



a/b  
Auto/Biography Study Group

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

**Auto/Biography and everyday life: a celebration of the work and  
legacy of David Morgan**

**3<sup>rd</sup> December 2021  
Online**



Sketch: Lynne Chapman

## Programme

0900-0910 Welcome

0910-1010 Keynote

**Infamy, infamy: auto/biographical practices, conventions and silences.**

Liz Stanley (University of Edinburgh)

Chair: Anne Chappell

1010-1030 Refreshment Break

1030-1115 Paper Session

**Auto/Biographical reflections on the significance of acquaintances and acquaintanceship in one woman's everyday life**

Gayle Letherby (University of Plymouth)

Chair: Carly Stewart

1115-1200 Paper Session

**It's hard, really hard': How mothers of autistic children describe family life**

Juliet Hall (University of Plymouth)

Chair: Christine Lewis

1200-1215 Refreshment Break

1215-1300 Paper Session

**Family practices**

Mike Thomas (Brunel University London)

Chair: Gayle Letherby

1300-1345 Lunch

1345-1430 Paper Session

**Cultural capital in close encounters: doing family**

Yvonne Anderson (Mind of My Own)

Chair: Aidan Seery

1430-1515 Paper Session

**Auto/Biographical reflections on 'estrangement' in everyday life**

Christine Lewis (Edgehill University), Julie Parsons (University of Plymouth) and Carly Stewart (Bournemouth University)

Chair: Mike Thomas

1515-1530 Refreshment Break

1530-1615 Paper Session

**Re-reading 'Discovering Men' after 30 years**

Aidan Seery (Trinity College Dublin)

Chair: Julie Parsons

1615-1630 Close

## Abstracts

### **Infamy, infamy: auto/biographical practices, conventions and silences**

Liz Stanley (University of Edinburgh)

This plenary presentation is in memory of David Morgan, a loved friend and colleague. It explores some issues concerning practices as used in an auto/biographical framework, and does so around an abandoned shared project, a planned book by David and I about scandalous failed masculinities. A connected focus is biography and its conventions as related to the editorial function and the ways in which silences are produced concerning what can and should, what cannot and should not, be present in biographical accounts. And for biography, also consider other ways of representing lives. The presentation is structured around the following headings:

- Introducing biographical performances and silences
- The failed project
- Enter an unreliable narrator
- Learning some lessons and taking what we want
- Living a life, representing a life: it's a scandal!
- The end or the beginning? More on practices
- Horses for courses: methodological thoughts
- Two conclusions and a final comment

### **Auto/Biographical reflections on the significance of acquaintances and acquaintanceship in one woman's everyday life**

Gayle Letherby (University of Plymouth)

Acquaintanceships are relationships 'characterized by a particular mix of intimacy and distance, although the intimacy is rarely very great and the distance rarely consequential' (Morgan 2009: 5). Much of my research has included reference to relationships between acquaintances; for example, encounters between healthcare professionals and patients, between educators and learners, and between people who meet and talk whilst travelling on trains. All of these issues have auto/biographical significance for me and have, of course, resulted in many relationships involving both intimacy and distance, that I would otherwise not have had. After briefly detailing the place of these acquaintanceships in my everyday life, I turn, with David's work in mind, to more recent reflections on 'the practices' of acquaintanceship including conversation (including auto/biographical sharing), ethics, community networking and (reciprocal) kindness, outside of the academy. I accept that some acquaintance relationships are unwanted and negative and/or based around social divisions but although I make some reference to this here I focus mostly on the positive, if complex experiences of acquaintanceship. With reference to three groups of acquaintances; voluntary work acquaintances, online acquaintances and pandemic acquaintances I explore the 'fuzzy' boundaries between acquaintances and some of the consequences of encounters with those we meet whilst 'pursuing other projects'.

### **It's hard, really hard': How mothers of autistic children describe family life**

Juliet Hall (University of Plymouth)

David Morgan provided what is considered one of the most influential perspectives on the family (Rogers, 2017). 'Family practices' (Morgan, 1996), an approach which sought to understand family life as it is lived, experienced and enacted by real people. Morgan (2020) suggested a natural affinity between auto/biography and the family practices approach with its emphasis on the activity and experience of 'doing' family (Morgan et al., 2011). My doctoral research utilises auto/biography to explore how mothers of autistic children describe family life. I found that many mothers express that their child's autistic traits can negatively disrupt family life and family relationships. Parents of autistic children have higher levels of relationship difficulties, marital separation and divorce than parents of non-autistic children (Brisini & Solomon, 2021). Mothers in my study report an uneven distribution of parental responsibility and describe feeling unsupported, desperate,

isolated, physically and emotionally 'lonely' and helpless. They report feeling inadequate that they are unable to get the support they need for their autistic child and their family. Most mothers express concern that the challenges of having an autistic child make family life extremely difficult. There is an inequity in the way siblings are treated in an attempt to maintain a happy household. Siblings are often jealous of the things they miss out on and the attention afforded to their autistic sibling. Mothers express feelings of guilt for neglecting their spouse and the needs of their other children who they describe as ignored or pushed aside to make accommodations for their autistic child.

### **Family practices**

Mike Thomas (Brunel University London)

David Morgan's work on family practices (1996, 2004, 2011) acknowledged the continuing relevance of family to understanding the social world and key relationships, but goes beyond biological and kinship ties to locate family life in terms of affect and intimacy. This paper re-examines narrative dyad interview data gathered during studies of same-sex marriage and civil partnerships (Thomas, 2016) to reflect on the ways in which LGBTQ+ couples understand and negotiate family practices. In British law, Section 28 of the Local Government Act, 1988, defined homosexuality as a 'pretended family relationship' for over a decade and sought to place LGBTQ+ couples outside the boundaries of family life. The notion of families of choice (Weston, 1991) also indicates that biological families often present hostile environment for LGBTQ+ people. In this adverse social and legal context, the political connotations of the label 'family' are made clear. Same-sex couples' understanding and deployment of family practices may both assert and defend a contested social status. Although same-sex marriage seems to shore up the nuclear family and its heteronormative connotations, it provides opportunities for LGBTQ+ couples to demonstrate their 'doing' of family life and to assert their status as families within their social networks, and as citizens and consumers. Getting married or forming a civil partnership is not simply a milestone in the individual and joint biographies of LGBTQ+ spouses: it also creates a context for assessing the extent to which their claims around family, family practices and family display (Finch, 2007) are accepted or resisted.

### **Cultural capital in close encounters: doing family**

Yvonne Anderson (Mind of My Own)

Family rites include celebrations of birth and the shared grieving of death. In this sense such occasions may be regarded as commonplace, everyday events. Yet the ordinary and everyday can also be surprising, full of incident and sometimes very moving. Morgan (2011) describes instances when the general term 'family', while lacking specificity, may be helpful in understanding relationships between different sets of individuals, who may all nonetheless, be family, stating, "A 'family event', for example is distinct from some other event however similar in activities." (Morgan, 2011:4). In the summer of 2021 I attended the funeral of a paternal aunt, a birthday party for a maternal cousin and the christening of twins born to my partner's son and his wife. Across three family branches on three very different occasions, each to some degree unexpected and all charged with emotion, I was struck by the diverse cultural capital salient in each encounter. The habitus of commonly shared social events such as a funeral, birthday and christening may transcend differences between classes and tribes, but when experienced as family occasions the practices serve to convey and reinforce the cultural capital that divides one group from another.

### **Auto/Biographical reflections on 'estrangement' in everyday life**

Christine Lewis (Edgehill University), Julie Parsons (University of Plymouth) and Carly Stewart (Bournemouth University)

Morgan's (1997) pioneering work celebrated previously obscured issues of significant sociological importance, when themes such as family, home, body and food became the subject of exploration and interrogation. In this paper we will be exploring the implications of embodied acts of estrangement between family members, that might well occur in the home, in private and through through everyday acts. Events and cycles of family estrangement can also be helpfully understood through the lens of epiphanies (Denzin 2001). Epiphanies as problematic personal situations, occur when an encounter and experience turn into a crisis, yet these are not just personal, they are connected to larger social and public issues which transcend

local environments. Denzin suggests there are four forms of epiphany: major, cumulative, minor and illuminative. It is the particular character and feel of epiphanies that we draw upon when exploring the lived experience of estrangement in our own auto/biographical narratives, which can often be dramatic events with beginnings, middles, and endings. The general lack of narratives around estrangement in families indicates that these narrative performances can allow space for reflection on our individual and combined lived experiences during moments of epiphany.

### **Re-reading 'Discovering Men' after 30 years**

Aidan Seery (Trinity College Dublin)

Nearly 30 years ago, David Morgan, published the book 'Discovering Men' in which he undertook a critical study of men and masculinities by examining the challenges that men face when they try to analyse and understand themselves. This was an important work as it was among the first texts to highlight the specific methodological and epistemological issues that arise when men try to look through the 'stained glass' of their position and perspectives that are shaped by patriarchal structures and prevents a clear view of the world of men. David, of course, was no essentialist but neither was he a pure structuralist. Men are present in the world and their lives and actions are real but much understanding of men is obscured by the dark-coloured lens of a patriarchal society. Whether feminism and feminist methodologies can be employed by men in order to understand themselves is a key question that David asks in an original way in this book. This paper will consider some of the concerns and questions that David posed 30 years ago, in an era before internet, social media, and later waves of feminism. It attempts to show that some of his strategies, such as reading texts for 'the hidden stories about masculinity' and the methodology of examining situations 'where masculinity may become problematic', remain relevant and enduringly useful in the sociology of men and masculinities.

### Conference Delegates

Aidan Seery	Trinity College Dublin, University of Dublin
Anne Chappell	Brunel University London
Carly Stewart	Bournemouth University
Christine Lewis	Edge Hill University
Corinne Squire	Bristol University
Gayle Letherby	University of Plymouth
Geraldine Brown	Coventry University
Geraldine Brady	Nottingham Trent University
Jenifer Nicholson	Southampton University
Judith Chapman	
Julie Parsons	University of Plymouth
Juliet Hall	University of Plymouth
Karen Hanrahan	University of Brighton
Laura Fenton	University of Manchester
Liz Stanley	University of Edinburgh
Mike Thomas	Brunel University London
Chrissie Rogers	University of Kent
Mich Page	
Raf Nicholson	Bournemouth University
Robin Hadley	
Rosalind Edwards	University of Southampton
Sharon Clancy	University of Nottingham
Terry Martin	
Yvonne Anderson	Mind of My Own