

1 Who was she? Surveying the educated woman: posture photos, beauty queens, dormitory rules and achievement motivation

It certainly would be healthy to take the American College Woman off the point of a pin and out from under the microscope, where she has been now for years on end.¹

I was looking at myself through the lens of history.²

In the 1950s and early 1960s women were frequently the object of the professional, the disciplinary and the prurient gaze. Educated women in particular were a matter of considerable anxiety and concern. Could they be well educated and still be trusted to take their places as dutiful wives and mothers? What did this surveillance mean for women? How could they become the subject of the gaze: looking at themselves and others? For some, higher education led to a transformation, an ability to see themselves in history³ and in literature.⁴ In this process of becoming a subject, rather than an object, women were transformed by, and began to transform, the educational experiences on offer.

As Jill Ker's plane left Sydney for the United States in 1960 she left behind 'a culture hostile to aspiring women'. She was beset by 'the overwhelming anxiety induced by the social attitudes of the 1950s, at being a young women travelling about the world bent on her own in-

1 Nancy D. Lewis, 'College women and their proper spheres', *Journal of the American Association of University Women*, 47(4), 1954, p. 207.

2 Conway, *True north*, p. 56.

3 Jill Ker Conway, *The road from Coorain*, Vintage Books, New York, 1990.

4 Carolyn Heilbrun, *Writing a woman's life*, Ballantine Books, New York, 1988; Kate Millett, *Sexual politics*, Doubleday, Garden City, NY, 1970.

dividual purposes'.⁵ Ker felt she was leaving behind the expectation that would signal to the world that 'a young female belonged with somebody else ... that she was going about her business of being a helpful and charming female bent on caring for the needs of others'. But could she leave those expectations behind? Were they peculiarly Australian?

At Radcliffe Graduate Centre at Harvard Jill Ker soon felt that she had come to live in 'one of the world's greatest concentrations of intellectual women'.⁶ Her intellectual concerns were real, not defined as eccentricity as in Australia.⁷ Not only the women's excitement at undertaking study but the articulateness of the men in her cohort delighted her as she realized that she had lived her 'entire life without really *talking* to people'.⁸ Perhaps this was the promised land.

Yet even as she came to love the heady atmosphere of Cambridge and Harvard, Ker was puzzled by the attitudes to sex and dating. Women felt that they belonged in couples. They were even ashamed to be without a 'date' on a Saturday night, hiding in their rooms. Worse, Ker complained, 'not to want to be paired off in this ludicrous manner meant that one was "poorly adjusted", having trouble with one's feminine nature and headed for deep psychological trouble'.⁹ Her request for migraine medication was received with a 'knowing look, which conveyed that I was riddled with neurosis, and that what ailed my head would disappear if only I found a man'.¹⁰ Was the peer culture that distorted so many women's lives insidiously present at even the most respected centres of intellectual culture? Jill Ker was not immune to feminine distractions, or the need to project an attractive appearance. After agonizing about her forthcoming General Examination, the essential hurdle before undertaking research for a thesis

5 Conway, *True north*, p. x.

6 p. 9.

7 p. 23.

8 p. 17, original emphasis.

9 p. 21.

10 p. 22.

at Harvard, she spent the day before the exam ‘getting a massage and a facial at Elizabeth Arden and dining with friends’.¹¹

By travelling across the Pacific Jill Ker had been transformed from a ‘university graduate’ in Australian parlance to a ‘college woman’. And both were a matter of considerable interest in her country of origin and the newly adopted one she embraced with such joy.

As Dean Nancy Lewis of Pembroke College noted: ‘it certainly would be healthy to take the American College Woman off the point of a pin and out from under the microscope, where she has been now for years on end’.¹² But had Jill Ker entirely escaped a culture hostile to aspiring women? Could she avoid the feeling of belonging to somebody else? The need to escape, to find a self, was an enduring motif of the 1950s and 60s when social science and psychology, politics and advertising conspired to convince women of their inevitable futures. They were to be wives and mothers, consorts of men. Educated maybe, fascinating dinner companions maybe, as well as sexual partners, but partners nevertheless. These college women excited considerable comment.

In a 1954 address Dean Nancy Lewis cleverly satirized the continuing interest in ‘the college woman’. How, she asked, ‘has the college man escaped and why has no one written a critical analysis of *his* shortcomings so that his college could see and mend the error of its ways?’¹³ Lewis went on to do precisely that, suggesting some cunning reversals: ‘Educating your son in the interests of our daughter’ or ‘Trends in the higher education of men and what this portends for the post-graduation activities of women’.¹⁴ Joan Scott noted that continuing concern in 1985: ‘There is [in the literature about higher education for women] a persistent and striking undercurrent of concern with sex and gender, with the impact education will have on the sexuality of women and on that system of gender relations deemed “natural” to human society’.¹⁵

11 p. 35.

12 Lewis, ‘College women and their proper spheres’, p. 207.

13 p. 208.

14 p. 207.

15 Quoted in Carolyn Heilbrun, *Hamlet’s mother and other women*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2002, p. 220.

It was not only the American ‘college’ woman who occupied that uncomfortable position. Since women entered higher education in the nineteenth century they have been the subject of anxious social commentators. From Herbert Spencer’s well-documented fears that study would ‘desex’ women, causing blood to flow from their wombs to their brains and hence limit their child-bearing potential, to later concerns that educated women might be *disinclined* to marry and produce children, educators, medical experts, social scientists and psychologists have wanted to understand that disturbing being – the educated woman.

Women too have joined the fray, frequently with the desire to rebut some of the stranger theories of their detractors. In 1880s England Eleanor Sidgwick undertook a lengthy study of Newnham College graduates in an attempt to show that they had not been ruined for marriage and child bearing compared with their less educated relatives.¹⁶ It has not only been in defence of women’s education that women have surveyed their peers. They too have wanted to know what difference education made to the lives of women who sought it. The International Federation for University Women and its national affiliates have skilfully used the instrument of the survey to argue for a better deal for women in employment and the professions.

In this chapter we look at a range of surveys, studies and other measures that focused on the lives of women graduates of the 1950s and early 60s in both Australia and the United States. Some looked briefly at women at a particular point in time. Other life course studies enable us to track the lives of women over several decades. Underlying them all is a distinct anxiety about the educated woman. Who is she? Can she really be trusted not to undermine life as we know it? If we categorize her can we perhaps tame her, make her more amenable? In this climate it is hardly surprising that the young Jill Ker was unsure of her sense of herself as an intelligent person.

Women graduates have been the subjects of massive observation. The Henry A. Murray Research Center Data Archive at the Radcliffe

16 Alison Mackinnon, *Love and freedom: professional women and the reshaping of personal life*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1997.

Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard, for example, lists at least seventy studies, several of them longitudinal, that dissect and analyze the educated woman from all possible angles. This is not surprising: the Murray Center is after all the Center for the Study of Lives. But what is truly astonishing is the range of studies. We can assess a woman's achievement motivation; her goals, attitudes and values; the role conflict she experiences; her fear of success; her likelihood of suffering from bulimia; and her ideas of identity and intimacy in marriage. We can begin to understand her likelihood of studying engineering, joining the women's liberation movement or volunteering; her ability to cope with children and a career, with ageing or with occupational stress. She has been truly put under the microscope.

While many of these studies cluster around the period of the 1970s and 80s – a period when women researchers were trying to understand themselves better – many started earlier and followed women through the stormy period of the changes of the 1960s and 1970s, thus producing a valuable picture of 'lives over time'.¹⁷ Many come from a narrowly psychological approach; others are sociological. All reflect their time and the preoccupations of their practitioners. Sometimes the questions asked are as revealing as the responses. Some studies not specifically aimed at college women nevertheless offer a window into understanding graduates' way of life, as it is possible to select highly educated women from the larger group. The wonderful Kelly Longitudinal Study, for example, used extensively by Elaine Tyler May for her book *Homeward bound*,¹⁸ looks at marital compatibility. For researchers who seek to understand the marriages of educated women in the fifties this is an insightful, and often baffling, resource on the level of acceptance of marital limitations by women that is hard to understand today.

17 Kathleen Day Hulbert, 'Reflections on the lives of educated women' in Hulbert and Schuster, *Women's lives through time*.

18 Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward bound: American families in the Cold War era*, Basic Books, New York, 1988.

Measuring up: the sexual gaze

Not only were women subjected to the metaphorical gaze of the social researcher. They had to measure up under the direct gaze of many others, usually male. The direct gaze stretched from the posture photos taken by a generation of researchers, supposedly to support scientific and anthropological understanding, to the multitude of university and college beauty contests that characterized the fifties and early sixties. Both subjected women's bodies to critical observation, teaching them the hard lessons of what constituted the ideal feminine shape.

Posture photos

An extraordinary ritual of the period from the 1930s to the 1960s was the taking of nude posture photographs of new students on campus, particularly at the more elite US institutions for both men and women. Radcliffe, Ron Rosenbaum claims, took posture photos from 1931 to 1961, Wellesley from the 1920s.¹⁹ Male and female students were photographed nude, full length, front, back and side. These photographs were originally intended to highlight postural defects, leading to remedial exercises. At least that is the official story ... Rosenbaum, a *New York Times* writer, following leads in the 1990s, claimed that the photos were actually made for anthropological research, stemming from Francis Galton, the British founder of social Darwinism. The practice was taken over in the 1940s and 50s by anthropologists E.A. Hooton and W.H. Sheldon. Sheldon in particular was obsessed with body types (somatypes) and was the originator of the well-known endomorph, ectomorph and mesomorph typology, which purported to predict personality from body type, to predict, for instance, who was predisposed to criminality or leadership. George Hersey, interviewed

19 Ron Rosenbaum, 'The great Ivy League nude posture photo scandal', *The New York Times Sunday Magazine*, 15 January 1995.

for a 1995 article on Sheldon, claimed that it was believed at the time ‘that a person’s body, measured and analysed, could tell much about intelligence, temperament, moral worth and probable future achievement’.²⁰ Sheldon also wrote the well-known *Atlas of men*, illustrated with Harvard nudes.

Was there a sinister motive behind the posture photos? Hersey claimed a eugenic purpose for the practice and cited Hooton as proposing that the data would eventually lead to proposals ‘to control and limit the production of inferior and useless organisms’.²¹ The idea was to encourage better breeding – getting the male and female students of the elite colleges together – an idea that was certainly in the minds of many students and parents if not for such eugenic and indeed racist purposes.

It is not my intention to get to the bottom of this fascinating story here, although the defeat of Sheldon’s attempt to put together an *Atlas of women* would make a tempting detour. Many women’s colleges were keen to distance themselves from any such motives.²² At Smith College posture pictures continued to be taken until 1973. Alison Prentice wrote to her parents:

I never did tell you what I got in my posture picture – I’m almost a genius. It was C+. However I have an increased pelvic tilt, my shoulders are too far back and my head too far forward. ie [picture] – something like this! We are having our pictures taken again next Monday – and so I will let you know if there is any gigantic improvement. It’s terribly humiliating and above all downright discouraging to discover that as a physical specimen you are a complete wreck! A shame to the human race.²³

A later study found that posture was not a strong predictor for future neck or back pains, suggesting that the intent was medical rather than

20 Hersey, quoted in Rosenbaum, p. 30.

21 Hersey, quoted in Rosenbaum, p. 30. See also George L. Hersey, *The evolution of allure: sexual selection from the Medici Venus to the Incredible Hulk*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1996.

22 See for instance, Sarah Ligon, ‘A crooked science: the history of posture photos at Wellesley’, *Counterpoint: the MIT-Wellesley Journal of Campus Life*, February 2002, pp. 12–15.

23 Prentice letters, private collection, 8 November 1951.

anthropological.²⁴ What is significant is the impact of such practices – nude photos often taken by male photographers, albeit in white lab coats – on the psyches of the women students who lined up for them. *The Radcliffe News* of 1949 wrote flippantly of new students: ‘their egos were deflated at the sight of their cotton-robed selves awaiting posture pictures’.²⁵

Sylvia Plath fictionalized the ritual in *The bell jar*:

[it] appealed to me about as much as having my posture picture taken at college, where you have to stand naked in front of a camera, knowing all the time that a picture of you stark naked, both full view and side view, is going into the college gym files to be marked ABC or D depending on how straight you are.²⁶

To her mother, as always, she wrote a more sanitized and cheerful version:

my physical exam ... consisted in getting swathed in a sheet and passing from one room to another in nudity. I'm so used to hearing, 'Drop your sheet', that I have to watch myself now lest I forget to dress! My height is an even 5'9", my weight 137; my posture good; although when my posture picture was taken, I took such pains to get my heels and ears in a straight line that I forgot to tilt up straight. The result was the comment, 'You have good alignment, but you are in constant danger of falling on your face'.²⁷

But there were more serious claims than deflated egos. In 1995 Ron Rosenbaum tracked down remaining photos, and Sheldon's files, then located in the National Anthropological Archives within the National Museum of Natural History in Washington.²⁸ There he found *inter alia* proof that for women the experience could indeed be disturbing. A reply to a letter of Sheldon's asking to rephotograph the female freshmen

24 Smith College, Class of 1957 25th Reunion Book, 1982.

25 *The Radcliffe News*, September 1949.

26 Sylvia Plath, quoted in Jane Yolen, 'Posture picture on the wall, who's the straightest of us all?', *Smith Alumnae Quarterly*, Fall 1984, p. 19.

27 Aurelia Schober Plath (ed.), *Letters home by Sylvia Plath*, Faber and Faber, London, 1975, p. 48.

28 Rosenbaum, 'The great Ivy League nude posture photo scandal', p. 46.

at Denison University, Ohio, for technical reasons, was revealing. Sheldon's request was refused on the grounds that 'to require them to pose for another [nude posture photo] would create insurmountable psychological problems'.²⁹ The faces told a similar story. Rosenbaum found the faces of the men in the photos 'diffident', 'oblivious'. But the women, he claimed, 'were another story'. He was surprised at how many 'looked deeply unhappy': he detected 'what looked like grimaces, reflecting pronounced discomfort, perhaps even anger'.³⁰

Did this practice take off elsewhere at the time? My high school class was examined semi-nude in the late '50s by a doctor who asked jovially if I were a horse rider, a reference to my bandy legs. The legacy of this remark, probably well-intentioned and meant to set a young woman at ease, was a recurring anxiety about the shape of my legs. But I have not yet found evidence of posture photographs in Australia.

Beauty contests

Being in front of the camera was not always an unhappy experience for women. One large state campus in the United States offered a sample of the wide array of contests through which a US co-ed (that is, a woman who attended a co-educational institution) could achieve acclaim from her peers. She could become a University of Texas Sweetheart, the highest accolade, or at least a finalist in that competition. She might become a Bluebonnet Belle (there were ten belles so the chances were considerably enhanced) or even a Bluebonnet Belle nominee. All sweethearts, runners up, belles and nominees were photographed, frequently in full-page photo spreads, or, in the case of nominees, listed in the *Cactus*, the annual University of Texas at Austin yearbook. She might also be chosen as one of the student 'literary' magazine, the *Texas Ranger's*, monthly pin-ups where a two-page spread would feature prominently the girl of choice, preferably in

29 p. 56.

30 p. 56. See also Yolen, 'Posture picture on the wall'.

shorts with as much leg displayed as possible. Several other smaller, less prestigious possibilities existed, giving many young co-eds the opportunity to include these awards in their CV. In the frequent wedding announcements listed in *The Daily Texan*, the student newspaper, a girl's awards were always noted with great acclaim, even providing headline material. 'Texas Sweetheart weds' was not atypical. Even in the Law School, not a common destination for women students at the time, a U of T young woman could vie to become a Portia. *The Dicta*, 'the voice of the Law Students' noted in 1958 that this annual event is sponsored by *Perigrinus* as a recognition of the girls in the Law School. They were chosen on their scholarship, personality, beauty and extra-curricular activities.³¹

One law graduate of the class of '51 recalls that the few women in law school were exploited by today's standards.

The Portia contest developed during my time. That was the election for the law school Sweetheart. If you were female, you were automatically entered in the contest, and your name went on the ballot to be voted on by the whole school. One year, all women in school were called to the office. We were posed for a photograph, sitting on the counter with legs crossed in cheesecake style. When one brave soul voiced the discomfort many of us felt at this stunt, she was characterized as a 'bad sport'.³²

This law graduate went on to become the first woman from Texas and the youngest lawyer ever to argue a case before the United States Supreme Court.³³ No doubt the experience bred a strong sense of self, of needing to 'sink or swim', as an earlier graduate noted.³⁴ At Louisiana State University Beauties, Favorites and Darlings were chosen by male ballot. The LSU *Gumbo* regularly reported the voting and the winners of the Darling of LSU.

31 *The Dicta*, vol. 57, 4 March 1958.

32 Tarpley, quoted in Marquette Maresh, 'Our place in history: a celebration of women in the law at the University of Texas School of Law 1999 reception remarks', *Texas Journal of Women and the Law*, 8(2), 1999, pp. 340–341.

33 p. 361.

34 p. 337.

It is strange that the beauty queen culture became so rampant in colleges and universities. It was pervasive in American high schools of the time but was usually inaccessible to ‘clever’ girls. In high school, Lois Banner claims, beauty and popularity were incompatible with ‘brains’ or athletic success for girls. ‘Brains like Fran [Banner’s soul mate] and me could never win such titles’, she reported. They would not have their outfits exhibited in the school front hall display case as ‘winner of the monthly competition for the best groomed girl-of-the-month’, Banner explains: ‘brains cancelled out whatever beauty I possessed’.³⁵ Clearly this cancellation no longer operated in colleges and universities where even stronger measures were necessary to assure the anxious population that educated girls were being produced for their ultimate roles as wives, mothers and consumers.

On the west coast of the United States, University of California at Berkeley girls did not feature quite as prominently in full-page spreads in the annual yearbook but could nevertheless vie for the titles of Homecoming Queen, Dream Girl of Delta Sigma Phi, Daffodil Queen and Ski Queen. They could even be a ‘Lux Lovely’. But the Berkeley co-eds roped in their male counterparts to at least a small degree. There was an annual ‘Ugly Man’ contest (photos do not seem to bear out the aptness of the title) and at a fashion event ‘Bud Sweet was crowned Dude of the Day by these fair co-eds’, as the caption put it.³⁶

Australian universities also had their beauty queens although there was a far smaller set of awards to vie for. The University of Adelaide Miss University contest of 1950, ostensibly a fundraising event, was reported in the student journal *On Dit*. The basis of judging was ‘*General Attractiveness*, which includes (1) figure, (2) posture, (3) features, (4) clothes sense – individuality, smartness etc. Secondly, *Personality*, which includes (1) general intellect, (2) voice, (3) mannerisms and (4) social sense.’³⁷ At Melbourne University in the late 1950s and early 60s Miss Fresher contests still attracted keen interest.

35 Banner, *Finding Fran*, p. 64.

36 *Blue and Gold*, Associated Students of the University of California at Berkeley (ASUC), 1952, p. 97.

37 *On Dit*, 19 June 1950, p. 3.

The tone of *On Dit* made it clear that women's appearance was paramount and a sexual sub-text was common in reporting women's activities. Reporting of student balls and dances in the local Adelaide newspapers focused more on fashion than on sex: 'Frocking, colourful and delightfully individual, allied with the gaily attractive flower groupings, made a picture of collective beauty' gushed a report of the St Ann's College dance of 1951.³⁸ Individual outfits were described enthusiastically: the 'silvery grey tulle and satin dress' of the vice president of the College Club received the full treatment. 'Vertical tucks fashioned the little strapless bodice banded in satin, and fullness to the skirt was draped from one side. A cloud of tulle was added for [a] stole.'³⁹ Student publications, however, were less concerned with the niceties of fashion.

If Australian student publications lacked the same obvious enthusiasm for women competing through their looks they made up for it in their level of reporting, often salacious and misogynist. A report of the Women's Union annual revue in 1953 declared that

Despite the fears of certain old-fashioned girls who had heard 'that the Women's Union Revue is not quite nice', Lorna Seedsman, Marie Guinand, Jenny Samuel, Julianne Gunnin and a host of other luscious and leggy lovelies will be let loose towards the end of July in an extravaganza of music, mirth and mysticism.⁴⁰

The caption of the photos of two women from the previous year's revue was: 'Talk about cheesecake. 202 pounds of fun in a highlight from last year's Women's Revue.' A report about rehearsals stated: 'day by day the high kicks get higher and the low jokes get lower'.⁴¹

There was a distinct sexual innuendo in these reports, less common in the US student journals. The impact of the innuendo in Australian student journals was magnified by the sheer barrage of misogynist remarks and relentless emphasis on women's sex. In the mid 1950s *On Dit* contained a regular column on current affairs called 'A-Breast

38 Payne, *St Ann's College*, p. 32.

39 p. 32.

40 *On Dit*, 1 July 1953, p. 3.

41 *ibid.*

of the Times' which featured a gratuitous picture of a woman showing plenty of cleavage or a large-breasted film star in profile (the word 'gratuitous' was suggested here by my young female research assistant whose twenty-first century feminist values were affronted by such blatant reporting). A mammary fixation seems to have been a particular obsession for the student editors at the time. In May 1950 a debate between men students was held on the topic 'That this house prefers Bertrand to Jane' (referring to Bertrand and Jane Russell). The *On Dit* report, as well as the actual debate, contained many comments about Jane Russell's breasts. This same concern almost crushed the high spirits of one female law student: 'There was an incident I think almost in my first year where there was a law school paper ... and someone wrote about me and my bouncy breasts, and that was just enough to make you self-conscious and to dampen what otherwise would be a very natural outgoing sort of thing. But it didn't dampen me totally.'⁴²

The disciplinary gaze

Women students who lived in residential colleges or dormitories in both Australia and the United States were subject to a set of rigid rules that shaped their comings and goings and, in particular, any activities with the opposite sex. The rules encompassed dress, curfews and forms of appropriate behaviour. It was hard work policing the moral boundaries, as the US Intercollegiate Associated Women Students (IAWS) acknowledged in 1954. 'Since every community looks to college women for leadership', they noted, 'AWS should be concerned with training them in their campus life'. Yet there was a common problem: 'how could moral values be upheld when there is a considerable time lag between the time when entertainment facilities close and

42 Interview, 'Graduating in the Fifties' project, Melbourne.

the hours the girls are required to be in'.⁴³ 'No alcohol' and 'no men' were two important rules at St Ann's College in Adelaide, South Australia.⁴⁴ Clearly the mix of alcohol, men and unsupervised hours was inflammatory in an age where unmarried pregnancy was the most feared outcome for women and college authorities alike.

Those who infringed the rules might come before a Judicial Committee of their peers. The committee had the power to impose sanctions such as 'grounding' or being 'gated' (being confined to the residence), or being 'campused' (confined to the college and the library). Curiously these rules, while part of the wider university's *in loco parentis* role, often overseen by a Dean of Women, were administered by the students themselves, who operated as responsible governing and judicial officers. Women's rules stood for self-government. Thus while they constituted a set of behavioural restrictions on the one hand, their administration provided a training ground for young women in a range of leadership and committee activities on the other. Women learned how to police other women. The papers of the Judicial Committee of one particular Women's Dormitory Association (WDA) provide, over a number of years, an insight into a process of social change as the fine distinction of rules and sanctions for infringement of rules that obtained in the early 1950s gave way to an increasing sense of irrelevance and, eventually, restructuring by 1966.

The University of California (Berkeley) Women's Dormitory Association (WDA) was formed in 1915 and aimed to 'encourage the development in each house of a high standard of scholarship, conduct and participation in living group and campus activities'.⁴⁵ Records kept in the early 1950s include rules of personal conduct such as these:

43 IAWS, regional convention reports, manual on leadership program and life after college, 1954, in Women's Dormitory Association Records, Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley, p. 16.

44 Payne, *St Ann's College*, p. 26.

45 WDA records, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

1. Housecoats and slippers may be worn to breakfast and in the downstairs rooms until 10am only.
2. Slacks and jeans may be worn to breakfast and lunch only; campus clothes may be worn to dinner.
3. Bandanas may never be worn to Sunday dinner. Bandanas may be worn at all other meals if tied neatly.
4. Shorts must never be worn in the living room, drawing room, sitting room etc. or dining room.

Smoking had its own set of rules:

1. Smoking on campus shall be allowed only in accepted places (ie Wheeler steps, Library steps, in classrooms with the approval of the instructor).
2. There shall be no smoking in the dining room except on special occasions when smoking is permitted.

The rules also noted menacingly that ‘No woman should be out alone after dusk’. The rules on ‘lockouts’ were one of the key issues the Women’s Judicial Committee (WJC) concerned itself with. The girl on duty was to close the downstairs door at 6 pm, the time the girls were to be back in the residence. A girl could be ‘campused’ for two nights if she forgot to do the lockout. Exceptions were made for those with specials (permissions) and on weekends. The WJC constantly worried about the problem of ‘apathy’: girls who did not want to go to residence/dormitory meetings.

The involvement of students in the judicial and other committees that administered the rules was deliberate: it trained them in leadership opportunities. They learned meeting procedures, to engender sociability, etiquette and the place of service activities. The annual report of the Dean of Women at the University of Texas, Austin, mentioned with concern a survey that showed that ‘all major offices for women were held by just a handful of students’.⁴⁶ This resulted in an attempt

46 Dean of Women at the University of Texas at Austin, *Annual Report 1953–54*, Centre for American History, University of Texas Archives.

to distribute opportunities for leadership and responsibility more widely. Beth Bailey argues that throughout the 1950s the system of controls became increasingly complex: 'by the early 1960s it was so elaborate as to be ludicrous'.⁴⁷ She gives the University of Michigan as an example: nine of the student handbook's fifteen pages were devoted to the details of women's hours and curfew regulations. Bailey argues that in fact 'the overelaboration of rules is in itself evidence that the controls were beleaguered'.⁴⁸

There were many who sought to transgress the rules. Elaborate stratagems were devised to escape detection if a student with a late pass returned after the deadline. At St Ann's students were required to place their keys into a box, the resounding thud assuring the listening authorities of their return. Latecomers devised strategies such as flushing the toilet at the same time to muffle the sound, or lowering the key on a strand of hair or, in time-honoured fashion, climbing in through windows left open by friends.⁴⁹ In Texas the Dean of Student Life reported in October 1954 that 'girls are objecting to petty rules regarding dress, blue jeans, etc.' and further in 1955 that there was concern over students moving out to apartments.⁵⁰ By 1959 the Dean was considering limited joint activities between the men and the women. She 'suggested a letter should be written to Indiana University to see how their dormitory with one wing for men and one for women and joint eating in the centre is working out'.⁵¹ The University of California (Berkeley) Women's Dormitory Association constantly complained of apathy amongst students, of girls not attending meetings, resisting attempts to engender 'house unity' and 'spirit'.

The dormitory association papers at the University of Texas at Austin offer another perspective – on racial segregation. It was noted

47 Beth Bailey, *Sex in the heartland*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1999, p. 79.

48 p. 80.

49 Payne, *St Ann's College*, p. 25.

50 University of Texas at Austin, Dean of Women's reports, summary of disciplinary cases, University of Texas Archives.

51 Dean of Women, UT-A, staff meeting minutes, 27 October 1959.

that ‘During a wing meeting in Kinsolving [the women’s dormitory] in October, 1961, upper-class advisers told residents that it was unadvisable to invite them (female negro [sic] guests) up, and we will discourage it’.⁵² The co-eds at the meeting applauded. It was not until 1972 that *The Daily Texan* headlined the news of ‘UT dorms integrated after long struggle’.⁵³ This contrasts with the more liberal UC (Berkeley) where a Co-operative Association booklet of 1961–62 noted ‘their cosmopolitan atmosphere and inter-racial interdenominational traditions’.⁵⁴

For those elite American women who lived in sorority houses a different form of disciplining was occurring, a shaping of the ideal wife for the new professional, a subtle containment of any nascent academic ambitions. The sharpest, sometimes satirical, portraits of the era come from women writers. Joan Didion, alumna (class of 1956) of the University of California at Berkeley, wrote an account of Berkeley in the up-market magazine *Mademoiselle* in 1960. Describing women students who are ‘affiliated’ she wrote:

in a house a girl observes all the amenities of life at home. She reads or plays bridge until dinner, against a comforting counterpoint of soft voices, muffled telephones and someone picking out an everlasting Autumn in New York on the piano. After dinner the housemother pours coffee in the living room from a silver urn, pledges drift off to their compulsory three-hour study period and upperclassmen [sic] settle down to study or knit or watch television and to wait for the telephone ...

‘I wish we could go somewhere besides fraternity parties’, a pretty girl tells you wistfully, and another, a transfer from a smaller Californian college, adds: ‘I used to go out with boys I wouldn’t dream of marrying. Sometimes now I miss that.’ She sounds as if she were expressing a desire to see the far side of the moon, and she is, in her terms, doing just that. Her entire *modus vivendi* is oriented towards the day when she will be called upon to pour coffee in her own living room.⁵⁵

52 UT-A, Almetris Papers.

53 *Daily Texan*, 5 May 1972.

54 In WDA records.

55 Joan Didion, ‘Berkeley’s giant: the University of California’, *Mademoiselle*, January 1960, quoted in Ray Colvig, ‘Few concerns, fewer women’, *Chronicle of the University of California*, 1(2), 1998, p. 113.

Joyce Carol Oates went further in her bitter fictional portrait of the Kappa Gamma Pi house at Syracuse where ‘a half-dozen girls blithely ignored the ledger book, and, yet more defiantly, trailed in after 11.00 pm curfew, delivered giggling and swaying-drunk to the doors by their dates’.⁵⁶

Sororities warrant a book on their own but it is worth noting here that even in 1965, our year when the axis tilted, UC sociology professor John Finlay Scott observed that the college sorority was one of the principal instruments created by the American middle class to make sure its daughters married the right man.⁵⁷ Sororities were carefully ranked for social class and some evaded the worst of the marriage mills. Lois Banner wrote of UCLA that her sorority sisters ‘actually respected scholastic achievement and esteemed me for my good grades’.⁵⁸

By the mid 1960s in a climate of increasing questioning the strain of maintaining the rules was just too great. At university campuses throughout the US and Australia the rules gave way to a sense of women being responsible for their own behaviour, an acceptance that the double standard was outdated. An Associated Women Students (AWS) meeting was called in 1963 to discuss the rules concerning lockout – ‘not from a standpoint of how they are enforced or carried out – but rather from the more philosophical side relating to why we have them at all’.⁵⁹ The UC (Berkeley) yearbook of 1965 was dedicated to the United Nations and focused on student protest and free speech. At Berkeley in 1966 the WDA formed a restructuring committee with a proposal for an independent social organization. Membership was to be open to men’s houses and co-ed houses. It was the end of the Women’s Dormitory Association as such.⁶⁰ The restructuring committee proposed the dissolution of the association, the scholarship funds to be distributed to girls in approved ‘non-sorority houses’.

It was the end of an era, the beginning of a more open and sexually liberated climate at universities and colleges.

56 Joyce Carol Oates, *I'll take you there*, Fourth Estate, London, 2003, p. 15.

57 ‘Sororities like marriage mills, sociologist says’, *LA Times*, 10 May 1965.

58 Banner, *Finding Fran*, p. 112.

59 AWS records, 8 May 1963, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

60 WDA records, University of California, Berkeley.

The social science gaze

The will to achieve

Although the ambitions of senior women at Berkeley seemed serious did women have the same will to achieve as men? This hot topic has flourished in the research literature on women's education. In some ways it is an element of Freud's famous question 'what do women want?' In another it harks back to the nineteenth century concern about the 'divided aim' that vitiated women's drive: were women to be educated for motherhood or for a career? The question has animated educators since women's appearance on the educational stage, as it is feared that an investment in women's higher education, without a guarantee of her commitment to achievement, would be an investment wasted. Of course a woman's will to achieve could always be sidetracked by other concerns: her need to attend to family matters, her fear of appearing 'unfeminine', or most tellingly the 'role conflict' she suffered. The tendency to see such traits as independent of circumstances is typical of the narrow psychological approach of many studies of highly educated women. We are brought back to the realities of 'achievement motivation' by a statement from a Sydney graduate study: 'mothers of pre-school children found their aims more difficult to achieve than the working women generally'.⁶¹

Also hidden in many women's subconscious was the infamous 'motive to avoid success', a problem that did not seem to afflict Jill Ker. Matina Horner's work sums up much of the anxiety around educating women in the mid 1960s. Horner and others identified a trait within some women that made them anxious about success. The anxiety was based on the idea that femininity and individual achievement, particularly feats that reflected intellectual competence or leadership

61 Madge Dawson, *Graduate and married: a report on a survey of one thousand and seventy married women graduates of the University of Sydney*, University of Sydney, Sydney, 1965, p. 181.

potential, were mutually exclusive.⁶² This idea in itself drew on Freudian psychology, particularly on the idea that the essence of femininity was the repression of aggressiveness. Thus the qualities necessary for intellectual success, competition, independence and competence, which were highly valued in men, cast doubts upon a woman's femininity. Indeed they might lead to feared accusations of masculinity in women. Horner quoted Margaret Mead: 'Each step forward as a successful American regardless of sex means a step backward as a woman'.⁶³

How pervasive was this 'fear of success' or, as Horner recast it, the 'motive to avoid success'? Horner found it to be prevalent among girls from predominantly middle and upper class homes, and those whose male peers did not value educated or career women. It occurred even in select women's colleges and became more marked over the course of their studies. Basing her studies at the University of Michigan, a large public 'multiversity', Horner lamented the fact that in spite of the increasing freedoms for women from the mid 1960s the motive to avoid success was growing. Femininity and competitive achievement continued to be desirable but mutually exclusive. She suggested that young women who faced this conflict would adjust their expectations and behaviours, disguise their abilities and move away from competition. This however, came at a price: internalized feelings of frustration, bitterness and confusion.⁶⁴ Here surely was a variant of Friedan's 'problem that has no name'.

But for some the script could work in reverse. The motive to achieve could be activated by class as much as by personality, by attempts to heal the 'hidden injuries of class', to live out the unachieved ambition of deeply imprinted family scripts. Lois Banner, writing of her background as a daughter of farmers and workers with strong ethnic ties, recognized later in life her family legacy: 'The drive to achievement was my birthright, handed to me by a family whose

62 Matina Horner, 'Towards an understanding of achievement-related conflicts in women', *Journal of Social Issues*, 28(2), 1972, p. 157.

63 p. 158.

64 p. 171.

members for several generations had fallen short of the mark'.⁶⁵ 'Behind my lust for education', she wrote of her UCLA degree, 'lay the drive to improve my social status even though it was hidden from my external self'.⁶⁶ On the other hand, Banner felt that her friend Fran, who had a patrician heritage, could reject high achievement because 'her personal lexicon, her family history, already included it'.⁶⁷ This analysis, based on class, seems more satisfying than seeking an elusive trait of personality.

Role conflict: could married women work without destroying the family?

When the Homecoming Queens and Daffodil Girls left colleges and universities with their newly minted degrees they anticipated a life of marriage but not necessarily of paid work. Increasingly however paid work became part of their lives. So did the expected parenting and voluntary work. Could they handle those competing 'roles'? The notion of role conflict embodies the anxieties that surrounded the entry of highly educated women into careers. A study undertaken by Baruch and Barnett in 1979–80 set out to examine women's involvement in multiple roles in relation to three indices of psychological distress.⁶⁸ These indices were role overload, role conflict and anxiety. The researchers examined 'women in the middle years', women whose mean sample age was 43.6. These then were the women who had graduated from US universities in the 1950s and early 60s. Among the questions they were asked was 'Have you ever had a nervous breakdown?' – a question redolent of the period which solicited a surprising number of positive responses and was certainly seen as entirely appropriate.

The study yielded some unexpected results, including the fact that highly educated women were at particular risk: 'It may be that more

65 Banner, *Finding Fran*, p. 97.

66 p. 114.

67 p. 97.

68 Baruch and Barnett, 'Women in the middle years'.

highly-educated women in fact experience more conflict, perhaps because of more rigid standards they set as wives, or mothers, or perhaps because of greater demands at work'. The authors looked first for an explanation in their subjects' sense of responsibility: 'They may be more likely to report the conflict'.⁶⁹

As well as educational achievement playing a greater part, motherhood seemed to cause particular problems. The authors wrote: 'role conflict increases with greater educational attainment: moreover, controlling for education, age, income and employment status mothers experience more role conflict than do childless women'. So far this might have been predicted. But the next sentence is unexpected. 'In contrast to widespread belief,' the authors wrote, 'the role of paid worker per se does not add significantly to role conflict'.⁷⁰ Thus 'the two most striking findings of the study are', Baruch and Barnett concluded, that 'the role of parent rather than that of paid worker is the major source of stress for women in the middle years' and 'the quality of the experience within a woman's social roles is a major independent predictor of role overload, role conflict and anxiety'. Finally, 'role overload and role conflict were associated with anxiety *only amongst the non-employed women*'.⁷¹ Hence, they concluded, not surprisingly, 'it may be that employment mitigates the stressful effects of role overload and role conflict'.⁷²

Here was a strange finding indeed: that employment might mitigate rather than worsen possible role conflict. The anxiety might also have been in the mind of the observers, anxious as to where the employed wives and mothers were heading. The psychological notion of role conflict was pervasive among the many varied studies of graduate women. In a study of Vassar women graduates of the class of 1957 and '58 Brown and Pacini found that '[m]ost of the Vassar women reported having experienced some conflict among their roles – mother, wife and worker – especially during the years when their chil-

69 p. 9.

70 p. 13.

71 My emphasis.

72 p. 18.

dren were very young'.⁷³ Role conflict was felt most acutely by the divorced women in their sample.

Summing up twelve studies that followed educated women into midlife and beyond Kathleen Hulbert argues that the majority, 'whatever paths they followed through adulthood, were found to have a strong sense of self and of their own competence and to have high levels of satisfaction with their lives'.⁷⁴ This suggests that 'role conflict', where it existed, had been dealt with in ways that allowed most educated women to feel it had been resolved or at least accommodated.

Interviews

As revealing as the interviews themselves in Baruch and Barnett's study were the directions for the interviewers. On the last sheet of the questionnaire the following instructions appeared. The interviewers were to rate the respondent for her level of comprehension and cooperativeness.

Interviewer: this section by observation

1. Interviewer Judgment: comprehension rating
 - Fully comprehended questions
 - Did not fully comprehend questions
 - Unable to make judgement
2. R's cooperativeness toward the interview (R was, in general)
 - Cooperative, neutral, antagonistic.

The interviewer was also to observe and rate the respondent's physical appearance as:

73 Donald Brown and Rosemary Pacini, 'The Vassar classes of 1957 and 1958: the ideal student study' in Hulbert and Schuster, *Women's lives through time*, p. 180.

74 Hulbert, 'Reflections on the lives of educated women', p. 434.

- Strikingly beautiful
- Good looking above average for age and sex
- Average looks for age and sex
- Quite plain: below average for age and sex
- Homely

One interviewer took the first instruction very seriously, writing the following note:

The interview began at 9.30am. R said she needed a can of beer. She gave a story about being sick all week and friends had recommended drinking beer. R did not appear to have DTs but did appear to have difficulty comprehending questions in the initial section of the interview and not from lack of intelligence.

For appearance she wrote: 3 – ‘but a worn-out look’.

It seems that it was not just the masculine or anthropological gaze that had to be endured but that of the social science researcher – male or female. And, we might wonder, whose standards of beauty were paramount? The stories from this study trace a longitudinal picture of many women who graduated in the 1950s and 60s from a range of institutions, state and private, elite and otherwise. Happily, the questionnaire asked the respondents if they had been affected by the women’s movement. Three stories from this study’s detailed questionnaire reveal some of the workings of role conflict and role satisfaction as they were understood at the time.⁷⁵

75 As well as avoiding names and places to ensure complete confidentiality I have occasionally scrambled details, for example altering a husband’s occupation to a related occupation.

Women's stories

The first story illustrates a level of anxiety (role conflict).

Master of Science (library science), husband doctor, 3 children

On a scale of 1–7 this respondent replied to the question ‘how satisfied [are you] with being at home rather than having a paid job’ between 5 and 6. The interviewer noted that she would like a part-time job and to be able to be involved in community activities around children. Her sexual relationship was rated ‘not as good as I might like’. She rated herself an average mother.

On her expectation of her husband’s support she said ‘It was one of those things always assumed like going to college. This was the dream of the 50s. [Now] I feel economically very dependent.’ She wrote of having limited freedom and options. ‘Makes me feel annoyed with myself over lack of initiative, courage, daring’. Her husband felt much less threatened by their finances because he had control over a large amount of money. The wife was asked about her expectations when she was growing up: ‘I cringe to think. Expected to go to college, to work, to marry, to travel, to have children. My expectations virtually stopped there. I don’t think it’s all that uncommon. I would be a housewife and mother.’ She reported problems with depression.

[Int.: if you could change one thing?] I would have a career. I would – with perfect hindsight. I would have prepared in college for something I could do professionally, on a part-time basis rather than a series of interesting jobs without a common goal. [Turning points?] Marriage? My life became centred in a different way. I automatically thought I was supposed to put other people first and systematically – it sounds too strong but can’t think of less strong words – put myself in a secondary position. In effect that’s what happened. [Overall?] Not too happy. What I’m going to become involved in. How I’m going to spend my time. What I’m going to become committed to ... Striking the balance between home and away from home activities ... I think that in 15 years I won’t feel such a conflict over being out working or at home. I’ll be either doing it or be at peace with not doing it. Perhaps I’ll have carved out a more comfortable niche for myself. I think I see women’s roles as much more flexible than I used to. I see a much greater need for women to develop employment skills and to plan for own financial futures.

A college-educated sculptor tells her story of taking control of her life

It never occurred to me that I'd do anything. Essentially I was groomed to be a charming, decorative, woman – good mate for a professional. Before I got a divorce I was frightened of the future. I stayed in a marriage I knew was wrong for me and afterwards found I was perfectly capable of raising my child by myself – capable of earning a living – not a great living – capable of not needing anyone ... I didn't let it happen. I decided that's what I wanted.

[Int.: Has the women's movement affected your life?] Morally [I] felt no shame about having lovers, being aggressive when it's necessary. I just felt a great deal more freedom to do what I felt I should do – up to going without bra in the summer. If you grew up in the 50s you'd realize what a change that meant.

Whereas I was raised with discipline imposed from outside it took many years to understand internal moral choices. I raised my daughter as I would like to have been raised ... She grew up with a feeling of strength, belief in self – able to cope with other people.

An administrator, half time with public charitable organization, married with children

A third story shows someone aware of, but dealing fairly happily with, the conflicts of motherhood, partnership and work.

Good thing about combining [work and family] is that I want to do all those things – work, be married and have children. All are allowing me to develop – it would be a loss to not have any one of those parts of my life.

[She went to an elite women's college] On a track to prepare me for any numbers of careers. Pushed not by parents but groupings in school ... [believed] center would be a man and children and his career would be the center of my life.

[Int.: Now?] What I want now is different. I have many parts of that original dream – what has changed most is that I no longer see my husband's career as central to my life or the family's life. I no longer see his career as my career. If could change anything: I would not have gotten married as young as I did.

[Int.: Major issues?]: job change, ending relationship with another man, aftermath[!!] [worries about ageing], feeling unattractive.

[Int.: Impact of ideas of the women's movement?] I've been very affected by them. I was in a woman's group for 4 years. I want more than I did and I think it's alright for me to have it – But I'm not sure.

[Int.: Hopes for children?] Also to give them a chance to see me working and way to behave as mother, wife and working person. They know I have conflicts about that.

For the ‘women in middle life’ of this study the years after graduation had brought the realization that their education had not prepared them for a career in a way they now wished. They had had to feel their way towards a satisfying fully rounded life and for many it seemed too late. One woman with an MA in education expressed that desire very clearly. She had become a children’s author and the satisfaction of that work was palpable: ‘I am self-supporting or can be. I enjoy what I’m doing. I feel competent. I get appreciation and ego gratification and I guess that’s about it – and also social stimulation’. Looking back at what she would change with hindsight she reflected:

I would have concentrated on doing work where I would have consistently worked at some money making job, and spent more time on myself. Spending more time again doing things that would have accrued to rewards, both financial and ego gratification rewards, that is things that would accrue to me.

Her work and her children, she claimed, brought her most pleasure.⁷⁶ Like many married respondents in the study she expressed reservations about her sexual life: ‘frequency an issue, husband gets very tired, he works late, no intercourse very often’ and was coming to terms with her own body after a mastectomy.

Role conflict: sexuality

Although the sex life of respondents was not a major aspect of the role conflict investigated by Baruch and Barnett, issues around sexuality and its conflicts emerge vividly. The married women who expressed ambivalence about their sexual life had married at a time of the ascendance of strong Freudian views on sexuality. These views were often filtered through the more popular works of authors such as Lundberg

76 Baruch and Barnett, ‘Women in the middle years’.

and Farnham. Their 1947 book *The modern woman: the lost sex* was still reprinted in the 1950s. The title says it all. The goal of sexuality for women, they claimed, was ‘receptivity and passiveness, a willingness to accept dependence without fear and resentment, with a deep inwardness and readiness for the final goal of sexual life – impregnation’.⁷⁷ Furthermore, feminists, they asserted, ‘when they came to perform the sexual act, found that they were frigid’. To be called frigid in the 1950s and 60s was the final insult and women, not surprisingly, sought to avoid it by meeting the expectations of the day. The women in the middle years study demonstrate both the unsatisfactory state of married sexuality for many women and the joys of rediscovery of a sexual self after the women’s movement gave them permission to be more experimental. One alarming interview opened a window onto a clearly difficult issue for a married couple.

The wife had marked sex as issue ‘once in a while’, and also wrote ‘no big horrendous problem’. The interviewer noted that the husband came in during this question and told his wife to tell the truth about sex – she said for him to please leave. He said it again and she said ‘leave, this is my interview’. Then he said ‘tell the girl the truth, if any good will come of it, that’s what she’s here for’. The interviewer wrote, ‘I thought they might have a fight’.⁷⁸

This was a topic several did not want to discuss: ‘Sex – not as good as I would like. [I: felt you might have nervous breakdown?] – Yes! Can’t talk about it.’⁷⁹

Others revelled in the new opportunities release from marriage offered. When asked about the impact of the women’s movement, one replied: ‘Morally felt no shame about having lovers, being aggressive when it’s necessary’. A divorced social worker and self-proclaimed feminist had more practical problems. She was asked whether the frequency of sex was an issue for her: ‘Yes, trying to fit in going with

77 Quoted in Elaine Tyler May, ‘Pushing the limits: 1940–1961’ in Nancy F. Cott (ed.), *No small courage: a history of women in the United States*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000, p. 512.

78 Baruch and Barnett, ‘Women in the Middle Years’.

79 Ibid.

three different people and trying to keep that in balance and deal with kids. There's only three nights in a weekend and sleeping with people three nights in a row is something I worry about and think about.' However, she deemed her sex life 'very satisfying'. She highly valued 'my ability to support myself and my children – my independence'. This woman put paid to the Lundberg and Farnham link between feminism and frigidity.

The demographic gaze: who was marrying and having babies?

In twenty-first century society there is widespread concern at the 'declining birthrate', the fact that on the whole young women are marrying later, if at all, and are producing on average fewer than the 2.1 children necessary to reproduce the population. In some societies, such as Japan and Italy, this is deemed to have reached crisis point. Desperate measures are suggested, such as the reintroduction of large baby bonuses and domestic training. Those who worry about this issue might well look at the family formation patterns of highly educated women, particularly at the highest achievers of the 1950s. They were the prototypes of the young educated women of today.

Of course the issue of declining birthrates is not new. In earlier times the 'new women' were blamed for turning away from motherhood for their selfish ends.⁸⁰ As women's involvement in higher education increased over the twentieth century so too did the interest of demographers in their family formation patterns. Women's propensity to have babies or to refuse to have them sparks off a number of deep-

80 Mackinnon, *Love and freedom*.

seated national fears.⁸¹ It is well known that the higher a woman's level of education the fewer children she was likely to have and the later she was likely to produce them. While this phenomenon was easy to dismiss when a small proportion of the age group attended university, as the proportion of college goers increased it could not be so easily brushed aside.

Did having a degree exempt women from the norms of 1950s life? It may have done so early in the twentieth century but by the 1950s a Bachelors degree was sufficiently common, and having a higher degree was necessary for that exemption.⁸² We can see that pattern when we look at the women with professional training and higher degrees. But how did these new young graduates shape their family lives? Were they different from their sisters who did not undertake higher education?

Age at marriage

The decade of the fifties was the high point of marriage and the nuclear family. Some statistical patterns are useful here to set the parameters. In Australia the average age of marriage for women before the war of 24.7 years had dropped to 23.9 by 1940 and to 23.6 by 1954.⁸³ Not only was the age at marriage dropping but the percentage of women ever marrying was rising. In 1954, 58.84 per cent of women aged 20–24 were married, which was an 'Australian record of at least

81 See Alison Mackinnon, "'Bringing the unclothed immigrant into the world": gender and population policy during the twentieth century', *Journal of Population Research*, 17(2), 2000, pp. 109–123.

82 Patricia Albjerg Graham, 'The cult of true womanhood: past and present' in Eleanor Bender, Bobbie Burk and Nancy Walker (eds), *All of us are present: the Stephens College symposium. Women's education: the future*, James Madison Wood Research Institute, Columbia, MO, 1983.

83 W.D. Borrie, 'Australian family structure: demographic observations' in A.P. Elkin (ed.), *Marriage and the family in Australia*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1957, p. 11.

seventy years standing, and probably a good deal longer'.⁸⁴ By the ages of 35 to 39 over 91 per cent of women were married. In an Australian study 18.3 per cent of fifties graduates remained single, while over 81 per cent had married at some stage. While the figure of 81 per cent seems high in comparison to the 50 per cent of graduates of the first generation of university women who embraced wedlock, it was nevertheless lower than the population at large in the period.

'A ring by spring' at women's colleges was not a fantasy. Dean Nancy Lewis noted of the US: 'The picture of the married college girl has become a familiar one on every campus'.⁸⁵ Sydney graduate women too showed a trend to earlier marriage over several cohorts. While the oldest women, those over 60 who had graduated before 1901, married at an average age of just under 29 years, those aged forty to forty-nine (i.e. graduated by 1920) married two years younger on average and more of them married under 21 than over 40. In the youngest group, the cohort of our period, 6 per cent of the youngest women were under 21 when they married and a large number tied the knot by the age of thirty. They were far from immune to the trends of the day.

Graduates may have married earlier than previously but they continued to marry later and less often than non-graduates. They were a much smaller proportion of those Australian women married by the age of 20.

Women were also marrying at a younger age in the United States. Yet graduate women too were marrying less. The authors of *They went to college* (1952) claim that 31 per cent of women graduates of 1947 failed to marry compared to 13 per cent of all US women.⁸⁶ This however occurred shortly after the end of World War II and was to change rapidly throughout the fifties.

Other sources also show that age at marriage for graduates had declined but that they did, however, marry at a slightly higher age than non-graduates. Women in the US who married between 22 and 29 years of age had higher levels of education than those who married

84 Ibid.

85 Lewis, 'College women and their proper spheres', p. 210.

86 Havemann and West, cited in Horowitz, *Campus life*, p. 218.

aged 21 years or under.⁸⁷ Yohalem's high-achieving women who graduated from Columbia University between 1945 and 1951 were more likely to delay marriage or to remain unmarried than women of similar ages in the general population (28 per cent unmarried compared to 6 per cent) and especially so for women with a PhD (41 per cent unmarried).⁸⁸

Fertility rates: a spectacular rise

In Australia, the mini-boom in fertility rates that resulted from more and earlier marriage was quite distinct. As one demographer pointed out: 'There was a slow rise in the birth-rate as economic conditions improved before 1939; but towards the end of and since the war the rise in the total number of births and in the birth-rate has been spectacular'.⁸⁹

Dawson found that the trend towards earlier marriage in the general population was also evident among Australian graduate women but, although they were less likely to remain childless overall, they were more likely to delay child bearing. For example, though there were fewer childless women among the graduate women than in the general population (15 per cent compared to 19 per cent), graduates began their families later and had smaller families.⁹⁰ The Adelaide and Melbourne '50s graduate women showed a slightly different pattern: almost 30 per cent had no children, a very high proportion of childlessness for the time. Dawson's small group of women with Masters and doctoral degrees had even fewer children: 'the 12 women with doctorates had an average of 1.33 children per women, well below the

87 Hugh Carter and Paul Glick, *Marriage and divorce: a social and economic study*, Harvard University Press, Boston, MA, 1970, p. 92.

88 Alice Yohalem, 'Columbia University graduate students, 1945–1951: the vanguard of professional women' in Hulbert and Schuster, *Women's lives through time*, pp. 142–143.

89 Borrie, 'Australian family structure', p. 8.

90 Dawson, *Graduate and married*, pp. 33–34, 44–46.

sample average. One third of them had no children'.⁹¹ This seems to bear out the idea that higher degrees in this period led to an exemption from the norms of the time.⁹²

However, as in Australia, 1950s college woman in the United States married earlier and had more children compared to earlier cohorts of women graduates who more often remained single and childless.⁹³

Is this what they expected?

Regardless of actual outcomes, women expected a great deal of their marriages in America and in Australia in the 1950s.⁹⁴ Commentator Norman Mackenzie summarised the attitude to home-centredness in 1962 in his *Women in Australia*:

It is ... taken for granted that women are home-centred, and that there is something odd and rather undesirable about a woman who is making a career, or is active in public life outside a range of socially-approved types of women's work and women's interests. The 'normal' woman is expected to conform to the stereotype of femininity, seeking her satisfactions in house-pride and the care of the husband and children, finding her relaxation in card-parties, tennis or bowls, entertaining friends and relatives, tending the garden and watching television.⁹⁵

91 p. 46.

92 Graham, 'The cult of true womanhood'.

93 Barbara Sicherman, 'College and careers: historical perspectives on the lives and work patterns of women college graduates' in John Mack Faragher and Florence Howe (eds), *Women and higher education in American history: essays from the Mount Holyoke College Sesquicentennial Symposia*, Norton, New York, 1988.

94 Giele, 'Women's role change and adaptation'; Brown and Pacini, 'The Vassar classes of 1957 and 1958'; Ravenna Helson, 'The Mills classes of 1958 and 1960: college in the fifties, young adulthood in the sixties' in Hulbert and Schuster, *Women's lives through time*.

95 Norman Mackenzie, *Women in Australia*, F.W. Cheshire, Melbourne, 1962, p. 81.

A curious detail in Dawson's 1965 study examined the numbers of educated women who made their own clothes. Of the women aged 60 and over, 40 per cent made some and 2 per cent made all of their own clothes. This percentage rose with each younger cohort until in the youngest cohort, those women under 30, 70 per cent made some of their own their own clothes and 11 per cent made all of them.⁹⁶ Was this a response to postwar austerities or an excess of domesticity? It is not surprising that in this climate Jill Ker felt as she left Sydney for the United States in 1960 that she was leaving behind 'a culture hostile to aspiring women'.⁹⁷ Yet something in the climate was changing. It seems that graduate women expected to marry more quickly, to spend less time in paid employment, and to have larger families than they ultimately did, as we shall see.⁹⁸

Marriage and career: is it elementary?

If 'love and marriage, love and marriage' went together 'like a horse and carriage', as the popular song proclaimed, could marriage also be harnessed with career? This is a key point that will be developed more fully in Chapter 4 but it is worth briefly considering here. What did women expect at the time of their graduation? Only 5 per cent of Sydney women graduates expected to combine a university degree with marriage, but, Dawson concludes, 41 per cent actually did.⁹⁹ There were differences between the older women's expectations and those of women under 30 – those of our cohort. Only 18 per cent of women over 60 agreed that 'marriage is a full-time career', whereas 69 per cent of those under 30 thought that it was. Was this a reflection of the hard yards of experience or of the exposure of the younger women to the starry-eyed views of marriage portrayed by 1950s popular cul-

96 p. 51.

97 Conway, *True north*, p. x.

98 See especially Helson, 'The Mills classes of 1958 and 1960', pp. 193–194.

99 Dawson, *Graduate and married*, p. 123.

ture?¹⁰⁰ Women from a Roman Catholic religious background were more strongly of this view than others and of the view that ‘working women threaten family life’.¹⁰¹ Most women, in both the US and Australia, expected to have more children than they ultimately produced. Few, in sum, anticipated the upheavals of the next decades, which would reshape their futures in so many ways.

It is a strange paradox that in a period when more and more women were attending colleges and universities and vast numbers were entering the workforce, society’s expectations for women could be so firmly rooted within the constrained life of the nuclear family. The very paradoxical nature of those circumstances meant that surveillance was more necessary than ever, becoming more hysterical in tone as women challenged those boundaries. Disciplinary rules in women’s colleges multiplied as they became increasingly ineffective. Regulatory regimes became more oppressive before crumbling completely a few years later.

The gaze that fell upon educated women was all pervasive. They were observed by their male peers, by those who were responsible for their well-being and their intact femininity and by the new breed of social scientists who swarmed into the field finding educated women a fruitful ground for research. But in the latter area educated women themselves were often the observers, gradually becoming the doers of research, rather than the subjects of it. Women began to see themselves differently. As Jill Ker Conway spoke of looking at herself ‘through the lens of history’, so many other women began to see themselves through the lens of sociology or psychology. They began to see that the lens was clouded by a male perspective, a male-inflected set of expectations, which did not gel with their view of women. But we are moving forward here to the discoveries of the 1970s and 80s. First we need to look more closely at the social, political and cultural milieu of the 1950s and early 60s. For within that troubled context lay both repression and the beginnings of escape.

100 p. 202.

101 p. 203.

