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Women in Conversation: a wartime social survey in Melbourne, Australia 1941-43

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ABSTRACT This article examines the gendered dimensions of relationships in the conduct of a major academic Australian social survey in Melbourne in the early years of the Second World War. Despite its grounding in methodology current in Britain at the time, its execution and outcomes mirrored the gendered and classed nature of the survey, with its male direction, middle-class female interviewers, and largely working-class respondents. The value of 'women's conversations' was reflected in the fullness of the findings that were made publicly available in subsequent years.

On the eve of the Second World War a British economist, Wilfrid Prest, arrived in Australia to take up a chair at the University of Melbourne. He was to make a notable contribution to Australian academic life over the course of his career. Not least in importance was his successful attempt to spearhead a significant undertaking, a social survey of household living conditions across Melbourne's sprawling suburbs. The interviewers who were paid to undertake the work of door-by-door questioning of householders were almost entirely women. When interviewed himself some forty years later, Prest declared that 'A little too much [has been made] about the fact that the interviewing was done by women and the analysis by men. There was no conscious sex bias in this ... there were no men social workers in those days: it was unheard of. You necessarily had to rely on women there'.^[1] Yet scholars of social surveys in other times and places have consistently uncovered gendered dimensions in the conduct and outcome of such investigations, sufficient for us to question whether Prest's own honestly held beliefs might not be subjected to a careful evaluation.

Building on the work of Eileen Janes Yeo, Kathryn Kish Sklar, Jane Lewis and others ^[2], we focus on the gendered nature of the Prest social

survey, evident both in the relationships between Prest and the women he employed as interviewers, and the interviewers and their overwhelmingly female interviewees. As Eileen Yeo has shown in her detailed study of the rise of the social sciences in Britain, the collection of information from door to door by inspectors dedicated to the task was a significant creation of the nineteenth century.[3] It was a way, Seth Koven suggests, in which middle-class philanthropists imagined that they could come to 'know' the poor, soliciting information from working-class families in order better to control them.[4] That potent symbol of middle-class charity organisations, the 'lady visitor', survived well into the twentieth century.[5] Such visitors, Ellen Ross has argued, established their authority in the absence of official positions 'mainly through talk in many forms: declaiming, questioning, listening [and] praying [in people's homes]'.[6] Their impressions of a home or a family were central in deciding who would be offered relief. However, as Yeo explains, in turn:

the more disciplining social workers suspected the motives of the poor. The new recognition that different classes attached a different degree of importance to honesty threw question marks over the value of interview and of statistics of any kind. Unfortunately some of the investigators reached their most profound insights while sharply on the lookout for frauds, and went on to berate the character of the poor rather than to interrogate the process of the interclass interview itself.[7]

By the early twentieth century some interviewers came to the conclusion that 'direct questions were not so quick a route to information as circuitous chat, double checking with neighbours and keen observation on regular visits'.[8] Trainee social workers were instructed to 'take no notes in the presence of the poor' but, rather, to use visualisation or other methods to commit the details of their interaction to memory, thus allaying any suspicions the poor may have had of their intentions.[9] But despite the apparent ease of conversation that this was intended to produce, full notes designed to be filed and used as evidence in assessing the client's case were nevertheless dutifully recorded after the interview had come to an end. In an article published in 1981 John Lack [10] and fellow historian Graeme Davison alerted urban and social historians to the importance of the Prest data set.[11] Kate Darian-Smith also demonstrated the value of the material in the survey in her examination of wartime housing conditions in the context of the housing crisis in Melbourne which followed the collapse of the building industry during the Depression and War.[12] Our interest here is a different one: to analyse the gendered process by which the data itself was produced in a specifically Australian context with these other historians' evaluations in mind.

When Charles Booth set out to conduct a social survey of the East End in London he chose to use women who already had access to the homes of

the poor as his primary informants. This pattern was replicated in social surveys in both Britain and the USA over the next 50 years. Ellen Ross has advanced a possible explanation for this choice, suggesting that the way in which middle-class women used 'talk' and words and conversation to extract information and place it in its social context contrasted sharply with nineteenth-century 'male' forms of investigation, which reduced the information from social investigation to poverty maps, statistics or photographs. When opinion polling began in the USA in the early years of the twentieth century, again it was women who were identified as the employees of choice, valued as much for their 'ability to read minds as well as lips' as for their availability.[13] Reporting, in 1944, on the 'types of interviewers preferred' by the newly established Office of Public Opinion Research at Princeton University, Selden Menefee looked to women, recommending housewives, teachers, librarians and social workers before freelance writers, students and the elderly. 'Housewives with former teaching experience', he noted, were 'particularly apt', but 'elderly social workers who have the traditional "lady bountiful" approach' were to be avoided.[14]

Transplanting the Social Survey Technique

Wilfrid Prest arrived at the University of Melbourne in 1938 and he was surprised to find that Australians had not reproduced the large-scale social surveys that had been commonplace in Britain and the USA since the late nineteenth century.[15] Graeme Davison has argued that the failure of philanthropic efforts in the Australian colonies, and in particular the absence of any social settlements in the major cities, led to social enquiry, like social welfare, being seen as the province of the state. 'The royal commission, the select committee, the inspector's report, the bureaucratic inquest often filled the investigative role played elsewhere by the amateur social investigator', he concludes.[16] Thorough though many of these investigations were, they had little of the scientific rigour that increasingly marked the social survey in Britain and the USA. It was this gap that Prest moved quickly to remedy by persuading the federal government that such a survey was critical to its planning for post-war reconstruction. 'Sufficient information already exists to show the reality of these problems', he argued, 'but the object of the present enquiry is to estimate their extent and to determine their relative importance'.[17] Commissioned through the University of Melbourne, and paid for to some extent by a number of Melbourne business firms [18], his survey was explicitly designed to place academic social science at the centre of future policy development.

In an approach which owed much to the model established by Charles Booth in London in 1888, Prest sent young female interviewers to every

thirtieth household in Melbourne's inner, northern and western working-class suburbs and every sixtieth house in the more middle-class southern and eastern suburbs to complete a standard questionnaire in relation to housing and social conditions. He initiated the project during wartime and required that the interviews be carried out in the daytime, sending the interviewers to domestic residences only. Most men and indeed a good number of women were absent at workplaces; some shift workers were at home asleep and did not open the door to information gatherers. In retrospect, it is clear that such employment conditions were most likely to be acceptable to women interviewers. The necessity of domestic rather than workplace visits, however, clearly created conditions in which the young middle-class women employed as interviewers confronted mainly women as their respondents. Because the survey placed its greatest emphasis on surveying the poorer inner suburbs, the class difference between the interviewer and respondent was also marked.

Working within this tradition, then, Prest looked to women with experience in such purposive visiting to enter into conversations with women in households all over wartime Melbourne, believing that they would have the necessary skills to talk their way around people's inhibitions and into their homes. Although Melbourne had never introduced the health visitors that Booth had preferred, Prest approached their nearest equivalent, infant and maternal welfare sisters, as well as kindergarten teachers and professional social workers, all of whom, he believed, had cause to enter working-class homes to ask questions and make assessments without arousing suspicion. However, this belief sat awkwardly alongside the more conscious egalitarianism and the growth of professionalism and professional ethics in twentieth-century Australia. The women in charge of infant welfare sisters and kindergarten teachers declined to place their employees in a position where their professional reputation for maintaining confidentiality would certainly be jeopardised. Vera Scantlebury Brown, director of the Maternal and Infant Welfare division of the Public Health Department, argued, 'any information which [infant welfare sisters] receive during their work is understood by the others to be purely confidential. Hence the importance of not relating an official survey directly with their Infant Welfare Centre Work'. If any of the women chose to help out, she stipulated that they must work 'in districts other than those in which they do their Centre work ... and as voluntary workers but not as Infant Welfare Sisters'.^[19] Helen W. Paul, Principal of the Kindergarten Training College, likewise explained that her more experienced teachers had rejected the notion of cooperating. Their professional obligations kept them so busy, she wrote, that they 'felt that it would be an impossibility to spare the necessary time for carrying out the visits. It is obvious that such visits could not be cursory in nature'.^[20]

Gender and New Social Science

Leaders of the emerging profession of social work were more obliging. With the University of Melbourne having recently taken responsibility for their training, they were quick to see that a liaison with the survey might be mutually beneficial. Marion Urquhart, chief almoner at the Society for Crippled Children, offered four social workers to visit 'in connection with the household survey'.^[21] Jocelyn Hyslop, Director of the new Department of Social Studies at the University, agreed to coordinate the recruitment of further trained social workers. However, this proved to be difficult as both her female staff and social work students found themselves too busy to fulfil their promises of help.^[22] Undaunted, Hyslop arranged for social work methodology and expertise to be incorporated into the training of the eventual interview team, and her colleague, Mary Noall, supervised the new interviewers.^[23]

Although women gained entry to Australian universities in the 1880s, their participation was highly constrained for a long period.^[24] Even by the 1940s few women were represented above the lower levels of academia, yet their value as workers, particularly in the new field of social science, was about to be recognised. Prest found that to some extent he could draw on the pool of qualified women already within the social circles of the University to perform some of the interviews. Barbara Burton, for instance, whose husband was an academic at the University, was a trained kindergarten teacher who was willing to take a leading role in training interviewers after Mary Noall reduced her role. The bulk of the women employed, however, were not social workers but students or graduates of the University who were prepared to do the survey work for money. Predominantly young and middle class, the women were trained to present a professional and neutral persona as they worked through a series of questions in order to gather information about wages and employment, the state and quantity of housing, the range and density of population in various areas and the make-up of families.

The leading social work text of the time, Mary Richmond's *Social Diagnosis*, argued earnestly for the advantages of conducting interviews in the home both for its casual appearance and because the interviewer could extract information simply by observation. The balance of power, Richmond explained, favoured those being interviewed. If the interviewer failed to build a relationship with the subject, she argued, he would come away 'without the simplest and most elementary data ... In the home, the social worker is on the defensive; the host and hostess are at their ease'. Other benefits flowed too, she claimed, from seeing the interview as a pleasant social experience. The interviewer avoided having to ask a large number of questions, 'some of which are answered unasked by the communicative hostess and her surroundings', and the conversation provided 'natural

openings for a frank exchange of experiences'. This, in turn, allowed a 'further emphasis upon the personal side' and meant the 'relegation of official paraphernalia and attitudes, in such instances at least, to the rear'.[25] Putting such techniques of disguised interrogation into practice, Prest's young female interviewers learned to introduce themselves and then quickly change the topic to 'the state of the petunias'.[26] They exultantly noted on their forms if they managed, in the course of their conversation, to convince a hostile respondent that their intentions were 'friendly'.

The survey was announced in a letter and two tiny reports in the local newspapers, the *Herald* and the *Argus*. 'Every 30th householder in the metropolitan area will receive a questionnaire and will be asked to supply information which will be treated as confidential and used to compile statistics under which people of Melbourne live and work', Prest explained.[27] To his interviewers, however, he declared, 'it would probably be unwise to let the people you visit examine the questionnaire. It is merely intended as a convenient form or return for entering the answers to the questions you ask'. Using the back of the form, interviewers were asked to comment on 'their impression as to the reliability of the information obtained' from the women they interviewed. And this they dutifully did; recording comments which ranged from 'Interviewed wife - very co-operative. Information reliable. Everything in good order, income over £500' [28] to comments such as 'interviewed wife who was very hostile, but in conversation [I] got fairly reliable information'. The respondents, however, did not always see the conversation as a benign conversational interchange. 'Wife's mother', she noted further, 'had been visited for the survey in Prahran - she said her mother had refused information as she was insulted by the questions'.[29] In another household, the female respondent happily gave the information required by the interviewer, but it was her husband - not at home at the time of the interview - who, alarmed at what he saw as a breach of privacy, rang Prest to demand (without success) the return of his survey sheet. Some interviewers had qualms about pushing the women they interviewed for information they would rather not provide. But they were in a fairly invidious position as they were only paid for survey sheets that were judged to be 'complete'. The interviewer who returned an incomplete survey sheet, despite having performed what she found to be an 'Extremely difficult interview as she was hostile, suspicious and sensitive. I did not feel justified in asking her too many questions as her circumstances were so unusual [unmarried mother] ... she obviously did not want me to see over the house as she interviewed me [*sic*] in the hall - and only there with reluctance, so I did not press the point' [30], most probably would not have been paid for her efforts.

Despite its construction around the interaction of women, Prest tried, in correspondence with householders, to present his survey as both class-

and gender-neutral, yet both were encoded in its conduct and basic assumptions. No interviews for the survey were carried out in the workplace so the daytime interviews conducted in the respondents' homes ensured that the data was collected predominantly through woman-to-woman interaction and primarily relied on those women who had not taken up special war work. The few male respondents were shift workers or retired, or men interviewed in the evening when a day visit had failed. Women had at their fingertips the information Prest wanted, especially that about housing conditions, and he relied on them to have knowledge of the earnings of family members. Though he relied on women interviewers and women interviewees, there was no conscious gendered dimension to his inquiry. He was not unaware, however, that similar surveys in Britain explicitly played on the gendered interview of the housewife by another woman. His papers include a clipping from the *Yorkshire Post* about a social survey, run by the Women's Advisory Housing Council, that was specifically addressed to housewives:

One day a woman interviewer of the War-time Social Survey may call upon you ... She will ask you as one of Britain's housewives to give careful and accurate answers to a few questions. If you co-operate (and out of 30,000 such interviews in the last six months there have been only 120 refusals) you will be helping the Government Departments to solve war-time problems.

In helping out, the article promised, the relevant departments would 'attempt to find out what the housewife really wants in order to make her post-war home as easy to work as possible'.^[31]

Such employment of sister-to-sister questioning hinted that gender familiarity between the two women might ease class antagonism; but this was rendered difficult in this Melbourne survey where class was a defining characteristic of most of the questions asked. Respondents who earned over £10 per week were not asked any intrusive financial questions. Poorer women and their families, on the other hand, were expected to open their homes for inspection and provide financial details on request: 'Since we were mainly interested in [low income households], our visitors were instructed not to press for exact details of income when the head of the household was clearly receiving more than £10 per week'.^[32] The interviewers' status as researchers for the University may have backed Prest's claim to neutrality but, in fact, both the interviewer and the respondents were forced to negotiate class positions throughout the encounter. Gwen Dow (Rivett), who had grown up in salubrious middle-class suburbs, found that the early interviews she conducted in working-class areas shocked her: 'For the first few days I came home and I couldn't sleep, because I thought I had bugs and fleas. Of course, most of those places had

rats under the house and that was very sordid, but after a while one got used to it'.[33]

Some of the women interviewed were also uncomfortable at exposing the difficult circumstances under which they had to live to the gaze of their middle-class interviewers. Under peculiar loopholes in Australian law, census forms had been regularly destroyed since the 1830s to protect families who did not wish to divulge their convict origins [34], and in any case due to wartime conditions no censuses were carried out in Australia between 1933 and 1947 so some householders viewed with suspicion the underlying motivation of Prest and the University in collecting such detailed material at a time when the government itself was not undertaking similar data collection.

Currents of Conversation

Circumventing resistant attitudes to divulging personal information became a prime concern for the interviewers. The attitudes of people in inner working-class suburbs were already moulded by their often negative experiences of slum clearance programmes and charity visitors. Some were, understandably, concerned that the information gathered on wages would be passed on to the taxation department or that unfavourable housing evaluations would lead to their homes being condemned. As one of the women noted after a difficult interview, 'Interviewed [F] Head she was very difficult. Terrified we were working hand in glove with housing commission. Particularly worried about that because 205(a) has been condemned. For that reason I did not ask to see over house'.[35] Though the University had a respected position in Melbourne society, some householders expressed their fears that Prest would pass their answers on to the state, or, alternatively, that he might use them to attack the state in order to promote communism.[36] After an interview in the working class inner-city suburb of Carlton, Gwen Rivett (later Dow) noted on the back of her interview card, 'Interviewed wife. She was terrified when she received the letter and immediately took it to a friend who had told her not to say anything. She was convinced we would report her house to the housing commission. Fear no 2. That the university was full of communists'.[37] A different interviewer noted after a survey visit in the more 'genteel' suburb of Hawthorn that a woman who kept a milk bar with the help of her daughter was 'inclined to be suspicious and need much reassurance ... she had fears that we were going to expose her landlady' thereby jeopardising her rental arrangements.[38] Against such obvious class positions, interviewers found, not surprisingly, that their gender alone did not create an instant bond with the women they were supposed to interview.

Some respondents fearfully saw the interviewers as symbolic of an interfering welfare bureaucracy. Others, however, instantly dismissed the veneer of authority lent to the interviewers by the official nature of their work. Laurie O'Brien remembered visiting one home where the woman opened the door, having got the letter that was sent out, 'looked at me up and down and said, "As if I would tell anything to someone of your age!" and closed the door.' 'That was the extraordinary thing about this survey', she noted, 'you had a group of older experienced women ... and then there were, I think, about half a dozen green-as-grass students who'd completed not much more than their first year, so there was a great gap ... And so we really didn't know anything at all about housing, about budgeting, incomes, repairs, and we were supposed to make comments on whether a house was a "repaired" house ... so it was a very superficial reply'. [39, 40]

Yet the commonality of gender did, in some instances, compensate for the distance created by class. Many historians have analysed the ways in which 'talk' creates bonds between women. [41] Carla Kaplan has labelled this phenomenon the 'erotics of talk', a dialectic based on a 'desire to be reassured that an exchange between people is still possible, that we are not merely alone, speaking to ourselves, talking into the empty wind of a world from which meaningful and satisfying interrelationship has been eradicated'. [42] For women on a similar social standing, she argues, such talk can bring women 'recognition and reciprocity' as well as 'understanding'. [43] Ellen Ross has extended Kaplan's analysis to suggest that talk could perform a similar function even among women of strikingly different social status. [44] A similar dynamic is clearly evident in interviews conducted for the Prest social survey. Most of the women interviewed were far from hostile. Rather, they seemed to welcome the opportunity for conversation.

The recently married Pat Counihan found that the sight of her wedding ring led women to tell her details of their married lives and to ask a great many questions about health issues and contraception. Gwen Dow, who was heavily pregnant when she acted as an interviewer, noted many years later, in an interview with Kate Darian-Smith, that women responded positively to her pregnancy and divulged personal information outside the scope of the survey. Her pregnancy also allowed her to see more of the houses than some of the other interviewers as she had needed to use the lavatory in each house she visited. [45] As Mary Richmond had noted, such casual requests allowed the interviewer to intrude into less public parts of the house, and in houses with outside toilets, even into the back yard without the residents feeling they had been subjected to an official inspection.

Nevertheless, information gleaned in such moments of openness and exchange between the two women was noted both on the survey grid and as

comments on the back of the form in accordance with their training. Some of the interviewers appeared able to write down almost verbatim what was said to them; others paraphrased it. There is a mass of both sympathetic and condemnatory impressionistic detail in their notes: like social workers creating case notes of families visited, or anthropologists in the field, the interviewers put down potted histories of people's lives, as well as observations about the cleanliness of the house and family. Feminist researcher Ann Oakley has argued that the qualities of women's 'talk' make the interview an attractive method of research.

Interviews imitate conversations; they hold out the promise of mutual listening. Many of the reasons for preferring a 'qualitative' approach centered on in-depth interviews are the obverse of the objections which feminist critiques have levelled against 'quantitative' methods: the advantages of the artificial boundaries between knower and known, the opportunity to ground knowledge in concrete social contexts and experiences.[46]

But could the interviewer and the women they were interviewing really overcome the boundaries foregrounded through class, education and professional codes of behaviour?

Modern Talk

By the 1940s there was a precedent for assuming that such a bridging was possible. Women's talk was in the process of being popularised in such forms of modern media as radio, bringing the talk of 'experts' into people's homes on a daily basis.[47] Radio allowed women at home to 'listen in' to everything from the crooning of a jazz singer to an expert discussion of contemporary issues. To Australian listener Muriel Sutch, the women's hour was particularly valuable. 'These sessions provide rallying points where matters essentially feminine are discussed', she wrote. 'What a field is covered! Social fixtures, fashions, beauty culture, home management, home decoration, recipes, health questions and a dozen and one related subjects'. Radio encouraged listeners to be involved, encouraging women to 'write to the stations and the broadcasting of personal messages in reply. Apart from the double intimacy thus secured, it is a source of much pleasure, especially to country women, to hear these messages addressed to them. It puts them in touch with "the heart of things"'. [48]

Australian broadcasters quickly learnt that their female listeners were enamoured enough of what they heard to form auxiliaries where they met to discuss the content of radio programmes.[49] Such women's auxiliaries, or 'Happiness Clubs' as they came to be known, were encouraged by commercial stations as a means to tap into an identifiable advertising audience [50], but other broadcasters used such radio clubs for women for

non-commercial causes as well. Media savvy clergyman, R.G. Nicholls, who broadcast successfully on Melbourne radio under the name of 'Brother Bill', described the women who flocked to form listening groups around his programme as a slightly amorphous, if very modern, congregation for his 'radio church'. Recognising that there was a demand for a more reciprocal concept of 'talk' than was offered through the one-way broadcasting provided by radio, Nicholls and his wife offered to run a 'worry clinic', where listeners could talk 'off-air' about their troubles. Although the clinic never eventuated he had been inundated with replies from people keen to sign up.[51]

An expectation of reciprocity was also evident in the 'talk' between interviewer and interviewee in the course of the survey. Prest, however, had instructed his employees not to offer definite promises of future national benefit to the women they interviewed. Indeed, by late 1942 he had come to view as facile the widespread assumption that wartime controls and planning would simply be transposed to post-war planning for peace, prosperity and full employment.[52] As researchers rather than case-workers they were supposed to listen scientifically in order to extract information, not listen with an intent to bring about change. Some of their interviewees, however, drew no such distinctions, seeing the interviewers as social workers with the power to intervene directly in people's lives. Some of the respondents welcomed such interference in the hope that the survey would be able to bring about change in their material circumstances. Already, significant legislation had been introduced at a federal level, extending child endowment in 1941 and, in 1942, widows' pensions. H.E. Holt, the Minister for Labour and National Service, had described child endowment as 'an instalment of the Commonwealth's reconstruction policy' which was 'evidence of the Government's determination to make Australia a better place to live in - a place worth working and fighting for'.[53] Prest himself had links with the Department of Post-war Reconstruction, and briefing notes produced by the department indicated that they hoped the information he gathered would be widely disseminated 'because a full realization that Australia possesses bad housing conditions will make easier the task of implementing a remedial programme'.[54] They doled out £200 in 1945 to enable the project to be finished.

Prest's links with the Department of Post-war Reconstruction and the claim in his letter that the survey would help lead to better conditions after the War led some of the respondents to believe that he could, in fact, pull strings in government bureaucracy.[55] His papers contain letters sent to him from women who believed that his public interest in the falling birth rate might give him the leverage necessary to have their husbands transferred back to Melbourne from war duties interstate. Others thought that his interest in housing might allow them the chance to gain a highly

prized Housing Commission house.[56] The confusion of the respondents may have been mirrored, to some extent, by the interviewers themselves. Laurie O'Brien recalled, in 1988, that the interviewing team understood that they were gathering material for an academic study but were never properly briefed about the purpose of the survey. She found that, 'the people we talked to, whose homes we invaded ... would quite often ask in a very reasonable tone, or occasionally an apologetic tone, "what is it for?" "Is it going to help with this, or is it going to help with that?" and next thing you were feeling a bit embarrassed because you didn't really know what was going to come out of it'.[57]

Some of the interviewers were politically active either in the Labour Club at the University or in local communist groups. Contrary to Prest's instructions, they became increasingly concerned to show that there could be a measure of reciprocity in the exchange of information. Fay Jackson, a British woman who had had experience of 'slum-work' in London and Sydney, accompanied some of the people she interviewed to the Fair Rents Court, while others took it upon themselves to inform women that they were eligible for child endowment or extra ration books for their families. In the second year of the survey, Fay Jackson wrote to Prest alerting him to the fact that the community was largely unaware of the purpose of the survey and the probable benefits that might flow from it. 'Would you have any objection to my doing an article for the "Argus" [newspaper]', she wrote, 'saying that the "Survey" was making it possible to keep track of [the lack of housing], and giving a very general idea of the kind of thing that was happening? Naturally, I'd submit the article to you before sending it in'. As if forecasting Prest's disapproval of the idea, she added, 'If you would rather I didn't bring the "Survey" in, I could perhaps do something based on my own personal experience of Melbourne boarding houses, "rabbit warren" flatettes, etc. ... I am very interested in the "Survey" and would like to write about it. I don't think we should be shy about it: the charting of Melbourne housing conditions is a real necessity, as most of the people interviewed agree'.[58]

Aware of the power of radio as a means of disseminating women's talk, she later devised a bolder plan, offering to do a series of interviews for the Australian Broadcasting Commission, placing 'five working women before the microphone on each of the following subjects: housing, help for the large family, food and basic wage, and health services'. 'In three or possibly four of these cases', she wrote, 'I had planned to interview women whom I had seen in connection with the Survey and some of whom I had, in a purely personal capacity, helped since (about such matters, for instance, as the Fair Rents Court.) ... My whole object was to give the working people a chance to speak for themselves'.[59]

Prest, however, fearing that the glare of publicity would compromise the confidentiality of the survey, and thereby imperil its completion, swiftly torpedoed Fay Jackson's project. He telephoned the ABC and demanded, on the grounds of protecting his respondents' privacy, that her proposal be rejected. Jackson bitterly resented Prest's interference. 'It is obvious that my connection with the Survey is over but now my whole journalistic and broadcasting future has been called into question. *It is a hateful thing to have to say but I feel like an American miner or steelworker who has been black-listed*' [60] (original emphasis). Prest clearly found it quite acceptable for middle-class women to question their working-class 'sisters'; he was perhaps affronted by Jackson's attempt to act as their spokesperson, or to try to take a defining role even in a manner tangential to the survey. She was removed from the sanctioned role of interrogator and became instead the interrogated.

Jackson clearly believed that her proposal to use the radio to disseminate information about housing conditions was a most appropriate way to channel women's talk using the most modern and popular means. She hoped to bridge the gap between the women she had interviewed and the so-called experts who stood to gain from the information gathered about them. In so doing, she wanted to give them a voice and acknowledge the difficulties they had discussed with her during her time on the survey, adding to the list of 'women's issues' often discussed in the women's hour on the radio throughout Melbourne. Jackson believed that Prest neither cared about those interviewed nor about the careers of the women who acted as interviewers. Furiously, she pointed out that she had been attempting to give a public voice and a degree of public reciprocity to the same women who had shared the details of their lives with Prest's interviewers.

Conclusion

Shortly after the completion of the survey, Wilfrid Prest observed that 'Special mention must be made of the field workers ... but even their zeal and skill would have been of no avail had it not been for the ready co-operation of the anonymous families who allowed themselves to be interviewed'. [61] Yet never did he connect the outcome with the rapport that women interviewers had established. No survey in the social sciences was conducted in an absence of practices grounded in the class and gender structures of the time. The Prest social survey was undeniably a major achievement, even if was left to historians rather than policy-makers to realise its full potential. This article, while seeking in no way to deny its value, has sought to demonstrate the ways in which gender was central to the survey process. The model of social research that Wilfrid Prest had

brought to Australia may have been blind to the influence of gender but it was never gender-neutral. Indeed, the success of the interview method he had selected was dependent on what has since been recognised as the distinctive nature of 'women's talk'. However, in the 1940s, cross-class 'women's talk' had moved beyond its authoritarian/hierarchical origins, creating a space for the recognition of a shared identity between interviewer and interviewee on the basis of gender. Some of the young women employed on the Melbourne social survey moved outside the boundaries considered standard in the academic interview process, staking a claim both for autonomy in relation to their male employer and reciprocity in relation to their female interviewees. Prest resisted this more modern form of 'women's talk'. When his team of interviewers started working against the grain of the project by promoting the personal gendered dimensions of the social survey, he reasserted his control of the data, declaring that talk needed to be translated into the 'science of statistics' if it were to make a valid contribution to social research. The publications through which Prest disseminated the results of his research, drawn exclusively from the data his employees dutifully entered on the front of the survey sheets, very much reflect this view.[62] But the Melbourne social survey cannot be so easily contained. By drawing on the comments entered on the reverse of the sheets, and the surrounding documentation, we have tried to reclaim the notion of social research as a process in which gender played a central role.

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Notes

- [1] Melbourne University Social Survey, seminar by John Lack and Graeme Davison conducted with Wilfrid Prest, who had run the survey, and Laurie O'Brien, Gwen Dow and Pat Counihan, who were key interviewers during the survey. The seminar was held at the University of Melbourne, 20 March 1979. John Lack's tape of the proceedings is available in the Jessie Webb Library, History Department, University of Melbourne.
- [2] The relevant articles are all contained in M. Bulmer, K. Bales & K. Sklar (Eds) (1991) *The Social Survey in Historical Perspective 1880-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- [3] Eileen Janes Yeo (1991) *The Social Survey in Historical Perspective 1830-1930*, in Martin Bulmer, Kevin Bales & Kathryn Kish Sklar (Eds) *The Social Survey in Historical Perspective, 1880-1940*, pp. 49-65 (Cambridge:

- Cambridge University Press); Eileen Janes Yeo (1996) *The Contest for Social Science: relations and representations of gender and class* (London: Rivers Oram Press).
- [4] S. Koven (1991) The Dangers of Castle Building – surveying the social survey, in *The Social Survey in Historical Perspective, 1880-1940*, p. 370 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- [5] Ellen Ross (1993) *Love and Toil: motherhood in outcast London 1870-1918* (New York: Oxford University Press).
- [6] Ellen Ross, (2001) Slum Journeys: ladies and London poverty 1860-1940, in Alan Mayne & Tim Murray (Eds) *The Archaeology of Urban Landscapes: experiments in slumland*, pp. 11-21 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- [7] Yeo, *The Contest for Social Science*, p. 273.
- [8] This quotation comes from Eileen Yeo's discussion of M.E. Loane (1910) *Neighbours and Friends* (London: Edward Arnold); see *The Contest for Social Science*, p. 274.
- [9] M. Richmond, (1917) *Social Diagnosis*, pp. 127-128 (New York: Russell Sage Foundation).
- [10] John Lack is currently engaged on a major research project which will demonstrate the importance of the data collected in the Prest survey.
- [11] Graeme Davison & John Lack (1981) Planning the New Social Order: the University of Melbourne Social Survey, 1941-43, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology*, 17, pp. 36-45.
- [12] See Kate Darian-Smith (1990) *On the Home Front: Melbourne in wartime 1939-1945*, p. 85 (Melbourne: Oxford University Press) and her PhD thesis on which the book is based, *A City in War: the homefront in Melbourne 1939-1945*, University of Melbourne, Department of History, 1987.
- [13] J. Wechsler (1940) Interviews and Interviewers, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 4, p. 260. Although the pronouns used throughout this article are almost exclusively masculine, the characteristics that Wechsler ascribes to the good interviewer are those more traditionally coded feminine.
- [14] S. Menefee (1944) Recruiting an Opinion Field Staff, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 8, pp. 265-266.
- [15] See Yeo, 'The Social Survey in Historical Perspective'; Yeo, *The Contest for Social Science*.
- [16] Graeme Davison (2003) The Social Survey and the Puzzle of Australian Sociology, *Australian Historical Studies*, 34, P.144.
- [17] Wilfrid Prest, 'Instructions to Interviewers', no date, Prest Papers, Social Survey, University of Melbourne Archives, Miscellanea, box 37.
- [18] These firms included G.J. Coles, Sidney Myer Charitable Trust, and M.A. Nicholas, who had made his fortune making aspirin. See University of Melbourne Registrar's Files, UM 312, boxes 670, 605, 701.

- [19] Letter from Vera Scantlebury-Brown to Mr Medley, Vice Chancellor of the University, 21 June 1941, Prest Papers, Social Survey, Correspondence, box 37.
- [20] Letter from Helen W. Paul to Jocelyn Hyslop, 1 July 1941, Prest Papers, Social Survey, Correspondence, box 37.
- [21] Letter from Marion Urquhart to Mr Medley, 9 June 1941, Prest Papers, Social Survey, Correspondence, box 37.
- [22] Letter to Mr Prest, from Jocelyn Hyslop, 21 June 1941, Prest Papers, Social Survey, Correspondence, box 37.
- [23] Graeme Davison & John Lack, 'Planning the New Social Order'.
- [24] For a detailed discussion of women's entrance and promotion into Australian universities, see A. McKinnon (1997) *Love and Freedom: professional women and the reshaping of personal life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); F. Kelly (1985) *Degrees of Liberation: a short history of women in the University of Melbourne* (Melbourne: The Women Graduates Centenary Committee of the University of Melbourne); Jane Carey (2001) No Place for A Woman? Intersections of Class, Modernity and Colonialism in the Engendering of Australian Science, 1885-1940, *Lilith: a feminist history journal*, 10, pp. 153-172.
- [25] Mary Richmond (1917) *Social Diagnosis*, p. 107 (New York: Sage Foundation).
- [26] Interview of Pat Counihan by Kate Darian-Smith, 1988. Tape lodged at the Australian Centre, citation used with permission.
- [27] *Argus* (Melbourne), 1 September 1941, p. 3; *Herald* (Melbourne), 31 August 1941.
- [28] Social Survey, Hawthorn, box 1/3/18 Prest Papers /18, Prest Papers, University of Melbourne Archives, University of Melbourne, card 1458.
- [29] Social Survey, Hawthorn, box 1/3/18, Prest Papers, University of Melbourne Archives, University of Melbourne, card 1229.
- [30] Tenement dweller in South Melbourne, cited in Davison & Lack, 'Planning the New Social Order', p. 40.
- [31] *Yorkshire Post*, 7 October 1942, University of Melbourne Archives Social Survey, Miscellanea, box 37.
- [32] Wilfred Prest (1952) *Housing, Income and Saving in War-time: a local survey*, p. 10 (Melbourne: Department of Economics, University of Melbourne).
- [33] See Kate Darian-Smith, *On the Home Front*, p. 85.
- [34] See Graeme Davison, John Hirst & Stuart Macintyre, (1998) *The Oxford Companion to Australian History*, pp. 116-117 (Melbourne: Oxford University Press). For a contemporary view on the census held in 1933, see G.V. Portus (Ed.) (1936) *What the Census Reveals* (Adelaide: F.W. Preece & Sons/Australian Institute of Political Science).
- [35] Prest Social Survey returns, box 1/3/17, 1941, card 2158, Carlton.

- [36] These comments were drawn from survey return cards: 1404, 1417, 1418, 1424, 1448, 1457, 1459, 2158, 8160, 8170. In almost two-thirds of John Lack's random sample of 4250 survey households, visitors recorded their estimate of the attitude of the person interviewed. Almost 90% of informants were judged to have been friendly and/or cooperative from the outset (though 6% remained uncommunicative about money matters), 8% were hostile (but this fell to just over 6% once the purpose of the survey was explained), and a little over 3% were judged 'unreliable', 'vague' or 'garrulous'. Female heads of households were judged marginally more inclined to be friendly and/or cooperative than male heads of households.
- [37] 1404, Carlton. Social Survey, Hawthorn and Carlton, box 1/3/17 & 18, Prest Papers, University of Melbourne Archives, University of Melbourne.
- [38] University of Melbourne Social Survey interview number 1417, Hawthorn.
- [39] Interview with Laurie O'Brien by Ellen Warne, 17 December 2001. Tape lodged in the Jessie Webb Library, History Department, University of Melbourne.
- [40] Interview with Laurie O'Brien by Kate Darian-Smith, 11 February 1988. Tape lodged at the Australian Centre, University of Melbourne. Quotation cited with permission.
- [41] See, for instance, Melanie Tebbutt (1995) *Women's Talk? A Social History of 'Gossip' in Working-class Neighbourhoods, 1880-1960* (Aldershot: Scolar Press); Jennifer Coates (1996) *Women Talk: conversation between women friends* (Oxford: Blackwell); see also *Women Talking Together* (1994) [videorecording] produced by Wendy Rogers (Brisbane: Aboriginal Perspectives); Diane Gosden (Ed.) (1992) *Women's Talk: conversations [about pregnancy, birth, motherhood and community]* (Stanwell Park, NSW: D. Gosden).
- [42] Carla Kaplan (1996) *The Erotics of Talk: women's writing and feminist paradigms*, p. 15 (New York: Oxford University Press).
- [43] Kaplan, *The Erotics of Talk*, p. 141.
- [44] Ross, 'Slum Journeys', pp. 11-21.
- [45] Interview with Gwen Dow by Kate Darian-Smith, 21 January 1988. Tape lodged in the Australian Centre, University of Melbourne. Quotation cited with permission.
- [46] Ann Oakley (2000) *Experiments in Knowing: gender and method in the social sciences*, p. 47 (Cambridge: Polity Press).
- [47] See Alan Thomas (1980) *Broadcast and Be Damned: the ABC's first two decades* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press); Ken Inglis assisted by Jan Brazier (1983) *This is the ABC: the Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1932-1983* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press); Michelle Hilmes (1997) *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).

- [48] Muriel Sutch (1934) Broadcasting from a Woman's Point of View, in C.C. Faulkner & J.D. Corbett (Eds) *Broadcast Year Book and Radio Listeners' Annual of Australia*, p. 88 (Sydney: Challis House).
- [49] Lesley Johnson (1988) *The Unseen Voice: a cultural study of early Australian radio*, pp. 88, 105, 110-111, 196 (London: Routledge).
- [50] Johnson, *The Unseen Voice*, pp. 104-105.
- [51] For the development of the radio church and the 'worry clinic', see *Brother Bill's Monthly* 1937-1943, Mollison Library, Trinity College, University of Melbourne.
- [52] Wilfrid Prest (1942) War-time Controls and Post-war Planning, *Economic Record*, XVIII, 35, pp. 211-217.
- [53] See *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 January 1941 and 3 March 1941. For a discussion of this legislation, see T.H. Kewley (1973) *Social Security in Australia, 1900-1972*, chs x-xi, (Sydney: Sydney University Press).
- [54] 'Housing Surveys', Agendum 16, Prest Papers, University of Melbourne Social Survey, Miscellanea, box 37.
- [55] Letter from J.F. Foster (registrar of the university) to Wilfrid Prest, 14 May 1945. F/p 10243, Prest Papers, University of Melbourne Social Survey, Miscellanea, box 37.
- [56] Correspondence File, Prest Papers, box 30, University of Melbourne Archive, University of Melbourne.
- [57] Interview with Laurie O'Brien by Kate Darian-Smith, 11 February 1988. Tape lodged at the Australian Centre, University of Melbourne. Quotation cited with permission.
- [58] Letter to W. Prest, from Fay Jackson, no date. 'Naumai Lodge', 1081 Hoddle St, East Melbourne, Social Survey box 37, Prest Collection. 'St Kilda + correspondence 1941-1944'.
- [59] Letter to W. Prest, Commerce School, Melbourne University, Carlton, from Fay Jackson, Flat 7, 'Naumai Lodge', 1081 Hoddle St, East Melbourne, 23 September 1942. Social Survey box 37, Prest Collection. 'St Kilda + correspondence 1941-1944'.
- [60] Letter from Fay Jackson to Wilfrid Prest, J3267. No date, (shortly after 23 September 1942), Social Survey box 37, Prest Collection. 'St Kilda + correspondence 1941-1944'.
- [61] Preface to Wilfred Prest (1952) *Housing, Income and Saving in War-time: a local survey* (Melbourne: Department of Economics, University of Melbourne).
- [62] These included the following articles by Wilfrid Prest: (1942) Wartime Controls and Post-war Planning, *Economic Record*, 18, pp. 211-217; (1943) The Present Number of Dwellings in Melbourne, *Economic Record*, 19, pp. 230-237; (1944) Review of John Madge, *Wartime Pattern of Saving and Spending in Economic Record*, 20, p. 135; (1945) Rents in Melbourne, *Economic Record*, 21, pp. 37-54; (n.d.) *Housing, Income and Saving in*

War-time, a Local Study (Melbourne: Department of Economics, University of Melbourne); (n.d.) Report on War-time Developments in the Social Survey Technique in England, mimeo (copy in Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne).

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