

# Critical autobiography and men, masculinities and gender

**SOC350 Men and Masculinities, 2011, University of Wollongong. Course convenor: Dr Michael Flood**

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*Background (for people not in the SOC350 course)*

Students in the third-year Sociology course Men and Masculinities at the University of Wollongong have the option of writing a piece of critical autobiography – what I’ve termed a ‘Reflective Journal’ – rather than a conventional essay, for their final written assessment. This document provides guidelines for the Reflective Journal, and further resources on critical autobiography.

*Introduction to the Reflective Journal*

The Reflective Journal is based on critical autobiography. You will reflect on your own experiences of and involvements in gender, and make links between these and the concepts and themes explored in the subject Men and Masculinities and in scholarship on gender.

*Writing both personally and theoretically*

The Reflective Journal involves critical reflection on your own experiences of and involvements in gender. You will therefore be writing in part in the first person. At the same time, you will also be writing about themes, insights, and issues based in scholarship on men, masculinities and gender. Your writing may move between the two in either direction: using scholarship on men and gender to shed light on your personal experience, and/or using your personal experience to illustrate or extend scholarship on men and gender.

The Reflective Journal is based on *critical* autobiography. This involves more than simply telling your story or stories. Instead, you must analyse, evaluate, and reflect on such stories, and link them to wider intellectual or theoretical issues and points. In particular, link the accounts of your experience to the themes of the Men and Masculinities subject.

While you will be reflecting critically on your own experience, you are expected also to demonstrate an understanding of the material addressed in the Men and Masculinities subject. Your piece will draw on and cite academic sources, and it will have a reference list or bibliography listing these at its end.

*Assessment of your piece*

The balance of your piece – between the description of your experiences and your sociological analysis – should be weighted towards the “critical” more than the “autobiography”. This relative weighting will be reflected in the evaluation of your Reflective Journal: 30% for description, 50% for analysis, and 20% for style and mechanics.<sup>1</sup>

*Organising the piece*

You will somehow need to organise your piece into some kind of order, comprising a series of paragraphs where each has a central point or focus (as you would for a standard academic essay). There are various ways to do this. You may consider organising your piece by:

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<sup>1</sup> I have borrowed here from guidelines provided by Powers (1998: 204).

- Key themes or points from the subject and/or from scholarship on men, masculinities and gender;
- Themes in or aspects of your personal experiences;
- Particular experiences or incidents;
- Particular relations or individuals.

Your Reflective Journal may cover a wide range of aspects of your experience, focus on a series of incidents or just one, or explore your relations with a particular man.

### *Confidentiality and privacy*

Your piece will be confidential. It will be seen only by the course convenor, Michael Flood. Reveal as much or as little of your own life and experiences as you wish.

### *For female students*

If you are a female student writing the Reflective Journal, you are still expected to address issues regarding men, masculinities and gender and to demonstrate an understanding of the material addressed in the Men and Masculinities subject. In writing personally, you can explore your experiences of men and your relations with them. See above regarding the kinds of things you may wish to explore. For example, you may reflect on:

- Your perceptions and understandings of men and masculinities;
- Your negotiations of gender e.g. with particular men (boyfriends or husbands, brothers, fathers, male friends, work mates, etc.);
- Experiences of how men 'do masculinity' – in particular relations, through particular settings, and in particular interactions.

### *Further resources*

NOTE that this incorporates and extends the list first given out with the essay questions.

#### Examples by men reflecting on men and masculinities

Various texts illustrate men's use of critical autobiography. For example:

- *Unmasking Masculinity: A Critical Autobiography*, by David Jackson (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990).
- Shira Tarrant's edited collection, *Men Speak Out*, contains various critical autobiographical reflections by young and older men.
- Schmitt, Richard. (2001). Proud to Be a Man? *Men and Masculinities*, 3(4), April (and Response by Brod, Schmitt)
- Kay *et al.*'s edited collection *Male Lust* contains a variety of personal reflections regarding male sexualities.
- Kimmel's collection *Men Confront Pornography* includes stories centred on critical personal reflection.

- “A black man’s place in black feminist criticism”, by Michael Awkward (In Tom Digby (ed.), *Men Doing Feminism*. New York & London: Routledge, 1998). (Also in Rudolph P. Byrd & Beverly. Guy-Sheltall (eds.), *Traps: African American men on gender and sexuality*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.)
- *The Achilles Heel Reader: Men, Sexual Politics and Socialism*, edited by Victor J. Seidler (London & New York: Routledge, 1991).
- *Men, Sex and Relationships: Writings From Achilles Heel*, edited by Victor J. Seidler (London: Routledge, 1992).
- *Unbecoming: An AIDS Diary*, by Eric Michaels.
- *Jar Head*, by Anthony Swofford. About the first Iraq war and being a macho marine.
- *Hoi Polloi* (or the next volume, *Muck*), by Craig Sherborne. About growing up in New Zealand and Sydney to socially pretentious parents. Learning to be a bully when you’re quite ‘effeminate’ etc. Very funny.
- *Black Hours*, by Wayne King. Growing up Aboriginal and gay.
- McKenna, Kate, Eric Peters, and Doug Weatherbee. (1993). *Reconstructing Masculinities Through Autobiography*. In Haddad, Tony. (ed.). *Men and Masculinities: A Critical Anthology*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press. [UOW: 155.332/9]
- Keyworth, Saul Asher. (2001). *Critical Autobiography: ‘Straightening’ out dance education*. *Research in Dance Education*, 2(2), 117-137.

Various blogs demonstrate critical reflections by men on their negotiations of gender, including:

- Richard Newman’s blog, ‘Fragments of Evolving Manhood’: <http://richardjnewman.com/fragments-of-evolving-manhood/>
- Hugo Schwyzer: <http://hugoschwzyer.net/>

#### By women

Autobiographical texts have been influential in feminist writing and scholarship. Various colleagues on the Australian Women’s and Gender Studies Association e-mail list and the profem list generously made suggestions for useful texts. Two texts mentioned by various colleagues are:

- *Sister Outsider* by Audre Lorde, (critical autobiographical reflection on gender, race, sexuality);
- *Blood, Bread and Poetry* by Adrienne Rich, (as with Lorde, but add Jewishness).

Other texts mentioned include:

- *Click* by Courtney Martin contains dozens of recollections by young women about their “click” moments of coming to feminist awareness.
- *Colonize This!: Young Women of Color on Today’s Feminism*, edited by Hernandez *et al.*, collects various stories by young women.

- Dorothy Allison's introduction to her collection of short stories, *Trash*;
- *Bi-Polar Expeditions* by Emily Martin (gender and mental health/illness);
- *Life and Death* by Andrea Dworkin (which includes e.g. an essay of autobiographical writing regarding prostitution);
- *Outercourse* by Mary Daly;
- *Fields of Play: Constructing an Academic Life*, by Laurel Richardson (a personal account of intellectual journeys and writing);
- *Moments of Being* by Virginia Woolf;
- *Landscape for a Good Woman* by Carol Steedman;
- *Tiger's Eye* by Inga Clendinnen;
- *Giving Up the Ghost*, by Hilary Mantel (a memoir of growing up in England in the 1950s);
- *An Experiment in Love*, by Hilary Mantel;
- *Sexing the Self* by Elspeth Probyn.
- *If Everyone Cared* by Margaret Tucker;
- *Snake Cradle* by Roberta Sykes;
- *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* by Gloria Steinem.
- *How Simone de Beauvoir Died in Australia* by Sylvia Lawson;
- *Poppy* by Drusilla Modjeska;
- Dorothy Hewett's autobiography;
- *Don't Take Your love to Town* by Ruby Langford;
- *Snake Cradle* by Bobbi Sykes.
- *There's a good girl* by Marianne Grubecker (a woman writing a diary of what she notices about the gendered messages received by her daughter from 0 to 3 years, and which also includes what she notices regarding the acquisition of gendered messages for her daughter's closest male playmate).
- *Women Writing Culture*, edited by Ruth Behar and Deborah A. Gordon (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995);
- *Autobiographical Writing Across the Disciplines: A Reader*, edited by Diane P. Freedman and Olivia Frey (Durham, NC: Duke University Press);
- Barbara Myerhoff (has films and writing about the connections between her own Jewishness, feminist ideologies and experience of death)
- *Taboo: Sex, Identity and Erotic Subjectivity in Anthropological Fieldwork*, edited by Don Kulick and Margaret Wilson (London: Routledge Press, 1995).

Some texts involve women's critical autobiographical reflections regarding their relations with men in particular or sexuality more generally. See for example:

- *Heterosexuality: A Feminism and Psychology Reader*, edited by Wilkinson and Kitzinger (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1993);
- *Jane Sexes It Up: True confessions of feminist desire*, edited by Merri Lisa Johnson (New York and London: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2002);
- *Real Live Nude Girl: Chronicles of Sex-Positive Culture*, edited by Carol Queen (Pittsburgh: Cleis Press, 1997).

Critical autobiographical writing also has been central to writing on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender sexualities. Michael Murphy writes, "The field of LGBTQ studies is filled with critical autobiographies that ruminate on gender (at least partially). Two canonical titles are Kate Bornstein's *Gender Outlaw* and Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*. I just finished reading a magnificent memoir by Ryan Van Meter titled *If You Knew Then What I Know Now*. A handful of essays in this book are explicitly about homosexuality, masculinity, and childhood. Also, I would recommend Kirk Read's memoir of growing up gay in rural Virginia: *How I Learned to Snap*. There are also a number of essays in S. Bear Bergman's two books that are autobiographical, critical, and deal with gender, especially masculinity: *Butch is a Noun* and *The Nearest Exit May Be Behind You*. Bornstein and Bergman just finished an edited collection of first person essays entitled *Gender Outlaws: The Next Generation*. One of the most interesting books I've ever read, because it interweaves autobiography, sexuality, and Classics, is Daniel Mendelsohn's *The Elusive Embrace: Desire and the Riddle of Identity*. Mendelsohn is quite astute on gender issues. There are several useful essays on gender in *First Person Queer: Who We are (So Far)* and the entire genres of writing on lesbian butch/femme, tomboys, bear, and leather communities entail thinking about gender, much of it autobiographical---titles too numerous to mention here."

Scholarship on women and autobiography in literary theory includes:

- *Women's Writing: A Challenge to Theory*, edited by Moira Monteith;
- *The Private Self* by Shari Benstock;
- "My Monster/ My Self" by Barbara Johnson (*Diacritics*, vol 12);
- *Getting Personal : Feminist Occasions and other Autobiographical Acts*, by Nancy K. Miller (1991);
- *The Female Autograph*, edited by Domna C. Stanton.
- "Writing Autobiography", by bell hooks. (In *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (1989). Also in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Madison: The U of Wisconsin P, 1998: 429-432.)

Alison Bartlett's university course "Fictocriticism: Writing the Body" includes various relevant references. See

<http://www.chloe.uwa.edu.au/outskirts/archive/volume20/Teaching/UWA>.

Liz Conor's blog, now archived by the NLA, includes a range of autobiographical essays. See <http://lizconorcomment.blogspot.com/>.

Academic discussions of critical autobiography as a teaching strategy

There are various discussions of critical autobiography as a teaching strategy, including the following.

- Church, K. (1995). *Forbidden Narratives: Critical autobiography as social science*. Gordon and Breach Publishers.
- Czarniawska, B. (2004). *Narratives in Social Science Research*. London, Sage Publications Ltd.
- Grauerholz, Elizabeth, and Stacy Copenhaver. (1994). When the Personal Becomes Problematic: The Ethics of Using Experiential Teaching Methods. *Teaching Sociology*, 22: 319-27.
- Kebede, Alem. (2009). Practicing Sociological Imagination Through Writing Sociological Autobiography. *Teaching Sociology*, 37(4): 353-368.
- Liberti, R., Swantek, D., Kunz, M., and Sullivan, S. (2004). 'Forbidden Narratives': Exploring the Use of Critical Autobiography in a Graduate Sport Sociology Course. *Quest*, 56(2), 190-207.
- Powers, Rosemary F. (1998). Using Critical Autobiography to Teach the Sociology of Education. *Teaching Sociology*, 26: 198-206.
- Ribbens, J. (1993) Facts or Fictions? Aspects of the use of autobiographical writing in undergraduate sociology. *Sociology*, 27 (1): 81-92.

Also see:

- Discussion on the WMST (Women's Studies) list:  
[http://userpages.umbc.edu/~korenman/wmst/gender\\_autobiog.html](http://userpages.umbc.edu/~korenman/wmst/gender_autobiog.html)
- An example of a similar assignment:  
<http://personal.bgsu.edu/~edietel/critautobiography.pdf>