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Constructing a Sociological Biography: A Surprisingly Complex Autobiographical Practice

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Abstract

Biographical statements are an important part of impressions management in the academic milieu. These statements provide an online presence, accompany our academic products, and represent us in the academy. This becomes a high stakes activity, which can be quite anxiety provoking. As a qualitative sociologist with a particular interest in auto/ biography, producing such a statement really ought to be easy - putting into words: who I am, what I do, and where I am currently located. However, writing sociological biographies requires a fine balance, particularly during the early career phase, when we may be juggling projects, research directions and institutions. An additional concern is that of selecting the appropriate “voice,” which of course can vary depending on the nature of the journal, conference, or other destination for the biography. In this article I draw on examples from my own autobiographical experiences to explore the dilemmas faced when constructing academic biographies.

Keywords

Biography, Impressions Management, Sociology, Voice

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Constructing a Sociological Biography: A Surprisingly Complex Autobiographical Practice

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Biographical statements are an important part of impressions management in the academic milieu. These statements provide an online presence, accompany our academic products, and represent us in the academy. This becomes a high stakes activity, which can be quite anxiety provoking. As a qualitative sociologist with a particular interest in auto/ biography, producing such a statement really ought to be easy - putting into words: who I am, what I do, and where I am currently located. However, writing sociological biographies requires a fine balance, particularly during the early career phase, when we may be juggling projects, research directions and institutions. An additional concern is that of selecting the appropriate “voice,” which of course can vary depending on the nature of the journal, conference, or other destination for the biography. In this article I draw on examples from my own autobiographical experiences to explore the dilemmas faced when constructing academic biographies. Keywords: Biography, Impressions Management, Sociology, Voice

The early career trajectory can be difficult to navigate in today’s academic environments. It is often characterised by short-term contracts, which lack the security of “permanent” or longer-term, fixed-term positions. This can lead to feelings of marginalization and isolation, which limit opportunities for professional development and advancement (Collinson, 2003; Goode, 2006). My own trajectory was in this vein. I spent several years going from contract to contract, accumulating research skills and publications, and doing a variety of things to make myself more marketable as a sociologist (Wheeler, 2014a). I engaged in the careful construction and presentation of the self, or “self-story,” which culminates in the formulation of a sociological CV (Miller & Morgan, 1993; Sparkes, 2007). I created online profiles in all the appropriate forums, and fussed and fretted over them, particularly during precarious times, when presenting a successful and confident “front” (Goffman, 1990, pp. 32-40) was rendered more difficult.

There were some bleak times, particularly before I earned my PhD, when my career appeared to have reached an impasse (Wheeler, 2015a). During this time, writing biographical statements to accompany all-important publication submissions, and even just filling out the biographical information required, could be quite tricky, since my career was in a state of continual flux. Even my designated institution would change over a short period of time, with an onerous risk of becoming “without institution.” Equally stressful was selecting how much detail to include in the biography. After all, this might be the first time my fellow scholars, and possibly future employers, become acquainted with my work. I therefore spent hours reading other people’s biographical statements and tinkering with mine, to get the balance just right – especially for my very first, first-author publication.

All of this careful impressions management work eventually paid off and I gained a longer-term, short-term contract of three years. At last I had some stability and I could make plans. However, I was faced with a new challenge – constructing the academic biographical statement (several as it turned out) for official corporate and staff pages. I hadn’t really engaged much with this activity up until now – living from one short-term contract to the next had meant

I was constantly on the move, between departments and institutions, which meant that I was never in a department long enough to warrant creating a staff page. However, now it was worth it - and more than that – it was necessary.

At first I was excited. This was a chance to present to the world who I was, what I had achieved, what I was doing now, and what I hoped to do next. This should be easy for me, or so I thought at first; after all, I am a wordsmith and this is what I do so well. I quickly learned that this was different to writing a CV or presenting myself through Researchgate or other independent online forums. This was a high stakes endeavour because it spoke of my place in the institution, which created more of a sense of responsibility to convey a certain image. On the other hand, I had a responsibility to be true to myself and my convictions – to be genuine, authentic, and articulate. I took the task very seriously, spending a considerable amount of time researching the matter before carefully preparing something suitable.

As a Sociologist I naturally became interested in this process I was going through and how this fit with my previous behaviour regarding biographical statement preparation. Furthermore, since I have an interest in “writing as a method of inquiry” and the Creative Analytical Practice (CAP) ethnographies (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, pp. 959-978), I decided that it would be an interesting exercise to reflect on a few of these experiences, to present an evocative autoethnography (Anderson, 2006; Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Denzin, 2014; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Drawing inspiration from “*Twelve Uneasy Pieces on Research and Therapy*” (Richardson, 2013), the second part of this paper is presented as a series of reflective pieces about times when I have had to prepare biographical statements and provide biographical and institutional information. This is followed by a third and final part of the paper, where I reflect on what this exercise in “writing as a method of inquiry” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) has revealed, what can be learned from it, and what questions are yet to be answered.

Constructing the Sociological Biographical Statement: 7 Vignettes

1. On Being (Potentially) “Without Institution” (Summer 2013)

It is a bright August day and I am sitting at the picnic bench on the glaxis in the garden. My laptop is in front of me and I am squinting at the screen, struggling with how to describe myself. It is just a book review, so they don’t need a biographical statement, just an institution. However, my latest short-term research contract has just ended. I have been through the whole redeployment process and am horrified to find myself unemployed. Luckily I have recently been communicating with the university in my hometown and they have made me a “Visiting Research Fellow,” saving me from the awkward situation of being “without institution.” Would this have mattered? I wonder. Would my review have been taken less seriously if I had submitted with the description “independent researcher?” In any case, I instruct the journal to amend my details to my honorary institutional home.

By the time it is published (Wheeler, 2013) I am on a new short-term contract at my original university, but am proud that my modest publication bears my honorary affiliation. I am proud of my connections to “back home” and the colleagues who have been so supportive of me. However, I am also uneasy. What about my current institution? Given the zero gap in my contracts it would seem to most people that I never left my current institution, so why would I, weirdly, have submitted solely with the institution where I only have an honorary contract?

Looking back on this angst I realise that I worried far too much about the publication of a single book review, which had every chance in the world of going largely unnoticed – as indeed it did. But such was my heightened sense of importance for the “biography” and the impression management at the time, that I obsessed over every minor detail – even the three

words denoting my institution. Would it have mattered if the book review had borne the details of my “previous institution?” Looking back with hindsight I realise that it almost certainly wouldn’t have and I could probably have left things as they were, without fussing and mithering the journal’s book review editor; however, at the time I felt a sort of intangible uneasiness about it – as though I no longer had the right to claim affiliation to my previous institution. Then, when the review was published, and I was back where I had started, I was concerned that people might wonder why I *wasn’t* declaring affiliation. On reflection I would say that, when one is early career, and is not yet comfortably and safely settled at a particular institution, the line denoting institutional affiliation can take on a whole new sense of importance and meaning. Certainly the idea of ever being completely “without institution” can seem like an unpalatable prospect.

2. A Career in a State of Continual Flux (February 2014)

I am very excited. A conversation between my cousin and I on Facebook, about the tinnitus we both experience, has come together nicely as a CAP ethnography paper (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). I am sitting on the settee with a glass of wine in my hand when the email arrives from the journal, informing me of the favourable decision. However, preparing the manuscript and submitting it for publication was the easy part it seems. I am now engaged in the agonizing process of preparing the all-important “biographical statement,” which I want to produce as soon as possible so as not to hold up publication.

Reading through it now it seems a little ridiculous. My biography is longer than the paper itself (Wheeler & Hopwood, 2015), which is presented as poetic inquiry (Prendergast, Leggo, & Sameshima, 2009). However, I did manage to squeeze almost everything into that statement: my current research project, my hopes and dreams for future research funding and, most importantly of all, both of my current (at that time) institutions. However, by the time it is published (January 2015), the main part of my career is based at a completely new institution. So all of that careful formulation and fretting had been an exercise in futility; I no longer recognise the person being described in the biography – it all seems like such a long time ago, rather than just a few months, and even my designated institution and job title are now different.

I reflect on the seemingly haphazard trajectory of my career these last few years, despite all of my faithful endeavouring. I feel as though I have been engaged in a constant campaign to establish myself as an academic, trying to find somewhere to belong, where I might “fit,” settle, become established, build a reputation and a career long-term. I feel that I have so far failed in this endeavour. If someone was trying to figure out who I am, then my job title and place of work would be important sources of identifying information. But as things stand, these are in a continual state of flux and don’t even remain steady long enough for me to get a scholarly article published. Whilst I am obviously still ecstatic about the publication of my first article with first authorship, my elation is somewhat dampened by these “incorrect” personal details in my “biography.”

3. Tweeting: A New Forum for Impressions Management (June 2014)

I am confused and unsure of myself. I have just finished a piece about constructing a sociological career and am preparing it for submission to an online publication (Wheeler, 2014). They require a Twitter address. I set one up ages ago, using my old online chat-room name as the address. The brief, tweet-esque, uber-short biography is all in Welsh and, apart from the single-word reference to me being an ethnographer, it is entirely about my personal hobbies, rather than my academic career; this was appropriate at the time since I was only envisioning it as a private life activity. However, “tweeting” required brevity, not a skill I am

particularly blessed with, and I had promptly lost interest. I didn't even really understand how it worked – little slithers of statements, maybe with a link to a webpage or a photo – I just didn't get it. Yet now, here I am, needing to force myself to engage with it, for the sake of career-advancement and further impressions management. I feel like a dinosaur. I decide to leave the profile as it is, out-dated avatar and all, and just add it to the end of my inappropriately-detailed, yet acceptably short (especially for me) biography and send it off. It is accepted and published very quickly – the benefits of social media.

My bold step in self-promotion is rewarded as I tentatively master twitter to find that the editor has tweeted my article and other early-career sociologists have responded with warm, supportive comments. I am touched, delighted and surprised. I “get” twitter now, for the first time and am enjoying it. I make a new network of contacts and begin discussing the difficulties of navigating the early career trajectory.

4. When the Same Publication Represents Two Institutions (October 2014)

I have just started my new research contract at Bangor University and I am basking in the glory of my first ever publication in “*Sociology*” (Wheeler, 2014b). Oh how I have dreamed of this moment – since 2002 when I first joined the British Sociological Association (BSA) and began receiving the journal through the post. I used to snatch it up from the pile of post and read through it, thinking how proud the authors all must be; and now here I am (admittedly 12 years later and it is only a book review essay) in their midst. I sit quietly, savouring every detail – which is how I notice my hiccup. The institution at the top, and my institutional email address at the bottom, do not match. I think back to the months in between writing and submitting it, having it accepted, and then the agonizing time spent awaiting its publication. I had several email exchanges with different book editors (as they themselves switched roles) to amend my affiliation and contact details, including during the summer when I had once again found myself in a precarious place.

After spending a few minutes panicking and feeling horribly uncomfortable, I decide that it doesn't matter. Both were true at some stage during the writing process, and it is nice, therefore, to have honoured them both – even if it was by mistake. Reflecting on this almost comical position, I consider that it is quite nice to have this happen now – it serves as a reminder of how far I have come, since that unsettled time.

5. The Complexity of the Corporate Staff Page (December 2014)

I open the door and am greeted by the paper-strewn office floor beyond. My recent biography-related-angst is spiralling out of control. This is my first proper, longer-that-a-year contract, which means I am here for a while, so it's worth putting down roots. At any rate, I have a “staff page” assigned to me, which I feel obliged to fill. People might be looking for me; people who have been reading my publications, students looking for a potential supervisor for their thesis... anyone really, so my most up-to-date “front” needs to be perfectly presented. It was a quiet week before Christmas and I thought I would just cobble something together in an afternoon. Oh how wrong I was. Worrying that I might go off on a tangent and write something completely left-field I resorted to printing off the biographies of all my colleagues in my school. Next, I tried to condense these into a sort of template, including all possible tabs and sections.

Stepping over the piles of paper to get to my desk, I switch on my computer. I start trying to write but keep deleting. This is ridiculous – writing is my forte, isn't it? So why am I finding it so hard? It dawns on me that it is all the more ironic that as a self-professed autoethnographer I do not seem to possess the skill required to write a simple description of

my career and professional self. I must overcome this gremlin today, section by section. Overview: that needs to be written last, but will include some personal detail in the last couple of lines. My current role: easy enough, that should just be a summary of the job description. Research interests were proving to be a little trickier. The benefits of an enquiring mind and a wide field of interests (stemming in part from the plethora of short-term contracts that have characterised my career) have a flip side, it seems – they can look bitty and incoherent in a biography. I eventually resolve to group them by theme, as I note one colleague has done, bringing coherence to an otherwise confusing array of harlequin patches. Other sections must be equally carefully constructed – to include book reviews or not is a point of considerable deliberating at this delicate stage in my career (Miller & Morgan, 1993; Wheeler, 2014a).

As it turns out, the trickiest consideration is that of “voice.” Why is it that so many sociological scholars write their biographical statements in the third person, passive voice? We are the ones writing them after all so is this not disingenuous? Of course, the concept of “voice” must be considered within the wider academic sphere. Specifically, the practice of avoiding the use of the “I” has been challenged by contemporary philosophical thought as a “nineteenth-century notion of academic writing,” which is in any case inappropriate since “we are always present in our texts, no matter how we try to suppress ourselves” (Richardson, 1997, p. 2). Describing the use of this “narrative voice” as “science’s omniscient voice from nowhere” (p. 3), Richardson (1997) points out that by not using “I” or “we” the narrator is eclipsed and thus the “illusion of objectivity is created” (p. 18). She continues, “Science does have a human narrator, the camouflaged first person, hiding in the bramble of the passive voice” (Richardson, 1997, p. 18). So the first person, active voice is now very much present in scholarly sociological writing, particularly in the qualitative sphere.

Casually using Google to learn about “sociology” and “voice,” I note that many institutional websites offer advice on how to *avoid* writing in the first person, suggesting instead that sociologists should opt for statements such as “this paper argues”...but surely is this not anthropomorphising? The paper is surely an inanimate object, constructed by the authors, to carry forth the argument that they (or we, or I) are making? But I am allowing myself to get carried away with all this ruminating and must get back to the task in hand. The biography presents a slightly different challenge. It is describing me to the world, as a member of staff at the university; I am part of a corporate whole and this should be reflected. And yet, is not a part of my contribution to this whole the research which I am engaged in and the academic practices within my discipline which I seek to champion? After much deliberating I settle on a first person approach (Wheeler, 2014b).

6. Online Biographies in Cyberspace: When the “I” is Absent (March 2015)

One of my new favourite activities is spending Saturday mornings in bed, drinking tea and browsing journals for new autoethnographic publications. A few months ago I came across an article that I liked very much so I emailed the author to tell her. We discussed our mutual interest in poetics in the social sciences (Prendergast et al., 2009) and a few days ago she emailed me to ask if I would be interested in joining an online centre for imaginative ethnography. I was absolutely delighted and accepted; I would now be a member of a network of like-minded people. However, now I must once again prepare an appropriate online biography. Reading through the biographies of established members, I was surprised to find that many had opted for the third person narrative. However, after much ruminating and abandonment of unsuccessful drafts, I follow my postmodern instincts and write about myself in the first person (Wheeler, 2015b).

A little while later I am invited, through the network, to take part in an imaginative ethnography project. I look over some old, discarded poems and select one which reflects an

earlier time in my career when things were not going so well (around six years ago). I prepare a “writing story” about its production (Richardson, 1997, p. 1) and submit it for consideration. To my delight, it is accepted and published as part of a series (Wheeler, 2015a). At last I feel that I have begun to be accepted, and that I have finally found my “voice,” in every sense of the word.

7. Simplicity, Finally (September 2015)

Something wonderful has happened. I now have a lectureship with *Y Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol* (the National Welsh-Medium College). I will be teaching Social Policy through the medium of Welsh. It is my dream appointment – everything I could possibly want, all rolled into one. Then I am required to submit a biographical statement to accompany a journal article. I used to feel a surge of energy when thinking about writing such a biography. My thoughts were a confusion of how to present the best “front,” to make the very best of “this opportunity,” and to communicate the “very best” about myself. However, I am now curiously calm and my mind is uncluttered. I write: “I am a Lecturer in Social Policy (Welsh-medium), with *Y Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol*, based at Bangor University.” I find that I am happy with this – there really is no need to say any more.

As I reflect on my journey, I know I am where I want to be. I am no longer quite so anxious about my career, and have stopped seeking approval and recognition from others. I have found confidence in myself, enough to continue writing, publishing, and am even considering grant applications. All of my efforts and pride are thus encompassed and encapsulated by this new description. I am happy and contentment. I have found my scholarly home.

February 2016: As I complete the final proof-reading of the article before it is published, I realise that, for purposes of submission to the Research Excellence Framework (REF), I need to slightly amend my institutional details to make clear that, whilst my lectureship is funded by *Y Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol*, my contract and institutional designation is Bangor University. I list them both as my designations and assign them each an appropriate number. I amend my biography at the end of the article. I leave out my honorary institutional designation as it would complicate rather than strengthen the coherent “front” that I am required to present here – though this is slightly paradoxical, given that the article is a “writing-story” about this very phenomenon.

Directions for New Inquiry

Continually constructing and revising my biographical statement has been a scholarly activity in itself. I have had to reflect on every detail of my career, including my approach to academic writing. I gained a deep understanding of the complex process of constructing this “writing story” and felt worry, frustration, uncertainty, and joy. As Richardson points out, “We ply our sociological craft within – not above – broader historical social, and intellectual contexts. Today the dominant intellectual context challenges all “grand theory” and all claims for a singular, correct style for organizing and presenting knowledge” (Richardson, 1997, p. 13). For me, this became most evident in the selection of voice. It was relevant for me and it is relevant within sociological scholarship today. Choice of narrative voice requires more thought, open discussion, and perhaps rigorous debate and analysis. With this autoethnographic contribution, I hope to reintroduce the topic for fresh discussion and consideration.

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