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TELLING AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC AND SOCIOLOGICAL STORIES OF SOCIAL CLASS

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Abstract

In this paper, autoethnographic writing is used to try to understand how my life, life chances, choices, and opportunities have been influenced by social class. I outline an approach to autoethnography, drawing on the work of C. Wright Mills and Norbert Elias, and consider why sociologists are storytellers and what they share with other literary traditions. The discussion also explores the relationality of stories as collective experiences rather than ego-driven accounts of uniqueness. Two stories relating to working-class life and community are offered, dealing in turn with 'work' and 'holidays'. Themes from the stories are considered, and the paper concludes with a reflection on how the experiences captured in the stories have shaped my sociological orientation. That is, I approach sociology in the same class-based way I practise my work, through craft, skills, applied knowledge, and hard work, as did my father and grandfather. A brief consideration of relational ethics is also provided as a context to autoethnographic practice.

Keywords

Autoethnography, Storytelling, Social Class, Family. Work. Holidays. Community

Introduction

> *We longed to use and/or develop forms of expressing lived experiences in which we wouldn't have to suppress our own subjectivity…where we would feel free to reflect on the consequences of our work not only for others but also for ourselves*. (Bochner 2017: 69)

The desire to 'express subjective lived experiences' has led me, like many others, to use autoethnographic writing to explore my 'subjective' stories and how these narratives have shaped my writing and research (see Bochner and Ellis 2016; Fowler 2021; Beattie 2024). Specifically, over the last few years, I have aimed to reflect on and seek to understand how my life, life chances, choices, and opportunities have been influenced by social class. Indeed, being a working-class 'school failure' from a coal mining community in northern England (see Goodwin 2016), social class has always 'loomed large' in my biographical experiences. Class has appeared at various points throughout my career. Indeed, since my early experiences working at a university, I have been aware that my social class background has shaped my sociological perspective and the analytical and interpretive lens I use. I am interested in exploring answers to questions such as how have everyday experiences later shaped my focus and informed some of my concerns? Perhaps autoethnographic storytelling can serve a revelatory function.

Autoethnographic practice provides a framework for reflecting on and interpreting our own subjectivities and, consistent with much reflexive social science research, focuses the researcher's (in this case, my) experience as central to the problem being analysed or critically examined. It requires applying academic questions to our experiences, as one would with any research scheme or problem (Ellis 2004; Bochner and Ellis 2016; Beattie 2024). Indeed, autoethnography requires a careful evaluation of how our lived experiences serve as a lens through which we interpret the world and inform or frame our interests (Dieumegard *et al.*, 2021), reflecting or capturing the broader trends, social phenomena, and behavioural standards of the era in which the researcher lives. Relatedly, as Norbert Elias (1956) advocates, sociologists must gain insights through 'a detour via detachment'. Autoethnographic enquiry is well-suited to a 'detour via detachment', as this process problematises our inherent involvement in our social world by stepping back or suspending our emotional, fantastical, practical, and relational concerns (see Elias 1997). Such a detour via detachment should not be confused with 'objectivity' but instead represents the pursuit of more reality-congruent insights, as involvement and detachment lie on a continuum rather

than at extremes. For autoethnographic practice, sociologists need to recognise what we are 'emotionally involved in', briefly distance themselves from these involvements so that they may learn how '*things are'*, not how they 'should be', 'might be' or 'hope to be' (see Dunning and Hughes 2012).

To support the writing process, several guiding positions or starting points have shaped my approach to autoethnography. First, storytelling remains central to the sociologist's craft. That is to say, sociologists 'tell stories'. Whether the story is based on data from large-scale quantitative surveys, focus groups, observation methods, or interviews, the data is organised to craft a narrative and convey meaning via a story. These stories can concern the lives of others or our own. In *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), Mills describes tools and skills that enable an authentic portrayal of lives, understanding, explaining, and narrating how history and biographies intersect. Mills also aimed to explore how we write.

> *We've got to work out new forms of writing – using some fictional techniques and some reportage tricks* (Mills 1957: 220)

The call to fictional techniques, the desire to convey a message or, as Wakfield (1971) outlines, Mills also aimed to dramatize personal and shared stories, along with their intricate relationships, to 'tell those stories' more effectively and to illuminate 'private troubles and public issues (Mills 1959). We can use data in all its forms and present it in various ways to tell sociological stories as effectively as possible. What Mills also suggests is the potential for the sociological craft to overlap with other writing practices, such as those underpinning fiction, prose, and poetry. For instance, what is notable about John Steinbeck is his use of ethnographic and observational data collection methods. In *Travels with Charley* (1962), Steinbeck describes an immersive process of collecting literary source materials, which involved travelling across the United States, stopping where people gathered to observe, listen, and 'feel' for the material for his writings. Similarly, Stephen King (2000) in *On Writing* proposes that writing involves paying close attention to the behaviours of those around you and truthfully recounting what you see. Others, like Storr (2019), highlight moments of 'unexpected change' or information gaps as the starting points for stories or plot twists. All of this aligns with the practices Mills (1959) described and aspired to. What sociologists do and what writers do — create a file, go out and observe, record, and reflect — we pay attention to people, document their stories, and then 'storify' (Mills 1959; Goodwin 2022). This implies that such autoethnographic stories can also be exploratory, used as starting or concluding points, and may be revelatory in both form and process.

Second, individual stories have inherent sociological value. If we want to understand the broader narrative arc of history, we can do so by capturing the stories embedded within people's biographies. As Assmann (2001) suggests:

> *It is true that personal memories of history differ as one individual's life differs from another's. This, however, does not exclude certain similarities arising from biographical patterns.* (Assmann 2001: 6822)

As such, biographies share similarities, which in turn means that the individual story serves as a basic vehicle for illuminating this grand arc of history. History is a composite of our relationships that evolve over time, and the 'answers' found in our personal stories and autobiographical experiences can, in turn, be used to consider the 'bigger' sociological, psychosocial, geographical, cultural, or political themes that are the focus of our intellectual life. Some may see little analytical value in the 'individual story' and argue that it is neither 'good social science' nor 'reliable', 'robust', or valid. What can you possibly deduce about society from one person's life? However, it depends on how one understands society. If you conceptualise society as relational—that is, your biography reflects the biography of the people you live with, your workplace, your community, and your culture—it can reveal quite a lot. Elias (2001) explains this differently and encourages us to view the 'I' as a plurality. Elias argues that 'I' cannot exist in isolation from everything else around it, and it must be plural, unless you live in a vacuum and are devoid of any interaction at all. The story tells us so much. Indeed, studying the 'I' or the individual story, we gain insights into broader social relationships or interwoven biographies (Stanley and Morgan 1993: 3), at that specific time or in particular places. This power of the individual story was well understood by past sociologists such as Pearl Jephcott (1900-1980). Jephcott, in her book *Girls Growing Up in Britain* (1942), gave working-class girls and working-class communities a voice. Jephcott did this without side or angle, no reinterpretation of their stories, no editing. Jephcott presented stories in their own words (see Goodwin and O'Connor 2015; Goodwin 2018). For example, she begins *Girls Growing Up* with *'One Girls Story by Mary Smith'*.

> *Once more we gabbled rather than sang the old vesper hymn and thought how many more times we'd have to sing it, we've had to sing it for the last 8 years and still another year of school yet. I started school at the age of 5 in 1926….* (Jephcott 1942: 11)

Jephcott's stories speak directly to the personal troubles of being a young person in the UK in the 1940s. The stories tell us about education, religion and class. They can also serve as a maker against which we can understand continuities and changes in what society was like then and how it is now.

Finally, social class is experiential and less about 'structures' or 'classifications' but. It is lived, a form of habitus with its own set of behavioural standards (Charlesworth 2000). Class is a community of practice – a set of behavioural standards, a way of being and doing. As a child, you are on the periphery of a class group, but you move to the centre of that habitus through interactions with family and community. This relational web is 'who we are'. This is not to imply homogeneity, as even within class groups there is a variety of habituated behavioural standards that inform individual family-community orientations to the world (see Elias and Scotson 2008; Jephcott et al 1954). However, social class is embedded within the minutiae of everyday practices — ways of doing things, experiencing things, and understanding. The reality of class is in the details, and such information shapes one's outlook.

In the remainder of this paper, I offer two autoethnographic stories about social class: *Socks on the Settee* and *Holidays by the Sea.* In the stories I consider my own perspective on, and memory of, certain life events rooted in the working-class culture of my childhood. I will offer some context and reflections on the stories before finishing the paper with thoughts on how stories like this have shaped my sociological orientation.

Ethical Considerations

In all autoethnography, there are tensions between self/other, truth/privacy, vulnerability/rigour, and personal story versus cultural and social responsibility. There are no straightforward solutions to these tensions, and the autoethnographer must maintain an ongoing commitment to reflexive and dialogic practice in the face of both constant and emergent ethical challenges. This is a mindfulness towards the privacy of others, managing self-disclosure whilst remaining truthful. While I have the 'right' to tell these stories, I have to be cognisant of the fact that autobiographical stories are not stories of 'ego-dependent uniqueness' but are inherently relational. That is the point – 'my story' is a plurality of relationships and intersecting stories, shared experiences and memories, although both those memories and shared experiences of events may also differ and not be the same, but vary by standpoint, involvement and recall. As such, there is a need to be attentive to what has been termed relational ethics (see Ellis 2007) in the context of autoethnographic writing. Relational ethics underpins modern autoethnography and requires the writing to transcend the notion of the self-story and to reflect on how others are represented and on the overlapping and related stories they tell. Although these are my reflections, they include family members, living and dead. As such, I have discussed the issue of consent as well as key themes of these stories, and my memories of them, with close relatives. Such a dialogue serves as a check and balance, ensuring that stories are more of a negotiated outcome and that stories represent events and people authentically, responsibly, and in the context of an ethic of care (see Adams and Manning 2015; Bochner and Ellis 2016).

Sociological Storytelling: Two Stories of Social Class

[1] Socks on the Settee

I grew up in a terraced house in northern England—a family home since 1964. My dad was an electrician who served his apprenticeship in the coal industry. He had an allotment where he grew vegetables. My mum was disabled but, in her earlier years, had worked in a factory making coffin liners. My sister trained to be a secretary. Like his father, my maternal grandfather was a navvy; he dug holes in roads. My maternal grandmother was an expert at cooking and making the little food she had stretch to feed an extended family. She created imaginative dishes with offal or wild rabbits that had been dropped over the fence by a relative with 'poaching skills'. Along with inexpensive cuts of meat such as calf's head, all combined with pastry and gravy, this was the food of my childhood. My paternal grandfather was a metalworker for British Rail, making railway coaches during the week and laying railway track on weekends to boost his income. My brother-in-law was a miner, as were various uncles, neighbours, and friends, until the Thatcher government of the 1980s closed the pits. Many memories and mental images of my childhood remain. Small, mundane snapshots of events, times, and occasions that capture the relational aspects of everyday life. In this first story, I consider the role of work and how it intersects with the domestic space. It is a story of my father's everyday routine at home, which for me came to symbolise industrial accidents and the heavy industry he worked in as a younger man. It's typical of our social class – how continuous physical labour (of 'real work') is evidenced in later life by damaged hips, arthritic hands and knees, missing fingers, and 'bad feet'.

> *Work has played a key role in my life since childhood, and that is reflective of the community in which I grew up. People went to work, people worked hard, and people were tired from their days at*

work. Work was the thing that you did from early morning to early evening and was the inevitability for all after leaving school at age 15 or 16.

At home, my mum and my grandmother spoke most about work. I knew that my grandmother, as well as being cook, worked in a factory that made products for the dairy industry. She made rings that went through bulls' noses. I'm not sure why, but I always found that quite interesting - an exotic job to do, something unusual yet practical and mundane. Making the metal rings allowed farmers to tie up the cattle. My mother told us stories about working in paper products in a large paper mill. Variously, she made paper-based coffin liners, women's sanitary products and those little paper doilies or coasters used to put around the bottom of glasses of Irish coffee in a chain of steak restaurants in the 70s and 80s — circles of absorbent paper to mop up those coffee spills of after-food revelry.

Their stories reflected some of the humdrum aspects of the work but also of the community and the joys of working with the 'girls' on the floor or in the factory—the days out, the social events, the weddings. What about the men?

My maternal grandad was a 'navvy'. He dug holes and trenches, working on the roads or any other major construction projects as required. He got partly buried in a hole in the 1960s, which led to a permanent injury to his leg and hip. He swapped hard physical manual labour for singing in pubs – standing at the piano being paid in pints of beer before moving on to the next pub, the next song and the next pint. If he wasn't singing, he would be playing 'fives and threes', a game of dominoes that was an expensive early life lesson for me, losing to an experienced 'crafty' player who could concentrate despite being many pints in. I struggled to keep up with the game when sober.

But for all of the stories the thing that stands out in my mind are my dad's socks on the settee. More precisely, my dad's socks that were neatly folded over the arm of the settee every weekday evening.

My dad never talked about work when I was young. Yet I knew my dad worked hard. I knew it was physical and dirty. He always had a bit of an oily hue in the creases on his hands. The way he slept in this post-evening meal slumber suggested real tiredness. A sleep from which neither my sister nor I would have better not wake him.

But the socks? Dad would come home for after work, eat and then fall asleep in his chair one leg draped over the arm. Before drifting off, he would ritually take off his socks. Place them neatly over the other arm of the settee. They would dangle, greenish grey, neatly placed but discarded.

Dad was always keen to discard his socks. In the mid 1970s be bought clogs to wear – sockless and that was embarrassing to us kids. When we went on holiday as soon as we arrived, he would take off his heavy work boots, to feel the air, sand and water between his toes. He would not wear shoes or socks all the time was there if he could help it.

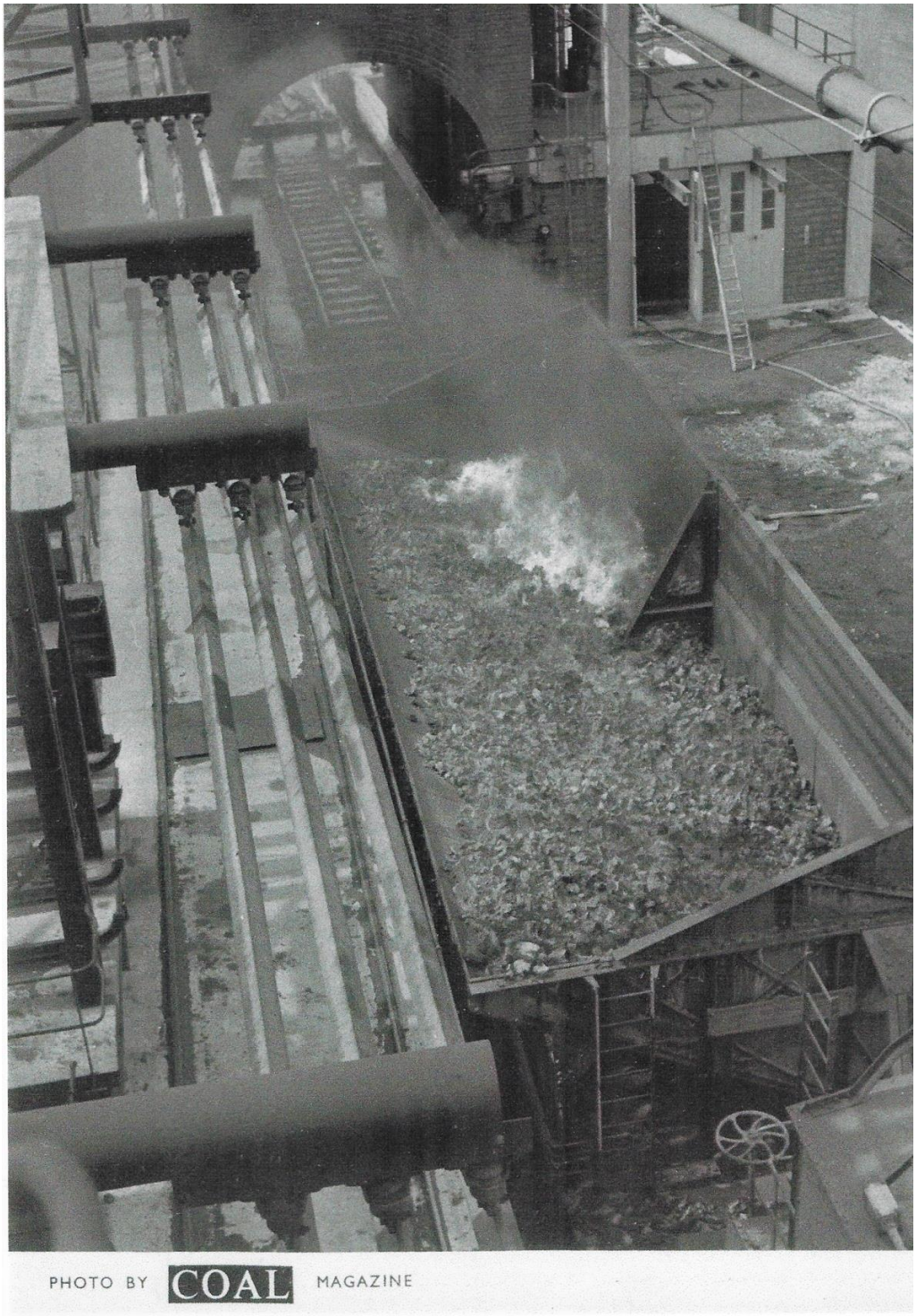

Image 1: 'Hot Coke' from *Coal* magazine (NCB), Nov. 1956, p. 16.

But why the socks? Dad only began to talk about work once he had left it behind and retired. The physical scars of a manual trade had replaced the oily hue on his hands. The aches and pains. The weakening grip and his frustration at his declining strength. So it was only years later, when talking to my dad about his stories of work, that the sock memories and the reasons behind their immediate removal became clear.

> *My dad had been an apprentice electrician in the National Coal Board. In his early career, he worked mainly in the carbonisation plants of Northeast Derbyshire – these plants converted coal into coke, a high-carbon smokeless fuel. As a young electrician, not knowing any better, he got stuck while working. To escape, he jumped and landed on top of one of the coke hoppers – the heat was such that the soles of his boots instantly melted.*
>
> *The socks on the settee – a random, mundane childhood memory – told a story of my dad and work in a way I would never have known as a child. He wasn't badly injured – he could have been seriously injured – but the soles of his feet always yearned for fresh air and freedom. To be cool, unconfined, be sockless, shoeless….and free.*

There are multiple intertwined stories here in this short account. Stories that point to 'making do' or having very little materially, factory life or times spent on 'the machines'. Of lives at home or in the pub. However, there are two stories that I want to consider a little further. Both my grandfather and my father experienced industrial injuries. In my grandfather's case, the injury ended his working life. In the case of my father, it left sufficient physical and emotional scars, a literal searing of the memory of work boots being melted by burning coal. These are personal troubles and public issues. Injuries that impact the men personally but reflect he public issues of the dangers of working-class life and the routinised manner in which they can become injured set against the backdrop of limited state support or sympathy. Their stories reflect those we can read elsewhere. My father and grandfather could be, albeit underdeveloped, characters in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), or feature in Orwell's *Road to Wigan Pier* (1932) or Down and Out in Paris and London (1933) or Sillitoe's (1958) *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958). Orwell (1932) is particularly insightful: when he writes about industrial injuries or deaths at work among working-class communities in Britain, he also emphasises that they were so routine and commonplace as to become unremarkable everyday. Injury at work or something to be expected. As Jackson (1968) discusses:

> *…disablement was an everyday fact of working in the mill…. The man who swept up at heart disease; a man who brought round the tea only one good arm… a minor accident threw up a whole crop of reminiscences from men in the shed of accidents to themselves or to near relatives; of broken bones, torn limbs and bad burns; cases of people who have been rendered incapable of doing their skilled work.* (Jackson 1968: 82)

The everydayness of the injuries is captured in a childhood memory of socks neatly folded. Socks serve as relational clues to the working lives of men in that community. However, a note of caution. It would be easy to offer a romanticised view of the past and of these men. Easy because they are people I love or have loved and members of my family. That is not the intention here. There is no objective to glorify working-class masculinity or the hard physical labour that men in working-class communities endured. More to highlight the fact that within my own ethnographic stories are experiences that are typical of a whole community. Experiences that are reality-congruent, pointing to the real physical demands and challenges of being a navvy worker in a coking plant.

[2] Holidays by the Sea

In direct contrast to the hard physical labour enjoyed by many working-class communities, there were leisure activities and, if lucky, the annual holiday to the 'seaside'. The promise of fresh air and big blue skies was a direct contrast to the grime of heavy industry or the darkness and claustrophobia of working in a coal mine. Surprisingly, there are few detailed first-hand sociological accounts of working-class holidays, although holidays and trips to coastal resorts are mentioned more frequently in social histories (see, for example, Walton 1981; 1996; Cross 2006). Documenting my holiday experiences had been something I considered doing for a while. About ten years ago, I produced a calendar that combined 'then and now' photographs of our family holidaying in the same location over the span of about fifty years. I had wondered about looking back through family photographs and used the hundreds of these images as a starting point for my next autoethnographic writing.

> *We never went to Benidorm, nor did we go to Tenerife. We didn't even go to Devon or Cornwall. They were far too 'down south' for a family without a car. I didn't really fly anywhere until I was in my early twenties. Travel, for me, meant one thing, and holidays were always to one place. A seaside town on the east coast of England*
>
> *Even by the 1970s, it was a faded seaside town, yet also a place of freedom. A place of golden sands and endless sunshine. Full days on the beach. Full days on the beach were a badge of honour. If you could stay on the beach all day without going back to the caravan, stay on the*

beach regardless of the weather. We would arrive about 8:30 in the morning and around teatime Mum would say, 'Oh we've been here all day'.

I'd go to the seaside town on holiday as a child, then in my teens, and then as a parent myself of two boys. Colleagues would say, 'why on earth do you go there? It's a dump; there's nothing there, it's 'kiss me quick hats', fish and chips, bucket and spades, and sand'. The fact is, I hadn't really been anywhere else. My family never went anywhere else. It started with my grandparents, aunts, cousins, and extended family, who never went anywhere else. We went to the seaside town for a week or so each year. Rain or shine. For me, it wasn't a dump. For me, it was freedom. It was time away to do the things I wanted to do.

Image 2: Family at the Seaside, 1972

Digitised by Author.

My grandmother began going to this seaside town in the late 1930s. She went with her family, and then she took her six children. Then it expanded to the grandchildren, the in-laws, the wider family—the same family from home but in a different place. It's holidays as social reproduction, as some might say.

We didn't have a car, so the journey was by bus starting at the local bus station. The long journey to the coast made it seem much further away than when, in later years, I could drive. We would stop halfway at a tea bar and a coach stop. I have vivid memories of old suitcases strapped together with belt straps holding all the contents inside and such a variety of contents there were—everything from clothing to toiletries and food. The memory of a cooked chicken in a suitcase is an image that still stays with me. The cases were all pushed into that small space underneath of the bus.

'Can you see it yet?'. An adult would ask as we got closer, 'can you see it?'. What we were looking for was a tall, castellated structure—the water tower on the outskirts of seaside town. They needed a water tower because the east coast had no water pressure. This castle was a landmark visible for miles. A symbol of being away and being on holiday that was so important.

Home for the week was a chalet built in the 1930s or early 1940s used originally to hold and house soldiers in the Second World War. A nice holiday camp, but a little bit like Butlins or the TV show Hi-de-Hi. But as a family, we didn't go in for the on-camp entertainment or activities. No. We would spend all our day on the beach digging in the sand, rain or shine, come what may.

Holidays followed a routine. The men in my family worked shifts in the coalfields. They had a routine. They had early starts, and holidays were no exception. We would be up at 6 a.m. or earlier, walking down the seafront to one of the cafes that opened specifically for those men who

couldn't break the pattern of night shifts or early starts. Drinking milky coffee and eat bacon rolls sat by the sea. With my grandparents and my dad and aunt and uncles. Never my mum. She would be at home cooking our second breakfast. It seems bizarre now, but these early morning outings with hungover, coughing, and spluttering dads and uncles were a highlight.

After breakfast, everyone would walk to the beach carrying the windbreaks. All kids in tow with their buckets and spades. In terms of food, when my grandma was there, she always wanted to hot dinner, regardless. Vegetables, potatoes, meat and gravy. On the Sunday, the day after arriving, she would go back at lunchtime and cook a roast dinner whilst we were on holiday. A roast dinner! In the week, we'd go to the cafes and have roast meat, meat pies and the like.

Evenings were spent in the pub. A 'Home Ales' brewery pub with a children's room that was chaos, and with a sticky floor. The smell of stale beer and tobacco smoke.

These were golden times, times of family and community. As I said, the same family but in a different place, doing different things, yet routinised over all the time that we were there, from the 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s, right up until when I last went last year. We still think about the good times we had. We celebrate and reflect. There's a lot to be said for working-class family life, and the times we had on holiday stand out to me as precious. It's part of who we are and what we did.

Reflecting on the story, several pertinent themes emerge for me. Again, it's a story about a family that didn't have much, but made the best of what they did have and enjoyed it. Doing pretty similar things but in a different location. The same family but elsewhere. It's a story where the patterns of working-class life continue—the early rising, the cooked dinners, drinking in pubs and so on. The story suggests that these holidays were about enjoyment, relaxation, and time away, but they were not concerned with the middle-class 'pose' of location or with encountering 'different' cultures, peoples, and experiences. Such holidays were a process of reinforcing the existing practices of social reproduction and strengthening family and community ties by reinforcing a habitus rather than exposure to something new, different or exotic. Limited resources and time meant that the real benefits and knowledge of what that seaside town offered were far more attractive than going somewhere new that might not offer the same, requiring different behaviour. It was understood; it was easy. Indeed, this is best illustrated for me in later life, when family members said, after visiting destinations further afield, '*it was good, but it wasn't a holiday, it wasn't the seaside town'*. They went to Greece and Spain, but the seaside town always remained the 'proper' holiday.

Reflections: Linking Stories of Social Class to 'Becoming' A Sociologist

One of the dangers with autoethnographic storytelling is the 'so what' question. What can we learn from this? What does it really tell us? I hope I illustrated above that the underlying academic and sociological concerns mean that these stories are not personal stories but point to a whole set of community and relational practices that are typical and therefore illuminate in a way that is instructive to understand the realities of working-class life. However, the stories do more and point to a process of becoming. At the outset of the paper, I asked the question concerned with the extent to which academic interests, orientations and concerns are shaped by these personal and biographical experiences. Writers such as Mills (1959) encourage me to ask: what specific intersections of history and biography, or the circumstances of 1970s and 1980s England, shaped my life chances as they did? Or how did I get here? Indeed, Elias also ponders these same questions and states that *'it is an interesting question why all these people actually became sociologists'* (Elias 2009: 100). A review of the literature reveals that the routes into academic sociology are many and varied, with the process of 'becoming' a sociologist widely considered in the reflexive journeys that established sociologists recount (see, for example, Homans 1986; Burger and Bendix 1990; Elias 1994; Oakley 1997, 2014; Shils 2017; Hall 2020; Fowler 2021). My own route into sociology is shaped by stories such as these and many others (see Goodwin 2016). Such auto/biographical stories reveal chance encounters, fateful moments, influential experiences, guiding teachers, significant involvements, and more. For me, these auto/biographical stories also emphasise and reaffirm sociology's stock of knowledge as ways of doing, being, and as embodied practices. Although my sociological impact has been modest compared to those named above, the way I talk about, teach, and research sociology is deeply rooted in craft and skill. Sociology is a craft-based toolkit containing tools, systems, and approaches that can be applied purposively to understand our social world. I arrived at this view long before reading C. Wright Mills (1959) (see Goodwin 2016). Indeed, I have suggested elsewhere that I have always been engaged in what I later discovered to be sociological practices (see Goodwin 2016). This is a class-based approach to work, in the same way my father and grandfather practised their work through craft, skills, applied knowledge, and hard work.

Image 3: Dad's Tools, 2014, by Author.

An image I regularly use to exemplify what sociology means to me and how my stories brought me to this point directly links to the stories above. It is a photograph of my dad's National Coal Board tools. The things he used to do his job from the time he was an apprentice, and the burning of his feet. Evocative objects (see Turkle 2007) that lead to stories of where I came from, the complex historical and biographical intersections of how 'this' came to be.

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