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HISTORIOGRAPHICAL REVIEW

INTIMACY IN MODERN BRITISH HISTORY*

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ABSTRACT. *Recent developments in the history of modern Britain have led to the emergence of a history of intimacy, whether or not it is recognized as such. This historiographical review argues that intimacy is a useful category of historical analysis. Thinking in terms of inter-relationships between different forms of intimacy allows us to think with greater conceptual clarity about these forms, as well as types of intimacy that are difficult to categorize. The first section reviews recent and significant contributions to the literature and seeks to draw out existing connections and cross-currents between subfields. The second section turns to recent work on the histories of selfhood and the emotions and considers what thinking about intimacy might add to these fields; it then builds on this recent work to propose that one way to ‘do’ the history of intimacy is to think in terms of ‘intimate practices’.*

In recent years, historians of modern Britain have produced subtle and nuanced histories of various forms of intimacy—love, friendship, family, touch, sexuality, and privacy—enabled and shaped by broader movements in the field. The emergence of histories of emotions and subjectivities has provided both the impetus and a theoretical toolkit with which to approach private intimacies in the past. The history of sexuality, once peripheral, is now firmly part of the historiographical mainstream. Histories of the body and the senses have opened up space for an emergent history of touch. At the same time, few historians have recognized the existing archipelago of studies in the history of intimacy as an inter-related field of research. The inter-relatedness of types of intimacy—which sometimes blurs their distinctions—means that thinking in terms of a broader history of intimacy has great

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explanatory potential; understanding intimacies as inter-related broadens our enquiries in such a way as to throw greater light on these specific types.

The intimate is not a stable field; like the private sphere with which it is associated, it is open to constant contestation – it has a history.¹ Historians deploy the term ‘intimacy’ in various ways, to refer to sex or emotional closeness, for example, with little unified sense of what it might mean. Some scholars, such as Ann Laura Stoler, include sexual violence under this term; others do not include all sex acts.² Nonetheless, I wish to suggest that it has value as ‘a useful category of historical analysis’.³ The forms of intimacy already referred to are not an exhaustive taxonomy of types; instead, they indicate the many ways in which scholars have approached this subject. Taking intimacy as a lens allows us to see more clearly the inter-relationships between these various forms. It also allows us to look at the relationships that cannot be categorized within them. It is an analytic tool that allows us to step back from fragmented subfields while at the same time being useful in our approaches to particular types of intimacy. In this sense, it is something like what scholars in the digital humanities call a ‘macroscope’, capable of simultaneously taking in big pictures and zooming in on intricate detail.⁴ Intimacy runs the risk of being so capacious as to cease to be useful, but this flexibility is also part of its analytic usefulness; it allows us to consider the boundaries and slippages between feelings, bodies, and practices.

It is useful here to distinguish between intimate history – which concerns intimacy as a feature of our historical praxis, whether in terms of the scale of our subject matter or our emotional involvement with it – and the history of intimacy, the study of intimacy as a historical phenomenon. Many of the texts cited below refer to themselves as ‘intimate histories’. Marcus Collins’s *Modern love* and Seth Koven’s *The match girl and the heiress*, for example, each describe themselves as ‘an intimate history’, while Claire Langhamer tells us ‘the intimate story’ of *The English in love*.⁵ Here, intimate history seems to suggest an intimate approach to history. A number of historians have commented on intimacy in historical practice, in the ways we engage emotionally with historical subjects, or the tactile encounters we have with the past through

¹ For a reflection on intimacy in relation to public and private, see Lauren Berlant, ‘Intimacy: a special issue’, *Critical Inquiry*, 24 (1998), pp. 281–8.

² Ann Laura Stoler, ed., *Haunted by empire: geographies of intimacy in North American history* (Durham, NC, 2006); Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal knowledge and imperial power: race and the intimate in colonial rule* (rev. edn, Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, 2010).

³ Joan Wallach Scott, ‘Gender: a useful category of historical analysis’, in *Gender and the politics of history* (New York, NY, 1999), pp. 28–50.

⁴ Julia Laite, ‘The emmet’s inch: small history in a digital age’, *Journal of Social History* (2020), shy118, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jsh/shy118>.

⁵ Claire Langhamer, *The English in love: the intimate story of an emotional revolution* (Oxford, 2013); Marcus Collins, *Modern love: an intimate history of men and women in twentieth-century Britain* (London, 2003); Seth Koven, *The match girl and the heiress* (Princeton, NJ, 2015).

archives and objects.⁶ When our research concerns the history of intimacy, our historical practice might seem especially intimate. Prying into the private lives of others, reading through deeply personal material never meant for academic attention, or imaginatively reconstructing losses and love affairs in which we have no business, the explorations of the historian can create a feeling of intimacy with the past. While I want to address intimacy as a category of analysis rather than a feature of praxis, the two are intimately interlinked.

The point of arguing for the history of intimacy in modern Britain is not to propose a new field of study, but rather to highlight meeting points and cross-currents within the existing literature. As my next section shows, historians already draw such connections; I will suggest ways in which to develop a history of intimacy further. The influence of the history of the emotions, for example, throws into question boundaries between the histories of love and sex; the history of same-sex friendship has, thanks especially to the influence of queer theory, become indispensable to the history of sexuality. Our understanding of each of the strands indicated here is enriched by recognizing that there is a history of intimacy nascent in the existing literature. The second section discusses intimacy and practices of selfhood. I argue, via the work of Monique Scheer on emotions as practices, that the concept of intimacy has much to offer historians of the self. At the same time, drawing on Scheer, I wish to suggest that intimacy might be thought of in terms of practices; this offers a way in which to use intimacy as a category, a way to ‘do’ the history of intimacy.

I

A number of recent interventions by historians have painted a picture of fragmentation and crisis in historical scholarship in general, and modern British history in particular.⁷ Amidst this ongoing debate on the state of the discipline, a number of works have been published offering broad overviews of the nineteenth or twentieth centuries, or of the modern period as a whole.⁸ This

⁶ See, for example, Carolyn Steedman, *Dust* (Manchester, 2001); Katie Barclay, ‘Falling in love with the dead’, *Rethinking History*, 22 (2018), pp. 459–73; Emily Robinson, ‘Touching the void: affective history and the impossible’, *Rethinking History*, 14 (2010), pp. 503–20.

⁷ ‘Modern British studies at Birmingham working paper no. 1’, Feb. 2014, www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-artslaw/history/mbs/MBS-Birmingham-Working-Paper-1.pdf; Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The history manifesto* (Cambridge, 2014); Deborah Cohen and Peter Mandler, ‘The history manifesto: a critique’, *American Historical Review*, 120 (2015), pp. 530–42; David Armitage and Jo Guldi, ‘The history manifesto: a reply to Deborah Cohen and Peter Mandler’, *American Historical Review*, 120 (2015), pp. 543–54.

⁸ James Vernon, *Modern Britain: 1750 to the present* (Cambridge, 2017); David Cannadine, *Victorious century: the United Kingdom, 1800–1906* (London, 2018); David Edgerton, *The rise and fall of the British nation: a twentieth-century history* (London, 2018); Pat Thane, *Divided kingdom: a history of Britain, 1900 to the present* (Cambridge, 2018); Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite et al., ‘Roundtable: modern Britain, 1750 to the present, by James Vernon’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 30 (2019), pp. 264–84.

spate of new books speak to a desire for ‘macro’ accounts of modern British history, whether or not the crisis and fragmentation of the field is as grave as some participants in the debate have suggested. Intimacy is often best explored by microhistorical, or at least small-scale, studies, but recent ‘macro’ accounts of modern British history are sometimes critical of microhistory – James Vernon, for example, one of the keener proponents of histories written with ‘organizing narratives’, has called for a turn away from ‘the navel gazing of microhistories’.⁹ Yet, in arguing that modernity can be characterized as a ‘society of strangers’ that ‘provided the conditions for the reconstitution of the intimate domain of personal relations’, Vernon implicitly indicates the importance of intimacy in understanding modernity.¹⁰ Here, we see one way in which intimacy might illuminate ‘big’ historiographical themes. It also offers a way in which to conceptualize currently separate bodies of literature as interconnected. As has been suggested, intimacy serves as an analytic lens that allows us to see both small details and across fragmented typologies.

Historians of modern Britain have produced illuminating work on many forms of intimacy; I wish to suggest that thinking with intimacy as a category allows us to examine interconnections between these forms more deeply. Some of the most interesting work being done on modern British history is that associated with what Chris Waters has called the ‘new British queer history’.¹¹ With roots in the lesbian and gay liberation histories of the 1970s, queer methodologies have pushed beyond thinking about sexual identities, beyond thinking about same-sex desire and increasingly beyond thinking about sex at all.¹² A good guide to the work of the new queer history can be found in a 2012 special issue of the *Journal of British Studies*, and a 2013 edited collection, both of which emerged from a conference on ‘British Queer History’ held at McGill in 2010.¹³ This work includes studies of, for example, ‘the odd centrality of homosexual practices to late Victorian urban communications regulation’, of how a First World War VD film can be used to unsettle the hetero/homo binary, and of the queer domesticity of Charles Shannon and Charles Ricketts.¹⁴ In particular, the work of Matt Houlbrook suggests the new avenues opened up by queer methodologies; the 2013 edited

⁹ Vernon, *Modern Britain*, p. xxi; James Vernon, *Distant strangers: how Britain became modern* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, 2014), p. 132.

¹⁰ Vernon, *Distant strangers*, p. 44.

¹¹ Chris Waters, ‘Distance and desire in the new British queer history’, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 14 (2007), pp. 139–55.

¹² Jeffrey Weeks, ‘Queer(y)ing the “modern homosexual”’, *Journal of British Studies*, 51 (2012), pp. 523–39.

¹³ *Journal of British Studies*, 51 (2012); Brian Lewis, ed., *British queer history: new approaches and perspectives* (Manchester, 2013).

¹⁴ Katie Hindmarch-Watson, ‘Male prostitution and the London GPO: telegraph boys’ “immorality” from nationalization to the Cleveland Street scandal’, *Journal of British Studies*, 51 (2012), pp. 594–617; Laura Doan, ‘Sex education and the Great War soldier: a queer analysis of the practice of “hetero” sex’, *Journal of British Studies*, 51 (2012), pp. 641–63; Matt Cook,

collection *British queer history* indicates a turning point in Houlbrook's thinking. Houlbrook pitches his essay as 'a conversation' between his first book, *Queer London*, and his then on-going project, now published as *Prince of tricksters*.¹⁵ The former, according to Houlbrook, had tried to move beyond exercises in 'social historical recovery', and yet remained too wedded to 'a notion of queerness-as-being'. In particular drawing on Laura Doan's work, Houlbrook makes an intellectual move from queerness-as-being to queerness-as-method; his second book uses the alterity and unknowability of a confidence trickster to unsettle ideas about the interwar period.¹⁶ Houlbrook suggests that 'in certain contexts and as a temporary historicising operation perhaps the time has come to both think and *not* think about sex'.¹⁷

Released from the limitations of searching for the emergence of a stable homosexual identity, queer methodologies often indicate the importance of intimacy rather than sexuality per se as a useful analytic lens.¹⁸ Much of the most significant literature on histories of friendship is concerned with women's same-sex friendships, the relationship of these friendships to same-sex desire and lesbianism, and their significance to the broader culture.¹⁹ Sharon Marcus seeks to contextualize women's same-sex feelings and attractions within the broadest possible context, taking into account 'friendship, mother–daughter dynamics, and women's investment in images of femininity' in order to highlight that 'even within a single class or generation, there were many different kinds of relationships between women'.²⁰ For Marcus, 'lesbian lives are best studied as part of the general history of women and the family' and 'heterosexual women's lives can only be fully understood if we attend to their friendships with women and their relationships to female objects of

'Domestic passions: unpacking the homes of Charles Shannon and Charles Ricketts', *Journal of British Studies*, 51 (2012), pp. 618–40.

¹⁵ Matt Houlbrook, *Queer London: perils and pleasures in the sexual metropolis, 1918–1957* (Chicago, IL, 2005); Matt Houlbrook, 'Thinking queer: the social and the sexual in interwar Britain', in Lewis, ed., *British queer history*, pp. 134–64; Matt Houlbrook, *Prince of tricksters: the incredible true story of Netley Lucas, gentleman crook* (Chicago, IL, 2016).

¹⁶ Laura Doan, *Disturbing practices: history, sexuality, and women's experience of modern war* (Chicago, IL, 2013).

¹⁷ Houlbrook, 'Thinking queer', p. 137. See also Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC, 1993); Sharon Marcus, 'Queer history for everyone: a review essay', *Signs*, 31 (2005), pp. 191–218; Regina Kunzel, 'The power of queer history', *American Historical Review*, 123 (2018), pp. 1560–82.

¹⁸ See, for example, the ways in which intimacy is discussed in Matt Cook's work on queer domesticities. Cook, 'Domestic passions'; Matt Cook, *Queer domesticities: homosexuality and home life in twentieth-century London* (London, 2014).

¹⁹ Here, historians are particularly indebted to Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's work on nineteenth-century America. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, 'The female world of love and ritual: relations between women in nineteenth-century America', *Signs*, 1 (1975), pp. 1–29.

²⁰ Sharon Marcus, *Between women: friendship, desire, and marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton, NJ, 2007).

desire'.²¹ Martha Vicinus, meanwhile, is willing to situate intimate friendships within the history of sexuality even if the relationships were celibate. For Vicinus, thinking about 'intimacy' offers a way in which to think about relationships that cannot easily be pinned down by any particular term; her title, *Intimate friends*, for her 'embodies the indeterminacy inherent in any study of sexual behaviors and beliefs'.²² Intimate friendship here suggests 'an emotional, erotically charged friendship between two women'.²³ Though they take different approaches, both Vicinus and Marcus recognize the conceptual significance of intimacy, whether as a way to think about relationships that seem indeterminate to the historian, or as a broader context without which our understanding of specific forms of intimacy cannot be adequately understood. A more recent intervention on a similar theme can be found in Seth Koven's *The match girl and the heiress*, which follows the relationship between Muriel Lester and Nellie Dowell in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Koven reaches to 'queer' rather than 'homoerotic' or 'lesbian' as the most useful way to characterize Muriel and Nellie's 'loving friendship'.²⁴ Same-sex relationships in the past, which were perhaps not sexual, do not accord with our contemporary understandings of friendship, and were sometimes navigated using languages of family and matrimony, starkly suggest the usefulness of thinking in terms of intimacy.²⁵

In his review of Hera Cook's *The long sexual revolution*, Houlbrook points out that historians who are influenced by Foucault's concerns with regulation, power, and subjectivity tend to write the sex out of the history of sexuality.²⁶ When historians have focused on sexual practices, this work has demonstrated that thinking in terms of the history of privacy can be particularly rewarding. Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher's *Sex before the sexual revolution* demonstrates the importance of privacy to physical and emotional intimacy, drawing on oral history interviews with eighty-nine men and women who lived through the period 1918–63.²⁷ They emphasize, following Joan Scott, the historicization of 'experience'.²⁸ Their oral history sources allow the authors to be attentive to

²¹ Ibid.

²² Martha Vicinus, *Intimate friends: women who loved women, 1778–1928* (Chicago, IL, 2004), p. xxiv.

²³ Ibid., p. xxiv.

²⁴ Koven, *Match girl and the heiress*, pp. 244, 252.

²⁵ A recent history of the experience and representation of female husbands in Britain and America from 1740 to 1910 uses 'intimacy' to describe relationships, in part because of the difficulties of more firm definition in such cases. Jen Manion, *Female husbands: a trans history* (Cambridge, 2020).

²⁶ Matt Houlbrook, 'Sexing the history of sexuality', *History Workshop Journal*, 60 (2005), pp. 216–22; Hera Cook, *The long sexual revolution: English women, sex, and contraception 1800–1975* (Oxford, 2005).

²⁷ Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher, *Sex before the sexual revolution: intimate life in England, 1918–1963* (Cambridge, 2010), p. 2.

²⁸ Joan Wallach Scott, 'The evidence of experience', *Critical Inquiry*, 17 (1991), pp. 773–97; Szreter and Fisher, *Sex before the sexual revolution*, p. 50.

the role played by emotions, in which sexual practices were often implicated; we see how private life was coloured by a range of feelings, from married love to fear of pregnancy. Sreter and Fisher push back against liberationist accounts of sexual change by arguing that, for example, ideas of duty and sexual innocence were not seen as repressive, but were instead conceptualized ‘as values informing a loving, dynamic and mutually satisfying partnership’.²⁹ Changes in the availability of information about sex, in ideas about gender roles and in the availability of contraception were translated into lived experience in complex ways, ‘structured in particular’ by ideas about the privacy of sex.³⁰ Though their interviewees were willing to talk about sex, and in some cases seemed to have enjoyed doing so, the authors argue that the respondents highlighted the privacy of their own sex lives in distinction to perceived openness among successive generations; they spoke openly in order to underline the historic importance of privacy. Rather than simply being a methodological problem, then, the privacy of sexual practices can in itself be illuminating. Indeed, implicit in this citation of historic privacy is a sense of the shifting bounds of the private. Sexual practices and talk about sex serve here to shape the appropriate bounds and forms of the intimate.

There is a small but important literature on the history of privacy in modern Britain. Deborah Cohen offers an account of the ways in which families have navigated ideas of secrecy and privacy from late eighteenth-century India to the television show *Who do you think you are?* Cohen charts how privacy and secrecy were shaped by domestic, familial, and sexual intimacies in practice. The covering up of shameful family secrets, she argues, ‘accustomed those who took part to a moral relativism about behaviour’ which led to an understanding of privacy as a right, ‘intertwined with personal freedom’.³¹ Like many historians of intimacy, Cohen points to the period between the 1930s and 1950s as key to this shift; it was then that privacy and secrecy ‘parted ways’.³² Privacy became increasingly protected by the state, while secrecy was seen as potentially damaging to individuals and relationships. Similarly illuminating is David Vincent’s recent work on the history of privacy. In *I hope I don’t intrude*, Vincent offers a subtle history of nineteenth-century privacy via the many lives of the comic character Paul Pry, while his subsequent *Privacy: a short history* provides a synoptic overview of the history of privacy from the fourteenth century to Edward Snowden.³³ For Vincent, the ‘history of intimacy is

²⁹ Sreter and Fisher, *Sex before the sexual revolution*, p. 385.

³⁰ *Ibid.* See also Kate Fisher, *Birth control, sex, and marriage in Britain, 1918–1960* (Oxford, 2006).

³¹ Deborah Cohen, *Family secrets: living with shame from the Victorians to the present day* (London, 2013), p. xvi.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 210.

³³ David Vincent, *I hope I don’t intrude: privacy and its dilemmas in nineteenth-century Britain* (Oxford, 2015); David Vincent, *Privacy: a short history* (Cambridge, 2016).

critical to the evolution of privacy as a concept and a practice'.³⁴ Ideas of intimacy, secrecy, and privacy are clearly interlinked. The intimate is often private, if not secret. But secrecy and privacy produced intimacy as much as protected it. In sharing secrets, intimacies are built – sharers 'know' each other better, and open themselves up to vulnerability; Vincent uses gossip to make this point.³⁵ Cohen, Vincent, and Szepter and Fisher all indicate the ways in which understanding the history of privacy is important to understanding other aspects of intimate life. Work on privacy suggests that what constitutes intimacy cannot be taken as given. Adopting intimacy as a category of analysis involves examining its shifting and historically contingent boundaries, as well as its contents as constituted by intimate practices, as will be discussed below.

More has been written about love than about any other form of intimacy.³⁶ In modern British studies, two works in particular, Marcus Collins's *Modern love* and Claire Langhamer's *The English in love*, stand out as important.³⁷ Collins charts the rise and fall of the idea of 'mutuality' – 'the notion that an intimate equality should be established between men and women through mixing, companionate marriage and shared sexual pleasure' – from around the First World War to the end of the twentieth century.³⁸ This is a conceptual history, in which pre-war 'separate spheres' ideology was replaced by mutuality, which, challenged by feminists and their opponents, was in turn succeeded by the 'individualism' of the 1990s. Langhamer similarly places the middle decades of the twentieth century as a significant moment in the history of modern love, in which greater emphasis was placed on authentic emotional connections and the ability of love to transform the self. Langhamer's 'emotional revolution' is intended to make us question the idea of a sexual revolution, and for her it is the new emphasis on the emotional significance of sex that makes it particularly significant to married life in this period. Despite approaching a similar set of questions, and arriving at a similar chronology of change, there are, as Alana Harris and Timothy Willem Jones have pointed out, important differences

³⁴ Vincent, *Privacy*, p. 180.

³⁵ Vincent, *I hope I don't intrude*, p. 167.

³⁶ For recent reflections on love, see Lisa Appignanesi, *All about love: anatomy of an unruly emotion* (London, 2011); Simon May, *Love: a history* (New Haven, CT, 2011). Much of the sociology of love provides interesting models for historians, as well as an analysis of the state of intimacy at the end of the twentieth century, when much of it was produced. See Anthony Giddens, *The transformation of intimacy: sexuality, love and eroticism in modern societies* (Stanford, CA, 1992); Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *The normal chaos of love* (Cambridge, 1995); Lynn Jamieson, *Intimacy: personal relationships in modern societies* (Cambridge, 1998); Lynn Jamieson, 'Intimacy transformed: a critical look at the "pure relationship"', *Sociology*, 33 (1999), pp. 447–94; Alan Frank, Patricia Ticinato Clough, and Steven Seidman, eds., *Intimacies: a new world of relational life* (New York, NY, 2013). There is a significant literature on the history of love in other contexts. See, for example, Luisa Passerini, *Love and the idea of Europe* (Oxford, 2009); William M. Reddy, *The making of romantic love: longing and sexuality in Europe, South Asia, and Japan, 900–1200 CE* (Chicago, IL, 2012).

³⁷ Collins, *Modern love*; Langhamer, *English in love*.

³⁸ Collins, *Modern love*, p. 4.

between Collins's and Langhamer's readings of the history of modern love.³⁹ Perhaps most significantly here, Collins is primarily interested in concepts, whereas Langhamer is more concerned with experience. Like the work of other scholars, such as Szepter and Fisher, Langhamer's account of the history of modern British love, emphasizing practices, experiences, and emotions, suggests the usefulness of intimacy as a category of analysis without explicitly using it. Thinking more consciously about the interconnectedness of types of intimacy allows greater conceptual precision; the idea of an emotional revolution, for example, might have much to tell us about how changes in romantic love can be mapped onto changes in norms of friendship or family.

Indeed, the interlinkings of intimacy are nowhere more evident than in families, which can be understood as complex networks of relationships, the parameters and bounds of which have shifted significantly across time and in different contexts.⁴⁰ Much of the existing historical literature deals with the development of professional experts and state bureaucracies that sought to shape modern parenthood and the family, and the complex and various ways in which parents responded to these developments.⁴¹ But the history of emotions also poses new questions to historians of the family; as Emma Griffin has recently noted, the literature continues to emphasize 'the transhistorical and constant nature of parental love', despite 'the burgeoning literature on the history of the emotions'.⁴² Much of this literature is attentive to the relationship between familial intimacy and selfhood.⁴³ As Leonore Davidoff points out, the importance of childhood to the development of the self necessarily means that

³⁹ Alana Harris and Timothy Willem Jones, eds., *Love and romance in Britain, 1918–1970* (Basingstoke, 2015), pp. 6–7.

⁴⁰ Leonore Davidoff et al., *The family story: blood, contract and intimacy, 1830–1960* (Harlow, 1999); Naomi Tadmor, *Family and friends in eighteenth-century England: household, kinship and patronage* (Cambridge, 2001); Leonore Davidoff, *Thicker than water: siblings and their relations, 1780–1920* (Oxford, 2011).

⁴¹ Sian Pooley, "All we parents want is that our children's health and lives should be regarded": child health and parental concern in England, c. 1860–1910', *Social History of Medicine*, 23 (2010), pp. 528–48; Angela Davis, *Modern motherhood: women and family in England, c. 1945–2000* (Manchester, 2012); Sian Pooley, 'Parenthood, child-rearing and fertility in England, 1850–1914', *History of the Family*, 18 (2013), pp. 83–106; Mathew Thomson, *Lost freedom: the landscape of the child and the British post-war settlement* (Oxford, 2013); Hester Barron and Claudia Siebrecht, eds., *Parenting and the state in Britain and Europe, c. 1870–1950* (London, 2017); Laura Tisdall, 'Education, parenting and concepts of childhood in England, c. 1945 to c. 1979', *Contemporary British History*, 31 (2017), pp. 24–46; David Cowan, "Modern" parenting and the uses of childcare advice in post-war England', *Social History*, 43 (2018), pp. 332–55.

⁴² Emma Griffin, 'The emotions of motherhood: love, culture, and poverty in Victorian Britain', *American Historical Review*, 123 (2018), pp. 60–85. Anthony Fletcher, for example, makes the bold claim that there are no 'grounds for supposing that anything of fundamental importance changed, between 1600 and 1914, in the dynamic of the relationships between English parents and their children'. Anthony Fletcher, *Growing up in England: the experience of childhood, 1600–1914* (New Haven, CT, 2008), pp. xx–xxi.

⁴³ Davidoff et al., *Family story*; Davidoff, *Thicker than water*; Julie-Marie Strange, *Fatherhood and the British working class, 1865–1914* (Cambridge, 2015); Harry Hendrick, *Narcissistic parenting in an insecure world: a history of parenting culture 1920s to present* (Bristol, 2016).

relationships between children and adults are of central importance; 'taking on an identity', she observes, 'implies intimacy'.⁴⁴ Julie-Marie Strange likewise points to 'the importance of family, in all its formations, as a site for the constitution of the self'.⁴⁵ The implications of this relationship between intimacy and selfhood will be discussed further below, but here it is important to note the significance of the family not just as a unit of analysis, but as fundamentally connected to other forms of intimacy; studies of courtship, marriage, and parenting are studies of the same individuals at different stages and in different roles. Perhaps we are constrained here by a focus on the role played rather than on the individual in a life-course. A recent intervention by Laura Tisdall examines elite, expert discourses of child-centred education in post-war England, and is especially notable for its attention to the ways in which age is a relational category.⁴⁶ Historians need to reflect more upon age as a category of historical analysis; the role of intimate relationships both within and beyond family structures in an individual's navigation of growing up and adopting and adapting a range of social roles is under-examined. Thinking about this in terms of intimacy allows us to conceptualize these different intimate roles together.

Intimacy as a category of analysis, then, already exists in a nascent form within the historiography of modern Britain. Sreter and Fisher, for example, highlight the importance of privacy in their history of sex; histories of privacy are promising not only for what they might tell us about sex, but also about love, family life, and privacy as a form of intimacy in itself. Histories of sexuality, influenced by queer theory, often take the intimate, rather than the sexual, as their centre of focus. These existing literatures should be seen simultaneously as rich fields in their own right, and as part of a history of intimacy as a broader field; thinking in terms of intimacy is one way in which to encompass both these individual forms and the broader ways in which they are inter-related. This move between forms of intimacy and their inter-relations can, as the already existing literatures that moves across the boundaries of subfields suggest, be useful. Developing intimacy as our category of analysis, by thinking about the practices that constitute it and the ways in which its boundaries are conceptualized, grants greater conceptual clarity to the existing archipelago of subfields. The great strength of this way of thinking lies in the ability to account for intimacies that fall between particular types. Far from being too capacious to be useful, thinking in this way about intimacy has much to offer not just historians of sexuality, the emotions, and the family, but to historians of modern Britain more broadly.

II

According to the *OED*, an older meaning of 'intimacy', now obsolete, is 'inner or inmost nature; an inward quality or feature'. This is appropriate, because the

⁴⁴ Davidoff, *Thicker than water*, p. 7.

⁴⁵ Strange, *Fatherhood and the British working class, 1865–1914*, p. 20.

⁴⁶ Tisdall, 'Education, parenting and concepts of childhood'.

history of intimacy is deeply imbricated with the history of the self.⁴⁷ As has been noted, the family is an intimate site for the shaping of the self. But it is not the only one. Indeed, some scholars have suggested that a characteristic feature of modernity is the historically unusual importance of friendship, rather than ‘traditional’ familial connections. ‘More than family, kin or faith’, argues Mark Peel in Barbara Caine’s edited collection on the history of friendship, ‘friendship was the social glue of modernity.’⁴⁸ The reason for this shift, Peel suggests, is the modern conception of selfhood, viewing people as ‘relatively autonomous and mobile individuals who understand themselves as changeable, and as having the right to pursue choices’.⁴⁹ Here, we see how the histories of selfhood and intimacy are related in complex ways – intimacy is important in the construction of the self, and ideas of selfhood shape our intimate interactions.

Recent developments in the histories of selfhood and emotions indicate ways in which, using intimacy, we might focus on how relationships shape the self. Particularly helpful here is an important essay by Monique Scheer, which argues that emotions are a kind of practice.⁵⁰ The essay seeks to offer conceptual clarity to historians of emotion troubled by the problem of experience versus expression. Peter and Carol Stearns proposed the neologism ‘emotionology’ to allow historians to avoid claiming that they are describing emotions (emotional experiences) when in fact they are describing emotional standards (‘emotionology’).⁵¹ William Reddy proposed an alternative neologism with different implications – ‘emotives’, emotional speech-acts, have effects on feeling; this focuses attention onto the language of emotion.⁵² Scheer builds on Reddy’s insights to go beyond speech and make a case for emotions as practices. She suggests that emotions are embodied practices – things that are done – located in social, cultural, and historical contexts. The problem of experience versus expression which Scheer addresses is familiar to historians of selfhood.⁵³

⁴⁷ For a sociological approach to this dynamic, see Giddens, *Transformation of intimacy*.

⁴⁸ Mark Peel, ‘New worlds of friendship: the early twentieth century’, in Barbra Caine, ed., *Friendship: a history* (Sheffield, 2009), p. 279.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 282.

⁵⁰ Monique Scheer, ‘Are emotions a kind of practice (and is that what makes them have a history)? A Bourdieuan approach to understanding emotion’, *History and Theory*, 51 (2012), pp. 193–220.

⁵¹ Peter N. Stearns and Carol Z. Stearns, ‘Emotionology: clarifying the history of emotions and emotional standards’, *American Historical Review*, 90 (1985), pp. 813–36.

⁵² William M. Reddy, ‘Against constructionism: the historical ethnography of emotions’, *Current Anthropology*, 38 (1997), pp. 327–51; William M. Reddy, *The navigation of feeling: a framework for the history of emotions* (Cambridge, 2001).

⁵³ Michael Roper turns to psychoanalytic theory because it ‘focuses on the states of mind that emerge within human relationships’, and maintains the oft-forgotten distinction between experience and representation. James Hinton is likewise concerned with the problem of ‘collapsing subjectivity into discourse’, and argues for individual agency in ‘the creative moment in which an individual, struggling to make sense of him- or herself in the world, will bend, select, recombine, amend or transform sources of meaning available in the public culture’. See James Hinton, *Nine wartime lives: Mass-Observation and the making of the modern self*

As Elwin Hofman points out, Scheer's methodological contribution to the history of emotions has much to offer historians of the self.⁵⁴ The self in Scheer's analysis must be understood in terms of practices, actions, and doings. Hofman moves from this starting point to argue that study of 'the practices by which the self was formed may help us to take the history of the self to a new level'.⁵⁵

Intimacy as a category of analysis has much to offer this way of thinking about practices. After all, if emotions and selfhood are thought of in terms of practices, those practices were often – though not always – enacted in the context of interpersonal relations.⁵⁶ The intimacy of touch cannot be ignored if we think about practices as embodied. The intimacy of privacy or secrecy was often important to the expression of emotions and selfhood; for Scheer, 'naming' as an emotional practice, coterminous with Reddy's emotives and analogous to what Hofman identifies as 'self-talk' as a practice of self, is dependent on 'socially situated usage'.⁵⁷ Thinking about intimacy thus becomes important in thinking about the histories of emotions and selfhood in terms of practices.

The second step I wish to take with Scheer's work is to think about intimacy in terms of intimate practices; touch and 'self-talk', to take the examples already given, can clearly be seen as such. A recent book by Sally Holloway on courtship in Georgian England suggests the ways in which Scheer's methodological insights might be put into conversation with intimacy.⁵⁸ Holloway is interested both in courtship ritual and in the material culture associated with it, and is alert to the ways in which these were made possible by broader social, cultural, and technological change. Increased literacy, the development of a professionalized postal service, and the expansion of the luxury trade are key to Holloway's situating of her account at a 'transitional period in the modernization and commercialization of romantic customs'.⁵⁹ Holloway argues that 'rituals of gazing at, caressing, kissing, and smelling love tokens worked to cultivate particular

(Oxford, 2010); Michael Roper, *The secret battle: emotional survival in the Great War* (Manchester, 2010); Michael Roper, 'Slipping out of view: subjectivity and emotion in gender history', *History Workshop Journal*, 59 (2005), pp. 57–72; Michael Roper, 'The unconscious work of history', *Cultural and Social History*, 11 (2014), pp. 169–93. Much of the literature on both intimacy and twentieth-century selfhood is heavily indebted to Mass Observation, and often places great emphasis on MO's classic period as one of significant change in intimate and emotional practices. See for example Langhamer, *English in love*.

⁵⁴ Elwin Hofman, 'How to do the history of the self', *History of the Human Sciences*, 29 (2016), p. 16.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ For a particularly sophisticated theoretical approach to the 'sociality' of emotion, see Sara Ahmed, *The cultural politics of emotion* (2nd edn, Edinburgh, 2014).

⁵⁷ Scheer, 'Are emotions a kind of practice?', p. 213.

⁵⁸ Sally Holloway, *The game of love in Georgian England: courtship, emotions, and material culture* (Oxford, 2019), p. 15.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 1–2, 116.

feelings, summoning fond memories of loved ones and inspiring love letters and romantic poetry'.⁶⁰ Thus, drawing on Scheer, Holloway is able to construct an analysis of Georgian courtship which incorporates emotions, material cultures, and the history of the senses. The writing and reception of love letters certainly cultivates feeling; at the same time, further to this, we might also read these practices as intimate, and as creating intimacy. An emphasis on practices, as is beginning to be developed by historians of emotion, is one way in which we might think of 'doing' the history of intimacy.

As has been noted, historicizing the body, for Scheer, is an important methodological step in understanding the history of emotions.⁶¹ It is useful, then, to consider touch, 'the most intimate and illusive of the human senses', as Santanu Das puts it, as a case-study in the inter-relationship between histories of the senses, the self, the emotions, and intimacy, and a test of what a history of intimate practices might look like.⁶² For Das, 'working at the threshold between the self and the world, touch can be said to open up the body at a more intimate, affective level, offering fresh perspectives on certain issues that repeatedly surface in war writings and have become central to contemporary cultural thinking'; thinking about touch in First World War literature allows Das to construct 'an intimate history of human emotions in times of crisis – to explore the making and unmaking of subjectivity through the most elusive and private of the senses'.⁶³ With Joanna Bourke, Das argues that 'the norms of tactile contact between men changed profoundly' in the trenches, the physical, psychological, and emotional conditions of modern warfare creating 'a new level of intimacy' amongst men desperately far from home.⁶⁴ Thus, for example, men ritually reconstructed the affections of missed mothers and sweethearts in proxy kisses and tender moments.⁶⁵ We ought also to think here about the ways in which physical or mental injury sustained in the war altered the forms of intimate practices which historical subjects could enact; this is one way in which we might think about the ways in which the boundaries of intimacy were defined, including in exclusionary and disciplinary ways. With Scheer we might think of touch as an emotional practice, with Hofman as a practice of self. We can also see it as an intimate practice. The changing 'norms of tactile

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

⁶¹ Scheer is not, of course, the first person to argue this. Rob Boddice argues that historians of the senses had already made much of Scheer's argument. Nonetheless, it is an argument that Scheer puts forward with a conceptual clarity that makes it useful to historians. Rob Boddice, *The history of emotions* (Manchester, 2018), p. 123; Matthew Milner, *The senses and the English reformation* (London, 2011).

⁶² Santanu Das, *Touch and intimacy in First World War literature* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 20. See also Mark Paterson, *The senses of touch: haptics, affects and technologies* (Oxford, 2007); Constance Classen, *The deepest sense: a cultural history of touch* (Chicago, IL, 2012).

⁶³ Das, *Touch and intimacy*, p. 6.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 111; Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the male: men's bodies, Britain and the Great War* (London, 1996).

⁶⁵ Das, *Touch and intimacy*, pp. 109–36.

contact' in conditions of trench warfare – to take one example – suggest that an emphasis on intimate practices is a useful way in which to think about the constitution and reconstitution of the intimate.

Touch as an intimate practice, implicated in the construction of the self, allows us to think about the relationship between body, self, and space. The intimacy of the railway carriage, for example, raised the fear among nineteenth-century commentators that women travelling alone were disruptive of the gender order, and liable either to become victims of sexual violence, or false accusers of their male co-passengers.⁶⁶ As Robin J. Barrow notes, nineteenth-century railway carriages 'were intimate yet public spaces'.⁶⁷ In building a history of touch on the London Underground, Simeon Koole puts forward a nuanced analysis of the practice of personal space, seen not as something given but rather as something constantly negotiated.⁶⁸

We might think about other spaces in similar terms – the modern British bedroom, for example. In the nineteenth century, overcrowded slums in which working-class families and unrelated tenants slept in a single room led to moral panic about the dangers of incest and promiscuity.⁶⁹ As Peter Scott suggests, the ideal separation of bedrooms between parents and children of different genders continued to be governed by different ideas of 'decency' into the early twentieth century.⁷⁰ The material transformation of the modern home was also a transformation of the possibility of forms of intimate practices.⁷¹ At the same time, thinking seriously about intimacy should prompt us to reflect on the ways that the boundaries of intimacy were enforced in contexts of close spatial and physical proximity; as Joanna Bourke puts it, 'proximity did not necessarily breed intimacy'.⁷² As in the constant negotiation and renegotiation of personal space described by Koole, proximity established new boundaries to intimacy.

Intimate practices were also shaped by technology and forms of communication.⁷³ Holloway draws our attention to the ways in which courtship practices were enabled and shaped by the professionalization of the Georgian postal

⁶⁶ Robin J. Barrow, 'Rape on the railway: women, safety, and moral panic in Victorian newspapers', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 20 (2015), pp. 341–56.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 343.

⁶⁸ Simeon Koole, 'How we came to mind the gap: time, tactility, and the tube', *Twentieth Century British History*, 27 (2016), pp. 524–54.

⁶⁹ Seth Koven, *Slumming: sexual and social politics in Victorian London* (Princeton, NJ, 2004), p. 42.

⁷⁰ Peter Scott, *The making of the modern British home: the suburban semi and family life between the wars* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 26–8.

⁷¹ See also Michelle Perrot, trans. Lauren Elkin, *The bedroom: an intimate history* (New Haven, CT, 2018); Hilary Hinds, *A cultural history of twin beds* (London, 2019).

⁷² Joanna Bourke, *Working-class cultures in Britain, 1890–1960: gender, class and ethnicity* (London, 1994), p. 124.

⁷³ For a recent study of the development of the dating industry in modern Britain, see Zoe Strimpel, *Seeking love in modern Britain: gender, dating and the rise of 'the single'* (London, 2020).

service. A recent article by James Baker and David Geiringer considers encounters with personal computers in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and argues that changes to practices of textual production, ‘an intimate, personal process of self-fashioning’, in turn ‘recalibrated the processes through which the late-modern self was constructed’.⁷⁴ Modes of work, shaped by technology, also produce intimacies. Industrial employment created forms of working-class male homosociality that have only recently begun to be examined by historians, comparable to the changes in intimate practices in the trenches of the First World War.⁷⁵ Domestic service was ‘the most everyday and intimate realm in which individuals of different social classes confronted each other’, and shaped norms of physical interaction and privacy within the domestic sphere.⁷⁶ New histories of work informed by the history of emotions are a promising new departure among historians of modern Britain.⁷⁷ Thinking about intimate practices, shaped by space and technology, offers a useful tool to this new labour history, incorporating both the embodiment of work and the social relationships created in workplaces. Again, it is important to think here about the ways in which intimate practices at work existed alongside the policing of the boundaries of intimacy – workers could find themselves in frequent, close proximity to one another in various forms of employment, and spent large amounts of time with workmates and bosses usually not of their own choosing. While space, technology, and work create new possibilities for intimate practices, they also call into existence new boundaries of intimacy and practices of enforcing them.

III

Taking intimacy as a category of analysis promises to be useful, and part of this usefulness ought to be provoking new questions. Importantly, we need to historicize the terrain of the intimate itself, not assuming that what was intimate was fixed. Just as Koole shows that ‘personal space’ was negotiated and never settled in a clearly defined way, so what was considered intimate must also be

⁷⁴ James Baker and David Geiringer, ‘Space, text and selfhood: encounters with the personal computer in the Mass Observation Project archive, 1991–2004’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 33 (2019), pp. 293–312.

⁷⁵ Helen Smith, *Masculinity, class and same-sex desire in industrial England, 1895–1957* (Basingstoke, 2015); Jon Lawrence, *Me, me, me?: the search for community in post-war England* (Oxford, 2019), pp. 142–3.

⁷⁶ Lucy Delap, *Knowing their place: domestic service in twentieth-century Britain* (Oxford, 2011), p. 19. See also Alison Light, *Mrs Woolf and the servants* (London, 2008); Judy Giles, ‘Authority, dependence and power in accounts of twentieth-century domestic service’, in Lucy Delap, Ben Griffin, and Abigail Wills, eds., *The politics of domestic authority in Britain since 1800* (Basingstoke, 2009); Claire Langhamer, ‘Feelings, women and work in the long 1950s’, *Women’s History Review*, 26 (2017), pp. 77–92.

⁷⁷ Arthur McIvor, *Working lives: work in Britain since 1945* (Basingstoke, 2013); Langhamer, ‘Feelings, women and work in the long 1950s’.

historicized.⁷⁸ Understanding intimacy means understanding how and why understandings of intimacy changed over time. This article has approached the literature on intimacy in modern Britain, and we ought to ask what, if anything, was peculiarly or particularly modern about intimacy in this period. As has been mentioned, Vernon's attempt to breathe new life into the concept of modernity includes an argument that the 'modern social condition...engendered new forms of intimacy, affection, and self-knowledge'.⁷⁹ While Vernon has been critical of the small histories which interest in intimacy often leads us into, it is worth considering the ways in which intimacy was related to broader themes such as modernity. We should also consider what intimacy as a category of historical analysis does to our sense of periodization and chronology; how do we map the different stories of social change to be found in literature on love, family, sexuality, and friendship onto one another, and what is revealed in the process of doing so? This historiographical review has not sought to answer these questions, but rather to prompt them, and to suggest methods by which they might be addressed.

Using intimacy as a category of analysis requires us to think about how the boundaries of the intimate were shaped, policed, and altered, and how what constitutes intimacy was enacted in practices. The work of Monique Scheer, which has been particularly important to historians of emotions and which offers a great deal to histories of the self, indicates a useful way in which to think about intimate practices. This is a step which provides a way of looking at the relationship between intimacy, emotions, and selfhood, but also helps to give greater depth to the idea of intimacy as a usable category of historical analysis. It suggests one way – though I do not wish to suggest the only way – in which to 'do' the history of intimacy.

Rather than risking losing meaning through its capaciousness, thinking in this way makes possible description of relationships while allowing for the unstable, the unknowable, and the queer. Historical subjects were always imbricated in complex networks of intimacy – explorations limited to single relationships can only ever be partial. It matters that the parents a child reacts against in their own romantic life, for example, were once young lovers themselves. The relationships between siblings ought to interest historians as much as the relationship between parents and children. Sex is important, but touch is too. The history of intimacy, already nascent in inter-relationships between subfields, is complicated and methodologically challenging. But thinking about intimacy is a useful step in conceptualizing this inter-relatedness and accounting for the indeterminate; it offers a revealing category of analysis to historians of modern Britain.

⁷⁸ Koole, 'How we came to mind the gap'.

⁷⁹ Vernon, *Distant strangers*, p. 50.