

## Reflecting on Loss as a M/Other and a Feminist Sociologist

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*In an attempt to highlight the importance of critical auto/biographical academic reflection I reflect on my status as M/Other and the significance of this identity to my work as a feminist sociologist. I present an overview of some of my academic work in the area of pregnancy loss and nonmotherhood and highlight some of the ways in which I think non/motherhood defines and determines girls' and women's lives. In reflecting on my own relationship to non/motherhood I demonstrate further the complexities of definition and experience. I consider the significance of ambivalence and of change in my own life and those of others who do not mother. Overall I argue that my continued work in the broad area of reproductive and non/maternal (parental) identities is enhanced by my continued critically auto/biographical reflections. I also aim to demonstrate on how a focus on the life of an individual can lead to meaningful understanding of the lives of others in similar situations.*

### Losses and Identities

Thus far there have been three significant losses in my life. In 1979 at the age of 55 my father, Ronald (Ron) Thornton, died suddenly of a heart attack. I was 20, living at home, and training to be a nursery nurse, in part, in preparation (or so I thought) for all of the children that I would have. Five years later after 15 months of attempting to get pregnant I did. This brief time of joy and expectation was to be followed by months of despair following a miscarriage at 16 weeks gestation. To my knowledge I have never been pregnant since. My first marriage, within which my pregnancy took place, ended six years later in 1990 just as I was preparing for the finals of my undergraduate

Sociology degree. In 1995, almost four years into our relationship I married for the second time. My husband William John (John) Shields had custody of his two teenage sons and the boys (now men) lived with us (off and on as they got older) for the next 13 years. Following some years of illness John died in February this year.

All of those I write about here have an impact on how I define myself; as daughter, wife and partner as “nearly mother” and step mother. Some of these identities of course I no longer hold or perhaps never did. Employing a sociological auto/biographical approach in this piece I reflect on my status as M/Other and the significance of this identity to my work as a feminist sociologist. I aim to highlight the value of auto/biographical reflection for understanding not only the life of an individual (in this case myself) but for understanding how an individual’s life is itself social and might be significant in understanding social life more generally. Thus, although this is my experience it is likely to have significance for others in similar circumstances (Clyde Mitchell; Attar; Letherby 2002a).

### **Auto/biographical Inclinations**

This is not the only auto/biographical piece I have written as a sociologist; indeed critical auto/biography is an approach that I find both challenging and liberating and is, I think, central to the sociological project.<sup>1</sup>

Auto/biographical study—either focusing on one, several or many lives—highlights the need to liberate the individual from individualism; to demonstrate how individuals are social selves—which is important because a focus on the individual can contribute to the understanding of the general (Mills; Stanley 1992; Okley; Evans). In addition auto/biographical work highlights the relationship(s) and similarities and differences between the self and other within the research and writing process. Thus, as David Morgan notes:

[auto/biography is not] ... simply a shorthand representation of autobiography and/or biography but also [a] recognition of the inter-dependence of the two enterprises.... In writing another’s life we also write or rewrite our own lives; in writing about ourselves we also construct ourselves as some body different from the person who routinely and unproblematically inhabits and moves through social space and time. (655)

I agree with this and would add that research and social scientific scholarship always contains auto/biographical elements and acknowledging this makes our work academically rigorous:

... self-conscious auto/biographical writing acknowledges the social location of the writer thus making clear the author's role in constructing rather than discovering the story/the knowledge. (Letherby 2000)

Among the criticisms of auto/biography within the academy is that it is both self-indulgence and weak intellectual work (e.g. see Katz Rothman; Scott; Letherby 2000: 93). But, self-awareness and a critical scrutiny of the self is quite different from self-adoration and self-indulgence (Okley). And in addition to the critical insight it can give us (see above) self-conscious auto/biography explicitly recognises that “knowledge is contextual, situational and specific, and that it will differ systematically according to the social location (as a gendered, racial, classed, sexualized person) of the particular knowledge-producer” (Stanley 1993: 49-50).

Steph Lawler argues that:

... the relationship between identity and autobiography is not that autobiography (the telling of a life) *reflects* a pre-given identity: rather, identities are *produced* through the autobiographical work in which all of us engage every day, even though few of us will formally write an “autobiography.” The narratives we produce in this context are stories of how we come to be the way we are. But it is *through* the narratives themselves that we produce our identities in this way. (13)

This piece represents my (latest) auto/biographical telling of my personal experience of loss with specific reference to biological motherhood. As such the substantive part of this article is largely a narrative account of aspects of my life as M/Other and the significance of this aspect of my identity to my academic self and my work in the area of reproductive and non/maternal (parental) identity. Following Lawler (see also Kirkman et al. 2) I also recognise that the re/telling of my story has in turn implications for the story itself.

### Challenging M/Otherhood

My sociology degree which I began two years after my miscarriage felt like doing something for myself and for my father, who largely self-educated (having left school at 14), valued education as “an activity that helps to give you confidence.” My early sociological career—as undergraduate and postgraduate student—also gave me the opportunity to engage in intellectual reflection on my miscarriage (undergraduate final year dissertation) and subsequent “infertility” and “involuntary childlessness” (Ph.D.) which I write in quotation marks to highlight the problems of definition.

From my own experiences I felt that pregnancy loss and nonmotherhood were both misunderstood and under-researched. Whilst researching “Meanings of Miscarriage” (see Letherby 1993, 2008) and “*Infertility*” and “*Involuntary Childlessness*”: *Definition and Self Identity* (e.g. see Letherby 1999, 2002a, 2010; Exley and Letherby; Earle and Letherby), I came across many others who felt the same. I met and talked or corresponded with women (and men) who had had experiences more distressing than mine; individuals whose reproductive “failures” dominated their lives completely. I also came across others for whom reproductive loss and non-parenthood was less significant or something that they dealt with and “left behind.” Now self-defining as more (biologically) “voluntarily childless” than “involuntarily childless” I credit this shift in part to the opportunities my academic endeavours have given me for detailed reflection on my own experience and those of similar others: an opportunity that most people do not have.

Since completing my doctoral work I have continued to research and write about the complicated issue of non/motherhood, sometimes independently and sometimes with others. In addition to my individual work on the experiences of disrupted reproduction I have considered (among other things), with others, the similarities and differences in the experiences of “voluntary” and “involuntary” childlessness; the connections between motherhood and nonmotherhood; the experience of motherhood and nonmotherhood in both the public and private spheres; and (new) technology and non/motherhood. I have also, again with others, been involved in a series of projects concerned with the experiences of pregnant teenagers and young mothers and am currently involved in work focusing on the experience of pregnancy and early motherhood for women with pre-existing diabetes. I have other, future, plans and am hoping to do further work on, not least, reproductive loss and social networking; identity and donation (including gamete donation) and lay understandings of in/fertility opportunities. In much of my work and my writing I have aimed to challenge the *othering* of women who either do not mother (biological) children or who do but not in the perceived correct social, economic and sexual circumstances. Throughout all this work I continue to reflect on my own identity and the significance of the loss of my own biological child and my status as M/Other (see <<http://www.plymouth.ac.uk/staff/gletcherby#> for detail on publications>).

In one of my earliest academic writings I began my consideration of non/motherhood by reflecting on definitions and meanings of motherhood and nonmotherhood:

... all women live their lives against a background of personal and cultural assumptions that all women are or want to be mothers and

that for women motherhood is proof of adulthood and a natural consequence of marriage or a permanent relationship with a man. A great deal of social and psychological research has focussed on women and the role of children in their lives and is thus complicity in reproducing societal assumptions about women deriving their identity from relationships in domestic situations and particularly from motherhood within the family. Consequently, “and how many children have you got?” is a “natural” question. Social attitudes and institutions support the assumption that women’s ultimate role is motherhood and women who do not mother children are still expected to mother others; either vocationally as a teacher or a nurse or within the family as a sister, aunt, daughter, or wife/partner (Letherby 1994: 525).

Sixteen years on I continue to explore further the ways in which non/motherhood defines and determines girls’ and women’s lives. I would suggest that motherhood is still taken for granted, unquestioned and traditionally seen as “natural,” and central to the construction of “normal femininity.” This is despite the plethora of work highlighting the ambivalence of the actual and perceived experience and status of motherhood (e.g. de Beauvoir; Hollway and Featherstone; Gordon et al.).

### Personal and Not So Personal Identities

And what about the ambivalence of my own identity? *If* good motherhood is synonymous with good womanhood (e.g. Ruddick; Letherby 1994; Liamput-tong) surely this impacts on my status not only as mother but also as woman? *But ...* if motherhood is really about nurturing and not merely (even) about biological and kinship connections surely I am a mother, no need for the word STEP? *But ...* when I came into their lives my stepsons already had a mother, something I never denied. So although I cared and cooked, provided financial support and affection I was always Gayle, never mum. This has struck me even more in recent years because as my husband’s sons became estranged from him they have become estranged from me also. *But ...* even if mother is just about biology and biological connections I am a mother in that I carried a child for 16 weeks. *But ...* I was never able to name my biological child or hold it (you see *it* doesn’t even have a sex) or play with it. So in both these cases then am I nearly a mother but not quite, not really? Certainly this was the view of the editor of a feminist journal who changed my reference to a “parenting relationship with my partner’s two sons” to “a *kind of* parenting relationship...”<sup>2</sup>

I am, I know, a person who cares, for family members, for friends—young and not so young—but carer feels much less of a significant identity than mother. My identity as wife and partner are gone too now (for the second time) but through it all I continue to be a daughter and a friend, my relationship with mother and close friends (and some of their children) are reciprocal in their love and support. These relationships mean a lot to me as do those with colleagues and workmates that I have developed through my feminist sociological work. My work too—as researcher, as writer, as teacher, as supervisor, as mentor—gives me satisfaction and much opportunity for pleasure and fulfilment.

Please do not misunderstand me for just as I feel the loss of my father and my husband I still feel the loss of my biological child and the other biological children I might have had. But other things have filled my private and public life. Indeed, I've done so much in recent years and plan to do so much more that at times I wonder how I would have managed to fit a biological child(ren) into my life. I appreciate then that some of my creativity, some of my fulfilment has come from this lack, this loss, this space in my life.

However, I wonder if this is something that I shouldn't admit to; if it will position me as a clinical, cynical workaholic rather than a "real woman" and/or as a sad and desperate nonmother who protests too much. I find the writings of other nonmothers interesting here. I first came across Tillie Olsen's (1980) during my doctoral studies. Olsen appears to be arguing that writing and motherhood are not compatible and writes:

In that long roll of childless women writers who paid the cost of being able to do their best work, was there not one who felt it was damnation? Not one? Silence, reticence, until with Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf, in our century, an anguish, a longing to have children, breaks into expression. In private diaries and letters only. (200)

She then goes on to reproduce extracts from Virginia Woolf's diary. Thus:

...and all the devils came out—heavy black ones—to be 29 and unmarried—to be a failure—childless—insane too, no writer...

At thirty eight:

Why is life so tragic; so like a little strip of pavement over an abyss?  
...It's having no children, living away from friends, failing to write well...

At forty four:

Woke up perhaps at 3. Oh it's beginning, it's coming—the horror—physically like a painful wave swelling about the heart—tossing me up. I'm unhappy, unhappy! Down—God, I wish I were dead.

Pause. But why am I feeling this? Let me watch the wave rise. I watch. Vanessa [her artist sister, and mother of three]. Children. Failure. Yes. Failure. Failure. The wave rises.

She was one month to forty six before she could write:

... and yet oddly enough I scarcely want children of my own now. This insatiable desire to write something before I die, this ravaging sense of the shortness and feverishness of life, makes me cling, like a man on a rock, to my own anchor. I don't like the physicalness of having children of one's own. This occurred to me at Rodmell, but I never wrote it down. I can dramatise myself as a parent, it is true. And perhaps I have killed the feeling instinctively; or perhaps nature does.

Only at forty-eight, on a day of intoxication ... when I sat surveying the whole book [*The Waves*] complete ... felt the pressure of the form—the splendour, the greatness—as perhaps I have never felt them....

Children are nothing to this. (qtd. in Olsen 200-201).

Soon after reading the Virginia Wolff diary entry (during the final write of my Ph.D. thesis) I read an article in the UK weekly publication *The Times Higher Education Supplement* written by a male scientist who, having just defended his Ph.D. thesis, suggested that writing and defending a doctoral thesis is the closest a man can come to being a woman as it's the closest thing to giving birth a man can experience.

Unlike Wolff seems to be suggesting I do not feel that my academic work is better than/superior to the experience of mothering the children I have not had and I certainly DO NOT consider myself to be an honorary biological mother or indeed more of a woman for having completed a Ph.D. But maybe, as suggested above, I do need to credit some of the work I have done as an academic to my biologically childless state. In addition, in part from my own experience of living with two teenage children, I do recognise that, for women with children, the practical and emotional demands in their lives can make it very difficult to work (Ramsay and Letherby).

Of course I can not know how my life would have turned out if I had carried my baby successfully to term. I may have returned to education and study; I may have not. However, it is very unlikely that I would have felt motivated to study the same issues in quite the same way. I guess (and hope) though that I would have felt equally political and passionate about something else. What I do know (as noted earlier) is that my desires and intentions have been subject to change and I have shifted my position on what James H. Monach calls the

“voluntarily”/“involuntary” childless continuum. I appreciate that my choices are constrained i.e., made within circumstances not of my own making; but of course this is not unusual and indeed relevant of the reproductive “choices” that all women make (Petchesky). So, even though I am aware of the constraints on my “choice” it feels like a choice nevertheless. Twenty-six years ago when I had my miscarriage my central aim was to be a mother, and I felt that I was only half a woman without a child. Any doubts or ambivalences I had about becoming a mother I denied. Now I feel very different. I no longer feel a lesser woman (or less than adult) for not mothering children. I am able to accept the equivocal nature of my desires—that is, a part of me enjoys the freedom that I have had and have because of my biologically childless state. If I had become a biological mother I know that I would have felt opposing emotions in relation to that experience also.

Reflecting on her own changing identity with reference to her work on infertility and childlessness Anne Woollett notes:

... my perspective on infertility has changed from that of “insider” to that of “Other,” but coming as I have to this perspective from the position of “insider,” it is probably more appropriate to position myself as experienced or privileged “Other,” thereby raising questions about the usefulness of the insider/outsider dualism. (71)

I appreciate and agree with this in terms of my own position. My continued work in the broad area of reproductive and non/maternal (parental) identities is, I would argue, enhanced by my continued critically auto/biographical reflections. In turn I owe much of my positive self-identity to that academic work I’ve been able to do in this area. For these reasons and with reference to the work I have undertaken with a wide variety of women (and men) who have had both varied reproductive experiences and varied responses to these, I have no intention to generalise my experience to other women who do not mother children. I also appreciate that (for me) things could change again, and that, for example, the future grandparenting experiences of friends might be another challenge for me.

Yet, I would suggest that this auto/biographical piece does have sociological value. For in reflecting in this way on the relationship between loss and identity I have, as Charles Wright Mills urged us to do, deployed my “sociological imagination.” As Liz Stanley argues, all “people theorize their own experience ... and so researchers of the social are faced with an already ‘first order’ theorized material social reality.” Thus, “people observe, categorize, analyse, reach conclusion” (1992: 208). Further as Dana Attar notes, experiential material is valuable:



Sometimes, the point we want to make may indeed be that our experiences differ, and that no one woman can represent another. But this should not be taken to mean that we have wholly different concerns—as if racism, violence, sexuality, could be issues for some women but not others. When a woman writes about experiences she has had which have not been shared by most of her readers—describing specific religious upbringing, perhaps, or writing as an incest survivor—there will still be connections. (33)

I agree and suggest that my experience of non/motherhood is likely to have resonances for others with similar, and possibly not so similar, experiences (Clyde Mitchell; Letherby 2002b) in both their personal and private and public and professional lives.

<sup>1</sup>I have written previously about my personal experience of miscarriage (see Letherby 2008) and with my mother about the death of my father (see Thornton and Letherby). In July 2010, I presented a conference paper within which I reflected on my father's and my husband John's lives (Letherby 2010a) and, in a new type of venture for me, I have begun to write a novel which relates in several ways to a particular difficult period in John's and my life together. <sup>2</sup>I changed the text again, took out the word "nearly" but added "...parenting relationship to my partner's two sons who lived with us full time." I felt annoyed though at having to justify myself and my status in this way.

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