

New Perspectives From Unstructured Interviews: Young Women, Gender, and Sexuality on the Isle of Sheppey in 1980

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Abstract

In the early 1980s, Ray Pahl, a sociologist at the University of Kent, and PhD student Claire Wallace conducted interviews examining young people's experiences of growing up, work, and unemployment on the Isle of Sheppey; these interviews are now deposited at the University of Essex, and this article examines how historians and others might reuse them to interrogate other subjects. The article examines one working-class young woman's ideas about gender and sexuality in the early 1980s, using the *Listening Guide* method developed by psychologist Carol Gilligan to probe the individual subjectivity and emotion, as well as the cultural discourses at play in this interview. The interviewee was a young woman who was involved in a culture of casual sex with men "on the ships," and the article focuses on how she saw the exchanges of money, drink, and gifts between them and herself, and how she avoided seeing her actions as "prostitution." The analysis shows how in a particular locality in the early 1980s, a particular subculture could allow some young women to sidestep the dominant codes governing young, working-class women's sexuality and go "on the ships" without seeing this as marking them as "prostitutes" or any related category. Thus, the article troubles the ontology of "prostitution" as a category. It also suggests how we can use a single individual's narrative to offer a broader account of cultures or subcultures, by starting with the individual and examining how one subjectivity navigated and interacted with broader cultural discourses. Finally, this article also offers suggestions about some of the methodological and ethical issues with reusing archived sociological data but argues that it holds rich possibilities.

Keywords

youth culture, gender, sexuality, prostitution, re-analysis

In the early 1980s, Ray Pahl, a sociologist at the University of Kent, and PhD student Claire Wallace conducted interviews examining young people's experiences of work and unemployment on the Isle of Sheppey; these interviews are now deposited at the University of Essex. This article examines how historians and others might reuse them to interrogate other subjects; it offers suggestions about some of the methodological and ethical issues with reusing archived sociological data but argues that reuse holds rich possibilities. In particular, I examine one working-class young woman's ideas about gender and sexuality in the early 1980s, and use the *Listening Guide* method developed by psychologist Carol Gilligan to probe the psychological forces at work, as well as the cultural context around this interview. I argue that a single interview can shed light on the broader cultural discourses at play, as well as giving us insights into the operation of particular subcultures, and into the emotions at work in constituting individual subjectivities. Thus, I suggest how historians can use a single individual's narrative to offer a broader account of British culture and of subcultures, by

starting with the individual and examining how they subjectively interacted with broader cultural discourses.

The interviewee in this case was a young woman who was involved in a culture of casual sex with men "on the ships" that docked on the island, and other men who were on the island for a short period of time. I focus on how she saw the exchanges of money, drink, and gifts between them and herself, examining the mismatch between how the interviewee and interviewer saw this culture of casual sex; the term *prostitution* was never mentioned but appeared to figure in the way the interviewer saw the interviewee's actions. The interviewee had a very different way, however, of seeing her actions, drawing on a particular set of values and discourses common to her and her friends on the island. The analysis

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thus shows how in a particular locality in the early 1980s, a particular subculture could allow some young women to sidestep the dominant codes governing young, working-class women's sexuality and go "on the ships" without seeing this as marking them as "prostitutes" or any related category. Thus, the article troubles the ontology of "prostitution" as a category. Before moving to a close analysis of the interview transcript, I will first sketch the background to the study, and the historical context of legal and discursive codes governing prostitution and working-class women's sexuality in the late 1970s and early 1980s. I will then outline the methodology I use in the re-analysis, and the ethical issues surrounding reuse.

Study Context

Understanding the context in which an interview was conducted and the interests, assumptions, and methods of the interviewer is, of course, vital to interpreting the meanings contained in it. However, as in this case, it can sometimes be impossible to recover all the contextual information surrounding a particular interview or interviews. Yet it is still possible to reuse archived sociological data where not all the contextual information is available in the form we might want it. Archived contextual data, reading published outputs and work that informed the original project, comparative work in the same archive and different archives, and, where possible, interviews with those involved in the original project, all help to build up a sense of the method of production for the source.

The interview under examination in this article was conducted in the context of a larger project begun in 1978 by Ray Pahl, a sociologist at the University of Kent (Crow & Takeda, 2011; see also the interview with Ray Pahl in the *Pioneers of Social Research*, 1996-2012 project, SN6226). Pahl had previously worked on managers, corporatism, and urban sociology (see R. Pahl, 1963, 1965a, 1965b, 1966, 1971, 1977; J. M. Pahl & R. Pahl, 1971; R. Pahl & Winkler, 1974). His new project was an ethnography of employment, work, and "getting by" on the Isle of Sheppey. A PhD student, Claire Wallace, and research assistants also worked on the project. Outputs included Ray Pahl's (1984) *Divisions of Labour*; Wallace's (1987) *For Richer, for Poorer*; Ray Pahl's work on school-leavers (1978) and the domestic division of labor (1980); and a co-authored study for the Department of Employment on youth unemployment (R. Pahl & Wallace, 1980). The body of sources Pahl's team generated was deposited at the University of Essex for future researchers (*Social and Political Implications of Household Work Strategies*, 1978-1983, SN4876). Ray Pahl (1978) was interested from early on in the project in schoolchildren's perceptions of their futures (see Lyon & Crow, 2012; Winterton, Crow, & Morgan-Brett, 2011). This led to Ray Pahl and Wallace's (1980) project for the Department of Employment on young people's experiences of the transition from school to employment or

unemployment. Wallace (1987) reused some of the interview material in her book *For Richer, for Poorer*. It is from these interviews that the transcript re-analyzed here is drawn (these interviews are archived as 17-19 and Unemployed on the Isle of Sheppey, 1980, SN4860).

The Isle of Sheppey was a difficult place for young people leaving school in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The island is around 36 square miles, lying in the Thames estuary. In 1971, it had a population of 31,590. Sheppey's naval dockyard closed in 1960, and Sheerness, the island's largest town, developed into a commercial dock thereafter. There were a number of other industries, including a steelworks and seasonal tourism, but many jobs were insecure, semi-skilled, or unskilled (R. Pahl, 1984). As traditional male areas of employment had declined, women's employment expanded, and employers often preferred women workers, seeing them as cheaper (despite equal pay legislation that came into force in Britain in 1975) and more docile. In 1981, women doing the semi-skilled work that predominated could expect to earn between £55 and £80 a week. Men might earn £90 or more. This was hardly a high wage: most employers on the island recognized that it would be "very hard to bring up a family on £100 a week" (R. Pahl, 1984, p. 172). Youth unemployment was a particular problem on the island (R. Pahl, 1978). Prospects for young women were, thus, not bright.

In January 1980, Claire Wallace went to talk to a 17-year-old called "Sue" as part of the Department for Employment project. Though the interviewer is not identified in the transcript, it seems most likely that Wallace conducted the interview: she had a wealth of informal knowledge about the island, having spent large amounts of time living and working there, and this was on display in the interview, helping her gain some trust and mutual understanding from her interviewee. In a telephone conversation with the author (Wallace, 2014), Wallace did not remember conducting this particular interview but agreed, having seen the transcript, that the interviewer was very probably her, given all the evidence pointing in that direction. Wallace and Pahl found interviewees for this project by going through gatekeepers such as local schoolteachers, or networks of friends: this way of finding interviewees helped to gain their trust more quickly than the alternative, approaching people cold. Wallace recalled that they probably used an informal interviewing technique, making use of a list of topics to guide the interview, but no formal interview questionnaire (Wallace, 2014). The interview is, therefore, a relatively informal process, and Wallace, despite having a great deal more education than her interviewee, was in a position to hope to be able to gain a measure of trust and openness from her.

Where archived social science data are of relatively recent provenance, it is often possible to talk to the original researchers and hear their recollections of the project. It is perhaps likely that, given the number of interviews a sociologist will conduct over the course of his or her career, often researchers will not remember one particular interview, even with the

transcript to jog the memory. However, such contacts can be useful in gathering more contextual information about the collection of data, the methods, and theories that informed the project. This is particularly useful where published outputs of a project are not extensive and archived contextual information is limited, as in this case. Wallace also read a draft of this article while it was in preparation, which allows a further round of engagement between the initial researcher and later users of the data; it provides one possibility to check whether any of the secondary analysis jars with the impressions and memories of the researcher who conducted the research.

The interview transcript is 21 pages of typed A4. It was typed by a professional typist (Wallace, 2014). The transcription did not follow practices that would be standard today. This means it is difficult to make inferences with complete confidence about the meaning and nature of pauses and hesitation. The transcriber used dashes (–) to indicate hesitations and shifts in the interviewee’s words, and recorded dropped “h”s, and fillers like “you know”; emphasis was sometimes indicated with underlining; grammar was apparently not tidied up, and we can assume that little changing or “tidying” of the transcript went on. No transcript can ever perfectly catch the cadences and emotions of speech; interpreting this interview transcript is necessarily an imperfect attempt, but the relatively straightforward nature of the transcription of interviewer’s and interviewee’s words makes the attempt possible.

I came across this interview while researching my PhD; my research examined discourses of “class” in Britain from the 1970s to the 1990s, and as such, I reused archived sociological interviews as well as archived oral histories and other materials to examine how interviewers and interviewees discussed and understood “class,” their own class position, and the class landscape of contemporary Britain. The class dynamic between interviewers with high levels of education and interviewers from working-class backgrounds was of particular interest. I examined this interview along with others from the collection in the archive at the University of Kent (the interviews have since been digitized as 17-19 and Unemployed on the Isle of Sheppey, 1980, SN4860). This interview interested me because, although I did not use it in my final research project, the subject that the interviewee ended up discussing threw up so many interesting questions: how could interviewer and interviewee apparently see the interviewee’s going “on the ships” so differently? How could they understand the category of “prostitution” so differently? What would lead one working-class young woman to choose this line of action and defend it relatively openly in an interview, when it was a form of behavior generally condemned in working-class culture and in public discourse? This was the only interview I found that discussed at length the practice of “going on the ships.” I was thus prompted to ask how much I could understand about this practice from the relatively slim information I could find directly relating to it in

this collection. Thus, I began to look for a method that could help me use an individual interview to shed light on wider cultures and practices.

Method

In reading Sue’s interview, I use the *Listening Guide* method, which developed out of feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan’s (1982; and see Gilligan et al, 2003) work on gendered moral development. The method helps to distinguish sensitively the different layers of meaning and encounters that go into the making of self-narratives. It involves three reading stages, with the text being color coded during each and separate notes written up. The first stage involves reading the narrative for the plot. The second involves reading for the “I,” the moments when the narrator asserts agency. The final step is reading for “contrapuntal voices,” for moments of emotional charge, conflict, and strain. This method of close reading sensitizes the reader to the moments when a speaker or writer asserts agency, and the sort of actions (internal, external; passive, active; bold, diffident) they narrate. It also helps the reader locate the cultural discourses on which the speaker or writer draws in giving an account of themselves. And listening for contrapuntal voices alerts the reader to the emotional landscape and the particularly emotionally or morally charged moments of the story. Historians have recently become interested in the role of emotions in history, and this approach gives one method with which to identify and analyze emotion in an interview text (see Rosenwein, 2002). The purpose is to read the interview to understand individual subjectivity and emotion, and how the individual relates to, uses, or ignores broader cultural and subcultural discourses in their account. Historians can write cultural history starting with the detritus of public discourse—newspapers, advice literature, textbooks, and so on—but the purpose here is to show that we can write cultural history by starting with the individual and examining how they subjectively interacted with broader cultural discourses, as a few historians have begun to do (see Hinton, 2010).

Other methodologies drawn from history have also played a part in the analysis of this interview. Michael Roper’s work on the emotional survival of soldiers in the First World War shows how useful psychoanalytic (particularly Kleinian) theory can be in shedding light on disturbances, absences, symbols, and conflicts in individuals’ narratives (Roper, 2009). In addition, sociology and oral history theory have generated important insights into the methodological problems with conducting and re-analyzing interviews, in particular, the necessity of paying attention to the interviewer, and to the ways in which both participants in an interview are involved in the production of meaning (see Abrams, 2010; Cicourel, 1964; Gilbert, 2008; Perks & Thomson, 2006). These methodological insights prompt the reader to pay attention to silences and to intersubjectivity in the interview

environment. Of course, in re-analyzing interviews, I am adding a third subjective perspective to the mix: my own background, concerns, and understandings. Thus, my re-analysis adds a second layer of intersubjectivity to the mix.

Ethical Questions

Re-interpreting this interview throws up immediate ethical questions. While researchers gave permission for their archival material to be deposited in the QualiBank, the interviewees and other research subjects were not asked their permission at the time for later depositing of data. Explicit, informed consent for *future* sharing of research data was not considered in the 1980s as part of standard research practice. The issues faced in reusing this interview thus reflect issues that are common when reusing data that were gathered before large-scale digitization and reuse of data were commonly thought of. Indeed, the precise form of consent for the original interview has not been recorded in the archive. In this case, the interviewee would have assumed that the interview would be used to examine the subject under study: young people's experiences of unemployment. Reusing the interview to focus on quite a different subject—and an emotionally and morally freighted one like sex and prostitution—thus poses clear ethical issues. There is an evident imperative for the researcher to anonymize the interview thoroughly, changing enough incidental details as to make it anonymous without losing key contextual information, and this practice has been followed here (when Claire Wallace used some extracts from this body of interviews in her book on young people on Sheppey, she anonymized them; Wallace, 1987). In this way, I have attempted to ensure the identity of the interviewee is protected.

Historical Context

Before moving on to analyze the interview transcript, it is necessary to sketch out the historical backdrop to the interview. First, I will examine the dominant codes and discourses that structured working-class women's sexuality in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This, of course, was a decade on from the "swinging sixties," but the so-called "permissive" currents of that decade only affected a minority of largely well-educated, metropolitan young women (see Mort, 2010). Working-class young people's sexuality was generally governed by older codes of behavior (see Chamberlain, 1975). The results of two studies of working-class teenage girls—one conducted in a northern city in the mid-1970s, the second in Islington, London, in the early 1980s—give an insight into the culture and discourses around sexuality that prevailed among such young women. In both cases, the young women privileged monogamy or serial monogamy. Though they endorsed pre-marital sex, they saw it as something that should take place within relationships that involved "love," or at least "going steady" (Cowie & Lees, 1981; Wilson,

1978; see also Willis, 1977). Marriage was seen as inevitable, and to be left on the shelf was a disaster. Words like "slag," "prostitute," and "whore" (which blurred the distinction between having casual sex or sex with multiple partners, and prostitution) stigmatized girls or young women who disrupted the pattern of serial monogamy with groups of boys or young men from the same schools and areas. The categories these young, working-class women used seemed to work partly to ensure that marriage would, indeed, be the end point for these young women. They staked out a middle ground "between the promiscuity which appears to be advocated by the 'permissive society,' and the ideal of virginity advocated by official agencies, and to a large degree, the families" (Wilson, 1978, p. 68).

Wallace's work seemed to confirm that this was also the dominant pattern of assumptions among young, working-class women on Sheppey (1987). There had been a rise in pre-marital cohabitation on Sheppey among younger generations, mirroring, or even exceeding, the national increase: nationally, cohabitation increased threefold between the early 1970s and the early 1980s, but in Sheppey, the increase was even sharper (Wallace, 1987; see also the data in 17-19 and Unemployed on the Isle of Sheppey, 1980, SN4860). However, young women cohabiting on Sheppey saw cohabitation as a stage before the inevitable marriage—It still fitted into a pattern of monogamy (Wallace, 1987). In addition, some of the young, working-class women on Sheppey whom Wallace interviewed were disapproving of behavior that deviated from seeing sex as properly located in close, monogamous relationships. One, Sally, commented in 1980 that "[s]ome of the girls I used to go to school with, they've got kids and they're not married. Norma Daley, she's on the boats already . . . and Joanne Smith, she's all tarty" (Wallace, 1987, pp. 104-106). Young working-class women on Sheppey, then, did not endorse either "permissive" sex with multiple partners, or "officially endorsed" ideas of virginity.

What, then, of discourses around prostitution in late 1970s and early 1980s Britain? A brief survey of the law on prostitution is necessary to begin with. Prostitution has never been illegal in Britain, but from the 1820s, a series of repressive laws restricted almost all of the activities around prostitution: soliciting, brothel keeping, living off the earnings of a prostitute, and controlling a prostitute for gain. From 1824, the police had the power to label a woman a "common prostitute," and the solicitation laws introduced in 1839 and 1847 gave the police power to arrest and prosecute "any common prostitute loitering or soliciting for the purposes of prostitution to the annoyance of inhabitants or passers-by." Once a woman was convicted under these laws, the term *common prostitute* could forever be brought forward in future proceedings against her under these acts—an anomaly in English law (Laite, 2006). This label could profoundly affect women's self-perception: A report on prostitution in the West End of London in 1979 found that for women involved in casual prostitution, the first court experience

and the label “common prostitute” intensified the “degree of awareness of their actions and often precipitated them into seeking companionship with the more experienced practitioners with subsequent socialisation into habitual prostitution.”¹ Laws against solicitation were made tougher in 1959 after the publication of the Wolfenden report (Laite, 2006; Wolfenden Report, 1957). The focus on keeping the streets “clean” intensified (Bartley & Gwinnett, 2001; Laite, 2011), and British culture shifted to seeing the law as properly regulating public space but keeping out of the private realm (Brooke, 2011). In the eyes of the police, then, keeping “common prostitutes” off the streets was one of the central aims of the law.

The dominant images of prostitutes in British culture in the 1970s were “women soliciting men on the streets—usually portrayed in a few shady shots in television documentaries” (like “Brasstacks,” a documentary about Sutherland made by the BBC in 1979) or “an assignation with a high class call girl or brothel keeper in the lap of luxury” (McLeod, 1982, p. 4). Prostitutes working on the streets were pushed to the forefront of the media presentation of prostitution by the battles over law reform, which re-ignited in the late 1960s. A series of Local Councils, pressured by Residents’ Associations, and even a branch of the National Housewives Association, debated legalized brothels as a way of getting prostitutes off their streets.² Other public voices, like the Josephine Butler Society (JBS), spoke out against any such plans.³ Further debate about street prostitution was stoked by the advent in the mid-1970s of organizations or trade unions for prostitutes.⁴ In the late 1970s, the English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP; founded under the aegis of Selma James’s Wages for Housework Campaign) and PLAN (Prostitution Laws Are Nonsense, founded by high-class call girl Helen Buckingham) were particularly good at getting media coverage.⁵ The ECP even organized the “occupation” of a church near King’s Cross, London, in 1980.⁶ Finally, yet more media attention focused on street prostitution as a result of attacks on prostitutes. The mass media always covered these with reference to Jack the Ripper; 1964-1965 saw “Jack the Stripper” on the loose in Hammersmith, while the late 1970s witnessed the infamous case of the “Yorkshire Ripper” (Laite, 2011, pp. 209-210). Mass media thus reinforced the idea that prostitution meant walking the streets and that the prostitute was deviant, corrupt, stigmatized, yet also a perennial victim. In public discourses and in the law on prostitution in the period, it was also viewed as a binary, and permanent, state.

In the analysis that follows, I will examine the extent to which Sue was aware of or unaware of these discourses about young women’s sexuality, and about prostitution, how she navigated them, and what meant that she was able to break with the dominant codes governing the behavior of a young woman of her class.

Re-Analyzing Sue’s Interview

Wallace followed an informal interviewing style in the interview with Sue, opening with “So, when were you born—that’s the way to start?” Sue was born in 1962 into a large family. She had several siblings in care. Until Sue was about 7, the family was peripatetic. Her father was an unskilled worker. The family was not well off. Sue had left school at 16 and had no qualifications. There were hints that a previous boyfriend, to whom she had been engaged at the age of 16, had been controlling: She had left him “‘cos he wouldn’t let me go out or nothing.” Sue was living with her friend “Jackie” (and it was in this house that the interview took place). Also living there was a friend who was staying for a couple of weeks, and a friend of Jackie’s boyfriend, who worked on the ships. Jackie’s boyfriend was currently away working.

Sue was reticent at the start of the interview, giving very brief answers. Her answer to the question of whether she knew what she wanted to do when she left school revealed a pattern that was often repeated during the interview:

I don’t know—I did ‘ave a few, you know, want to be a nurse and all this—but then I thought “no.” Then I just sort of, wanted to do anything. The main thing I wanted to do was shop work—or working in a shop—but—then I couldn’t make up me mind what I wanted to do—I thought “Well, I’ll do anything,” you know, “what comes up—I’ll do it.”

“I don’t know” (and “you know,” another phrase Sue often used) acted as verbal and psychological buffers. “I don’t know” distanced Sue from her own explanations. Both phrases suggested that the reasons for Sue’s actions were both obvious and uninteresting. After putting up this buffer, Sue would usually answer the question but in such a way as to throw doubt on her own part in taking decisions. She prevaricated, explaining at some length the situation and her own lack of certainty about what to do. Often, friends were invoked: For example, when she explained to Wallace why she had left home, she said, “That’s me, you know—huh—because—er—I don’t know really what made me leave. ‘Cos I just wanted to be like me mates I s’pose.”

But these prevarications and halfhearted explanations were often followed by sudden action: “I’ll do anything . . . what comes up—I’ll do it.” Frustrated in her desire for a typically female job as a nurse or in a shop, Sue had taken a job at a clothing factory. But when she felt the factory manager was hassling her, drift once again turned into an abrupt decision: “so I said, ‘Right.’ Just tell ‘im what to do with ‘is job. So I signed on [claiming unemployment benefit]. And I moved away from Sheerness.” This was the second time she had signed on, and, perhaps partly because of her frequent moves, Sue had some trouble claiming unemployment benefit. She told Wallace that, eventually, “I just writ back and

said don't bother—I don't want yer money.” Listening for the ‘I’ voice in Sue’s testimony shows that most of Sue’s moments of action involved leaving or abandoning something. These were moments of decisiveness from one angle, but the decisiveness generally manifested in a disengagement from the situation. Even this more forceful voice that broke through periodically was a third line of defense, painting Sue’s actions as *reactions*, provoked by the situation. They were naturalized and neutralized: she took control of the situation, paradoxically, through walking away from it. A situation would slowly develop to a sort of crisis point, at which moment Sue’s decision—to leave home, to take a job, to leave a job—seemed like an inevitable reaction to the situation.

These elements were all present when Sue explained how she first went onto a ship:

Couple was sitting there one night—couple of me mates—you know I was really bored—and they said, “Oh, we [*sic*] going back with them on the ship” and I said “Oh, I’ll come.” I was a bit, sort of tiddly. I went back, got a drink, and I thought “Good crack . . .”

Later, she told the same story again, emphasizing the agency of the sailor who picked her up, and her friend’s encouragement:

er, I was sitting in the pub one night and all these blokes were sitting there—there’s one bloke kept looking over [*sic*] and I thought. Don’t know he was foreign like, and I said to my mate, “He’s nice” you know and she said “Oh yes” [*sic*] talk to him. He come over and started talking to me you know, and he was German, and, he said to me “Do you want to come back to the ship for a drink” and I said “No, I’m not going back.” Me mate said “Come on” I said, “Just for a drink, all right—one drink then I’m going off” and I said “Yer all right then” and I did. I had—I didn’t have one drink, you know, I come off about two o’clock in the morning. And then I’d only sort of spoke to the bloke, and I says “Are you going to find a taxi for me?” and he give me £10 for me taxi.

As noted above, in 1981, most semi-skilled women workers on the island could hope to earn between £55 and £80 a week; £10 was, thus, not an insignificant amount of money. The fact that Sue asked him to find her a taxi implies a certain amount of knowledge about how things worked “on the ships.” But the way that Sue set up her narrative served not to foreground her own agency, but rather minimized the importance of the stories Sue was telling, and particularly minimized her own agency in the narrative.

However, there were moments when this cadence was interrupted and more difficult feelings intruded: these were moments when contrapuntal voices broke into the narrative. Sue first mentioned going on the ships in response to a question about her parents, who were not speaking to her. Wallace queried this, and Sue replied, “Well, they used to speak to me, me Mum and Dad, but then I started, ‘cos me mates and

that, they all go on ships and I started going on ships with them, and me Mother” (she trailed off, apparently unable to complete the sentence and explain what her mother’s reaction to this had been). This was a somewhat confused statement; first Sue prevaricated, then she started to state her actions, then she reverted to the excuse—“‘cos me mates . . . all go on ships”—and finally she admitted to doing the same. But when it came to explaining the effect on her relationship with her mother, words failed. This was a point that threw up real emotions: Her mother’s disapproval weighed heavily on Sue.

At first, Sue claimed that “[n]othin much” happened on the ships: “you know, ‘ave a drink, talk, laugh, come off and go home.” She said she would “[j]ust go and have a look at them.” “Can’t get any money?” Wallace asked. “No, I don’t really—well, I mean, I have—all I go on there is for a drink, that’s it.” Sue was constructing this self-presentation for the first time, to a relative stranger from a different class and background to herself, and there are notes of confusion and contradiction as she sorted through the layers of explanation. She claimed, “If I don’t like them I just have a drink and go ‘ome.” But Wallace pressed her: “Easy way of getting money, though, isn’t it?” Sue admitted that it was and that it did help. Wallace asked her if that was “what you’ve done about getting money?” and suddenly, Sue reverted to talking about her parents; the two subjects were bound together in a knot of guilt that she seemed to want to explain,

I don’t m—it’s not so much that—when they first sort of—found out—it was a shock for them you know, ‘cos they didn’t think I’d do anything like that. But now, I spoke to me father a couple of weeks ago, and ‘e said, “I don’t care what you do,” he said, “But just look after yourself.” He said, “You’re old enough now” which I suppose I am now you know—I’m more 18 than I am 17. He says “Look after yourself—you don’t want to get yourself into trouble, or anything—just be careful,” he said, “If you want to come home, you can come home.” But me mother sort of—I saw me mother yesterday, ‘cos I don’t—I see her about once every two weeks—she sort of didn’t know whether to smile at me or not, you know, she gave me a sort of little smile—that was it.

Her parents lived just around the corner with several of Sue’s siblings. Sue later confessed that when she was away from Sheerness, “I do worry about ‘ow me father is, and me mother—especially me father ‘cos I think the world of him you know.” Speaking about her parents, regret, confusion, and uncertainty crept into Sue’s words. “Other people” might think she had gone astray, but that did not matter much to Sue. Her parents’ opinion, however, mattered deeply. She was keen to explain that her father had offered her a sort of acceptance, but her mother’s “sort of little smile” haunted her. Sue noted with wistfulness that Jackie, her landlady-housemate, “calls me her baby—‘cos I’m the youngest one,” suggesting that being part of a family was important to her. Yet her parents still adhered to a relatively traditional moral

code—this involved, of course, disapproving of young women sleeping with many men. It also involved women not swearing. When Sue admitted that “I have gone a bit astray since I come back here,” the example she chose to illustrate this was not the emotionally sensitive subject of her sexual behavior but swearing in public.

One of the most striking moments of the interview was when Wallace implicitly suggested that there was a simple dividing line between selling sex and another sexual act: “[i]t’s one thing going off with a fella you like, but if he starts giving you money . . .” (she trailed off; the implication seemed to be that Wallace felt that there was a difference between sex and a man giving a woman money in some form of exchange for sex). Sue, however, did not see or acknowledge such a simple division, as her response to Wallace’s statement showed:

R1: Yer . . . my earnings!

I: Well, I mean, where do you draw the line?

R1: Um . . . It don’t bother me, you know, say I went with a sailor.

I: Yer.

R1: Right, I’ll say I’ve been with a sailor, right?

Sue refused to see her encounters with sailors as “selling” herself. That would have been shameful, and she stated here that she was not ashamed of or unwilling to admit to her behavior. But in addition to rejecting a stigmatized, shameful picture of her behavior, it is important to recognize that specific facets of the local youth culture, in particular the subculture to which Sue belonged, also allowed her to classify her behavior differently from the way the interviewer did.

Why did Sue not see the same clear divide as Wallace did between having sex with men on the ships, and crossing the line into taking money for sex? One part of the answer lies in the fact that Sue’s relationships did not lack an emotional aspect. This was important to her. The men she encountered were finely shaded. There was not a simple dividing line between emotional relationships and ones that involved some form of exchange. There was Gary, a local man whom, she said, she could see herself marrying (though only if he stopped being a sailor, because his being away for long periods would “put temptation in my way”). Her present “boyfriend,” Jimmy, was a contractor, and expected to return to the north of England at some time in the future, where he was going to marry someone else. He bought Sue drinks in the local pub almost every night and paid for her to get home. There was little commitment—“e said he didn’t want to get involved or nothing, so I said, ‘All right then’”—though Sue encountered his sexual jealousy when she went to a “party” on a ship. Wallace seemed surprised that this had seemed odd to Sue.

Then there were sailors who took her back to their ships, bought her drinks, and gave her “taxi money.” The first sailor she had been back with had given her £10 (and, she stressed, “I’d only sort of spoke to the bloke”). This was large in

comparison with her highest weekly earnings to date (£45), but it was not as much as other women might take—one older woman apparently refused to get into bed for less than £80. Sue spoke at some length of the “really nice” sailors whom she had encountered. One, who she had thought was gay because of his initial chivalrous repose on the day bed in his cabin, had given her a gold ring as a keepsake. With these examples, Sue stressed that this was not a simple exchange of sex for money; emotional and personal ties were at play too. She emphasized that she liked the sailors and had fun with them. This suggests an alternative set of categories that could be used to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behavior, positing a key difference between “fun” and “work,” and emphasizing the importance of having fun. Of key importance was the fact that Sue’s group of female friends were also involved casually in “going on the ships.” Sue’s main point of reference was the value-set of this group of young women. Having a drink and a laugh was the main aim: “[a]nything for a laugh, like,” as Sue put it. We can view this culture and network as an “emotional community,” privileging certain emotions and ways of expressing emotion. Barbara Rosenwein (2010) has theorized such communities as welcoming circles in a hostile world that, through valorizing particular emotional experiences and expressions, give support to their participants. Sue’s circle of young women valued fun and freedom, and valorizing these enabled them to justify actions that others might disapprove of.

The culture of Sue and her “mates” in some ways resembles that of the working-class “lads” in “Hammertown” secondary modern, described by Paul Willis (1977) in the mid-1970s. They stressed autonomy—particularly the freedom to get up and leave at any time, and the ability to turn boring and banal situations to their own purposes, with practical jokes, ribbing and low-level violence. Sue lacked control over her life: She had few opportunities for rewarding work, she had no income, and having broken up with her fiancé, she was not set to attain the recognizably adult status of housewife and mother any time soon. In this context, drinking and going on the ships was one way to “have a laugh.” Sue did enjoy herself; though she admitted that she sometimes felt quite depressed, she put this down to drinking too much. She had a strong sense of her own sexual drives, an understanding rooted in her own experiences of sex and sexuality. Hence, she said she would not want to marry a sailor who would leave her alone for significant periods of time. This appreciation was rather similar to the active female sexual agency described in working-class Battersea in the late 1950s and early 1960s by Nell Dunn (1963), in *Up the Junction* (see also Brooke, 2012).

Sue also drew on ideas of youth as a period of transgressive behavior. These probably did not come principally from ideas of youthful rebellion and youth culture forged in the 1960s. Rather, Sue probably drew on older assumptions (established particularly in the inter-war period) about a working-class life cycle that involved a moment of greater

freedom (and sometimes a relatively high disposable income) for young people before marriage and children brought the inevitable responsibilities of full adulthood (see Todd, 2005). Sue also, perhaps, had some sense of the powerful implications social workers attached to the category of female “juvenile delinquency.” As one author put it, “The prevailing idea among sociologists and society as a whole, [is] that ‘delinquent girls are sexual delinquents’” (Wilson, 1978, p. 66). There were echoes of these discourses in complex interplay in Sue’s narrative. She suggested that her current lifestyle was a phase—either of youthful rebellion or even of hedonism. It was certainly not a long-term choice. She said that she planned to return to live with her brother off the island in a few weeks’ time and thought that she would take up a normal job there. Her brother had moved away “so that he wouldn’t get in no more trouble,” and she felt she could do the same. She said that she had “gone astray” a bit, but if this was merely part of a youthful phase, then it could easily be constructed as temporary. She thought that she would ultimately settle down and possibly marry. She planned to have one or two children—hopefully one. She said she did not want to marry until she was at least 25, and expressed a definite preference for living with a man before marrying him; in this, she was very similar to the other, more “respectable” young women on Sheppey who did subscribe to the dominant code of serial monogamy in close relationships.

It was important to Sue to assert that she maintained the standard she set herself: of only taking “taxi money” from sailors. But as the interview went on, she had to admit that she had compromised. Her explanation was first halting and then heated:

I have done it before—I admit it—I ‘ave. You know, if I’ve been really short, like got no money or nothing, couple of times I ‘ave gone back on a ship ‘cos I’ve ‘ad no money to get ‘ome, nor nothing—my shoes (not them ones—I just bought them) I had, me shoes was all split up the side and that, and I thought, sod it, why should I sit here with my feet soaking, when they’ve got all the money—let them give me some of it . . . They don’t miss it . . . I’ve been really skint you know.

Sue’s broken shoes were a potent symbol of her material need, the harm done to her by the elements, and her need to protect herself. Carolyn Steedman (1986) has written about the central importance of clothes to many women’s sense of self in postwar Britain. But Sue maintained an emotional distance from these economically driven encounters. Another contrapuntal voice emerged at this point in her narrative: “The way I look at it now, I think, if you go on a ship you might as well get off them what you can, because they do it—they get off us what they can, so . . .” She said she just made “a night’s money, you know, that’d be about thirty or forty pound.” Here, we hear—in “us”—a little of the collective voice of Sue’s friends, and the other women involved in “going on the ships” in a less casual way (like the woman

who would not get into bed for less than £80, which Sue noted in an aside, suggesting that for some women on Sheppey, there was a “going rate”).

Sue told Wallace that other women had encouraged her in the past to ask for more money. Perhaps there was a conflict of loyalties at play; Sue’s landlady-housemate Jackie (who appeared at one point during the interview) claimed that the older and more experienced women “lead the others” and “start taking you on,” and then become jealous of the greater popularity of the younger girls. Some of the other women perhaps did not like being undercut in price. In many local economies of prostitution, there have been methods of price control, enforced semi-collectively by the old hands—as described in London in the 1950s, Birmingham in the early 1980s, and Lyons in the mid-1970s (Jaget, 1980; Laite, 2011; McLeod, 1982). Sue had not developed a strong sense of solidarity with the older women who seemed to view their relations with sailors as more purely economic. The reasons for this center on two factors: first, Sue’s greater identification with her younger group of friends who went “on the ships” casually, for fun; and, second, the temporary nature of her current lifestyle. Moreover, Sue had never run up against the law. She was relatively sheltered from the law because of its focus on controlling street prostitution. In Sheerness, the local economy of prostitution centered around particular pubs and ships. There was no “red light district” in the stereotypical form. Dominant representations of “the prostitute” in law, mass media, and public discourse, as sketched above, probably seemed to Sue to bear little relation to her own activities.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to do two things. First, I have tried to explain how, in one particular locality in the early 1980s, a particular subculture could function to allow some young women to sidestep the dominant codes governing young, working-class women’s sexuality and go “on the ships” without seeing this as marking them as “prostitutes” or any related category. The value-set or subculture of Sue and her female “mates,” which centered on autonomy and “having a laugh,” sidestepped dominant codes of young, working-class women’s sexuality and justified their going “on the ships.” The freedom she had to choose among the sailors, the emotional and intimate aspects to her relationships with them, and the fun she had on the ships, all allowed Sue to construct this behavior with no reference to the morally freighted category of “prostitution.” There were other discourses present that she drew on when the need arose. Sue used justifications for taking more money that rested on an analysis of the differential economic power of the sailors, and an assumption that they, too, were using the women for what they could get. And she justified her behavior by suggesting that it was merely a brief, youthful period of “going astray.” She was also fully aware of—though she shied away from—the

emotionally unsettling knowledge that she had transgressed her parents' categories of good and bad behavior. Cultural categories were present but by no means determinative; what is interesting is how Sue navigated these, how she constructed her actions, and the moments of tension and heightened emotion in her account.

This analysis suggests that we need to rethink the ontology of the category of "prostitution." As Elizabeth Clement (2006) has suggested, "[w]e have often assumed with prostitution that we 'know it when we see it,' but a broad historical approach makes it clear that few of us can agree on what we are seeing" (p. 207). Even in this single interview, the interviewer and interviewee had very different ideas about what constituted "selling yourself." Similarly, 20th-century Britain saw repeated moral outcries about "amateur prostitutes" (Bland, 1985). In the First World War, this figure appeared to "give" sex "for free." As Lucy Bland (1985) pointed out, the term *prostitute* was applied because contemporaries could see no other way to conceive of active female sexuality. Bland went on to suggest that "[s]uch a woman was not . . . a prostitute at all" (p. 28). What she meant was that their activities did not fit historians' definitions of prostitution in the mid-1980s. But it is more interesting to notice the mismatches between different definitions of prostitution and understandings of female sexuality. Many groups of women who have been labeled "prostitutes" probably felt that it bore little relation to their life, work, or sense of self. Sue was one such woman. "Amateur prostitutes," or the "Charity girls" of 1920s New York, were probably others (Clement, 2006, pp. 206-207; Mort, 2010, pp. 129-130). To explain their activities, historians need to study the alternative understandings of "good" and "bad" feminine behavior that were available to—and deployed by—such groups. Further comparative work using a variety of archival sources to try to access the self-narratives of a range of women across time and place, and of different ages and backgrounds, would here be useful.

Many of the cultural representations of prostitution that dominated the mass media in the 1970s and 1980s are still with us today, despite (or perhaps because of) several decades of heated wrangling among different feminists, prostitutes' organizations, and self-professed moral guardians. This analysis of Sue's experiences disrupts several of these stereotypes. As Lucy Delap and Selina Todd have argued with relation to domestic service, "prostitution" has been assumed to be a "total" institution, because of the great cultural surpluses of meaning that have attached to it in the 20th century (Delap, 2011, p. 30; Todd, 2009). But historians should not fall into the trap of assuming that this was the case for all women involved in what might be labeled by outsiders as "prostitution," who often built their identity around an alternative set of values and categories.

Alongside challenging how we understand the category of "prostitution," this article has offered several methodological suggestions relating to the re-analysis of sociological data. I have argued that long, unstructured interviews can be

productively revisited to ask very different questions to those which the researcher conducting the interview was interested in. I have also suggested that detailed reading of a single interview can be used to shed light on individual subjectivity, and to use that as a prism through which to understand the reach of local and national discourses, cultures, and subcultures. In particular, I suggest that Gilligan's *Listening Guide* method allows close attention to the emotional tensions and flashpoints in a narrative. This can help historians to write narratives where not only cultural representations but also individual subjectivities and emotions form part of our histories, as historians have in recent years pushed for (see Roper, 2005). Reading through the individual narrative to see the broader cultural and subcultural discourses at play can also help with another issue raised in recent years by cultural historians, that is, the problem of attempting some assessment of the *throw* or *impact* of cultural discourses (see Mandler, 2004). I have also argued that to reuse archived data, we must first understand as much as possible about the nature of the source, the method of production, and the thinking that informed the researcher. This context is important, but, as I have attempted to show in this article, even without perfect information about the process of production, archived data can be productively re-analyzed.

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Notes

1. Su Cunngington, "Some aspects of prostitution in West End of London 1979," October 1979, 3AMS/B/16/15, the Papers of the Social and Moral Hygiene Association, Women's Library, London.
2. "Birmingham brothels," *Nova*, November 1967, 3AMS/B/16/03; "Sex on the Rates. Council's amazing plan for brothels run by the Town Hall," *Sun*, October 18, 1979. Margaret Schwarz to National Housewives Association, March 31, 1978, 3AMS/B/16/03.
3. For example, Letter from Joyce Ansell to *Sunday Times*, February 7, 1977; Margaret Schwarz to Cllr. The Rev. Middleton, Leicester City Council, December 3, 1981; Margaret Schwarz to the secretary, Haldane Society of Socialist

Lawyers, November 17, 1983; Margaret Schwarz to “Any answers,” BBC, February 14, 1987; “Cynthia Payne on sex, porn and prostitution” in *Every Women. The Current Affairs Magazine for Women*, December 1988, with printed letter from Margaret Schwarz about this article, all in 3AMS/B/16/03.

4. See, for example, “Prostitutes’ champion demands: change law,” *Hampstead & Highgate Express*, January 25, 1980 (describing the views of a spokeswoman of the English Collective of Prostitutes [ECP]); leaflet by Prostitution Laws Are Nonsense (PLAN) group, both in 3AMS/B/16/05.
5. See, for example, Ann Cadwallader, “Why we should change our attitude to prostitution,” *Tribune*, December 8, 1978, Scrapbook relating to prostitution, 10/50, Women’s Library, London.
6. See John Hobson, “Protest grows in red light square,” *Observer*, November 23, 1980; and materials relating to the occupation in 3AMS/B/16/05.

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