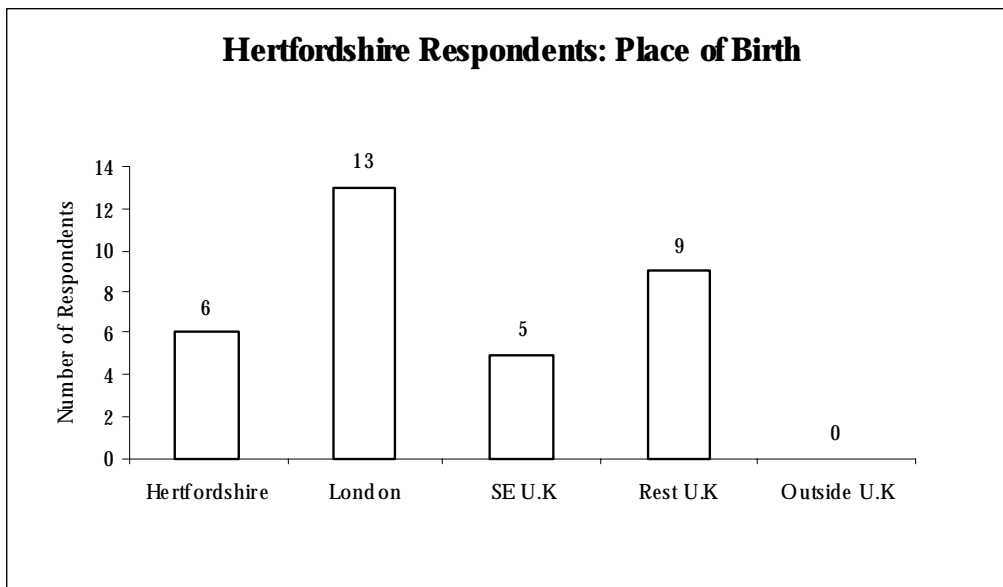


Chart 3: Respondents' dates of birth- percentages

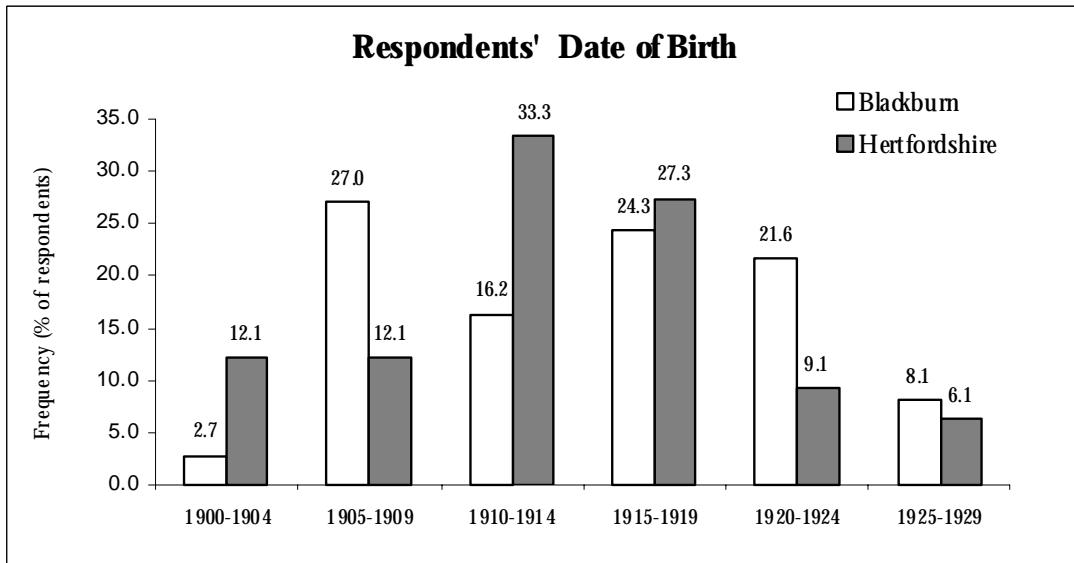


Chart 4: Respondents' dates of first marriage (percentages)

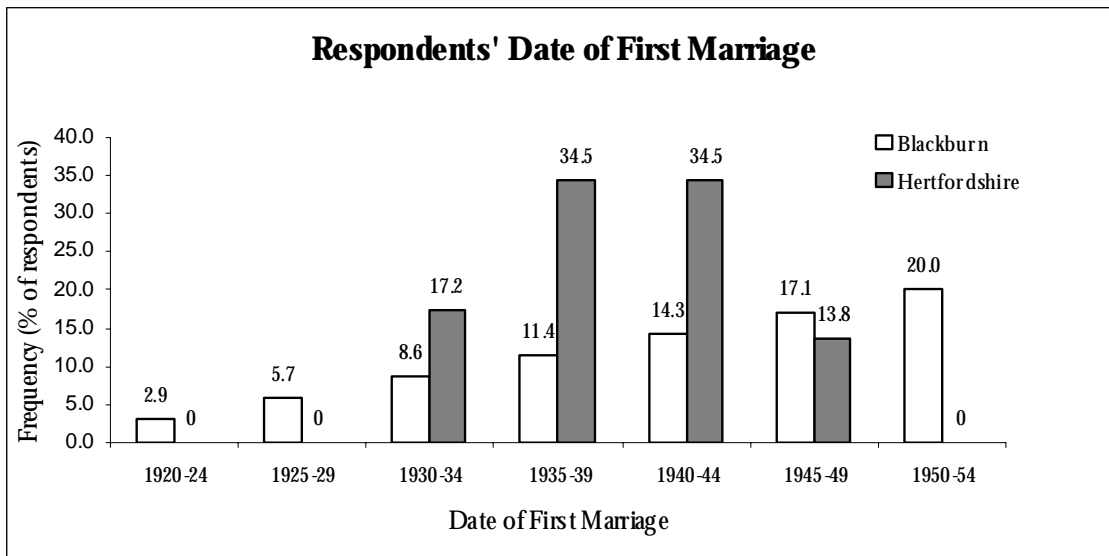


Chart 5: Male respondents' age at first marriage (percentages)

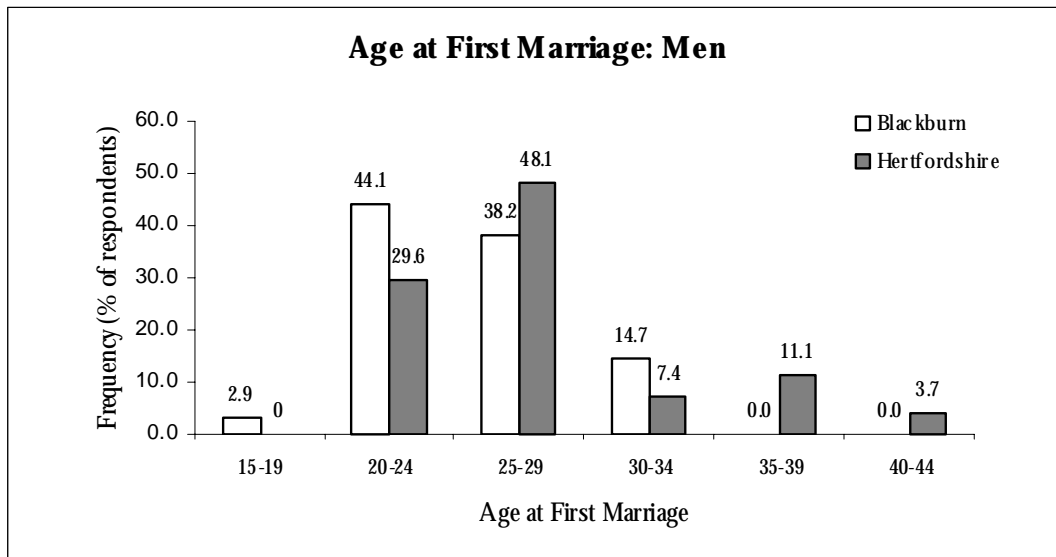


Chart 6: Female respondents' age at first marriage (percentages)

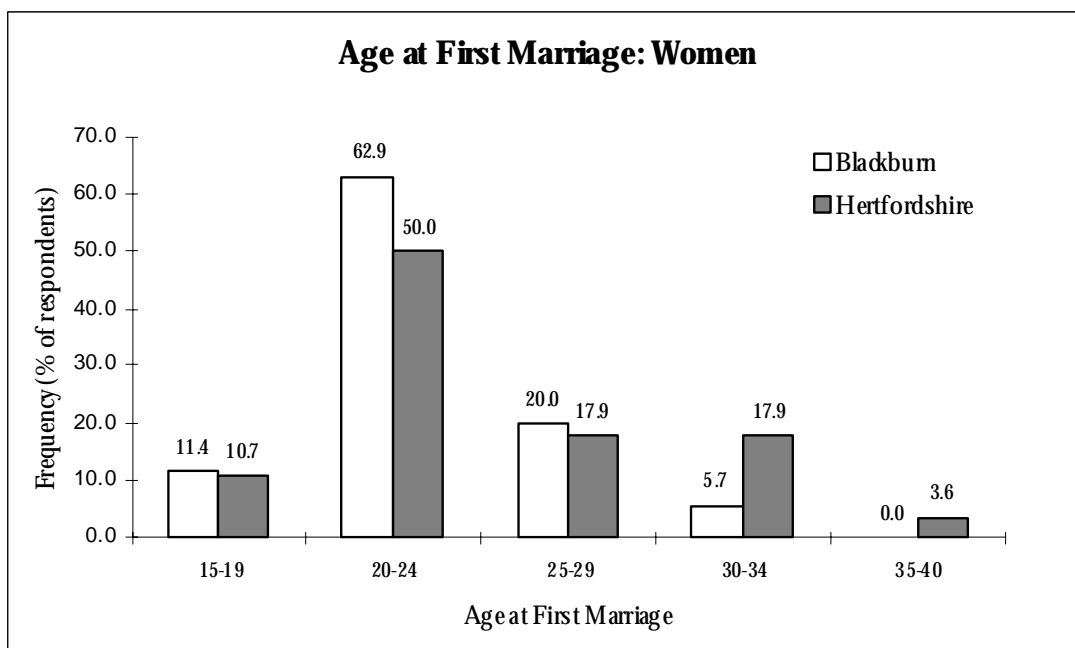


Chart 7: Eventual (completed) family Size of respondents married 1920-39 (percentages).

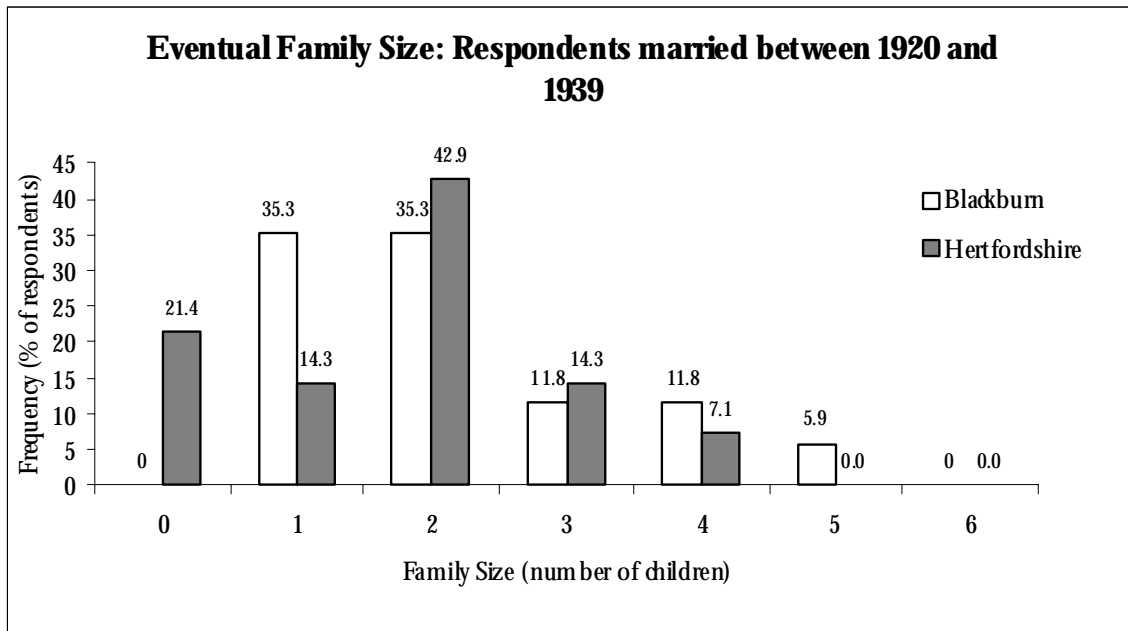


Chart 8: Eventual (completed) family size of respondents married after 1940 (percentages).

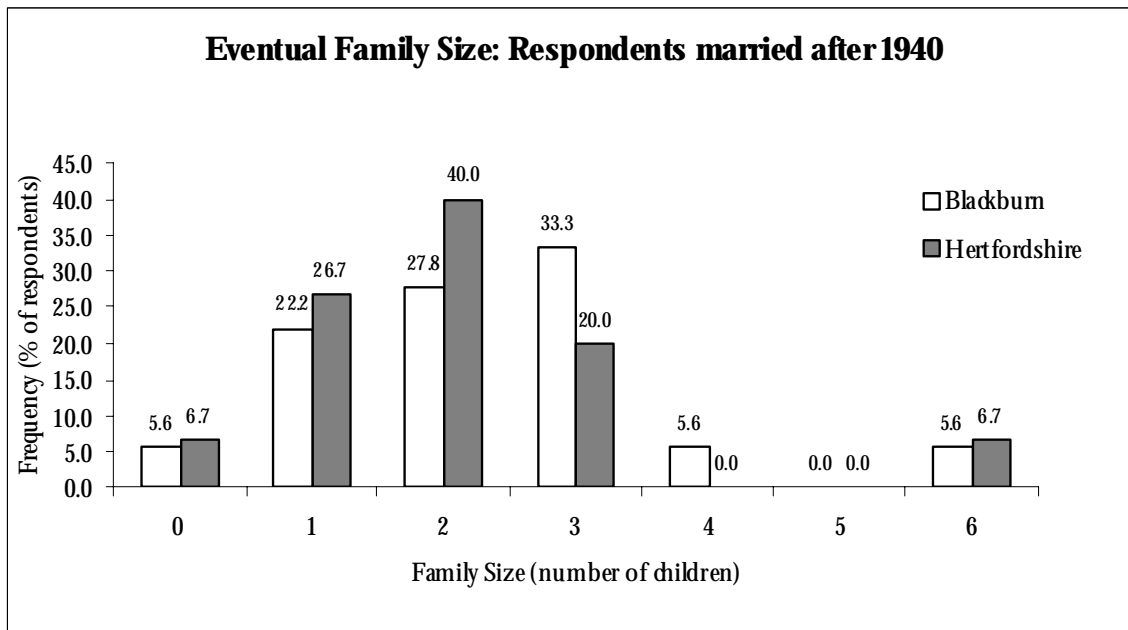


Chart 9: Blackburn respondents' number of siblings – split by date of birth.

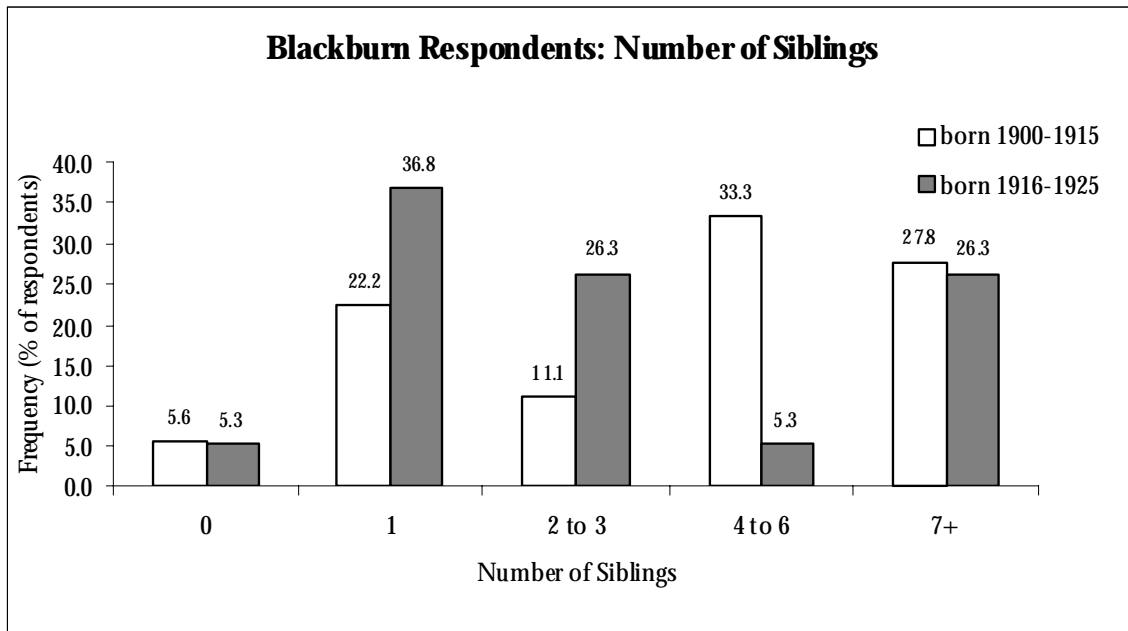


Chart 10: Hertfordshire respondents' number of siblings – split by date of birth

