17 Sociological Lives and Auto/Biographical Writing

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This article arises from some reflections on the role of the researcher in the context of writing an account of my educational experience (Roberts, 1998) and the realisation that I had written various accounts of my educational (university) experience within a short space of time as part of academic 'routine'. It was also in the context of my longer interest in the role of the researcher in biographical work and the current (increasing) discussion of the topic in the fields of oral history, biography and auto/biography. Of course, such discussion originates in debates in the 1980s, for instance, in work on popular memory and feminist research practice, but perhaps we can take the issue a little further - in relation to the auto/biographical writing of the researcher. The influence of the researcher on the collection, writing, presentation of research, eg. on the lives of others, is commonly noted - it is obvious - but what does it entail? How much should or could we reveal - in achieving 'reflexivity' - about our lives and experience in the research process and wider relationships?

Writing Auto/Biography

There is a common injunction in current research practice to demonstrate 'reflexivity' which raises central questions such as, how far should we include our own lives and for what purpose? What is 'relevant' and what is not? If, as has been argued, the research relationship involves changes in the researcher's own experience and identity, how can these shifts be revealed? If we include our 'intellectual biography' within research - or in some other forum is there a danger of 'studying ourselves' to the detriment of the research. In writing or telling a life story the giver also will relate the lives of others - there is both autobiography and biography.

On three particular occasions (Roberts, 1995; 1997; 1998) I have given my 'intellectual biography' in various forms and length for publication and also answered another request for details on connections between biographical and academic life around questions of identity (Roberts, unpublished). These writings are apart from sending in cv's (see Miller and Morgan, 1993) for job applications and in support of course developments, assessment visits and so on.

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Biographical Details

The most often published biographies of academics are at the end of articles or outlines in book leaves. I have written examples of these for books and articles which are usually about three and four lines. I find these are surprisingly difficult to construct not simply because of the small space allowed but perhaps due to the fact that they are a form of 'personal statement'. However, there are examples of more extended autobiographies within sociology, which have sought to understand the intellectual development of (usually) prominent writers. These usually focus on key mentors and colleagues, institutions and written influences but do, on occasion, at least touch on personal or social lives (Merton, 1972; Horowitz, 1970; Morgan, 1998). There are also examples of more 'personal' background in terms of early upbringing and family. Here, we could include those of Park and Thomas which are especially interesting given the Chicagoan development of the 'life history' (Baker, 1973). Rather more 'revelatory' on personal background and feeling is the volume by Goldman which includes a range of writers from diverse fields including Richard Hoggart (Goldman, 1968). Other examples are where academics give reflections on past research work (Moore, 1977) or report on particular institutional or wider events which impacted on their working lives and interests (see Thompson and Bornat, 1994). Horowitz (1970) in his edited volume argues that it is through 'subjective processes' that a science is accomplished. In summary, he contends that the papers show a 'simple, yet elusive truth' - 'becoming a sociologist' is connected to 'becoming a person' (Horowitz, 1970, p.12).

I was asked some time ago to provide a note on the main intellectual influences on my work for an edited reader of previously published articles - in my case a co-authored article published over 20 years ago (Clarke et al., 1997). I mentioned Darwin, Marx, Park, Mead, and Matza for this relatively unusual request. A similar unusual example was written as a request for authors to submit short pieces on sources - biographies, autobiographies and associated writings - that they had found influential. I searched for 'great names' (again the lives and work of Darwin, Marx, and so on) but instead I thought the 'biographical' writing that had had most influence was 'boys' comic football heroes'. The deeds against the odds of these heroes, often from a similar background to me, provided some inspiration at both a practical and a 'fantastic' level (Roberts, 1995).

Auto/Autobiographical Experience

A life-account I produced recently (Roberts, 1998) was for a book on education and biography. I wrote on my early educational experience. It is due to writing this piece that I have been led to reflect more deeply on the issue of the

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research writer's life. In particular, I have considered the difficulties I found in writing of my own biography at the same time as being aware of the various issues concerning the construction of narrative/story, the question of the audience and so on. It was a story at one level, which I frequently told and renewed; but it was also a mystery. I have become increasingly aware of the notion of the audience and what I will present, and what will remain private. Here is a concern for how interpretation takes place, and what interpretations will be made, why certain events are focused upon, how much to say about them - how 'deep' to give the interpretation. I called my story an auto/biographical account (following Stanley, 1992; 1994) since I have become increasingly concerned with the linkage between my own life experience and the research practices and interests (biographical work, ethnic and national identities) that I am engaged in. One emerging question here concerns 'reflexivity' - but in monitoring our practices does this mean that we should also be continually assessing our own work, our products - possibly leading to some endless interpretative spiral?

The Curriculum Vitae

The cv is an interesting example of a biographical document written for a particular purpose and audience. It may seem to be a trivial example of biographical work but as Miller and Morgan have argued, the 'cv' has become a key part of contemporary academic life (Miller and Morgan, 1993, p.133; see also Morgan, 1998). They also use the idea of 'auto/biographical practices' which they take as much broader than the usual meanings of 'biography' and 'autobiography' and apply it to the construction of the cv. By the use of Goffman's notion of the 'presentation of self' they explore the cv as a construction of a story which relates to the particular situation rather than to some wider idea of 'truth'. Interestingly, the production is both becoming more formalised or rule orientated while also containing aspects of performance and presentation involving the self (Miller and Morgan, 1993, p.137-40).

Issues

The Auto/Biography of the Researcher

There is a whole range of issues involved in the understanding of the construction of auto/biographical accounts, relating to the inclusion of the researcher's 'own story' of research practice and wider life. Here we will examine the conception of 'auto/biography' and surrounding debates on the researcher's role, which have influenced my own thoughts in writing on the

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personal influences on my research. A starting point for my own consideration of the 'researcher's role', to use the conventional term, is Hammersley and Atkinson's view as applied to ethnography but just as relevant for biographical work. They argue that the account by the researcher has commonalities with other accounts; just as language used in description is not neutral neither is the mode of reporting - a reflexive, self-conscious researcher should be aware of the mode of writing used (Hamersley and Atkinson, 1983, p.207; see also Van Maanen, 1995). I have found in my own research that the biographer's social background, knowledge and identifications should be seen as positive rather than as negative (as a source of 'bias' which compromises 'objectivity') - as 'resources' rather than the researcher's characteristics or involvement merely taken as potential difficulties. For example, if we recognise our 'stage in life', as a researcher this could be an 'enabling' feature in the research which may reveal or enhance certain elements in the 'field', such as in biographies and relationships within groups of respondents. In this way the researcher's own biography can be utilised and explored within the research process and relationship.

Auto/Biographical 'I'

For Stanley (1992; 1993) the use of the term 'auto/biography' denotes a challenge to the accepted 'taxonomies' used in life writing - the usual distinction between public and private, the self and other, and memory contrasted with 'immediacy'. But, importantly, it also places the sociologist as active, as exploring within a context rather than merely uncovering knowledge (Stanley, 1993, p.41; Evans, 1993). For Stanley 'auto/biography' places the researcher and writer within the social and political production of the text - whether these are oral, written or visual biographical representations.

    Stanley draws on Merton's discussion of 'sociological autobiography', which is taken from a range of 'sociological lives', assembled by Riley (Stanley, 1993, p.42). Merton says that the 'sociological autobiography' uses sociological ideas, procedures and perspectives to form and interpret our own lives - but crucially within a wider history and contemporary society; in this way our own inner lives can be related to more extensive concerns and changes. Thus, the sociological autobiography by the sociologist would make the connection between intellectual development both to the immediate social context and the much broader socio-cultural formation (Stanley, 1993, p.43).

    The second strand of influence on Stanley's notion of 'intellectual autobiography' is from feminist writing in which, she says the usual distinctions or oppositions are not accepted by a realisation of connections between individual and social, and political and personal realms. A reflexive understanding of the interplay between 'individual practices and social structure' - the self within the social group situates the self as both part of the

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formation and mediation of social structure (Stanley, 1993, p.44). The notion of 'reflexivity' (although open to various interpretations) in research practice is of particular relevance for our discussion of the role of the researcher and the researcher/researched relation - as placing our own self as changing and non-unitary and integral to of the research process (Stanley, 1993, p.44; see Reinharz, 1992, pp.258-63; Gluck and Patai eds, 1991).

The Interview - identity and 'shared authority'

There has been a necessary recognition - as we have seen - within biographical work, oral history and other areas, that the researcher is involved in the production of meanings in the relation with the subject and that forms of power have a bearing on the research process. The latter concern has led to a consideration of how power/authority differences in research may be modified or overcome (eg. Frisch, 1990; see Ritchie, 1995, p.9) and again feminist writings have discussed how meanings are exchanged and commonalities strengthened, including in the research relation (see Reinharz, 1992). Frisch (1990) has offered the notion of the 'sharing of authority' - the injunction to involve subjects in the processes and meaning of remembering, and ensuring that memories are more than mere collections or classified objects but rather 'active and alive'. However, the shared relationship of authority needs a little more scrutiny through the phases of 'collection', interpretation and the reporting of the study to an audience. As a starting point, as Stuart says, the questions asked of the 'subject' could be turned to the interviewer (Stuart, 1993, p.80; see also Stuart, 1994). Atkinson points to multiple voices - the voice of the 'knowing sociologist' and the 'observer' and the 'social actor' which are combined to produce the finished, complex account within which the voices change and interrelate to provide an interpretive whole (Atkinson, 1990, pp.92-4). Atkinson records how 'exemplars' are taken from interviews, field notes and so on to demonstrate to the reader the familiar and mundane or the exotic and unusual according to purpose. These 'exemplars' are given which are not fully elaborated by the researcher's commentary but nevertheless are connected to the reader through images, meanings and expectations.

Audience

The telling and writing of lives presumes an audience. As Mann describes, when we write we about ourselves we not only addressing ourselves (both past and present) but also have a sense of the 'other'- in terms of friends, colleagues, community and so on (Mann, 1993, p.61). The researched may, to a greater or lesser extent, assume or know the likely audience/readership. Thus, there is the initial relationship between the researched and researcher - a relationship which will be shaped to some extent within the framings of

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gender, ethnicity, sexuality an class and other dimensions (age, region) and also the (expected and realised) response by the reading audience according to cultural affiliation and difference (see Tonkin, 1990, p.26). The 'subject's' story is from a cultural context - it is informed by group constructions and public or communal accounts (traditions, books, etc. of communal/personal history(ies)): the account draws upon sets of discourse or broader ideologies (see Grele, 1991). Respondents apart from telling their story as part of general interaction within a group may well discuss (rehearse) the giving of stories with others before telling the researcher. In understanding any research account, therefore, we have to pay attention to both sides of the research relation ('subject' and researcher), the structuring of the story (its genre or forms, cf. Atkinson, 1990), the structure of feeling within the account; the interview relationship and the broader shaping of the account by communal and broader ideological or other framings (see Mann, 1994 p.61; Popular Memory Group, 1982; Grele, 1991, pp.140-1).

Conclusions - Biographical Work and the Auto/biography of the Researcher

Having reflected somewhat on my own various forms of intellectual biography (in articles and cv's and so on) I have realised that feelings of unease regarding biographical accounts in research may be connected with the following issues:

1. The turning of 'the questions back to me': my response to the writing of my own life produced a sensitivity to possible interpretative frameworks and theoretical questions: which of these to use and why in examining our own (academic/personal) lives? Are they the same as used to in my research to understand others?

2. The feeling of being a 'subject' (like the doctor becoming the patient): being on the other 'side' can make us sensitive to how much to reveal our own 'self' and past experiences and how they may be connected with the research issues that we have explored. Again, asking questions of ourselves that we ask others makes us reflect on the nature of such questioning (eg. the type of relations with 'subjects') and how in research, and more routinely in life, individuals 'structure' (select, re-order, re-interpret) experience over time for different purposes and audiences.

3. Self-realisation: the auto/biography is part of the everyday practices of life - it takes a range of forms - some more public some relatively private or informal but all are expressions of the self and self-change.

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Notes

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