**Auto/Biographical Approaches to Researching Death and Bereavement: Connections, Continuums, Contrasts**

**Abstract**

We argue here that auto/biography is an epistemological approach challenging traditional claims to objectivity, recognising the personhood of researchers as well as respondents and the complex relationship between the self and other (in both face-to-face encounters and ‘texts’ of various kinds). After outlining some of the fundamental benefits of an auto/biographical approach—within the social sciences generally, and death studies specifically—we, with reference to some of our research and writing experiences, reflect on each of our positions on the auto/biographical continuum. We explore the differences and the similarities in our epistemological approach and make the case for the significance of auto/biography.

**Key words**

Auto/Biography, critical subjectivity, reflexivity, methods and methodology

**Introduction**

Within sociology and across the humanities and social sciences more generally, there has been a growing recognition over 30+ years of the value of auto/biography for exploring elements of ‘lived experience’, and critically examining subjectivity. As Stanley (1992, 1993) argues, ‘auto/biography’ as a linguistic device illustrates the elision between categories—self/other, public/private, immediacy/memory—normally considered separate and distinct. In sociology, our own discipline, auto/biography has provided insight into areas of life difficult to access or research. Self and identity, domestic life and intimate relationships, the experience of dying, death and bereavement are all elements of the ‘sociological private’ (Bailey 2000; Ribbens McCarthy & Edwards 2001) to which an auto/biographical approach—utilising a number of different primary and secondary (generally qualitative) methods—provides useful access and consideration.

Alongside the popular interest in personal history (including family genealogy) there is widespread interest in the lives of others (in television and radio programmes; in film biopics; and published memoirs, diaries and obituaries). This is reflected in a commensurate, though differentiated academic interest in auto/biography. Recent examples such as Lynsey Hanley’s (2016) *Respectable* (documenting the experience of growing-up working-class in Britain); and Atul Gawande’s (2014) *Being Mortal* (drawing upon Gawande’s experiences in the end-of-life decisions faced by both his patients and his father) illustrate how such writing blurs traditional distinctions not only between popular and academic (and medical) writing but between self and other; for the stories of others are filtered through the voice of the author, who is in turn influenced by others (Cotterill & Letherby 1993).

There is a long and distinguished pedigree within sociology, cultural studies and feminist work in documentary or textual material that is auto/biographical in nature, from oral testimonies and life histories (e.g. Hoggart 1957; Thomas & Znaniecki 1927; Plummer 1983), through analyses of the social dynamics of narrative and story-telling (Brunner 2004, Plummer, 1995; Letherby, 2014), to personal diaries, correspondence and material of an epistolary nature (Alaszweski 2006; Bell 1998; Plummer 2001; Stanley 1984, 1987; Letherby & Zdrodowski 1995). Where early interest in biographical material tended to treat these documents as unproblematically referential of the lives they described (Stanley & Morgan 1993), the ‘biographical turn’ has involved critical reflection upon the social, cultural, political (and psychodynamic) processes and motivations underpinning the particular focus, selection and omission of material in auto/biographical work.

We start from the assumption that auto/biographical reflection should be part of critical analysis that acknowledges the inevitable inclusion of the self and the complex relationship between self and other throughout the whole research and writing process. Furthermore, identities are inhabited and performed through a repertoire of repeated tellings (Plummer 1995)—whether verbally, in writing, outwardly to others, or inwardly as ‘inner speech’ (Volosinov 1976)—providing a structuring effect upon our sense of selfhood and identity (Sparkes 2004). Thus, ‘identities are *produced* through the autobiographical work in which all of us engage everyday, even though few of us will formally write an “autobiography”’ (Lawler 2008, p.13).

We came to auto/biographical scholarship in different ways. Michael’s 15+ years of research has led to questions. To what extent has research into the public mourning for, and public dying of, seemingly ‘distant’ others been guided by auto/biographical influences and benefited from auto/biographical reflection? How do choices of topic reflect (un)conscious identificatory dis/investments in the individuals or events that have been the focus of inquiries, reflecting ‘some contingency in (auto)personal biography’ (Taylor et al. 1996, p.3)? Gayle in her 25+ year career has always been interested in and reflected upon the personal in her work. Motivation for early work on reproductive disruption was related, in part, to personal experience; and more recent writing on bereavement and grief are similarly grounded in the auto/biographical.

After introducing and outlining some of the fundamental benefits of auto/biography within the social sciences, and specifically with reference to death studies, including a consideration of ethics, we reflect on our positions on the auto/biographical continuum (from auto/**biography** to **auto**/biography (see below)). Following this, we discuss the significance of auto/biography for understanding dying, death and bereavement.

**Auto/Biography**

. . . learn to use your 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, p. 216).

We are suggesting here the significance of an auto/biographical continuum. When academics write about themselves, but acknowledge the significance of others, their work could be labelled **auto**/biography (what some might call autoethnography (see for example Ellis & Bochner 2000, Jackson & Mazzei 2008). When writing about others but recognising the subjectivity of the biographer, auto/**biography** is more appropriate. Our use of ‘continuum’ acknowledges that concentration on the *self* OR on the *other* is not clear cut and that, whether conscious or unconsciously ‘slippage’ often occurs. Writing and working auto/biographically recognises the entanglement and slippage between the self and other: especially the fact that any autobiography involves others (especially others whose lives impact on the writer’s life) and that biography inevitably involves autobiographical traces of the writer (Stanley 1993, Morgan 1993, Stanley & Morgan 1993, p.3). Auto/biography has clear epistemological (and ethical and political) implications, where it has featured prominently in feminist and other critical research approaches to challenge ‘malestream’ assumptions about objectivity, value neutrality and in an attempt to counter (and challenge) researcher/researched imbalances (Letherby 2013). Thus, auto/biographical research serves as a corrective to much traditional research (typically written in the third-person passive voice, as if from nowhere and by no one (Ellis & Bochner 2000, p.734). It also challenges traditional autobiographical and biographical writing (with its emphasis on historical figures and individuals privileged by gender, ‘race’ and class) by giving voice to identities and groups previously excluded or othered (Zussman 2000; Letherby 2013).

In sum, auto/biography is an epistemological approach that acknowledges the personhood of all involved, enabling us to consider ‘the extent to which our subjectivity is not something that gets in the way of our social analysis but is itself social’ (Ribbens 1993, p.88). Auto/biography is academically rigorous, highlighting the social location of the writer and making clear the author’s role in the process of *constructing* rather than discovering the story/the knowledge (Mykhalovskiy 1996; Stanley, 1993; Letherby 2003). Furthermore, auto/biographical study—either focusing on one, several or many lives—demonstrates how individuals are social selves, fashioned from interwoven biographies (Elias 2001; Goodwin 2012; Cotterill & Letherby 1993), and how a focus on the individual can contribute to an understanding of the general (Mills 1959; Stanley 1992; Evans 1997; Ellis & Bochner 2000). With specific reference to dying, death and bereavement, working auto/biographically: whether in interviews with individuals nearing the end of life and their in/formal carers; textual analysis of newspaper obituaries or blog entries of someone close to death; observation at a funeral parlour or creative writing grief group—all assist in the practical, ethical and epistemological reflection of such events and experiences.

**Auto/Biography and Dying, Death and Bereavement**

As Small (2001, p.36) notes: logic, while useful for classifying and categorising a range of phenomena, is not necessarily very good at giving insight into people and their lives. It is perhaps then unsurprising to find a relatively long, if neglected or unrecognised, tradition of auto/biography within death studies. Historically, the various attempts to describe the emotions and experiences elicited by loss were, until Freud’s (1917/1957) ‘scientific’ examination of grief, largely the preserve of artists, poets and others within the creative arts (DeSpelder & Strickland 2007, p.17–23). There are examples of auto/biographical reflection within death studies. Gorer’s (1965), *Death, Grief and Mourning in Contemporary Britain*, for example, begins with an auto/biographical introduction which provides insight into experiences of family loss, providing a basis for his examination of ‘Anglo-Saxon’ attitudes towards death and dying as obscenities smothered in prudery. Handsley’s (2001) exploration of the effects of traumatic loss upon the relationships and identities of surviving family members, Timmermans’ (1994) ‘introspective ethnography’ using his own mother’s dying, and Walter’s (1996) theorisation of enduring relationships between survivors and the deceased through the (re)construction of a ‘durable biography’ are all examples of auto/biography within death studies.

Walter’s (1996) work, together with Klass et al’s (1996), *Continuing Bonds,* helped to initiate a paradigm shift within bereavement studies and counselling circles by asserting the normlacy of maintaining an ongoing relationship with the deceased. Klass and colleagues take Freud to task because his own experience of grief did not accord with his theoretical model for explaining it (and his clinical advocacy to others in how to cope with it). In all of these publications, not only does the use and reflection upon lived experience serve to help authenticate the claims subsequently made, but allows researchers to take personal responsibility for their assumptions and practices (Small 2001, p.35).

Aside from studies that draw partially or are guided implicitly by auto/biographical reflection, are those in which the researcher’s own experience of loss provides the *explicit* basis for substantive and sustained scholarship. Such work has been variously described using a range of terms that can be included under the broad rubric of ‘biographical research’ (Goodwin 2012, p.xx). Comprising a variety of forms and differences in application and approach, this has resulted in the proliferation of disciplines and groupings working within this register, and a variety of descriptive labels—from oral history, biography, and life story, to life history, narrative analysis, reminiscence and life review (Bornat 2004, p.34; cf Ellis & Bochner 2000, pp.739–40). Whether labelled ‘auto/biography’ or ‘autoethnography’, what these approaches have in common is a shared concern with the individual’s life experiences and the meanings and interpretations they attach to their own life stories (Goodwin 2012, p.xx).

Auto/biographical examples for study and reflection upon losses of various kinds, include: reproductive and child loss (Davidson 2011; Ironstone-Catterall 2004-5; Letherby 2015); loss of a parent (Hermann 2016; McKenzie 2015; Poulos 2014, Thornton & Letherby 2009; Ellis 1996); a spouse (Ellis 1995; Thornton & Letherby 2009); a sibling (Ellis 1993); close personal friends (Richardson 2007); and the proximal or distal, yet no less visceral, involvement in public tragedy and disaster (Brennan 2008a, 2008b; Ellis 2002; Tilley-Lubbs 2011). Whether through traditionally academic or more creative presentations (Letherby & Davidson 2015), such work tells us something valuable about the self /other(s) relationship, the sociality of life, and the various losses within it.

A genre of auto/biographical writing that pertains particularly to death studies is that of ‘pathography’ (Hawkins 1990)—first-person accounts written by or about individuals experiencing terminal illness and its aftermath. Neurologist and writer Oliver Sacks (1990), like many other celebrities and public figures, documented his own experiences of dying. Written for multifarious purposes, including educating the public, and, less altruistically, for commercial gain or as a bid for symbolic immortality (Bauman 1992; Becker 1973), these accounts provide the basis for critical analysis (Armstrong-Coster 2005; Brennan 2017a, 2017b; Hawkins 1990; Woodthorpe 2010). Like the wider genre of popular auto/biography of which they are a part, pathographies (and their analysis) tell us much about self/other relations; about the experience of dying; the motivational factors underpinning their production and consumption; and the important ethical issues which they raise (Tolich 2010); as well as providing the opportunity to reflect upon what their popularity tells us about contemporary culture’s relationship with dying, death and bereavement.

**Ethics and Auto/Biography**

It is often assumed (incorrectly) because auto/biographical writing does not always bring us into direct personal contact with others, that it is free of the ethical obligations and concerns with which all researchers need to attend. Auto/biographical work affords the opportunity to subject ourselves to the same critical analysis as others we write about but it also provides us with ‘narrative privilege’ (Adams 2008) in ways that are not extended to others implicated in our stories. The power embedded in narrative privilege comes from the inability of others to write back: to challenge or contest our accounts, perhaps because they are unaware they appear in our stories and/or because they lack the resources to do so (Adams 2008, p.181). Obtaining the informed consent of ‘included’ others when we write about ourselves is not always practically possible, not least when those invoked in our stories are dead. Death and serious life-limiting illness are among the greatest impediments to informed consent and the ability to answer back (Couser 1997).

Being prepared to show to others what we have written about them as a moral rule of thumb is useful in foregrounding the ethical obligations incumbent upon us in auto/biography (Tolich 2008), but arguably reaches its limit when the moral imperative to speak out (such as in writing about cases of trauma and abuse) is greater than the need to protect the privacy of the abuser. Neither does informed consent resolve issues about the validity of representation: just because those invoked in our stories do not concur with our account of an event does not necessarily invalidate it. In attempting to address these moral concerns, we should be careful not to silence ourselves for fear of offending others, for self-censorship is the most dangerous of all censorships (Andersen 2005, p.13).

Treating all of those about whom we write as vulnerable (Tolich 2010) is one way forward, though it does not resolve the ambivalence and ambiguity of relational ethics (Ellis 2007), and the complexity of power relationships within the political, emotional, embodied experience of research (Letherby 2003). There is, also, a risk that we may also ‘harm ourselves, out of responsibility to others, by choosing not to share a traumatic experience that could help others’ (Adams 2008, pp.184–5); the very purpose surely of research itself.

**Our Auto/Biographical Journeys**

**Michael:** In the late 1990s I started a PhD in Sociology (Brennan 2003) which grew out of an interest in the public mourning for Diana, Princess of Wales in 1997. This stemmed from an antipathy towards what, at the time, I perceived (and experienced) as ‘feeling fascism’ and the journalistic construction of a ‘nation in mourning’. My approach and motivation for study implied what Walter (1999: 39) called a ‘sociology of error’ (which, he acknowledges, has long been discredited), proceeding from the assumption that people’s behaviour was somehow irrational and flawed, before going on to investigate—in a ‘detached’ manner—where and how exactly they had ‘gone wrong’. Commensurately, and in a manner consistent with ‘malestream’ academic research, I devised a methodology for exploring the phenomenon of public mourning (the expression of grief for individuals we have not known through a traditional ‘face-to-face’ relationship) by ‘holding constant’ the public mourning for Diana in 1997 with that following the death of Queen Victoria, in 1901. I began thinking I was somehow removed from the people or events that I was studying, unaware of the political and identificatory dynamics unconsciously guiding my research.

As my doctorate proceeded, I came to appreciate my role in the construction of knowledge; an epistemological shift in my thinking that led to auto/biographical explorations of my own public (and private) mourning alongside the mourning of others as conventional research ‘subjects’. Experienced as an ‘epiphany’, or what Denzin (1989) calls ‘turning-point’ moments in people’s lives, I realised that I too, as a teenager, had been a public mourner following the stadium disaster at Hillsborough, Sheffield in 1989, in which 96 fans of Liverpool Football Club were crushed to death and many more injured before an F.A. Cup Semi-Final match between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest. I had ‘instinctively’ been moved to ‘do something’ in the aftermath of the disaster: to tie, along with many others, my football scarf to the gates of the Leppings Lane entrance to Hillsborough in a spontaneous and ritual act of commemoration; to sign books of remembrance; and to compulsively imbibe as many media accounts of the disaster in the weeks following the disaster as I could find. Clearly, I was deeply affected by the disaster for some time after, even though I was not personally involved as a survivor, nor as someone bereaved by these events.

As a Sheffield Wednesday fan, whose ‘home’ stadium was Hillsborough, I had a close personal bond with the stadium and the affectionate sense of ‘placeness’ it evoked for me—what social geographers describe as ‘topophilia’ and the sense of *genius loci* that comes from sacralised or ‘homely’ space. As a Sheffield resident who lived relatively nearby the stadium and closer still to one of the major hospitals that treated victims of the disaster, I was part of the affected community. In a hierarchy of victims identified by Taylor (1990), I was one of many concerned people in the community who identified emotionally with the victims, not least perhaps because I, but for chance, may well have been one of the disaster’s primary victims (Eyre 2001, p. 260).

Once I had ‘(re)discovered’ my own involvement as a vicarious griever (Kastenbaum 1987), my own mourning—alongside that of others’—following the Hillsborough disaster became a site from which to explore from *within* (rather than without), the dynamics of public mourning. Two readings in particular had a transformative effect on me, opening up for the first time the possibility of auto/biography: Peter Redman’s (1999) ‘Boys in Love: Narrative, Identity and the Production of Heterosexual Masculinities’ (which uses autobiography alongside interviews to explore the cultural construction and lived experience of heterosexual masculine identities), and Richard Johnson’s (1999) ‘Exemplary Differences: Mourning (and not mourning) a princess’ (about the psychic *transferences* between his own mourning for Princess Diana and that of his late wife some years earlier).

Using auto/biographical writing to explore my own mourning (and not mourning), invoked other significant losses, allowed me to tease out issues of masculinity, place, politics and fandom as essential preconditions for my mourning (and its refusal—in the case of Diana). The ‘memory work’ (Haug 1987) employed in my research—in which personal memories of events are written rapidly (so as to avoid the conscious temptation for editing and self-censorship)—was especially useful in this respect, providing the basis for analytic auto/biography. The death of my grandfather (my first close personal bereavement as a teenager), the rapid industrial decline of Sheffield (the city which provided a basis for my identity), and the anticipatory changes facing football (another essential part of my social being) post-Hillsborough, were all losses implicated in my auto/biographical writing about my mourning for Hillsborough.

Such writing, although not without its ethical and personal challenges, was useful in yielding the ‘silences, hidden selves and shadows of others’ that Gayle writes about below. It was useful both as a means of understanding the processes (social, cultural, political) by and through which we are constituted as subjects, and as a vehicle for achieving critical self-understanding (and the ways in which this impacts my academic work). As Plummer (1983, p.34) acknowledges, while we might never come to *really* know another’s world, we might *just* come to understand our own.

Researching grief in this way, whether for that of a ‘distant’ other(s) or following the loss of a close personal relationship, seemed, despite all my academic schooling thus far, intrinsically logical. For if grief and mourning are emotions conditioned by society but experienced, first-hand, by the self—an embodied self that both thinks and *feels*—then the self, and auto/biographical writing as a vehicle for unleashing it, seemed like a logical starting point. Like many others who have adopted auto/biography I too experienced the pangs of self-doubt that routinely accompany it—especially the imagined voices of significant academic others critical of biographical methods within the social sciences. This led me to challenge much of the sociological thinking upon which I had been raised (another loss of sorts), leading me to a sociology that was porous (permeated by allied disciplines) and radically reconstituted. That it felt more like art than science was perhaps because attempts to map the contours of grief, mourning and loss (and many other human experiences besides) are more likely to be found in art and literature; in characters made available through fictional and imaginative writing whose experiences are in some way representative of social being (Rustin 2001).

So my journey into the field of dying, death and bereavement was an academic ***and*** personal one, motivated by ‘autobiographical’ interest and moulded along the way by the social influence of significant (academic) others. In the years since completing my PhD, I have not always adopted an auto/biographical approach explicitly—through, say, the presentation of auto/biographical vignettes (perhaps for fear of the risks associated with it). I have however, experienced a fundamental shift in epistemological orientation and approach in ways that always involve attempting to think critically (and reflexively) about my own (dis)investments in research. This involves keeping a research diary in which I record my feelings, thoughts and anxieties about my relationship with my research (Etherington 2004).

My recent research into the re-invocation of traumatic loss and the potential resolution of grief occasioned by the new Hillsborough inquests (Brennan 2017a), was precipitated by the influence of living and working in Liverpool—a ‘homecoming’ of sorts given the focus of my PhD, with its focus on the people and public mourning on Merseyside. My interest in public dying (as a corollary of public mourning) is also an area of research I have experienced as emotionally absorbing, not only because of the recursive methods of viewing and transcribing interviews, but also because my interest in the writer/journalist, Christopher Hitchens, as a recent case study of public dying was born of ambivalent interest in Hitchens that oscillated between admiration and repulsion (Brennan 2015, 2017b). Only in the *process* of my research, however, did I become aware of *transferences* between Hitchens and a personal friend/academic mentor influential in my academic development, thereby illustrating the constant slippage and myth of complete academic detachment between self and other. Similarly, my foray into research on industrial ruination/dereliction tourism (Brennan 2016) has been acknowledged as auto/biographical palimpsest. Working auto/biographically, then, is for me, indexical to conscious subjectivity (Cotterill & Letherby 1993).

**Gayle:** It was a life changing experience in the mid-1980s, a miscarriage at 16 weeks gestation, following my only pregnancy that led me to sociology. Following an A Level I began my undergraduate degree still hoping for biological motherhood. I knew I wanted my final year research project to focus on miscarriage. This small study led to one of my first publications (Letherby1993). The journal reviews were positive and encouraging and I adhered to all but one of the recommendations/suggestions.

In discussing my motivation and approach I had very briefly outlined my personal experience and one reviewer wrote: ‘I would advise the author to think carefully about such disclosures as I have known such information to be used against colleagues in the past.’ This is the suggestion I ignored. The influence of feminist work and arguments for the personal as political and the personal as theoretical were significant here (see Letherby 2003 for further discussion). In 1997 I completed my doctoral research which focused on individuals’ (predominantly women’s) experience of ‘infertility’ and ‘involuntary childlessness’. At the time of the fieldwork I fitted the medical definition of ‘infertile’ and was ‘involuntarily childless’, although before completing my studies I became a social (step)mother, which also influenced research and writing choices. I have always researched and written about the experience of working and learning in higher education and in the early 2000s began working on the sociology of travel mobilities. Each of these later areas has involved auto/biographical methods and reflection and throughout my career I have continually reflected on the methodological and epistemological aspects of what I do. Recently, I have returned to where I started, and in many ways never left: issues of death, loss, bereavement and grief (e.g. Letherby 2015, 2015a; Letherby & Davidson 2015).

In addition to my miscarriage, my adult life has been peppered by experiences that, following Bury (1982), we might call ‘biographical disruption’. My father died when I was 20, I left my first husband in my early 30s. My relationship with my second husband was happy but hard work given his many years of illness and when he died six years ago, he was estranged from his two sons who remain estranged (their choice) from me, even though John had sole custody and they had lived with and were cared for by the two of us during their teenage years and early 20s. Four years ago the person who was my main support and source of comfort throughout all of these experiences—my mum, Dorothy—died. In addition, other extended family members and close friends have died over the years and as such I feel that I have become something of an expert in bereavement and grief, which includes, but is not limited to, what Howell (2013, p.4) describes as the ‘significant reorganisation of one’s sense of self, for better or worse’ following the death [loss] of a significant other(s)’.

I am not, and have never, suggested that we should *all* do work so closely related to our own experience. I do not believe that this type of work is **better**. I do insist, as noted above, that all research is auto/biographical in some way and indeed, those who do not engage in self-reflection as part of the research and writing process are missing a methodological trick. Auto/biographical work that relates closely to the identity and experience of the researcher/writer is valid and useful. I acknowledge, however, that auto/biographical ‘voices’ within academia remain predominantly white, educated, middle-class and Western. Thus, not everyone has equal access to auto/biography (Adams 2008). Furthermore, auto/biography is always partial in that the writer has the power of editorship and silences, hidden selves and shadows of others are always present in all our writing (Wilkinson & Kitzinger 1996; Letherby 2013).

But auto/biographical work is not without its challengers, not least because it threatens the traditional academic orthodoxy of working. Those of us who do write auto/biographically have been criticised, by some, for being ‘self-indulgent’, and for producing work that is perceived as intellectually ‘weak’. Delamont (2009) differentiates between work that she identifies as autobiographical ethnography and autobiographical reflexivity: the latter being beneficial, even essential, whereas the former is ‘the narcissistic substitution of autoethnography for research’. My own work (most specifically that which is more **auto**/biographical than auto/**biographical**) has been criticised as ‘sickly self-indulgent’ and ‘gross self-advertisement’ and even some supportive comments have felt back-handed; ‘very interesting, not theoretical of course but very interesting’. Criticisms can feel personal: I have been told in research interviews that it’s my ‘own fault’ that I have no biological children having not ‘tried hard enough’ and my personal definitions of self were challenged when a journal editor changed my reference of a ‘parental relationship with my partner’s two sons’ to ‘a kind of parental relationship’.

Another criticism of auto/biography is that the writer is attempting to ‘sort themselves out’. However:

Autobiographical writing has a strong therapeutic function, like all creative writing. Writing is different from talking, because it creates pathways to memories, feelings and thoughts that aren’t necessarily conscious. It’s a way of organising experience, of incorporating threats to everyday routines and meanings, and particularly of associating traumatic events with non-traumatic ones, thereby making them more bearable (Oakley, 2007, p. 22).

I have written:

. . . I have begun to wonder why ‘sorting myself out’ is such a bad thing to do, to spend time on. We all have ‘issues’ to deal with in life and for those of us whose work includes the responsibility of representing the lives of others it is important that those issues do not cloud our presentation of the lives of others. (Letherby, 2015, p.10).

Recently I have published a number of pieces specifically related to my own bereavement experiences within which I argue not only for continuing bonds and legacies of influence of the deceased but also suggest that not only did loss—my miscarriage—bring me to sociology but sociology in turn affects the way that I do grief (Letherby 2015, 2015a). In these (and other) academic publications, I have experimented with/included some different sorts of writing—auto/biographical ‘fiction’ or faction (which always includes some ‘fact’ just as ‘fact’ is always in some ways fictitious)—and memoir. Additionally, I have published short pieces in non-academic papers and online outlets; some of these relate to my experience and/or my research, some to other issues I feel passionate about. These endeavours lead me to agree with Richardson’s (1994, p.515) suggestion that ‘[life]writing [i]s a *method of inquiry*, a way of finding out about yourself and your topic’.

**Revisiting Auto/Biography in Death Studies**

As we have argued, an auto/biography enables a viable and intuitive approach for exploring—with reference to self/other relationships—dying, death and bereavement. Whether working **auto**/biographically (in which the principal focus is on the self while acknowledging the social influence of others) or auto/**biographically** (in which the focus is on others while recognising the subjectivity of the researcher), both approaches involve deep introspection and reflexivity, which is invaluable when researching and writing about such subjective and emotionally significant experiences. The telling of stories, through memoir or via research (for example via face-to-face or online interviews or video diary), whether by the dying themselves or by in/formal carers, have been vital in exploring living with life-limiting illness, suffering and the experiences of care (Bingley et al. 2008). As well as having implications for policy and practice, auto/biographical life research and writing has some advantages over conventional qualitative research approaches, explicitly including the perspective of all involved. Grinyer’s (2006) diary-based study of bereaved parents of young adults illustrated, for example, the web of familial connections through which grieving for offspring was mediated, and the efficacious nature afforded by personal diaries for introspection—for example, during a sleepless night—in ways not amenable within conventional research.

Our research and writing spans the auto/biographical continuum. Michael’s research on public mourning, has involved both an explicit focus upon the *self* (and the social, cultural and ideological influences through which grievous ‘subject positions’ are inhabited and ‘performed’); **and** a focus upon the public mourning and dying of *others* (as influenced by social and cultural conditions) while acknowledging that the interpretive meanings attached to such mourning/dying practices are themselves filtered through the subjectivity of the researcher. Gayle’s research on reproductive loss has always included an element of *self* even when the central focus has been the *other* and her academic and other writings on grief and loss more generally, although grounded in her own experience, always acknowledge the presence of other(s). Our reflexive auto/biographical approach acknowledges our power and privilege as researchers throughout the research process (Letherby 2003, 2013), while also recognising that we too are the products of prevailing social conditions: in which we ‘speak’ but are also ‘spoken by’ culture, ideology, discourse. Self-knowledge in this way, as post-structuralism has indicated, can only ever be tentative, contingent and situated (Gannon, 2006). Here we should be mindful that the ‘narrative I’ should not be mistaken for providing access to some authentic, unmediated ‘truth’ (Jackson & Mazzei, 2008), but that recollections expressed in auto/biographical writing are always and already discursive—*representations* rather than pure experience or event (Kuhn 2000, p.189). So too, we would do well to remember that the ‘I’ who writes is not singular but plural, enmeshed in a web of relational interdependencies in which ‘there can be no “I” without “he”, “she”, “we”, “you” or “they”’ (Elias 2001, p.124, cited in Goodwin 2012, p.xxii).

**Final Reflections**

Writing about and using the *self* (alongside the *other*) in research and scholarly writing can be rewarding, especially in ways that tell us much about the elision and entanglement of our own personal and professional identities and our own place in the world (Mills, 1959). It is also fraught with challenges, some of which we have considered. However, this approach allows us to (reflexively) communicate our feelings, and relationality (Butler, 2004; Elias, 2001) with others, in ways that, because they are intellectually honest, provide insight into human experiences (including dying, death and bereavement) and the processes through which such knowledge is produced.

We are not of course suggesting that life writing is the *only* medium of auto/biographical expression. Although we are arguing that self/other reflection is an essential part of research and scholarly writing. As a reflexive technology of the self (Foucault 1997a, 1997b), writing does nevertheless allow us to articulate inchoate feelings—for sense-making—in ways that, in dark times, may help make traumatic experiences bearable (Arendt, 1968). For survivors, the Holocaust as an exemplar of traumatic loss was also a ‘limit case’ (LaCapra, 1998), highlighting the ‘unspeakability’ of lived experience vis-à-vis literary representation (while simultaneously, and paradoxically, giving lie to this through a plethora of Holocaust literature (Richardson, 2005)). Creative Analytic Practice (CAP) of the sort described by Richardson (2000, p. 929), including various forms of writing, fuses creative and critical aspects of scholarly inquiry in ways that allow us to unlock experiences—including those involving death, dying and bereavement—that might otherwise remain hidden or inaccessible to researchers.

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| **Auto/Biographical Approaches to Researching Death and Bereavement: practical tips**   * Auto/Biography presents a challenge to some traditional, mainstream research approaches. Some more recent methodological writings across the social sciences and humanities—which challenge the inevitability of objectivity by highlighting the significance of theorising on the subjective—make for useful background reading (see for example Letherby 2003, 2013). * Auto/Biography as an epistemological approach encompasses a board range of primary (collected for the purpose of the study) and secondary (already existing) social science methods. Look for examples of auto/biographical work and reflect on the appropriateness of the methods used and the methodological discussion provided. * Much social scientific research is still re/presented through numbers or the written word. Auto/Biographies can be told in other ways. Look for examples (both generally and specifically with reference to death, dying and bereavement) in art, music, literature and so on. Consider how useful these types of representation are for social scientists. * Although this article is written by two sociologists, auto/biographic work in death studies and elsewhere is undertaken across a number of disciplines. There are also many examples of auto/biography outside of academia. Having read our piece, read some of these examples and make some notes on where you think they sit on the auto/biographical continuum (i.e. in terms of a focus on the auto or the biographical). * Accepting that all research and scholarly writing takes place somewhere on an auto/biographical continuum highlights how important it is to always keep a research diary within which the researcher(s) records connections to (or not), and personal, as well as intellectual, reflections on the research process. |

Note: single quotation marks highlight the problems of definition.

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