



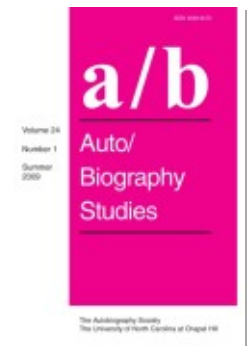
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Biographical Sociology: Struggles over an Emergent Sociological Practice

By Jeffrey Shantz

POSTMODERN RESEARCH has questioned the privilege of dominant research methodologies for obtaining social knowledge. This has included a critique of traditional qualitative research practices. As part of these criticisms new research practices have recently been developed. Specifically, emergent practices like auto/biographical sociology, which include personalized accounts of authors' experiences, have answered a call to give greater attention to the ways in which the sociologist or ethnographer interacts with the culture being researched. Biographical sociology includes various forms of research that connect the personal with the cultural, situating the researching subject within specific social contexts. Texts from biographical sociologists present their research as relational and institutional stories affected by history, culture, and social structures (which are also affected by the researcher). The texts, which vary in their emphasis on self, culture, and process, offer means to examine closely self/other interactions. In this paper I scrutinize the emergence of what might be called biographical sociology or sociological biography—practices that encompass biography, autobiography, autoethnography, and various forms of life writing and creative presentations of the self.

Biographical sociology offers means to examine closely self/other interactions within sociological research, challenging accepted views about social “scientific” authorship. By altering how researchers are expected to read and write, biographical sociology might allow social researchers to avoid the constraints of dominant “realist” modes of ethnography in which emphasis is placed on the explanatory powers of the informed social science expert while opening new options regarding what sociologists might write about, including explanations of othering practices in research and analyses of difference construction within social sciences. Biographical sociology encourages a practical rethinking of terms such as validity, reliability, and objectivity, offering a critique of representation and legitimation within social science disciplines. These are perhaps some of the reasons that this

emergent practice remains controversial within social sciences such as sociology.

Biography assumes an ambiguous role in sociological and historical research both as a tool of social research or, as some critics claim, an escape from social research. This article offers outlines for researchers interested in developing biographical sociology or sociological biography while also outlining how such work has itself been a site or subject of struggle within sociology. I also discuss the problematic nature of such approaches and their limits in relation to dominant perspectives on research. I suggest that biographical sociology offers critical researchers a useful new tool for understanding complex social relations in contemporary (perhaps postmodern) contexts.

New Directions: Biographical Sociology

When speaking of biographical sociology I intend to emphasize an openness to various and differently labeled approaches to research and writing, including those that have been identified as biography, autobiography, autoethnography, and so on. Thus, in what follows I will often use the term *auto/biography* to indicate the inclusion of multiple approaches. Bogusia Temple, following Brian Roberts, defines biographical research in sociology as “research undertaken on individual lives employing autobiographical documents, interviews or other sources and presenting accounts in various forms (e.g., in terms of editing, written, visual or oral presentation, and degree of researcher’s narration and reflexivity)” (Temple 8). Biographical sociology is an encompassing term that speaks to a willingness to engage with sociology and a variety of practices that have typically been marginalized or excluded within the discipline. Those sociologists who have been influenced by biographical research, such as Temple, Roberts, and Liz Stanley rather consistently argue for an inclusive definition of the approach, one that does not seek to apply rigid barriers or methodological or definitional enclosures around the notions of biography and autobiography. As Temple notes, “There is no consensus on the boundaries between terms such as narrative, biography, life history or life story and researchers use the terms in overlapping and different ways” (8). This position is supported by others’ attempts to open up sociological explorations, such as BRE, Stephanie Taylor and Karen Littleton. Such researchers recognize that there is some fluidity marking these terms and practices especially in their encounters with sociology. For example, the sociologist approaching biography infuses biographical work with her or his own analysis, interpretation, history, and readings, thus adding an autobiographical aspect to biographical works.

Similarly, autobiographical works of sociology take on biographical characteristics in the engagement with theory, theorists, teachers, and disciplines. Temple, following Roberts, argues that sociologists include “research that spans across differently labeled research to learn from debates rather than try to adjudicate between definitions of what constitutes a particular kind of research” (8). Inasmuch as there remain those who seek to establish, patrol, and maintain such boundaries, it is true that biographical sociologists (e.g., Merton, Sparkes, Roberts, Given) pose an additional challenge to received notions of what is acceptable or appropriate in biography and autobiography.

Certainly encouragement for a biographical turn in sociology can be found within other social science disciplines. Biographical case histories have played a key role in elaborating various traditions within psychology, including, of course, Freud’s works. Marjorie Shostak’s *Nisa: The Life and Words of a Kung Woman* has become a standard text for anthropologists since its release in 1981. Notably, Shostak’s education was in literature. In addition, biography has played an important role in recent works of critical philosophy and social theory, including texts such as Michel Foucault’s *I, Pierre Rivière, Having Slaughtered My Mother, My Sister and My Brother . . . : A Case of Parricide in the 19th Century*. Indeed Foucault’s work should provide an example to sociology of the value of biographical work to social analysis. Unfortunately, despite these significant examples, there has been much reluctance and even opposition within sociology to consider an engagement with biographical work as an acceptable part of sociological practice, as will be discussed below.

While biographical research has received growing attention within disciplines such as anthropology, literature, and history, sociologists have been left on the sidelines of discussion around this emergent methodology. I view that as unfortunate since biographical sociology offers a potentially useful methodological alternative as sociologists grapple with questions of community, identity, values, and structure within the current context. It might also take sociological discussions of autobiography and biography beyond viewing these texts as resources or data towards discussing them as topics for investigation in their own right (Stanley, “On” 41–52).

The lack of involvement from sociologists is particularly curious if one remembers C. Wright Mills’s “insistence that unless sociology works at the level of biography it does not and cannot work at the level of structure” (qtd. in Stanley, “On” 51). Mills coined the phrase “sociological imagination” to speak to the need to understand the interplay between public issues (social structures) and personal troubles (biography). In his view it is imperative that sociologists understand

the links between apparently private problems of the individual and broader social institutions. For Mills, neither the history of society nor the life of an individual can be grasped without understanding both. The sociological imagination develops a quality of mind that offers people a solution to the regular feeling of being trapped by seemingly uncontrollable circumstances within highly stratified, industrial societies. According to Mills, "[The sociological imagination] enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals . . . enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society . . . [and] between 'the personal troubles of milieu' and 'the public issues of social structure'" (Roberts and Kyllonen 3). The recent impetus for a turn towards biographical sociology can be found in the postmodern crisis of representation (Spry 710). Key contributors to Continental Philosophy¹ and critical social theory² have argued that auto/biography plays an integral role in the construction and development of both individual and cultural meanings and political and economic engagement. As Taylor and Littleton note, postmodern theorists challenged simplistic and uncritical analyses in which people were reduced to simple demographic identity categories (e.g., "female," "black," "working class") in relation to positionality within a presumed social structure (24). Such analyses ignored or downplayed how fragmentary identities intersect even where they offer some overarching sense of continuity. Postmodern theory and practice pose a response to realist agendas in ethnography and sociology "which privilege the researcher over the subject, method over subject matter" (Spry 710). According to C. Ellis, the work of the biographical sociologist involves moving back and forth between a broad sociological or ethnographic lens focusing on the social and cultural aspects of experience and a more personal lens that exposes a researching self that moves by and through cultural interpretations which are often resisted (669–83). Biographical sociology explores the interplay of biography, culture, and history.

Within this approach, biographical sociologists "identify zones of contact, conquest, and the contested meanings of self and culture that accompanies the exercise of representational authority" (Neuman 191). In this work, actions, emotions, and ideas are featured as relational and institutional stories influenced by history and social structures that are themselves engaged in dialectical relations with actions, thoughts, and feelings (Ellis 669–70). As Brian Roberts and Riitta Kyllonen describe it, "Biographical Sociology, in general terms, can be said to be an attempt to understand the changing experiences and outlooks of individuals in their daily lives, what they see as important, and how to provide interpretations of the accounts they

give of their past, present and future” (3). This holds as much for sociologists themselves who are engaged in auto/biographical work as for the sources or subjects of biographical sociology. Temple notes that such an “epistemological position acknowledges that there is no way to make ‘objective’ knowledge claims from outside of your position in the social world” (9). It also means that researchers cannot escape their position in the world by reference to objectivity or science. This does not mean that there is no reality. While sociology is understood as not strictly referential, it is constructed within and mediates real world situations (Roberts 3–6).

Biographical sociology offers a unique approach to understanding individual-society relations. Moving beyond stale structure-agency debates, it allows for a situated analysis of agency-in-structure, of the reflective individual engaging society. It is not, as critics would maintain, simply the study of an individual life. Rather, biographical sociology “involves sociologists questioning and indeed rejecting conventional sharp distinctions between structure and action, and relatedly, individual and collective, as presenting an over-dichotomized view of social life. It means rejecting any notion that a ‘life’ can be understood as a representation of a single self in isolation from networks of interwoven biographies” (Stanley and Morgan 2). For biographical sociologists it is understood that meanings are constructed, maintained, and modified in expression and interaction, rather than signifying stable properties of objects (Taylor and Littleton 24). People’s biographies are also understood to be constructed and enacted, to arise through performative processes that are engaged with and within social structures, networks, and practices; as Taylor and Littleton note, “a further assumption is that a speaker is active in this identity work which is an ongoing project that includes constructing a personal biography. . . . However, identities are also social because they are resourced and constrained by larger social understandings which prevail in the speakers’ social and cultural context” (24).

People’s identities are complex composites of who they create themselves to be and present to the world, and who that world makes them and constrains them to be (22–24). Biography is shaped both by the particular and specific circumstances of people’s lives and the meanings circulating within the broader society, culture, and polity. These meanings include established, and even enforced, categorizations of people and contexts and the values attached to those categories (23). These meanings, however, are variously adopted, resisted, and re-worked in the construction of personal identity or biography. Biographies are also situated constructions, which is in fact another

possible benefit of biographical sociology. It provides a window into the struggles involved in these processes.

Biography as Critical Sociology

Among the key interventions in the development of sociology in an auto/biographical direction has been the groundbreaking work of Liz Stanley, which has consistently engaged and challenged issues of representation, reflexivity, and voice in research. In discussions that predate most of the writing on biographical sociology by several years, Stanley argues that sociological discussions of what she terms auto/biography have two parallel sites of origin. The first is the feminist concern with reflexivity within sociological research processes (as discussed above). The second is Robert Merton's discussion of "sociological autobiography." Through his investigation of the dynamics of "sociological autobiography," Merton draws "analytic attention to the way that insider and outsider positions systematically influence what kind of knowledge is produced" (qtd. in Stanley, "On" 42). These differently located and produced knowledges raise crucial issues for the sociology of knowledge, notably affirming that reality is not singular; it is not necessarily the same event for which people are only constructing different descriptions. Stanley suggests that auto/biography "disrupts conventional taxonomies of life writing, disputing its divisions of self/other, public/private, and immediacy/memory" ("On" 41). In her view, "the auto/biographical I' signals the active inquiring presence of sociologists in constructing, rather than discovering, knowledge" (41).

Crucial in this movement are processes of reflexivity, a key component of feminist praxis. Reflexivity treats the researching self as a subject for intellectual inquiry "and it encapsulates the socialised, non-unitary and changing self posited in feminist thought" (44). In feminist praxis, conventional dichotomies or binaries that separate the social and the individual, the personal and the political, are refused: "Personal life' and 'ideas' are both socialised in this standpoint, the conventional individualistic treatment of them being thoroughly rejected in favour of conceptualising them as socially-constructed and socially re/produced" (44). Academic feminist work has focused on women's auto/biographies in part because "feminism as a social movement is concerned with the re/making of lives, of inscribing them as gendered (and raced, and classed, with sexualities), and also with inscribing a wider range of possibilities for women's lives by providing contrasting exemplars" (46). These have also been the concerns of critical sociological work.

Roberts and Kyllonen suggest that biographical sociology involves a critical humanism (3–4). This entails a challenge to social science to undertake a personal-political engagement with the world. According to Ken Plummer, adopting such an approach constitutes “a longing for social science to take more seriously its humanistic foundations and to foster styles of thinking that encourage the creative, interpretive story telling of lives—with all the ethical, political and self-reflexive engagements that this will bring” (1). As John Given notes, “People’s intimate stories have transformative power,[sic] the question is how might this power be used?” (64). The critical work done by biographical sociologists in contesting the hegemonic authority of institutional elites, including the institutional authority of orthodox social science, offers something of an answer.

Arnaldo Momigliano suggests that the subjects of biography are the adventurer, the failure and the marginal figure (3–4). Momigliano insists on the distinction between the genres of history and biography. The lives of those whom Hegel referred to as “world-historical individuals,” on the other hand, are those with universal histories. Through a symbolic character, one might salvage “a multitude of lives crushed by poverty and oppression” (Ginzburg 112). Such approaches represent an effort to suggest the existence of historical dimensions that are hidden, in part (but not only) owing to the difficulties of documentary access (112). Sociological biography may offer a response to the question, “Can someone, however, who is investigating the history of subordinate social groups expect to reconstruct individuals in the fullest sense of the term?” (115).

Indeed some of the most interesting applications of biographical sociology have involved marginalized, excluded, or exploited people and communities. In his auto/biography of life on the streets, BRE suggests that biography can be an act of resistance for people who are largely erased from history as individuals with their own desires, hopes, and dreams (as opposed to the derogatory terms in which they are constructed by authorities seeking to “clean up the streets”) (223–41). Not relying on others to tell their stories, BRE suggests that biography can be an act of self-determination in contexts in which people would otherwise be rendered invisible. As BRE concludes, “Part of this struggle involves recounting our stories, providing glimpses into the many contact zones, streets, struggles and courts, in which our bodies live. Sometimes telling our stories, raising our voices enough to be heard beyond the streets, requires a good old-fashioned bread riot” (240–41).

Maggie O’Neill and Ramaswami Harindranath employ biographical sociology as an aspect of Participatory Action Research, research that involves the researcher directly in social and community movements

for social change. Their work, which is centered on the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees in Britain, uses biographical work to contest and oppose the othering stereotypes and myths constructed by authorities in the media and the state regarding migrants as a social threat. O'Neill and Harindranath "develop a case for theory building based upon lived experience using biographical materials, both narrative and visual, as critical theory in practice towards a vision of social justice that challenges the dominant knowledge/power axis embedded in current governance and media policy relating to forced migration" (39). They also sketch an outline of how such work can be broadly transformative across many levels of praxis. This contributes to not only awareness raising and understanding, but towards a holistic sense of social justice:

First level—*textually*—through: documenting lifestories as testimony to the suffering, exile, and forced displacement they experienced at the hands of soldiers, civic officials, friends (for some family members) and neighbours; and the experience of exile—both internal and external. Second level—*visually*—through producing art forms to re-present their lifestory narratives, saying the "unsayable," challenging normative media representations and producing auto/biographical visual and poetic texts to re-present their lives and experiences as lived. Third level—*practically*—together the combination of the visual and textual elements supports and fosters practical (real) processes of intervention and transformation for both the producers/creators and audiences. (47)

O'Neill and Harindranath argue that the nearly complete absence of alternative voices, particularly from the perspective of refugees and asylum seekers themselves, "raises important ethico-political issues relating to the politics of representation, democracy and immigration" (41). They note that much of the knowledge produced by refugees, asylum seekers, community advocacy groups, and organizations promotes better understanding of the issues, providing at least an alternative perspective, but is largely overwhelmed by the often stereotyped knowledge production of mainstream media and policymakers who have successfully framed the issue through the repeated use of othering terms such as "illegal" and "bogus" (40). O'Neill and Harindranath make a case "for the role of biographical research linked to participatory action research (PAR) to develop better 'understanding' of the lived experiences, lived cultures of exile, displacement and belonging" (45).

Biographical sociology, in these contexts, provides a means by which those whose voices have rarely been heard or listened to might talk back to power. Research methodologies that open or extend spaces for the voices of subaltern actors can do more than raise awareness and challenge stereotypes. They can also contest hegemonic practices and contribute to mobilizations for material, “real-world,” change. This means challenging directly economic, political, and cultural elites from below. It is a process of “talking against” established ideas (Billig 2).

Biographical sociology contributes not only to critical theorizing but also to a cultural politics pursuing a vision of social and political justice (Roberts and Kyllonen 5). Indeed, as O’Neill and Harindranath note, the right to speak, to be heard, and to be recognized are fundamental pillars of social justice (44). “Narrative as cultural politics can challenge exclusionary tendencies, promote resistances and transformations by creating spaces for voices and alternative discourses” (44). This has been met by considerable criticism and opposition from the would-be defenders of sociology as social *science*.

Against Biography, Against the “Ordinary”: Gatekeeping Sociology

Some of the sociological silence over auto/biographical practice might be the result of loudly negative responses that have been leveled by gatekeepers of sociological methodology. Perhaps the most vocal opponent in sociology, Herbert J. Gans, asserts that biographical sociology is “the product of a postmodern but asocial theory of knowledge that argues the impossibility of knowing anything beyond the self” (540). Gans also argues that biography abdicates sociology’s main “roles in, and for, helping people understand their society” (543). It is precisely this sort of patronizing approach, in which only (or mostly) sociologists understand society and that the (other) people who live in it must be helped, that has spurred some biographical writing in sociology. Rather, biographical sociologists insist that members of marginalized communities have great insights into “their society” and the mechanisms by which marginalization is constituted and reproduced, including through academic elitism. Biography seeks to situate the sociologists as those in need of understanding.

Instead, Gans bemoans the loss of “researcher detachment” and “distancing”—key elements of methodological orthodoxy—and contends that this leads to a loss of reliability, validity, and possibly funding (542–43). He then tries to disparage biography by comparing it to social movements, such as women’s, gay and lesbian, and anti-racist movements, as if they are negative aspects of society. Finally,

Gans dismisses biography as being “too ordinary to become part of any sociological canon” (543). To this the biographical sociologist might say, “Hear, hear.” What after all is the trouble with ordinary, when one is talking about everyday life? Perhaps one might reflect on BRE’s caution about sociologists’ claims to scientific detachment: “Notions of objectivity and neutrality don’t have much meaning on the streets. Not when you hear how ‘objective’ observers like social workers and psychologists talk about you or see (and feel) how ‘neutral’ agents like police respond when a shopkeeper accuses you of causing a disturbance or loitering. The context of ‘objective’ and neutral practices in a capitalist, racist, patriarchal and heteronormative context is always apparent” (236). While I agree with some of the cautions Gans puts forward, and indeed all methodologies should be approached with caution, overall his presentation of autoethnography is so distorted that it borders on caricature. Whether this rather one-sided reading suggests a specific agenda more than an attempt at understanding is open for debate.

Gans argues that auto/biography is inherently non-sociological, but one gets a decidedly different perspective from Merton’s description of “sociological autobiography”: “The sociological autobiography utilizes sociological perspectives, ideas, concepts, findings, and analytical procedures to construct and interpret a narrative text that purports to tell one’s own history within the larger history of one’s times” (18). He goes on to suggest that “autobiographers are the ultimate participants in a dual participant-observer role, having privileged access—in some cases, monopolistic access—to their own inner experience” (43). Auto/biography has its sociological interest “within the epistemological problematics concerning how we understand ‘the self’ and ‘a life,’ how we ‘describe’ ourselves and other people and events, how we justify the knowledge-claims we make in the name of the discipline, in particular through the processes of textual production” (Stanley, “On” 50).

What most biographical sociologists argue is the need for practices that actively and directly situate the researcher within social relations beyond the self, in which the self is engaged and developed and to which the self contributes. Instead of a self/other dichotomy, which many opponents implicitly or explicitly uphold, biographical sociologists recognize the mutual constitution of self and other as relational concepts and seek to understand and express the processes by which they are composed and, significantly, might be re-composed or de-composed. What is presented is a re-evaluation of the dialectics of self and culture (Spry 706–32). Randal Doane suggests that biographical sociology juxtaposes memory and social theory, extending and embodying theoretical conflicts (274–78).

As well, Stanley asserts that “focusing on ‘the sociologist’ and [her or his] intellectual practices and labour processes does *not* mean that we focus on one person and exclude all else” as Gans claims (“On” 45). Rather, these practices and contexts can reveal much about the history of sociology, divisions within society, social networks, and the social production of ideas. Biographical sociology does not imply a shift of sociology towards individualism. As Taylor and Littleton note, “biographical accounts are shaped and constrained by the meanings which prevail within the larger society” (22). This is true whether one is an asylum seeker or refugee, a homeless youth, or even a graduate student or faculty member. This context includes, of course, the meanings constructed and communicated by social scientists and other presumed “experts” whose opinions and perspectives impact the lives of people well beyond their immediate sphere of activity. BRE speaks to the role of biography in disrupting the unequal relationship between researchers and researched: “We are not asked to tell our own stories/we do not get many opportunities to tell our own stories. We are treated as objects rather than subjects. We don’t ask which questions to address, we don’t design the experiment and we are not invited to present the findings” (225).

Biographical sociologists suggest that sociologists situate themselves materially within a specific labor process and be accountable for the products of their intellectual labor. This also means acknowledging the situational and contextual production of knowledge and the sociologist’s position within a social division of labor. The positionality of the sociologist is important for understanding each research activity. The biographer is involved in the active construction of social reality and sociological knowledge rather than discovering it. This can be impacted by the sociologists’ own biographical trajectories, at which stage they are in their own professional development. For Merton, good sociological autobiography “is analytically concerned with relating its product to the epistemological conditions of its own production”(qtd. in Stanley, “On” 43).

Auto/biography replaces the “power over” of scholarly authority, offering instead a “power with” the researching self and others. An auto/biographical text reflects a space in which “truth and reality are not fixed categories, where self-reflexive critique is sanctioned, and where heresy is viewed as liberatory” (Spry 721). It is situated personally and politically; as Trinh Minh-ha notes, “It interrogates the realities it represents. It invokes the teller’s story in the history that is told” (118). Spry offers an account of some of the benefits for research that she identifies with auto/biography: “I am better able to engage the lived experience of myself with others. I am more comfortable in the often conflictual and unfamiliar spaces one inhabits in

ethnographic research. I am more comfortable with myself as other” (721). While Gans argues that auto/biography will cause readers to lose interest in sociological texts (543), for biographical sociologists a “self-reflexive critique upon one’s positionality as researcher inspires readers to reflect critically upon their own life experience, their constructions of self, and their interactions with others within socio-historical contexts” (711). In this way auto/biography can make us better sociologists. Instead of taking categories and experiences for granted we are required to look past our own common sense assumptions, to peel back the curtain on such everyday concepts and notions as citizen and scholar.

As O’Neill and Harindranath suggest: “Biographies help us to understand the processes, structures and lived experiences of citizenship and lack of citizenship; and the experiences of humiliation and abandonment (dominant experiences for some asylum speakers/refugees). They highlight the importance of engaging with the subaltern other, creating spaces for voices and narratives to make sense of lived experience, trauma, loss, but also the productive dimension of rewriting the self” (50). These are, or should be, fundamentals of sociological practice. These are the tasks that Mills, using of course a rather different language, outlined in his discussions of the sociological imagination. Biographical sociology holds the promise of a revitalization of the sociological imagination at a time when neo-functionalism and objectivism would seek to restore the authority of the sociologist as expert.

Still, there are other obstacles faced by practitioners of auto/biography in their attempts to develop alternative methodological practices. As Spry notes, biographical sociology can “interrogate the politics that structure the personal, yet it must still struggle within the language that represents dominant politics” (722). In particular, “[s]peaking and embodying the politically transgressive through experimental linguistic forms (i.e., autoethnography, sociopoetics, performance scripts) can result in a lack of publications” (722). Thus, biographical sociologists must often become advocates “for the multivocality of form and content in academic journals,” against the academic preference for impersonal and nonemotional modes of representation (723).

In addition, biographical sociologists such as Temple have raised the important, if overlooked, issue of translation and the use in biographical work of a language that is not the same for the speaker(s), researcher(s), and intended audience(s) (9). Drawing upon work in translation studies, Temple examines the difficult and complex issues relating to representation across languages and questions of meaning and interpretation within biographical sociology associated

with translation, especially into English. Of course, an open engagement with biographical sociology encourages these sorts of critical developments, questioning, and innovation. Such is the case in lively, reflexive, and critical work.

The defensive reactions of disciplinary gatekeepers, what some biographical sociologists call a “backlash” (Rinehart 220), has had the effect of silencing larger sociological debate over the emergence and development of new methodological practices (Sparkes 21–43; Spry 722). It may also explain why some auto/biographies have been written recently on experiences with the gatekeepers of academic journals when authors have attempted to publish works of biographical sociology. As Andrew C. Sparkes suggests, charges of individualism or subjectivism “function as regulatory charges against certain forms of sociology and act to reinscribe ethnographic orthodoxy” (30).

By placing themselves clearly in the story as agents from specific locations in processes of social and cultural production, auto/biographers have openly challenged accepted views about silent authorship. Indeed the “living body/subjective self of the researcher is recognized as a salient part of the research process, and socio-historical implications of the researcher are reflected upon” (30). In biographical sociology the researcher is firmly in the picture, in context, interacting with others.

Conclusion

Biographical sociology raises important questions of “identity,” “belonging,” “voice,” “knowledge,” and “power” and the place of orthodox social science in relation to these issues. Biographical work is “part of the ongoing, interactive process through which identities are taken up” (Taylor and Littelton 22), including the impact upon sociological researchers who engage in such work.

Biographical sociology also opens avenues for sociology as a public practice. As the work of O’Neill and Harindranath (39–53) and BRE (223–41) illustrate, biographical sociology can contribute to a sociological engagement with people and communities that intervenes rather than merely describes or comments upon social policy and political decision-making. According to O’Neill and Harindranath, “Thus a politics of representation informed by a politics of subalternity and Biographical Sociology can provide alternative narratives and praxis (purposeful knowledge) that may feed into public policy and ultimately help to shift the dominant knowledge/power axis embedded in current governance” (50). Other biographical sociologists, such as Given, suggest that biographical sociology might provide a useful perspective or medium in dealing with the data deluge of the

digital age and the phenomena of lives lived within cyberspace, and in dealing with digital storytelling and the use of digital technologies in constructing and recording narratives, including the narratives chosen by sociologists (64). This remains an emergent area of research and much work needs to be done in exploring those possibilities. As such it may allow for reflection upon activities that would otherwise be inaccessible.

I would much rather see an open and honest engagement with auto/biography within sociology. Such an engagement would not shy away from critique but would at the same time address the challenges to sociological practice posed by auto/biography. Rather than reacting against the experimental and the personal in auto/biography, sociologists might do well to see this as a method suited to what Mills once called (unscientifically it seems now) the “sociological imagination.” Clearly, we must question how sociologists can live up to Mills’ crucial challenge to connect personal issues with public problems if we continue to disavow methodological practices that have no time for the personal experiences, concerns and contexts of the sociologist.

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Notes

1. See Deleuze and Derrida.
2. See Foucault and Bourdieu.

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