Introduction

During the course of the twentieth century family structure was undergoing many changes. Social and geographical mobility which were increasing as the century progressed meant the breakdown of old communities and the development of new ones. Families in new suburban estates were thought to be more privatised, because there was no sense of neighbourhood, which in turn left women lonelier and more isolated than they were in traditional urban communities. Using Oxford as a case study I will examine the ways in which women were affected by the changes. I will be basing this paper on twenty-four oral history interviews with women who were living in Oxford at this time. They are equally divided between those who lived in traditional, working-class urban neighbourhoods and new suburban estates to compare women’s experiences of living in both types of community. There were also a number of social surveys and community studies undertaken in Oxford at this time, such as the Barnett House Survey and John Mogey’s study of St Ebbe’s and Barton, to which I will also refer.

Throughout the 1950s and much of the 1960s, decentralization was actively encouraged by planning policies which favoured the comprehensive redevelopment of run-down areas of the inner city. Demolition in St Ebbe’s began in 1962 and was completed ten years later, with its population being rehoused at Cutteslowe, Barton, Rose Hill and Blackbird Leys. The built environment in the two areas was very different. In the city centre areas, the houses were packed tightly together. Small terraced houses, with little private outside space meant the residents spent more time on the street. The community in the old areas was also stable with houses passing down the generations. Houses in the new estates were usually semi-detached with gardens to the front and back; which meant that physically the families were further apart. In their study of family and kinship in Bethnal Green and a new suburban estate at ‘Greenleigh’ East London in the mid 1950s, Michael Young and Peter
Willmott highlighted the isolation women could feel, separated from kin on new estates. However in Oxford, unlike the situation Willmott and Young described in London, the majority of people re-housed came from the same original communities; it was the same people lived in both the old areas and the new estates. In this paper I want to investigate whether moving as a community reduced the experience of dislocation that women experienced in new estates, or was it the estates themselves, rather than the inhabitants, which created these problems.

**Oxford**

In her autobiography Olive Gibbs described the housing at St Thomas’ a traditional urban community within the city centre of Oxford where she grew up in the first decades of the twentieth century. She recalled, “front rooms kept immaculately cleaned and polished with bits of brass and china, ‘presents from Southsea, or Weston-super-Mare’, prominently displayed, together with plush-framed photographs of members of the family, mostly men in uniform.”¹ The interviewers who conducted the interviews for Mogey’s study of family and neighbourhood in Oxford relayed similar accounts of the St Ebbe’s interiors of the 1950s. One interviewer explained, “The room, apparently the living-room, gave immediately the impression of tidiness and cleanliness. There was a tremendous fire made of both coal and wood logs in the old-fashioned grate highly polished with black lead. The fender was low and there were pokers, &c., with brass knobs also highly polished…Everything was in very good condition, no signs of wear, no tear, no dirt. The room was arranged in a homely and comfortable way.”² The fact that the houses seen by Mogey’s team corresponded so closely to that described by Olive Gibbs demonstrated how little change had occurred in the areas over fifty years. The consequence of this continuity was that women were still struggling to maintain homes and raise children in houses without facilities such as bathrooms, inside toilets and central heating. By the 1930s, though, the worst of the houses had been condemned and declared as clearance areas. There were 1,200 houses classified as unfit for human habitation under the 1930 act and 780 of this number had been demolished or closed by 1937. The authors of the Barnett House survey argued that the problem of slum clearance in Oxford was similar to that in other old non-industrial towns, but quite different to that existing in big industrial

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cities: “There are no large areas of uniformly mean and squalid houses, inhabited by the poorest sections of the community. Oxford’s ‘slums’ consist of small pockets of insanitary houses.” In Oxford, the majority of the people removed from clearance areas came from these relatively small but well-established communities. For example, John Mogey had found that long residence was common in St Ebbe’s with almost 70 per cent of the sample population have been married and living in their present house for ten years or longer. Fifty-five per cent of the housewives interviewed were born and brought up in these parishes. Half the mothers I have interviewed from the city centre areas in Oxford had their mothers living within a few streets whereas this fell to only a quarter for those living in the Cowley estates. In their study of family and kinship in Bethnal Green and a new suburban estate at ‘Greenleigh’ East London in the mid 1950s, Michael Young and Peter Willmott highlighted the isolation women could feel, separated from kin. When they were removed to new municipal housing developments in Cutteslowe, Barton and Rose Hill, the inhabitants of the new estates, particularly the women, faced many of the problems sociologists had found their contemporaries faced across the country.

The new housing estates around Cowley were very much the products of the local motor industry, but the residential concentration of the working class that this produced did not imply any obvious social solidarity. The workers who lived on the estates had been attracted to Oxford from various backgrounds and were settled in an area which did little to break down the barriers of regional difference. The divisions within the Florence Park estate lead Francis Moody to conclude that it was not a cohesive community. Arthur Excell was a Welsh immigrant living on the Florence Park Estate which became known as ‘little Rhonda’ because the Welsh population was so high. Nonetheless he described the hostility the Welsh faced, “The Oxford people didn’t want the Welsh, because the Welsh were undercutting the English…When I went to live on the estate the hatred against the Welsh was terrible.” These Welsh immigrants suffered isolation from their friends and relatives as later commonwealth immigrants did. Women were thought to be particularly affected because they had previously relied so heavily on support from kin. For example, women were believed to learn how to mother from their own mothers. The educationalist Kathleen Ollerenshaw

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2 Mogey, Family and Neighbourhood, p. 18
4 Francis Moody, Florence Park: A History of its Development and Building MSt English Local History, University of Oxford, 1999, p. 23
thought that, “Parents have the major responsibility in imparting the arts and graces [of housecraft] and most girls do learn a great deal about homemaking from their mothers.”

Women shared the same trade of housewifery, with knowledge and skills passed down the generations; increased mobility meant that this chain was broken. John Mogey gave the example of a Welsh woman who had missed the advice of her kin. She said, “Being one of a family of girls, I never got used to boys, and never had anything to do with the, and I didn’t even know how to dress them.”

The estates were believed to foster a more privatised, insular lifestyle centred on the nuclear family. Comparing Barton and St Ebbe’s John Mogey found that the neighbourhood-centred society of St Ebbe’s had been replaced by a family-centred society at Barton. The estates themselves were several miles from the centre of the city, usually on its eastern edge. Richard Whiting argues these peripheral estates offered severe problems of social dislocation, such as crime, vandalism, youth disaffection and inadequate leisure facilities.

Annie lived in Jericho, a traditional urban area, but volunteered at the Rose Hill family planning clinic described what this meant in practice for women living on the estates, ‘Rose Hill I remember going up because we ran a very small clinic there once a week, and Rose Hill people came, young mums came to the clinic and they were always dressed up with the baby you know the toddler or whatever they’d got that was dressed up and it was their outing, and they met people at the clinic and we encouraged this very much but I did think you know it was rather sad. And I know one rather snappy doctor did say because of course we only had one room and then a curtain, you know, “Wouldn’t your mother look after the children when you come?” and I thought you old cow’, but it was you know, it was noisy, she had to raise her voice and so on so, and they never had anybody you know they could leave the children with, eventually I suppose they got to know each other, but er a sort of Family Planning clinic isn’t really where you want spend your little outing.’

Cowley developed as a strongly working-class area. Its housing, whether in the form of the privately-built estates of the 1930s or the later council provision of the 1950s and 1960s, was larger in scale and more uniform in character than anything in the older working-class districts. Richard Whiting describes the social context of the estates as being “rather barren”.

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9 Mogey, *Family and Neighbourhood*, p. 66
10 Mogey, *Family and Neighbourhood*, pp. 152-153
12 Annie, interviewed by author (Oxford City).
similar picture on the estate at ‘Greenleigh’, an Essex council estate. Mrs Prince, one of the women interviewed, told them, “When I first came I felt that I had done a crime, it was so bare.”\textsuperscript{14} Feminist writers also examined the consequence of suburban living on women. The American Betty Friedan published \textit{The Feminine Mystique} in 1965. Friedan examined the consequences of living in a privatised nuclear family, with the division of labour so lauded by functionalism and its implications for women. She wrote of the isolation and boredom that gripped many suburban housewives who felt relegated to an endless cycle of childcare and housework.\textsuperscript{15} In the estates at Cowley this situation was somewhat improved as time progressed and the communities on the estates matured. There were some facilities on the estates and more developed. Florence Park was unusual in that it was the only privately built estate to have shops, most of which were on a very grand central avenue. In addition, it had its own doctor’s house and a park. The residents also formed their own associations to provide support and services for their communities. The Florence Park Residents Association was formed in 1949 and moved into its own purpose-built community centre in 1957.\textsuperscript{16} Women began to meet at the shops, clinics and outside the school gates. A Young Wives Club started in Florence Park in 1960 with about sixty members and belonged to the National Woman’s Club.\textsuperscript{17} Beryl was a resident of Florence Park at this time and described how active the Community Centre was and how important it was to her. ‘There was lots going on at the Community Centre here…There was a young wives group… And there were fitness classes and things like that that I went to… It was very good. A good way to meet other people and get out of the house.’\textsuperscript{18}

Moreover, not everyone regretted moving away from their old areas. Michael Mann found that most of the Bird’s factory workers he questioned, who relocated from Birmingham to Banbury in 1965-1966, liked their new place of residence and, “a majority of those in sample who lived in the traditional working-class areas of Birmingham did not even like their supposed ‘communities’.”\textsuperscript{19} I found a similar picture among the women I interviewed. Elizabeth lived next door to her mother on the Cowley Road and enjoyed a close relationship, but did not recall turning to her for support. When asked if she asked her mother for advice she replied, ‘only in conversation not, I didn’t, I never actually asked her about anything as such.’\textsuperscript{20} Similarly Sarah lived with her mother when her

\textsuperscript{14} Young and Willmott, \textit{Family and Kinship}, p. 117
\textsuperscript{15} Betty Friedan, \textit{The Feminine Mystique} (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 24-26
\textsuperscript{17} Tree, \textit{Florence Park}, p. 76
\textsuperscript{18} Beryl, interviewed by author (Cowley).
\textsuperscript{20} Elizabeth, interviewed by author (Oxford City).
first child was born, but when asked if that was helpful thought, ‘No, because my husband and my mother weren’t getting on very well at home that, no she wasn’t, and she tended to, I mean she really erm, it was difficult because I was in the middle of my husband and a mother, no, it was not easy [laughs], and therefore no it wasn’t a comfortable time. And you tend to, I mean looking back on it, it must have been really grim for her, but erm. I think it was her, I mean she was fairly old, she was what erm, let me think, yes she must have been getting on for seventy, but I suppose we didn’t feel that she was erm, didn’t like to trust her with a child, because then that was old I mean in comparison with now, and I think that was the feeling that you didn’t want her to do too much because erm, but there was definite, I mean it was a problem with her, we were there for a year and then we moved out.’

Moreover for women who had not been born and brought up but had moved into these communities as adults it could be very difficult to feel accepted and make friends. Jane moved to St Clements to join her husband who lived there and found it very difficult to integrate into the community because it was such a tight-knit neighbourhood. Indeed as the period progressed and increasing numbers of families were rehoused the demographic make up of the city-centre areas made it even harder for mothers who moved there. Young families tended to be the first to leave so women were left without their peer group. Winifred’s husband was sent to Oxford during the war and she moved to join him, also living in St Clements. When asked whether there were other women with young around, she answered, ‘there was no other young mothers. The girl next door had none, and the other ladies were older.’

Conclusion

Whether for good or bad, however, the patterns of community seen in the traditional working-class neighbourhoods in the city centre were never replicated on the new estates. While many of the same people may have lived in both the old areas and the new estates, the nature of the communities changed. There was a lack of shops and entertainments on the new estates. In contrast in St Ebbe’s, Mogey had found a large range of shops and services on offer. There was a general store and public house about 100 years from any front door, and a fish and chip shop and café within 250 yards. Churches and community halls were so over-abundant that some had been given over to

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21 Sarah, interviewed by author (Oxford City).
22 Winifred, interviewed by author (Oxford City).
The built environment in the two areas was very different. In the city centre areas, the houses were packed tightly together. Small terraced houses, with little private outside space meant the residents spent more time on the street. The community in the old areas was also stable with houses passing down the generations. Houses in the new estates were usually semi-detached with gardens to the front and back; which meant that physically the families were further apart. Although many inhabitants of the old areas moved together to the new estates there was still great dislocation and all the residents had new neighbours. Moreover challenging some of the assumptions of Willmott and Young, even if the communities had been rehoused on the existing sites and not moved to new areas it seems likely that the old patterns of community would have still broken down. Raymond Morris and John Mogey’s study of Berinsfield, also in Oxfordshire, conducted in the 1950s, where the squatters’ camp community of Field Farm was rehoused in the new village of Berinsfield built on the same site, still found the residents suffered from feelings of disruption and displacement and a new spirit of community had to be fostered. I would like to argue that women with young were particularly affected by these developments, as the majority of their time was spent in the home and therefore their lives were deeply influenced by their surroundings. Throughout the 1950s and much of the 1960s, decentralization was actively encouraged by planning policies which favoured the comprehensive redevelopment of run-down areas of the inner city. Oxford faced renewed attempts at slum clearance. Demolition in St Ebbe’s began in 1962 and was completed ten years later, with its population being rehoused at Cutteslowe, Barton, Rose Hill and the new estate at Blackbird Leys, and the traditional, neighbourhood centred community that Mogey described had disappeared. Hannah Gavron demonstrated how the disappearance of street life she found in London meant that, “The young working class mother in this sample was confined to her home in a way that previous generations may not have been.”

The move to new suburban estates meant that women were experiencing a different type of neighbourhood and community life, and consequently a new experience of motherhood.

23 Mogey, Family and Neighbourhood, p. 10
Appendix 1

**Oral History Interviews:**

**Oxford City**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Year of Birth</th>
<th>Place of Birth</th>
<th>No of Children</th>
<th>Children’s Years of Birth</th>
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<tr>
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<td>1930</td>
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<td>Surrey</td>
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<td>1915</td>
<td>Canada</td>
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<td>Ruth</td>
<td>1940</td>
<td>Swindon</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>Jericho</td>
<td>Sarah</td>
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<td>Oxford</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Daphne</td>
<td>1930</td>
<td>Ilford</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1957, 1960</td>
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<tr>
<td>St Clements</td>
<td>Winifred</td>
<td>1920</td>
<td>Croydon</td>
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<td>1940, 1945</td>
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<td>1944</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>Jane</td>
<td>1935</td>
<td>India</td>
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**Cowley**

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<th>No of Children</th>
<th>Years of Children’s Birth</th>
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<td>Florence Park</td>
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<td>Wantage</td>
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<td>1949, 1956, 1965</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Maud</td>
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<td>1930</td>
<td>Derbyshire</td>
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<td>1955, 1958, 1965</td>
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<td>Carol</td>
<td>1927</td>
<td>Wigan</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1957, 1960</td>
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Bibliography

Francis Moody, *Florence Park: A History of its Development and Building* MSt English Local History, University of Oxford, 1999