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‘The people who write to us are the people who don’t like us:’ Class, Gender and Citizenship in the Survey of Sickness, 1943-1952.

‘The essence of the sample survey differs in no essential from the familiar technique of the blood-count. In each, a tiny fraction only of the whole is examined, and from this deductions about the whole are made. In each, a measurement is made, while the vast multitude to whom it applies, whether human or cellular, swirls by unaware that it has been measured.’

The Lancet, 1 July 1950, 22.

In July 1950, *The Lancet* declared the sample survey, as ‘a tool of medicosocial research,’ had ‘come to stay.’ It cited the Survey of Sickness, an inquiry carried out by the Government Social Survey (GSS) department on behalf of the Ministry of Health, and praised its ability to identify ‘where and whether human needs’ were being met.¹ *The Lancet*’s comparison of the sample survey with a blood-count implied that survey subjects were silent, passive bodies, ignoring the role the public played in providing information. Whilst some members of the public might have ‘swirl[ed] by unaware’ that the Ministry of Health was investigating people’s experiences of sickness and health, many were aware. The national press, from the *Daily Express* to the *Daily Mail* and *The Times*, reported on the Survey. They discussed the reliability of public responses and debated issues of privacy; reanimating allegations of spying and surveillance which had been levelled at the Minister of Information, Duff Cooper, and his government ‘snoopers’ in 1940. More significantly, the ‘tiny fraction’ of the population who were sampled and surveyed, around 300,000 from 1943 to 1952, were not merely ‘examined’; they actively engaged with public health. As an inquiry into whole population health the Survey targeted people from all walks of life. This included middle

¹ *The Lancet*, 1 July 1950, 22.

class men, who were not often the subjects of public health measures in this period, and middle class women, many of whom were all too used to government intrusion into their homes and lives under the auspices of civic duty and post-war reconstruction.² This article aims to recover the attitudes and experiences of some of the people interviewed for the Survey of Sickness. In doing so, it will demonstrate how women and men negotiated their role in public health, while coming to understand what it meant and how it felt to be participants in government research in the immediate post-war period.

This article sets the Survey of Sickness in the context of British public health and social inquiry in the 1940s and early 1950s. It shows how the Second World War and the rise of social medicine encouraged the conception of whole population health as a social problem worthy of social investigation. It demonstrates how this produced an inclusive definition of the ‘public’ in public health which was representative of the whole population, not just the sick and marginalised. Yet, as wartime controls continued into the post-war period, some members of the public grew increasingly frustrated with the state’s role in their day to day lives.

For some approached by the GSS, the Survey of Sickness bore the brunt of their frustrations. This article uses archival evidence of the ‘material practical encounters’ of social surveys – instructions to and reports by fieldworkers, letters between staff at the GSS, the Ministry of Health, and the Central Office of Information Public Relations Office, and, most significantly, letters of complaint – to explore how different sections of the public reacted to

² Virginia Berridge, *Marketing Health: Smoking and the Discourse of Public Health in Britain, 1945-2000* (Oxford, New York, 2007), 188. Caitriona Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens: Domesticity and the Women’s Movement in England, 1928-64*, (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 2013).

being surveyed.³ Whilst most people responded to the Survey, answering questions when asked, a few refused outright to be involved, and others wrote to complain about the process after the fact or resisted the survey through less conspicuous means; misleading interviewers or withholding information. Complaints have left the clearest paper trail for historians to follow, the most vivid of the ‘fragmentary traces’ left behind by the ordinary people engaged by the GSS.⁴ These acts of resistance cannot be viewed unproblematically as representative of public feeling, as Louis Moss, Director of the GSS, acknowledged; ‘the people who write to us are the people who don’t like us’.⁵ Nevertheless, it is likely that the concerns raised by these complaints were shared more widely, and an examination of these traces can reveal the complexities inherent in relationships between members of the public and the British state in the immediate post-war period.

The complaints, often tinged with Conservative Party rhetoric, can be broadly categorised into four inter-related themes: the survey as a violation of privacy; as an infringement of liberty; as a waste of government money and of individuals’ time; and criticisms of the conduct of fieldworkers, most of whom were women. By situating complaints alongside extracts from popular newspapers and official reports of non-compliance and by paying close attention to demographic markers of class and gender, the article explores how a diverse public made up of men, women, working and middle class

³ Mike Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940: The Politics of Method* (Oxford, New York, 2010), 12.

⁴ Jon Lawrence, “Social-Science Encounters and the Negotiation of Difference in early 1960s England,” *History Workshop Journal* 77, (2013): 215-239, at 216.

⁵ The National Archives (TNA): RG 40/16: Health Index Survey: General Correspondence, Letter from Louis Moss to Stephen Heald, 1950.

people responded to being surveyed. In doing so, it finds that certain sections of the public were more able than others to respond to the Survey and to affect change in its process. Demographic information provided in fieldworkers' reports, though patchy and uneven, suggests that complaints largely came from middle class households. By acknowledging that the complaints came from exceptionally 'vocal ... individuals' – ones with the means and confidence to complain, we can also use such complaints to shed light on the reported actions of those with less power and agency – such as working class women – whose assumed ignorance and apathy can be reframed as a subtler form of resistance.⁶

Whilst the reasons for complaint were broadly shared across class and gender lines, women and men tended to frame their complaints in different ways, and members of the public used varied methods of resistance and refusal. Through these different modes of resistance, individual men and women were able to rearticulate their relationships with the expanding state, articulating citizenship on their own terms. Complaints revealed how the everyday politics of these doorstep encounters were heavily influenced by gendered notions of home and citizenship. Exploration of how different sections of the public were constructed by public health and how they responded to that construction develops our knowledge of the hierarchies of expertise under formation, whilst illuminating how class and gender informed contemporary understandings of citizenship in the emerging post-war British state.

In making the whole population worthy of social investigation and seeking information only the public could provide, the Survey made itself vulnerable to public criticism. To a certain extent the complaints received were an inevitable accompaniment to developments in social surveying and the privileging of the public's contribution to social knowledge. The Survey

⁶ TNA: RG 40/133: Complaints Received from Members of the Public Interviewed by S.S. Investigators, Letter from Thomas Fife Clark to Louis Moss, 15 January 1947.

gave public voices weight by design, and in turn had to adapt to their criticisms. But complaints also revealed the limitations of relying on the public's contributions. Without public cooperation, a survey could falter. Even with cooperation, the complaints of some were enough to bring the Survey of Sickness to an end in 1952, knocking the faith in expertise on which the welfare state was formed.⁷

From social surveys to social medicine: the development of everyday health as a social problem in 1940s Britain

The technological innovations of social surveys, medical statistics and epidemiology were integral to the development of twentieth century public health and its scientific credibility.⁸ Public health's expansion and interpretation of statistics played a vital role in determining how population health was viewed by policy-makers and what actions should be taken to improve it.⁹ But it also encouraged a new, more comprehensive conception of the public as objects of and participants in research and the governance of health.¹⁰ Much of the literature on the development of social surveys in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has been influenced by Foucauldian notions of surveillance and power, positioning the survey as 'an

⁷ David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain, 1945-51* (London, 2007), 24.

⁸ Theodore Porter, *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life* (New Jersey, Chichester, 1995), 202-5.

⁹ Simon Szreter, "Rethinking McKeown: The Relationship Between Public Health and Social Change," *American Journal of Public Health* 92, no. 5 (2002), 722–725.

¹⁰ Tom Crook, *Governing Systems: Modernity and the Making of Public Health in England, 1830-1910* (Oakland, California, 2016), 295.

instrument of order and control.’¹¹ Surveys developed as a method of mapping ‘the unknown slums’ in cities expanding under industrial capitalism. Middle class philanthropists and social reformers utilised the survey ‘to know, to contain, to control, and to speak about the poor,’ often using terms of moral judgment.¹² In the twentieth century, social scientists picked up the mantle conducting social surveys which focused on a public of unemployed or working people ‘whose lives were impoverished and marginalised’ over those who were ‘prosperous and secure.’¹³ With a few notable exceptions studying ‘ordinary’ people’s experiences, British social research continued to focus on so-called ‘social problems’ well into the post-war period.¹⁴ The interest in those deemed to be impoverished and marginalised was widely shared by researchers, social workers, the clergy, the police, doctors, and within public health. Public health largely focussed on women and children, sending sanitary inspectors and health visitors into communities to monitor and educate throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth

¹¹ David Armstrong, *Political Anatomy of the Body: Medical Knowledge in Britain in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, London, 1983), 51.

¹² Seth Koven, “The Dangers of Castle Building – Surveying the Social Survey,” in *The Social Survey in Historical Perspective*, eds. Martin Bulmer, Kevin Bales and Kathryn Kish Sklar (Cambridge, New York, 1991), 370.

¹³ Jon Lawrence, “Class, ‘Affluence’ and the Study of Everyday Life in Britain c.1930-64,” *Cultural and Social History* 10, no.2 (2013): 273-299, at 274-275.

¹⁴ Lawrence, “Class, ‘Affluence’ and the Study of Everyday Life,” 282; Joe Moran, “Mass-Observation, Market Research, and the Birth of the Focus Group, 1937-1997,” *Journal of British Studies* 47, no. 4 (2008): 827-851.

centuries.¹⁵ In these accounts of social surveys, research was concerned with classifying populations, aiming to pathologize the ‘morally deviant,’ separating them from the respectable and legitimate.¹⁶ Power lay with the surveyors and with the reformers, experts, and policy makers who commissioned the surveys.¹⁷ This relationship was ‘was emphatically not dialogic.’ The survey’s ‘language of graphs, tables and statistics defined an elite readership and excluded those whom it surveyed.’¹⁸ The surveyed were constructed as a ‘social problem’; objects necessitating study by experts.

The development in the 1920s and 1930s of public opinion research and surveys which sampled whole populations complicates this narrative. Surveys began to focus on publics beyond the marginalised poor and, at the same time, wider reportage and higher literacy rates enabled more people to engage with the data such surveys produced. Igo has shown how American society was influenced by surveys. Modern survey methods ‘helped to forge a mass public,’ creating a measurable average, a “typical American,” out of a heterogeneous population. Through detailing how ordinary Americans experienced ‘anger, scepticism, and relief’ as they wrestled with survey findings, Igo shows that by the mid-twentieth century ordinary people understood and engaged with the ‘language of graphs;’ relating statistical

¹⁵ Berridge, *Marketing Health*, 188. Celia Davies, “The Health Visitor as Mother’s Friend: A Woman’s Place in Public Health, 1900-14,” *Social History of Medicine* 1, no.1 (1988): 39-59.

¹⁶ Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain*, 7.

¹⁷ Catherine Marsh, “Informants, Respondents and Citizens,” in *Essays on the History of British Sociological Research*, ed. Martin Bulmer, (Cambridge, 1985), 206-227, at 206.

¹⁸ Koven, “The Dangers of Castle Building,” 370.

findings to themselves, and themselves to statistical definitions of ‘normal.’¹⁹ By giving ordinary people a voice in society public opinion surveys could be ‘democratising’.²⁰ The advent of representative sampling also introduced an element of obligation. Participating in a survey could take on the form of civic duty.²¹

In Britain social surveying remained rooted in a prominent culture of philanthropy throughout the 1930s and governments were initially wary of being seen to follow public opinion, even that of a fully enfranchised public.²² This began to change as the rise of mass markets, the expansion of mass communication, and the experience of ‘total war’ encouraged politicians to seek out public opinion in order to govern more effectively and efficiently.²³ The Second World War made understanding everyday life matter just as much as cataloguing Britain’s social problems.²⁴ Due to the importance placed on civilian contributions to the war effort, information about and from ordinary people became vital. From 1939 onwards, British

¹⁹ Sarah Igo, *The Averaged American: Surveys, Citizens, and the Making of a Mass Public* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2007), 282-5.

²⁰ Thomas Osborne and Nikolas Rose, “Do the Social Sciences Create Phenomena? The Example of Public Opinion Research,” *British Journal of Sociology* 50, no. 3 (1999): 367-396, at 379.

²¹ Alain Desrosieres, *The Politics of Large Numbers: A History of Statistical Reasoning*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1998), 224.

²² Charlotte Greenhalgh, “The Travelling Social Survey: Social Research and its Subjects in Britain, Australia and New Zealand, 1930s-1970s,” *History Australia* 13, no. 1 (2016): 124-138, at 125.

²³ Osborne and Rose, “Do the Social Sciences Create Phenomena?” 379.

²⁴ Lawrence, “Class, ‘Affluence’ and the Study of Everyday Life,” 278.

government departments made more frequent use of direct-response social surveys. This was initially met with criticism from parliamentarians and the press who objected to government-sponsored opinion polling on the grounds that it represented a ‘dangerous accretion of power to the executive.’²⁵ The furore was such that the Government turned its attention from opinion polling to fact finding.²⁶ In 1941 the GSS emerged with the intention of investigating so-called ‘social problems.’ Its aim was ‘establishing facts and the attitudes of the public towards these facts.’²⁷ By planning to investigate social problems in this context, the GSS meant to map the everyday concerns of health, nutrition, and labour. In wartime, the everyday had become a social problem, and the focus of enquiry had shifted from the marginalised to the whole population.²⁸

The Times saw this development as a democratic advancement: ‘a new and quantitative bridge’ between Government and the British public.²⁹ On being asked for information about their lives and how they ‘felt about their housing, living standards and their futures... people

²⁵ Laura Beers, “Whose Opinion?: Changing attitudes towards opinion polling in British politics, 1937 - 1964,” *Twentieth Century British History* 17, 2 (2006): 177-205, at 181 and 189.

²⁶ Beers, “Whose Opinion?” 190.

²⁷ Kathleen Box and Geoffrey Thomas, “The Wartime Social Survey,” *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 107, no. 3-4 (1944): 151-189, at 151; Louis Moss, *The Government Social Survey: A History* (London, 1991), 4.

²⁸ Jon Agar, *The Government Machine: A Revolutionary History of the Computer* (Massachusetts, London, 2003), 227-228.

²⁹ *The Times*, 28 March 1942.

were encouraged to believe that their views and experiences mattered.³⁰ Citizens came to see the information produced as a right; something the government had a ‘duty’ to provide.³¹ Paired with the expectation in wartime that the Government should ‘continually ‘do something’ in all spheres,’ this belief out-weighed the ‘popular cherishing of privacy’ and reinforced the obligation to participate.³² Marsh suggests this led to a ‘new respect’ for those studied. They were participants in and ‘subjects of research.’³³ Members of the public were approached directly and encouraged to speak their mind, rather than being observed and reported on by ‘expert’ informers such as health visitors.³⁴ But with a direct approach came the expectation that the public responded appropriately within the parameters of the survey; providing answers to questions when asked. The GSS may have contributed to democracy by recording people’s feelings and experiences, but this was democracy ‘mediated by experts rather than by direct election.’³⁵ As David Vincent explains, when the arm of the state reached into the homes of its citizens, people weighed their rights to privacy against the benefits afforded to them by surveillance.³⁶ In wartime a degree of sacrifice was accepted; not just of privacy, but of

³⁰ Selina Todd, “Class, Experience and Britain’s Twentieth Century,” *Social History* 39, no.4 (2014): 489-508.

³¹ Brendan Maartens, “From Propaganda to ‘Information’: Reforming Government Communications in Britain,” *Contemporary British History* 30, no.4 (2016): 542-562, at 543.

³² Jose Harris, “War and Social History: Britain and the Home Front During the Second World War,” *Contemporary European History* 1, no.1 (1992):17-35, at 25, 31-2.

³³ Marsh, “Informants, Respondents and Citizens,” 215.

³⁴ Greenhalgh, “The Travelling Social Survey,” 133.

³⁵ Agar, *The Government Machine*, 229.

³⁶ David Vincent, *Privacy: A Short History* (Cambridge, 2016), 101.

consumer choice as well, with rationing and market controls. Yet as wartime controls continued into the post-war period, the scales began to tip.³⁷ Sitting in opposition, the Conservative Party capitalised on this feeling, equating surveys and surveillance – in their anti-socialist rhetoric, “snoopers” – with rationing, queues, and shortages, contrasting them with their proposals of ‘liberty’ – the ‘freedom to earn all you can and buy what you like’ – in attempts to whip up support among middle class voters.³⁸ In the immediate post-war period the GSS continued to imagine the whole population as a social problem necessitating investigation. Although tolerated by most members of the public, it did not go uncontested.

The GSS emerged at the same time as interest in the discipline of social medicine reached a high point in Britain.³⁹ Social medicine was considered by some to be the ‘radical’ arm of public health. Its practitioners viewed population health as a social problem and thought medicine had a political role to play in addressing inequality.⁴⁰ In the 1940s, social medicine emphasised the dynamic relationship between health and social factors, and aimed to explore how social and economic change affected health. Practitioners refused to view health and sickness as absolute states and instead used statistical methods to examine ‘norms and ranges of variation’ bringing the whole public under the purview of public health.⁴¹ As a discipline,

³⁷ Mark Roodhouse, *Black Market Britain: 1939-1956* (Oxford, 2013), 238.

³⁸ Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, “Explaining the Gender Gap: The Conservative Party and the Women’s Vote, 1945-1964,” in *The Conservatives and British Society*, eds. Martin Francis and Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (Chicago, 1996), 193-224.

³⁹ Shaun Murphy and George Davey Smith, “The *British Journal of Social Medicine*: What was in a Name?,” *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 51, (1997): 2-8, at 2.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ Murphy and Davey Smith, “The *British Journal of Social Medicine*,” 3.

social medicine focused on building statistical links between ‘life hazards, poor environments and poor health,’ and conceived of medicine as a social science which examined the social relations of health and aimed to rectify inequalities.⁴² This ‘new epidemiology’ turned ‘the private inner states of individuals into public objects of government’, reinforcing the connection between social medicine and political action.⁴³ Debates around social medicine intersected with those around the planning of a National Health Service, drawing the suspicion of clinicians and doctors for questioning their focus on individual patients and for looking beyond their professional expertise to the field of medical statistics.⁴⁴ As a political project, social medicine also identified whole population health as a social problem and looked to social science to inform health policy.

These ideas influenced the development of the GSS’ 1943 Survey of Sickness which aimed to measure the incidence of illness and injury in the whole population. During the Second World War, the Government came to share social medicine’s perception of whole population health as a ‘social problem,’ and the Ministries of Information and Health reached out to researchers trained in medical statistics who were willing to apply their science in a

⁴² Ann Oakley and Jonathan Barker, *Private Complaints and Public Health: Richard Titmuss on the National Health Service* (Bristol, 2004), 5-6.

⁴³ Rhodri Hayward, *The Transformation of the Psyche in British Primary Care, 1880-1970*, (London, New York, 2014), 77-80.

⁴⁴ Oakley and Barker, *Private Complaints and Public Health*, 5-6; see also Dorothy Porter, “From Social Structure to Social Behaviour in Britain after the Second World War,” *Contemporary British History* 16, no.3 (2002): 58-80.

government investigation.⁴⁵ Although 1942 broke previous records for low maternal and infant mortality, recorded a low incidence of infectious diseases, and a low death rate, there were increased anxieties around the effect of wartime food rationing, working hours and stress on people's health.⁴⁶ These were exacerbated by reports from the reduced number of general practitioners about increased workloads, and complaints from members of the public that they were feeling 'below par.'⁴⁷ In July 1943, Dr Stephen Taylor of the Ministry of Information wrote to Dr Percy Stocks, Chief Medical Statistician of the General Register Office, stating the need for an inquiry into the general health of the population. Taylor raised the issue of public concerns about poor wartime health.⁴⁸ 'Alarmist rumours' about the public's health were seen to adversely affect wartime morale and undermine confidence in the Government.⁴⁹ Stocks agreed. The need for reliable and more specific statistics about the general health of the population was 'very evident.' He explained that Sir Wilson Jameson, Chief Medical Officer

⁴⁵ Dorothy Porter, "Social Medicine and the New Society: Medicine and Scientific Humanism in mid-Twentieth Century Britain," *The Journal of Historical Sociology* 9, no.2 (1996): 168-187, at 182 Edward Higgs, "Medical Statistics, Patronage and the State: The Development of the MRC Statistical Unit, 1911-1948," *Medical History* 44, no.3 (2000): 323-340, at 340; Armstrong, *Political Anatomy of the Body*, 48.

⁴⁶ Stephen Taylor, "The Survey of Sickness, 1943-52: Was our survey really necessary?" *The Lancet*, 8 March 1958, 521.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

⁴⁸ TNA: RG 26/24: Survey of Sickness: Dr Stock's Correspondence with Social Survey, Letter from Stephen Taylor to Percy Stocks, 24 July 1943; Higgs, "Medical Statistics, Patronage and the State," 325.

⁴⁹ Moss, *The Government Social Survey*, 157.

at the Ministry of Health – a keen proponent of social medicine himself – had requested he liaise with the GSS to develop an inquiry.⁵⁰ Together with staff at the GSS, Stocks piloted the Survey of Sickness in October 1943.

The Survey of Sickness aimed to be a ‘scientific’ investigation of whole population health, and used emerging statistical methods to ‘promote confidence’ in its results and alleviate public concerns.⁵¹ The Survey asked randomly sampled members of the public to report on their health over the preceding three months; encouraging them to include details about specific symptoms and illnesses and how much time they had taken off work. Those selected were intended to be a ‘representative sample’ of the civilian population in England and Wales between the ages of 16 and 64.⁵² Each month around 3,000 people were selected, each time from a different set of regional districts representative of the variations of rural and urban living in England and Wales.⁵³ Between 1943 and 1952, trained fieldworkers, mostly women, questioned around 300,000 people in their homes and at their workplaces.⁵⁴ Survey participants were also asked questions about their personal and material circumstances and social status. From their answers the Survey provided data on sickness rates by age, sex, and income, as well as on days lost to incapacity, and on medical consultation. The results were published regularly in the *Bulletin of the Ministry of Health* and the *Registrar General’s Quarterly Return*.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Murphy and Davey Smith, “The *British Journal of Social Medicine*,” 6.

⁵¹ Porter, *Trust in Numbers*, 200.

⁵² Patrick Slater, *Survey of Sickness: October 1943 to December 1945* (London, 1946), 1.

⁵³ *ibid.*

⁵⁴ Taylor, “The Survey of Sickness, 1943-52,” 522.

⁵⁵ Moss, *The Government Social Survey*, 157-8.

The findings of the Survey of Sickness contributed to social medicine in important ways, shifting the focus of research to whole populations by questioning what it meant to be ‘sick’ or ‘healthy.’⁵⁶ The Survey found that when questioned ‘more than half will complain of some illness;’ a statistic the *Daily Mail* could not dismiss ‘as unimportant.’⁵⁷ This helped to redefine what was ‘normal’ and what was ‘healthy’ and provoked further scrutiny of whole population health.⁵⁸ The expanded focus of social medicine understandably brought new members of the public to the attention of public health. Although the GSS claimed that the public had ‘become familiar’ with sampling methods and that their ‘application to social problems’ was ‘generally accepted,’ certain sections of the public found themselves the subjects of social investigation for the first time.⁵⁹ These people may have been familiar with survey methods intellectually but not with how it felt to be subjected to them. Rather than the usual survey subjects of women and the marginalised poor, middle class households (men included), were placed under the lens of the Survey, and these newer publics did not always behave as the surveyed should. Endowed with more social, economic and political capital, and shored up by anti-socialist political rhetoric, these people could more easily speak back to public health. Rattled by what they perceived as increasing government intrusion into their lives when they felt they had ‘sacrificed most’ already under wartime rationing, some of them did speak back.⁶⁰ Positioning themselves as the ‘subject[s] of rights’ as well as of research,

⁵⁶ TNA: RG 26/24: Survey of Sickness: Dr Stock’s Correspondence with Social Survey, Letter from Percy Stocks to Louis Moss, 2 December 1946.

⁵⁷ *Daily Mail*, 5 February 1958.

⁵⁸ Armstrong, *Political Anatomy of the Body*, 79.

⁵⁹ Slater, *Survey of Sickness*, 1.

⁶⁰ Roodhouse, *Black Market Britain*, 260.

members of middle class households called into question top-down narratives of expertise and the authority of state representatives, rearticulating their relationships as private individuals within a changing state intent on making ‘public objects’ of them.⁶¹ This is evident in complaints made about the Survey of Sickness.

Reading resistance: locating the public in complaints

Percy Stocks viewed the public as active participants in research rather than passive objects. He trusted all of those sampled for the Survey of Sickness to know and to be able to describe their own health. Stocks anticipated that the Survey might face criticism for this, suggesting that ‘non-medical people’ with ‘an exaggerated idea of the precision of what doctors write... compared with what they tell their patients’ might find fault in his methods.⁶² But Stocks did not anticipate receiving complaints from those surveyed. Rates of compliance were generally high throughout the duration of the Survey. GSS director Louis Moss maintained throughout the 1940s that very few people – less than two percent – refused to take part in his department’s surveys.⁶³ GSS researchers working on the Survey of Sickness from 1943 to 1952 evidently expected high response rates. Fieldworkers insisted that ‘everybody welcomes a sympathetic listener’ and Stocks himself wrote that people were often ‘rather over anxious’ to provide

⁶¹ Crook, *Governing Systems*, 295. Hayward, *The Transformation of the Psyche in British Primary Care*, 77-80.

⁶² TNA: RG 26/24: Survey of Sickness: Dr Stock’s Correspondence with Social Survey, Letter from Percy Stocks to Pixie Wilson, 14 July 1944.

⁶³ TNA: RG 40/134, Complaints Received from Members of the Public Interviewed by S.S. Investigators, Letter from Louis Moss, 8 December 1949.

information.⁶⁴ One fieldworker, Edna Grossman, found three failed interviews ('one person too deaf to interview... one refusal, and another who had left her husband (I got all the "low-down" from a neighbour!') enough to describe Wandsworth as 'not... a happy hunting ground.'⁶⁵

But, although the clear majority of people sampled for the Survey of Sickness agreed to take part, the Central Office of Information received complaints from some of those surveyed after the event. In January 1947, Thomas Fife Clark from the Public Relations department of the Central Office of Information wrote to inform Moss that they were getting 'an average of one complaint a day... it would be a very bad thing for the Survey of Sickness... if these complaints continued to increase.'⁶⁶ Fife Clark acknowledged that complaints were still comparatively rare but the rate of one a day had him feeling 'most anxious.' He wanted the Survey to keep 'the good will of the public,' and urged Moss to investigate 'vocal and justified protests from individuals.'⁶⁷

⁶⁴ TNA: RG 26/24: Survey of Sickness: Dr Stock's Correspondence with Social Survey, Letter from Percy Stocks to Fife Clarke, 13 April 1944; Slater, *Survey of Sickness*, 10.

⁶⁵ TNA: RG 40/198: Health Index Correspondence, Letter from Edna M Grossmann to Mrs Edwards, 12 November 1946.

⁶⁶ TNA: RG 40/133, Complaints Received from Members of the Public Interviewed by S.S. Investigators, Letter from Fife Clark to Moss, 15 January 1947.

⁶⁷ *ibid.* Unfortunately there is no record of how many complaints were received. Through a Freedom of Information request I have been able to access 69 complaints, but 215 pages in folders RG 40/133 and RG 40/134 remain closed. It is unclear if these folders contained all the complaints made. Moss wrote frustrated letters to Fife Clark indicating that he was not receiving all the complaints which suggest that there were more than we have record of.

Complaints such as these offer useful insights into public perceptions and attitudes otherwise difficult to grasp. The philosopher Julian Baggini argues that ‘there is value in reflecting on what our complaints say about ourselves.’⁶⁸ Reflections are possible because, as John Clarke argues, complaints require ‘going public.’⁶⁹ Whereas a grievance can remain private, the process of submitting a complaint to the relevant authority and investigation procedure makes it inherently public and leaves a record. Complaints represent a ‘hinterland’ of ‘anxieties, doubts and frustrations’; the public articulation of private grumblings shared by many people.⁷⁰ Complaints tell us not only what some objected to, but what other members of the public acquiesced to. Furthermore, there is value in noting which people were able to make complaints, and how they constructed their grievances. In ‘going public’ with a complaint, those writing to the GSS differentiated themselves from the general surveyed public and were marked out as ‘vocal... individuals.’ These people spoke back to the Survey, not only when prompted to, but by pushing beyond the parameters set by the Survey to engage with it on their own terms. In doing so, they rejected the collective enterprise of the Survey for an individual relationship with the state conducted through correspondence. Whilst many of those surveyed held a ‘desire to join the majority’, to have their opinions and circumstances represented, others

⁶⁸ Julian Baggini, *Complaint: From Minor Moans to Principled Protests* (London, 2010), 3, 128.

⁶⁹ John Clarke, “Going Public: the Act of Complaining,” in *Complaints, Controversies and Grievances in Medicine*, eds. Jonathan Reinartz and Rebecca Winter, (Oxon, New York, 2014), 259-269, at 261.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

pushed back against being “‘statisticized.’”⁷¹ Letters of complaint offered the women and men who wrote them an opportunity to construct an individual subjectivity in response to the Survey’s attempts to aggregate them. Even correspondence of ‘the most ‘impersonal’ sort’ could articulate ‘complex narratives about identity’, or offer spaces for the ‘the ongoing devising of a plausible self.’⁷² Writing in 1945, the novelist Elizabeth Bowen claimed that wartime controls had sapped people’s sense of self: “‘You used to know what you were like from the things you liked, and chose. Now there was not what you liked, and you did not choose.’”⁷³ In response to the Survey, some found that formal complaint, or the articulation what they did not like, offered a restoration of self and a claim to individual freedom. Yet, whilst complaints were important as individual expressions of dissatisfaction, the act of complaining resulted in the creation of a public record, now an archival source, and can be read as both an articulation of subjective experience and as an expression of a public feeling; albeit a formally constructed and unusually vocal one.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Igo, *The Averaged American*, 4. Sarah E. Igo, “Hearing the Masses: The Modern Science of Opinion in the United States,” in *Engineering Society: The Role of the Human and Social Sciences in Modern Societies, 1880-1980*, eds. Kerstin Bruckweh, Dirk Schumann, Richard F. Wetzell, and Benjamin Ziemann (Basingstoke, 2012), 227.

⁷² Rebecca Earle, “Introduction,” in *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-Writers, 1600-1945*, ed. Rebecca Earle (Aldershot, 1999), 2. Toby L. Ditz, “Formative ventures: eighteenth century commercial letters and the articulation of experience,” in *Epistolary Selves*, ed. Earle: 59-78, at 62.

⁷³ Jenny Hartley, “‘Letters are *everything* these days’: mothers and letters in the Second World War,” in *Epistolary Selves*, ed. Earle: 183-195, at 192.

⁷⁴ Clarke, “Going Public,” 262.

Examination of these complaints reveal shared and overlapping points of tension in the relationships between members of the public and the state. Unfortunately, not all the complaints mentioned by Fife Clark were kept, or even passed on to Moss, and therefore it is impossible to quantify the exact number of complaints made against the GSS. However, there are sixty-nine complaints available in the National Archives to read (with many more redacted), which, when read alongside letters and reports from interviewers, show how class and gender influenced how members of the public responded to public health surveys and articulated their relationships with the state. Even the accessible complaints have been redacted under data protection legislation. Any demographic information mentioned here has been pieced together and inferred from contextual information provided in the complaints and in fieldworkers' reports, written as part of the investigation procedure. Out of sixty-nine complaints made available by the archive, forty were from men and seventeen from women, with the remaining twelve unspecified. Nineteen complainants show clear markers of being middle class; such as owning telephones or tennis courts, having domestic staff, or running their own businesses. Other complainants may have also been middle class, but it is impossible to know for certain.

Although it is difficult to know how widely held the grievances of such a small sample were, it is likely that these men and women were not alone in their struggle to reconcile their roles as individuals in the collective enterprise of government research and make sense of the tensions between rights and obligations inherent in the foundational years of the welfare state. Issues recurred frequently in separate complaints and were framed in the language of broader public discourses around surveys articulated by the popular press. By tracing the use of these discourses by such 'vocal ... individuals' – ones with the means and confidence to complain – we can infer the possibility that such grievances were shared by those less able to speak back to public health and the state. The sixty-nine complaints accessible in the National Archives broadly fit into four inter-related themes: the survey as a violation of privacy; as an

infringement of liberty; as a waste of government money and of individuals' time; and criticisms of the conduct of fieldworkers. Through these themes, we can see how the Survey of Sickness was contested and 'judged with suspicion' by women and men negotiating their role in public health, while coming to understand what it meant to be participants in government research in the immediate post-war period.⁷⁵

'I believe it is a snoopers, what shall I do?': problems of privacy in the Government Social Survey

The concerns raised in complaints about the GSS were revealing of both the Survey and the publics it engaged. Although those complaining were a tiny percentage of a small surveyed sample of the population they showed themselves to be part of a wider public discourse on surveys through their use of the word 'snoopers' to refer to GSS staff. The term 'snooper' gained a specific government context through the phrase 'Cooper's Snoopers,' coined to refer to the Ministry of Information's Wartime Social Survey department, criticised by contemporaries as 'dictatorial and alien to the British political tradition.' Developed under Minister of Information Duff Cooper, the department later became the GSS but failed to shake the 'snooper' smear.⁷⁶ Although, as Beers suggests, the 'Cooper's Snoopers' outcry was short-lived, 'snooper' continued to be used throughout the 1940s and early 1950s as shorthand in popular newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* and the *Sunday Express*. Owing to its use in parliamentary debates, it even found its way into reporting by *The Times*.⁷⁷ Popular newspapers

⁷⁵ Crook, *Governing Systems*, 296.

⁷⁶ Laura Beers, "Whose Opinion?," 189-190, 198.

⁷⁷ Laura Beers, "Whose Opinion?," 190. *Daily Mail*, 2 August 1940, 8 November 1941, 17 November 1949; *Sunday Express*, 11 June 1950; *The Times*, 30 June 1944, 5 February 1946, 10 December 1948.

have often been viewed as trivial or reactionary, prioritising entertainment over politics. But with high readership rates they reached a large number of people and played a role in framing how readers thought about issues.⁷⁸ Across a week in July 1944, the *Daily Express* ran articles about the Survey of Sickness, framing complaints from members of the public as an outcry against ‘snoopers.’ Published letters were collated under the headline ‘Doctors and Patients Complain of Ministry Quiz. Door-to-door ‘snoopers’ ask ‘How is your health?’’⁷⁹ ‘Snooper’ had negative and invasive connotations and was used to criticise the perceived increase in people employed to inspect functions within the home and the breach of privacy this represented.⁸⁰

Such reservations highlight ‘the novelty’ of social scientific requests for information about ‘ordinary,’ rather than marginal lives.⁸¹ They suggest there were perceived limits to the information government should seek from its citizens. The *Daily Express* picked up on public concerns of privacy and state interference and succinctly distilled them into the word ‘snooper.’ Although parliamentary criticisms of government-sponsored surveys largely disappeared throughout the 1940s, the wider public held onto their concerns for longer.⁸² As part of public discourse, ‘snooper’ was used by some of those writing to the GSS to complain about the Survey; seven of sixty-nine complaints mention ‘snoopers.’ One GSS fieldworker reported being called ‘snooper’ in person. A woman she interviewed in Marylebone, London left the

⁷⁸ Adrian Bingham, “Ignoring the First Draft of History? Searching for the popular press in studies of twentieth-century Britain,” *Media History* 18, no.3-4 (2012): 311-326.

⁷⁹ *Daily Express*, 27 July 1944, 3.

⁸⁰ *Daily Mail*, 17 November 1949.

⁸¹ Greenhalgh, “The Travelling Social Survey,” 125.

⁸² Laura Beers, “Whose Opinion?” 190.

room to use the telephone and was overheard asking ‘I believe it is a snooper, what shall I do?’ before showing her to the door, muttering ““snooper” under her breath.’⁸³

‘Snooper’ acted as a catch-all for several concerns held by the public, but certain methods employed by the GSS were felt specifically to be breaches of privacy. In the early stages of the Survey of Sickness, redrafted instructions to interviewers noted the ‘difficulty most widely experienced... is that of asking the Income Group of the Chief Wage Earner.’⁸⁴ Nine of sixty-nine complaints echoed this concern by mentioning salary or income. One man expressed shock at being asked questions of a ‘very personal nature... my age... my employment ... my SALARY.’⁸⁵ Another could not understand why such information was needed; ‘please let me know what connection... there is between my daughter’s health and my... Income?’⁸⁶ Even those who understood the necessity of putting health in a social context, or trusted there was a reason, expressed annoyance with having to reveal their income in person and on the doorstep.⁸⁷ In response the GSS issued each fieldworker with a card printed with income categories so the survey subject could ‘indicate... his income’ non-verbally.⁸⁸ The GSS assumed wage earners were male, but this could also suggest the ‘most widely experienced’

⁸³ TNA: RG40/134: Complaints Received from Members of the Public Interviewed by S.S. Investigators, Fieldworker Report, 19 July 1950.

⁸⁴ TNA: RG 26/26: Survey of Sickness: Instructions to Interviewers.

⁸⁵ TNA: RG 40/134: Complaints Received from Members of the Public Interviewed by S.S. Investigators, 3 May 1951. The emphasis used here reflects that of the original.

⁸⁶ TNA: RG 40/134: Complaints Received from Members of the Public Interviewed by S.S. Investigators, 9 May 1951.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*

⁸⁸ TNA: RG 26/26: Survey of Sickness: Instructions to Interviewers.

difficulty was a problem often, but not exclusively, articulated by men who were generally unused to being the subject of public health surveys.

Despite the measures taken, income questions remained a problem. As one researcher noted in 1951; ‘budget surveys, in fact, any survey dealing with income are likely to encounter some public criticism.’⁸⁹ Although concerns about income questions had been present since the 1930s, changing expectations of privacy in the post-war period combined with dissatisfaction with continuing wartime controls, led to an increase in criticism of income questions.⁹⁰ The response rate to the GSS’s Household Expenditure Survey conducted over the course of 1953 amid a resurgence of the use of the word ‘snoopers’ in the press, was a comparatively low 67 percent. A regional report specifically noted, ‘the middle classes were inclined to be hostile, giving the impression that they resented enquiries into their private affairs.’⁹¹ By the time of the GSS Family Expenditure Survey in 1957, response rates had fallen further to a ‘relatively low level’ of ‘just under sixty percent.’⁹² This remained a sore spot for

⁸⁹ TNA: RG40/134: Complaints Received from Members of the Public Interviewed by S.S. Investigators, Letter from Kemsley to Moss and Fife-Clark, 29 November 1951.

⁹⁰ Hubert Llewellyn Smith, *The New survey of London Life and Labour Vol.III. Survey of social conditions (I) The Eastern Area* (London, 1932), 32–3. Vincent, *Privacy*, 80.

Roodhouse, *Black Market Britain*, 253.

⁹¹ Ministry of Labour and National Service, *Report of an Enquiry into Household Expenditure in 1953-1954*, (London, 1957), 11. Mark Dunton, “Public Cooperation with the Household Expenditure Enquiry, 1953-1954,” *National Archives Podcast*, 20 January 2014, <http://media.nationalarchives.gov.uk/index.php/public-cooperation-household-expenditure-enquiry/>, accessed 30 October 2017.

⁹² Moss, *Government Social Survey*, 197.

GSS director Louis Moss, who felt, through professionalism and ‘appropriate care,’ his staff should have been able to reduce complaints and refusals to ‘insignificant proportions.’⁹³

Another common grievance held by men was the use of their wives, sisters, or mothers as proxies in their absence. Out of forty complaints from those clearly identified as men, nine were about this issue. For some, the concern was accuracy. One complainant, gender unknown, had no problem with the Survey in principle, but thought their sister may have provided ‘sketchy... incorrect’ information.⁹⁴ But for others, all specified as male, the use of proxies was considered a serious breach of privacy. One demanded in 1947; ‘What authority have you to question my wife... regarding my personal health?’⁹⁵ Another, whose job title was given by his wife as ‘Higher Executive Officer in the Civil Service’ argued in 1950, ‘the method of securing information from a proxy, is...to be deplored.’ He threatened to write to his Member of Parliament and the press.⁹⁶ A third was incensed his mother had been used as a proxy. He located the fieldworker at her address and ‘remained at least a half an hour insulting [her].’⁹⁷ The fieldworker was so shaken she took two months leave to consider tendering her

⁹³ TNA: RG40/134: Complaints Received from Members of the Public Interviewed by S.S. Investigators, Letter from Kemsley to Moss and Fife-Clark, 29 November 1951.

⁹⁴ TNA: RG 40/133: Complaints Received from Members of the Public Interviewed by S.S. Investigators, 5 May 1948.

⁹⁵ TNA: RG 40/133: Complaints Received from Members of the Public Interviewed by S.S. Investigators, 6 May 1947.

⁹⁶ TNA: RG 40/134: Complaints Received from Members of the Public Interviewed by S.S. Investigators, 12 January 1950.

⁹⁷ TNA: RG 40/133: Complaints Received from Members of the Public Interviewed by S.S. Investigators, 17 June 1949.

resignation.⁹⁸ These complaints are particularly significant as they came as a surprise to the GSS. The instructions to fieldworkers working on the Survey of Sickness made it clear that ‘in general a man is not a good proxy for a woman,’ but specifically mentioned that women; wives, daughters and mothers, could be used as proxies for men.⁹⁹ Many social researchers expected women to be knowledgeable about ‘stomachs, homes and emotions’ and to be willing to report on them.¹⁰⁰ As Langhamer has shown, men and women experienced different meanings of home in the 1950s, and developed different understandings of domestic privacy.¹⁰¹ For Beaumont, the ‘salience of the household as a site of domestic labour by women’ complicated understandings of home as a private “space of personal leisure”. The notion that ‘the family is not private for women’ puts the use of proxies in perspective.¹⁰² In the case of the nine complaints mentioned above, the Survey trusted women’s knowledge of their husbands’ health more than the men in question did, and in doing so disrupted the privacy of home experienced by many men, but which could be viewed differently by their wives.

This oversight was indicative of both the GSS’s gendered assumptions of household knowledge and public health’s inexperience of handling a male and middle class public. By the end of the 1950s, the Ministry of Health still deemed it largely ‘inappropriate’ to focus on

⁹⁸ *ibid.*

⁹⁹ TNA: RG 26/26: Survey of Sickness: Instructions to Interviewers, 6.

¹⁰⁰ “Anatomy of the ‘Don’t Knows,’” December 1947, SxMOA1/1/12/12/6, 15, Mass Observation at The Keep.

¹⁰¹ Claire Langhamer, “The Meanings of Home in Postwar Britain,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 40, no. 2 (2005): 341-362, at 344.

¹⁰² Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens*, 42.

men.¹⁰³ This only changed through the emergence of smoking as a key public health issue and the identification of male smokers as a target within public health campaigns. In the 1940s, the GSS was prepared for men to be reluctant to talk to female fieldworkers about sensitive topics, but resistance to routine survey methods took researchers by surprise.¹⁰⁴ Complaints regarding questions about salaries and the use of wives and mothers as proxies suggest some men were not only upset about being surveyed about their health; they had a problem with being surveyed in general and were mistrustful of survey methods. Through complaints about privacy, a new, male public brought previously unconsidered concerns to the attention of the GSS. At the same time, the use of a public rhetoric of ‘snoopers’ indicated these concerns may have been held more widely, but these men, some of whom were middle class, had the social and cultural capital to articulate them and to influence the practice of the Survey, negotiating their role within public health.

‘An Englishman’s home is his castle’: liberty and the limits of the state

The rhetoric of ‘snoopers’ was often used in conjunction with another phrase; ‘an Englishman’s home is his castle,’ to articulate grievances around state intrusion and the perception of the Survey as a threat to liberty as well as privacy. In April 1949, the *Daily Express*’ satirical columnist Beachcomber encapsulated the feeling of escalating intrusion in a sketch entitled ‘Conversations in an Englishman’s home.’ He imagined the following exchange:

‘Husband: “Who is that man in the bedroom, measuring my boots?”’

¹⁰³ Berridge, *Marketing Health*, 188.

¹⁰⁴ Pixie Wilson and Virginia Barker, *The Campaign Against Venereal Diseases* (London, 1944), 3.

Wife: "I think it's someone from one of the Ministries, dear. The one in the bathroom is testing water pressure for a Gallup poll."

Husband: "And who let in the one who's going through my letters?"

Wife: "He broke in while I was out. He's from the secret police."

Husband: "Are there any other people in the house?"

Wife: "Only the man who came to see if we had any pigs concealed on the premises, and the fuel official they've billeted on us."¹⁰⁵

Juxtaposed with the placid responses of 'Wife,' Beachcomber's examples of extreme state intrusion and social investigation aimed to amuse, but they highlighted Conservative anxieties about government inspectors. Privacy as a value was entrenched in western Europe by the late eighteenth century, and articulated in England through versions of the phrase 'an Englishman's home is his castle' from the seventeenth century onwards.¹⁰⁶ The Conservative Party had used 'an Englishman's home' on election material in 1929 which informed the public that 'socialism would mean inspectors all round.'¹⁰⁷ Following Labour gains in the 1906 election,

¹⁰⁵ *Daily Express*, 8 April 1949, 4:

¹⁰⁶ Amanda Vickery, "An Englishman's Home is His Castle? Thresholds, Boundaries and Privacies in the Eighteenth-Century London House," *Past and Present* 199, no.1 (2008): 147-173, at 149.

¹⁰⁷ "Socialism Would Mean Inspectors All Round," 1929, POSTER 1929-1931, Conservative Party Archive, Poster Collection.

Conservative Party literature increasingly focussed on defeating the spectre of socialism.¹⁰⁸ Conservative propaganda in the 1920s warned women in particular to be vigilant for “Communist spies... disguised as nurses and health workers” who would attempt to infiltrate the home.¹⁰⁹ For some Conservatives, the Attlee government’s insistence on retaining wartime controls, regulations, and surveillance mechanisms in peacetime ‘seemed the thin end of the wedge of totalitarianism.’ Member of Parliament Bernard Braine told the Conservative Party Annual Conference in 1947 that seventeen separate ministries had the power to authorize the entry into private houses. He exclaimed: ‘Today it is an official coming in to search your larder; tomorrow it may well be an official coming in to inspect your books and private papers... tomorrow it may well be a fascist state.’¹¹⁰ Such Conservative rhetoric was echoed in complaints received by the GSS after the end of the war.¹¹¹ Although hostility towards government inspectors and surveyors had been growing since the interwar period, with citizens increasingly protesting the ‘violation of their right to be left alone’, the Second World War

¹⁰⁸ John D. Fair and John A. Hutcheson, Jr, ‘British Conservatism in the Twentieth Century: An Emerging Ideological Tradition’, *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 19, no. 4 (1987): 549-578, at 551, 559.

¹⁰⁹ David Jarvis, “Mrs Maggs and Betty: The Conservative Appeal to Women Voters in the 1920s,” *Twentieth Century British History* 5, no. 2 (1994): 129-52, at 148.

¹¹⁰ Martin Francis, “‘Set the people free’? Conservatives and the State, 1920-1960,” in *The Conservatives and British Society*, eds. Martin Francis and Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (Chicago, 1996): 58-77, at 61-62.

¹¹¹ TNA: RG 40/133: Complaints Received from Members of the Public Interviewed by S.S. Investigators, 4 August 1948. TNA: RG40/134: Complaints Received from Members of the Public Interviewed by S.S. Investigators, Fieldworker Report, 19 July 1950.

sharpened understandings of freedom and liberty.¹¹² One complainant wrote; ‘I cling rather obstinately to the idea ... of freedom for which I fought during the recent war.’¹¹³ Another described the use of proxies as an ‘un-English procedure.’¹¹⁴ The phrase ‘An Englishman’s home is his castle’ appeared in several complaints suggesting state-run surveys and social investigation could be perceived as threats to a nationally-specific notion of liberty intertwined with privacy.¹¹⁵

Phrases like ‘snoopers’ and ‘an Englishman’s home is his castle’ also conflated invasions of privacy and property.¹¹⁶ They connected anxieties around the Survey to fears of burglary – satirised as “he broke in while I was out” – and suggested a definite limit to the level of state intrusion deemed acceptable. An association between two very different forms of home invasion was evident in complaints received, especially those motivated by the controversial income question. In 1945, Fife Clark warned Louis Moss that the public were concerned by ‘questions about income’ and wanted ‘to check the bona fides’ of investigators, conflating

¹¹² Deborah Cohen, *Family Secrets: Shame and Privacy in Modern Britain*, (Oxford, 2013), 196.

¹¹³ TNA: RG 40/133: Complaints Received from Members of the Public Interviewed by S.S. Investigators, 9 December 1947.

¹¹⁴ TNA: RG 40/133: Complaints Received from Members of the Public Interviewed by S.S. Investigators, 4 August 1948.

¹¹⁵ Cohen, *Family Secrets*, 6, 196.

¹¹⁶ David Vincent, *The Culture of Secrecy, Britain 1832-1998*, (Oxford, New York, 1998), 143, 266.

anxieties about income questions with doubts about the legitimacy of the Survey.¹¹⁷ To combat this, fieldworkers were issued with official cards explaining the purpose of the GSS, reassuring participants interviews were anonymous and voluntary, and informing them that local police were aware the Survey was working in their district.¹¹⁸ This did not solve the problem, however. In January 1947, Fife Clark wrote to Moss again expressing his displeasure at complaints of fieldworkers refusing to show their cards and asking Moss to tighten procedure.¹¹⁹ By 1952 the issue required intervention in the House of Commons, with a Scottish Member of Parliament, calling for ‘strict instructions to all “snoopers” that they must produce their credentials.’¹²⁰

But even when GSS fieldworkers informed the police of their presence and showed authorisation cards there were still anxieties. Eloise Moss argues that in the first half of the twentieth century emotive advertisements for burglary insurance exacerbated an ‘existing culture of fear’ about crime and burglary.¹²¹ By the 1930s, such advertisements were featured in a wide range of newspapers, encouraging the perception of burglary as a ‘universal threat’

¹¹⁷ TNA: RG 40/198: Health Index Correspondence, Letter from Fife Clark to Moss, 9 October 1945.

¹¹⁸ TNA: RG 40/133: Complaints Received from Members of the Public Interviewed by S.S. Investigators, January 1947.

¹¹⁹ TNA: RG 40/133: Complaints Received from Members of the Public Interviewed by S.S. Investigators, Letter from Fife-Clark to Moss, 15 January 1947.

¹²⁰ *The Times*, 18 June 1952.

¹²¹ Eloise Moss, “Burglary Insurance and the Culture of Fear, 1889 -1939,” *The Historical Journal* 54, no.4 (2011): 1039-1064, at 1044.

and a ‘pervasive aspect of everyday life.’¹²² Through visual images of ransacked drawers, insurers stoked fears, not just of the loss of material goods, but of the violation of privacy experienced through home invasion.¹²³ Some members of the public viewed social surveys as similarly invasive. In July 1948, a Chief Constable in York notified the GSS that he had received complaints about the Survey.¹²⁴ The Medical Officer of Health for Southgate, a north London suburb, although generally supportive of the Survey of Sickness, wrote; ‘with the amount of house-breaking ... going on... householders are naturally sceptical about callers who appear and ask questions.’¹²⁵ These anxieties reached their logical conclusion when a fieldworker called Miss Ratter was ‘suspected... of being an accomplice to a burglar’ by a couple in Guildford and was interviewed by the police. In her report of the incident, Ratter was very understanding of the mix up. She wrote, ‘they had every excuse to suspect me.’ The house next door had been ‘ransacked’ while a female accomplice distracted the occupants with ‘questions.’¹²⁶ Even GSS fieldworkers recognised their work could be misconstrued in this way, and were understanding of a(n English)man’s right to defend his home.

Although female complainants did use the term in relation to the Survey, Lawrence suggests men generally tended to be ‘more determined to maintain the strict domestic privacy

¹²² Moss, “Burglary Insurance,” 1054-5, 1046.

¹²³ Moss, “Burglary Insurance,” 1054.

¹²⁴ TNA: RG 40/133: Complaints Received from Members of the Public Interviewed by S.S. Investigators, 30 June 1948.

¹²⁵ TNA: RG 40/133: Complaints Received from Members of the Public Interviewed by S.S. Investigators, 10 July 1947.

¹²⁶ TNA: RG 40/133: Complaints Received from Members of the Public Interviewed by S.S. Investigators, 10 January 1948.

of the ‘Englishman’s castle’ than women.¹²⁷ Likewise, Eloise Moss has shown how insurance advertisements presented the safety of domestic spaces as the responsibility of male heads of household.¹²⁸ Protective masculinity was also provoked by interviewers’ failure to inform people that participation in the Survey was voluntary. The importance of gaining consent before an interview was explained to staff at the GSS, but reliability of results rather than ethical practice was emphasised. In his instructions to interviewers, Percy Stocks wrote, ‘co-operation in answering the questions is entirely voluntary ... information given unwillingly about health is unlikely to be reliable.’¹²⁹ But Stocks also instructed interviewers to encourage the public to answer their questions; ‘the value of their answers should be stressed since there is no other practical way of obtaining such information.’¹³⁰ As a result, fieldworkers did not consistently tell to Survey subjects they could refuse, often only informing them that it was voluntary in an information leaflet provided at the end of the questionnaire.¹³¹ Ten of the available complaints were about this issue. Six of those were from men writing in on behalf of their wives; taking issue with the intrusion occurring in their absence. A similar feeling was expressed by an unlikely source: a Ministry of Health Officer who, arriving home to find his wife in the middle of an interview, objected and called the process to a halt. The fieldworker, particularly exasperated by this disruption to her quota, wrote; ‘As the Survey is being done for the Ministry of Health... some cooperation might be expected.’ But Fife Clark, who was

¹²⁷ Lawrence, “Class, ‘Affluence’ and the Study of Everyday Life,” 285.

¹²⁸ Moss, “Burglary Insurance,” 1054.

¹²⁹ TNA: RG 26/26: Survey of Sickness: Instructions to Interviewers. Emphasis Stocks’ own.

¹³⁰ *ibid.*

¹³¹ TNA: RG40/134: Complaints Received from Members of the Public Interviewed by S.S. Investigators, 29 November 1949.

handling the complaint, argued that Ministry ‘officers ... in their private lives are in exactly the same position as any other members of the British public. They are quite entitled to refuse.’¹³² This official’s status as a member of the ‘public’ of public health brought the state into his home, but his membership of the ‘British public’ also gave him the right of refusal.

Protective instincts did not only surface on behalf of wives, but for other female members of the household too. In 1949 a man from Surrey wrote to his MP complaining that a ‘lady ... spent some time making very personal enquiries of the governess.’ He argued the Survey was ‘a gross infringement of ... liberty’ and went on to express fears that the public would become immune to such violations; represented in its extreme form by Beachcomber’s placid ‘Wife.’ He feared the Survey would ‘induce the unthinking public’ to imagine themselves ‘at the beck and call of the government.’ In his complaint, however, he presented himself as a hindrance to creeping state control; ‘I only wish that the lady had called to question me.’¹³³ Whilst this man and the Ministry of Health Officer were in some ways in ‘exactly the same position’ as other members of the public, they and many of the men who wrote to complain about the GSS were very different from the usual subjects of social surveys, and marked themselves out as such. Public health campaigns and social surveys were often aimed at women and children. Although millions of men had presented themselves to medical boards

¹³² TNA: RG 40/15: Survey of Sickness Pilot Questionnaire, Letter from Fife Clark to Louis Moss, 15 August 1947.

¹³³ TNA: RG40/134: Complaints Received from Members of the Public Interviewed by S.S. Investigators, 8 December 1949.

between 1939 and 1945 for medical exams to assess their suitability for military service, the experience of being surveyed at home and in peacetime was a harder pill to swallow.¹³⁴

Although the ‘domestic privacy of the “Englishman’s castle”’ was not a uniquely middle class phenomenon, surveyors in the 1930s had found there was more visible ‘reluctance’ to answer questions from ‘the middle class and better off working class’, a Conservative constituency, than from the marginalised poor.¹³⁵ It may be that marginalised communities, especially the unemployed, were more experienced in engaging with the state and had felt the consequences of not cooperating in the past.¹³⁶ Means testing in the 1930s meant poorer families would have been practiced in giving the ‘right’ answers and treading the fine line between respectable and impoverished necessary to be deserving of state assistance; a practice Lisa McKenzie terms ‘getting by.’¹³⁷ Anxieties around state ‘snoopers,’ privacy and liberty were shared by a broader, newspaper reading public by the interwar period, but the

¹³⁴ Berridge, *Marketing Health*, 188. Emma Newlands, *Civilians into Soldiers: War, the Body and British Army Recruits, 1939-1945* (Manchester, 2014), 26-27.

¹³⁵ Lawrence, “Social-Science Encounters and the Negotiation of Difference in early 1960s England,” 215. Lawrence, “Class, ‘Affluence’ and the Study of Everyday Life,” 285. Llewellyn Smith, *The New Survey of London Life and Labour*, 32–3.

¹³⁶ Stephanie Ward, “The Means Test and the Unemployed in South Wales and North-East of England, 1931-1939,” *Labour History Review* 73, no. 1 (April 2008): 113-132, at 117.

Vincent, *Culture of Secrecy*, 23.

¹³⁷ Lisa McKenzie, *Getting By: Estates, Class and Culture in Austerity Britain* (Bristol, 2015), 48. David Vincent, *Poor Citizens: the State and the Poor in Twentieth Century Britain*, (London, New York, 1991), 13.

ability to push back and be listened to was more of a middle class phenomenon.¹³⁸ By surveying a representative sample of the whole adult population, the Survey of Sickness brought a different section of the public – men, and middle class ones at that – under the focus of the Survey and government intervention. Not only did these men dislike their bodies, wives, homes, businesses, and staff being subject to the scrutiny of the Survey, but they also had the means to express their displeasure and the words provided by wartime experience and Conservative political rhetoric.

‘I had been participating in yet another waste of public money and private time’

Another common concern inflected by Conservative rhetoric, was that the Survey was a waste of time and government resources. Criticisms of wasteful public expenditure increased after the First World War as state spending grew and the number of people paying income tax multiplied.¹³⁹ ‘Sensational stories’ of public waste featured heavily in the popular press from the 1920s and anti-waste campaigns were fiercely promoted by the proprietors of the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Mirror*.¹⁴⁰ These concerns were echoed in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War when scarcity sharpened attitudes to waste further, and can be seen specifically in responses to the Survey of Sickness.¹⁴¹ There was a sense that both individual citizens and the state had better uses for their time and resources. Fourteen of the sixty-nine

¹³⁸ Cohen, *Family Secrets*, 8, 196-7.

¹³⁹ Andrew McDonald, “The Geddes Committee and the Formulation of Public Expenditure Policy, 1921-1922,” *The Historical Journal* 32, no. 3 (1989):643-674, at 644.

¹⁴⁰ McDonald, “The Geddes Committee,” 645-6.

¹⁴¹ James Hinton, “Militant Housewives: the British Housewives' League and the Attlee Government,” *History Workshop Journal* 38, (1994), 132. Roodhouse, *Black Market Britain*, 240.

complaints mentioned waste and criticised the Survey in the context of wartime shortages. These complaints were often linked to other concerns, such as the perception of the Survey as an infringement of liberty, but were frequently gendered. Focussing on waste proved a popular form for women to express their grievances. Their complaints can be read as expressions of political subjectivity alongside other home-centred claims to citizenship.

A preoccupation with government waste was, again, particularly apparent among middle class survey respondents. Six of the fourteen complainants identified themselves as middle class, brought home large incomes or showed clear material markers such as owning a telephone or television at a time when only 4.3 percent of the population owned the latter.¹⁴² One man, who earned £20 a week and was wealthy enough to have both a library and tennis courts in his home, decided after completing an interview, a process he had enjoyed, that he objected to the Survey ‘in principle.’ He wrote;

‘Your canvasser... was very courteous and competent ...[but] if ... your organisation had given me an opportunity of considering this more fully, my answer would most certainly have been negative. As it happened my house was invaded without notice and I only realised when it was finished that I had been participating in yet another waste of public money and private time.’¹⁴³

A 57-year-old housewife from Croydon, in south London, was much clearer from the outset that she thought it was a waste of her time. She wrote that having ‘felt irritated and puzzled at the call’ and having informed the fieldworker that she was ‘very busy and pressed for time’ she

¹⁴² Langhamer, “The Meanings of Home in Postwar Britain,” 353.

¹⁴³ TNA: RG40/134: Complaints Received from Members of the Public Interviewed by S.S. Investigators, 21 July 1950.

was ‘now glad to say that all [her answers] were not true.’¹⁴⁴ The wife of a skilled manual worker and a member of the aspirational working class, this woman’s irritation with state surveillance came just months before a surge in Conservative votes from women in the 1951 general election.¹⁴⁵ Significantly the fieldworker in question, a Miss Trumper, wrote that she did not ‘recall having had any difficulty’ with the woman. Liz Stanley and Margaretta Jolly note that in letters we see a ‘subtle interchange between fantasy, writing and relationship’ rather than ‘outpourings of the true self.’¹⁴⁶ Whilst there might have been an element of fantasy in this woman’s claims about her actions in the moment, her letter served to rearticulate her relationship with the Survey from compliant subject to active refuser. It raises the possibility that she vocalised a grievance shared by others whose protests also went unacknowledged by Survey staff and who chose not to write in.

Indeed, her complaint was echoed by another woman; ‘What housewife has time to answer questions... in the middle of the day when she is dishing up the midday meal.’¹⁴⁷ This complaint was provoked by a GSS survey on shortages which focussed on the views of housewives. While the woman in question recognised that shortages were a concern she let her exasperation show; ‘apparently we are not short of civil servants to come round requesting interviews – at inconvenient times!’ Whether because of or despite of the fact that women were

¹⁴⁴ TNA: RG40/134: Complaints Received from Members of the Public Interviewed by S.S. Investigators, 8 May 1951.

¹⁴⁵ Zweiniger-Bargielowska, “Explaining the Gender Gap,” 201.

¹⁴⁶ Margaretta Jolly and Liz Stanley, “Letters as / not a genre,” *Life Writing* 1, no.2 (2005): 91-118, at 93.

¹⁴⁷ TNA: RG40/133: Complaints Received from Members of the Public Interviewed by S.S. Investigators, 23 February 1948.

frequently the focus of social surveys as austerity brought their work into the political domain, she was not the only housewife to express irritation at being questioned.¹⁴⁸ In 1950 a representative of the Scottish Housewives Association wrote to the GSS on behalf of housewives who ‘resent this interference and have no time for it.’⁹¹ She explained that;

‘We are advising all our members that should they be approached they should refuse the information demanded, as we regard it as an infringement of the liberty of the subject. Britain is still supposed to be a free country.’¹⁴⁹

Her use of the words ‘liberty’ and ‘free country’ spoke to concerns beyond time management. The Scottish Housewives Association was a counterpart to the British Housewives League; a largely middle class militant consumer organisation who campaigned against rationing in the 1940s and went on to mount a campaign against fluoridation in the 1950s, perceiving any ‘unnecessary controls’ as a ‘totalitarian threat.’¹⁵⁰ James Hinton suggests that ‘‘militant housewife’ was a contradiction in terms’ as housewives ‘were people who coped.’¹⁵¹ Voluntary women’s groups, such as the Mothers’ Union, Women’s Institute and Townswomen’s Guilds, representing hundreds of thousands of women who were full-time wives and mothers, emphasised a ‘gendered citizenship’ based on housewives’ ‘capacity to cope’ and advise on

¹⁴⁸ Hinton, “Militant Housewives,” 137-8.

¹⁴⁹ TNA: RG40/133: Complaints Received from Members of the Public Interviewed by S.S. Investigators, 3 June 1950.

¹⁵⁰ Amy Whipple, “‘Into Every Home, Into Every Body’: Organicism and Anti-Statism in the British Anti-Fluoridation Movement, 1952–1960,” *Twentieth Century British History* 21, no.3 (2010): 330–349, at 332. Roodhouse, *Black Market Britain*, 240.

¹⁵¹ Hinton, “Militant Housewives,” 149-150.

domestic affairs.¹⁵² Yet as Amy Whipple has shown, the BHL and sister organisations like the SHA ‘challenged their members to become more educated, more active citizens’ – advocating a more vocal, critical form of citizenship.¹⁵³ In doing so they critiqued the expansion of the state and argued that ‘even well-intentioned government interventions eroded liberty.’ The BHL and the SHA saw public health interventions like fluoridation as ‘robbing housewives of their time-honoured responsibility for the education, nourishment and health of the nation by foisting the opinions of ‘so called experts’ on private homes and families,’ and the GSS was seen as a tool of this expertise.¹⁵⁴ It turned out that the SHA had the wrong survey. Moss wrote back to explain that the GSS was not surveying in Scotland at that time and that the SHA must have been confusing his organisation with a market research agency. Caitriona Beaumont has shown how most middle class women’s groups responded enthusiastically to government requests for their views in order to place the voices of housewives ‘right at the heart’ of post-war reconstruction.¹⁵⁵ In surveying ordinary people and trusting women to act as proxies for members of their households, the GSS recognised the gendered expertise of the ‘citizen housewife.’¹⁵⁶ Yet the above complaints suggests that some middle class or aspirational working class women, although more used to being the subjects of state inquiry than middle class men, could still be pushed to a limit. These women utilised the same concepts of ‘liberty’ and similar social connections to complain, but wrapped their complaints in the narrative of

¹⁵² Hinton, “Militant Housewives,” 137-8. Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens*, 62.

¹⁵³ Whipple, “Into Every Home, Into Every Body,” 334.

¹⁵⁴ Whipple, “Into Every Home, Into Every Body,” 344.

¹⁵⁵ Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens*, 146.

¹⁵⁶ Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, “Housewifery,” in *Women in Twentieth Century Britain* ed.

Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (Harlow, 2001), 156.

‘busy-ness’. As individuals they internalised the rhetoric of groups like the BHL and SHA and articulated an oppositional form of gendered citizenship, reaffirming the importance of their work in the home whilst simultaneously rejecting the state’s place there.

Another complainant saw the value of the Survey of Sickness, but could not comprehend why government resources were being ‘wasted’ on her. She wrote at length:

‘I really cannot imagine why the Government should think it necessary to visit ... a road like this which does not spell poverty. When one owns a house and pays rates amounting to over £20 a year and income tax, one hardly likes to be accosted at the door with questions about health... It is an absolute intrusion and an indignity – as well as a waste of Government money... I pointed out to the visitor that the poorest person in the road... who is suffering from cancer in the face is the only one ... needing help... It just seemed to me that the [fieldworker’s] visit was entirely futile and unnecessary.’¹⁵⁷

At the root of this complaint was a misunderstanding of the purpose of the Survey of Sickness. The complainant failed to recognise that the Survey aimed to understand the health of the whole population rather than to identify those in need of assistance, a point Louis Moss was quick to clarify. However, this complaint was also suggestive of a middle-class shock and offense at being subject to the ‘intrusion and... indignity’ usually reserved for the ‘poorest.’¹⁵⁸ As David Vincent has articulated; there was a balance to be struck between rights lost and benefits gained on the ‘contested boundary between privacy and surveillance.’¹⁵⁹ Here, the complainant had

¹⁵⁷ TNA: RG 40/16: Health Index Survey: General Correspondence, 29 July 1948.

¹⁵⁸ Vincent, *Culture of Secrecy*, 23, 144.

¹⁵⁹ Vincent, *Privacy*, 101.

failed to appreciate the benefits to wider society posed by the Survey, preferring to focus on the individual. By naming her neighbour and discussing her circumstances so frankly, she also showed an ironic lack of awareness of what might be considered an ‘indignity’ or a loss of rights.¹⁶⁰

Other, less vocal, members of the public may have also resented the imposition of the state surveys on their lives and on their time. The final question of a 1944 GSS inquiry into venereal disease asked ‘What else do you think should be done to stamp out VD apart from publicity?’ Only fifty-six percent of respondents made suggestions, with thirty-nine percent recording a ‘don’t know/no ideas’ response and five percent making ‘no answer’ at all. GSS researchers found that ‘analyses by education, income, sex, marital status and age’ showed ‘that certain groups of people have more constructive suggestions to make than others.’¹⁶¹ Sixty-seven percent of men made suggestions compared with forty-eight percent of women, and seventy-three percent on a ‘higher income’ did compared with fifty-four percent on a ‘lower income.’¹⁶² This inquiry was carried out in factories and asked workers to ‘sacrifice’ their time even when they were ‘working on piece-rates.’¹⁶³ Rather than being ignorant or apathetic, some people, male or female, might have answered ‘don’t know’ to get back to work more quickly; conscious of lost wages, embarrassed, or unwilling to reveal the extent of their knowledge of sensitive subjects.¹⁶⁴ In this light, claims of ignorance might have been utilised

¹⁶⁰ TNA: RG 40/16: Health Index Survey: General Correspondence, 29 July 1948.

¹⁶¹ Pixie Wilson and Virginia Barker, *The Campaign Against Venereal Diseases* (London, 1944), 53.

¹⁶² Wilson and Barker, *The Campaign Against Venereal Diseases*, 54.

¹⁶³ Box and Thomas, “The Wartime Social Survey,” 151-2.

¹⁶⁴ Kate Fisher, *Birth Control, Sex and Marriage in Britain 1918-1960* (Oxford, 2006), 6, 67.

as a less confrontational form of resistance more accessible and familiar to some than outright refusal or complaint.

The GSS required everyone to be an expert in their own health, whilst continuing to position women as experts in their families' health. For some women's organisations this enabled a greater claim to citizenship through involvement in post-war reconstruction, but others saw state intrusion as undermining their expertise within the home, or merely as an added burden on already busy lives made more difficult by government controls. Letters of complaint allowed individual middle class women to form another narrative around expertise: that they were experts but had no obligation to share that expertise. These letters articulated an oppositional relationship with the state, a form political subjectivity outside the boundaries of the Survey that was unavailable to many women, especially working women, who may have resisted in other ways.

'I did not think she was genuine': the relative authority of female fieldworkers

Both men and women complained about the conduct of female fieldworkers and questioned their authority. Their grievances were not only with state surveillance, and the breaches of privacy and disruption of schedules it brought, but with the women who enacted it. The authority of the state was conditional on members of the public recognising it in the women working for the GSS. Whether members of the public did or not was informed by their relative positions in society and reflected existing power structures. Though some of those questioning the legitimacy of individual fieldworkers were motivated by political concerns, anxieties about burglaries, or felt personally slighted, there were occasions when criticisms were informed by prejudices against the gender or ethnicity of the field staff.

In 1952, Douglas Marshall, Member of Parliament for Bodmin in the south-west of England, passed a letter from his constituent, a doctor, onto the Minister for Health. The doctor, complaining about the Survey of Sickness, had written;

‘It is obvious that under the cloak of “research” which is plain eyewash ... we are being subjected to espionage by Government snoopers ... in the form of interfering women ... paid a salary – out of taxation that we have to pay – to poke their noses into other peoples’ affairs. This is when a large proportion of my patients are suffering in health from overwork due to lack of domestic help.’¹⁶⁵

The doctor’s language – ‘espionage by Government snoopers’ and mention of ‘taxation’ – shows that he shared the concerns of other complainants about privacy, liberty, and the misuse of resources, yet his complaint was also very gendered. The words ‘interfering women’ and his implicit suggestion that fieldworkers would be better employed as ‘domestic help’ reveal anxieties about class, gender and women’s labour. This is striking as women had been employed in a similar capacity as health visitors for many decades. By the late 1940s there were as many as 6,000 visiting mothers across Britain.¹⁶⁶ So-called ‘female characteristics’ such as ‘tact and sympathy’ were ‘prime requirements’ for the face to face work of both health visitors and interviewers, and this could at times lead to them being mistaken for one another. Indeed, during the GSS’ 1942 inquiry into diphtheria immunisation, it was noted that ‘in a few cases the investigator was taken for a health visitor with consequent over estimation of the amount of sleep’ by working class mothers.¹⁶⁷ In this context it might seem odd that a medical

¹⁶⁵ TNA: MH 55/991: Public Health Propaganda, Letter, 16 March 1952.

¹⁶⁶ Vincent, *Privacy*, 101.

¹⁶⁷ Davies, “The Health Visitor as Mother’s Friend,” 41, 47. Ellen Warne , Shurlee Swain , Patricia Grimshaw & John Lack, “Women in conversation: a wartime social survey in

professional would not recognise the similarities. Yet, female health visitors had largely entered the homes of the poor, perhaps an underrepresented group among those of this doctor's patients lamenting the loss of domestic help.¹⁶⁸ His scepticism of “research” indicates that the larger grievance was a professional and political one: an objection to the discipline of medical statistics and Government interference in medicine epitomised by social medicine and the new National Health Service.¹⁶⁹

Other complaints cast doubt on the legitimacy of fieldworkers by questioning their ethnicity or nationality. A man from Bradford, interviewed at the business he owned, wrote to register his ‘distaste’ with the process and ask if the fieldworker was ‘of British Stock.’¹⁷⁰ Moss, realising that the woman concerned was ‘not a British subject,’ she had ‘no nationality and [had] applied for naturalisation’, attempted to gloss over the issue, writing; ‘I take it you had no objection to the personal conduct of the investigator... we have every confidence in their integrity and scientific impartiality.’¹⁷¹ However, the man replied that it was a ‘simple question’

Melbourne, Australia 1941-43,” *Women's History Review*, 12, no.4 (2003): 527-545, at 530.

TNA: RG 23/23: Diphtheria Immunisation Enquiry, July-August 1942, 10.

¹⁶⁸ Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (New Jersey, 2004), 225.

¹⁶⁹ Porter, *Trust in Numbers*, 205; Oakley and Barker, *Private Complaints and Public Health*, 5-6.

¹⁷⁰ TNA: RG 40/133: Complaints Received from Members of the Public Interviewed by S.S. Investigators, 23 February 1948.

¹⁷¹ TNA: RG 40/133: Complaints Received from Members of the Public Interviewed by S.S. Investigators, February 1948.

and he wanted an answer. At this point, Bradford's regional organiser Enid Swindlehurst stepped in, writing to Moss;

'Please ... let me know of any action that may have to be taken. I sincerely hope however – bias, prejudice, aggressive-ness or like qualities will not be upheld to the detriment of anyone whose fault may be seen in colour, race, creed only.'¹⁷²

That Swindlehurst felt the need to take this stand on behalf of her junior colleague is instructive. A year earlier, Moss had dismissed one of the few male fieldworkers for the crime of being 'Canadian with perhaps a rather expansive manner' deemed 'likely to upset' the 'more reticent.'¹⁷³ Although this man was technically a British subject, he was deemed foreign in character by the surveyed of Chelsea, London, and, subsequently, his 'Canadian' mannerisms were considered unprofessional by Moss. Criticisms based on ethnicity and nationality reflected a general racism in society at a time when Britishness and whiteness were becoming 'increasingly synonymous,' but in the pairing of these two incidents we can further explore where the lines of 'foreignness' were drawn in society and the Survey.¹⁷⁴

Moss' response to the Bradford businessman reflected contemporary discussions about social research methods which proposed that 'evident racial characteristics [in fieldworkers]

¹⁷² TNA: RG 40/133: Complaints Received from Members of the Public Interviewed by S.S. Investigators, February 1948.

¹⁷³ TNA: RG 40/133: Complaints Received from Members of the Public Interviewed by S.S. Investigators, 15 January 1947.

¹⁷⁴ Chris Waters, "'Dark Strangers in Our Midst': Discourse of Race and Nation in Britain, 1947 - 1963," *Journal of British Studies* 36, no.2 (1997): 207-238, at 212.

are undesirable in certain surveys but irrelevant in others.¹⁷⁵ Difference only mattered if it was seen to adversely affect the Survey. Moss wrote that the GSS did ‘not normally employ’ non-British fieldworkers, but justified hiring this particular woman because she was highly skilled: ‘the girl [was] a qualified social worker with strong recommendations from academic people... we knew this one was good.’¹⁷⁶ Moss’ insistence on her ‘scientific qualifications and experience as a fieldworker’ as well as her ‘reliability and efficiency’ attempted to confer authority back onto the woman in question, whilst reaffirming the scientific credibility of the GSS. For Moss and his colleagues at the GSS, employing ‘competent investigators’ was deemed more ‘important’ than employing people who read as ‘British’ in body and mannerisms. But the ‘foreignness’ of fieldworkers, whether white or not, was a cause of concern to some complainants, whose complaints served to conflate both physical and cultural differences with unprofessionalism, adding to their discomfort with the Survey. These complaints show that the ‘material practical encounters’ of surveys were fraught with prejudices and assumptions around gender and ethnicity which could undermine the authority of the fieldworkers and the GSS.¹⁷⁷

Conclusion

Unbeknownst to them, in March 1952 the fieldworkers of the Survey of Sickness conducted their final interviews and completed their schedules for the last time. The GSS had been under pressure to justify its expenditure since the election of the Conservative Government in 1951, but in the spring of 1952 the Treasury set its sights on the Survey of Sickness specifically. In

¹⁷⁵ Claus Moser, *Survey Methods in Social Investigation*, (London, 1958), 192.

¹⁷⁶ TNA: RG 40/133: Complaints Received from Members of the Public Interviewed by S.S. Investigators, February 1948.

¹⁷⁷ Mike Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain*, 12.

February, researchers working on the Survey had met with Treasury representatives. Despite making a ‘reasonable case... for continuing the Survey’ and agreeing to cost-cutting procedures, they were not out of the woods.¹⁷⁸ On 5 March, the Treasury wrote to the Minister for Health, Harry Crookshank, remarking that the Survey was ‘expensive as these things go’ at £25,000 for the year and asking whether he felt it was ‘really necessary to continue this Survey in our present financial position.’¹⁷⁹ Whilst Crookshank was deliberating, he received Member of Parliament Douglas Marshall’s letter forwarding the complaint from his constituent, the doctor from Bodmin. As well as complaining about ‘espionage by Government snoopers’ and ‘interfering women’, Marshall’s constituent included this indictment against the Survey: ‘although this is the sort of thing at which one could hardly be surprised under Socialism, it does occasion surprise under an allegedly Conservative Government.’¹⁸⁰ Writing from one Conservative MP to another, Marshall argued that the Survey ‘really [was], I think you will agree, going too far.’¹⁸¹ Crookshank replied, promising that ‘in light of this letter and also for other wider reasons’ he ‘was anxious to look into the matter.’¹⁸² Two weeks later, Crookshank wrote to the Treasury agreeing to ‘the immediate suspension of the Survey.’¹⁸³

In subsequent parliamentary debates, the decision to suspend the Survey was defended solely on economic grounds, but for Louis Moss, director of the GSS, it was this final letter of

¹⁷⁸ TNA: MH 55/991: Public Health Propaganda, Memorandum, 19 February 1952.

¹⁷⁹ TNA: MH 55/991: Public Health Propaganda, Letter, 5 March 1952.

¹⁸⁰ TNA: MH 55/991: Public Health Propaganda, Letter, 16 March 1952.

¹⁸¹ TNA: MH 55/991: Public Health Propaganda, Letter, 18 March 1952.

¹⁸² TNA: MH 55/991: Public Health Propaganda, Letter, 22 March 1952.

¹⁸³ TNA: MH 55/991: Public Health Propaganda, Letter, 1 April 1952.

complaint which ‘settled the matter.’¹⁸⁴ Although very few of the 300,000 people interviewed by the Survey of Sickness complained, those that did had their complaints heard. This article has used a selection of complaints made by members of the public about the Survey of Sickness to explore people’s perceptions of the Survey and their experiences of public health research in Britain in the immediate post-war period. Paired with newspaper reports, the complaints of a few can be suggestive of more widely held grievances, but it is also important to explore who complained and what they complained about. In sampling the whole adult population of England and Wales, the Survey of Sickness engaged a much broader public in public health research, a percentage of whom had not previously experienced the scrutiny of the state and had perhaps not recognised themselves as being a ‘public’ of public health before. Certain sections of the public were more able than others to respond to the Survey, and the reasons and ways in which they did deepen our understandings of the hierarchies of expertise and the relationships between different publics and public health, whilst illuminating how gender and class informed understandings of citizenship in post-war Britain.

For Crook, modern public health involved multiple agents; experts and administrators matched with an active and accountable public, all of whom were both ‘objects and subjects of power.’¹⁸⁵ Some sections of the public were able to wield more power than others, but what the complaints show us is that the role of the public in public health was not just varied, but up for negotiation. The middle classes, newly aware of their role as the subjects of public health research and rattled by what they perceived as increasing government intrusion into their lives when they felt they had ‘sacrificed most’ under wartime rationing, were able and willing to

¹⁸⁴ Moss, *Government Social Survey*, 159. Iain Macleod, Answer in the House of Commons, 2 July 1952, *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 503, col. 563.

¹⁸⁵ Crook, *Governing Systems*, 17.

construct complaints, and in doing so affected change on the Survey process. As John Clarke argues, when institutional practices are transgressive of public-private boundaries, institutions expend a lot of effort to mitigate the transgression by ‘establishing the notion of consent – and the maintenance of legitimacy in the face of dissent.’¹⁸⁶ This was evident in the response of the GSS to certain criticisms. It gave its staff authority cards and developed an income card so people could reveal their income silently. The GSS met what Clarke terms the ‘modest demands of respect, dignity and recognition’ articulated by its new, vocal public. These demands were ‘highly individual and personal,’ yet, when shared, evoked ‘norms of social and organisational conduct’ and questioned the practices of the Survey.¹⁸⁷ Their complaints; around issues of privacy, liberty, waste, and the conduct of fieldworkers, were sometimes couched in the anti-socialist rhetoric used by the Conservative Party and often reflected in the wider public discourse, especially in the popular press. From the latter we can infer that other sections of the public, such as working class women who were not clearly represented in the complaints, may have shared these grievances. These women may have resisted the Survey in their own ways; through using ‘don’t know’ as a quick answer, or deliberately misleading survey staff, but the Survey’s perception of them as ignorant of matters outside the home often obscured such forms of resistance.

Clarke notes that although complaints ‘may appear singular, personal and particular... they evoke a world of relationships (real and imagined).’¹⁸⁸ The complaints made against the Survey of Sickness reveal a complex set of relationships between different sections of the public and the British state; ones of power and prejudice, imagined and real. Complaints about

¹⁸⁶ Clarke, “Going Public,” 263.

¹⁸⁷ Clarke, “Going Public,” 268.

¹⁸⁸ *ibid.*

privacy and liberty suggested that for some people there was a definite limit to what information the state should ask from citizens and how it should collect that information. These types of complaints were frequently made by men whose wartime experiences had sharpened their understanding of freedom and fed their notions of home as a private space to be protected at all costs. Complaints about wasted resources indicated that members of the public felt they had a stake in how public money was spent, and that the Survey was not a good use of it. People also valued their own time and contested the state's claims to it. These complaints, more commonly articulated by women frustrated with wartime controls, allowed them to present alternative narratives around citizenship and expertise: that they were experts in the home but had no obligation to share that expertise with the state. Last, complaints about fieldworkers suggested that the authority of the state was contingent on people recognising it and that this was influenced by existing prejudices and power structures.

That the complaining public was largely middle class was significant not only because of their absorption of Conservative political rhetoric, but because they had the economic and social capital to speak back to the Survey and shape its practices; vocally negotiating their role as participants of research. At the same time, gendered and class-based perceptions of working class women informed how their actions were perceived as passively non-compliant rather than deliberately transgressive. Unable to negotiate their role, this public could only subvert the Survey using other methods. In this way, the 'micro-politics of complaint' reflected the politics of society in 1940s and early 1950s Britain; a politics in flux. The authority and legitimacy of the Social Survey was contingent on the recognition of that authority by the public. By expanding its public, the Survey met with vocal respondents who threatened to disrupt hierarchies of state expertise. At the same time, it continued to engage an older, less vocal public, in ways which reinforced those hierarchies. As public health evolved in the post-war period influenced by the ideology of social medicine, everyone became a participant in public

health. But just as the role of public health was up for negotiation, so too was the role of the public, for those with the leverage to negotiate.