Narrating the Self between Heterodoxy and Tradition. The Use of Personal Documents in Late Modernity

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Abstract

Thomas and Znaniecki's highly celebrated contribution to the methodology of social research is mainly due to the kind of data they used in their well-known work *The Polish Peasant*: an enormous number of personal documents. However, treating autobiographies and personal narratives as empirical data can raise objections not only because they are reconstructive experiences, but also due to the formal characteristics of the narrative reconstruction. A tale of one's own life is, to all intents and purposes, a literary genre, which consists of a subjective selection of facts reported following rhetorical and stylistic conventions. Fiction narratives and reality narratives actually belong to the same continuum and this is quite clear from the recent trend in mixing different genres. Fictional tales are sometimes loosely based on real events. Surveys, inquiries, reports, diaries and pamphlets are often made up of a patchwork of reality and fiction. The boundaries between entertainment and information tend to disappear. In the light of this new scenario, what are the outcomes of the use of biographical documents in sociological research? Many symbolic interactionists have moved away from orthodoxy, proposed a radical use of biography and autobiographies, introduced new ways of reporting - even borrowing from the arts - and developed new techniques such as autoethnography. The aim of this paper is to analyze and discuss some recent trends in the use of personal documents, highlighting the various needs they can fulfill by improving and deepening hermeneutic approaches, and, on the other hand, the possible risks and drawbacks of the most radical choices and experimentations.

Keywords: narrations, symbolic interactionism, autoethnography.

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1. Introduction

Thomas and Znaniecki's highly celebrated contribution to the methodology of social research is mainly due to the particular kind of data they used in their well-known work *The Polish Peasant*: an enormous number of personal documents such as letters, biographies, autobiographies and life histories, which vary from the 754 letters at the core of their study to Wladeck Wisznienski's autobiography.

In their quest for the unique and innovative structure of *The Polish Peasant*, Abbott and Egloff (2008) recovered three possible sources for the use of personal documents: the casebook tradition in the social reform literature, the psychiatric concept of 'life history', and literary narrative sources. According to the authors, even if casebook genre and psychiatric case studies gave an important contribution to *The Polish Peasant*, this alone cannot explain other equally important basic features. Particularly, both the unceasing focus on the relationship of the individual personality to social change and the author's near obsession for collecting documents of all kinds are typical of literary narratives. William Thomas had been a professor of English literature as a young man, and many of the novels he chose to teach in his courses resembled the themes, narrative forms and structures that would characterize his later work with Znaniecki. The difficulty of an individual to find stable ground in a radically changing society, and the contrast between traditional town communities and modern urban societies were recurring themes in many novels listed in Thomas's course lectures, such as Dickens's *David Copperfield*, Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* and Eliot's *Romola*. Many of Thomas's favorite texts were written in the first person or as a combination of dialogue and first-person travelogue, as in the case of Thomas More's *Utopia*; many were fictional autobiographies filled with references to real life, like Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*; their narrative structures would involve 'found' autobiographical documents, diary entries, and epistolary correspondences as a literary device to add realism to the story. On the other hand, as a literature teacher, Thomas did not seem to be interested in the great 'social problems' novels of the English midcentury, but his selection focused mainly on fictional texts about the problem of individual identity in a changing world. The previous brief overview of Thomas's literary sensibility (see Abbott, Egloff, 2008) could offer a hint to the discussion about the use of personal documents as empirical data: the ambiguous relationship between documentary representation and actual experience.

Moreover, Florian Znaniecki (1939) was deeply aware of the methodological implications of using data 'originally experienced' by men or using data of 'reconstructive experiences'. According to Znaniecki, empirical data result from the standardization of original experiences, which are sensory

experiences of material data and conceptual experiences of logical data. On the other hand, as he states in the following passage:

> We cannot standardize theoretically the original experience of a pain, a dream, Mr. Pickwick, the devil, a human soul, an activity of lovemaking or planning in order to determine what these data or the activities thus experienced are objectively… The datum for scientific investigation in such case is not 'the pain as such'… but the pain as felt by the patient (Znaniecki, 1939: 801-802).

Therefore, when objects of study are human individuals or social groups, data cannot consist of 'original experiences' but of 'reconstructive experiences'. The process of reconstruction takes place firstly when one remembers, imagines, feels, perceives or dreams about something and then, when speaking or writing, one reports it to the others who become aware of his or her subjective perceptions. As Berger and Luckmann (1966) highlight, narrations are forms of interaction, and they are primary tools in the process of the construction and reconstruction of reality. According to Gubrium and Holstein (2009: 228), narratives are 'continuously unfolding accounts, whose extensions move in many directions' and they are firmly embedded in the situation: 'stories are assembled and told to someone, somewhere, at some time, for different purposes, and with a variety of consequences… The point is that the environments of storytelling mediate the internal organization and meaning of accounts' (Gubrium, Holstein, 2009: 10). If narrations have a relational nature, their meaning will arise out of social interactions: one can tell his or her own story only if there is someone else ready to listen, and readers are not passive since narrations vary according to the kind of receiver they are addressed to.

On these assumptions, Thomas and Znaniecki could claim that personal documents constituted 'perfect sociological material' and that sociologists do not generally work in a systematic way on these kinds of data only because they are difficult to collect and very hard to analyze (Thomas, Znaniecki, [1918-20] 1996: 532).

As a matter of fact, treating autobiographies and personal narratives as empirical data can raise objections not only because they are reconstructive experiences, but also due to the formal characteristics of the narrative reconstruction. A tale of one's own life is, to all intents and purposes, a literary genre which consists of a subjective selection of facts reported following rhetorical and stylistic conventions: realism is, in the end, a literary effect which cannot prove by itself the evidence of what one is reporting (Becker, 2017); and if so, fictional narratives could also be considered legitimate empirical data.

According to Philippe Lejeune (1975), the autobiographical genre is based on a contract between the author and his readers: 'the author self', 'the narrating self' and 'the narrated self' are the same, but these correspondences are constructed and taken for granted. The narrating self and the author are not necessarily the same person, and the use of the first person in narrating personal experiences is not so obvious as one might think. The use of the 'I' pronoun is a culturally constructed rhetorical convention. The way of narrating the self changes according to the consideration and relevance given to the individual in different societies. One could say that, since the perception of oneself as an individual emerges within a modern society, the autobiography is certainly the literary genre of modernity (Jedlowski, 2015). On the other hand, an autobiography in the third person could be possible too, when the author speaks about himself or herself by using the 'he' or 'she' pronoun instead of the 'I', or when an invented narrator presents the author's life story (Lejeune, Tomarken, Tomarken, 1977). Moreover, fictional narrations often report something that is just likely and not the truth in a strict sense, but a novel reporting a plausible reality could be very useful to better understand actual social phenomena. On the contrary, a true story, written just for aesthetic reasons, will not be useful if it does not help people to understand the social world better, even if it tells a very intense or a very beautiful tale (see Dal Lago, 2008).

2. Developments in investigative journalism and autobiographical literature

The existence of a continuum between fictional narratives and reality narratives emerges from analyzing the paths crossing between social sciences, journalism and literature. A case in point is that *The Polish Peasant* was published in the age of 'muckraking journalism'; moreover, Robert Park strongly affirmed that there was a close relationship between journalism and social sciences: 'If… different individuals draw different and even contradictory conclusions from the same story, well that is what news is… The fact that a news story provoked violent approval and violent disapproval from different members of the public at the same time is at least an evidence that the events were reported objectively' (Park, 1940: 108).

The previous quotation highlights how Park remarks on the need for a systematic reporting of facts; nevertheless, he assumes that objectivity and emotional tones are not contradictory in news making: they can coexist and

strengthen each other[1]. In fact, both the Chicagoan sociologists and the new breed of investigative journalists used to share the same style in reporting and presenting their first-hand observations in the field; moreover, their writing style was also deeply influenced by literature. They both expressed sympathy for the underdog, experimenting with the lifestyle of those on the margins of society, and quoting their slang expressions. Their use of empirical data and editing techniques were similar; they used to give careful descriptions rather than interpretations and abstract theorizations[2]. However, reporting facts objectively does not necessarily imply the adoption of rhetorical devices of the realistic genre.

According to Bret Schulte, following the groundbreaking approach by the muckrakers, an evolution of journalistic style took place: 'Stylistically, journalism continued to evolve, moving beyond reports simply focused on facts and into the realm of literary storytelling' (Schulte, 2014: 6). *The New Yorker* magazine, founded in 1925, introduced a new way of news reporting based on strict control on the objectivity of facts but adopting a dramatized smart style addressed to cultivated and sophisticated readers. A good example of this new trend in journalism is offered by John Hersey's 'Hiroshima', published in *The New Yorker* in 1946. Hersey follows the lives of six characters (a clerk, a physician, a tailor's widow, a Jesuit priest, a surgeon and a Methodist pastor) from the morning of the 6th of August 1946 (just before the flash of the atomic bomb) over the following six months. Once again, the adoption of rhetorical devices and narrative strategies borrowed from fiction becomes a tool to expand knowledge and include a deeper understanding of the perspective of ordinary people: 'The reader is conscious of the journalist presenting material to him. This was one of the reasons why I had experimented with the devices of fiction in doing journalism, in the hopes that my mediation would, ideally, disappear' (Hersey, in Dee, 1986, n.p.).

Writing ethnographic fieldnotes in the first person is a way to remark: 'I was there'. The typical use of the third-person in fiction implies an omniscient narrator and at same time it is a literary device to keep the author invisible and leave the readers able to relate directly to the characters of the story, and sometimes force them to imagine on their own by providing less.

On the other hand, novelists moved toward investigative journalism and contributed to the rise of a new emerging genre comprising a mixture of fiction

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[1] The 'sociological journalism' by Robert Park shared many elements with the 'literary journalism' by Jack London either for biographical similarities or for the subjects. Moreover, some of Jack London's novels, either fictional or realistic (see *South of the Slot*, 1909, and *The People from the Abyss*, 1903), closely resembled a typical Chicago style ethnography (Toscano, 2008 and 2019).

[2] This is a style that belongs, for example, to American writers such as Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, Bernard Malamud.

and reality. Authors such as Ernest Hemingway and John Dos Passos worked as war correspondents. Others, like Kurt Vonnegut, wrote fictional novels, which were the result of a hybridization of literary genres, like in the case of *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) whose sources vary from fairy tale to parable, and from autobiographical memoir to science-fiction. Mixing different kinds of registers, Vonnegut 'locates his narrative outside any particular "regime of knowledge" and well beyond any recognizable discursive discipline' (Rigney, 2009: 13). *Slaughterhouse-Five* tells the author's life story from the point of view of an invented ingenious character (Billy Pilgrim) who provides his own report of historical events of World War II. In his report there are several inaccuracies (for example, the number of victims caused by the Dresden bombing is considered overestimated), but the subjective perspective has the great advantage of translating abstractions into individual life stories. As in the case of Hersey, Vonnegut's adoption of fiction in real life reporting is a rhetorical device used in order to strengthen the objectivity of the reports. In the case of Hersey, the invented dialogues and the third person are used to avoid the narration from the point of view of the Americans. In the case of Vonnegut, the use of a science-fiction-like style is adopted to avoid the celebratory tones taken from granted in the war reportage genre:

> She thought wars were partly encouraged by books and movies. So, I held up my right hand and I made her a promise: 'Mary,' I said, 'I don't think this book of mine is ever going to be finished. I must have written five thousand pages by now, and thrown them all away. If I ever do finish it, though, I give you my word of honor: there won't be a part for Frank Sinatra or John Wayne'. 'I tell you what,' I said, 'I'll call it The Children's Crusade' (Vonnegut, 1969: 14-15).

In contemporary fiction, the quest for raw reality has reached exponential levels, and ever more sophisticated literary devices are used to give realistic effects through exciting narrating rhythms, hybridity, hyper-textuality and extra-literary sources such as fragments from legal acts, letters, e-mails, chat and telephone calls (Simonetti, 2017). Fictional novels are often based on real stories or on stories that seem plausibly real. Realistic reports such as the inquiry, the field-diary, the pamphlet and the travelogue are actually a mixture of reality and invention. Moreover, in mass media, the borderlines between entertainment and news, documentary and fiction, and everyday life and talk shows tend to vanish. Auto-fiction is the new genre, which summarizes in a quite emblematic way the late modern ambivalence between reality and hyper-reality.

These changed journalistic and literary scenarios have profoundly reshaped biographical and autobiographical narratives, and so there must have been

consequences in the use of biographical documents as data for sociological research.

3.   New trends in the use of personal documents: the Post-modern turn in Symbolic Interactionism

These consequences are visible if one considers the theoretical, epistemological and methodological changes that the sociological perspective of Symbolic Interactionism has gone through since the beginning of the 1990s. Symbolic interactionism, which began at the University of Chicago and was developed by the new American sociology of the 1960s, reached its more extreme and radical positions in the 1990s. In the light of the social transformations of the so-called postmodern society, Norman Denzin gathered around him many scholars expressing the need to acquire a new gaze. According to Denzin, society can no longer be conceived in terms of a well-integrated and functional system but has to be conceptualized as a sum of small heterogeneous fragments. There are countless social worlds and each of them offers its plausibility structure which supports the sense of a preexisting, autonomous and tangible reality, and if so, objectively reporting facts does not make any sense anymore, and the positivistic paradigm must be rejected.

> The role of the author, his or her authority, the distance or closeness to the subjects, the assumption inherent in methodologies, any methodology, the ways to report a study, the role of the audience, the nature of the text under study, all came under scrutiny. There were no new answers but many, many more questions (Fontana, 2001: 5-6).

In a postmodern society the perception of self should be redefined. The answer to the question 'who am I?' can no longer be taken for granted, and the idea of a hard and clear personality structure made of unique cognitive and emotional dispositions cannot be accepted (Kotarba, Fontana, 1984); moreover, reporting a subjective experience in the first person cannot be a pledge of objectivity: 'social selves and identities could be as superficial as the ephemeral texts, discursive structures, and appearances that human beings produced' (Katovich, Reese, 1993: 396). Each individual can tell multiple stories about their life, since they can focus on different key events; they can reinterpret their own life in the light of sharp epiphanies (Berger, Luckmann, 1966), and they can even present a distinctive dramaturgical self according to the different reference groups they participate in (Shibutani, 1955), but all narratives are 'true' since they are part of their life; even if the narratives are apparently incoherent and contradictory, they have to be taken into account by the interpreter.

Moreover, many individuals can narrate the same biographical events from different points of views. As a result, the main objects of study for sociologists are now the narrative texts and not the actual lives of the people.

The use of personal narratives belongs to the qualitative tradition of the social sciences, but in a late modern social context, personal narrations should be studied under a new light because their relationship to the objective reality has changed. Personal narratives are neither reconstructions of individual experiences, nor sources for learning the reality; they have acquired an autonomous status: they are reflections on the world and not reflections of the world. 'Of course, narratives do not establish the truth of events, nor do they reflect the truth of experience. Narratives create the very events they reflect upon' (Denzin, 2001: 60).

If one deals with the text and not with a person's life itself, sociologists will have to analyze how the text is constructed and interpreted by the reader, and the problem will no longer be a matter of checking how faithfully narrations reflect the social world; rather, it will involve focusing on biographical texts as sense-making practices, the making of a life history, the wide range of ways used to communicate individual experiences and the process of writing and telling the life story: 'I have no desire to reproduce arguments concerning the importance of maintaining some distinction between fictional (literary) and nonfictional (journalism, ethnography) texts. These are socially and politically constructed categories… No form is privileged over others; all simply perform different functions for a writer and an interpretive community' (Denzin, 2001: 7).

The previous assumptions imply two outcomes:

1. A self-referential trend: the boundaries between personal document analysis and ethnography tend to blur. In the late modernity, a widespread self-referential trend has taken place: sociologists can neither pretend to be out of the field nor report their experiences from a detached stance; ethnographic fieldnotes are autobiographical documents; one cannot omit one's emotional and subjective involvement with the people and the situation one is studying, and fieldwork has to be conceived as a self-referential practice. This explains the increasing number of auto-ethnographies in the last few years, a technique widely adopted even by scholars who do not directly recognize themselves within Denzin's entourage (see Ellis, 2004).

2. A literary narrative trend: the boundaries between fiction and reality tend to blur. Since 'fiction' and 'reality' are socially and politically constructed categories, creative writing is allowed to enter the sociological terrain, not only because it can help to offer vivid and useful teaching tools, but also because it produces research data. According to Laurel Richardson (1999),

the notion of personal documents has to be extended to all the so-called forms of 'Creative Analytic Practice' (CAP) which includes many different narrative forms, such as stories, poetry, performance texts, polyvocal texts, readers' theater, responsive readings, aphorisms, comedy and satire, visual presentations, allegory, conversation, layered accounts, writing-stories and mixed genres. 'The narrative genres have been blurred, enlarged, altered to include poetry, drama, conversations, readers' theater, and so on' (Richardson, 2000: 929).

3.1 From Interpretive biography to interpretive auto-ethnography

At the beginning of the postmodern turn, particularly in the early 2000s, artistic performances seemed to play a central role among all the other creative analytical practice[3]. In his manifesto, *The Call to Performance* (2003), Denzin suggests that symbolic interactionists should adopt a performance-based approach as a way to give new life to the heritage by Mead and Blumer. On the other hand, in the same article, he foreshadows a move to auto-ethnography: 'We need to explore performance autoethnography as a vehicle for enacting a performative cultural politics of hope. I have outlined provisional interpretive criteria for others to evaluate and continue this important work' (Denzin, 2003: 202). As a result, in the following years autoethnographies exceeded by far all the other innovative research techniques; they were adopted even by mainstream sociologists who did not seem to accept radical or anti-positivistic instances and they were regularly published by mainstream academic journals such as *The Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* and *Ethnography* (Ellis, 2004; Anderson, 2006).

Reflexivity in sociology is an assumption, and sociological research cannot overlook 'a self analysis of the sociologist as cultural producer and a reflection on the socio-historical condition of possibility of a science of society' (Bourdieu, Wacquant, 1992: 36); in other words, the researcher has to start his sociological inquiry by investigating his position in the field. As a matter of fact, in autoethnography, the reflexivity bias is so radical that the research focus becomes the author himself or herself, as in the works by Carolyn Ellis, a pioneer of this innovative practice. According to her definition, auto-ethnography is an:

> Autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Back and forth autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of the personal experience;

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[3] See also Toscano (2008).

then they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract and resist cultural interpretations (Ellis, Bochner, 2000: 739).

Ellis's autoethnographies are based mainly on her own personal losses, traumas and bereavements, such as the death of her brother in an airplane accident (1993), an encounter in a restaurant with a friend dying of Aids (1995a), her nine-year struggle with the chronic emphysema and death of her husband (1995b) and the assistance needed by her elderly mother (2001). Her purpose is to show the extent to which her emotional experience influenced what she saw; there is hardly any sociological interpretation in her early writings - her own emotions are just reported but not analyzed; she offers what seems to be a therapeutic approach either for herself and her readers in the name of 'an imperative to personalize and humanize sociology' (Ellis, 1995a: 9). Following this self-referential trend, along with Carolyn Ellis, other interactionists published autoethographies focused on private events of their lives, such as Lauren Richardson (1997) who describes the backstage of her academic life and Arthur Frank (2002) who reflects on illness, reporting the restructuring of his own self from person to oncological patient.

However, in the second half of the 2000s, qualitative sociologists seem to be less interested in self-referential practices, and new forms of auto-ethnographies were introduced, such as the collaborative auto-ethnography, the relational auto-ethnography and the evocative auto-ethnography.

In 2009, Carolyn Ellis (2013) started a research project based on the life histories of Holocaust survivors, adopting the approach of collaborative witnessing and developing an innovative form of relational auto-ethnography[4]. The project began with conventional in-depth interviews with forty-five survivors; subsequently, a small number of interviewees were selected among those interested in continuing to talk about their experiences. In particular, the contribution by survivor Jerry Rawicki was crucial in providing additional stories, concrete details and emotional context and he was considered the actual co-author of the study. In fact, the interaction between Ellis and Rawicki was so intense that: 'by the end, our roles overlapped so that analysis joined with storytelling, with Jerry offering analytic insight and I, using all the detail that Jerry provided, becoming a storyteller' (Ellis, Rawicki, 2013: 267).

In a sense, relational and collaborative autoethnographies move away from the early self-center bias based on the assumption that it is not possible to report the lives of others since we cannot get rid of our conceptual categories and we

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[4] Ellis also directed a 45-minute documentary about survivor Jerry Rawicki's first visit in Poland since the Holocaust in 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w9es0TQkj8s

can make sense only of our subjective experiences. In collaborative ethnographies, researchers are required to distance themselves from personal experiences and take the role of the other as fully as they can and 'consider why, given their histories and location as well as their reflexive processes, they act on the world and respond the way they do' (Ellis, Rawicki, 2013: 376). This is a clear recall of the original notion of role-taking, as defined by Mead. On the other hand, the role-taking process emerges from intense dyadic or group interactions:

> Collaborative autoethnography (CAE) is a qualitative research method that is simultaneously collaborative, autobiographical and ethnographic. Putting these three terms together in one definition may appear to be oximoric. Ethnography, for example, is the study of cultural groups; therefore, pairing it with autobiography, for example, the study of self, seems contradictory. Despite the seeming inconsistency, some qualitative researchers have succeeded in joining these two conceptual opposites to create a research method called autoethnography (AE). To this relatively recent approach to qualitative inquiry, we are adding another dimension – collaboration (Chang et al., 2013: 8).

In collaborative auto-ethnography, researchers and studied subjects are peers - they are involved in discussions, experiencing and reflecting on the same phenomena, and in so doing themes emerge from interactions, and some of the participants may report personal experiences and solicit the others for analysis and interpretation; in the course of the interaction, relationships deepen and the early definitions of the situation could be revised. For example, in the study by Ellis on the Holocaust, Jerry Rawicki used to refer to 'luck' as the only explanation for his survival; at the end of the collaborative interaction, Ellis succeeded in persuading Rawicki to develop a more elaborate sense-making pattern which could overcome the stereotype of the Jews passively failing to resist during the Holocaust (Ellis, Rawicki, 2013).

A recent collaborative autoethnography by Edward Sumerau and Alexandra Nowakowski (2019) faces the same methodological issues. Once again, the sociologist (Sumerau) and the studied subject (Nowakowski) overlap their roles and cooperate in studying patients' reframing process of their health and illness as a result of the redefinitions of new diagnostic information. The co-author of the study (Alexandra Nowakowski) was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis after years of misdiagnosis; she produced field notes about her own experience and her notes were shared with the second author (sociologist Edward Sumerau) who played the role of the 'outsider'. He conducted his analysis from an external perspective, then sent back his manuscript to Nowakowski; the draft was shared back and forth several times between the

two co-authors and the final text emerged from their interaction. The final result was:

> an in-depth critical analysis of the most common themes in the first author's experience of adapting to the reframing of her health and illness status after a new diagnosis, situated simultaneously in the insights and standpoints of both authors and focused on the experience with suggestions for further theorizing and applicability in future studies (Nowakowski, Sumerau, 2019: 727).

What seems to characterize these new forms of authoethnography is the need to soften the most radical choices of the early experimentations, to reconnect to classical interactionist sensitizing concepts and take a broad view, placing the study results within the perspective of the public issues.

3.2 From evocative autoethnography to social fiction

Carolyn Ellis's exploration in new ethnographic approaches took a step forward in 2016 when she published *Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Lives and Telling Stories*, co-authored by Arthur Bochner. The book faces a well-known problem of academic writing: the need for objectivity and generalizations forces social scientists to express concepts in an obscure style that is hard to read. According to Ellis and Bochner, it is time sociologists wrote in a clear and effective way, and evocative writing can help to fulfill this purpose; the book itself is not the classic university handbook but it is presented as a fictional tale about an academic seminar. On the other hand, the evocative effect is not just a means to reach a wider audience; it is also a response to the detractors of autoethnographers accused of being self-centered and not able to generalize their experiences in the field, since an evocative auto-ethnographic narration transcends the particular portrayed situation and gives the research results wider scope.

> 'When you write an empirical research paper for the first time - even the first few times - you may feel unprepared, even intimidated. I know I did, because I hadn't received any specific instruction on how to write a research article. Why not? Why did I have to fly by the seats of my pants? Because I was being trained as a researcher, not educated as a writer. After all, researchers in the social sciences don't have to be storytellers'. Art walks toward the whiteboard, stops suddenly, then turns back quickly. 'Or do they?' He asks' (Bochner, Ellis, 2016).

The evocative effect is performed with the adoption of literary techniques (for example, adding dialogues and giving voice to the characters), which helps

to report vivid images, stimulating imagination and emotionally involving the readers in the storytelling. Nevertheless, if sociologists are storytellers, the borderline between reality and fiction once again tends to become vague:

> As I said, I don't consider 'Bird on the Wire' to be a work of fiction. Even if it were, I would not want you to underestimate its potential as a means of expressing truth. The best fiction succeeds because it is true to life… Besides, we don't need to inhabit the actual in order to satisfy our hunger for the real. Evocative autoethnography shares with fiction the desire to produce the effect of reality, verisimilitude, which seeks a likeness to life. I think of this kind of production as a performance of truth. Whether containing elements of fiction or not, an autoethnographic narrative must be true to life (Bochner, Ellis, 2016: 243).

Andrea Fontana (2001) reports an emblematic argument concerning Carolyn Ellis's (1993) essay on the death of her brother in a plane crash. After reading the paper to his students, Gary Alan Fine told them that Ellis did not have a brother. 'Since the essay intensely describes real feelings' asked Fine 'Would it make any difference?' It was, of course, a provocative question; anyhow, according to the most radical among the auto-ethnographers, it would not make any difference.

This is the case, for example, of the novel *Cigarettes & Wine* (2017) by Edward Sumerau. Sumerau's book is an example of the literary genre named Social Fiction that has recently become trendy. The Danish Sense Publisher has even introduced a book series dedicated to Social Fiction, which includes academic postmodernists such as Laurel Richardson or former academics such as Patricia Leavy. *Cigarettes & Wine* (2017) is a fictional account of the social world of LGBT people, grounded in Sumerau's personal experience. Its main purpose is to evoke an emotional response in the readers by displaying the internal psychological turmoil of the invented, but verisimilar, characters of the novel. Any reference to real data is lacking in the narration, but at the same time, this work can be considered the development and logical conclusion to the postmodernist assumption that producing valid and reliable ethnographic accounts is impossible. As one can well imagine, pushing the borders of qualitative inquiry even further involves an ultimate step: breaking the grounding conventions of the academic world and leaving it behind forever. This is the case of Patricia Leavy, a former academic sociologist who started her career adopting a standard qualitative approach (Leavy, Gnong, Sardi Ross, 2009), but whose interest in new methodologies (Hesse-Biber, Leavy, 2008) led her to develop what she calls Arts-Based Research:

I often get asked about the difference between a novel I would write as research and one a novelist would write, as a work of fiction… In my own work I think of both the process and outcome as arts-based. During my research and writing process I work rigorously with literary tools and so the process itself is grounded in the arts just as much as the research. I used literary impressionism, narrative gaps and other literary or artistic tools during the entire process. Then of course the end result, the novel, is itself arts-based. I consider my novels both art and research, or arts-based, because of both the process and the intent in creating them (Jones, Leavy, 2014: 2).

According to Leavy, her departure from Academia was not caused by ostracism or by gatekeeping processes; it was a necessary choice due to the need to follow the developments of her research interests:

It's funny because when I published my first novel, Low-Fat Love, I received countless emails from colleagues including many scholars I have long admired but never met, all telling me I was brave… Of course, people also ask if something 'happened' at my job, which couldn't be further from the truth and makes me laugh. I had a fantastic position and supportive colleagues. But the bravery thing is kind of funny because while I appreciate the compliment, I didn't see the decision to write arts-based novels as brave or the decision to leave academia to be independent. For me it simply had to be this way (Jones, Leavy, 2014: 4).

However, leaving a social world does imply entering a new one, which in the case of Leavy is the world of commercial publishing houses, with its own rules and legitimating mechanisms strictly controlled by the goal of reaching the widest and most heterogeneous mass of readers. On the other hand, social worlds tend to react to heterodoxy as a form of integrity defense for the violation of their legitimating conventions (Strauss, 1982); moreover, mainstream sociologists raised a lot of criticism against radical approaches.

4. Conclusions

Paul Atkinson and Sara Delamont are among the most severe critics of auto-ethnography and its current developments. Delamont (2007) highlights that:

Sociologists are a privileged group. Qualitative sociologists are particularly lucky as our work lasts: what sociology is remembered for – the great ethnographies: City of Women (Landes, 1947), The Silent Dialogue (Olesen and Whittaker, 1968), Street Corner Society (Whyte, 1955), Boys in White

(Becker et al., 1961), Tally's Corner (Liebow, 1967). Autoethnography is an abuse of that privilege – our duty is to go out and research the classic texts of 2050 or 2090 – not sit in our homes focusing on ourselves' (Delamont, 2007, www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/qualiti/QualitativeResearcher/QR_Issue4_Feb07).

Moreover, she adds that autoethnographies are ethically questionable, since private narrations also involve subjects who may feel they are being violated in their personal lives. In the end, according to Delamont, autoethnographers elude the well-known advice by Howard Becker ('being on the side of the underdog'), since their texts focus on the powerful. Paul Atkinson addresses his critical remarks both to self-referential and narrative trends which: 'strip research of any coherent account of the social, they lack any sense of encounters and of interaction, they deny any possibility of sustained understanding of the socially or culturally "other"'. Rather, they are preoccupied with the self, with essentialized identities, and with personal experience. They admit of no sustained, systematic sociological analysis' (Atkinson, 2015: 468).

Specifically referring to Social Fiction, Atkinson (2015) uses the expressions 'sentimental realism' and 'narrative reductionism'. This means that in the end, literary auto-ethnographies are not so innovative as they proclaim to be. Social fictions are naïve forms of representations; they are first-person narratives, which on one hand ignore modern literary experimentations (like 'the death of the author'), and on the other hand are hyper-reflexive and obsessed with the self of the author, which reveals their fundamental absence of 'the social'.

Assuming softer tones, Gary Alan Fine (1993) highlights the fact that writing is an essential part of doing ethnography since ethnography consists of converting sensory experiences into texts. Therefore, ethnographers are required to improve their writing skills, and postmodernists are generally good writers. However, effective prose could not make up for poor ethnographic data; besides, many literary ethnographies do not make the interpretation of the experiences they report explicit, and they do not give readers analyzing keys: auto-ethnographers just give us stimuli, but, according to Fine, we do not know what they want us to think.

However, these issues are not new; there was still a lot of controversy when *The Polish Peasant* was first published, and the doubts raised by Herbert Blumer (1939) about the legitimate use of personal documents in sociology are well known. What seems to be implicit in the classic and contemporary argument is the reference to Charles Wright Mills' *Sociological Imagination*, and to his advice to connect public issues and personal troubles. As Fine (1993) states, in the early auto-ethnographic experiments the connection to 'public issues', as advocated by Mills, was often lacking, and there was hardly any reference to sensitizing

concepts or analytic frameworks. In the following years, collaborative and evocative auto-ethnographies were introduced also as a response to the critics; in fact, they tried to develop highly crafted forms of role-taking to involve the readers emotionally, and in so doing trying to locate subjective experiences in a broader perspective. On the other hand, it is out of the question that focusing on the self and subjectivity belongs to the tradition of symbolic interactionism: the self is a social construct and if so, it belongs to 'the social'.

However, in spite of criticism, auto-ethnographic practices have apparently been getting ever more pervasive in the last few years[5]. On the one hand, Denzin tends to incorporate traditional personal document analysis within autoethnography, as it appears from the 2014 edition of his classic handbook of biographical sociology, whose traditional title, *Interpretive Biography*, was replaced by a new one: *Interpretive Autoethnography* (Denzin, 2014). On the other hand, more conventional and reverent forms of autoethnography have been introduced, like the 'analytical autoethnography' which seems to move towards mainstream sociology (see Anderson, 2006, and Gariglio, 2017).

Even if over time the use of personal documents has been reshaped, criticized, praised, radicalized and standardized, the teaching of *The Polish Peasant* seems to be still alive and in progress. Ken Plummer, whose contribution to the study of documents of life is a milestone in the biographical sociology, confirms it. Plummer has recently highlighted the pervasive nature of narrations and storytelling (Plummer, 2019): in order to be defined social, events will have to be narrated; society is narrated, and narrations are social. The idea of narrations as mirrors of society is misleading since it assumes that it is possible to detach narrations and storytelling from social life. The development of a humanistic approach to the social, which is at the roots of Thomas and Znaniecki's work (Znaniecki, 1969), is closely connected to a focus on the narrated self.

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[5] Even if it is mostly spread in the United States, the auto-ethnographic trend is not limited to Anglo-Saxon countries. In Italy, for example, there are few but interesting experiments, see for example Perrotta (2012), and Barnao (2017).

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