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A Sad Story? Time, Interpretation and Feeling in Biographical Methods

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ABSTRACT

What do we do with emotion in biographical research: is it an end in itself, a symptom to be explained, a thread to be pulled? This paper presents an experiment in methodology within a field of biographical methods that involved revisiting a single qualitative interview after the elapse of thirty years. The interview with 22 year old Stacey was troubling at the time it was generated (as captured in fieldnotes and interview transcript) and was still troubling when these documents were reprised. Naming sadness as an emotion at play in the material took teamwork and emotionally engaged methods of analysis and interpretation. Working with psychoanalytically informed theories we show how a curiosity about emotion and a willingness to follow feelings can help connect individual stories to collective histories. The paper presents group based analyses and writing methods as a way of tracing the psychic logics of story through scenic material (what we call 'emotional bombshells'). We consider the difference that time might make to an analysis, considering the possibility that more time might produce more perspective through allowing the original context to be rendered (more) visible. We also suggest that clock time can be transcended when considering unconscious processes and experiences that resist narrative. Recontextualising research materials can enrich meaning and further realise the value of qualitative interviews that always contain more to be heard, resituated in new times and relationships. This is not simply an exercise in nostalgia but is offered as a method in its own right, reanimation as a route to the generation of new intergenerational knowledge of a thick present in which past, present and future co-exist.

KEYWORDS

emotion; narrative; psychoanalysis; feminism; sexuality

The use of group-based analytic methods as a tool for both the primary and secondary analysis of qualitative data is increasingly established (Phoenix et al., 2016; Thomson et al., 2012; Walkerdine et al., 2001). The idea that emotion and insight can be reanimated in biographical material in new times and places with new audiences is part of a rich vein

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in psychosocial biographical studies that exist in conversation with clinical traditions. Working over longer time frames brings us into contact with historical traditions which in turn contribute to an interdisciplinary field of archive studies which overlaps with biographical research. In this paper, we report on a collective group analysis of a single archived interview and field note generated 30 years earlier as part of a study of young people's sexual cultures. The interview was troubling at the time and is still troubling today. Revisiting this material, with the original researcher, reveals the "weird" temporal materialities bound up with the research process (Blackman, 2019) and the distinctive affordances of the auto/biographical method enabling recognition, connection and a movement of emotion that transcends linear time within a "thick present" in which past, present and future co-exist (Riceour, 1979).

In this paper, we think about the nature of a "sad story" and what might be tied up within this familiar phrase. Our approach involves working with two sources of documentation linked to an interview encounter: a reflective field note made shortly after the interview and a transcription of a recording of the interview. Both documents are over 30 years old and form part of a newly available archive.¹ The analysis presented involves the original interviewer, whose biography (if not memory) spans the original conversation, and the revisiting of the material 30 years later as part of a wider group of researchers. A key aspect of our analysis involves discrepancies between feelings evoked through and by the field notes and the interview. The method of analysis employed for this paper can be thought of as historical and sociological, utilising a psychoanalytically informed sensibility (Frosh & Baraitser, 2008) that allows for "an unrecognised past that saturates the present" (Frosh, 2013, p. 123). The intention of the paper is to facilitate collaborative and intergenerational forms of knowledge creation through emotionally engaged methods of analysis of biographical narratives. We contribute to the SI intention of illuminating "the multidimensionality of emotionally painful events in young people's narrations, which shape and reflect their relationships, notions of self and other, and engagement with professional services". We also aim to generate new methodological insight building on traditions of biographical research that engage with emotion and the complexities of the auto/biographical connection.

Psychosocial tools—theoretical and methodological

In this paper we work with the idea of the scenic which emerges from the work of Alfred Lorenz who championed a depth hermeneutic method for the analysis of cultural texts including research interviews (Bereswill et al., 2010; Hollway & Froggett, 2012; Morgenroth, 2010; Rothe et al., 2022). The term scenic captures material that is in some way "unprocessed, not yet in language" and as such operates within the text in a way that is provocative and engaging—yet not simply interpreted. Lorenz also uses the term "reprise" for capturing how this material has the potential to re-enact and encourages the use of group methods of analysis as a way of thinking through and with this material (Froggett & Wengraf, 2004). In a key article, introducing Lorenz's ideas to an English language audience Bereswill et al. (2010, p. 223) explain how "texts work on or provoke the reader"—and that attending to this process is an important aspect of the researcher's task—elaborating that "latent meaning is, in some sense, beyond language but is nevertheless present within it and is consequential in its own right". There is nothing inevitable

about meaning making, in Bereswill and colleague's words "the connection forged between the scenic and the symbol in the formation of symbolic interaction-forms can, Lorenzer argues, be ruptured. Indeed, it can fail ever to occur." (2010, p. 230) The hope is that "using these resources as a starting point, passages that seem particularly resonant or otherwise provoking are then subjected to in-depth analysis. [...] what exactly is going on or being said; how is this happening or expressed (for example, what is the emotional tone of what is being said; what rhetorical strategies are being used); and why is what is going on or being said happening in this way; what might explain it?" (2010, p. 239). A key claim is that scenic material can reprise in new spaces and times and that "the configuration of feelings that arise in the interpretation group is read as corresponding in some way to the configuration of scenic content as this occurred in the original setting in which the data were generated" (2010, p. 239).

Drawing on a different vocabulary yet shared interest in the mobilisation of unconscious material, Walkerdine et al. (2013) write about their experience of secondary analysis of interview material. Their paper draws on work of French analysts Davoine and Gaudilliere, sociologist-clinicians who interpret trauma through ideas of re-enactment within a project of linking small (biographical) stories with bigger histories.² The secondary analysis project pursued by Walkerdine, Olsvold and Rudberg involves working with an interview conducted several years earlier by another researcher (Ann Phoenix) as part of a study on chain migration within families. Working with a single in-depth interview with a young woman, whose account of rejection in childhood is characterised by emotional turmoil, the group focus attention on a neglectful father who is admired as a "lady's man". They observe how the young woman describes being drawn to such men (repeating the rejection), and how they then work with this insight in the group. This includes engaging in reading and research about the aftermath of plantation slavery as a way of making sense of their feelings about the case. Building on the work of Davoine and Gaudilliere, they connect big and small histories through the "event"—operationalised as material in an interview that draws you in, noting that "sensation often tells us that the senses of the person who experienced it are heightened through the memory ... such places are a good place to begin" (2013, p. 283). These intense passages can, they argue, be "rhizomatically" linked to other episodes in the text—those that "all involve abandonment and break of trust" (2013, p. 287). The subtitle of the paper "history walks into the room" refers to the way that this unprocessed material is re-enacted by the interviewee "because it could be argued that her body 'knows' that history through the embodiment of the small histories that she recounts" (2013, p. 292). Unresolved trauma denies time ("what is known but not yet thought" (2013, p. 281)—as it is passed through and re-enacted in acts of storytelling, listening and reflection. Or as Artaud says, "sometimes the scenario has to be performed before the text can be known" (2013, p. 292)).

Walkerdine and colleagues are attentive to how the feelings of the group are an expression (however cryptic) of this unprocessed material and how engaging with such material demands exploring identifications. We are repulsed as well as making links with "what is it that demands to be heard but that is so hard to hear that the listener cannot bear to make a link?" (2013, p. 282). They describe following hunches, asking "what clues are being thrown our way, even if, at the time, this seems like grasping at straws" (2013, p. 293). Rather than taking up the clinical language of transference³, the

authors use the term “resonance” to conceptualise the movement of emotion, explaining that “resonance is a relational concept that allows the analyst to connect with the patient and therefore to work together with her/him. In our view, it is also relevant for conducting social research, in that it allows us to approach reading in an actively and affectively aware manner” (2013, p. 283). As a method of analysis of an individual case this involves asking “What resonances does it have for her?”, elaborating that “It is here that we enter the terrain of the event. The event is volatile and dynamic and is created in the telling and its reception by the listener, and thus we need to pay close attention to the effect of the story on the listener for a clue as to what is being communicated that cannot yet be spoken.” (2013, p. 281)

These two examples are key texts in a small and evolving body of scholarly work exploring how affective material may be understood as travelling over time and place in the secondary analysis of qualitative data (Phoenix et al., 2016; Thomson et al., 2012). Both attend to the value of group-based analysis including the need for many minds to help think difficult thoughts (Walkerline et al., 2001). This primarily social science literature converges with scholarship in narrative research on the importance of gender and emotions (Habermas, 2018; Nielsen, 2018; Reissman, 1987) and in the humanities on unconscious processes within archival research (Blackman, 2019; Hall & Pick, 2017; Roper, 2005; Scott, 2012; Steedman, 2001). It is beyond the remit of this paper to discuss this literature beyond noting that an awareness of this generative interdisciplinary nexus informs the analysis reported here, including key insights concerning timelessness in the unconscious and how the past might be present in moments of analysis, interpretation, and representation. In the account presented here we disrupt the fragile binary of primary and secondary analysis that, within a social science paradigm, comes to distinguish the encounter generating the original talk (interview) and the encounter generating the analysis. Working with the assumption that each act of analysis is also an act of recontextualisation and data generation (Moore, 2007) we use ideas of reprise and re-enactment to explore how scenic or resonant material can provide a focus for analysis, connecting the small stories of individuals and the bigger histories of which these stories form a part. In the context of accessible digital archives, we are interested in how small and marginal stories may be honoured and connected in new acts of attention and interpretation, what Lisa Blackman describes as a “connecting up of fragments across time and space” through which “a new collective storytelling machine can take form” (2019, p. 177). We also push at the boundaries of auto/biography working with reflexivity, memory, field notes and the imagination to explore the entanglement of selves and stories that is part of the research process (Caetano, 2015; Goodwin & Parsons, 2020 Stanley, 1995;).

Starting with a field note

The research⁴ reported here was funded as a methodological development project. In 2018 the process of digitising, archiving and revisiting a social science data set collected in 1989 was undertaken: over 150 in-depth interviews with young women aged 16–21 living in Manchester and London, talking about their sexual and intimate lives as part of a self-styled feminist project exploring women’s sexual practice and health in the shadow of HIV and AIDs.⁵ The research team received funding allowing them to conduct a series of experiments with the archive including revisiting archived data

with the benefit of new theories and approaches not available to the research team at the time. As one of the original researchers, Rachel chose an interview from the archive that stirred memory and emotion when she encountered it again and which she felt would benefit from the kind of collaborative, psychoanalytically informed approach outlined above. Notes made by her at the time of selection observe:

something still compelling about this interview—both in terms of what her case captures (a link with a distant and disturbing past) as well as what the encounter between researcher and researched enables—sense of strong identifications (a 3 h interview) and a sense of urgency.

The opportunity to conduct this secondary analysis arose as part of an annual psychosocial symposium held at the University of Sussex in June 2019. Within this symposium a small group (the authors) explored what it might mean to “reanimate” data, focusing on the field note linked to this interview (Thomson, 2022). The field note (rather than the interview) was chosen for two reasons. First, because it was relatively short, making it a feasible proposition to work with over a 2 h session. Second, because the analysis of observational writing within groups has been the main approach within social research (Urwin & Sternberg, 2012). Following the usual practice in such groups, Rachel read the field note aloud, slowly and in full, before receiving responses from the whole group. This began by focusing on their emotional response to the whole text, before then returning to the material for closer line by line examination. What differed methodologically from the usual approach was that this field note was 30 years old (Figure 1).

Contemporaneous notes on the group discussion capture comments by group members on the “weirdness” and “strange-making” of the reanimation. Members observed that the field note conveyed an “interaction between two people”, telling us as much about the interviewer as the interviewee. Someone said that it was like reading a “teenage diary”: vivid, moving yet also funny and embarrassing. Another felt that it was “film-like”, suggesting an immediacy that allowed entry into the past, encountering “ghosts”, “former selves and

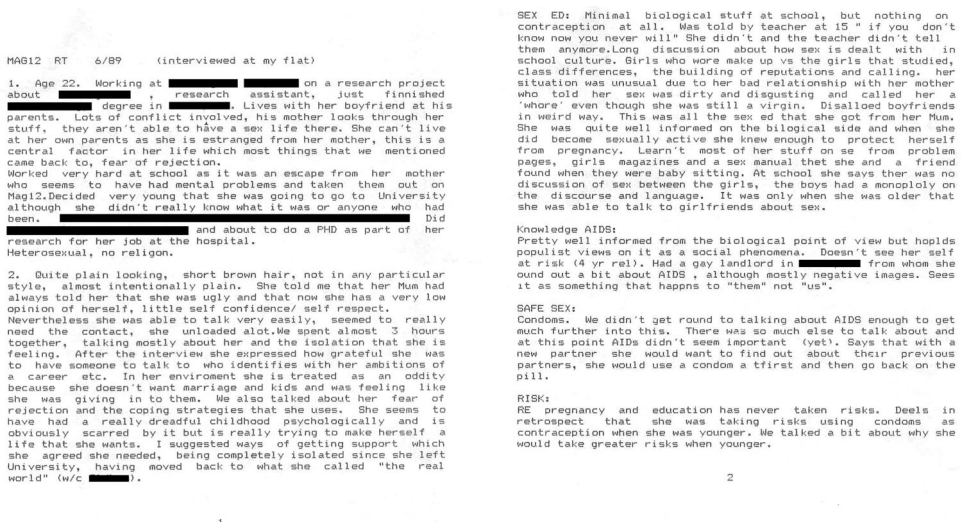


Figure 1. The original field note with redactions.

past feeling”. The genre conventions of the field note were also observed as “peculiar” and group members were surprised by how emotion was conveyed through such a conventional structure. “Short sad sentences” were noted and “self-regulation” on the part of the field note writer, which is what was postulated might reflect a sense of responsibility, prompting the exclamation on the part of one group member that “this [social research] is serious work”. Group members also reflected upon a pull towards retrospective meaning making, where the encounter is made sense of from a position within the present of “what we know now”, that is both “in” and “out of time”. This sense of the interviewer being in two times—in the text and in the room—was especially engaging for the group. Rachel notices in the field note traces of her past self, reaching out for meanings that “I didn’t know but yet was able to put into language”. In the present of the group she comments on the unspoken identifications between herself and the interviewee (Stacey⁶) including shared experiences of a mentally ill parent and the bittersweet transmission of thwarted ambition. She even notices her 23-year-old self misspelling the same words.

A closer, line-by-line reading focused attention on resonant phrases: “almost intentionally plain” stands out and feels like a provocation, suggesting that a feminist politics is in play. Group members said that this language instructed them to notice how Stacey wanted to be seen, warning the audience not to misinterpret her. This attuned us to the careful language of the fieldnote (“She told me that ...”), and how feelings are powerfully communicated to us through the text, despite not being explicitly named. We traced an emotional transaction taking place over the course of the field note, which in turn produced an emotional response in the group. This involved excitement in encountering a feminist text from the past that expresses something of the creative work involved in solidarity between two young women across their differences. Yet there was also a profound sense of sadness that entered into the analytic space. Reflecting on the experience of sharing the field note in the group soon after the event Rachel writes:

My memory of the process is that it was cathartic and oddly performative. I vividly imagined the setting of my old flat in Manchester. I was also surprised and affected by Peter [a member of the group] being moved to tears on witnessing the material and wondering to the group if she [Stacey] was still alive. From this I understood that what might have been in the interview was something akin to suicidal feelings.

When the group reconvened a month later to work together with the interview transcript our thoughts focused on how much we had appreciated the interrogation of the field note, noting a sense of “time travel” and “being in two places”. Although it was only Rachel that was present in the archived material, other members of the group were provoked to think about connections between “now” and the “then” of 30 years ago, including changes in our different biographies and changes in feminist social research. Our talk included words such as “fascination” and a reported sensation of being “caught up” in the material, enabling us to think about what it might mean to be “caught or trapped as a woman” in different social class positions in particular historical moments. When we settled down to read the interview, we used the method of reading aloud to help us connect with the talk in a more embodied way. Rachel selected sections of the interview, which had a resonant quality—self contained stories that arose within the question and answer structure of the interview, characterised by vivid imagery. The sections were read by other members of the group (Rebecca & Rachael O).

A sad story?

The immediate reaction of group members to this reading and listening exercise was that the interview was less melancholy than expected, leading to the speculation that the sadness experienced in the group when engaging with the field note may have been pre-digested by the researcher as she reflected on and captured the encounter immediately after it took place. Reading aloud extracts of the interview together in a new time and place, group members were struck by strong words, arresting imagery and a sense of disquiet. One described the interview as a series of “well-worn stories that don’t hang together” suggesting that as analysts we are invited to “look under the stories only to find bombshells”. Another suggested that there was something peculiar in the telling of stories of “abandoned women and weak men” involving a “battle of wills” between generations of women as they “switch off”, “cut off” and “banish”. Emotions named included envy, shame and disgust as well as a “hint of abuse and trauma”. In effect, the group voiced suspicion and ambivalence towards Stacey’s account, something that had not been present in their responses to the field note. At the same time, they also acknowledged that another more hopeful narrative thread was also evident involving social mobility, resourcefulness and the support of other adults (teachers, friends’ parents, and an ameliorating father). The group was left with something of a conundrum in the shift of their own feelings from working with the field note to working with the interview. What had previously been sensed as a story that conveyed sadness was now seen as involving many different facets and conflicting emotions. At the end of the group session Rachel undertook to make further sense of the materials whilst reflexively engaging with the purpose of revisiting the document. This shift from collective to individual work was pragmatic, but also in keeping with practices of group data analysis that place value on the multiple perspectives that a group can bring to empirical material, including operating as an “analytic third”⁷ that arguably allows for new thinking to emerge.

Rachel was only able to engage with the material in earnest the following summer (2020), saturating herself again in the original materials and the documentation of the group analysis of that material. She experimented with different methods for analysis including noticing arresting phrases and stories within stories, considering both the talk of the interviewer and the interviewee and identifying extracts within the interview that had a “scenic quality” as discussed by Bereswill et al. (2010)—or in the language of Walkerdine and colleague, those “intense” passages that can be linked to others through the text. This rather lonely period of work contrasted the sociability of the group, yet relied on the insights and perspectives opened by this collective work. Moving from such a close engagement with the empirical material to a strategy for writing *about and with* the material, involved reading within the field of psychosocial studies as well as experimenting with creative writing practices.⁸ (Ellingson, 2009; Ellingson & Sotirin, 2020 Richardson, 2000;). The following account of the interview emerged from this process and was shared and elaborated by members of the original analysis group.

*

In 1989, a key point of identification between Stacey and Rachel was that they were both young women educated at a higher level and beginning research careers within universities. Their conversation about sexuality was shadowed by an awareness of social class with tensions emerging between notions of moral respectability and the cultural

demands of social mobility. In explaining how exceptional her path had been Stacey tells a stark story, the language of which prefigures something of what is yet to come:

Oh no, they never expected me to go [to university]. I've got a cousin who's mentally retarded, and when I was at infant school, at first they thought I was the same as him. And they actually told my mother that I'd never learn. So, when I started to come on, and learn things and do really well at school, it was a big surprise. Because nobody from my family has ever done that sort of thing.

Stacey goes on to narrate a story where sexuality and social mobility are inextricably linked, centring on an emotional rupture with her mother at the point of adolescence characterised as the time she “stopped talking to me and started picking on me”. This is the sad story:

Well, we didn't have a happy family life; my mother never liked me. For some strange reason, I don't know why. My father did, and I was always sort of my father's little pet, you know. And I just sort of went through school and did my own thing. I was a real mouse really, very very quiet, very sort of studious, you know. At 16 I sort of noticed boys, and sort of started going out with a couple of them. My mother didn't like it at all. And then, when I met the boy that I'm engaged to now, I was in the sixth form, and I had to sort of get up and go to university. For some reason my mother decided that he wasn't good enough, because he wasn't planning to go to university, and said I had to leave. Said I had to leave home if I didn't stop seeing him. It all collapsed into turmoil in the sixth form, I carried on seeing him, and went away to university. I've never been back since.

Beneath the surface of this story we find another (the “bombshell”), a story from her mother's childhood which provides clues as to the source of the feelings conveyed through the mother's rejection of her daughter. When asked “has this bad relationship with your mum always been there?” Stacey explains:

I always remember it being there, I'd always get blamed for things that my younger brother had done. [...] But I knew that she never liked me, just for the things she used to say to me. I remember once kissing her, I was something like 10, something like that, and she just turned to me and said—Are you a lesbian or something? She always, I don't know, she always sort of picked on me. But she had a bad upbringing herself. [...] when she was young, her father went off with a younger woman. And grandma was left on her own to bring up my mum and her older sister. But me grandma was a bit of a raver; she used to go to the seaside with these men friends for the weekend. And she'd leave me mum and me auntie sort of on their own. And me mum said she used to remember being sat huddled in a chair, when the electricity meter had run out, just sat in the dark, huddled together. And like grandma used to throw her out on the streets; she used to have men coming round visiting. And I was really ill when she stopped speaking to me and started picking on me.

Rachel: How old were you then?

Stacey: Well, it was when I first started going out with boys.

This is a vivid memory, arguably bearing traces of her mother's childhood trauma, and conveying a powerful sense of the sexual morality of times past where (for the grandmother) the pursuit of pleasure and material favours could be a matter of survival. In the same way that Walkerdine and colleagues write about “history walking into the room” we can feel history entering into the interview and our analysis through this

part of the narrative. It is without a breath or pause that Stacey makes a connection between the two children in the dark and the emotional rupture with her mother that happens in response to the expression of her own burgeoning sexuality.

Evidently, her rejection by her mother denies Stacey something that she wants and needs. There is a strong sense of dissatisfaction throughout her account—as if the drama enacted by her mother has set parameters for her life that give her few choices. This includes committing to a steady relationship more quickly than she might have wanted—something which in turn complicates the kind of social and cultural mobility available to her. It is as if she is chased into a place of sexual respectability that is also a trap. Throughout the rest of the interview Stacey tells a series of smaller stories each of which involves images of sexual exposure, narratives that we might understand as cautionary tales of what might happen to the sexualised girl:

Rachel: Were there many people who were sexually active?

Stacey: Well, you thought that they were, because by the age of 16, some people had had what seemed like really long relationships, like two years. When you were 16 that was a long time. And you thought that they were, you got the idea that they were. I remember there was lads that always sort of talked about it, it was always the lads, never the girls. You know, they'd say—Oh, I wouldn't mind having her tonight—all this sort of thing.

Rachel: Were there girls who were called slags?

Stacey: There was just one that I really remember, they said she's a slag but she's really nice, you know, but she's a slag. She was, she was really nice. Her mum and dad I remember were, people used to talk, and you were always given the impression that they were really free and easy, sort of swinging sixties, which I suppose they were. And she'd sort of talk about anything, you know, she'd bring her Tampax in and let the boys have a look at them. Actually in the sixth form we got some photos of her, like she'd done it all, you know, she'd been a lesbian, and she'd done everything. There were stories about her in this straight jacket at a party and nothing else, like wriggling around on the floor. There were some photos of her that got passed round the sixth form and round the teachers, very sort of explicit centrefold photos. That sort of thing. A friend had took them, one of the other girls had taken them.

This story is told two decades before the non-consensual sharing of sexualised images on social media we are now familiar with today (Marwick & boyd, 2014; Ringrose et al., 2013), that position us as participants or observers in “spectacles of intimacy” (Berriman & Thomson, 2015). The moral of Stacey's story asserts the gendering of sexual knowledge, that girls are the objects and not agents, at least not within the terms of the local working-class heterosexual culture within which she has grown up. As her mother made clear “lesbian” is an impossible identity, the imputation of which authorises punishment. Stacey is ambivalent. She explains that the girl is “nice”. She resituates behaviour that gets her called a “slag” at school with a “free and easy, swinging sixties” family culture. She is sitting on an uncomfortable fence which involves being a “friend” but also “one of the other girls” who take the photograph that then become the source of public humiliation involving teachers and students—overwhelming any fragile claims to sexual agency.

This interplay of sexual morality and social class is also the focus of another story that Stacey tells, capturing and conveying feelings of exclusion and isolation when she goes to

university. We are transported to the university halls of residence by a description of “green walls and prison bed, tatty rug and green wardrobe”. In this account we sense her alienation in a spartan yet middle-class milieu, noticing how familiar patterns of rupture and rejection are close at hand when Stacey is faced with difficult feelings. Again, female sexual agency provides a focus for disgust:

I remember being really shocked at one of my friends really. She'd gone out one night and come back with this bloke and slept with him. I remember knocking on her door and being really surprised, you know, when two of them came out, and not really knowing what to say. Or where to look, I thought—Oh! What's she done? What's she doing here sort of thing. I was really shocked.

Rachel: You said most of the people at university came from very different backgrounds, did they have a different idea of what was OK to do in relationships? It was OK to have more partners, and they weren't so frightened of being called a slag?

Stacey: A few of them were ... [pause] I used to get sick of them actually. Used to think—Oh no, not again. I think she was bisexual, that was ... she used to have girlfriends and boyfriends and ... This sort of came out later on in the year, when I wasn't so shocked by anything anymore. But like, Steph she was from a very middle-class background: “OK jah”, you know. And I remember we were all shocked, all of us were when she was in the bath with her boyfriend. We had a bath at the end of the corridor, you could hear them doing things; we were all really shocked.

Here, getting “sick of it” involves a turning away, a disidentification that in turn enables these spectacles of intimacy—a girl lying on the floor in a strait jacket, the sound effects of a shared bath. There is a scenic quality to each of these evocations that ensures that they are memorable, indelible, condensing complex associations and meanings. These are the “bombshells” that are found beneath the stories, and although they are presented within narratives there is something profoundly non-narrative about them. Again, without pause or breath, Stacey goes on to talk about how unhappy she was at this time at university and how the promise of social mobility was experienced in terms of cultural chasms between herself and her fellow students. Returning to the local neighbourhood and her boyfriend seems inevitable. Yet has she jumped to judgement? Might she have waited longer, long enough to see beneath the appearance of things?

Yeah, everybody seemed to get a boyfriend very very quickly. I remember feeling really left out because I was still seeing Carl, but he was never there during the week; he'd come up at weekends. The first year, I used to go home at weekends to see him, and I had a Saturday job, and I used to go home and see him. And I missed everything at weekends. And consequently, during the week, I'd be very left out, because everybody else had got boyfriends ... So I used to feel like really alienated, you know. You'd go and knock on somebody's door, and they'd have their boyfriend in there, and you didn't really like to stay very long, you know. And you'd go out, and you'd always be the one walking at the back, because you didn't have a boyfriend with you. And like later on you'd find out that these relationships weren't perfect, you know, that some people actually really hated them.

The emotional labours demanded by social mobility has been a fertile focus within the sociology of education, with working class feminist academics revealing and theorising the psychic costs of “success” (Mahoney & Zmroczek, 1997; Walkerdine, 1990; Wilson et al., 2021). The late 1980s were a period of rapid expansion in higher education in

the UK when clever working-class girls forged new biographical pathways involving further education, professional careers and delayed or deferred motherhood. Sociologists of youth characterise this period as involving a shift from the gendered “normal biographies” of the post-war period characterised by clearly gendered trajectories, towards the androgynous “choice biography” characterised by an apparent equality of opportunity and expectation between young men and young women, a key motif of which was the ideal (if not the reality) of sexual agency (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998). Stacey’s account suggests that in 1989 this fantasy of the level playing field was part of a middle-class culture that did not feel open to working-class young women, especially not those carrying emotional traumas rooted in lives of poverty. In retrospect we might also question the durability of the level playing field that McRobbie (2007) sees as the reward of a post-feminist contract which demands the relinquishing of feminism. This is a generation of young women who were to discover the motherhood penalty⁹ as well as witnessing the enduring and adaptive character of sexual violence (Phipps, 2019; Thomson et al., 2011). Social mobility and self-improvement continue to operate as master narratives for working class young women, despite there being very little “room at the top” (McLeod & Wright, 2009; Ravn, 2021). The solution proposed by Stacey in 1989 is that she can gain an education and become a professional while also maintaining continuity in terms of a respectable working-class morality, achieved through her commitment to her boyfriend in the face of rejection from her mother. Yet this situation is far from satisfactory once that she is back living in her home-town and with his family. In the final story shared here we find another instance of the dreaded sense of becoming a spectacle for others, with one’s intimacies revealed and reviled.

I didn’t want to live with his parents. I find it really difficult living with other people in that sort of situation. That’s one of the things that worries us about getting a house, I just can’t stand it. I spend a lot of time in my room at Carl’s house. His parents get really narked, one of us not sitting down there. They sort of intrude, like his mum’s been through all my things, which really upset me. You know, like wanting to know. I just feel awful ... to tell you this. We went to the sea-side and he bought a massive vibrator. He thought it was really funny, a big joke and what have you. I was thinking—Oh God, throw it away. And he thought it was really funny and was laughing about it. I thought he’d thrown it away. And he hadn’t, he’d hidden at the back of his record player at home, in his mini-system. His mum was cleaning in the back of the record player for some reason, and she found it.

Rachel Did she say anything?

Stacey: No, she didn’t say anything. I don’t know what she must think, because she’s been through all my things, I know she has. I put my pills, my contraceptive pills in my suitcase under my bed. And to get that suitcase out you need two people, you know, me and Carl needed two people, one to lift the bed up, and one to pull the case. And like she’d been in it, she’d put something in it that had never even been in there before, so I knew that she’d been reading through everything. And I was so upset, because I didn’t want her to know about that.

From stories into histories

In an essay on the “incommensurability of psychoanalysis and history” Joan Scott draws on the work of Certau to argue that we may need to “uncover the psychic logic of the tale

before we can guess at its meaning.” (2012, p. 80). It is this that we hope to have achieved above, connecting the resonant (scenic) material within a single story, revealing the psychic logic that connects and incites these different spectacles of intimacy. The interview with Stacey was very long, dense and characterised by stories within stories. The extracts brought together above all share a quality that defies the passage of time. In bringing them together in this way, in the sequence in which they took place in the interview, we have re-assembled the feelings at the heart of this memorable and unsettling interview and noticed how collaborative sense is at play in the psychic logic of the encounter. So how might we move from this singular story towards the bigger history of which it forms a part?

One way to do this is explored by Joanna Bornat in an essay that reanalyses emotions in an oral history interview that she conducted 30 years earlier with a Mrs Lockwood. Bornat explains that “in going back to the extract I’ve found not just how much I have changed but also how much more can be learned from it because of the changes I have lived through.” (2010, p. 45). Bornat refers to the interview text as a “product of a particular moment generated by Mrs Lockwood and myself”. In retrospect she is not only able to situate her younger self within a cultural and historical habitus, but with the experience of age is now able to recognise aspects of Mrs Lockwood’s contribution that had previously been opaque including the “active theorizing that Mrs Lockwood was engaged in during her interview” (Bornat 2010, p. 47). With humility she acknowledges that “In my secondary analysis I can see that the story she tells is more significant than I had previously thought” (2010, p. 50). And while she is diffident about the “added solidarity or empathy to be drawn out of my added years” (2010, p. 95) she does find value in considering the emotional qualities of the interview which “now become more, not less, significant in helping us to understand not only its internal dynamics but what it contributes to wider understanding of the social history of the period in which it took place and of the remembering of an older woman, Mrs Lockwood” (2010, p. 51).

There are resonances between Bornat’s reflections and our own approach to historicising the encounter between Rachel and Stacey and reprising this encounter with and for others 30 years on. Reflecting on an earlier draft of this paper one of our group [Rachael O] observed “strange resonances with some of my own family history (working class Northern culture, poverty, social mobility, sexuality and morality) which mostly feels far away in my educated London life, and also sometimes feels strangely present”. The interview with Stacey captures a moment when social norms that policed sex before marriage, illegitimacy and same-sex relationships were changing unevenly, structured by many factors including social class, geography, religion and labour market (Weeks, 2007; Roth & Dashper, 2016). Both interviewer and interviewee were positioned within this shared historical moment, yet with distinctive cultural locations and legacies, creating a dynamic encounter.¹⁰ Differences were bridged somewhat by a shared generational location and a progressive agenda of feminist politics. The conversation reveals and conceals similarities, differences, connections, and mutual attraction. Seen in retrospect with the perspective of 30 years, it becomes possible to historicise the researcher and the researched—enabling us to ask: who are these two young women to each other (Elliott, 2011; Thomson & Baraitser, 2018) and how might the documentary practices of social research become entwined with personal biography?

(Goodwin, 2016). By revisiting these materials in the way we have and focusing attention on the bombshells beneath the stories we must also ask if we are re-enacting the spectacle that is so persistent in Stacey's account—making a spectacle of oneself along the way. Our desire has been to do more than engage in reflexivity and repetition. Our intention is to show what is involved in bringing new perspectives and insights on the positions of subject and object, knower and known. The split between the middle and working-class habitus that is a preoccupation of Stacey's story, is also the very stuff of the encounter within the interview—played out again in our analysis and of course in the reception of this paper.

We end this part of the paper with an act of imagination, even fantasy—a field note written by Stacey in response to the experience of being interviewed. Rachel wrote this as part of working through her attempts at analysis. We might see it as a strategy for “crystallising” (Ellingson, 2009) the asymmetries in the data record as well as retrospective acknowledgement of the limits of the original and current projects to produce feminist knowledge. The possibility of “becoming fieldnotes” is explored by Ellingson & Sotorin as a form of intra-action, an experiment in “palpating data” and “following data's lead” (2020, p. 64). Imagining how Stacey *might* have represented the experience to herself and others enables Rachel to think again about the field note as a document of the self and to imaginatively take up the voice that so powerfully preoccupied her—in the original interaction and through periods of analysis and writing.

Stacey's imagined field notes

Was contacted through work about a research project on AIDS and thought I'd answer the advert. Don't know why, curious I suppose, but also a chance to get out the house. Said I'd like to be interviewed at her place rather than the university and turned up at house in Chorlton. She was a about the same age as me, punky trendy type, southerner. The flat was tiny, attic room. Mad décor. Stayed ages. Found it easy to talk though a bit shocked about how personal the whole things was. Said a lot more than I had intended to and felt a bit weird afterwards. She said that we might get together and talk more but never heard from her. Got a right mithering when I got home and teased Carl about how all his dirty secrets would be in the newspaper. Social research is really odd, different to what we do in science. No idea how they work out what is true and what is made up. Might have been interesting to study sociology, but would never have got a job. All a bit stuck up—right-on feminists. But was a good talk. I liked her.

Conclusions

This paper has been an experiment in methodology within a field of biographical methods. We have considered the difference that time might make to an analysis, considering the possibility that more time might produce more perspective through allowing the original context to be rendered (more) visible. We have also suggested that clock time can transcended when considering unconscious processes and experiences that resist narrative. The paper also raises questions about what constitutes biographical research, including tensions between telling of a life story and the meeting of two life stories (the auto/biography that Liz Stanley suggest is always present). As Ken Plummer has so

clearly conceptualised, stories are coaxed, cajoled and co-produced, relying on shared vocabularies and receptive audiences that come together around tellability, hearability and bearability (Plummer, 1994; Butler, 2006). The paper also raises the relation between the single story and the archive: why choose this one for such in-depth analysis? What is the relationship between this story and others (the story of the mother that haunts the stories of the third parties who feature, for example); or the stories of the other young women interviewed in the same study? We believe that every story in the archive deserves this kind of close attention. But this particular story was not chosen for being typical of a wider group, or even emblematic of a particular issue or trend. Rather it was chosen because it *was* unsettling and troubling, and because it had not been properly digested.

We engaged with this material initially in a way that involved all of our senses—the look of the original fonts and paper, the sound of the words read aloud, the presence of older bodies and voices connecting to younger selves. Through interpretative writing methods we found a way to retell the story of the original research encounter, while also opening sharing something of what is involved in collective scholarship and writing. We hope that our re-animation does some justice to the materials, allowing the text to be known, again, and with feeling. The sadness we encountered in the analysis was real, yet it is hard to locate its sources. We have argued that the field note captured something unspoken, something that its' author had not fully put into thought or words at the time she wrote it, but that was present in it, and was conveyed across the passage of years to the first analysis group. The rather different impression that the reconvened analysis group had of Stacey seems, on reflection, to have alerted us to how the “sadness” might have been unconsciously experienced, which in turn led Rachel to trace its sources (intergenerational pain and distress; rejection by the mother; marginalisation in new class milieu) in the process of her “immersion” in the data. If all of this is correct, it would suggest that the two-stage analysis group process generated an understanding of the interview data that was different from the researcher's original understanding of it 30 years ago, and not immediately available to her when she first revisited the material. All of which supports and augments arguments in favour of recontextualising research materials as a way of enriching meaning and further realising value.

This brings us to the question of what we do with emotion in biographical research. Is it an end in itself? Is it a symptom to be explained? Is it a thread to be pulled? The motif of the “sad story” that recurs in this paper is deliberately ambiguous. We doubt that Stacey thinks of her story as especially sad. Naming sadness as an emotion at play in the material took teamwork and emotionally engaged methods of analysis, interpretation, and writing. Does it matter who the sadness belongs to, or who might be saddened in this process? It is possible that characterising the story as sad pathologises Stacey, fitting her into the “forced narratives” through which working-class women are governed with a discursive formation of “welfare” of which both sociology and psychoanalysis are part (Hartman 2019; Steedman, 2000). Yet a curiosity about emotion—a willingness to follow feelings—can also incite an analytic process that involves connecting individual stories to collective endeavours, social resistance, and social research. Moreover, by working collectively and slowly we have elaborated psychic logics that exceed the well-worn and reductive narrative tropes that haunt the

sociological imagination. Finally, we have conveyed something of the richness of the archive and the value of revisiting qualitative interviews that always contain more to be heard, resituated in new times and relationships. This is not simply an exercise in nostalgia but is offered as a method in its own right, reanimation as a route to the generation of new intergenerational knowledge of a thick present in which past, present and future co-exist.

Notes

1. <https://doi.org/10.25377/sussex.c.4433834>.
2. The example is shared of a patient who brings into the consulting room the unspoken and unresolved personal history of the Holocaust. This is experienced through transference and the taking up of the role of the Jewish Grandmother on the part of the patient, which in turn gives the analysts the role of the Nazi persecutor.
3. Frosh argues that within psychoanalysis ideas of transference (between people) and transmission (over generations) are closely connected “haunting is something that happens continually, in all directions. What we are left with here is a network of connections around vertical and horizontal transmission, and a proposed mechanism for supporting this” (2013, p. 118).
4. The Reanimating Data project (ES/R009538/1), see <http://www.reanimatingdata.co.uk>.
5. The Women, Risk & AIDS Project was a feminist sociological study funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council and took place between 1988 and 1990. It is archived at <https://doi.org/10.25377/sussex.c.4433834> and can be contextualised through materials showcased at <https://archives.reanimatingdata.co.uk>.
6. The fieldnote and interview are anonymised, with all real names changed as agreed in the agreements made with participants in the original Women, Risk & AIDS study. The Reanimating Data study has worked with these consents to undertake an archiving process informed by a feminist ethics of care (Moore et al. 2021). The project received ethical approval from The University of Sussex Social Science & Arts Ethics Committee ER/RT219/5.
7. For a definition of “analytic third” see Ogden (2004) and for a critique see Frosh (2013). The idea that group data analysis provides the “many minds” needed to think difficult thoughts can be found widely in psychosocial methodological literatures, see for example Urwin and Sternberg (2011) and Walkerdine et al. (2001).
8. These included making poems with key phrases from the text and writing from different points of view.
9. How gendered inequalities reappear at the point of motherhood through the unequal division of reproductive labour, which takes a toll of women’s earnings (Davies, 2012).
10. The classed, raced and gendered character of research interview encounters emerges as a focal point of insight for several revisiting studies of sociological archives, drawing attention to changes in professionalism as well as well as historicising the sociological gaze (Gillies & Edwards, 2012; Hartman, 2019; Savage, 2010).

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