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VERNACULAR DISCOURSES OF GENDER EQUALITY IN THE POST-WAR BRITISH WORKING CLASS*

The post-1968 feminist movement has often been depicted as the vanguard of changing ideas about women's roles in Britain after 1945; working-class women, by contrast, are often seen as more 'traditional', sceptical of 'feminism', dis-identifying with a movement whose priorities and culture were shaped by its mainly middle-class activists.¹ But when, as part of a project exploring the lives of women in Britain's coalfields, we asked Maureen Coates, a miner's wife from Doncaster born in 1942, about changes in women's roles during her lifetime, she told a very different story. Maureen enthusiastically identified herself as a feminist, but argued that 'feminism' was already taking root in Britain in the early 1960s when she got married, and that for her, it had little to do with issues like the domestic division of labour, which so concerned the women's liberation movement. Instead, what was important to Maureen was that her husband Jim 'always backed me, whatever I wanted to do [...] he wouldn't stop me, 'cause he agrees that women should be equal'. Asked when attitudes began to move in this direction, Maureen described (somewhat whiggishly) changes in the culture of the family over the generations:

* We would like to thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council for funding the oral history project on which this article is based; Victoria Dawson, who worked with us on the project; participants at the NACBS panel that took place on 26–28 October 2018 at Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, USA, and the UCL Gender and Feminism Research Network on 12 February 2020, where we presented some of these ideas; and Lucy Delap, Margot Finn, Matthew Hilton, Jon Lawrence, Peter Mandler and Matt Worley. Above all, we must thank our interviewees.

¹ See Margaretta Jolly, *Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the UK Women's Liberation Movement, 1968–Present* (Oxford, 2019), 21–5; Beverley Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable* (London, 1997).

Because, you see, our parents, as well, were different to what ours [our children] were brought up, and us grandchildren. They never spoke in front of you. Things weren't discussed [...] nobody discussed anything in front of you. Children were made to be seen and not heard. And it weren't as bad as when me mum were younger. But each generation it's got a lot easier, I think. And right now, four — all our four granddaughters are — women's rules. Not rules, but women have equal say as much, which is a good thing.²

Maureen's testimony offered an intriguing suggestion: she seemed not to have been influenced in any direct way by post-1968 feminism, but she did identify as a feminist on her own terms. She outlined what we might call a vernacular ideology of gender equality, focused not on the division of domestic and paid labour, or sexual violence, but on autonomy, individuality and voice. We argue that this vernacular discourse of gender equality, in the construction of which working-class women played a leading role, came to be dominant in the decades after the late 1950s; in this article, we analyse its content and its sources.

There are several problems with the existing scholarly literature on change in gender roles after 1945. First, sociological work within the modernization paradigm finds the roots of change in stadial economic development, suggesting that industrialization and post-industrialization tend, across time and space, to propel gender equality.³ Meanwhile, sociological work within the 'high/late modernity' tradition identifies 'individualization' and the 'democratization' of private life as the motor of changes in women's lives in the West in the late twentieth century; the bringing of 'natural' processes under human control (for example, with contraception) is here

² Maureen Coates, b. 1942, Yorkshire, interviewed by Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite (FSB) and Natalie Thomlinson (NT), 11 Sept. 2014. In the text of this article, for second and subsequent references to interviewees, we use only first names, unless the interviewee is being reintroduced after some time. Interviewees' names are in quotation marks on first use if they are pseudonyms; interviewees usually chose their own pseudonym. Some interviewees did not wish to use their surnames. In first references in footnotes we include year of birth and regional location; where location in childhood and adult life was different, we include both.

³ Barbara Bergmann, *The Economic Emergence of Women*, 2nd edn (New York, 2005); Robert Max Jackson, *Destined for Equality: The Inevitable Rise of Women's Status* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998). Recent theorizations allow room for cultural context and path dependency: see Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, *Rising Tide: Gender Equality and Cultural Change around the World* (New York, 2003).

identified as the root cause of changes in women's lives.⁴ These teleological accounts of modernity offer materialist explanations of change. We do not wish to deny the significance of the material context — low birth rates and new-found prosperity and security — to working-class women after 1945. But our understanding of change in gender roles is inadequate if we focus on structural change in economics and technology without examining the *meanings* women invested in those changes, and the agency they exercised in constructing new understandings of womanhood.

By contrast, a burgeoning historiography on post-1968 feminism has vividly reconstructed feminist ideologies and praxis, but has yet to seriously examine the impact of the movement's ideas outside its ranks. This literature implicitly and explicitly places feminism centre stage in explanations for changing gender roles, but adduces little evidence for this.⁵ As we have argued previously, the term 'feminism' has been used by some scholars in a sense so all-encompassing that it explains everything and nothing about the changes in women's lives in Britain after 1945, becoming a category so wide as to become devoid of meaning.⁶ And where historians of feminism have neglected the popular reception of the movement, historians of women's lives and gender roles in post-war Britain have generally examined discrete themes, like the rise of married women's work, the ideology of companionate marriage, and 'progressive' models of motherhood, with little attention to women's engagement with 'feminism'.⁷ The historiography thus has two problems: first, the history of feminism on the one hand,

⁴ Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Cambridge, UK, 1992); Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, trans. Mark Ritter (London, 1992). See the powerful critique in Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture, and Social Change* (London, 2009), 18–19 and *passim*.

⁵ For example Pat Thane, 'Women and the 1970s: Towards Liberation?', in Lawrence Black, Hugh Pemberton and Pat Thane (eds.), *Reassessing 1970s Britain* (Manchester, 2013), 183; Lynne Segal, 'Jam Today: Feminist Impacts and Transformation in the 1970s', in Lawrence Black, Hugh Pemberton and Pat Thane (eds.), *Reassessing 1970s Britain* (Manchester, 2013), 156.

⁶ Emily Robinson, Camilla Schofield, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Natalie Thomlinson, 'Telling Stories about Post-War Britain: Popular Individualism and the "Crisis" of the 1970s', *Twentieth Century British History*, xxviii (2017), at 291–2.

⁷ Exceptions include Angela Davis, *Modern Motherhood: Women and Family in England, 1945–2000* (Manchester, 2012).

and women's history on the other, remain surprisingly siloed, rarely speaking to one another's intellectual concerns. And second, the literatures on work, marriage and motherhood — three key areas of change in women's lives — rarely bring these shifts into a single frame.⁸ Drawing these themes together, we suggest, allows us to understand the meanings working-class women invested in material, economic and social changes, and the cultural discourses they drew on — including, but not limited to, feminism — to construct a new vernacular ideology of gender equality in Britain from the 1950s on.

In order to do this, we use life-story oral history interviews conducted between 2014 and 2020, as part of a project examining women's experiences in the miners' strike of 1984–5. Over a hundred women from coalfield communities in England, Scotland and Wales were interviewed by the authors and the project's postdoctoral researcher, Victoria Dawson. Interviewees were born between 1934 and 1974, the majority in the 1940s and 1950s.⁹ Most were the wives, daughters, mothers and/or sisters of miners; a few were linked to mining communities as supporters of the miners' strike. Popular and scholarly studies of the strike often suggest that coalfield women were transformed en masse by their activism in 1984–5; this article, however, decentres the strike.¹⁰ This highlighting of women's activism during the strike created the impression that the strike was the motor of women's activism and subsequent changes in coalfield women's lives: in reality, both were the result of much longer-

⁸ Again, there are exceptions, for example Helen McCarthy, *Double Lives: A History of Working Motherhood* (London, 2020).

⁹ Eight interviewees were born in 1934–40; fourteen in 1941–5; twenty in 1946–50; fifteen in 1951–5; eighteen in 1956–60; eight in 1961–5; ten in 1966–70; and six in 1971–4 (two did not record a date of birth).

¹⁰ Much popular literature emphasizes the transformative nature of the strike for women: Jean Stead, *Never the Same Again: Women and the Miners' Strike* (London, 1987); Triona Holden, *Queen Coal: Women of the Miners' Strike* (Stroud, 2005); and see accounts of women's groups in Raphael Samuel, Barbara Bloomfield and Guy Boanas (eds.), *The Enemy Within, Pit Villages and the Miners' Strike of 1984–5* (London, 1986); Vicky Seddon (ed.), *The Cutting Edge: Women and the Pit Strike* (London, 1986). See also Sheila Rowbotham and Jean McCrindle, 'More than Just a Memory: Some Political Implications of Women's Involvement in the Miners' Strike, 1984–85', *Feminist Review*, xxiii (1986). Curtis and Phillips also emphasize widespread female involvement in the strike and its transformative effects: Ben Curtis, *The South Wales Miners: 1964–1985* (Cardiff, 2013), 209; Jim Phillips, *Collieries, Communities and the Miners' Strike in Scotland, 1984–85* (Manchester, 2012), 1.

term shifts. An overwhelming majority of our interviewees grew up and spent most of their adult lives, until at least the late 1980s, in a working-class cultural milieu: the majority of their fathers and husbands were miners; their mothers (when they were in the paid labour force) also worked in manual occupations. As the service and public sectors expanded and industry contracted in Britain, particularly from the 1980s onwards, a significant number of the interviewees moved into white-collar work, and a small minority into the caring professions. But the vast majority still identified as working class — even if they thought that class boundaries had blurred and class had become more complicated over time — defining their class identity through their lifestyles, values and/or backgrounds.¹¹

This is not a representative sample of working-class women, or even of women from coalfield communities. First, our sample is skewed towards activists in the women's support movement during the miners' strike, who were more likely to respond to calls for interviewees; but many of our interviewees were not activists, and what is striking is how *similar* activists, supporters and opponents of the strike were when discussing feminism, work, marriage and motherhood. Second, we should not assume that coalfield communities were as distinctive in this period as they had been as recently as the 1930s: our sample is, we must acknowledge, skewed away from inner cities and is almost entirely white, but coalfield communities, as we argue below, became increasingly similar to many other non-inner-city working-class communities after 1945. With only one interviewee of colour in our sample, our evidence does not allow us to draw conclusions about women from ethnic minorities. However, our case study spans the three nations of England, Wales and Scotland, and the similarities in women's testimonies in all three are striking. Our sample is not representative, but it is broad-based. More fundamentally, for the purposes of the form of qualitative analysis of discourse we have undertaken, what is required is not a representative sample, but extensive and detailed testimonies. As many historians have argued in recent years, close reading of a small number of rich self-narratives can

¹¹ See Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, *Class, Politics, and the Decline of Deference in England, 1968–2000* (Oxford, 2018).

offer powerful insights into not only individual subjectivities, but also the broader culture, the ‘throw’ of discourses and the process of cultural change, illuminating how individuals, ‘struggling to make sense of [themselves] in the world ... bend, select, recombine, amend or transform sources of meaning available in the public culture’.¹²

Oral testimonies are not objective, unmediated accounts of the ‘truth’ of interviewees’ lives, but they provide us with a rich fund to explore the production of gendered subjectivities. In fact, faulty memories, the construction of ‘composed’ narratives, and the moments those narratives break down can be the most telling parts of oral history.¹³ In this article, we follow an intellectual tradition that suggests that, while subjects are constituted through hegemonic discourses that determine what sorts of selfhood are possible, within these constraints people are ‘active co-producers who use (adopt, transform, resist) available understandings of the world and themselves’.¹⁴ Indeed, as Joan Scott suggests, it is in precisely this strategic deployment of discourse that historians can see agency at work, limited as that agency always is.¹⁵ Recurring tropes and formulaic narratives highlight the interpretive frameworks and cultural scripts which gain purchase among individuals as ways of understanding their own lives, and which shape the meanings they invest in their experiences. As Scott argued in ‘The Evidence of Experience’, experience and discourse are not two analytically distinct phenomena, because experience is constituted *through* discourse: we must attend to the discursive frames through which historical

¹² James Hinton, *Nine Wartime Lives: Mass-Observation and the Making of the Modern Self* (Oxford, 2010), 19; see also Celia Hughes, *Young Lives on the Left: Sixties Activism and the Liberation of the Self* (Manchester, 2015), 9–15; Laura Kounine, *Imagining the Witch: Emotions, Gender, and Selfhood in Early Modern Germany* (Oxford, 2018).

¹³ See Popular Memory Group, ‘Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method’, in Richard Johnson, Gregor McLennan, Bill Schwarz and David Sutton (eds.), *Making Histories: Studies in History-Writing and Politics* (London, 1982). On ‘composure’, see Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London, 1994).

¹⁴ Eva Magnusson, ‘Gendering or Equality in the Lives of Nordic Heterosexual Couples with Children: No Well Paved Avenues Yet’, *Nordic Journal of Women’s Studies*, xiii (2005), quoted in Carol Bacchi, ‘Discourse, Discourse, Everywhere: Subject “Agency” in Feminist Discourse Methodology’, *Nordic Journal of Women’s Studies*, xiii (2005), 205.

¹⁵ Joan W. Scott, ‘Review of Gordon, *Heroes of their Own Lives*’, *Signs*, xv (1990).

actors understood their lives, because the meanings that people invested in particular ‘experiences’ constituted the significance of those experiences.¹⁶ Dominant discourses can shape and reshape the way individuals understand their own experience over time, as Penny Summerfield has shown in relation to women’s work in the Second World War.¹⁷ It is not always possible to parse the layers of present and past in our sources precisely, but we hold that it is nevertheless possible to use this oral history material to track the development over time of a new way of thinking about gender equality in post-war Britain.

This new discourse of gender equality held that women were fundamentally equal to men and had the right to autonomy and respect: to have their own opinions and to be listened to. It did not insist that men and women should take on precisely the same roles at home or in the workplace, and did not critique masculinity in the same way the women’s liberation movement did. To many women’s liberation movement activists, this would make it profoundly inadequate as a way of understanding inequality between men and women. But despite this, it represented an important shift in how women saw themselves and wanted to be seen. After all, one of the key criticisms Simone de Beauvoir made of the ‘myths’ of traditional femininity in *The Second Sex* in 1949 was that they involved ‘failing to take women as agents — as conscious human beings who make choices and develop projects for their lives, who want to love and be loved as such’.¹⁸ British women in the 1950s, one autobiographer has written, had ‘internalized from a lifetime of messages that achievement and autonomy were simply incompatible with love and family’.¹⁹ This was what, over time, many of our interviewees came to contest. Like the subjects of Lynn Abrams’s oral history interviews with middle-class women of the same generation, our interviewees were part of a shift from a mode of feminine selfhood based on self-abnegation, care for others and respectability to one based on an assertive belief in the right to self-development and

¹⁶ Joan W. Scott, ‘The Evidence of Experience’, *Critical Inquiry*, xvii (1991).

¹⁷ Penny Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women’s Wartime Lives: Discourse and Subjectivity in Oral Histories of the Second World War* (Manchester, 1998).

¹⁸ Kate Kirkpatrick, *Becoming Beauvoir: A Life* (London, 2019), 11.

¹⁹ Jessica Mann, *The Fifties Mystique* (London, 2012), 197, quoted in Heather Clark, *Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath* (London, 2020), xvii.

self-fulfilment *along with* the right to a family.²⁰ This new discourse of gender equality was formed out of resources found in diverse locations in the culture of post-war Britain: state-sponsored discourses of democracy, egalitarianism, opportunity and individual rights; discourses of self and self-fulfilment that echoed the psy-sciences; and teleological understandings of post-war Britain as ‘modern’.²¹ In order to give an account of this new vernacular discourse of gender equality, and the sources working-class women drew on to shape it, we proceed by examining, first, our interviewees’ views about ‘feminism’ and women’s equality, and then work, marriage and motherhood, three areas of profound change in women’s lives in this period.

I

Sociologists examining the impact of feminist ideology on working-class women have usually concurred with Beverley Skeggs, who argued, based on a longitudinal study carried out in the 1980s and early 1990s in north-west England, that feminism failed to speak to most working-class women. It simply did not ‘fit into their conceivability structures’, offered them fewer resources than did an alternative discourse of femininity and failed to speak to their concerns as working-class women.²² It is, therefore, unsurprising that most of our interviewees were reluctant to identify as feminists. Several responded with bewilderment to questions about ‘feminism’. Alison Anderson (born 1959) said she had never identified as a feminist ‘ ‘cause nobody — nobody’s ever asked me that before’.²³ She simply could not see herself as a possible subject for feminism. Despite the efforts of many activists to make post-1968 feminism

²⁰ Lynn Abrams, ‘Mothers and Daughters: Negotiating the Discourse on the “Good Woman” in 1950s and 1960s Britain’, in Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau (eds.), *The Sixties and Beyond: Dechristianisation in North America and Western Europe, 1945–2000* (Toronto, 2013). Some of Abrams’s interviewees came from working-class families, but most of these women enjoyed social mobility early in life via grammar school and university.

²¹ See Stephen Brooke, ‘Bodies, Sexuality, and the “Modernization” of the British Working Classes, 1920s–1960s’, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, lxi (2006).

²² Skeggs, *Formations*, 149.

²³ Alison Anderson, b. 1959, Fife, interviewed by Victoria Samantha Dawson (VSD), 29 Aug. 2018. See also Sue, b. 1956, Kent, interviewed by FSB, 14 July 2018.

relevant to working-class women, the image of the movement remained largely middle class.²⁴ Class differences — in ‘habitus’ and in political priorities — exacerbated the divide between post-1968 feminism and working-class women’s concerns. Prominent stereotypes of ‘women’s lib’ also surfaced in many of our interviews: feminists were seen as ‘bra burners’,²⁵ or as criticizing aspects of ‘traditional’ femininity (like make-up) or ‘traditional’ masculinity (like holding the door for a woman) that many of our interviewees appreciated.²⁶ As Skeggs pointed out, the performance of such traditional gender roles formed one of the few sources of cultural capital for working-class women in the late twentieth century.²⁷ Furthermore, many of our interviewees rejected the label ‘feminist’, because feminists were thought to *privilege* women over men and thus *undermine* equality. As Pat Smith (1949) put it, she was ‘pro female but [...] not anti-man [...] I believe in everybody’s equal’.²⁸ Betty Cook (1938), a prominent activist in the miners’ strike, said, ‘I’m a woman, I’m strong, I’m fighting for my rights; I don’t want to put the men down there where we were, we want equality; if that’s a feminist, well I am one’.²⁹ The implication was that some feminists *were* putting men ‘down there’. These were caricatures of post-1968 feminist ideology, but none of these interviewees participated in the ‘consciousness-raising’ groups or campaigns of the women’s liberation movement; their ideas about feminism were drawn almost entirely from the mass media, which often peddled such stereotypes.³⁰

While many of our interviewees were sceptical of ‘feminism’, almost all emphasized their belief in the equality of women.³¹

²⁴ See George Stevenson, *The Women’s Liberation Movement and the Politics of Class in Britain* (London, 2019); Jolly, *Sisterhood and After*, 21–5.

²⁵ Pat Smith, b. 1949, Yorkshire, interviewed by VSD, 8 June 2018; Ann McCracken, b. 1954, Scotland/Yorkshire, interviewed by VSD, 6 Dec. 2018.

²⁶ Angela, b. 1958, Kent, interviewed by FSB, 9 July 2018; Rita Wakefield, b. 1943, Nottinghamshire, interviewed by NT, 20 Aug. 2018; Marjorie Simpson, b. 1938, Yorkshire, interviewed by VSD, 23 May 2018.

²⁷ Skeggs, *Formations*.

²⁸ Pat Smith. See also Kay Case, b. 1948, South Wales, interviewed by FSB, 13 Aug. 2018; Anne Kirby, b. 1955, Fife, interviewed by VSD, 26 Nov. 2018.

²⁹ Betty Cook, b. 1938, Yorkshire, interviewed by NT, 16 March 2019.

³⁰ Adrian Bingham, *Family Newspapers? Sex, Private Lives, and the British Popular Press, 1918–1978* (Oxford, 2009), 224 ff.

³¹ Carole Hancock, b. 1938, Yorkshire, interviewed by VSD, 26 June 2018, said she did not entirely agree with the idea of equality between men and women, as she thought men had more physical — though not mental — strength.

Several spontaneously mentioned that ‘equal pay’ was fair and right, though a few added the caveat that equal pay was only right if men and women were really doing the *same* job.³² Of course, it may be that the valorization of the idea of equal pay in the 2010s shaped our interviewees’ testimonies here; but there is evidence that equal pay was coming to seem like ‘common sense’ in the 1950s and 1960s, finding support from international organizations, trade unions and women’s organizations.³³ Indeed, the Tories implemented equal pay for women in the civil service in 1954.³⁴ From the 1970s onwards, feminist activists critiqued this version of ‘equal pay’, pointing out that the segregation of women into particular roles allowed employers to pay de facto unequal wages. However, this critique was not one our interviewees made. This is not surprising, but it is telling. As Jonathan Moss argued in his study of women’s industrial militancy between 1968 and 1985, women drew on ostensibly ‘universal’ values of equality, autonomy and self-worth to justify their activism, rather than seeing their struggles as ‘feminist’.³⁵ It was these ideas which shaped our interviewees’ understandings of equal pay.

Similarly, their thoughts about equality for women in other spheres usually focused not so much on the typical concerns of post-1968 feminism, but on *individuality*, *autonomy* and *voice* for women. Tanya Dower (1967) explicitly constructed women’s ‘emancipation’ as being about a woman realizing ‘that they are a human being with their own needs, and rights, and life, that they can choose [...] to do what they want to do for a change’.³⁶ Other interviewees said that to them, ‘feminism’ meant:

A strong woman, with — with points of view and — classed as an equal. No, not even being classed as an — being classed as their own — their own individual outlook to life, choices.³⁷

³² Anne Kirby; Kay Case; ‘Rebecca Shirt’, b. 1956, Yorkshire, interviewed by VSD, 12 Nov. 2018. Women who introduced this caveat were: Myra Dakin, b. 1959, Yorkshire, interviewed by VSD, 16 Aug. 2018; Aggie Currie, b. 1950, Yorkshire, interviewed by VSD, 22 June 2018.

³³ Laura Levine Frader, ‘International Institutions and Domestic Reform: Equal Pay and British Membership in the European Economic Community’, *Twentieth Century British History*, xxix (2018).

³⁴ Harold L. Smith, ‘The Politics of Conservative Reform: The Equal Pay for Equal Work Issue, 1945–1955’, *Historical Journal*, xxxv (1992).

³⁵ Jonathan Moss, *Women, Workplace Protest and Political Identity in England, 1968–85* (Manchester, 2019); see also Sheila Cohen, ‘Equal Pay — or What? Economics, Politics and the 1968 Ford Sewing Machinists’ Strike’, *Labor History*, liii (2012).

³⁶ Tanya Dower, b. 1967, South Wales, interviewed by VSD, 13 Aug. 2018.

³⁷ Linda Conway, b. 1955, Fife, interviewed by VSD, 28 Aug. 2018.

Probably being me and who I am; I will make the decisions and the choices in my life.³⁸

An independent person I think, somebody that can speak for their self, that can look after their self.³⁹

These women all said they would call themselves ‘feminists’ *on these terms*. Jessica Gibson (1963), by contrast, resisted labelling herself as a ‘feminist’, arguing that it was ridiculous to take ‘a woman [who] thought out the box’ and say ‘oh she must be a feminist! Why? Just because she’s got an opinion?’⁴⁰ Whether or not they saw themselves as feminists, though, all these women agreed that women should be independent, have opinions, and be classed as individuals.

‘Confidence’ was a powerful recurring trope in many of our interviews, and was often linked to asserting one’s right to be oneself. Many women recounted experiences which had developed their sense of self-confidence, such as taking on paid work, or becoming an activist in the miners’ strike.⁴¹ Lorraine Walsh (1959) narrated a story of developing self-confidence centred on splitting up from her husband for about ten years from the late 1980s to the late 1990s: she said in this period she learned to ‘be strong’ and do things for herself, an experience she framed as transformative: ‘once I was standing up on my own, I was a different person’.⁴² (It is worth pointing out that almost all our interviewees went straight from their family home to their marital home.) As Lynn Abrams has argued, structuring an oral history testimony around a moment of ‘epiphany’ could allow women to reconcile a sense of a past, dependent self with a present self constructed as more autonomous and independent.⁴³ Many of our interviewees narrated life stories in

³⁸ Alice Samuel, b. 1958, Lanarkshire/Fife, interviewed by NT, 1 Aug. 2018.

³⁹ Janie Robertson, b. 1955, Stirlingshire, interviewed by FSB, 20 Nov. 2018.

⁴⁰ Jessica Gibson, b. 1963, Midlothian, interviewed by FSB, 26 Nov. 2018.

⁴¹ On the strike, see for example Anne Watts, b. 1949, South Wales, interviewed by FSB, 23 May 2019; Maxine Penkethman, b. 1967, Staffordshire, interviewed by VSD, 15 March 2019; Janie Robertson. On women’s work, see for example Anne Kirby; ‘Pippa Morgan’, b. 1962, South Wales, interviewed by NT, 13 Aug. 2018; Adrienne C., b. 1956, Yorkshire, interviewed by VSD, 26 June 2018.

⁴² Lorraine Walsh, b. 1959, Kent, interviewed by FSB, 3 July 2018.

⁴³ Lynn Abrams, ‘Liberating the Female Self: Epiphanies, Conflict and Coherence in the Life Stories of Post-War British Women’, *Social History*, xxxix (2014).

this form, presenting a developing ‘self-confidence’ as key to allowing them to act as independent agents, autonomous beings, above all as *individuals*. Gendered categories — particularly that of mother — were still important to most interviewees; but it was through constructing themselves as *individuals*, as well as wives and mothers, that they were able to claim equality *with*, and autonomy *from*, men.

Whether or not they agreed with ‘feminism’ (and however they understood it), most of our interviewees strongly stressed their belief in women’s equality: their right to an opinion, to autonomy and respect. Some women explicitly drew on socialism as a source for these beliefs.⁴⁴ Christine Harvey (1950) linked her belief in women’s equality to the values she had been taught by her left-wing family (her father was a trade union convenor).⁴⁵ Anne Watts (1949) said she felt ‘all my life with the Labour Party that there should be equality of opportunity, there should be equality for everybody, right across the board’.⁴⁶ As this suggests, the idea of meritocracy or equality of opportunity often shaped women’s understandings of ‘equality’, as when Kathleen Court (1943), herself a trade union activist, argued:

I think in society, we shouldn’t get anywhere because we are male or female. We should get there on merit. Not because of our gender. I don’t consider a man to be my better.⁴⁷

Likewise, Adrienne C. (1956) was against positive discrimination for women in employment, saying, ‘I made my own way in my career, not because I was a woman’, and emphasizing the importance of *fairness* as well as equality.⁴⁸ As Peter Mandler has argued, while governments in the 1940s and 1950s held to the ideal of meritocratic equality of opportunity, in society at large there was evidence of a popular upsurge of belief in a *democratic* version of equality of opportunity, and this belief was widespread among our interviewees.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Wendy Minney, b. 1964, Nottinghamshire, interviewed by NT, 20 Aug. 2018; Liz French, b. 1950, Kent, interviewed by FSB, 6 July 2018.

⁴⁵ Christine Harvey, b. 1950, South Wales, interviewed by FSB, 14 Aug. 2018.

⁴⁶ Anne Watts.

⁴⁷ Kathleen Court, b. 1943, Yorkshire/London, interviewed by FSB, 26 April 2019.

⁴⁸ Adrienne C.; see also ‘Poppy Peacock’, b. 1968, Northumberland, interviewed by VSD, 28 June 2018.

⁴⁹ Peter Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy: Britain’s Transition to Mass Education since the Second World War* (Oxford, 2020).

Perhaps the most striking facet of interviewees' answers to questions about equality between men and women was the tendency to move from talking about gender equality to equality for *all*. Vernacular discourses of gender equality were part of a much broader set of discourses stressing universal rights and equality in the post-war period. Human rights discourse formed one part of this, as did state-sponsored discourses of equality, enshrined in equal pay and equal opportunities legislation passed from 1954 onwards, and the collective 'liberation' movements for oppressed groups — Black, disabled and lesbian and gay people, as well as women — after c.1968.⁵⁰ As Elizabeth Roberts found in oral histories conducted with working-class women in the 1970s and 1980s, women increasingly thought the very 'aim of society' should be the 'protection and promotion of the integrity, independence and rights of the individual'.⁵¹ This was reflected in our interviewees' testimonies. Joyce Boyes (1955) said that to her, 'feminism' meant:

equality and fairness [...] giving everybody the same chances and opportunities as everybody else, irrespective of how much money you've got, your upbringing, your — your — your creed, and your colour.⁵²

Other interviewees asserted:

I think everybody's equal — black, white, anybody. A Palestinian and a Jew, we're always equal on this planet; we've all got a point of view.⁵³

I wasnae just fighting for women's rights, I was fighting for everybody's rights.⁵⁴

We're human beings. We're all equal, no matter where you come from.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ On human rights discourses, see Chris Moores, *Civil Liberties and Human Rights in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, 2017); Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn, *The Breakthrough: Human Rights in the 1970s* (Philadelphia, 2014); Hughes, *Young Lives*, 4; Celia Donert, 'Women's Rights in Cold War Europe: Disentangling Feminist Histories', *Past and Present*, no. 218 (Feb. 2013). On state-sponsored discourses of equality, see Robinson *et al.*, 'Telling Stories'. On liberation movements, see Adam Lent, *British Social Movements since 1945: Sex, Colour, Peace and Power* (Basingstoke, 2001).

⁵¹ Elizabeth Roberts, *Women and Families: An Oral History, 1940–1970* (Oxford, 1995), 14.

⁵² Joyce Boyes, b. 1955, Yorkshire, interviewed by VSD, 21 Nov. 2018. See also: Tanya Dower; Christine Harvey.

⁵³ Liz French.

⁵⁴ Alice Samuel.

⁵⁵ Jessica Gibson.

Women who identified as feminist — and women who did not — *both* made this move from discussing feminism to discussing equality for all. Those who saw feminism as being about equality usually identified as feminists; those who saw feminism as putting women's rights 'over' men's did not. Common to almost all our interviewees, though, was the claim that everyone was equal — including men and women — and that women should have the right to be 'classed as an individual', to have autonomy, their own opinions and voice, to be who they were and do what they wanted.

In these frequent references to being 'an individual', 'being oneself' and 'speaking for oneself', we can perceive the influence of the psy-sciences, which grew extensively in reach from the early twentieth century, particularly during and after the Second World War.⁵⁶ As Mathew Thomson has shown, the popular psychology of the mid-century was varied: individualistic but not radical, it retained an older emphasis on 'character', but also stressed the 'development of self' as a 'psychological, interiorised journey towards integration of personality'.⁵⁷ The psy-sciences and the other new 'sciences of man' (anthropology, sociology) offered new discursive resources through which the individual could make and remake herself, making selfhood 'not a given, but a quest'.⁵⁸ Crucially, Britain's post-war popular press provided a conduit through which psychologically inflected understandings of the individual's need for self-expression and self-fulfilment found a mass audience.⁵⁹ Our interviewees rarely referenced specific thinkers or ideas from the psy-sciences (though one did talk of her only daughter 'wanting a penis', to be like her brothers).⁶⁰ But their facility with the language of trauma — a term used by many as a way of describing difficult

⁵⁶ Mathew Thomson, *Psychological Subjects: Identity, Culture, and Health in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 2006); Michael Shapira, *The War Inside: Psychoanalysis, Total War, and the Making of the Democratic Self in Postwar Britain* (Cambridge, 2013).

⁵⁷ Thomson, *Psychological Subjects*, 266; see also Hughes, *Young Lives*, 4–5; Nikolas Rose, 'Assembling the Modern Self', in Roy Porter (ed.), *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Middle Ages to the Present* (London, 1996); Giddens, *Transformation*.

⁵⁸ Hinton, *Nine Wartime Lives*, 4.

⁵⁹ Bingham, *Family Newspapers?*; Penny Tinkler, "'Are You Really Living?" If Not, "Get With It!": The Teenage Self and Lifestyle in Young Women's Magazines, Britain 1957–1970', *Cultural and Social History*, xi (2014).

⁶⁰ Marie Price, b. 1935, Nottinghamshire, interviewed by NT, 29 May 2019.

childhoods or the experience of the miners' strike — and, indeed, their willingness to understand their adult selves as shaped by their childhood experiences, demonstrate the pervasive cultural influence of the psy-sciences in providing a framework for thinking about the self.⁶¹ When our interviewees described 'equality', then, they focused on the right to be 'classed as an individual', the right to autonomy, self-development, a voice and respect. As we will see, these ideals were the ones which structured our interviewees' accounts of work, marriage and motherhood.

II

Married women's paid work grew consistently across the latter half of the twentieth century, with a particularly sharp jump from 1961 to 1971, when participation rates for married women increased from 29.4 per cent to 42 per cent.⁶² Material shifts — changing labour markets, the growth of mass consumption and smaller family sizes — enabled and drove this growth.⁶³ Cultural change was intertwined in this process, as the 'career woman' and the ordinary 'woman worker' with 'dual roles' in work and home were increasingly normalized.⁶⁴ Working-class wives' skills as budgeters and household managers declined in importance, but even part-time, low-paid work could restructure the economic and affective relations of the family.⁶⁵ In addition, work powerfully reshaped many women's sense of self. In the

⁶¹ See Christina Bell, b. 1949, Newcastle upon Tyne/Nottinghamshire, interviewed by VSD, 27 June 2018; 'Joanne', b. 1974, Tyne and Wear, interviewed by VSD, 16 July 2018; 'Chloe', b. 1959, Yorkshire, interviewed by VSD, 30 Aug. 2018.

⁶² Duncan Gallie, 'The Labour Force', in A. H. Halsey and Josephine Webb (eds.), *Twentieth Century British Social Trends* (Basingstoke, 2000), 292.

⁶³ Dolly Smith Wilson, 'A New Look at the Affluent Worker: The Good Working Mother in Post-War Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, xvii (2006); Sara Connolly and Mary Gregory, 'Women and Work since 1970', in Nicholas Crafts, Ian Gazeley and Andrew Newell (eds.), *Work and Pay in 20th Century Britain* (Oxford, 2007).

⁶⁴ Helen McCarthy, 'Social Science and Married Women's Employment in Post-War Britain', *Past and Present*, no. 233 (Nov. 2016); Stephanie Spencer, *Gender, Work and Education in Britain in the 1950s* (Basingstoke, 2005); Marjorie Ferguson, *Forever Feminine: Women's Magazines and the Cult of Femininity* (London, 1983).

⁶⁵ Roberts, *Women and Families*, 139–40; Helen McCarthy, 'Women, Marriage and Paid Work in Post-War Britain', *Women's History Review*, xxvi (2017).

mid-century the identity of ‘housewife’ was constructed as modern, and most working-class wives aspired to give up work.⁶⁶ From the 1960s, women’s magazines presented domesticity as less central to femininity.⁶⁷ The image of the ‘modern’ woman as worker *and* wife — an image with roots in sociology and modernization theory — profoundly shaped our interviewees’ narratives of work. As Sam Brewitt-Taylor has argued in relation to secularization, Whiggish narratives of ‘modernization’ could function as self-fulfilling prophecies if enough people believed in them.⁶⁸ Work was not inevitably ‘liberating’ for women, but, crucially, it came to be *constructed* in this period as a route to independence and a marker of ‘modern’ womanhood.

In mining communities, married women’s paid labour followed the same upward trend that it did elsewhere in post-war Britain; even in geographically isolated pit villages, buses were sent round to collect women for factory shifts, and almost all our interviewees took on paid work for at least part of their married lives.⁶⁹ As Dolly Smith Wilson has shown, many women justified going out to work in the 1950s by reference to the affluence it brought their families, neatly turning on its head the idea that ‘good’ mothers stayed at home. However, women also hinted at other benefits they gained from work: enjoying the company of others, and doing something outside the home.⁷⁰ Laura Paterson and Helen McCarthy both argue that women in post-war Britain justified their return to the workplace as doing something ‘for themselves’, or claiming ‘a life of their own’.⁷¹ Our interviewees confirmed these findings. They worked for the

⁶⁶ Judy Giles, *The Parlour and the Suburb: Domestic Identities, Class, Femininity and Modernity* (Oxford, 2004); Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman’s Place: An Oral History of Working-Class Women 1890–1940* (Oxford, 1984), 137.

⁶⁷ Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture: From Jackie to Just Seventeen* (Basingstoke, 1991); Ferguson, *Forever Feminine*.

⁶⁸ Sam Brewitt-Taylor, *Christian Radicalism in the Church of England and the Invention of the British Sixties, 1957–1970: The Hope of a World Transformed* (Oxford, 2018).

⁶⁹ See Jim Phillips, ‘The Meanings of Coal Community in Britain since 1947’, *Contemporary British History*, xxxii (2018).

⁷⁰ Smith Wilson, ‘A New Look’.

⁷¹ Laura Paterson, ‘“I Didn’t Feel Like My Own Person”: Paid Work in Women’s Narratives of Self and Working Motherhood, 1950–1980’, *Contemporary British History*, xxxiii (2019); McCarthy, *Double Lives*, 30.

money, but this was not all that most got out of their work. 'Pippa Morgan' (1962), for example, took on three jobs during the miners' strike in order to provide for her family, and presented this as a transformative experience: she was getting out of the house, earning her own money, and the older women with whom she worked helped her realize that she 'didn't have to put up with' the abusive behaviour of her husband. There was, Pippa decided, 'a big world out there' which, married with a baby at age 22, she had not had a chance to see. She concluded that the experience was 'really empowering' and a key driver for developing her self-confidence.⁷² Anne Kirby (1955) also related re-entering the workforce and developing her career to self-fulfilment: 'eventually it got to the point where it had to be about me, and what I wanted to do in the future' (she worked in a variety of jobs including as a cook, a cleaner and later, after returning to education, in youth work).⁷³ Adrienne C. (1956) felt that her return to full-time work, when her youngest daughter was 10, was when she really started on her 'own personal development'.⁷⁴ These women rejected the ideal of femininity as self-abnegation and care for others, and insisted on their right to self-development.

Kay Case (1948) also linked work directly with increased autonomy for women. When asked whether she thought women and men had become more equal in her lifetime, she responded,

Women have got more say now, I think, because I remember when I was young, what the men in the family said, went; my uncle said something to my aunty, it was done, and the children were, you know — the men were the boss. I think women have liberated themselves over the years, now we have got our own opinions. I think that's got a lot to do with the fact that we went out and earned our own money, because years ago they didn't work. They had hordes of kids, stayed home, brought the kids up. Had to lean towards their husbands for everything. But I think that as the years have gone, and as women have actually got their own jobs, careers, have children but still go to work, I think they've made their own independence, so they're not so reliant on the men. And are not afraid to give their opinion out.⁷⁵

Kay went out to work when her two children were preschool age because she wanted to earn more money for their Christmas presents; she intended to give up work in the New Year, but,

⁷² 'Pippa Morgan'.

⁷³ Anne Kirby.

⁷⁴ Adrienne C.

⁷⁵ Kay Case.

finding the extra money useful, she remained in the labour force from that moment until she retired. Kay saw women's work — even if it was part-time and low-paid — as shifting the balance of power for women: they did not have to feel so 'beholden' to their husbands, and thus, she said, they 'liberated themselves'. Part-time work rarely changed the balance of domestic labour for our interviewees. However, for all but the youngest, this was simply not the point: it was the other benefits that work conferred — benefits that could potentially change the power dynamic of the marital relationship — that they valued. As Anne Kirby (1955) said, when she re-entered the labour force 'it was part-time and fitted in with family life, but it gave me something to do apart from sit at home and being tied to the sink'.⁷⁶

While many of our interviewees described husbands who approved of, or at least came to terms with, their wives' work, several described husbands who were unhappy about their wives' participation in the paid labour force; often work figured in these interviews as a critical motor of women's independence and, in the end, a cause of the dissolution of marriages.⁷⁷ 'Chloe' (1959) recalled that after her husband started a successful business with his redundancy money from the pit, he felt she should simply stay at home and spend the money he earned:

He was too traditional, and I wasn't that traditional, I wasn't that traditional woman [...] He was always saying to me, why do you want to go out to work and do all this, you know, I'll keep you and everything. But in the end, it was never enough for me.

After leaving her first husband, Chloe went to university as a mature student and trained as a librarian. Work was key to her sense of independence, and indeed to her sense of self, most clearly demonstrated when she laughingly said, 'I don't know if I can retire and not be a librarian!' Chloe contrasted herself with her sister, who 'always stayed at home and looked after t' children', only ever taking part-time work: 'she's always been a traditional [...] she's never stood on her own two feet'.⁷⁸ Most of our interviewees were mothers, and valued motherhood profoundly, but it could also feel like giving something up: 'as a mother [...] you lose part of your identity', as Anne Kirby put

⁷⁶ Anne Kirby.

⁷⁷ For example Anne Kirby; 'Pippa Morgan'.

⁷⁸ 'Chloe'.

it.⁷⁹ Work offered independence and another identity to put alongside that of mother.

For women like Chloe and Anne Kirby, telling the tale of themselves as working women was a way of implicitly fashioning a modern — as opposed to ‘traditional’ — identity. The notion of work as a key indicator of modernity and women’s self-fulfilment also figured heavily in the testimony of our youngest interviewee, ‘Joanne’ (1974):

Nowadays, women, you know, in the past it was, you had kids you stayed at home [...] But like — you can have kids if you want and still work. And you can, you know, some people have — run companies, or be CEOs if they want, you know, all that, and they still have a family, and [...] they might pay a childminder, or a nanny, or you know, that kind of thing. It’s just women being able to basically do exactly what makes them happy, or fulfilled.⁸⁰

Because of illness, Joanne had actually spent much of her adult life as a housewife and full-time mother, a fact she recognized as unusual; but it is significant that despite this, she still located work as a key site in which women could ‘fulfil’ themselves, unlike ‘in the past’. Work did not just have a material significance to the women we interviewed: it was also heavily invested with symbolic meaning, both at the time and in interviewees’ retellings of their life stories.

In the period 1890–1940, working-class women regarded it as ‘a matter of social progress and of status to be able to give up work’.⁸¹ In the post-war decades, however, ‘modern’, ‘liberated’ women were discursively constructed as occupying ‘dual roles’ in home and work.⁸² From the 1970s and 1980s, deindustrialization drove even higher rates of working motherhood as working-class women’s work became more vital to families’ standards of living.⁸³ Thatcherite rhetoric celebrated ‘hard work’ and demonized a supposedly workless ‘underclass’; New Labour stressed that ‘ordinary working families’ in modern Britain had both men *and* women in the labour force.⁸⁴ All these shifts impacted on women’s understandings of their own work,

⁷⁹ Anne Kirby.

⁸⁰ ‘Joanne’.

⁸¹ Roberts, *A Woman’s Place*, 137.

⁸² McCarthy, ‘Social Science’.

⁸³ Connolly and Gregory, ‘Women and Work’.

⁸⁴ Jon Lawrence and Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, ‘Margaret Thatcher and the Decline of Class Politics’, in Ben Jackson and Robert Saunders (eds.), *Making Thatcher’s Britain* (Cambridge, 2012); John Welshman, *Underclass: A History of the Excluded, 1880–2000* (London, 2007); Florence Sutcliffe-

and how they saw the difference between them and their own mothers. In fact, several of our interviewees elided their mothers' paid labour from their narratives; Linda Chapman (1958), for example, told us that her mother was 'just a mum', but later noted that she undertook cleaning jobs in the evening.⁸⁵ Though Chapman's mother *had* participated in the paid labour force, she was not recognized as a 'worker'. This pattern emerged in several interviews.⁸⁶ As 'Nadia' (1969) said of her mother, born in the late 1920s, 'she had jobs, but what she saw as a job was teaching, nursing, you know, a profession'.⁸⁷ But from the late 1950s, the 'modern' woman was increasingly seen as a worker as well as a mother (though this shift was gradual and uneven), and even women undertaking part-time or casual work could be viewed as 'workers'. Our younger interviewees were likely to have gained more qualifications, and to have worked for longer hours, over longer periods; but it was not just material shifts that impacted the place of work in women's lives. A revolution in understandings of employment — increasingly seen as empowering, not shameful, for married women — profoundly shaped how our interviewees understood their experiences at work.

III

Post-war sociology saw mining communities as especially patriarchal. *Coal Is our Life*, an influential 1956 study of 'Ashton' (Featherstone, in West Yorkshire), depicted women and men as living 'separate' or even 'secret' lives:

Young women in Ashton see their future in terms of being married and running a household; they have no prospects of professional or other social interests and activities outside the home ... The wife's confinement to the household, together with the acceptance of the idea that the house and the children are primarily her responsibility, emphasise the absence of any joint activities and interests for husband and wife.⁸⁸

(n. 84 cont.)

Braithwaite, '“Class” in the Development of British Labour Party Ideology, 1983–1997', *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, liii (2013).

⁸⁵ Linda Chapman, b. 1958, Tyne and Wear, interviewed by VSD, 18 July 2018.

⁸⁶ See, for example, Aggie Currie.

⁸⁷ 'Nadia', b. 1969, South Wales, interviewed by NT, 11 Aug. 2018.

⁸⁸ Norman Dennis, Fernando Henriques and Clifford Slaughter, *Coal Is our Life: An Analysis of a Yorkshire Mining Community* (London, 1956), 182. On the

(cont. on p. 21)

But in the post-war decades, it was less and less the case that mining communities retained a distinctive culture, as regional differences shrank in a period of increasing centralization in government and mass media, and of ever-greater consumerism and mobility.⁸⁹ Miners' wives increasingly worked outside the home. And mining communities, like the rest of Britain, witnessed the impact of new discourses of 'companionate' marriage, which became progressively more normative among working-class families after 1945, and which, indeed, had roots in inter-war working-class culture.⁹⁰ The state and the apparatus of advice literature and marriage guidance counselling encouraged working-class couples to see marriage idealistically, as a relationship of 'companionate' partners, equally committed to each other's sexual pleasure and to the home and family; 'love' was reconfigured, and was now supposed to entail 'understanding' one's spouse and 'cultivating their development'.⁹¹ Huge house-building projects (private and council), smaller families, affluence and growing domestic leisure opportunities made more 'companionate' or 'mutualist' marriages increasingly possible, and all these developments impacted mining communities.⁹² Historians have highlighted the shortcomings of mutualism, particularly its 'different but equal' model which, in practice, meant inequality and

(n. 88 cont.)

influence of the book, see Tim Strangleman, 'Mining a Productive Seam? The Coal Industry, Community and Sociology', *Contemporary British History*, xxxii (2018).

⁸⁹ Helen Smith, 'Working-Class Ideas and Experiences of Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Britain: Regionalism as a Category of Analysis', *Twentieth Century British History*, xxix (2018).

⁹⁰ Janet Finch and Penny Summerfield, 'Social Reconstruction and the Emergence of Companionate Marriage, 1945–59', in David Clark (ed.), *Marriage, Domestic Life and Social Change: Writings for Jacqueline Burgoyne 1944–88* (London, 1991); Marcus Collins, *Modern Love: An Intimate History of Men and Women in Twentieth-Century Britain* (London, 2003); Claire Langhamer, *The English in Love: The Intimate Story of an Emotional Revolution* (Oxford, 2013); on the inter-war years, see also Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher, *Sex Before the Sexual Revolution: Intimate Life in England 1918–1963* (Cambridge, 2010).

⁹¹ Claire Langhamer, 'Love, Selfhood and Authenticity in Post-War Britain', *Cultural and Social History*, ix (2012), 292–3.

⁹² Ben Jones, *The Working Class in Mid Twentieth-Century England: Community, Identity and Social Memory* (Manchester, 2012); Lynn Abrams, Barry Hazley, Valerie Wright and Ade Kearns, 'Aspiration, Agency, and the Production of New Selves in a Scottish New Town, c.1947–c.2016', *Twentieth Century British History*, xxxix (2018).

frustration for many women; Claire Langhamer argues that the unfulfilled promises of companionate marriage were a key reason for the rise in divorce rates in the 1970s and 1980s.⁹³ We do not take issue with these arguments, but we suggest that we must *also* recognize that the ideal of companionate marriage was popular because it inscribed a new, more egalitarian way of imagining relations between the sexes.

Many of our interviewees suggested that marriage should be based on love and companionship. Joan Holden (1937) remembered that as a young woman, she got engaged to her childhood sweetheart because it was ‘expected’ of her, but realized she did not love him and broke it off.⁹⁴ Kathleen Court (1943) spoke with regret of the fact that, although her first husband was a ‘nice man’ and a good provider, they did not love each other; once their children were grown up, she left him.⁹⁵ Many knew that the expectation of love within marriage was not one which had always been available to their mothers and grandmothers.⁹⁶ ‘Theresa Gratton’ (1955) recalled of her grandmother’s second marriage: ‘it was a marriage out of necessity; he would have been a single man in need of a wife and she was a widow, in need – with three kids’. ‘We talk about love’, Theresa said, but ‘that’s what happened in those days’.⁹⁷ Linda Chapman (1958) commented similarly of her grandparents: ‘they were just two people who’d put their eggs in the same pot. And life was hard, and there was no, sort of, I dunno, no time for them to have fun or do things together’.⁹⁸ These examples all demonstrate just how aware our interviewees were of the extent to which material shifts had fundamentally altered the possibilities of women’s lives.

Our interviewees saw the patriarchal marriages described in *Coal Is our Life* as a thing of the past (or a sad hangover from days gone by). Many used the term ‘traditional’ to describe their parents’ relationships. Christine Harvey (1950), for example, said her parents had a ‘very traditional set-up’: her mother ran

⁹³ Langhamer, *English in Love*.

⁹⁴ Joan Holden, b. 1937, Lancashire/Yorkshire, interviewed by VSD, 23 July 2018.

⁹⁵ Kathleen Court.

⁹⁶ See Davis, *Modern Motherhood*, 186–7.

⁹⁷ ‘Theresa Gratton’, b. 1955, north-east England, interviewed by FSB, 22 Feb. 2020. See also Rita Wakefield.

⁹⁸ Linda Chapman.

the household and had the final say over decisions relating to the children; her father was the breadwinner.⁹⁹ Sue (1956), from Kent, thought that for her grandparents' generation, 'it was a man's world, and — and what the man said went'; but, she said, 'I didn't want it to be like that'.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, Linda Chapman recalled her father 'telling my mum that he could hand her notice in at work if he wanted to — he was very old-fashioned'; but then said she and her husband had always been '50/50 kinds of people'.¹⁰¹ Christine Worth (1952) contrasted her parents' 'very traditional set-up' — 'men in charge and women supportive'; mum 'knew her place' — with what she explicitly saw as her own 'modern' attitudes towards women's autonomy within marriage.¹⁰² 'Theresa Gratton' worked outside the home and got involved in local politics while her children were young because, she said, she needed something for herself — 'my time' — but she noted that this brought her into conflict with her 'far more traditional' mother-in-law.¹⁰³ It was important to these women to construct themselves as 'modern', and modernity meant autonomy for wives and more 'equal' relationships.

Sociologists in the post-war decades constructed a powerful narrative of growing equality within marriage. Michael Young and Peter Willmott's influential *Family and Kinship in East London* (1957) spoke of a 'new kind of companionship between man and woman'; this claim was echoed in many further studies, and gained much public prominence, for example in the BBC documentary *Marriage Today* (1964).¹⁰⁴ In distinguishing between 'traditional', patriarchal marriages and 'modern', supposedly more egalitarian ones, interviewees echoed this social-science discourse. Young and Willmott's work has been widely critiqued as impressionistic and politically inflected, but

⁹⁹ Christine Harvey.

¹⁰⁰ Sue. See also Lorraine Walsh and her sister Linda Finnis, b. 1952, Kent, interviewed by FSB, 3 July 2018.

¹⁰¹ Linda Chapman.

¹⁰² Christine Worth, b. 1952, Derbyshire, interviewed by NT, 2 Aug. 2018.

¹⁰³ 'Theresa Gratton'.

¹⁰⁴ Michael Young and Peter Willmott, *Family and Kinship in East London* (London, 1957), 96; Colin Rosser and Christopher Harris, *The Family and Social Change: A Study of Family and Kinship in a South Wales Town* (London, 1965), 205; Pearl Jephcott, with Nancy Seear and John H. Smith, *Married Women Working* (London, 1962), 91; *Marriage Today*, part 4, 'Intimate Union', 30 Sept. 1964, <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p013vg9y/marriage-today-intimate-union>>.

their impression of growing equality between husbands and wives was not entirely baseless.¹⁰⁵ Given the pervasiveness of social-science-inflected discourses linking modernity with gender equality, it seems likely that these discourses both reflected and shaped changing popular understandings of equality in marriage.

Our interviewees insisted that women could take primary responsibility for the home and children without this necessarily denoting 'inequality'. Lorraine Walsh (1959) and her sister Linda Finnis (1952) described their parents' relationship as very 'traditional': their mother did the housework and childcare, as well as having part-time jobs.¹⁰⁶ Lorraine and Linda were both mainly mothers and housewives, doing very little work outside the home after the births of their children. But both agreed that their marriages were different to their parents': they had autonomy, and more close, communicative and 'equal' relationships. Linda thought that 'mum and dad's thing, it was a dying breed, after that generation'. Lorraine agreed. She recalled that when she first moved to Ramsgate from nearby Northbourne with her husband, she 'used to go home [to her parents' house] a lot', and remembered her father 'saying to my mum, *I wouldn't have that*'. But both Lorraine and Linda said *their* husbands would never have attempted to assert their control by stopping their wives from going away in this manner. Lorraine felt their mother did not really have a 'life for herself'; but both sisters agreed things were different for them. Most of our interviewees took primary responsibility for the home, whether or not they were also in paid work; however, the division of paid and unpaid labour simply did not seem like the most salient question to many when assessing the egalitarianism of marriages. Autonomy was a more critical factor.

Interviewees who had moved into a more middle-class milieu through education and/or work were more likely to interpret a question about equality between husbands and wives as relating to housework. This came out most explicitly in our interview with mother and daughter Joan (1937) and Shelan Holden

¹⁰⁵ For critiques, see Jennifer Platt, *Social Research in Bethnal Green: An Evaluation of the Work of the Institute of Community Studies* (London, 1971); Jon Lawrence, 'Inventing the "Traditional Working Class": A Re-Analysis of Interview Notes from Young and Willmott's *Family and Kinship in East London*', *Historical Journal*, lix (2016).

¹⁰⁶ Lorraine Walsh and Linda Finnis.

(1970). Miner's wife Joan, one of the oldest interviewees in our sample, said that she felt her marriage was equal, but Shelan, who had had a career in counselling and domestic violence services, and was doing a BA in women's studies, history and sociology, felt differently. She interjected, 'you were in what you saw as a complete — as an equal relationship, but I saw it as hugely, erm, sexist', adding that 'what he said went, and you just seemed to just go along with it'. Shelan perceived her parents to have occupied roles within their marriage that were heavily stereotyped by gender, and voiced disquiet about the fact that, as she saw it, her mother was always expected to go around 'sweeping up after him'. Joan, however, responded, 'it was done together. Everything we did was together'.¹⁰⁷ Here we see education, class and generation at play. The oldest women in our sample were only a few years younger than the youngest in Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher's oral history study of couples who married between the 1920s and early 1960s. In Joan's testimony, we see echoes of Szreter and Fisher's finding that 'sharing' their activities outside of work was profoundly important to many couples in these generations, demonstrating the persistence of mid-century understandings of equality in marriage for some of the older women we spoke to.¹⁰⁸ Joan valued equality-as-sharing.¹⁰⁹ To Shelan, this seemed inadequate as a conceptualization of 'equality': she insisted that women must have a voice and a say in decisions, and that wives should be more than their husbands' helpmates.

Just as many interviewees framed women's equality *in general* as being about voice, respect and autonomy, so, when assessing the equality of women within marriage, for many, the criteria were the same. Adrienne C. (1956) illustrated this assumption when she responded to a question about whether her marriage was more equal than her parents' with the words, 'equal as in decisions and things'.¹¹⁰ Maureen Coates presented her marriage with Jim as egalitarian on the grounds that he 'always

¹⁰⁷ Joan Holden and her daughter Shelan Holden, b. 1970, both Lancashire/Yorkshire, interviewed by VSD, 23 July 2018. See also Tracey Bell, b. 1971, Nottinghamshire, interviewed by VSD, 12 June 2018 (Tracey was a miner's daughter and later a teacher).

¹⁰⁸ Szreter and Fisher, *Sex*, ch. 5.

¹⁰⁹ Joan Holden. Carole Hancock, born in 1938, articulated a similar understanding of the relationship between equality and sharing.

¹¹⁰ Adrienne C.

backed me, whatever I wanted to do'; she said he would never have stopped her going out on her own.¹¹¹ Conversely, Liz French (1950), a shop steward in Kent, remembered her trade union activist husband Terry being very unhappy when she first went away to a union course in Manchester: he rang up the bar where the group congregated in the evenings to 'check up' on her. But Liz said that she was determined that her own marriage would be different to her parents': 'I didn't want to be in front of him, didn't want him to be downtrodden, I wanted us to be equal partners'. She attempted to assert her right to autonomy within her marriage; when Terry rang to check on her, she hung up on him.¹¹² This understanding of equality-as-autonomy did not precisely match up with the forms of equality socialist and radical feminists fought for in the 1970s and 1980s: nevertheless, this was what mattered to many of our interviewees; they sought to achieve it in their own marriages, and many, though not all, felt they had.

Several interviewees described their decision to divorce their husbands as stemming from a desire — or need — to experience the 'world out there'. As Pauline C. (1949) put it, 'I wanted to — I remember during the marriage wanting to learn more [...] — I knew there was like a world out there [...] — I wanted to do something'.¹¹³ Jean Shadbolt described her own increasing desire to be more than just her husband's helpmate, recalling that in the late 1960s when she married her first husband, he told her 'if you don't wash my shirts properly I'll take 'em to me mother's'; she then told us that if he had said that twenty years later she would have 'wrapped his shirt around his neck'.¹¹⁴ 'Polly' (1944) recalled with regret that her first marriage was a profoundly unequal one: she was 'financially dependent' on her husband and he did not want her to have any 'emotional freedom'; eventually, in the early 1970s, she left him.¹¹⁵ Many divorcees (including Polly) subsequently remarried or entered long-term relationships: the growth in divorce after 1969 was not a rejection of the idea of marriage, but rather driven by many

¹¹¹ Maureen Coates.

¹¹² Liz French.

¹¹³ Pauline C., b. 1949, north-east England, interviewed by VSD, 19 Nov. 2018; see also 'Pippa Morgan'.

¹¹⁴ Jean Shadbolt, b. 1948, Nottinghamshire, interviewed by NT, 23 Aug. 2018.

¹¹⁵ 'Polly', b. 1944, Lincolnshire/Nottinghamshire, interviewed by NT, 7 Nov. 2018.

women's desire to have relationships that met their aspirations for more autonomy and self-fulfilment.¹¹⁶ The model of equality within marriage which became prevalent among interviewees born in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s emphasized that wives should have a voice, and should be able to do what they wanted and have a 'life' of their own. This vision was likely to seem inadequate to contemporary feminists concerned with the equal division of labour, and equal pay and opportunities. Nevertheless, it was on these terms that growing numbers of working-class women who married from the late 1950s onwards evaluated the equality (read as 'modern') or 'traditionalism' of marriages; and most saw themselves as on the side of 'modernity'. Over time, understandings of equality continued to change; the youngest in our sample, born from the late 1960s onwards, were more likely to work outside the home when their children were preschool age, and were also more likely to expect more help from their male partners around the house — even if they did not always get it — suggesting another significant generational shift.¹¹⁷

IV

Just as marriage was changing, so were parenting styles. 'Progressive' child-rearing, which had grown in popularity in middle-class families in the inter-war period, was increasingly taken up by working-class families, too, after 1945.¹¹⁸ Men increasingly adopted the new ideal of 'family-centred masculinity', and mothers were encouraged to embrace the 'child-centred' parenting methods of psychologists like John Bowlby, Donald Winnicott and Benjamin Spock.¹¹⁹ From the 1960s onwards, there was a 'permissive' shift that changed 'what children can do, how they are listened to, and what adults can

¹¹⁶ See Jane Lewis, *The End of Marriage? Individualism and Intimate Relations* (Cheltenham, 2001); Langhamer, *English in Love*.

¹¹⁷ Rachel Johnson, b. 1970, and Kerry Smith, b. 1972, both Nottinghamshire, interviewed by NT, 23 Aug. 2018; 'Nadia'.

¹¹⁸ Laura Tisdall, 'Education, Parenting and Concepts of Childhood in England, c.1945 to c.1979', *Contemporary British History*, xxxi (2017); Christina Hardyment, *Dream Babies: Child Care from Locke to Spock* (London, 1983); Davis, *Modern Motherhood*.

¹¹⁹ On fathers, see Laura King, *Family Men: Fatherhood and Masculinity in Britain, 1914–1960* (Oxford, 2015); Roberts, *Women and Families*, 154. On mothers, see Davis, *Modern Motherhood*, ch. 5; Shapira, *The War Inside*.

do legally to control them'.¹²⁰ This was underpinned by a new conception of the 'autonomous child body and psyche', which posited childhood as the site of the creation of interiority and individuality.¹²¹ Many working-class parents in the 1960s and 1970s came to value a greater openness, and a more friend-like and playful relationship with their children.¹²² Many celebrated the fact that greater 'affluence' meant their teenage children could enjoy more leisure and more freedom.¹²³ Feminists and historians have critiqued child-centred mothering, suggesting it ignored the needs of mothers themselves and promoted a limited view of the child; but, while not dismissing these criticisms, we argue that child-centred and permissive forms of parenting represented — and promoted — a new emphasis on the individual and on (a particular version of) equality that was *also* transforming women's position within the family.¹²⁴

Many of our interviewees highlighted the importance of staying at home when their children were small, echoing Bowlby and Winnicott's focus on maternal attachment. Many also emphasized, as Spock urged, warmth, flexibility and the importance of being led by the individual child's needs; they talked about playing more and showing more affection and love.¹²⁵ Several explicitly framed this as new: Mary Hole (1935) recalled that when she was a child, parents 'didn't show any love to you': they were a 'different kind of people then'. Mary said she had brought up her children (born in 1962 and 1968) 'a lot different':

I can remember my mother just being there, and sewing and cutting things out, and I used to be with her, sometimes I remember sitting,

¹²⁰ Mathew Thomson, *Lost Freedom: The Landscape of the Child and the British Post-War Settlement* (Oxford, 2013), 1; see also Deborah Thom, "Beating Children Is Wrong": Domestic Life, Psychological Thinking and the Permissive Turn', in Lucy Delap, Ben Griffin and Abigail Wills (eds.), *The Politics of Domestic Authority in Britain since 1800* (Basingstoke, 2009); Carolyn Steedman, *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority, 1780–1930* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995).

¹²¹ Thom, "Beating Children", 261.

¹²² John Newson and Elizabeth Newson, *Patterns of Infant Care in an Urban Community* (Harmondsworth, 1965), 237–49. See also Roberts, *Women and Families*, 159–60.

¹²³ Selina Todd and Hilary Young, 'Baby-Boomers to "Beanstalkers": Making the Modern Teenager in Post-War Britain', *Cultural and Social History*, ix (2012).

¹²⁴ For critiques, see Tisdall, 'Education, Parenting'.

¹²⁵ Maureen Coates; Christine Worth; Linda Conway; Colette Butterly, b. 1968, Nottinghamshire, interviewed by NT, 8 Nov. 2018.

like, by the fireplace with my sister making rag mats and — and things like that, but I can't remember really being really involved with my parents much, like I've been with — with ours.¹²⁶

Similarly, 'Veronica' (1946) recalled that 'my mother never showed me any affection whatsoever, and I always showed my children affection'; Polly (1944) said she wanted her children to have 'the love that I felt I didn't get'.¹²⁷ Love was now supposed to be at the heart of family relationships, and meant not simply providing for, but also being 'involved' with, one's children.

Many interviewees recalled that it was normal when they were growing up for children to be 'seen but not heard': the attitude was 'tidy 'em away so that you can have your fun', recalled Christine Worth (1952).¹²⁸ This attitude gradually became less pervasive, though Colette Butterly (1968) still recalled that growing up in the 1970s and early 1980s, 'you were asked a few questions about what kind of day you had at school, and whatever, but the majority of the time your parents just spoke'.¹²⁹ Those interviewees who recalled that they *were* encouraged to develop and voice their opinions as children often framed this as a more 'modern' approach to parenting.¹³⁰ And among those who had been brought up to be 'seen but not heard', almost all wanted to do things differently with their own children. Colette wanted her daughter 'to be able to have a voice, and to — to be heard, and to be — to say what she wants to say and to be listened [to]'.¹³¹ Listening to children meant taking each child seriously as an individual, and several interviewees talked of the importance of seeing the 'different qualities' of each individual child.¹³² Adrienne C. (1956) recalled that her childhood home was 'very busy, and very — little time for individual needs', but said she had been

¹²⁶ Mary Hole, b. 1935, and her daughters Angela Jones, b. 1965, and Jennifer Llewellyn, b. 1962, all South Wales, interviewed by VSD, 2 Aug. 2018; see also Christine Worth.

¹²⁷ 'Veronica', b. 1946, Nottinghamshire, interviewed by NT, 29 May 2019; 'Polly'.

¹²⁸ Christine Worth. See also 'Veronica'; 'Pippa Morgan'; 'Joanne'; Maureen Coates; Pat Smith. Tellingly, in a public event we ran in Bannockburn in June 2019, one of the women attending recalled a culture of *women*, as well as children, being 'seen but not heard'.

¹²⁹ Colette Butterly.

¹³⁰ Janie Robertson; Kathleen Court; 'Nadia'; Anne Kirby.

¹³¹ Colette Butterly. See also 'Polly'.

¹³² Lorraine Walsh and Linda Finnis.

determined to do things differently with her own children.¹³³ Individual expression and individual fulfilment, two touchstones of the psy-sciences, were thus at the heart of new parenting practices enacted by working-class women from the late 1950s onwards.

As we have seen, much has been made of the potential for the practice of 'child-centred' child-rearing to isolate and oppress mothers.¹³⁴ But child-centred discourses pointed to a desire to recognize the individuality and personhood of children that was profoundly linked to the increased recognition of the individuality and rights of their mothers. Anne Watts (1949) captured the effect full-time motherhood could have on a woman's sense of self when she recalled running into an acquaintance who said she simply had not recognized Anne without her baby in tow: 'I thought, *well what about me?* [...] I came home and I really thought about that for days, and I thought, *well, where am I, the individual?*' A (proto)-feminist literature in the 1960s and 1970s critiqued the isolation that childcare often engendered, and Anne may have been drawing on this to make sense of her own experience.¹³⁵ Constructing this moment of epiphany within her narrative was a way for Anne to call attention to the injustice of the effacing of mothers' personhood, and this in itself was a powerful sign of the new assumptions about the rights of mothers that were beginning to take root in 1970s Britain.¹³⁶

As parents wanted to have more open and friendly relationships with their children, they likewise often took a new attitude to discipline.¹³⁷ Christine Worth (1952) recalled her father using his belt to discipline his children, but said she had not wanted to 'battle' with her own children.¹³⁸ Many interviewees encouraged a new attitude to authority in general, as well as to their own authority as parents. 'Elizabeth Ann' (1943) felt that growing up, she had been too unquestioningly

¹³³ Adrienne C.

¹³⁴ Tisdall, 'Education, Parenting'.

¹³⁵ Hannah Gavron, *The Captive Wife: Conflicts of Housebound Mothers* (London, 1966); Ann Oakley, *Housewife* (London, 1974); and, famously, in the American context but also highly influential in Britain, Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York, 1963).

¹³⁶ See Abrams, 'Liberating the Female Self'.

¹³⁷ Newson and Newson, *Patterns of Infant Care*, 237–49.

¹³⁸ Christine Worth.

accepting of authority, but said that she was ‘determined — or trying anyway’ to bring her own children up ‘to be questioning, not to accept authority just because they were authority’.¹³⁹ Tanya Dower (1967) said she brought her daughter up ‘to question things, where my mother taught me perhaps not to do that’, just to ‘keep your head down’.¹⁴⁰ This shift in attitudes to authority could have feminist implications, but it did not have primarily feminist roots; rather it was part of a larger shift in attitudes to authority and the individual, as deference to authorities and traditions of all sorts declined.

Many interviewees, echoing the psy-sciences, emphasized the importance of encouraging young people to be independent and broaden their horizons: to be who they wanted to be, and seek self-fulfilment. Some, like Anne Kirby (1955), thought their own parents had encouraged them to ‘be themselves’, and Anne saw her parents as ‘very modern’ in this regard (though she pointed out that she had encouraged her own children to be even *more* independent minded).¹⁴¹ But many women felt they had been socialized with low expectations and limited horizons.¹⁴² Alison Anderson (1959), who, as we have seen, had never imagined herself as a feminist, said,

when I was growing up, erm, you just thought, you were a wee girl, you knew that you were going to be a mum and keep house, and you never thought about a future or going out and getting a career for yourself, where now, cor blimey, when I was bringing mine up I was saying to them, oh — you can — the world’s your oyster, you can go and do what you want and be who you want.¹⁴³

Jeanette McComb (1953) said similarly that she ‘encouraged’ her daughters ‘to think about life outside the village, that there — there was a wider world out there’, in a way her parents simply had not.¹⁴⁴ These women perceived clearly the cultural assumptions that constrained the lives of many women growing up in mid-twentieth-century Britain. They paid less attention to the structural inequalities of contemporary Britain, perhaps precisely because they were so deeply invested in a vision of

¹³⁹ ‘Elizabeth Ann’, b. 1943, South Wales, interviewed by VSD, 12 Aug. 2018.

¹⁴⁰ Tanya Dower.

¹⁴¹ Anne Kirby.

¹⁴² E.g. ‘Polly’.

¹⁴³ Alison Anderson; see also Linda Conway.

¹⁴⁴ Jeanette McComb, b. 1953, West Midlands/Ayrshire, interviewed by VSD, 26 Sept. 2018; see also ‘Chloe’; ‘Joanne’.

individual self-actualization and opportunity for their own children.

Many of our interviewees recalled that their brothers were treated differently by their parents: boys were seen as 'special', were given no chores and were 'definitely freer'.¹⁴⁵ Kay Case (1948) recalled being annoyed as a child because 'my mother favoured my brother'; looking back in her interview, though, she took a more sanguine view: 'it was more a case of, *well women are brought up to do this and not the other*'.¹⁴⁶ This was no longer the case, however, and almost all interviewees who had been treated differently to their own brothers said they had wanted to raise their own children in a more equal way. Kay, when asked whether she had divided chores equally between her own son and daughter, said, 'yes, I think I did'; she had encouraged both to learn to cook, and reported that she was doing the same, now, with her grandchildren. On reflection, Kay thought: 'maybe I wouldn't ask them to do exactly the same thing; I might say to the daughter, *take the Hoover round for me while I'm in work*, and him, er, *sweep the back yard*'.¹⁴⁷ But she still felt it was important to give both chores. Equality was thus at the heart of new approaches to parenting from the 1960s onwards, even if, in practice, this did not mean girls and boys were always treated precisely the same.

In *Family and Kinship in East London*, Young and Willmott related the new, companionable marriages of the post-war period to 'a rise in the status of the young wife and children which is one of the great transformations of our time'.¹⁴⁸ Many of our interviewees also linked the changed status of women and children: as we saw earlier, when Kay recalled the dominance of men within the family when she was young, she emphasized this affected children as well as women: 'my uncle said something to my aunty, it was done, and the children were, you know — the men were the boss'.¹⁴⁹ Child-centred parenting ideologies drew attention to the development and expression of the self, and valued authenticity over authority. Our interviewees, like other

¹⁴⁵ Lorraine Walsh and Linda Finnis; 'Carol', b. 1969, South Wales, interviewed by NT, 19 June 2019; 'Elizabeth Ann'.

¹⁴⁶ Kay Case; see also 'Carol'.

¹⁴⁷ Kay Case; see also Lorraine Walsh and Linda Finnis.

¹⁴⁸ Young and Willmott, *Family and Kinship*, 96 (emphasis added).

¹⁴⁹ Kay Case; see also Maureen Coates.

working-class women around the country, adopted these ‘modern’ practices, often in conscious opposition to those of their own parents, from the late 1950s onwards. Here, again, discourses of ‘modernity’ overdetermined the construction of life stories. These modes of parenting were not feminist in inspiration — indeed, they were critiqued by second-wave feminists — but they could, nevertheless, by placing emphasis on the individual’s right to autonomy and self-fulfilment, advance the cause of gender equality.

V

Rita Wakefield (1943) thought her generation ‘was just really there to be married, and bring children up’, saying of her daughters (born in 1962 and 1964), ‘I look at them and I envy ’em, that — that they’ve got a lot more in life than what I’ve got out of it’.¹⁵⁰ It is important to stress that on many measures, including wages and time spent on domestic labour, women were in 2018 (when Rita was interviewed) profoundly unequal; sexism, misogyny and violence against women remained and remain profound problems in British society. However, Rita pointed to the importance of a new discourse of gender equality that *did* result in real gains for women after the 1950s. We argue that this shift in women’s roles — and women’s understanding of feminine selfhood — was inextricably linked to a new vernacular discourse of gender equality, which working-class women in Britain constructed gradually from the late 1950s onwards. This discourse insisted that, even if women took primary responsibility for home and children, they had the right to be seen as equal with men; to have a voice, autonomy, individuality and respect. It linked, or even elided, the question of rights for women with that of rights for children: equality for women formed just one part of a much broader discourse of equality for all. Women whose own opportunities had been limited wanted their daughters to have more. In *Me, Me, Me?*, Jon Lawrence describes the claims working-class women made in the 1970s and 1980s for greater autonomy, independence and self-actualization as a new ‘vernacular feminism’, but though some of the women he cites explicitly referenced ‘women’s lib’, many

¹⁵⁰ Rita Wakefield.

others did not use that term.¹⁵¹ Post-1968 feminism did have a profound impact on British society; however, we should not trace every shift in ideas about gender equality back to 'feminism'. This is why we refer to a vernacular discourse of *gender equality*, and not of feminism.

Many scholars have suggested that working-class women's refusals and disavowals of 'feminism' are the result of class-cultural difference: working-class women felt 'unseen' by feminist demands and were put off by a feminist habitus shaped by mainly middle-class protagonists.¹⁵² There is some truth in this; but we *also* argue that in working-class women's disavowals of 'feminism' we can see an alternative value system, interesting in its own right. The divergences between post-1968 feminist ideology and the vernacular discourse of gender equality we have traced in this article result from the fact that working-class women drew on *alternative* sources in fashioning their understanding of gender equality. Rather than seeing second-wave feminism as representing the decisive moment of radical rupture for women in Britain after 1945, the shifts we discuss in this article both predated and outlasted the moment of the women's liberation movement. The development of this new vernacular discourse of gender equality was gradual, but it can clearly be perceived from at least the late 1950s. In developing this discourse and enacting their ideas in their own lives, working-class women constructed a new understanding of female selfhood centred around autonomy, individuality and equality. Scholarship on changing forms of selfhood in modern Britain has usually focused on the highly educated or on political radicals; but, in fact, the development of new forms of selfhood emphasizing women's autonomy and individuality was bottom-up as much as it was top-down: not the result of a vanguardist movement so much as a popular front.¹⁵³

In a recent review article, Josie McLellan despaired that, in Europe, women's and gender history as a field 'has largely set questions of causality to one side'.¹⁵⁴ Any account of the causes

¹⁵¹ Jon Lawrence, *Me, Me, Me? The Search for Community in Post-War England* (Oxford, 2019), 167, 171–2, 225.

¹⁵² Skeggs, *Formations*.

¹⁵³ Hughes, *Young Lives*, and Abrams, 'Mothers and Daughters' both focus on the highly educated and/or political radicals.

¹⁵⁴ Josie McLellan, 'The Problem of Women in Post-War Europe', *English Historical Review*, cxxx (2015).

of the development of this vernacular discourse of gender equality must pay attention to structural change: the greater prosperity and security that most working-class people had in the era of full employment, expanding paid labour for women, and the welfare state produced the necessary conditions within which this vernacular discourse of gender equality could develop and thrive. But an explanation of the growing belief in gender equality also requires that we understand the creative use individual women made of the ideas and frameworks they found in the culture around them to make sense of their lives. Our oral history sources allow us to analyse the discourses women drew on and deployed to construct new forms of selfhood underlining the rights and the individuality of all. In this article, we have focused on several key discourses which left a mark on women's testimonies. The growing emphasis on democracy from the mid-century and the rhetoric of the 'People's War' and the 'People's Peace' created a context which emphasized the well-being of the entire population.¹⁵⁵ The expansion of the welfare state and education, and the implementation of equal pay and opportunities legislation offered tacit support for women's rights as individuals.¹⁵⁶ Many of our interviewees drew on languages of individual rights that circulated in different ways in post-war politics; some took inspiration from socialism and trade unionism, and many deployed the idea of equality of opportunity. Models of companionate marriage and progressive parenting prioritized individual autonomy and self-fulfilment, both of which were promoted by the new prominence of the psychosciences in these years. Finally, framing many of our interviewees' testimonies was the paradigm of modernity: new models of wifehood and motherhood were contrasted with the 'traditional' lives of many interviewees' mothers. And work was often framed as important, not only for the material gains it gave women, but also because it marked them as 'modern'. 'Modern' womanhood meant being an autonomous individual, and the desire to construct themselves as 'modern' itself became a motor

¹⁵⁵ D. L. LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain between the Wars* (Oxford, 1988); Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain 1939–1945* (London, 1969), Mandler, *Crisis of the Meritocracy*.

¹⁵⁶ See Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman* (London, 1986), 121–2; Elizabeth Wilson, *Women and the Welfare State* (London, 1977), 35 ff.

of change in women's lives. It was these discourses (rather than post-1968 feminism) that working-class women used — and repurposed — from the late 1950s to constitute themselves as agents in a new way.

Our research suggests that across the three nations of Great Britain, working-class women came to similar conclusions about women's equality and individuality in the years after 1945. Similar trends in economics and social policy were also seen in other Western European and Anglosphere nations in what came to be known in France as the *trentes glorieuses*, continuing into the era of globalization and deindustrialization; likewise, historians have pointed to similar shifts in modes of selfhood.¹⁵⁷ Alice Kessler-Harris has written in the American context of 'the desire of many women to locate themselves in the polity as individuals rather than as family members' by 1970.¹⁵⁸ In her 2006 memoir, French writer Annie Ernaux wrote that her generation 'looked upon their [children's] autonomy and independence with surprise and satisfaction, as something that had been won over several generations'.¹⁵⁹ And Caroline Rusterholz's research on lower-middle-class and working-class women in two contrasting Swiss cities in the period 1955–1970 suggests that women retained a strong commitment to motherhood and family, but insisted on the importance of giving their children more opportunities, and on their own right to enter the workforce.¹⁶⁰ Our case study of working-class women in Great Britain is likely, therefore, to have broader resonance for studies of other Western European and Anglosphere nations. We have argued in this article that we must attend to the vernacular discourse of gender equality that working-class women in Britain constructed in the decades after the 1950s, because without this we cannot fully understand women's changing role in society in this period. This new discourse allowed women to claim equality with men, but, perhaps more

¹⁵⁷ See, for example, the essays in Joanna Regulska and Bonnie G. Smith (eds.), *Women and Gender in Postwar Europe: From Cold War to European Union* (Abingdon, 2012), and the 'Women, Work and Value in Post-War Europe' special issue of *Contemporary European History*, xxviii (2019).

¹⁵⁸ Alice Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equality: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in 20th Century America* (New York, 2001), 241.

¹⁵⁹ Annie Ernaux, *The Years* (London, 2018), 143.

¹⁶⁰ Caroline Rusterholz, 'Du baby boom au baby bust: Les mutations de la parentalité saisies par l'histoire orale' (University of Fribourg Ph.D. thesis, 2014).

importantly, to claim recognition as individuals with desires, needs and opinions that differed from those of their husbands and families; in the final analysis, to be acknowledged as the fully human agents of Beauvoir's dreams.

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ABSTRACT

Why did women's roles change so dramatically in the West in the period after 1945? These years saw major changes in those roles, and in dominant understandings of female selfhood, from a model based on self-abnegation to one based on self-fulfilment. The roots of this shift have often been located in the post-1968 feminist movement and in economic change. Examining this question through the lens of Great Britain, this article, however, centres working-class women as drivers of these changes, drawing on oral history interviews with over 100 women from coalfield communities. In the decades after 1950, these women constructed a new vernacular discourse of gender equality which had profound implications for the position of women in society. This vernacular discourse shared some similarities with post-1968 feminism, but rather than focusing on the division of domestic and paid labour, or sexual violence, it emphasized women's autonomy, individuality and voice. In constructing it, working-class women drew on pervasive post-war ideas about equality and democracy, discourses of individualism and individual fulfilment, and discourses of 'companionate' marriage and 'child-centred' parenting in order to make claims for women's rights. Through doing so, they constructed women not only as wives and mothers, but also as free and equal individuals.