



a/b
Auto/Biography Study Group

**BSA Auto/Biography Study Group
Christmas Conference**

Challenge and Change

6th December 2024

Friends House, Euston, NW1 2BJ

<https://www.friendshouse.co.uk/>



**BRITISH
SOCIOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION**

BSA Registered Charity Number: 1080235

Programme

0845-0905 Arrival and Registration with refreshments

0905-0915 Welcome

0915-1015 Keynote

We who believe in freedom cannot stop until it's done

Geraldine Brown (Coventry University)

Chair: Anne Chappell

1015-1020 Comfort Break

1020-1055 Paper Session

'Grown-Up' Children from Armed Forces Families: Ever-Changing Friendships

Anne Chappell, Ellen McHugh and Christopher Ince (Brunel University of London and King's College London)

Chair: Gayle Letherby

1055-1130 Paper Session

Parallel Lives Mise-en-scène. Public Image Transformations and Challenges in Post-Communist Romanian Women's Life-Writing

Andrada Fătu-Tutoveanu and Simona Mitroiu (Babeş Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca and Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Iaşi, Romania)

Chair: Christine Lewis

1130-1150 Refreshment Break

1150-1225 Paper Session

From the mountains to the sea

Barbara L Clough (Oxford Brookes University)

Chair: Naomi Braithwaite

1225-1300 Paper Session

Changing the Paradigm of Humanity in the Age of Virtual Anatomy

Lily Evans (University of Plymouth)

Chair: Tracey Collett

1300-1345 Lunch

1345-1420 Paper Session

Losing 'my' self: Dementia, my mother and me

Naomi Joanna Braithwaite (Nottingham Trent University)

Chair: Ellen McHugh

1420-1455 Paper Session

We were in the same boat and now we're not': sibling relationships and inherited variants of dementia

Mel Hall (Manchester Metropolitan University)

Chair: Barbara Clough

1455-1500 Comfort Break

1500-1535 Paper Session

'Please have my seat sweetheart': public responses to women's ageing and changing

Gayle Letherby and Tracey Collett (University of Plymouth)

Chair: Mel Hall

1535-1550 Refreshment Break

1550-1625 Paper Session

I'm an activist now!

Christine Lewis (Edge Hill University)

Chair: Geraldine Brown

1625 Close

Abstracts

Losing 'my' self: Dementia, my mother and me

Naomi Joanna Braithwaite (Nottingham Trent University)

The aim of this paper is to discuss the impact of documenting through film the loss of self from the perspectives of a mother, and a daughter, the researcher. In summer 2023 I ventured into a new medium of creating an ethnographic documentary film to capture the impacts that advancing dementia was having on my mother's sense of self, and on myself as daughter and, carer. As an ethnographic researcher versed in capturing individual biographies through photography and interviews, I recognised the significance of image alongside narrative for documenting the self. In this self-reflective paper I will discuss how the ethnographic film enabled a powerful and intimate observation of the everyday impacts of dementia on my mother, and how it raised awareness of the devastating impacts that the disease was having on our relationship and my own sense of self. Opening with an extended extract from the documentary film titled, 'Where's Wilma?', the paper will discuss the significance of film as a medium for documenting auto/biographies. Reflecting on the ethical challenges of making such a personal, and at times painful film, I will share how I grappled with being both foremost a researcher, and then a daughter, who had to observe the harsh realities of her mother's deterioration in situ through the film's storytelling, through the camera lens, and after during the process of editing and screening. As dementia advances, the film becomes a record of self as it was then, and isn't now, and never will be again.

We who believe in freedom cannot stop until it's done

Geraldine Brown (Coventry University)

My title is derived from a song by Sweet Honey and the Rock titled 'Ella's Song' A poignant line within it states, 'Until the killing of Black men, Black mothers' sons, is as important as the killing of White men, White mothers' sons, we who believe in freedom cannot rest.' The song. A challenge for those engaged in social justice work involves striking a delicate balance between the commitment to continue accepting limited victories and the reality of repeated failures (Patricia Hill Collins, 2014). For me, research has always been a space for activism, a tool for understanding, engagement and action in a quest to address issues of inequality and a fight for social justice. As Arthur Bochner (2001: 1.38) reminds us, '[T]he myth that our research is divorced from our lives, that it has no autobiographical dimension, that what we do academically is not part of how we are working through the story of our own life, is a misconception. My research is personal and simultaneously political (Charles Wright Mills, 1959). In the UK, for decades now, Black women have drawn on their social, cultural, educational and faith-based knowledge to cultivate spaces where new forms of what Heidi Mirza (1997) calls 'real citizenship' have emerged. In this keynote, I provide insight into my approach, successes, and challenges in this endeavour, demonstrating how my research practice is deeply intertwined with my life and with who I am and a belief that change, whilst challenging to achieve, is possible.

References:

Bochner, A., (2001) 'Narrative's Virtues' *Qualitative Inquiry* 7(2): 131-157

Patricia Hill Collins, Lecture, February 26, 2014, Grand Valley State University's Office of Multicultural Affairs, Women's Centre and LGBT Resource Centre

Mirza, H. S (1997) *Black British Feminism: A Reader*, London: Routledge

'Grown-up' children from armed forces families: ever-changing friendships

Anne Chappell, Ellen McHugh and Christopher Ince (Brunel University of London and King's College London)

This paper will examine the experience of ever-changing friendships through the eyes of adults who grew up in families where one or more parent/guardian was a serving member of the British armed forces. This group have childhoods that are characterised by high levels of mobility and change for their own family and amongst the families in their community (Walker, Sealous and Misca, 2020). This 'super-mobility' has a number of implications, the more challenging of which are acknowledged through their eligibility for government Service Pupil Premium funding (MoD, 2023: para 1) and, in these terms, they are recognised as a disadvantaged

group. We collected and analysed auto/biographical data from 119 'grown up' children from armed forces families aged between eighteen and eighty through questionnaires and interviews. One of key areas they talked about was change in friendships, and how 'super-mobility' resulted in the need to regularly make new friends. In their accounts they outlined their approaches to making and maintaining (or not) friendships, the ways in which making friends differed depending on the context they moved to, a recognition of the skills they developed in being able to make friends, and an awareness of the different friendship experiences that they observed in others. We examine these narratives of ever-changing friendship in relation to identity (Lawler, 2014) and lost experience (Scott, 2020), and consider what policy-making and practice can do to support those experiencing these changes.

References:

Lawler, S. (2014) *Identity: sociological perspectives* (second edition). Cambridge: Polity Press.
Ministry of Defence (2023) *Service Pupil Premium: what you need to know* [accessed 27th August 2024]
Scott, S. (2020) *The social life of nothing: silence, invisibility and emptiness in tales of lost experience*. Abingdon: Routledge.
Walker, J., Sealous, A. and Misca, G. (2020) *Living in our shoes: Understanding the needs of UK Armed Forces families*. London: MoD.

From the mountains to the sea

Barbara L Clough (Oxford Brookes University)

As part of the fulfilment of my PhD, I am writing a work of creative non-fiction with a working title of 'From the mountains to the sea: an autobiographical-memoir'. This story interweaves my memoir around my father's autobiography whilst incorporating personal multiple forms of documentation: photographs, emails, boat logs, and letters. I also examine the public documentation available through historical societies, newspapers, and community organizations about the rural community in which I grew up. In scrutinising one small town in northeastern Pennsylvania, I can contribute to the historical analysis of the rise and decline of similar small towns in the United States during the twentieth and twenty-first century. In the interrogation of my father's autobiography, I investigate how my upbringing in a rural community was an attempt to replicate his own childhood. I examine how my experience of attachment to a specific time and place consumes a much larger share of my 'memory' than the actual chronological amount of time I spent there. Returning after a thirty-year absence, I interrogate my memories of that time against the written history as represented in public and personal documentation. I explore how my autobiographical-memoir represents and contextualizes the sweeping social changes in rural, twentieth century America. By layering objective historical evidence over subjective memory, my creative work enables me to access multiple pasts and ultimately gain a greater understanding how we remember and historicize a specific place and time.

Changing the paradigm of humanity in the age of virtual anatomy

Lily Evans (University of Plymouth)

For as long as anatomy has been studied, the dead have been our silent teachers. Cadaveric dissection has been an integral part of the field, from discovering the wonderful diversity of anatomical variation existing in the population to educating future health professionals and anatomists. Some (traditional) anatomists have described cadaveric dissection as the 'gold standard' of anatomy learning, however, many global challenges to the availability and ethical acquirement of cadavers remain. In the last decade, anatomy technology has exponentially grown in popularity and is now being used as a versatile adjunct to a wide range of curricula, including my own. The platform I use to virtually explore and teach the human body is the Anatomage table – an interactive 3D visualisation of cadaveric material donated to the Visible Human Project. These were the bodies of real people, showing their life experiences, healthy anatomical variations, and pathologies too. Because of this shift, many anatomists are concerned that choosing technology over traditional cadaveric dissection is a detrimental change for students experiencing empathy as they come face-to-face with the dead. As an anatomy lecturer teaching without cadavers, I find myself caught in the crosshairs of this debate. However, there have been many studies demonstrating that we can feel empathy from other digital media like simulation, animation, gaming, and artificial intelligence. I seek to understand whether we can apply these

concepts from other digital media to anatomy technology, and identify if we can feel empathy towards a virtual cadaver that is not a 'real' human.

Parallel lives mise-en-scène. Public image transformations and challenges in post-communist romanian women's life-writing

Andrada Fătu-Tutoveanu and Simona Mitroiu (Babeş Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca and Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Iaşi, Romania)

The Romanian Communist regime reshaped the patterns of privacy by redrawing the lines between public and private through its policies of surveillance, redefining the concepts of private and personal. Departing from these concepts and their transformations, our research focuses on Post-Communist Romanian women's life writing and the connections between memory, privacy, and autobiographical narrative in a political context marked by challenges and major change. We will look at the challenges brought by the surveillance of writers, practiced by the Romanian secret police during Communism. The case studies will address first the Nobel prize winner Herta Müller's efforts to construct an alternative representation in contrast to her "double" created by the Securitate, whose strategy was to fabricate and distort the public image of the targeted writers. As our aim is to discuss complementary modes of creating a public self-image within the Post-Communist narratives, therefore narratives of both victors and victims, we look at the second case study, Ana Blandiana, a significant yet ambivalent literary figure both during Communism and Post-Communism. In this case, the autobiographical writing is wrapped in multiple layers of public performance, both complex and problematic and therefore worth inquiring. This comparative study of Romanian women writers' narratives as taking control over their public image marks the changes and challenges of Postcommunism and women's life writing in Eastern Europe, and the strategies applied by the authors to fight the fiction about the self or to fictionalize their official biography, according to the change in the victors/victim dynamics.

We were in the same boat and now we're not': sibling relationships and inherited variants of dementia

Mel Hall (Manchester Metropolitan University)

Dementia is the umbrella term given to disease which manifests in brain function deterioration. Diagnoses are on the increase, comprising typically older age Alzheimer's disease and young onset variants. The disease is degenerative, terminal and especially notable for some variants, there is a genetic component. Prior research utilising biographical approaches has established the impact of dementia on familial relationships (Hall and Sikes, 2020). Medical advances which identify who is at risk of dementia through genetic testing and assisted conception can add a new dimension to this. This presentation draws on data from 10 biographical interviews conducted in the UK and US which explored the experiences of people who have experienced familial dementia attributed to a genetic variant. Some have undergone genetic testing and have a positive or negative result (they do or do not carry the gene), while others have decided against it, or are considering it. Siblings constitute our significant intimates throughout the life course, and be enjoyable and/or challenging. Analysis considers how sibling relationships may be challenged and changed by the experience of familial dementia, and in particular, the dissonances encountered when siblings receive different outcomes to a genetic test, e.g. one carries the gene and another does not, or where there are conflicting views on testing, reproductive choices and caring for family members. Findings highlight the imperative for timely testing, increased awareness in general medical practice and social support.

'Please have my seat sweetheart': public responses to women's ageing and changing

Gayle Letherby and Tracey Collett (University of Plymouth)

Exacerbated by the rise of social media and the shift towards celebrity, media driven politics, insults in everyday life have taken on added significance. Insults are 'everywhere': sometimes funny, sometimes cathartic, often offensive. Insults are at the same time staid and dynamic in that they draw on well-worn stereotypes and react to new meanings and events. Arguably, those with less power are more likely to be insulted and to have their concerns dismissed. As part of our broader auto/biographical interest in the sociology of insults, we have, as two women of certain ages, become increasingly interested in perceived

and/or intended insults surrounding women as they age and change. Here we draw on our experiences – as two mid-50s and mid-60s women - of being, or at least feeling, insulted and othered because of (we believe) our sex and our age(s). We appreciate that at some level our perception of age-related insults is likely influenced by our own age-related prejudice and we also acknowledge that what we perceive as insulting othering, others might view as politeness, respect even. Thus, in addition to providing examples of things that have been said to or done to us we reflect on some of the different ways these might be viewed. Our presentation embraces creative auto/biography and includes performance as well as references to appropriate research and scholarly writings. Ageing is an inevitable change that we all face and we hope that this paper will lead to discussion of how listeners experience similar change.

I'm an activist now!

Christine Lewis (Edge Hill University)

How did I get here? How did I become what I am at this moment? I was already changing when I noticed my pain at the death of a legendary captive orca named Tokitae (Lolita) in 2023. Loss triggered a fierce reaction in me, a questioning. How are my emotions entangled with a longing for Toki's liberation from her 53 years of captivity. Yet in the profound loss, the entanglements remain, there are so many more like Tokitae, stolen from their native seas and their families, for the amusement of humans. Why do I now challenge habits that once I thought worthy. The influential have become transient. My past habits no longer define the shifting space that I occupy. Now I challenge speciesism, realising this as a deeply held belief, but one that was resting, until now. My habits are changing, I notice my joy when the Japanese activist Kunito Seko tells us that today is a 'Blue Cove' day. I notice my feelings of sheer relief that no other cetaceans will die, the day that Miami Seaquarium is given notice to close. '#Empty the Tanks' I type avidly into my phone. I notice my feelings of helplessness as I find that Tokitae's family, the endangered Southern Resident Orcas are starving, because of the actions of human's. '#Breach the Snake River Dams now' I type avidly into my phone! I'm at the beginning but, who'd have thought it, I'm an activist now!

Conference Delegates

Andrada Fatu Tutoveanu	Babes-Bolyai University, Romania
Anne Chappell	Brunel University of London, UK
Barbara Clough	Oxford Brookes University, UK
Christine Lewis	Edge Hill University, UK
Ellen McHugh	Brunel University of London, UK
Gayle Letherby	University of Greenwich and University of Plymouth, UK
Geraldine Brown	Coventry University, UK
Jim Mitchell	Independent Academic
Lily Evans	University of Plymouth, UK
Madelaine French	University of York, UK
Mark Cieslik	Northumbria University, UK
Mel Hall	Manchester Metropolitan University, UK
Naomi Braithwaite	Nottingham Trent University, UK
Simona Mitroiu	Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, Romania
Tracey Collett	Plymouth University, UK