



The Palgrave Handbook of Auto/Biography

Edited by

Julie M. Parsons · Anne Chappell

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For Chris
—Julie M. Parsons

For David, Sam and Jack.
—Anne Chappell

Foreword

The Palgrave Handbook of Auto/Biography is a welcome addition to the scholarly work on Auto/Biography. The authors of most of the articles and the editors themselves have a long affiliation to The British Sociological Association (BSA) Study Group on Auto/Biography (A/B). As such, it is worth noting the importance of that organisation for the development of Auto/Biographical Studies and therefore the work before us.

The BSA Auto/Biography group was formed from a New Year initiating conference held on the 1st and 2nd of January 1992 and organised by David Morgan and Liz Stanley (then of the University of Manchester) and consequent, in part, upon the researches that led to Stanley's *The Auto/Biographical I*—a volume that became a founding text for the sociology of auto/biography. There soon followed in 1993 a special issue of the *BSA's Primary Journal, Sociology*, entitled 'Auto/Biography in Sociology' (edited by David Morgan and Liz Stanley) that consolidated Auto/Biography as an area of study and was a fillip to the nascent Study Group. The Editorial Introduction to the issue provided the best conspectus of the sociology of auto/biography to date. Some of the attendees at the 1992 Auto/Biography conference are represented in the volume herewith and others from the group have presented at various of the scores of conferences that have successfully followed the founding event. An enduring practice of the Auto/Biography Study Group has been that, whilst promoting publication, conference presentation and intellectual exchange, it has been done within a republic of scholarly affection. This ethos and the commitment it generated has had consequences: Study Group members, as their careers developed, were increasingly responsible for inaugurating programmes of Auto/Biographical

Studies and related areas (particularly at Masters and Doctoral levels) at numerous institutions within the UK system of Higher Education. For a Study Group, this is not a small nor an unimportant achievement.

There is a long, detailed and useful dissertation to be written on why the area of sociology represented by the Study Group should have arisen when it did. Certainly, it was not the first time such matters had been of interest to social scientists. The distinguished work of the Chicago School of sociology alone was evidence of that. However, there was a marked losing sight of this sociological tradition by the 1970s and 1980s both in the UK and the USA. A renaissance was needed and the Study Group became part of one. Its first publication—a modest, pre-internet, few-page bulletin—set the tone for how it was to go about its work, describing Auto/Biography as follows:

as the activity of attempting to render a succession of narrative moments relating to a life in such a way as to make them comprehensible to others, who in turn may complement or alter them and so become part of the Auto/Biographical project... Additionally, the term Auto/Biography demonstrates an alacrity to recognise that all biography has some impression of the biographer upon it and that no autobiography can be produced by an individual entirely ungoverned by the social. (Erben et al. 1992: 1)

Also, from the beginning, ordinary lives were explicitly given more attention than those publicly regarded as exceptional. The epigraph of the Auto/Biography journal is Dr. Johnson's maxim that 'there has rarely passed a life of which a judicious and faithful narrative would not be useful... no species of writing seems more worthy of cultivation than biography' (Johnson 1750: 1). Further, it was not just the lives themselves that were of importance to the Study Group's endeavours but the study of those telling those lives and the meaning of the notions of biography and autobiography per se. From this first 1992 bulletin, the Study Group has not been without a continuous publication and for the last twenty-one years, under the exemplary, untiring and exceptional editorship of Andrew Sparkes, it has produced a regular academic journal containing high quality, original articles. Within its journal and through its monographs, the Study Group has accomplished the analysis and understanding of lives, identity and selfhood in numerous ways and via numerous methods: through action research, through archival research, through participant observation, through prosopography, through in-depth interview, through auto-ethnography, through case-study, through auto-fiction, through psychoanalysis, through literature and history, through art, cinema and virtual worlds and so on.

Of course, it was not only in the formative BSA Auto/Biography Study Group that interest in the study of lives in novel ways was of interest. There were additional, co-extensive developments during this time. To a degree, this ‘biographical turn’ was brought about by a feeling that *some* of the High Theory of the 1970s and 1980s was proving repetitive, too self-involved, too remote from persons and too inaccessible. By the 1980s, it was felt increasingly within parts of the social sciences and humanities that it was time to bring human actors back on the stage. As a result, there is now a large body of work within an encompassing human sciences concerned with lives and the nature of selfhood. The growing interest in autobiographical and biographical forms in terms of individuals, themes and disciplines is illustrated by the popularity of the comprehensive two-volume *Encyclopedia of Life Writing* of 2001 edited by Margaretta Jolly, to which a number of Auto/Biography Study Group members made contributions.

A consciousness of the notion of narrative (of ways the ineluctable nature of time plays itself out in lives) and the exploration of that complex filigree of places and spaces represented by the interplay of structure and agency have been central to the Study Group’s research mission. As such, the intricacies of lives in social context remain as fascinating now as they have always been and are well represented in what follows in this volume.

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Erben, M., Morgan, D. H. J., & Stanley, L. (1992). *Editorial, Auto/Biography*, 1(1), 1–9.

Acknowledgements

The significance of auto/biography has evolved over the last three decades. This is exemplified in the work of the British Sociological Associations' Auto/Biography (BSA A/B) Study Group. In part, this book is a tribute to all scholars, past, present and future, who have been or are yet to become acquainted with auto/biography and/or the Auto/Biography Study Group.

The initial convenors and editors of the Auto/Biography Study Group from 1992 consisted of Michael Erben, David Morgan and Liz Stanley. Subsequent convenors and conference organisers are Jenny Byrne, Anne Chappell, Gill Clarke, Andrew Sparkes and Carly Stewart, with Michael maintaining a lead role throughout. Of course, there are also a host of other committed regular contributors to the group, journal and the field of auto/biographical. Not least for Julie on a personal note, her former doctoral supervisor and research mentor Gayle Letherby, a passionate and committed champion of auto/biography, who introduced her to auto/biography and the Study Group in 2010. Anne's experience is that the group conferences and journals, and the colleagues who contribute, have created productive spaces to talk and think in auto/biographical ways. The academic support and encouragement provided by these colleagues are profound in their influence on both research and confidence-building. The Auto/Biography Study Group is a unique and rich academic environment that has made a significant contribution to the development of auto/biography, and we feel very privileged to be part of it. We are very grateful to all involved.

This Palgrave Macmillan Handbook of Auto/Biography has only been made possible with the commitment of all nine part editors and twenty-eight chapter authors, to whom we are very grateful. Similarly, the support from Sharla Plant and Poppy Hull at Palgrave Macmillan.

A note from Julie: Anne and I have worked together on this handbook over the last four years, meeting regularly through Skype and spending time together in the British Library, as well as at Wolfson College, Oxford, Friends House, London and Dartington Hall, Devon, before and during various BSA Auto/Biography conferences. Throughout this time, Anne has been unwavering in her commitment to both the book and the Auto/Biography Study Group. It has been an enormously enjoyable experience and we have had some laughs along the way for which I am truly thankful.

A note from Anne: It has been an absolute pleasure to work on this with Julie over the last four years. We have had great fun as well as fascinating auto/biographical conversations. It has been a wonderfully collaborative academic adventure with both Julie and all the contributors. I would like to thank David, Neil, Heather and Alfie for entertaining conversations about both auto/biography and the book cover.

Introduction

We are delighted to welcome you to the *Palgrave Macmillan Handbook of Auto/Biography*. In this collection, we demonstrate that auto/biography offers endless possibilities for providing insights into the lives of others and the self. It is through first-hand accounts that lives and circumstances become known, providing opportunities for understanding the meanings that people make of their experience(s), as well as the impact of this meaning-making on their lives and the lives of others: 'if men [sic] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences' (Thomas and Thomas 1928: 572). Indeed, we agree with Letherby (2015: 130):

...that all writing is in some ways auto/biography in that all texts bear traces of the author and are to some extent personal statements (Denzin and Lincoln 1994) within which the writer works from the self to the other and back again. Research writings, then, include intersections of the public/ private domains of the researcher and the researched. (Stanley 1993a)

One of the most exciting things about auto/biography is its interdisciplinary nature and relevance to a range of substantive concerns. *The Palgrave Macmillan Handbook of Auto/Biography* draws on work from fields such as the arts, cultural difference; dis/ability, education, families; health, history; human geography, philosophy; sociology and social justice. Moreover, many of the part editors and contributors have long-standing and active connections with the British Sociological Association's Auto/Biography Study Group (established in 1992). The group draws from a varied and wide-ranging field of scholars interested in the intersections of

autobiography and biography in past and present lives, and the implications of this for our understanding of the social world.

The rationale for *The Palgrave Macmillan Handbook of Auto/Biography* emerged from a conversation between us at the British Sociological Association (BSA) Auto/Biography Study Group Silver Jubilee Summer Conference, at Wolfson College, Oxford in July 2016. Julie had given a paper on fieldwork she was conducting on commensality (eating together around a table) as part of a Sociology of Health and Illness Mildred Blaxter Postdoctoral fellowship.

The focus of the paper was on the benefits for participants sharing a lunch time meal at a prisoner resettlement scheme (RS) with men released on temporary licence from the local prison and others referred from probation, collectively referred to as 'trainees' (Parsons 2017). During the paper, Julie explained how she had published a book from her recently completed doctoral study entitled *Gender, Class and Food, Families, Bodies and Health* (2015). The book highlighted how our everyday foodways, or ways of doing food, can be divisive, enabling individuals to make distinctions between and across social groups. This was used to contrast to the commensality research which demonstrated how food could also be a useful means of bringing people together. Anne was curious about the book and Julie explained that, whilst it had been based on her doctoral research *An Auto/Biographical study of relationships with food*, the reviewers had requested that Julie should 'limit any auto/biographical reflections and to use these only if strictly necessary to make a point'. This resulted in a book of rich, thick descriptions (Geertz 1973) from research respondents, with little if any auto/biographical data (Parsons 2015). This is not the first instance of a misunderstanding in relation to the use of auto/biography. In Julie's doctoral thesis, she explains that:

... after a brief presentation of the rationale for my work, one of the key note speakers at a University event (a senior academic involved in applied empirical sociology) took me to one side and said; 'you're not serious about the auto/biographical focus of your research are you?' (2014: 78)

However, Julie goes on to add that this was not a typical response. Usually after a presentation of some of the data from her food research, audience members would share their own food stories, highlighting how food memories, like other lived experiences of the everyday are simultaneously both individual and collective.

Anne's experiences during her Ph.D. were similar in that people who she discussed her research with were both cautious and sceptical about her chosen methodological approach that was underpinned by auto/biography. Anne noted that the focus for the project:

...arose from my range of personal and professional experiences, and the associated observations of those of others... this project did not begin as a process of seeking to know and understand myself, however the consideration of others' understandings of themselves has inevitably prompted reflections on the self. (Chappell: 2014: 61)

As Anne came to understand more about auto/biography, it became clear that these reflections on the self, in researching with others, were inevitable and important given Stanley's observation that:

The notion of auto/biography involves the insistence that accounts of other lives influence how we see and understand our own and that our understandings of our own lives will impact upon how we interpret other lives. (Stanley 1994: i)

It was these individual experiences of research, along with our observations of different academic collectives that prompted the discussion at the conference which lead to the idea for the book. It was the appeal of auto/biography as a means to make explicit the links or otherwise between the individual and the social, the public and the private that we were keen to curate into an academic artefact as a resource for those seeking to work in this area. It was also important to illustrate the ways in which auto/biography ensures an engagement with a cannon of previous work, as Brennan and Letherby (2017: 160) explain:

Auto/Biography is academically rigorous, highlighting the social location of the writer and making clear the author's role in the process of constructing rather than discovering the story/the knowledge (Mykhalovskiy 1996; Stanley 1993a; Letherby 2003). Furthermore, auto/biographical study—either focusing on one, several or many lives—demonstrates how individuals are social selves, fashioned from interwoven biographies (Elias 2001; Goodwin 2012; Cotterill and Letherby 1993), and how a focus on the individual can contribute to an understanding of the general. (Mills 1959; Stanley 1992; Ellis and Bochner 2000)

It is no accident, therefore, that scholars working in the field of auto/biography make reference to the work of Mills' (1959) *Sociological Imagination* and the search for common vocabularies within and beyond the individual.

Book Outline

The book is in nine parts, each containing three chapters with introductions from part editors who are established researchers, most of whom are members of the BSA Auto/Biography Study Group. These parts provide the reader with current, previously unpublished research from authors at different stages in their careers: doctoral students, early career researchers, established professors and practitioners. The content will appeal to those with interests in a wide range of areas including, but not limited to, auto/biography, auto-ethnography, epistolary traditions, narrative analysis, life writing, the arts, cultural studies, education, geography, history, philosophy, politics, sociology, reflexivity, geography, research in practice and the sociology of everyday life.

The part titles are indicative of the general theme which has framed the writing of the chapters within it. The parts have been organised alphabetically. What follows is the summary of the parts through abstracts written by the part editors. We wanted to ensure that the part editors' voices are central in presenting their ideas so that these are shared directly with the reader rather than through the filter of us as editors.

Creativity and Collaboration

Gayle Letherby

The chapters in this part highlight how auto/biographical working across disciplines and genres enriches the telling of individual and group stories. With a focus on marginalised and excluded groups (Douglas and Carless); grief and memorialisation (Davidson) and the hidden emotional labour and subsequent burnout of a medical practitioner (Compton), the authors reflect on their use and analysis of creative and artistic approaches including music, poetry, art, dance and tattooing. As such, these pieces engage with the 'personal as political' through a consideration of (often) hidden/untellable stories, embodiment and emotion. Individually and as a collection they

challenge and extent social scientific understandings of method, methodology and epistemology both in terms of the tools used and in terms of working practices.

Families and Relationships: Auto/Biography and Family—A Natural Affinity?

David Morgan

There is a particularly intimate relationship between family practices and auto/biographical practices. The stories told help to construct families in space (homes, households) and, through intergenerational relationships, over time. Further, generational family practices over time provide major links between autobiography and history.

Epistolary Lives: Fragments, Sensibility, Assemblages in Auto/Biographical Research

Maria Tamboukou

As a genre of communication, letter-writing is almost universal—a phenomenon with diverse geographies and histories. Letters carry the immediacy of the moment they are written in and are thus considered to be ‘nearer’ to experience and life. Letters are also particularly ‘private documents’: their intimate character allows for thoughts, inner feelings and emotions to be expressed. Rather than imposing an overarching meaning derived from a central organising narrative authority or character, epistolary narratives offer multiple perspectives and thus reveal complex layers of meaning. Of course working with letters as documents of life raises a quite complex spectrum of questions around representation, context, truth, power, desire, identity, subjectivity, memory and ethics, questions that are now well identified and richly explored in the field of auto/biographical research. However, epistolary narratives have their own take on these questions and indeed demand ways of analysis that are particularly oriented to the specificities of their ontological and epistemological nature. The main argument of this part is that letters have opened up rich fields of inquiries in auto/biographical research, whilst the chapters comprising it point to new and emerging ways of reading, analysing and ‘rewriting’ letters.

Geography Matters: Spatiality and Auto/Biography

John Barker and Emma Wainwright

Whilst geographers have long explored the significance of space and place, more recently a diverse range of geographers (see Roche 2011) have begun to consider the role of space, narrative and auto/biography, for example, in exploring issues around health (Milligan et al. 2011), mobility (Sattlegger and Rau 2016) and urban studies (Valentine and Sadgrove 2014). In attempting to explore how narratives of lifepaths draw upon and can be navigated in geographical ways, this part brings together academics from Youth Studies, Education and Human Geography to consider interdisciplinary approaches to geography and biography. In doing so, the part considers a range of auto/biographical experiences from a range of social groups and locations. Chapter 11 (Cullen, Barker and Alldred) explore the spatial and temporal rhythms of young women with caring responsibilities. Chapter 13 (Hayes) considers the role of space, place and nature in biographical accounts. Chapter 13 maps autobiographical narratives of social housing tenants and the everyday challenges faced in moving off welfare. Together, the part illustrates some of the diverse ways in which auto/biography and spatiality are interwoven.

Madness, Dys-order and Autist/Biography: Auto/Biographical Challenges to Psychiatric Dominance

Kay Inckle

Psychiatric medicine remains a dominant force in contemporary society, orchestrating who and what is normal, and what practices should be used to achieve normalcy. Psychiatry is based on binary structures which separate the bad, the mad and the irrational from the normal, sane and reasonable. Positioned as irrational, insane and disordered, the mad can never narrate credible self-knowledge and are therefore always written about, objectified and diagnosed. What happens, then, when those who are mad/disordered/atypical narrate their critical and creative auto/biographical accounts? To answer this question, this part presents three auto/biographical accounts which explore neurodiversity, eating dys-order and madness to reveal how auto/biographical approaches are essential for revealing and challenging the

power underpinning the medical hegemony and proffering alternative and more productive ways of knowing and being mad, disordered and diverse.

Prison Lives

Dennis Smith

This part will consider the importance of past lives for the theory and practice of auto/biographical study. It will present three chapters of original historical research. The object of this part is to deploy a historical perspective in order to locate the high-profile lives of specific writers and political activists in the context of life and death struggles underway over generations in divided societies where the rights and obligations of powerful establishments and those over whom they exercise their power are in dispute. These conflicts are vividly and sometimes dramatically on display in the case of insurgents and rebels who stand up for exploited and neglected groups in confrontations that test the strength not only of personal character but also of competing ideologies, interests and sociopolitical alliances. In such cases, the heavy hand of imperialist oppression and the answering demand for individual freedom are set directly against each other, most evidently in the case of critics and insurgents that are incarcerated by regimes that wish to punish and silence them. The three chapters in this part draw together three such instances. They explore, in turn, the intellectual and methodological challenges and opportunities involved in narrating and analysing the following cases: first, Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937); second, Bobby Sands (1954–1981), and, finally, Nelson Mandela (1918–2013).

Professional Lives

Jenny Byrne

The three chapters in this part offer original research focusing on the lived experiences of individuals within their different professional contexts and how they view their working lives, their professional identity and sense of self. The auto/biographies are set against a landscape of neoliberal agendas, marketisation of services, performativity, accountability and the rise of managerialism that has disrupted traditional concepts of being a professional. Using auto/biographical accounts of academics in Higher Education (Selway, Byrne and Chappell), early career teachers (Stone) and millennials working in the private sector (Byrne) a reappraisal of professional life in

the twenty-first century, that is subject to ‘liquid modernity’, is presented (Bauman 2000). The chapters provide an enriched and up-to-date understanding of what it means to be a professional, and thus add to the theory and practice of auto/biography in this field of study.

‘Race’ and Cultural Difference

Geraldine Brown

Auto/Biography provides a means of capturing the multiplicity of ways in which our lives, intersects with power, the subject under investigation, the theoretical approach utilised the stories told by participants in our research and how we make sense and reproduce these stories. As highlighted in the opening introduction, in the UK, there is an array of literature that explores narratives and their relevance in our lives (Parsons and Chappell 2020). However, it is possible to suggest that less attention has been paid to how auto/biography offers individuals a valuable tool to capture the multifaceted ways factors such as ‘race’, racism and a process of racialisation shape and are implicated in how certain sections of British society live and experience their social world. The contributors in this part are three Black men who use auto/biography as a tool to interrogate such power relations. Sharing snapshots of his life, Paul Grant explores the relationship of autobiography to the practice of black socialism in the twenty-first-century UK. Gurnam Singh reflects on 35 years in Higher Education as a student and faculty member drawing on his journey from childhood to adulthood and through the education system as someone from a working-class Sikh family who migrated to a northern town and entered the academy. And, Carver Anderson’s work highlights contradictions associated with notions of community and his story shows his multiple connections to the choices he has made in key areas of his life.

Social Justice and Disability: Voices from the Inside

Chrissie Rogers

The chapters in this part engage with stories of disability and social justice. The narratives are gained through carrying out qualitative research from a particular position: that of the ‘insider’. All three chapters take an auto/biographical sociological position, whereby the researchers are explicit about

their positionality and reflexive in their analysis. From gaining and maintaining access with hard to reach groups, to broad assumptions based on the researcher's personal background and public others' perceptions, stories of social and embodied injustices are told. Stigmatised identities and the social gaze occur as persistent themes when drilling down into the life story and auto/biographical accounts. The first chapter begins this part and explains the very beginnings of a challenging research process with adults who have been through the criminal justice system and family members. What is discovered in Chrissie's chapter, is the emotive life story research, from the very inception, is unpredictable, chaotic and often hidden from the post-project sanitised formal write-up. The second chapter questions whether experiences of dwarfism could ever be separated from the exploitative historical and cultural portrayals which have plagued and blighted the fight for social justice both inside and outside of a community. Kelly-Mae's auto/biographical reflections as a mother with a son with Dwarfism are woven throughout, in pursuit of social justice. The final chapter in this part utilises reflexive writing as Amy, an autistic woman, examines disability within higher education as she reflects upon her experiences of 'passing' as 'normal' at an academic conference. Critically, she considers the decision-making process behind her reasons to present as a hybrid of an autistic and non-autistic researcher. All three chapters highlight the importance, benefits and challenges of doing auto/biographical disability research.

Concluding Thoughts

The chapters provide invaluable insights into the lives of others and/or selves, through the use of documents, diaries, letters, photographs and/or reflections on personal experience, past, present and future. The format of the chapters is mostly as might be expected in academic work, whilst some authors play with how the text is structured, organised and presented on the page. Authors also use a range of creative methods for delineating the voices of those represented in the text. It is these voices that make auto/biographical work so illuminating. They provide invaluable accounts across a number of different fields that explore aspects of the social world and the experiences of those within it. Authors utilise a range of academic perspectives and philosophical orientations, and their accounts cover the famous and/or infamous through to the everyday. It has been, and continues to be, a privilege to bear witness to the testimonies of the experiences of those represented here. This handbook is therefore an invaluable resource to understand how

auto/biography has been used over time for those with an interest in it and/or considering the use of auto/biography in their work or research.

In 1993, Stanley wrote that there were ‘a number of signs that the intellectual wind in Britain is now blowing fairly briskly in an auto/biographical direction’ (Stanley 1993b: 1). Our commitment in collaborating with colleagues on this book has been to draw some of that scholarship over the last three decades together in this collection.

Julie M. Parsons
Anne Chappell

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