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Thirty Years and Counting: An-other auto/biographical story

Invited Article

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Abstract

In this article, I share some of my experience of arguing for and doing auto/biography with reference to some of my research and writing interests and concerns. I reflect on how for me auto/biographical work highlights and celebrates the political aspects and responsibilities of both the process and the product of research. I show how my own ways of working in this way are part of a feminist sociologist tradition and how my own experience has led to different and creative ways of working, which can be significant in terms of impact both in and outside of the academy. To provide some examples of my own place in the construction of knowledge, I present some of my creative auto/biographical work in the areas of non/motherhood and food sharing between friends and acquaintances.

Keywords

Creative method/ologies, feminism, non/motherhood, food sharing, friends, acquaintances

Introduction

I attended the first Auto/Biography conference '*Auto/Biography in Sociology*' on January 2nd (my birthday) 1992 and gave a paper with my friend and colleague Pamela (Pam) Cotterill, which was later published in a special edition of the journal *Sociology* (Cotterill and Letherby 1993). In the paper, Pam spoke/wrote about her auto/biographical work on mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, and I spoke/wrote about my own experience of miscarriage and my first piece of independent research on the same topic. The special edition was reviewed in the *Times Higher Educational Supplement* (THES) by Gary Day. It is fair to say that Day did not think much of the various articles he read, and it seems he was particularly offended by Pam's and my piece, describing it as 'gross self-advertisement' and 'sickly self-indulgent'. Very recently, a colleague and I sent a paper focusing on our current experience of working and learning in higher education to a journal not well known for publishing auto/biographical work. The editor was not impressed,

their comments including: 'Self-indulgence is a risk in this type of effort, and it is important that readers ring the bell when they see that. And I see that here.' Despite these and other criticisms of my work and my approach, not least as non-theoretical, over the past 30+ years, I have been much encouraged and supported, not least within the study group where it all started for me. Auto/Biographical scholars appreciate the fine line between *situating oneself* and *egotistical self-absorption*, but reflexivity and auto/biography are neither *mere naval gazing* nor a form of *self-adoration*. Self-adoration is quite different from self-awareness and critical scrutiny of the self. Indeed, those who protect themselves from scrutiny could well be labelled self-satisfied and arrogant in presuming their presence and relations with others to be unproblematic. With this in mind, in this paper, I share some of my experience of arguing for and doing auto/biography with reference to some of my research and writing interests and concerns.

Arguing For and Doing Auto/biography

Throughout my work, I recognise/argue that all research is:

- An auto/biographical practice, which we engage in as insider/outsider and as 'children of our time' (Stanley 1999)
- An intellectual and embodied activity and experience that also necessitates consideration of power, emotion, and P/politics (e.g., Letherby 2003, 2004, 2011, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2020a)

I suggest then that all research and (scholarly) writing is in some ways auto/biographical, involving intersections of the lives of those who write and those who are written about. All texts bear traces of the author 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 both the researched and the researcher (Stanley 1993). As David Morgan reminds us:

[auto/biography is not] . . . simply a shorthand representation of autobiography and/or biography but also [a] recognition of the inter-dependence of the two own lives; in writing about ourselves we also construct ourselves as somebody different from the person who routinely and unproblematically inhabits and moves through social space and time (Morgan 1998: 655).

Adding to this, Michael Brennan and I suggest:

When academics write about themselves but acknowledge the significance of others in the story their work could be labelled auto/biography (what some might call autoethnography ...). When writing about others but recognising the subjectivity of the biographer auto/biography is more appropriate. Writing and working auto/biographically recognises the entanglement and slippage ... between self and other: the fact that any autobiography involves others (especially others whose lives impact on the life of the writer) and that any biography inevitably involves traces of the autobiographical self of the biographer. (Brennan and Letherby 2017: 53)

An explicit auto/biographical approach not only highlights the social location of the writer, thus making clear the author's role in constructing rather than discovering the knowledge produced (Stanley 1993) but also encourages reflection on power relationships within research (Letherby 2020a). Furthermore, auto/biographical sociological study – either focusing on one, several or

many lives – highlights the need to liberate the individual from individualism; to demonstrate how individuals are social selves (Ribbens 1993; Letherby, 2018).

The beginnings of the development of my own particular sociological self began when I signed on to study A' Level Sociology at my local Further Education College in the mid-1980s. The class was on a Monday, and there were two TV documentaries later in the evening, one following a couple through their first year of marriage and another focusing on individuals who had survived in extremely difficult circumstances. I watched these programmes with new, enlightened eyes as I began to think differently about society and my place within it. Impressed and influenced by Charles Wright Mills' (1959: 204) view that: 'The social scientist is not some autonomous being standing outside society, the question is where he (sic) stands within it. . .' I agreed then, and still do, that we should:

... learn to use [our] life experience in your intellectual work: continually to examine it and interpret it. In this sense craftsmanship (sic) is the centre of yourself and you are personally involved in every intellectual product upon which you work (Mills 1959: 216).

True to his word:

.. Mills turned his own personal troubles into sociology. They were rendered sociological in two ways: by means of his boundless, almost rabid energy that made him a voracious sociological writer; more importantly, by shaping his view that the public role of sociology was to facilitate ordinary people to make sense of the social condition by showing how their personal troubles both impacted on and were impacted by public issues. ... (Brewer 2005: 674).

With reference to my own life experience and my own 'personal troubles,' I agree with Christina Di Stephano (1990: 78) that gender is a 'difference that makes a difference' even if it is not the only difference or even the defining feature of a person's life. Other key identifiers such as ethnicity, class, sexuality, dis/ability, geographical location and so on are also significant to life experiences and life chances, including, of course, my own. The concept of intersectionality (multiple interlocking identities) is used by feminists, and gender-sensitive others, to theorise the relationship between different social categories to identify how interlocking systems of power impact complex patterns of inequality (Yuval Davis 2006; Valentine 2007; Hanson Frieze and Dittrich 2013). The development of and debates surrounding feminist methodology has taken place during a period of increasing inequality for many worldwide, and feminists insist that 'in order to transform unjust gender relations, more than gender must change' (Ramazanoglu with Holland 2002: 68).

In our paper at the first Auto/Biography Study Group Conference, Pam and I argued:

As feminist researchers studying women's lives, we take their autobiographies and become their biographers, while recognising that the autobiographies we are given are influenced by the research relationship. In other words, respondents have their own view of what the researcher might like to hear. Moreover, we draw on our own experiences to help us to understand those of our respondents. Thus, their lives are filtered through us and the filtered stories of our lives are present (whether we admit it or not) in our written accounts. (Cotterill and Letherby 1993: 74)

We highlight not only that research relationships are auto/biographical encounters but also the relationship between the research process and the research product; how what we do affects what we get (Letherby 2003, 2011, 2013, 2020a). In my research and scholarly writings, I have always been concerned (and have concerns) with 'the pursuit for objectivity', and I have argued

that if we start by accepting our subjective position - the significance of our personhood (our intellectual and personal auto/biographies) within the research and writing process - and really try to understand the complexities and the influence of these, these 'biased sources' can themselves result in useful 'data'. I suggest that, ironically, this acknowledgement of subjectivity and the associated 'super-sensitivity' to the relevance of the personhood of the researcher could feasibly lead to the conclusion that our work is more objective in that our work, although not value-free, is value-explicit (Letherby 2003, 2013). Laurel Richardson (2001: 34) calls for academics to 'get personal' by 'writing-stories that situate ... [our] work in sociopolitical, familial, and academic climates'. For Richardson '[w]riting is a method of discovery, a way of finding out about yourself and your world' (ibid). I take this further and increasingly believe that writing is, for me at least, part of a 'politics of belonging' (Yuval-Davis 2006; Monbiot 2017) – who I am, what I value, where I stand, how I want to be viewed by others.

My feminist sociological auto/biographical work then accepts and celebrates the political aspects of the research process and product. As such, I am part of a long and significant tradition. Relevant here is Mills' (1959) concern with the relationship between 'the personal troubles of milieu' and 'the public issues of the social structure', Alvin Gouldner's (1970) demand for a morally responsible, reflexive, radical, critical sociology and, Michael Burawoy's (2005) call for 'public sociology'. Add to this the development of critical feminist epistemologies and philosophies, scrutinising the absences of women from history, philosophy, social, political and methodological 'canons' (e.g., Letherby 2003, 2020), arguing for the need to:

- Give continuous and reflexive attention to the significance of gender as an aspect of all social life and within research and consider further the significance of other differences between women and the relevance of men's lives to a gender-sensitive understanding of the world
- Focus on the need for research to mean something, to lead to a change in women's (and men's) lives
- Provide a challenge to the norm of 'objectivity' and assumes knowledge can be collected in a pure, uncontaminated way
- Value the personal and the private as worthy of study
- Develop non-exploitative relationships within the research
- Value reflexivity and emotion as a source of insight as well as an essential part of the research process
- Insist that the research process should be clear and 'accountable' (see, for example, Letherby 2020a for more here)

I have, throughout my career, constantly engaged with the auto/biographical (as part of my feminist, sociological approach), and I recognise that my interests and concerns relate, at least in part, to my own experience of biography, history and social structure (Mills 1959). Three forms of auto/biographical work are relevant here in my work on reproductive and non/parental identity and experience, bereavement and loss, working and learning in higher education, travel and transport, gender and (ill)health, crime and imprisonment and insults:

- Research-based **auto**/biographical projects
- Research-based auto/**biographical** projects
- Reflective **auto**/biographical and auto/**biographical** writings

A few years ago, in a paper focusing specifically on personal experiences of bereavement and loss (Letherby 2015), I wrote about (amongst other things) how a personal loss resulted in me finding sociology and, in turn, how sociology has affected the way I understand and experience loss. My concern then was with how my **auto**/biography has motivated and influenced my personal

research journey **AND** how said research has affected and influenced by auto/biography. In addition, as reflecting on my own work and that of others in this piece, I also included some memoir writings and some pieces of short fiction. I began writing memoir and fiction in 2012 after the death of my husband John (in 2010) and my mum Dorothy (in 2012). This way of writing began as part of my grief journey but quickly became part of my sociological research, writing and publishing practice, both within and outside of the academy. Some of the fiction I write is explicit sociological fiction (written specifically to generate sociological knowledge); all of it is informed by my sociological auto/biographical self (Letherby 2015, Watson 2019) in that they are (variously):

- Written from data
- Written as public/political sociology in response to perceived inequality and social injustice
- Written with a concern for the emotional wellbeing of others and by self-care

For me, this way of working, of writing, of academic storytelling blurs the boundaries of ‘fact’ and fiction and moves between the academic and the personal; and is, in all ways, auto/biographical performance (Pelias 2008). Furthermore, I agree with Ronald J. Pelias that:

. . . performance itself is a way of knowing. This claim, axiomatic for performers, rests upon a faith in embodiment, in the power of giving voice and physicality to words, in the body as a site of knowledge . . . it insists upon a working artist who engages in aesthetic performances as a methodological starting point (Pelias 2008: 186).

Auto/Biographical work, including auto/biographical memoir and fiction writing (creative auto/biography, we might call it), has clear epistemological (and political) implications, not least in terms of the challenge to mainstream assumptions about ‘tidy research’ and its attempt to counter (as well as challenge) the imbalance between researcher and researched. Auto/Biographical research and writing then serve both as a corrective to much traditional research (by which researchers ‘write themselves out’ of the knowledge they produce). Similarly, creative, arts-based approaches challenge traditional approaches, and such approaches can engage academic audiences in different ways and can also have an impact beyond and besides the academy (e.g., Sparkes 2002, Douglas and Carless 2013; Letherby 2020b).

Auto/Biographical work, including creative auto/biographical writings, enables meaningful reflection of one story, many stories, unique stories, and collective stories. Such work highlights differences and encourages us to make connections. It challenges traditional practices and dominant discourses; it affirms and celebrates the real-world life experience of individuals and groups. It is also a powerful tool for telling sociological stories in different ways. In the rest of this article, I focus on two of my auto/biographical areas of interest and concern; *non/motherhood*, an area I have considered for several decades and a newer one, *food sharing* between friends and acquaintances.

An Established Interest: Non/Motherhood

For more than three decades, I have been thinking, researching, and writing about the status and experience of non/motherhood – i.e., women who do and do not mother. My interest in this area can be broadly grouped as follows:

- Reproductive loss, reproductive disruption
- Pregnancy and motherhood (parenthood)

- Mothers (including the hierarchy of motherhood) and nonmothers, including the differences and the similarities in status and experience

I have researched and written about the reproductive experience, identity and rights of, and for, girls and women, and to a lesser extent, of, and for, boys and men. My interest is in the experience and identity of those who mother/parent and those who do not. Amongst other things, I have undertaken research in the areas of miscarriage and pregnancy loss more generally, 'infertility' and 'involuntary childlessness' (which I write in scare quotes to highlight the problems of definition); teenage pregnancy and young parenthood; older mothers; experiences of pregnancy and early motherhood for women living with long term health conditions; stay-at-home and working mothers; nonmothers as a resource for care in institutions such as higher education and prisons. So, I have researched and written about mothers, nonmothers and other-mothers (those who mother in what some define as 'inappropriate' social, material, and sexual circumstances), within which I have been keen to reflect on the differences between the institution of motherhood and the experience of mothering.

In one of my earliest articles in 1994, I wrote:

. . .all women live their lives against a background of personal and cultural assumptions that all women are or want to be mothers and that for women motherhood is proof of adulthood and a natural consequence of marriage or a permanent relationship with a man. A great deal of social and psychological research has focused on women and the role of children in their lives and is thus complicit in reproducing societal assumptions about women deriving their identity from relationships in domestic situations and particularly from motherhood within the family. . . Social attitudes and institutions support the assumption that women's ultimate role is motherhood and those that do not mother children are still expected to mother others. . . (Letherby 1994: 525)

And in 1999, with Catherine Williams:

For many people 'childless' implies a person with something missing from her (sic) life. Mothers are perceived as proper 'women', while women without children are perceived as 'improper' and treated as 'other'. They are also treated as childlike rather than truly adult. Thus, women who have no children are considered to have no responsibilities and thus to be like children themselves. (Letherby and Williams 1999: 8)

Thus, along with the political, social, emotional and sometimes medical experiences of mothers, nonmothers and other-mothers, I am interested in the cultural representations of mothers and others. Despite the complexity of experience, cultural depictions of women who do not mother children or who mother children within relationships or in situations viewed by some as different, inappropriate and/or even as 'unreal' draw on oversimplified caricatures. Alongside this, mothers, nonmothers and other-mothers have always been labelled by the media, as well as through political and medical discourses, as deserving or undeserving. With this in mind, I have been struck recently by a continuation of these discourses and a more sinister development with non and other mothers being represented as a danger, as mad, bad or both, to themselves and to others (see Letherby 2017a).

I suggest that the experience of motherhood and mothering is often more complicated than the promise, and mothering is portrayed as instinctual to women, yet mothers are bombarded by 'expert' advice and cautions. Mothers are expected to put their children before themselves, to engage in 'intensive mothering' (Hays 1998), and yet, if not careful, may be accused of psychologically damaging their children through over-involvement in their lives and engaging in 'helicopter' parenting (LeMoyne and Buchanan 2011). Women who do not mother children are

often thought to have no interest in or understanding of them and may feel excluded and othered because of this, which is ironic given that all women – whether mother or not – are expected to display the characteristics associated with mothering: not least that of caring and nurturing. Additionally, nonmothers – either ‘voluntary’ or ‘involuntary’ (positioning as either is often not so simple as is suggested) – are often stereotyped as one-dimensional – as selfish or as desperate. Just as the experience of mothering can lead to feelings of ambivalence, non/mothers can also experience ambivalence. Thus, the ideologies and expectations of **ideal** motherhood affect all women in our private and our public lives, whether mother or not, and the image of the ideal woman – which is arguably synonymous with the image of the ideal mother – also affects us all, whether mother, other mother or nonmother. Evidence of this is demonstrated by the fact that the only words to describe a woman who does not mother children is in reference to what she does not have: not mother, nonmother, ‘childless’, ‘childfree’. All of which (and perhaps particularly the last two) are most like a simplistic and often inaccurate description of a woman’s actual experience (e.g., as godmother/guardian, aunt, friend, nurse, teacher) (Letherby 2002, 2017c).

With reference to my own experience, I have written (Letherby, 2010: 262):

My identity as nonmother is a complex one which impacts on my status and experience as a woman for parenthood is repeatedly equated with adulthood and the qualities of ‘good’ mother, not least as selfless nurturer, are often seen as synonymous with ‘good’ womanhood. **So**, if motherhood is really about nurturing and not merely (even) about biological and kinship connections surely, I am a mother for I helped to care for my late husband’s two sons during their teenage years and into their twenties. **But**, when I came into their lives John’s sons already had a mother, something I never denied. **So**, although I cleaned and cooked, provided financial support, advice and affection I was always Gayle, never mum. This struck me even more when, close to the end of their father’s life, my husband’s sons became estranged from him and thus became estranged from me also (their’ choice). **So**, if in reality, for many, motherhood **is** about biology and biological connections I am a mother in that I carried a child for 16 weeks. **But** I was never able to name my biological child or hold it (you see **it** doesn’t even have a sex) or play with it. **So**, in both these cases then was/am I nearly a mother but not quite, not really? Certainly, this was the view of the editor of a journal who accepted an article I had written on my experience but wanted me to change my reference to a ‘parenting relationship’ with John’s two sons’ to ‘a kind of parenting relationship’ . . .

As a daughter, I find it much easier to position myself. A beloved only child, I was always cherished by my parents. During my childhood and adolescence, we were a happy threesome and our life together often felt like an adventure. My father, Ron, died when I was 20 years old, 38 years ago [43 now], but I still feel his positive influence in my life, relevant here, not least, in his encouragement to read and to write. Inevitably, my mother, Dorothy, was my main support when my dad died, and again and again through my miscarriage, my own in/fertility journey, a divorce from my first husband and the long-time illness and death of my second husband (John). A few years ago, at a conference I attended, the keynote speaker suggested that it is only when women become mothers themselves that they fully understand and appreciate their own mothers. Clearly, this is a discussion from which I am excluded; to add to the suggestion by some that nonmothers can have little to say about children, childcare, and even ‘real’ womanhood (see Letherby 2017b).



Figure 1: My mum and I (quite a few years ago)

Now self-defining as more (biologically) voluntarily childless than involuntarily childless, I credit this personal shift in part to the opportunities my academic endeavours have given me for detailed reflection on my own experience and those of similar others (see, for example, Letherby 1999, 2002, 2010a, 2015a, 2017). An opportunity, a privilege, that most people do not have. My friendships with younger people, including the children and grandchildren of friends, are significant too, as is my work - as a teacher, supervisor, and mentor - in that all these relationships give me many opportunities for satisfaction and fulfilment. Of course, I cannot know how my own life would have turned out if I had carried my one and only pregnancy, my baby, successfully to term or if I had conceived and given birth to other children. I may have returned to education and study; I might not. I do know that this (and other) losses (Letherby 2015) have been significantly influenced by intellectual and personal development, opportunities, and life experience.

My long-term interest in, and support for, the politics of the Left was further stimulated in the summer of 2016 (following the EU Referendum and the coup against the Labour Party Leader, Jeremy Corbyn). When I stepped down from a full-time academic position (60+ hours a week being usual) to work freelance, I was able to spend more time in voluntary activities and political activism. I became more active in canvassing, protesting on the street and online, and in political writing (including letters to newspapers, writing for my blog ([Arwenack Creatives | Gayle Letherby's Blog](https://arwenackcreatives.com) ([arwenackcreatives.blogspot.com](https://arwenackcreatives.com)) and on Twitter (@gletherby)). I extended my fiction writing also (for examples, see <https://www.abctales.com/user/gletherby>). Amongst other issues, I have written (in various ways, for various outputs) about a number of issues, including school summer holiday hunger, the Grenfell Tower tragedy, homelessness, health, education and more. The (small amount) of political work I do is motivated by my strong desire for a better world for all, now and in the future. Many of my concerns then are for all 'our' children, their life chances, and their choices. Food poverty has been a particular concern, related in some ways to my childhood, which, although happy and full of love, was at times lean. Here is a letter I published in *The Guardian* in the summer of 2017:

As the school holidays begin, each time we brew ourselves a drink, reach for a snack or make ourselves a meal we need to remember that recent analysis from the Trussell Trust and others suggests that more than a million children could go hungry in England this summer. In the preface to *Oliver Twist*, Charles Dickens wrote “IT IS TRUE”. Commentators agree that while Dickens’ writings, in this book and others, did not eradicate poverty or cruelty, they were educative and influential. Current “fictional” representations such as the film *I, Daniel Blake* and the BBC1 drama *Broken* plus daily reminders in mainstream and social media of the scale of food poverty and the need, for those who can, to continue to donate – food, toiletries and sanitary products – to food banks starkly highlight the scale of the current problem. On Twitter this week [Jeremy Corbyn said this was a “national disgrace”](#). Whatever one’s political leaning, who can disagree? **Gayle Letherby** *Falmouth, Cornwall*

[Let them eat chicken ‘n’ chips? Poor food and hunger in 21st-century Britain | Letters | The Guardian](#)

Another example (it is worth noting here with the issue of impact beyond the academy in mind, that this story has thus far been viewed by 13,000 readers on [abctales.com](#), where it was first published):

Poppy

It’s my birthday today.

I’m eight years old.

My name is Poppy Rogers.

I was born at twenty past nine in the morning on November the 11th. Mum says if I’d waited a little longer we’d have scored a hat-trick. I think that’s a funny thing to say.

Last year I had a party but this year I am going to a restaurant for a pizza instead. My friend Beth is coming with me. Mum is taking us but not coming in. I’m going to text her on my new mobile phone when we have finished our pudding. She says she’s going to go for a walk in the park to see the ducks. It’s raining so she’ll probably wear her old mac. Nan bought the phone for me as my birthday present and it’s got a whole five pounds worth of credit on it. I got some new shoes and a book from mum. I’m excited about going out. This place is too small for a party anyway. Mum and I live on our own in one room in a big house. I’ve never met my dad. We have a sink, a kettle and a microwave so we can make ourselves hot stuff to eat. My favourite is tomato cuppa-soup with bread. The other day we had tinned rice pudding which was nice too. Mum said that there was a whole box full at the foodbank. She hasn’t been eating much lately. I think she must be on a diet. We have to share a bathroom with three other lots of people which neither of us likes much. The boys in the room next door wee on the seat. We moved here just after Easter when the rent on our flat went up. Nan used to take care of me after school on the days that mum was at work but we live further away from her now. Mrs Barsar from the room across the corridor sometimes makes my tea. Mum says we are part of the hidden homeless. But we have a home, even if it’s not a very nice one, and everyone knows we live here so that doesn’t make any sense. Tomorrow we will probably go to church with nan to say a prayer for grandad. I’ve not met him either but mum says it’s not because he doesn’t want to see me but that’s he’s poorly and finds it difficult to be with people, even us. Nan doesn’t see him either and he is her husband. We

don't even know where he is. Grandad was in a war a lot of years ago and his ship was attacked. We learned about another war in school this week and wrote some poems about it. Mr Potts asked me to read mine out first. He said it was 'fitting' but I'm not sure what he meant by that. We made poppies out of red tissue paper, black wool and a safety pin. I wore mine all evening and asked mum why she didn't have one. I was worried because when we walked home Beth's mum said that everybody who loves our country and is patriotic – I think that was the word – wears one. Mum just snorted though and said that of course she loves the country and proves it when she pays her taxes, unlike some people.

I don't know what taxes have to do with anything.

Grown-ups are really weird.

With all this in mind, I was disappointed (and hurt) for my *difference*, my *otherness* to be highlighted yet again when I read of the launch of *Mums4Corbyn* at *The World Transformed* event at the 2018 Labour Party Conference. From what I could see of planned events, many of the issues considered were those that affect all women, mother or not, and shared concerns were part of my pitch for a piece for the *New Socialist*, which published a series of articles focusing on the contemporary politics of motherhood in support of the initiative:

My concern is with the political significance of all women, whether mothers, nonmothers or other-mothers (women whose mother status is considered lesser, even 'unreal'). This is important because the ideologies and expectations of **ideal** motherhood affect all women in our private and our public lives, and the image of the ideal woman – which is arguably synonymous with the image of the ideal mother – also affects us all, whether mother, other- mother or nonmother. Feminism can be criticised for focusing on motherhood at the expense of a consideration of sisterhood. Yet any (political) understanding of motherhood and mothering needs to embrace the experience of nonmothers and other-mothers. It is only through such holistic reflection on our similarities and our differences that, as sisters together, we can challenge that which divides us and holds us back and celebrate our 'collective and communal relations', which will enable us to work together for 'transformative change'.

I appreciate, of course, the particular challenges and inequalities that mothers face **but** I maintain that we can more effectively work on this together as, in with reference to this issue, as in many others, we do indeed 'have far more in common with each other than things that divide us' (Jo Cox MP).

Sadly, the editors felt that my piece did not 'quite match' their intended agenda. This, in turn, felt, to me, like a further denial of the relevance of the very many of us who have an identity and experiences often defined by society as lesser. I wrote (a variation of some of what I have written above) to *Mums4Corbyn* and received a generous reply, but I remained, and remain, frustrated by the lack of attention to the difference in the *New Socialist* pieces. I must admit, too, that the 'meaningful identity' that I have carefully built for myself felt threatened. The poem I wrote soon after highlights some of my feelings about my own reproductive status and experience and (some of) the responses to it:

Being Other

Expectation (on multiple levels), preparation, anticipation, expectation (joyful this time) once more.

Loss, pain (lots of pain, the physical far outweighed by the emotional), feelings of failure and self-loathing.

Desperation.

More failure.

Gradually, slowly, with lots of loving support, if not resolution as least an acceptance.

And there are compensations both in relationships and through other opportunities to find enrichment, fulfilment, value. For this I am grateful.

*

Yet, there remains a sense of difference, compounded at times by exclusion.

Still feeling other and sometimes being othered.

Being also, at least at some level, an expert in my own experience, and through much study and research the experience of similar others, does not always protect me from distress.

So, what of the latest exclusion, that which forces me to relive my loss (yet again), and its' social, emotional and material aftermath, more than thirty years on from the life-changing night when all this started?

This time a denial not only of our contribution and our value but also a rejection of my knowledge and expertise.

I appreciate then that my pride is hurt on top of all the rest.

*

I will recover, I always do.

But for the moment I'm left reflecting on the fragility of it all.

Contentment, self-worth, security in one's achievements and meaningfulness, perhaps even some small legacy.

In a heartbeat all threatened.

Walking on ice.

Careful steps now ...

Newer Concerns: Food Sharing (and Other Kindnesses) Between Friends and Acquaintances

At the most recent Auto/Biography conference (December 2021) celebrating the life and work of David Morgan (1937-2020), I spoke about the relevance of David's work on acquaintances/acquaintanceships to my own work and personal life. In this book, he argues the following:

- Acquaintanceships are relationships 'characterised by a particular mix of intimacy and distance, although the intimacy is rarely very great and the distance rarely consequential' (Morgan 2009: 5)
- Work, professional/client, neighbours, passing (regular/overlapping timetables), fleeting, distant and unwanted acquaintances
- 'Doing' acquaintanceship involves, like other relationships, knowledge, ethics and often, of course, emotional labour/work

He also argues against the hierarchy of relationships: 'Acquaintances, whether formed at work or elsewhere, have significance in their own right. They should not be judged in terms of whether they match up to some other notion of friendship' (Morgan 2009: 40).

As Morgan suggests, sociologists, like anyone else, have acquaintances based on where they work and the networks they move in. Furthermore, 'the everyday practices of research require the making of acquaintances and the elaboration of acquaintanceship (Morgan 2009: 125). Of course, this is true of my own academic experience, and I spoke of this in my presentation and also of how acquaintances may become something more (e.g., Brown et al. 2015, Davidson and Letherby 2020 and Twinley and Letherby 2022) for some of my closest and dearest friends I met through work, John too.

I was also concerned with Morgan's (2009) work in mind, with more recent reflections on '*the practices*' of acquaintanceship, including conversation (auto/biographical sharing is relevant here), ethics, community networking and (reciprocal) kindness, outside of the academy. Here my concern was with the following:

- voluntary work acquaintances
- online acquaintances **and**
- pandemic acquaintances

Of course, I could have mentioned others: swimming acquaintances, taxi drivers, and more as 'acquaintances occur 'naturally' in the course of everyday living in a complex world' (Morgan 2009: 122). Here, I focus mostly on one of the issues I spoke of – pandemic acquaintances (although there is some reference to online acquaintances also) – and the relationship between these and my growing interest in food sharing.

I live alone, and like many such others, I spent much of the first UK Covid-19 lockdown alone. Responding to a call from the journal *The Sociological Review* for blog pieces on solidarity and care, I responded with a piece entitled: *The Gift of Sharing: Food Provision During the Covid-19 Lockdown in the UK*. I wrote of how for me, the many months of re-occurring / repeated lockdown were, if not always easy, marked by many kindnesses, not least in terms of food sharing and provision.

A couple of extracts:

A week or so into lockdown I woke to a note from a neighbour, Jane, who I have never met, informing me that she was going to the supermarket that evening and to get in touch

if there was anything I needed. When I texted to let Jane know that I was 'fine, thank you', she replied to say that the offer was open any time. A few days before my first contact with the farm shop (Anna put me in touch), I finally managed to get a supermarket delivery after several attempts at the four supermarkets in the small town where I live. When I posted about this on Twitter, I received a private DM message from Mathew, someone I have never met yet who I regularly engage with online, letting me know he has a friend living near me who he would ask to do a shop for me if I needed it (Mathew lives more than 200 miles away).

About six weeks ago I took a different route past a concrete seaside shelter, the inside of which is not visible if walkers take the slightly less scenic choice. In the shelter, tucked in the corner next to a park type bench, was a small two-person tent. David has been pitched there for nearly four months now.

A couple of days after I first met him, I walked that way again, this time taking some fruit and a sandwich. A few days later I gave David the teabags and instant hot chocolate (he has a small camping stove) I used to take to my local foodbank before lockdown. I stop by for a visit with David at least twice a week now. I take fruit, salad, bread, crackers, tinned fish and portions of the pies and flans I've been making. More recently I have started to include novels after we had a chat about a thriller David was reading. (Letherby 2020)

Thus, in addition to my increasingly deep concern about food poverty and its relationship to 'political austerity' over the last few years, I am also interested in the experiences and value (for all concerned) of food sharing between friends, acquaintances, and within communities (Quandt et al. 2001, Knight et al. 2018, Michelini et al. 2018). I hope to do more work on this in the future.

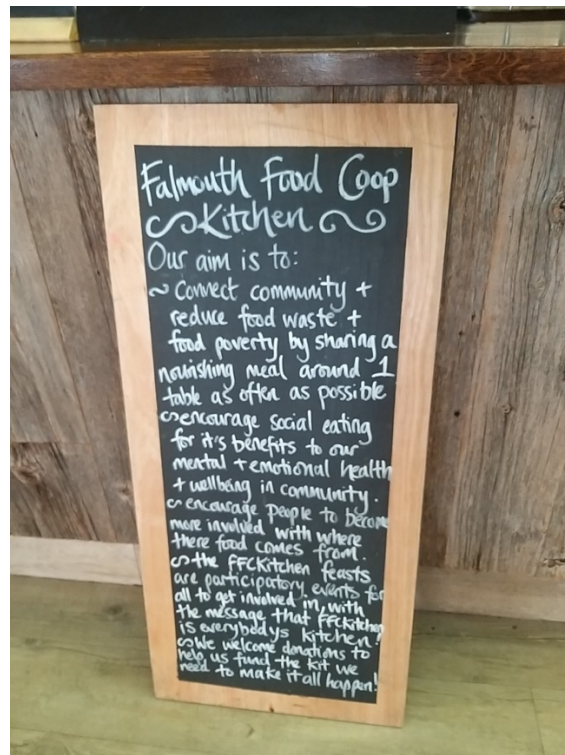


Figure 2: An initiative in my hometown

During the first lockdown, I wrote a small series of short stories for children (of all ages). Here is one of them:

The Clumsy Giant's Busy Spring

Almost nobody in the village of Codswallop knows Geoff by his name. Instead, he is known by everyone except his mum as the clumsy giant. All his life he's been accident prone. He falls over his feet, even though for his size they're not really that big and his shoes are well fitted; his breakage tally is so high there are no matching cups and plates at all in the house and he always, always, drops his toast butter side down.

Geoff's seeming inability to be quiet, calm and collected means that sadly he gets few invites to play or to parties. Any other giant would be saddened by this, but Geoff is happy enough and fills his day reading the books he loves and working in the garden. Surprisingly when pricking out seeds and weeding his vegetable patch Geoff never drops his hoe or spills the fertiliser and when harvesting his crops of luscious fruit and scrummy vegetables his wheelbarrow never tips over and every raspberry and every pea makes it to the kitchen.

So green are Geoff's fingers that his mum almost, I say almost, doesn't know what to do with all the colourful produce. The cupboards are full of gargantuan jars of berry jam and pickled onions and the freezer overflows with buckets full of root vegetable crumble and huge portions of leek and potato soup. Geoff's mum loves flowers, especially tulips and hyacinths, and in spring one corner of the garden, and the whole of their home, brims with bright blooms and lovely smells.

As the garden is at the back of the cottage few in Codswallop know it exists. Busy with their own lives they spare little thought for how Geoff fills his time. His mum usually does the shopping but when she sends Geoff for flour or stamps the village shopkeeper, who is a rather nervous wizard, stands in front of the bottles and jars and heaves a heavy sigh of relief as Geoff leaves. On the odd occasion Geoff and his mum visit Grumble Tums Café (why would they go often when their own food is so fresh and so tasty?) all the other giants and the goblins stopping by for coffee and cake hold onto their dishes as Geoff walks by their tables.

Life carries on much of a muchness until one spring a strange and terrible virus comes to the land and everyone, including all the occupants of Codswallop are told that they must stay at home and save lives. Sadly Grumble Tums has to close although the magical folk that run it continue to bake fairy cakes sprinkled with grated rose petals for home delivery.

The shop opens a couple of hours a day so daily essentials are easy enough to get for a while but soon enough the wizard finds that his suppliers have less to offer and everyone begins to get bored as their diet gets less and less interesting.

An unusually beautiful April weather-wise most of the village residents are out early for their once-a-day exercise and from the middle of the month they open their doors each morning to a surprise. Sometimes it's potatoes and a cauliflower along with a jar of juicy jam or maybe enough soup for the family's supper and some pickled veg to go with cheese and crackers. Those living alone are especially cheered by the beautiful flowers left on their steps and everyone falls in love with Geoff's mum's secret recipe tomato sauce.

Determined to keep everybody fed at this difficult time Geoff and his mum fall into bed each night having worked hard in the garden and kitchen respectively. Meanwhile, always carefully standing two metres apart, fairies, goblins, giants and wizards gossip and speculate over garden fences and whilst walking their dogs in the park, about who it can possibly be delivering such tasty bounty. Between them the village decide to investigate and one late April morning the goblins who live in the bungalow at the end of Sunny Corner Lane get up before the birds and keep watch behind the net curtains. Imagine their surprise when it's the clumsy giant they see arriving with some broccoli, a dark green cabbage and what must surely be a fruit pie given the gooey purple juice oozing out of it. Other neighbours take their turn at look-out over the next few mornings and at the end of the week a zoom meeting takes place so they can discuss the results of their detective work. As well as sharing their delight in the gifts they have received they talk about how guilty they all feel for not once thinking about how the young chap they know only as the clumsy giant and his mum might be coping during lockdown. Determined to make up for this, and for the years of avoiding the clever, kind-hearted but gangly, awkward big guy, they hatch a plan of their own and the next day Geoff is greeted with his own surprise as he does his daybreak rounds. In each and every window there is a poster. All of the posters contain the words 'THANK YOU TO OUR HERO GIANT' and as one all the doors open and the whole village start to clap, cheer and bang pots and pans. The noise reaches Geoff's mum in her kitchen, and she joins the doorstep applause for her very special son.

Overcome with shyness, Geoff goes as red as the pickled peppers in the jar he is holding but soon he is smiling too as the clapping and the banging continues. 'Hero Giant, Hero Giant, Hero Giant', everyone starts to loudly chant. But this is too much, and the blushing giant holds up his hand until everyone stops.

When everyone is quiet, except for the chirping birds, Geoff says; 'Geoff, my name is Geoff, please call me Geoff, just Geoff'. [The Clumsy Giant's Busy Spring | ABC tales](#)

Brief Reflections

As Steph Lawler (2008: 13) argues a written (we can extend this to recordings of auto/biographies and to other types of creative representation) autobiography does not reflect a 'pre-given' identity' but rather 'identities are *produced* through the autobiographical work in which all of us engage every day'. This paper demonstrates some of my auto/biographical work of self and other reflections. Auto/Biographical work has clear epistemological (and political) implications, not least in terms of the challenge to mainstream assumptions about 'tidy' and 'hygienic' research' in which researchers 'write themselves out' of the knowledge they produce. Creative, arts-based approaches challenge traditional approaches similarly, and such approaches can engage academic audiences in different ways and can also have an impact outside of the academy. It is not surprising then, I would suggest, that the creative and the auto/biographical work so well together, as I hope this piece shows.

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See <http://arwenackcerebrals.blogspot.co.uk/> and <https://www.abctales.com/user/gletherby>