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Auto/Biography Study Group

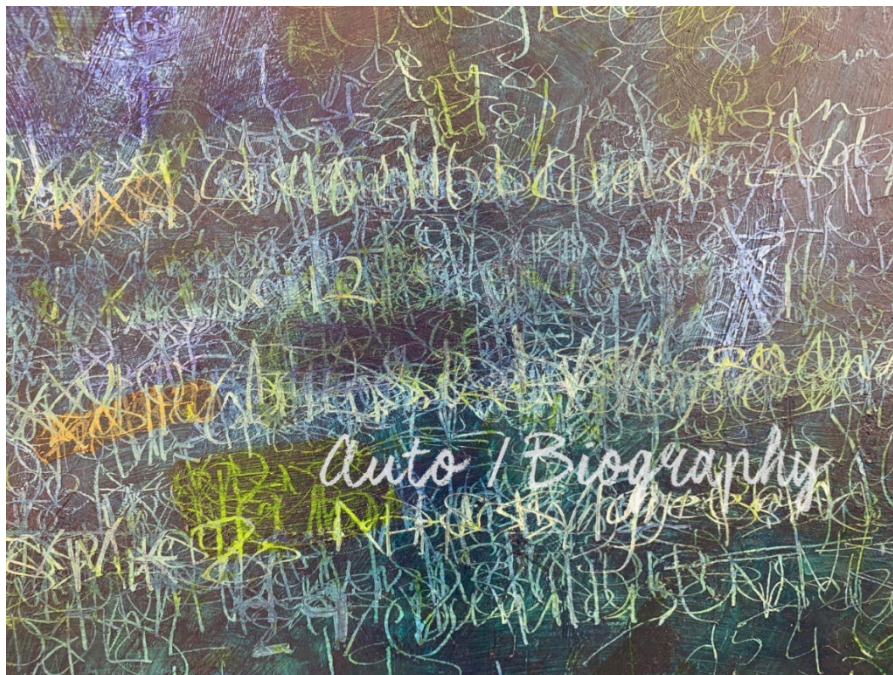
**BSA Auto/Biography Study Group
Christmas Conference**

Departure and Transformation

12th December 2026

Friends House, Euston, NW1 2BJ

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



BRITISH
SOCIOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION

BSA Registered Charity Number: 1080235

Programme

0845-0900 Arrival and Registration with refreshments

0900-0905 Welcome

0910-0955 Keynote

Ritual, rupture and meaning making in the everyday world of work: who says medical education is boring?

Tracey Collett (University of Plymouth)

Chair: Anne Chappell

0955-1000 Comfort Break

1000-1030 Paper Session

A transformation from self-destructively drinking high school dropout to fully funded PhD student researching the Civic University

Danielle Louise Broadhurst (University of Greenwich)

Chair: Gayle Letherby

1030-1100 Paper Session

What do accounts of inherited variants of dementia contribute to understandings of family sociology? Where does this depart from 'family practices'?

Mel Hall (Manchester Metropolitan University)

Chair: Chrissie Rogers

1100-1115 Refreshment Break

1115-1145 Paper Session

In the 'old country' and the new: diverging intellectual paths of aunt and niece

Jessica Jacobson (Birkbeck, University of London), Deborah Golden (University of Haifa) and Ruth Sack

Chair: Carly Stewart

1145-1215 Paper Session

Should I stay, or should I go? Tempestuous transformations

Chrissie Rogers (University of Kent)

Chair: Mel Hall

1215-1245 Paper Session

A tattooed becoming

Mark Price (St Mary's University)

Chair: Christine Lewis

1245-1330	Lunch
1330-1400	Paper Session
“I knew it, I knew it, I knew it”. How auto/biography helped capture the impact of innocence work on students Dr Louise Hewitt (University of Greenwich) Chair: Mark Cieslik	
1400-1430	Paper Session
Departure and transformation: a personal and musical journey Christine Lewis (Edge Hill University) Chair: Julie Parsons	
1430-1500	Paper Session
Follow the autobiography! The mobilisation of life-without-children autobiographical practice and its significance Nicola Spurling (Lancaster University) Chair: Laura Minogue	
1500-1520	Refreshment Break
1520-1550	Paper Session
A millennial woman: navigating and negotiating narrative knots Felice McDowell (London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London) Chair: Ewa Sidorenko	
1550-1620	Paper Session
Reflections on reciprocal relations of transformation Julie Parsons (University of Plymouth) and Daniela Chivers (LandWorks) Chair: Yvonne Anderson	
1620-1650	Paper Session
Small spheres of my own making: departure and transformation Laura Minogue (St Mary's University) Chair: Mark Price	
1650-1700	Close

Abstracts

A transformation from self-destructively drinking high school dropout to fully funded PhD student researching the Civic University

Danielle Louise Broadhurst (University of Greenwich)

In my PhD research I am taking a Participatory Action Research approach to work with people in the community local to the University of Greenwich to explore the vision for the university as a civic institution. Widening participation is a key concern which led me to thinking about my journey (or transformation) from a teenage self-destructive NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) to a thirty-odd year-old PhD candidate, four years sober. As I started to explore how my background is relevant to my topic, I could not ignore the role that self-destructive drinking had on my life, and my unconventional journey through not only higher education but tertiary education also. Following this, in this paper I consider two linked transformative experiences in my life following the pandemic: stopping drinking and returning to higher education. This is a paper in two parts. In Part 1, I explore where I came from, up to just before I joined University of Greenwich the first time. In Part 2 I examine the time following my return to higher education and my joining the University of Greenwich to now. When I first started at the university, I remember thinking: I don't know if I'm staying sober to stay in university or staying in university to stay sober. I think ultimately it doesn't matter. Either way, I'm thankful.

Ritual, rupture and meaning making in the everyday world of work: who says medical education is boring?

Tracey Collett (University of Plymouth)

This winter term at the Peninsula Medical School, University of Plymouth, in my role as Associate Professor and Subject Lead for the Sociology of Health and Illness, I have been reflecting on the role of the knowledge broker. Building on previous Auto/Biography Study Group presentations (*Challenging Normative Practices in the Spaces of Medical Education*, 2024, *Interdisciplinary Work, Mess and Praxis*, 2024, *A Reflection on Petty Squabbles within the Familiar Word of Work*, 2025), my focus is on how meaning is created and sustained in everyday encounters at work. Specifically, I employ Etienne Wenger's (1998) explanation of 'reification' to explore my auto/biographical musings over the past few months. My particular focus is on the ruptures and/or tensions that occur in the mundane rituals that take place between our-selves and others as, through our paid employment, myself and my colleagues, enact the business of medical education. From, the use of Donald Trump's catch phrases to encourage students to read the school newsletter, to referring to patient stories as 'the woolly' stuff ('just for a laugh'), I reveal the (not so) hidden curriculum of medical education and how sometimes (just sometimes) it is possible to counter this: to create alternative meanings and positive change. I conclude that knowledge brokering – including (the leading of) collective learning and collaboration - as an activity, is an essential form of epistemological practice that provides a challenge to dominant understandings of medical education both within and outside of the academy.

What do accounts of inherited variants of dementia contribute to understandings of family sociology? Where does this depart from 'family practices'?

Mel Hall (Manchester Metropolitan University)

Dementia is the umbrella term for symptoms associated with brain function deterioration. Rates are increasing, including 'classic' older age Alzheimer's disease and young onset variants. It is degenerative, terminal and for some, has a genetic component. Previous research drawing on biographical approaches has established the impact parental dementia has on families, relationships and the life course (Hall and Sikes, 2020). Additionally, medical advances which identify who is at risk of dementia through genetic testing and assisted conception which render it a unique area for exploring sociological approaches to family and

relationships. Our work on dementia in the context of families (Hall and Sikes, 2018; Hall et al, 2025) has been greatly influenced by the iconic work of David Morgan (2011) which conceptualised 'family practices', disrupting dominant notions of family centred around structural dimensions which failed to capture the relationality and diversity of everyday family life. However, we are grappling with how these relational approaches sit with tangible, biological facets of family where there is an inherited variant of dementia. This presentation draws on 10 biographical interviews conducted in the US and UK as part of a study with people who have experienced familial dementia attributed to a genetic variant. Some have undergone genetic testing and know their status (they do or do not carry the gene), while others have decided against it, or are considering it. What does this data tell us about the enduring relevance of 'family practices'? Is there potential for a departure from 'family practices'?

"I knew it, I knew it, I knew it". How auto/biography helped capture the impact of innocence work on students

Dr Louise Hewitt (University of Greenwich)

My impression of auto/biography was rather limited to the lives of others on stage and screen whose books appear in advertisements, most notably near Christmas. So, when I wanted to find an innovative way to capture the impact that working on the Innocence Project London (IPL) has on students, autobiography was not the first method I thought of. It did however, become the innovation I was looking for. The IPL is based at the School of Law and Criminology at the University of Greenwich. It is a charity and a pro bono law clinic where law and criminology students work on the cases of convicted individuals who have maintained their innocence but have exhausted the appeals process. The students deconstruct a claim of innocence by investigating either a new legal argument or fresh evidence that could form the basis for an application to the Criminal Cases Review Commission (CCRC). Anecdotally, students tell me how their work on the IPL not only changes their perspective on the criminal justice system and helps them develop skills not found in the classroom, but it also has a significant impact on their lives. Auto/biography has not only provided a way for me to capture this information, but it has given IPL students an opportunity to explain in their own words what innocence work means to them.

In the 'old country' and the new: diverging intellectual paths of aunt and niece

Jessica Jacobson (Birkbeck, University of London), Deborah Golden (University of Haifa) and Ruth Sack

We three cousins are currently writing a biography of our grandmother Liebe Jacobson, née Melamed. The work is based on an extensive family archive containing letters and photographs, spanning the course of the 20th century, that were exchanged among members of our geographically dispersed South African Jewish family. In this paper, we juxtapose one aspect of Liebe's story with that of her aunt Ita Hersch. Adopting an 'intergenerational lens' (Brannen, 2020), we examine the contrasting intellectual trajectories of aunt and niece both before and after each migrated from Eastern Europe to South Africa. Ita was born in 1871 and Liebe in 1895 into orthodox Jewish families in (what is now) Lithuania. Ita emigrated to South Africa in 1904, Liebe in 1919. Both women shared a deep love and strong aptitude for learning. In the 'old country', Ita struggled against gender restrictions to pursue study of traditional Jewish writings. Liebe, a gifted linguist and trainee-teacher, engaged with the intellectual challenges of the secular world. Subsequent to moving to South Africa, Ita gained a reputation as a highly respected scholar; Liebe's intellectual ambitions dissipated. Why did their paths diverge? We suggest that by claiming her place in the world of traditional learning, Ita succeeded in the new country, albeit within the confines of the Jewish community. Liebe, by contrast, found herself removed from traditional learning, but not yet anchored in new knowledge; hence, she remained intellectually 'betwixt and between', lacking a path along which to pursue her love of learning.

Departure and transformation: a personal and musical journey

Christine Lewis (Edge Hill University)

At the most recent Autobiography Christmas Conference, I took the opportunity to reflect deeply on how my values and beliefs have shifted, especially regarding the exploitation of animals – with particular emphasis

on captive animals used for human entertainment. This introspection allowed me to recognise that I have become an activist, a realisation that initially surprised me. However, when I revisited my life story, it became apparent that there were early indications of the person I would become. My recent activism could be said to be entangled with the biography of my family, which is intrinsically linked to songs and songwriting. In this paper I am keen to unravel how these creative expressions have marked points of departure and transformation in attitudes towards hunting foxes, hares and whales in song. I aim to consider how shifting views on hunting animals are reflected in key songs and to reflect on my views of these songs. For example, 'Do Ye Ken John Peel', an English traditional song from 1824, exemplifies the earlier glorification of fox hunting. In contrast, Pete Seeger's 'Song of the World's Last Whale' (1970) illustrate a growing awareness and concern for animal rights and the conservation of wildlife. Ultimately, the cultural and artistic shifts concerning animal welfare over my lifetime can be seen as contributing to broader societal changes, such as the 2004 Hunting Act. Through reflection, I have come to understand that my personal transformation was always ready to be awakened.

A millennial woman: navigating and negotiating narrative knots

Felice McDowell (London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London)

In 2023 I completed the Afterword to my monographic study *1960s Model Girl: Narrative Identities in Fashion, Time and History* (2025). Employing the knot as historical model and critical metaphor, I surmised that there remained for some, if not many Sixties women, a chronotopic knot – 'a narrative loop, pulling, feeding, tightening and loosening, back and forth, round and round, the subjective and individual self' (McDowell 2025: 151). Leading me to reflect upon how from the vantage point of a woman then entering her early forties, living through their own experiences of history and memory, a process of recognition regarding the narrative knots binding her own 'overlapping subject positions' (Kaiser and Green 2021: 203) had begun. The present paper marks a significant point of departure and transformation from this earlier study and work as I set out to research a generational demographic of millennial woman via the critical lens of fashion, hauntology and narrative failures. Drawing upon philosophy, critical theory, social history and auto/biographical studies I outline the developmental conceptualisation of narrative knots as a foundational methodological framework from which to approach doing recent fashion histories. In addressing the navigation and negotiation of these narrative knots I question the possibility of negating neo-liberal feminism/s in the very production of fashion studies and wider academia. An interdisciplinary work-in-progress this paper invites other such responsive recognitions regarding the varied, overlapping and interlocking narrative knots that interloop between the auto/biographical in researcher and subject, writer and history, profession and the personal.

Small spheres of my own making: departure and transformation

Laura Minogue (St Mary's University)

In October 2021 I began an EdD. This was my departure point, the embarking on the doctoral journey. My thesis explores the lived experience of second career academics, of which I am one, so my story is interwoven with the stories of my participants. I have been deeply touched by our interactions in the interviews and humbled at how openly they shared their stories with me. I came late to academia, not thinking I could come here. Working in the 'third space', I inhabit a role at my university which is designated both academic and professional and has therefore felt, at times, uncertain. Undertaking the doctorate has been transformational, challenging me on all levels and prompting me to question my professional identity and sense of self. The doctoral journey has been stormy, beset with family crises, illness and change alongside unsettling institutional restructures and redundancies. I am now approaching completion and am writing up and writing down to shape the final thesis. In this liminal space of endings, transition and change, I find meaning in small spheres of my own making: with people, places and things, in taking photographs, documenting my process, reflecting and writing. In this paper, I look back on the past four years of the doctorate, interweaving personal and academic reflections and the need throughout to make and remake, to assemble, disassemble and reassemble memories, thoughts and ideas to make sense of my research, myself as a researcher and the journey I am on.

Reflections on reciprocal relations of transformation

Julie Parsons (University of Plymouth) and Daniela Chivers (LandWorks)

In this paper Julie Parsons and Daniela Chivers reflect on issues of departure and transformation in relation to their work (research and practice) at LandWorks (LW), a prisoner resettlement and rehabilitation charity, operating since 2013. LW beneficiaries are former prisoners and people at risk of going to prison, collectively called trainees and referred to the project for a 6–9-month placement by probation. For many LW marks a clear departure from old ways of thinking and patterns of behaviour. It offers possibilities and opportunities to practice new identities through a range of on-site activities structured around a working day, with morning tea breaks and lunchtimes. These breaks are important moments of sociability when everyone comes together and engages in further performances of departure and transformation. Indeed, these are departures from the norm and transformations in identity that are similarly felt and enacted by everyone. The LW person-centred approach with a focus on trust-relationships, ensures a level of reciprocity, empathy, understanding and acceptance of the self and others. Julie and Daniela discuss what transformation means to them and how it relates to notions of departure. This is notable when people leave LW but also in terms of a departure from mainstream expectations and/or a criminal lifestyle. Moreover, these transformations are long term, as trainees continue to visit LW as a challenge to the notion that criminals cannot change. This contributes to the ripple effect and on-going impact beyond LW, as these lived experiences are shared with the community.

A tattooed becoming

Mark Price (St Mary's University)

My body: pasty white – always so embarrassing, so shaming. Never enough masculinity to claim as my own. But things do change – and aging brings wisdom (of a fashion). Seven years ago, I began a slow descent. Rather than a 'breakdown', let's call this a 'wandering' – into maleness, meaning and mark-making. My skin had been showing those all too familiar signs of middle-aging. Never taut nor toned, but now mottled, stretched, and stressed across organs, bones and flesh. A myriad network of broken nerves and capillaries, pulsing life, servicing head, hands and heart and all points between. Contained. My body has been contained. I have been contained. But then, I began to roam... I have become tattooed. This paper stories my corporal reclamation. Inked with meaning, my tattoos marking the movement to ownership of age and stage. Each tattoo a triangulation point – becoming Man-Marked. Uncertain in the roaming, the commitment to ink has become both a refuge within and rationalisation of, to quote Leo Whisten, "the blank white canvas that is my skin and self that is and is to be".

Should I stay, or should I go? Tempestuous transformations

Chrissie Rogers (University of Kent)

In November 2023 I received a life-changing email. I had been awarded a Major Leverhulme Fellowship (2024-2027) to carry out research: 'Creating performance sociology: re-imagining education and the school environment for pupils and teachers before the crime'. Perhaps as a 'working class' woman, I couldn't believe it, even saying to my husband, 'I hope this hasn't landed because I need to time to heal from something like illness or grief that I don't yet know about'. Two months later, on 31st January 2024, I sat in a room with colleagues, to be told the programme I directed was no longer viable. We were all going to be made redundant. By November 2024 I was in front of a paying audience playing Prospero(a), the lead in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. A troubled soul, who had 'her' demons, had made mistakes, but ultimately had been wronged and wanted to 'go home'. My research was thwarted. Not because I committed myself to a huge role - indeed, Prospera probably saved me - but because my identity had been violated, and my potential to earn a living stripped from my future plans. I felt worthless. By the summer of 2025 I was in psychotherapy. Whilst this paper draws on my narrative, it also considers how sociologically identity transformation and healing can develop through performance and psychotherapy. Indeed, this is critical for a broader understanding of systemic and systematic abuse and social (in)justice within higher education.

Follow the autobiography! The mobilisation of life-without-children autobiographical practice and its significance

Nicola Spurling (Lancaster University)

Over the past 15 years, across the UK, Europe, North America and Australia, autobiographical practice concerned with life-without-children whether by choice, not-by-choice or circumstance – has moved from the margins to something visible, vibrant and interconnected. This mobilisation is both culturally intriguing, in that it challenges long-standing taboo; and these practices are generating insights that matter for social research across fields of health, ageing, housing design, workplace policy and crisis planning. In this paper I talk about the methodology and initial findings from my in-progress research, which is situated at the intersection of autobiographical scholarship; the mobilities paradigm; and childless/childfree sociology. 'Follow the Autobiography!' is the methodological approach that I have designed to study this socio-cultural phenomenon. It takes the principle of 'following' from mobile methods (mobilities paradigm), where researchers attend to the movements of people, objects and ideas across complex relational landscapes. Here the 'thing' to be followed is not a person or object, but an autobiographical practice – its origins, its circulation, and the knowledges embedded therein. For the mobilities scholar, autobiographical mobilisation offers a distinctive empirical site: knowledge and practice that emerges, moves, and gains force as it crosses platforms and contexts. For the autobiographical scholar, it presents a challenge of how to trace and analyse such movements without flattening their emotional, political, and epistemic complexity. Follow the Autobiography! responds to that challenge with an approach that combines author interviews, textual and audio analysis, and an ethics of care that is integrated into every stage of the research.

Conference Delegates

Yvonne Anderson	Mind Of My Own Ltd
Danielle Broadhurst	University of Greenwich
Anne Chappell	Brunel University of London
Daniela Chivers	Landworks
Mark Cieslik	Northumbria University
Leslie Gardner	University of Essex
Deborah Golden	University of Haifa
Mel Hall	Manchester Metropolitan University
Louise Hewitt	University of Greenwich
Jessica Jacobson	Birkbeck, University of London
Shavena Kumar	Coventry University
Gayle Letherby	University of Plymouth
Christine Lewis	Edge Hill University
Felice McDowell	London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London
Laura Minogue	St Mary's University, Twickenham
Jim Mitchell	Independent Academic
Julie Parsons	University of Plymouth
Mark Price	St Mary's University, Twickenham
Chrissie Rogers	University of Kent
Ewa Sidorenko	University of Greenwich
Paula Vene Smith	Grinnell College, USA
Nicola Spurling	Lancaster University
Carly Stewart	Bournemouth University
Hazel Wright	Anglia Ruskin University