WOMEN, EDUCATION, AND SOCIAL MOBILITY IN BRITAIN DURING THE LONG 1970s

Abstract

Through analysis of oral history interviews and quantitative source material, this article offers a gendered model of social mobility in the post-war decades. It argues that women born between the late 1930s and early 1950s achieved social mobility through entering post-secondary education after a period of employment, followed by occupational movement into the welfare professions. Women's mobility primarily occurred in the long 1970s; facilitated by the Wilson government's investment in the welfare state and its expansion of further education and creation of the polytechnics. This challenges the predominantly masculinised trope of the grammar school as the driver of post-war mobility.

Contributor

Dr Eve Worth is the Jenny Wormald and Women in Humanities Junior Research Fellow in History at St Hilda's College, University of Oxford. She is preparing a manuscript on the lives of women of the 'welfare state generation'.

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WOMEN, EDUCATION, AND SOCIAL MOBILITY IN BRITAIN DURING THE LONG 1970s

Introduction

This article seeks to re-frame our understanding of the processes of women's social mobility in post-war Britain. It argues that for women born between the late 1930s and early 1950s, social mobility was achieved through entering post-secondary education after a period of employment, then experiencing upward occupational movement into the welfare professions. This mobility primarily occurred in the long 1970s. It was facilitated by the Wilson government's investment in the welfare state and its expansion of further education and creation of the polytechnics. This argument is significant because the generation who grew up during the post-war period are highly associated with the concept of social mobility in Britain. The terminology of 'social mobility' did not even fully emerge until after 1945 and the decades that followed the Second World War are considered a 'golden age' of mobility.[1] However, historians have not yet proposed a gendered model of women's mobility in the period, nor taken into account women's choices across the life course.

The evidence for this article is drawn primarily from a set of thirty life history interviews I conducted with women born in Britain between 1938 and 1952 for my doctoral research. The doctorate argue that this cohort was a coherent generation defined by their relationship to the welfare state throughout their lives.[2] The only criteria for inclusion in my sample was gender and birthdate. Women were found through a variety of methods including placing adverts in local magazines, speaking at community centres and using the snowball sampling technique. The women in my sample range from working class to upper middle class, which is unusual as most historiography focuses only on either middle- or working-class women. Half of the women had experienced social mobility across the life course, primarily upwards from manual working class to lower professional middle class. Even though grammar school attendees were over-represented in the sample,[3] only six women went onto university and five of them hailed from a middle-class background. However, thirteen of the women in my sample entered education as mature students between the late 1960s and early 1980s and the majority of these came from working-class families. [4]

[1] Chris Renwick, 'Eugenics, Population Research, and Social Mobility Studies in Early and Mid-Twentieth Century Britain', *The Historical Journal,* 59/3 (2016), p.865; Peter Mandler, 'Educating the Nation III: Social Mobility', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 26 (2016), p.2.

[2] Eve Worth, 'The Welfare State Generation: Life Histories of Women Born in Britain c.1938-1952', (Unpublished DPhil, University of Oxford, 2018).

[3] 2/3 of the women interviewed attended grammar school. This over-representation is a recurring problem in oral history studies of the period, see Stephanie Spencer, *Gender, Work and Education in Britain in the 1950s* (Basingstoke, 2005), p.165.

[4] The long 1970s is defined in the article as this period between the late 1960s and early 1980s.

Oral history research reveals the nuances of the educational itineraries pursued by women of this generation, and the different factors that fed into their educational engagement later in life. My methodology brings this personal testimony together with quantitative source material to demonstrate the wider significance of the women's experience. This is an innovative approach to social mobility as research on the theme tends to analyse these source types separately and therefore divorces experience of mobility from its interrelationship with the broader social and economic context. My analysis of the census supports the finding that post-war women returned to the education system and obtained post-secondary qualifications during the 1970s.[5] Between 1971 and 1981 the total number of the female population with qualifications increased by 50 per cent.[6] Crucially, this increase does not just represent a new generation of young people gaining qualifications straight from school: there is a substantial increase in older age groups including women born during my cohort. For example, 180,000 women born 1942-46 held qualifications in 1971, but by 1981 272,000 were recorded as obtaining qualifications. Similarly, for women born 1947- 1951 the numbers increased from 168,000 in 1971 to 292,000 in 1981.[7] There was a particular increase in married women with qualifications in these age cohorts. Over the ten-year period, the number of qualified married women born between 1942-46 increased by more than 50 per cent and those born 1947-1951 with qualifications tripled.[8]

By focusing on women entering education as mature students, this article makes a contribution to the developing historiography on social mobility in the post-war period. Historians such as Selina Todd and Peter Mandler have begun to challenge the prevailing 'myth' that the changes ushered in by the 1944 Education Act and the growth of grammar schools 'promot[ed], through the practice of meritocracy, great swathes of bright working-class boys (the folk wisdom assumes they were boys) into the salariat, and indeed into the elite'.[9] This long-range, masculinised social mobility through the grammar school and a university degree has dominated the social imagination regarding this period, in part because this is often the experience of those who have written autobiographies about growing up

[5] The lowest level of qualification recorded in these census tables was 'qualifications that generally satisfy the three requirements of: obtained at age 18 or over; above GCE 'A' Level; below first degree level. This level includes most teaching and nursing qualifications', 1971 Census- Great Britain Qualified Manpower Tables, 'General Explanatory Notes', Official Papers (OP), Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, pp.v-vii.

[6] 1971 Census, Great Britain- Qualified Manpower Tables, 'Table 8: Persons 18-69 Years of Age Qualified at Levels A, B, or C by Sex, Age and by Level, Subject Group and Primary Subject', p.48; 1981 Census, Great Britain- Qualified Manpower Tables, 'Table 6: Usually Resident Population Aged 18 and Over Qualified at Level A, B or C. Level of Qualification by Subject Group and Primary Subject by Age and Sex', OP, p.52. (All figures have been rounded to the nearest thousand).

[7] See the smaller but still significant jump for women born 1937-1941: 147,000 to 192,000, 1971 Census, Great Britain- Qualified Manpower Tables, 'Table 8'; p.48, 1981 Census, Great Britain- Qualified Manpower Tables, 'Table 6', OP, p.52.

[8] 1971 Census- Great Britain Qualified Manpower Tables, 'Table 8', OP, p.52; 1981 Census- Great Britain Qualified Manpower Tables, OP, p.58.

[9] Selina Todd, *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working-Class, 1910-2010* (London, 2014), pp.216-35; Mandler, 'Social Mobility', p.2.

in the post-war decades.[10] This is despite the fact only one in twelve students went from school into some form of higher education during the immediate post-war decades and just one quarter of these were women.[11] The women who attended university, just like those who passed the eleven-plus exam, were much more likely to be middle class.[12] It was the norm for women who attended both grammar schools and secondary moderns in the late 1950s and 1960s to leave on or near the statutory-leaving age of fifteen with few qualifications to enter routine non-manual employment.[13] However, personal testimony evidence demonstrates that this was not the end of the line in terms of education for many women. Rita (b.1952), who hailed from a working-class background and had passed the eleven-plus, left school at sixteen with 'about three O-Levels'. She stated, 'I didn't think about university, I mean it never entered my mind to go to university- students were like an exotic other'.[14] Yet, by the time of our life history interview in 2015, Rita had experienced social mobility through returning to education as a mature student in the 1970s and going on to teach in a polytechnic. It is argued that this trajectory is much more representative of the process of social mobility for women of the post-war generation than the grammar school to university trope.

This article examines the particular importance for post-war women of the Labour government's expansion of further education and creation of the polytechnics- a new layer of public sector higher education- in the mid-to-late 1960s. These changes were introduced as part of the understudied second expansionary phase of the welfare state, which, crucially, also expanded the labour market. The historiography of Wilson's educational reforms is fairly limited and has primarily focused on the so-called 'plate-glass' universities. Mandler has recently begun a comprehensive history of twentieth-century higher education but it is weighted heavily towards the traditional university sector and as yet there is no detailed consideration of class and sex differences.[15] Carol Dyhouse's monograph on women students points to the 1970s as a turning point for women in higher education, although in this regard it again largely focuses on the university sector and students entering straight from school.[16] She has argued that this was a key decade due to 'changing expectations about the role of women in society, a widening of women's choice of subjects of study, and their anticipation of more favourable labour market opportunities'.[17] The present article builds on her work by contending that these shifts were

[10] Phillida Bunkle, 'The 1944 Education Act and Second Wave Feminism', *Women's History Review,* 25/5 (2016), pp.791-2.
[11] Peter Mandler, 'Educating the Nation II: Universities', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society,* 25 (2015), p.8.
[12] As late as the 1960s only one in 600 working-class girls attended university, Arthur McIvor, *Working Lives: Work in Britain since 1945* (Basingstoke, 2013), p.21.
[13] George Smith, 'Schools', in A.H, Halsey and Josephine Webb (eds), *Twentieth-Century British Social Trends* (Basingstoke, 2000), p.209.
[14] Interview with Rita, 20th October 2015 (All names are pseudonyms).
[15] Mandler, 'Universities', pp.1-26.
[16] Carol Dyhouse, *Students: A Gendered History* (Abingdon, 2006).
[17] Dyhouse, *Students,* p.98.

influential on women born in the long 1940s who returned to study as mature students in this period enabled by the changing nature of further and higher education.[18] The influential sociologist of education A.H Halsey confirms that this was a broad phenomenon, stating that between the early 1970s and 1980s 'women have gained on men but their advance has been disproportionately in the newer forms of higher education**…**the expansion of opportunities for women in higher education has been markedly in part-time studies where percentage growth over the same period was 354.6 for women and 47.9 for men'.[19] Moreover, research conducted by the Polytechnic of North London in the early 1970s found that not only were polytechnics 'attracting a substantial proportion of students who were not in the school-leaving category' during this decade but that a higher percentage of these mature students were working-class women than in the wider student body.[20] The pattern of returning to education was especially important for working-class women to achieve mobility but it could also be used by middle-class women as a mechanism to halt downward mobility later in life.

Women have been largely neglected in the study of social mobility across disciplines. The defining text on the subject *The Social Mobility of Women: Beyond Male Mobility Models* was published by sociologists in 1990.[21] The authors of this text argued 'women experience distinctive kinds of mobility…the traditional framework simply cannot accommodate female social mobility'.[22] They posited that the male life-cycle of education and then continuous full-time work tends to be more linear than women's and that we need to develop a fuller conception of the differing educational and occupational arrangements women enter into at different points in their life course.[23] There has been some historiographical research into the specificities of women's mobility during the interwar period. Todd has demonstrated that young working-class women were more occupationally mobile into white-collar work prior to the Second World War than previously understood.[24] She used personal testimony and argued this source type is particularly valuable when analysing women's mobility because a purely 'social-scientific methodology' does not capture the complexities of women's employment histories.[25]

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[18] These two aspects are discussed together here because, unlike the universities, both of these types of institutions were under local authority control in this period which affected their character. They were also often collected together in statistical data under the umbrella of 'public sector institutions'. See A.H Halsey, 'Further and Higher Education, in A.H Halsey and Josephine Webb (eds), *Twentieth-Century British Social Trends* (Basingstoke, 2000), p.251.

[19] Halsey, 'Further and Higher Education', p.243.

[20] Julia Whitburn, Maurice Mealing and Caroline Cox, *People in Polytechnics: A Survey of Polytechnic Staff and Students 1972-3* (Guildford, 1976), p.61.

[21] Geoff Payne and Pamela Abbott (eds), *The Social Mobility of Women: Beyond Male Mobility Models* (Basingstoke, 1990).

[22] Geoff Payne and Pamela Abbott , 'Introduction: Origins and Destinations', in Geoff Payne and Pamela Abbott (eds), *The Social Mobility of Women: Beyond Male Mobility Models* (Basingstoke, 1990), p.11.

[23] Shirley Dex, 'Occupational Mobility over Women's Lifetime', in Geoff Payne and Pamela Abbott (eds), *The Social Mobility of Women: Beyond Male Mobility Models* (Basingstoke, 1990), p.121.

[24] Selina Todd, 'Poverty and Aspiration: Young Women's Entry to Employment in Inter-War England', *Twentieth Century British History,* 15/2 (2004), pp.119-42.

[25] Todd, 'Poverty and Aspiration', p.121.

Dyhouse analysed questionnaire responses from graduates and observed that a university education did not produce much social mobility for women in the 1930s but could influence their children's prospects.[26] There has not been a detailed historical examination of women's mobility processes during the post-war decades, despite the fact that it was a time of 'volatility and flux, within which changes in women's lives lay at the heart of social change'.[27] This article undertakes the much needed analysis of women's social mobility during this period. It begins by analysing the educational and economic context, then examines women's own reasons for entering education. The final section focuses on women's changing class and mobility profiles**.**

Educational and Economic Context

The late 1960s to the early 1970s were a key moment of expansion of the welfare state. As Pat Thane has stated, the Labour governments of the 1960s 'devoted exceptional levels of capital spending to such public institutions as schools, universities and hospitals'.[28] A report on patterns of UK public sector employment undertaken by the Centre for Public Policy at the University of Strathclyde in 1980 showed that there had in fact been a decline in public sector employment during the 1950s, however 'this was more than offset by growth in the 1960s and 1970s…after 1966 public employment rose by 1.8 million in a decade, taking 30.5 per cent of the labour force in 1976'.[29] Moreover, the report showed that the percentage of the public sector workforce that were women increased from 24 per cent in 1951 to 44 per cent in 1976 which 'reflects decline in male-dominated nationalised industries and the growth in education and health, which employ over twice as many women as men, and the proportion continued to rise'.[30] The effect of this phase of state expansion was two-fold: firstly, it created new middle class opportunities for women in the welfare professions that required trained staff, and secondly it reconceptualised post-secondary education to meet the needs and ethos of the changing economy.

These decades were a time of experimentation in higher education. In the wake of the Robbins Report of 1963, the responsibility for the recommended expansion of higher education fell to the newly elected Labour government of 1964. The educational expectations of the public had been rising since the end of the Second World War and they were increasingly demanding more higher education provision.[31] Employers also required more skilled workers. Fostering a rapid expansion of the university sector

[26] Carol Dyhouse, 'Family Patterns of Mobility Through Higher Education in England in the 1930s', *Journal of Social History,* 34/4 (2001), p.839.
[27] Penny Tinkler, Stephanie Spencer and Claire Langhamer, 'Revisioning the History of Girls and Women in Britain in the Long 1950s', *Women's History Review,* 26/1 (2017), pp.6-7.
[28] Pat Thane, 'Labour and Welfare', in Duncan Tanner, Pat Thane and Nick Tiratsoo (eds), *Labour's First Century* (Cambridge, 2000), p.110.
[29] Richard Parry, *United Kingdom Public Employment: Patterns of Change 1951-1976* (Glasgow, 1980), p.8.
[30] Parry, *United Kingdom Public Employmen*t, p.34.
[31] Mandler, 'Universities', pp.1-2.

proved difficult as universities had a liminal rather than direct relationship to the state.[32] Alongside the expansion of university places, the Labour government decided to create a 'new layer of higher education institutions- the polytechnics, assembled from existing technical, art and education colleges'.[33] Their remit was explicitly to have stronger links with the local area and also business, industry and the professions than other higher education institutions.[34] They were often situated in 'city centres near the target population, affording easier access by means of part-time study and sandwich courses'.[35] In addition, there was an expansion in places at and funding for further education colleges.[36] As Mandler has highlighted, these new institutions were 'providing half of all places by the early 1970s'.[37] Notably, the polytechnics were considered directly part of the 'public sector' and were a key element of the Wilson government's intention to continue the welfare state agenda of the Attlee government.[38]

In this vein, the Labour government also set up the Open University in 1969. This project, which was originally planned to be named the 'University of the Air', was Harold Wilson's personal passion. Wilson placed one of the few female MPs- Jennie Lee- in charge of its implementation and gave her direct access to him to make sure it was in place before the 1970 election.[39] The Open University was intended to provide university education to 'that part of the population who were past normal university age and were already in work or were at home bringing up children'.[40] This model appealed to my sample, with three women choosing to undertake degrees with the Open University and a fourth deciding to take a variety of modules. The creation of the Open University was part of the reconfiguration of higher education that enabled women of this generation to return as adults.

Further changes took place in the education system during the 1970s which accelerated the number of older women gaining qualifications. Feminist activists shone a spotlight on gendered inequality in education throughout the decade and campaigned for change.[41] The Sex Discrimination Act of 1975 impacted on the ability to advocate for change.[42] There had been a long association in British culture of post-secondary 'training' with industrial and technical apprenticeships (and day release) for men.[43]

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[32] Although they are often classed as part of 'the extended public sector', Parry, *United Kingdom Public Employment*, p.6.
[33] Mandler, 'Universities', p.7.
[34] Committee of Directors of Polytechnics, *The Polytechnics: Visions into Reality* (London, 1979), p.3.
[35] Mandler, 'Universities', p.7.
[36] Halsey, 'Further and Higher Education', p.227.
[37] Mandler, 'Universities', p.7.
[38] Thane, 'Labour and Welfare', p.107.
[39] Howard Glennerster, *British Social Policy since 1945* (Oxford, 2000), p.127.
[40] Glennerster, *British Social Policy,* p.127.
[41] Dyhouse, *Students,* p.108.
[42] Rosemary Deem, Jennifer Ozga and Craig Prichard, 'Managing Further Education: Is it Still Men's Work Too?', *Journal of Further and Higher Education,* 24/2 (2000), p.247.
[43] Study Group on Discrimination Against Women, 'Discussion Notes on Planning for Women at Work', Box 48, Labour History Archive (LHA), People's History Museum, Manchester, p.1.

Wilson did not have women specifically in mind in the changes he introduced to higher education, he was more concerned with his 'white heat of technology' rhetoric which promoted modernization in areas dominated by male workers.[44] Feminist activism put pressure on further and newer higher education institutions to pay attention to the complaint that they were not offering enough opportunities to potential women students. This led to the introduction of courses that were oriented towards female students (aside from just teacher training) and to institutions slowly opening up courses that had been male dominated. Angie (b.1945) recalled arguing with Ruskin, a trade union college, about wanting to take the course 'Labour Studies'. Tutors were reluctant because she would be the first woman to study that subject, but eventually they relented.[45] In a 1979 article for the feminist magazine *Spare Rib* Liz Heron (a historian working in further education) praised the provision of creches at numerous institutions and the new 'women returner courses'.[46]

The women in my sample who returned to education entered a wide variety of education institutions, from further education colleges to universities, although notably these newer, more non-traditional higher education institutions were dominant**.** Worries about gaining places on further education or polytechnic courses were not routinely expressed by interviewees. Rita explained that when she entered further education in the 1970s 'there were no fees to pay and no bar to entrance, it was a choice open to me almost without conditions'.[47] The further education college let her sit her A-levels in a year instead of two, she was allowed on her degree course at a London polytechnic at the last minute, and even though she dropped out of her degree course the Royal College of Art funded her to do an MA on the basis of her portfolio.[48] Of all the interviewees only Joy (b.1939) mentioned not getting straight onto a degree course at Sheffield polytechnic, although she was just asked to defer for a year.[49] Maureen (b.1944) chose to take A-Levels through a correspondence course before starting her degree to boost her confidence in academic work, not because this was a requirement**.** A further contemporaneous *Spare Rib* article highlighted the important work polytechnics had been doing on positive discrimination for women. The author stated that places were being offered to mature students without A-Level qualifications, and in some cases without O-Levels.[50] This was particularly significant for women in the post-war generation who had left school at fifteen or sixteen before sitting exams.

Similarly, there was little concern expressed in the interviews about the cost of entering education. During the 1970s course fees and living grants were paid for by the local authority. Maureen explained how her living grant allowed her family to retain a decent standard of living whilst she trained as a

[44] Todd, *The People,* p.276
[45] Interview with Angie, 11th May 2015.
[46] Liz Heron, 'Manpower Services Commission', *Spare Rib*, 81 (1979), pp.30-1.
[47] Interview with Rita.
[48] Interview with Rita.
[49] Interview with Joy, 7th April 2015.
[50] Author unknown, 'Education: A Framework for Collapse', *Spare Rib*, 124 (1982), pp.22-3.

teacher.[51] Lois (b.1947) discussed student finances in particular detail.[52] She had been encouraged by her local government department to undertake a part-time degree to help with her promotion chances in the early 1970s. As a working-class woman supporting herself, Lois was nervous and would not have taken the risk of doing the Open University degree without the financial help. She explained: 'the city council paid everything, all my costs, all the tuition fees, my set book costs, my fee for the summer schools. I was working but it would've been a very heavy strain on my resources to pay for it'.[53] Where there was concern expressed it was amongst lone mothers such as Anita (b.1952), who struggled financially without a full-time income when she returned to further education in 1979.[54] However, even in her case it was still possible just more difficult. It helped Anita that her son was school-age so she did not need to pay for full-time childcare, a cost which had stopped her taking up her place at art school in the 1960s.[55] These enhanced provisions of finance and availability promoted social fluidity because they allowed women in a more diverse set of personal situations to easily access education. The following section examines women's reasons for wanting to return to education in the context of the new education system and expanding labour market.

Choosing Change

The women of this generation who returned to education in the long 1970s presented this choice as incremental and contingent. Joy gave up her retail job in the 1980s and began a part-time teacher training degree at Sheffield Hallam, in her interview she describes this as unplanned and spontaneous 'I just thought -I'm going to go'.[56] With each step she explained 'I didn't have career goals, you just think about the next little bit each time'. This kind of language is common in the way socially mobile women talk about work and training- slippage; things just happen, got the opportunity, someone mentioned it to me. Chrissie's (b.1950) trajectory exemplifies this sense of chance over planning.[57] After leaving her secondary modern at fifteen with no qualifications, Chrissie spent a few years doing menial jobs interspersed with working abroad for short periods. In her early twenties, she got married and took a clerical job**.** Chrissie found this job so 'boring' however that by her mid-twenties she had decided to leave to 'start a GCE course at night school then A-Levels, and the woman who taught us told us about this social work course, which sounded really interesting so I applied to go on it'.[58] Chrissie became a social worker but later gave it up when she had her first child, but was soon asked

[51] Interview with Maureen, 10th April 2015.
[52] Interview with Lois, 4th September 2014.
[53] Interview with Lois.
[54] Interview with Anita, 1st February 2015.
[55] See Jane Lewis for discussion of the failure of successive British governments to fund adequate childcare provision, 'The Failure to Expand Childcare Provision and to Develop a Comprehensive Childcare Policy in Britain during the 1960s and 1970s', *Twentieth Century British History,* 24/2 (2013), pp.249-74.
[56] Interview with Joy.
[57] Interview with Chrissie 18th October 2015.
[58] Interview with Chrissie.

by a neighbour to volunteer for an adult literacy scheme. Involvement in this scheme led to Chrissie being invited to teach evening classes at the local adult education college. She then embarked on an Open University degree followed by a teacher training course 'at some point' during the early 1980s. In the telling of the life story one decision simply leads to another. The changes that took place in the economic and educational structure enabled post-war women, many of whom were married or had children by the 1970s, to make the choice to return to education. However, it is also clear that women of this generation chose to grasp these opportunities (when they arose) and that their sense of what was possible was adaptable to the changing context of the long 1970s.[59] As Rita noted, going back to education was about 'wanting something different than the life that seemed mapped out for you'.[60]

When they left school it was the norm for women born in the long 1940s to marry at a young age and to enter routine non-manual work in areas such as administration that did not require extensive qualifications. Women expected to be in paid employment until they had their first child and then when their children were much older they might return to a clerical or service role on a part-time basis: this model was termed the 'dual role'.[61] Although many women in my sample followed this model, it is implicit in the testimonies that women became dissatisfied with aspects of this life trajectory and were open to change during this period**.** There were also interviewees such as Ruth (b.1949) and Lois who had expected their life to follow the 'dual role' trajectory, but neither had married nor were parents by the early 1970s and this led them to reassess the type of working life they wanted. Lois recalled that at the secondary modern she had been told marriage was the main goal for women, 'but eventually I realised it was not going to happen for whatever reason, then you do think about [a career]'.[62] Both Ruth and Chrissie used the terminology of 'boring' as the reason they left their clerical jobs, and this chimes with Brenda's (b.1938) comment that her similar role was 'not interesting'.[63] This underscores that women of this generation felt as though they were entitled to more stimulating employment than it simply being a stop-gap before marriage and motherhood. Helen McCarthy has argued that the significance of work to women's identity and experience was growing throughout the 1950s and 1960s, and by the 1970s women were not satisfied with the dual role.[64] This discontent was strongly felt amongst women of the post-war generation who had been subject to contradictory gender discourses whilst growing up, and had started to 'reconcile conflicts' between autonomy and service during this period.[65]

[59] Interviews with Ruth, 17th October 2015 and Lois.
[60] Interview with Rita.
[61] Helen McCarthy, 'Social Science and Married Women's Employment in Post-War Britain', *Past and Present,* 223 (2016), p.270.
[62] Interview with Lois
[63] Interviews with Brenda, 17th November 2014, Chrissie and Ruth.
[64] McCarthy, 'Social Science and Married Women's Employment', p.304.
[65] Lynn Abrams, 'Liberating the Female Self: Epiphanies, Conflict and Coherence in the Life Stories of Post-War British Women', *Social History,* 39/1 (2014), p.20.

The changing expectations frequently pivot around the moment of motherhood in the interviews. Maureen gave up her clerical job when she had children and presumed she would largely be done with paid employment. However, being away from work in fact made her realise how important it was to her life, and she began to consider becoming a teacher as it seemed a 'rewarding' profession. Maureen stated that: 'having children changes you. I had no ambitions when I left to have babies, it was only when I got the two boys that I was ambitious…because I had a sense of the future'.[66] This ambition was encouraged by both her husband and the teachers at her children's school. Maureen noted that there were other mothers of children at the school who also went back to train as primary school teachers. Another interviewee Cynthia (b.1941), had been working in a secretarial position since leaving grammar school at sixteen. She had her first child with her husband in the early 1970s, and had always thought she would permanently give up work once she became a mother.[67] However, she soon found that staying at home 'wasn't as fulfilling as it might have been because I decided that I wanted to go back to work!'[68] She chose to study primary school teaching because she felt she could bring her knowledge of having small children to the position. Laura Tisdall has found that unlike their predecessors, post-war female teachers 'often utilised the idea that experiencing parenting made them a better teacher'.[69] The expansion of the welfare state 'was premised on the setting up of a range of caring professions' which 'resembled the kinds of work that women had previously been expected to carry out either at home or on a voluntary basis'.[70] Yet, there was a marriage bar in place across much of the public sector until the 1940s and, crucially, part-time or more flexible roles were not widely available in the welfare professions until the 1970s.[71] The structural changes meant that it was possible for women with children to re-train as semi-professionals such as teachers, nurses or social workers during this decade. This marked a big shift from their mother's generation who did not have this opportunity and instead went into more routine roles in retail or factories if they chose to go back to work after having children.

Women gaining qualifications in the 1970s were concentrated in the subject groupings associated with the welfare professions. In the 1971 census, 381,000 women were studying under subjects classified as 'education', compared to only 140,000 men, and the picture was similar with 'health' subjects- 483,000 women, to only 152,000 men. [72] By 1981, the comparable figures are 548,000 women to 212,000 men

[66] Interview with Maureen.
[67] Interview with Cynthia, 5th September 2014.
[68] Interview with Cynthia.
[69] Laura Tisdall, 'Education, Parenting and Concepts of Childhood in England, c.1945-1979', *Contemporary British History,* 31/1 (2017), p.39.
[70] Madeleine Arnot, Miriam David and Gaby Weiner, *Closing the Gender Gap: Postwar Education and Social Change* (Cambridge 1999), p.58.
[71] Veronica Beechey and Tessa Perkins, *A Matter of Hours: Women, Part-Time Work and the Labour Market* (Cambridge, 1987), p.79.
[72] 1971 Census- Great Britain Qualified Manpower Tables, 'Table 8', OP, p.44 and p.48.

studying education subjects, and 631,000 women to 195,000 men for health.[73] These comparisons held largely steady by 1981, but there was the biggest increase in women studying subjects classified as social studies which almost tripled from 56,000 to 157,000 (although still smaller than number of men studying these subjects).[74] Social studies disciplines included economics, psychology and sociology. Mandler notes that the biggest 'swing' towards social studies occurred in polytechnics.[75] The shift towards 'social studies' is reflected in the courses taken up by my sample in the 1970s. Those who chose these social science subjects typically argued that they were a good compromise between knowledge for its own sake and practical professional usage. For example, Anita chose 'applied social studies' as her degree because it allowed her to both do social work placements and to learn more about 'society and community development' which was her main interest.[76] Largely, my sample fall in line with the majority of women taking up directly welfare-related subjects in response to the contemporary labour market opportunities for women.

Going back into education was described as a welcome break from childcaring or housework responsibilities. Chrissie recalled that the Open University recommended that students needed to dedicate at least twelve hours a week study to the degree course, she framed this time as an 'escape' in her interview. She explained:

> It was hard work because we'd get three children and my husband was working, I was working. And then you know, having to do this timetable twelve hours, I needed even more than that. But it was great for me because I escaped for that period of time. Poor old Peter had to look after the kids while I had my twelve hours.[77]

That Chrissie's husband was prepared to care for the children whilst she studied demonstrates the increased participation of fathers in childcare by the 1970s. But her reference to him as 'poor old Peter' also underscores Angela Davis' and Laura King's argument that their contribution was still viewed as 'helping out' the mother rather than a shared obligation.[78] Sarah Stoller has argued that, 'while women's rates of employment outside of the home increased in the 1970s, they nonetheless continued to perform a disproportionate share of household work' and that this imbalance was a central focus of feminist campaigns during the decade.[79] Despite the fact men vocalised encouragement of their partner's

[73] 1981 Census- Great Britain Qualified Manpower Tables, 'Table 6', OP, p.46 and p.52.
[74] 1971 Census- Great Britain Qualified Manpower Tables, 'Table 8', OP, p.50; 1981 Census- Great Britain Qualified Manpower Tables, 'Table 6', OP, p.55.
[75] Peter Mandler, 'Educating the Nation IV: Subject Choice', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society,* 27 (2017), p.17.
[76] Interview with Anita.
[77] Interview with Chrissie.
[78] Angela Davis and Laura King, 'Gendered Perspectives on Men's Changing Familial Roles in Postwar England, c,1950-1990', *Gender & History,* 30/1 (2018), p.75.
[79] Sarah Stoller, 'Forging a Politics of Care: Theorizing Household Work in the Women's Liberation Movement', *History Workshop Journal*, 85 (2018), p.97.

ambitions in education or work, this did not necessarily translate into husbands taking on an equal share of domestic labour or childcare. Cynthia explained that her husband supported her returning to study but only if it did not cause too much disruption to the family routine and a relative was available to look after the children whilst she was in classes. In this case Cynthia's mother stepped in to help with the childcare. This speaks to the fundamental importance for women of new public sector institutions being situated in local communities and offering part-time (or even correspondence) courses. It made education and a career change seem feasible at a time when women were frequently expected to negotiate their life choices around the needs of their husband and children.

The diversified education system also provided space to women of this generation who wanted to leave their marriages. The process was also eased by the 1969 divorce law reform which introduced 'no fault' divorce for the first time in Britain.[80] Rather than studying nearby, Angie decided to move to Oxford during term-time for her degree at Ruskin College. She left her two daughters at home with their step-father in a different city. Angie had been forced to leave grammar school at fifteen before sitting any exams because she had got pregnant. Although she later trained as a nurse, she always regretted missing out on the intellectual stimulation of university so when her trade union sponsored her to study for a degree she wanted to make the most of it. She stated: 'I was challenged and invigorated at Ruskin, it was wonderful after eighteen years as a mum and a housewife to be able to say 'nobody come through' and not to be constantly asked 'where's my socks?'[81] Angie had been particularly dissatisfied with her marriage prior to going away, noting 'it was ok, he was a kind man, but it wasn't turning me on'.[82] She continued that it was the 'golden age' of free education and that she knew afterwards she would be able to 'walk into a job'. Pursuing the degree gave her the confidence and the prospects to finally initiate divorce proceedings. Brenda in fact explicitly used her return to education (at a polytechnic- the local university would not accept her recently obtained 'one A-Level at grade C!') as a mechanism to leave her husband in the early 1970s. She declared that once she had secured a place, a grant and accommodation for herself and her children- 'at that point I left my husband'.[83] Both Angie and Brenda came from working-class backgrounds and had been in relationships with middle-class men. Attending higher education- and the potential occupational opportunities this opened up in the expanded public sector- offered them a way to divorce and attain middle-class status in their own right.

Models of Mobility

It is notable that it was during the mid-1970s, when debate was ignited amongst British sociologists about how to define women's (especially married women's) social class. In traditional scholarship

[80] Jane Lewis and Patrick Wallis, 'Fault, Breakdown, and the Church of England's Involvement in the 1969 Divorce Reform', *Twentieth Century British History,* 11/3 (2000), pp.308-332.
[81] Interview with Angie.
[82] Interview with Angie.
[83] Interview with Brenda.

married women's class had been assigned based on a head of household model in which the husband's occupation was considered to be sufficient to determine the class position of the family. In influential mobility studies such as *The Affluent Worker,* conducted in the early 1960s, data was primarily collected on male subjects and only on women in their capacity as 'wife'.[84] Challenging this model was considered controversial, and preeminent sociologists such as John Goldthorpe continued to defend it even in the face of new research.[85] This research argued that a new model for women's class position was required in the wake of the education and occupational expansion, particularly the increases in 'welfare jobs', which had occurred in Britain in the quarter century or so since the Second World War.[86] Sociologists, such as Heath and Britten, and Abbott and Sapsford, used contemporary data to suggest that women's class and career patterns 'cannot be adequately predicted from their husband's occupational position alone, but that the addition of the women's qualifications yields a model which fits the patterns in the data tolerably well'.[87] They suggested the number of years spent in post-compulsory education was one of the best predictors of class during this period, 'even displacing husband's occupation'.[88] There was thus increasing recognition from certain sociologists that women were the protagonists in their own life stories, rather than defining their social class solely by their male relatives- although this recognition has been slow to enter the academic mainstream.

The growing significance of qualifications to women's class status reflects the normative shift towards qualifications in British society during the post-war decades- and particularly the long 1970s. It was increasingly unusual not to hold qualifications, and therefore more difficult to progress or feel confident without them. Dawn (b.1945) had left school at 16-years-old to take up a position in a local public library. She enjoyed the job and was able to progress up the ladder during the 1960s. However, she decided to take a sabbatical and return to do a degree in librarianship at the local polytechnic. It was not a necessity, but she felt 'inadequate' without one because by the mid-1970s it 'had become a degree subject' and she thought she would need it to have a chance at being promoted to regional level.[89] The phrase 'degree subject' is particularly notable here as it was government policy during the early 1970s to transform training for certain occupations into degree pathways. Teaching is the prime example of this as it was moved from teacher training colleges into the polytechnics.[90] The changing nature of the census during the post-war decades shows in microcosm the normative shift towards qualifications. The

[84] John Goldthorpe, David Lockwood, Frank Bechhoffer and Jennifer Platt, *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure* (Cambridge, 1969).
[85] John Goldthorpe, 'Women and Class Analysis: In Defence of the Conventional View', *Sociology,* 17/4 (1983), pp.465-88.
[86] A. Heath and N. Britten, 'Women's Jobs Do Make a Difference: A Reply to Goldthorpe', *Sociology*, 18/4 (1984), pp.475-90.
[87] Pamela Abbott and Roger Sapsford, 'Class Identification of Married Working Women: A Critical Replication of Ritter and Hargens', *The British Journal of Sociology,* 37/4 (1986), p.537.
[88] Abbott and Sapsford, 'Class Identification', p.545.
[89] Interview with Dawn, 12th September 2014.
[90] D. Gillard, *Education in England: A History* (2018), www.educationengland.org.uk/history.

1961 census was the first to ask respondents about their educational qualifications**.** The short summary table compiled using the data collected on this topic was titled 'Qualified persons by subject and type of qualification by industry' but only focused on 'scientific and technological qualifications' which very few women held.[91] In contrast, the 1971 census included a more detailed version of this table with more types of qualifications, plus an additional table (running to 16 pages) which focused solely on qualifications held by the populace and differentiated by gender. The 1971 census write-up also renamed the section featuring these tables from 'Occupation Tables' to 'Qualified Manpower'. Prior to this occupation and education were kept separate, and education tables focused primarily on terminal leaving age. These changes were replicated and extended in the 1981 census.

The normative shift was particularly significant for women's mobility prospects because they were more disadvantaged than men in the labour market when they did not have educational credentials.[92] Men were more likely to be able to achieve mobility through promotion within institutions or by setting up businesses.[93] In their work on women and class, Payne and Abbott have argued that although having educational credentials 'does not fully protect women from falling into a low status occupation', in the late twentieth century they needed qualifications more than men to move into Social Class I or II.[94] Similarly, Mike Savage has highlighted that 'credentialising' benefitted women:

> Seeking pathways into higher education is often a more viable route for relatively marginalised groups than other career strategies such as obtaining promotions within firms. It was by pulling this qualification lever from the 1960s onwards that women began to contest the sexist practices and attitudes they encountered.[95]

During the decade 1971-1981 'there was an increase in the numbers of women in higher socio-economic groups in Britain and a relative decline in their proportion in most of the lower socio-economic groups'.[96] Between 1961 and 1981 the number of female teachers increased from circa 250,000 to over 400,000, and in the same timespan female nurses more than tripled from 150,000 to around 500,000.[97]

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[91] 1961 Census- Great Britain Summary Tables, 'Table 1: Qualified Persons by Subject and Type of Qualification by Industry', OP, pp.2-6.

[92] Geoff Payne and Pamela Abbott, 'Beyond Male Mobility Models', in Geoff Payne and Pamela Abbott (eds), *The Social Mobility of Women: Beyond Male Mobility Models* (Basingstoke, 1990), pp.161-2.

[93] Andrew Miles, *Social Mobility in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century England* (Basingstoke, 1999), pp.88-91.

[94] Payne and Abbott, 'Beyond Male Mobility Models'*,* p.162.

[95] Mike Savage, 'Lazy, Drunken, Promiscuous, Rude…Why the UK Loves to Hate Young White Men', *The Guardian,* 19th December 2015.

[96] Pat Thane, 'The History of the Gender Division of Labour in Britain: Reflections on "Herstory" in Accounting, The First Eighty Years', *Accounting Organisations and Society,* 17/3-4 (1992), p.309; see also Paul Bagguley and Sylvia Walby, *Gender Restructuring: A Comparative Analysis of Five Local Labour Markets* (Lancaster, 1988).

[97] 1961 Census- Great Britain General Report, 'Table 54: Comparison of 1951 and 1961 Census: Occupations', OP; p.91; 1981 Census- Qualified Manpower Tables, 'Table 4: Usually Resident Population Economically Active Aged 18 and Over', OP, p.35.

As we have seen, returning to education as a mature student was a key enabler of social mobility for women born between the late 1930s and early 1950s.

Women who made use of further education and the new layer of higher education system, and achieved occupational mobility, largely moved upward from the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) class 3 or 4 to NS-SEC class 2- i.e routine non-manual to the lower professional occupations.[98] This is representative of the type of mobility women are likely to experience; as Payne has argued, female mobility is often short-range between the middle classes of the NS-SEC occupational structure and this may have contributed to the lack of research on this topic.[99]

There are many examples of women experiencing upward movement into welfare professions after finishing their studies in this period. Prior to undertaking a course at Sheffield polytechnic Cynthia had been a secretary, afterwards she was a primary school teacher who became the head of a department by 1980. Anita was a struggling single mother working in a print shop who returned to train as a social worker in 1979, then took these skills into community development to work with the local and national government on care strategies. She hailed from a middle-class background and going back into education functioned to stop her downward mobility and restore her middle-class status after a difficult divorce. In addition, the trend to return to education stretched beyond the women themselves in the interviews. Detailed descriptions were often provided of sibling's educational history. Whilst only Rita and her brother passed the eleven-plus (and both left grammar school early), her two elder sisters failed the exam and left at fifteen to work in the biscuit factory. All three of her siblings returned to some form of higher education, with her two sisters having qualified as a midwife and a nursery nurse by the mid-1970s. Another working-class interviewee Sylvia (b.1945) went to grammar school and then on to a prestigious art school. In contrast, her twin sister attended a secondary modern and left at fifteen without qualifications. She lived at home for a few years and worked as a secretary before deciding to return to study nursing and then took an MSc in health studies which allowed her to become a health visitor.[100]

As well as educating many women of this generation, the expansion of further education and creation of the polytechnics provided another avenue of employment and potential social mobility for women in the welfare state. This reconfigured post-secondary educational structure was the destination of some of the women who studied there as adults: Joy took on teaching at a further education college after completing her part-time teacher training degree, as did Chrissie. Rita took a lecturing position at a polytechnic. Notably, interviewees who had not returned to education also found occupational opportunities within the sector**,** for example, by the end of the 1980s, India (b.1947) and Jean (b.1950)

[98] For further explanation of NS-SEC see Geoff Payne, *The New Social Mobility: How the Politicians Got It Wrong* (Bristol, 2017), pp.178-80.
[99] Payne, *The New Social Mobility,* pp.129-34.
[100] Interview with Sylvia, 18th April 2015.

taught at further educations colleges and Sylvia was a lecturer at a higher education institution.[101] In addition, both Kathy (b.1950) and Barbara (b.1941) progressed in their careers in academic administration.[102] Carole Leathwood has argued an important reason for more women being employed as lecturers in these institutions was the introduction of more courses aimed at female students in the 1970s.[103] There was also a significant proportion of women lecturers (still a relatively small number overall) in the non-traditional institutions who were also feminist activists. Thane notes this in her research on women in the 1970s: women historians 'taught mainly in evening classes and colleges of further education. This was partly politically motivated, by the desire to speak to a wider audience, but also at that time women were a beleaguered minority in university posts'.[104] There remained a hierarchy within post-compulsory institutions, with universities at the top, followed by polytechnics then further education, but expansion nonetheless afforded more women the opportunity to have a career in education that was not confined to school teaching. One of the key debates in the study of social mobility is whether educational or occupational expansion is a more significant catalyst for mobility. However, scholars of women's mobility in this period cannot make a clear distinction between education and the labour market because employment in an array of possible educational institutions provided such an important route into the professions.[105] This is an example of the different analytical tools we need to approach women's social mobility during the post-war decades.

Women who had chosen to go back into education and then moved into a professional job, described their own efforts as central to their experience of upward mobility. Harriet (b.1941), hailed from a working-class family in Lancashire and had attended a secondary modern school after failing the eleven-plus.[106] She left school at fifteen 'without any qualifications' and went straight into employment. Harriet recently wrote that she had ended her career as a librarian and adult education teacher after returning to education in the late 1970s and thus 'I feel that I have progressed upwards from being working class to a middle-class semi-professional'.[107] She explained that 'my husband and myself had to get all our Qualifications [sic] after we left school and during a long working life. We feel that through our own efforts we have raised ourselves into a totally different class'.[108] It is significant in the context of this article that Harriet chose to capitalise the word 'qualifications' here. Similarly, my interviewee

[101] Interviews with India, 28th March 2016, Jean 13th April 2015 and Sylvia.
[102] Interviews with Kathy, 19th April 2015 and Barbara, 5th December 2014.
[103] Carole Leathwood, '"Treat me as a human being-don't look at me as a woman": Femininities and Professional Identities in Further Education', *Gender and Education,* 17/4 (2005), p.388.
[104] Pat Thane, 'Women in the 1970s', in Lawrence Black, Hugh Pemberton and Pat Thane (eds), *Reassessing 1970s Britain* (Manchester, 2013), p.178.
[105] Scholarship on earlier periods demonstrates that school-teaching has long been a dominant mechanism of mobility for women. See Dyhouse, 'Family Patterns of Mobility'; Christina de Bellaigue, *Educating Women: Schooling and Identity in England and France, 1800-1867* (Oxford, 2007).
[106] H2639, Spring 2016 Directive, Mass Observation Archive (MOA), University of Sussex.
[107] H2639, Spring 2016 Directive, MOA.
[108] H2639, Spring 2016 Directive, MOA.

Cynthia referred to her 'higher education' as one of the key reasons that meant she had 'gone up' from her working-class parents in social terms.[109] Another interviewee, Chrissie, outlined that a 'professional job' is a hallmark of middle-class identity, and therefore:

> I think by [the] process of Open University and teaching, then I guess I am middle class. Your aspirations and everything else, because I think it's about aspirations as well the class thing, isn't it? And your family, like my family wanted me to 'do well', but their 'doing well' was not through the education system. So, I would say I'm middle class but your roots never leave you.[110]

These women were clear that they had experienced upward mobility as a result of their engagement with, as Maureen summed up, 'education and work'.[111]

Conclusion

The changing structures of post-compulsory education gave women born between the late 1930s and early 1950s an important avenue back into education. Women took up these educational opportunities in droves especially from the early 1970s onwards- a trend which has been neglected by historians. As the decades progressed, it became harder for women of the post-war generation to let go of the idea of education and be satisfied with routine non-manual work. Their sense of what they wanted out of life, and what they thought was possible to achieve in their careers, was shifting during this period. This is illustrative of the interaction between wider social and individual change which deserves particular attention when studying the more volatile female life course. Moreover, that the educational reforms primarily took place in the mid-to-late 1960s but were influential on women during the 1970s highlights the value of taking a life history approach.

During the 1970s it was becoming more normative in British society to hold post-secondary qualifications. Unlike in the immediate post-war period, it was harder to achieve upward social mobility without credentials. This change was helpful for women's mobility prospects because it had always been harder for them to access the internal promotion path than men. Returning to education as a mature student led to many women achieving, albeit often short-range, occupational mobility, into professional public sector jobs. Women's upward mobility was largely dependent on the state needing trained workers in areas such as health, education and social work in this period. Entering education is not necessarily consonant with social mobility even though the two concepts are often elided**.** Once the expansion of the welfare state slowed there seemed to be diminishing returns in occupational terms from returning to education from around the early 1980s onwards.

[109] Interview with Cynthia.
[110] Interview with Chrissie.
[111] Interview with Maureen.

By centring women's experience, this article has challenged the dominant narrative that attendance at grammar school followed directly by a university degree was the primary driver of social mobility into the professional classes in post-war Britain. This might have been the 'golden age' of mobility, but for women the main instrument of their upward social movement was the reconfiguration of further and higher education that occurred during the long 1970s. The oral histories are testament to the significance of this historical moment and the agency post-war women demonstrated in choosing to alter the trajectory of their lives.