Auto/Biography Review

A Fine Balance:
The Cultural Biography of an Academic Journal and its Scholars

Editorial

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Abstract

In this editorial, I reflect upon my position as the new Editor of *Auto/Biography Review* and its transition from being solely a print journal to an online one. I consider the cultural biography of the journal as it entwines the embodied lives and professional identities of a community of scholars and illuminates some of the historical and economic forces in the academic publishing landscape. In closing, I suggest editors in a complex exchange economy can make publishing model choices that respond to the responsibilities of upholding the scholarly mission and uniting a community of diverse scholars. Following this, I outline the articles in this first online issue and invite future submissions.

Keywords

Biography, publishing, community, scholars, professional, lives, career, journal

Introduction

This editorial stems from a personal reflection on taking up editorship of this journal, *Auto/Biography Review* (ABR), and this issue marks a change in its method and mode of publication. From this issue onwards, ABR will publish as an online, open-access journal on our new website using the Public Knowledge Project (PKP) Open Journal System (OJS).

Print journals transitioned to an online publishing space some thirty years ago, and, unusually, this journal has remained, until now, solely a print journal. This fact speaks of its career so far, its cultural biography (Kopytoff, 1986), and the biographies of individuals entwined with its history.

In 1992, Liz Stanley and the late David Morgan founded the British Sociological Association (BSA) Auto/Biography Study Group. In collaboration with Michael Erben, they published the first iteration of the journal, *Auto/Biography Bulletin,* following a one-day conference in January 1992*.* In 1998 Andrew Sparkes became Editor of *Auto/Biography* (a role he held for 22 years), which later changed to the *Auto/Biography Yearbook* in 2008 and *Auto/Biography Review* in 2018. Andrew remarks that these name changes came as a response to the increasing quality and scope of the contributions, including those from international scholars (personal communication). The biographical profile of the journal speaks to the simultaneous shaping by and of individuals that have played a pivotal role in its existence and career thus far. However, moving from a print to an online journal is far from just a technological transfer process. The online journal as a digital object or 'thing' does not simply hark back to the scholarship of another time; it is a system intricately linked to what counts as scholarly knowledge and the 'prestige economy' (Fyfe et al. 2017: 3) of professional embodied academic lives. How, then, to shape the future of this journal and its people to maintain time-honoured periods of its biography so far yet ensure its survival in contemporary and often contested academic culture? In this editorial, I explore this question and frame this first online issue of ABR.

Academic Publishing, Tensions Past and Present

Kopytoff's (1986) essay, *the cultural biography of things*, offers an understanding of how objects, woven into the fabric of social life, move beyond use, acquire exchange value, and become commoditised. Notably, 'things' must not only be produced materially but 'culturally marked as a certain kind of thing' (Kopytoff, 1986: 64). Only some things can be marked and treated as a commodity, at some times and not others, by some people and not others, revealing a moral economy behind visible objective transactions. This process illustrates the cultural shaping of biographies. The academic journal, in print form as a material 'thing' and in an online format as a digital 'thing,' has a cultural biography. Fyfe et al. (2017) help us to understand the cultural shaping of this biography as they trace the history of academic publishing from the non-commercial mission of scholarship and sharing of knowledge via learned societies in the 18th and 19th centuries to professional employment in universities in the 19th century. The latter forged professional academic identities and culture by adapting these former scholarly cultures. Academic publishing became a means for generating income in the 20th century amid the 'serials crisis' (Douglas, 1990), where university libraries could not keep up with the growth in publishing demand. It became a tool for generating income that could be put to good purpose, for instance, by funding conferences whilst maintaining an academic mission. Following this, a new focus on 'serious' 'peer-review before publication journals' emerged that extends to the development of journal metrics today. Fyfe et al (2017) argue that the control of academic prestige was subtly transferred from communities of academic scholars to publishing organisations during this time. This meant that the academic journal became a system with claims to scholarly knowledge and therefore had a significant influence on the professional standing of academics in a prestige economy. Notable is the move of scholarly works from amateur to professional status and commercial gains, as well as its role in academic culture and professional identities.

For ABR, it is not just about a scholarly community adapting to technological innovation but about understanding a system that lays claims to scholarly knowledge and, therefore, its considerable influence on the professional standing of academics. Research publications are associated with research prestige and career progression. Put simply; they are a way for academics to measure up. Fyfe et al (2017) note the dilemma for some academics who want to maintain an amateur scholarly mission but publish under big companies because their prestige rests on it. *Auto/Biography Review* is caught up in this dilemma. This said, publishing is a form of symbolic capital and has the agentic capacity to contribute to an academic's everyday embodied processes of social differentiation and identification that Kopytoff (1986) describes. For Sparkes (2021), the academic audit culture, of which publishing is a part, can be tragic (and tragically humorous).

Sparkes reflects upon the absurdity of the comparatively different H index[1] metrics of two eminent scholars in the Auto/Biography Study Group relative to his own. He uses candid humour to observe that this metric does not reflect his (and he guesses many others') perspectives on such matters. Yet it is challenging to get beyond that metrics, like them or not, are a necessity to draw people toward a journal to publish their work. Publishing outside the established prestige-generating channels may be risky and a barrier too high. Fyfe et al. (2017) draw attention to the challenges of alternative not-for-profit models of publishing, where prestigious and familiar journals impede their progress and, as Kopytoff (1986) would term it, 'flatten' the values of the traditional scholarly mission—the amateur ethos of sharing knowledge—in pursuit of commoditisation.

Looking Ahead

According to Kopytoff (1986), exchange is a universal feature of human life, albeit different expressions of exchange related to the social system exist. As the new Editor of ABR, the challenge is that the exchange value for this community of scholars varies greatly. The group includes retired scholars, for whom metrics are of little concern, coming alongside new scholars early in their academic careers and undoubtedly feeling the pressure to make strategic publishing choices to progress their careers. How then to be all things to all people? It is not my aim to resolve these tensions in an all-or-nothing manner but to bring to light the responsibilities I and others hold as editors of journals in the current academic landscape. When taking up the role of Editor, I carefully considered ways to create a bridge for the voices in our community. I wanted early career scholars to see the journal as an outlet that might be part of their intellectual exchange with each other and those experienced voices in the community. Choosing to go online with ABR, and the methods through which we engage with online publishing models, are a response to these responsibilities.

Choosing PKP as an online host for the journal reflects a conscious choice to align with mission-driven publishing and enable publishing choices for various scholars. It can make an article more accessible and citable; all work has a DOI[2], is open access, and is indexed in a website built for discoverability. PKP offers journals like ABR self-publishing tools and services for a relatively low cost. It allows ABR to publish without a relationship with a larger publisher. The journal remains by and for the community of scholars, and most of the labour continues to be provided by volunteers committed to the Study Group.

Considering the chorus of voices linked to embodied lives and identities in the biography of this journal is, perhaps, like being a sound engineer. Faders—buttons that slide along a track to fade one music source whilst boosting another—enable you to tune into the sounds you need to hear and mask those you do not. At times, we will need to adjust to the metric-driven exchange value of the journal to ensure its viability. At others, we will fade out to listen to the whole system of reciprocal relations of kinship and community. This short piece, I hope, has illuminated some of the historical and economic forces at play in academic publishing, certainly some of which I had taken for granted before taking on this role. Fyfe et al. (2017) conclude that academic communities like this one give a solid claim to be able to set or redefine standards of scholarship within a given field, and this is a challenge I will not take lightly. In closing, a fine balance is what is needed.

The Occasion of this Issue

This ABR issue marks an important occasion in its cultural biography: The culmination of the 30th anniversary of the BSA Auto/Biography Study Group and the first online issue. To celebrate its accomplishments so far and the start of an online journey ahead, we include invited articles from our editorial board and peer-reviewed articles in this issue. With the kind permission of Dame Janet Finch, we are privileged to posthumously publish David Morgan's piece (with Michael

Erben), within which he reflects on a special place from his past. Following this, Gayle Letherby reflects on the ongoing political/personal responsibilities of past, present, and future auto/biographical work, drawing on non-motherhood and food sharing. The subject in Michael Erben's piece, Arthur Seaton, a fictional character from the post-war era, shares elements of a chaotic and anarchic life with Nod, a present-day ex-military serviceman in Frances Palmer, Katherine Howell's, and David Brown's life-history article. Finally, Rebecca Twinley considers a newly acquired identity as autistic and, simultaneously, a person with autism in her 40s. We hope these articles stir your contemplation of past, present, and future lives, stimulating important research to come.

We welcome sociologically orientated submissions that speak to a range of intersecting disciplines and fields, including but not restricted to history, geography, law and politics, psychology, health and healthcare, social work, education, work and employment, business and management, literary criticism, and the arts. We welcome all submissions through our website: https://autobiographyreview.com/index.php/abrev. Please also get in touch to discuss potential articles: ab.review@britsoc.org.uk.

Notes

1. The h-index is calculated by counting the number of publications for which an author has been cited by other authors at least that same number of times. For instance, an h index of 17 means the author has published at least 17 papers cited at least 17 times.
2. DOI stands for Digital Object Identifier.

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Author Biography

Carly Stewart is an Associate Professor and Head of the Department for People and Organisations at Bournemouth University. She is a co-convenor of the British Sociological Association Auto/biography Study Group and editor-in-chief of the BSA Auto/Biography Review journal. She is a narrative researcher of body-self relationships and identities in various disruptive and transitional contexts, including sports, health, education, employment, and the workplace. Carly is the author and co-editor of *Women's Artistic Gymnastics: Socio-cultural perspectives* (Routledge).