

To the Letter: An Overview of Letters in Sociology

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Please reference as: Liz Stanley (2018) To the Letter: An Overview of Letters in Sociology. Edinburgh: Whites Writing Whiteness Working Paper <http://www.whiteswritingwhiteness.ed.ac.uk/publications/working-papers/to-the-letter/> and also provide a paragraph number/s as appropriate when quoting.

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Acknowledgements

I am pleased to acknowledge the UK's ESRC (ES J022977/1) for supporting the research drawn on here. In memory of Bogusia Temple, with whom these and related ideas were explored.

Abstract

The use of letters in sociology has a long history, which is intertwined with their uses in other disciplines and more recently in interdisciplinary work, so various of the developments discussed in this overview can be found in somewhat different formulations in other inter/disciplinary contexts. While many sociologists might be puzzled about being interested in an apparently literary topic, the letter, there are good sociological reasons for being concerned with letters and correspondences which are discussed, and which also underpinned the best-known sociological engagement with both the form or structure and the content of letters, Thomas and Znaniecki's *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. Topics of discussion include: early progenitors, biographical sociology, letters as documents of life, letters as sources, migration and diaspora letters, letter writing practices, letterness and theorising the letter as an epistolary form.

1. Introduction

1.1 Why should a sociologist be interested in letters, aren't these the kind of thing that literature scholars are concerned with? Isn't sociology instead concerned with data that sociologists collect around formulating questions and exploring these using well-tried sociological methods like interviews, a focus group, case study, survey or ethnography? However, this is an overly limited way of thinking about the discipline as it goes about its business of understanding the social world. For a start, sociologists should be interested in everything about social life, no matter how routine or how extraordinary,

and not draw lines around things that are off-limits and the preserve of other disciplines. In addition, the fundamental method that all sociologists without exception use is... is to read documents and make assessments of them regarding their origins, purpose, content and impact, which is very similar how humanity scholars work with texts including letters. And often sociologists write about this in journal articles, with the academic article being a form of writing that originated in scientific investigators writing letters about their work and sending them to others working on similar topics.

1.2 So there are good reasons why letters in general should interest sociologists. There are also more specific reasons, in particular that investigations of letters have been extremely important in the discipline. In fact a sociological engagement with letters and letter writing began in the early twentieth century with an extensive project on migration letters carried out by Thomas and Znaniecki, with this ambitiously seeking to remake key aspects of the discipline in methodological terms. For complicated reasons discussed later, such work then followed to flourish. However, it is a truism that what goes around comes around, and alongside other recent developments a renewed interest in letters and related forms of writing has returned to the agenda. The result is much work on letters has been carried out in sociology subsequently. Both the early work and more recent developments are overviewed in this discussion.

1.3 In sociology, an analytical and substantive engagement with letters, correspondences and letter-writing practices is now particularly associated with narrative, historical, cultural and feminist areas of work. As with many academic disciplines, over the last few decades sociology has developed around an array of specialisms running in parallel with each other and having somewhat limited overlap, and which instead work in interdisciplinary ways. As a consequence much sociological work regarding letters occurs in interdisciplinary as well as disciplinary contexts, with key ideas shared across traditional boundaries. However, given the origins of sociology's interest in letters, there

is something of an irony here, for earlier a definitional affiliation was seen to exist between the centrality in sociology of the relationship between social structures and social processes regarding human agency, with the letter viewed as the most appropriate data-source for investigating this. This was the position promoted, for example, by Thomas & Znaniecki (1918-1920).

1.4 Key strands in the sociological engagement with letters regarding both their content and their form are overviewed in what follows. These are presented in the order they came on the scene over time, recognising that this was sometimes almost coterminously. All of them continue in active existence too. So not surprisingly there are some overlaps of theories, methodologies and substantive concerns. In addition, the boundaries of sociology are fairly fluid, for it is both exporter and importer discipline, and so distinguishing between work that is 'within' sociology and what is 'outside' it in interdisciplinary areas is not straightforward. The development of ideas is always a complex matter, and it is important to indicate such complexities rather than imply an artificial precision to disciplinary boundaries.

2. Progenitors: Thomas and Znaniecki on form and Dilthey on process

2.1 The sociological interest in letters and letter-writing can be dated to the publication of Thomas and Znaniecki's (1918-1920) multi-volume *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, with a second edition in 1927. It sought to establish a programmatic concern with 'the letter' as a form or genre and letter-writing as a social practice, and it viewed letters as an 'almost perfect' kind of data for its investigations, in which it integrated theory and method by using large numbers of letters in family correspondences to investigate large-scale migrations from Poland to the US in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

2.2 Presciently, Thomas and Znaniecki's analysis and their conceptual and methodological approach focused on the form or structure of the letter and recognised that changes in this can be seen as a proxy for social changes occurring more generally in social conduct and relationships (Stanley 2010). Their research used over 700 letters in inter-generational family correspondences between migrants and people remaining in Poland, analysing these in an iterative way by moving back and forth between close readings of letters, and building general conceptual ideas and frameworks from these. They were particularly interested in changes in the form of letter-writing and particularly so-called 'bowing' deferential letters as pointing to shifts in what were seen as appropriate ways of signifying social relationships and hierarchies, and thereby acting as an index to wider societal changes occurring.

2.3 Initially highly influential across the social sciences, Thomas and Znaniecki's work was subsequently subject to sustained critique from more positivist viewpoints (especially Blumer 1939), which in turn became caught up with the growth of quantitative methodologies encouraged by wartime 1940s funding for large-scale research, with post-war these coming to dominate the discipline until recently. A result is that the contemporary impact of Thomas and Znaniecki's ideas about the sociological importance of letters and their attention to form and not just content is now under-appreciated, with their volumes mainly read about in largely unsatisfactory summaries in secondary sources, rather than in the original. However, their approach has returned to the agenda around the rise of qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) and its emphasis on seriality over time, and this is discussed later.

2.4 Sociology's analytical interest in letters can also be associated with the slightly earlier work of philosopher and sociologist Wilhelm Dilthey on hermeneutics, biography and verstehen or intersubjective understanding, which also involved him editing the philosopher Schleiermacher's letters. In particular, Dilthey's (1989) concern with

reflexive awareness in human experience and the complexities of representations of the social world have considerably if diffusely impacted on sociological thinking. Around his concern with connectedness, identity and 'erlebnis' or the moment and its events and processes, Dilthey positioned human experience as central to interpretive understanding, something Ricoeur later took up regarding narratives of different kinds, including written documents such as letters. Although Dilthey's name is not very well-known amongst present-day sociologists, his thinking has had considerable impact on the development of hermeneutics by Heidegger and Gadamer followed by Ricoeur (Benton and Craib 2001). It has also been incorporated within ideas about verstehen and interpretive understanding, influenced thinking about reflexivity and agency, and through this has impacted on the sociological engagement with narrative theory and methodology.

2.5 Hermeneutics and its close relationship with narrative has importantly contributed to the resurgence of biographical approaches in sociology as well as to the 'narrative turn'. Although operating at a more philosophical level, much of this work has reverberated in sociological thinking about narrative, biography and letters. In particular, it has directed attention to the form of autobiographical and biographical texts, regarding their metaphors and narrative structures, the ways in which narration constructs notions of selfhood and identity, the importance and complexities of temporary ordering, and that acts of memory in written, visual and other forms need to be seen in non-referential terms.

3. Biographical sociology: narratives, auto/biography and letters

3.1 In many respects the 'turns' that have characterised intellectual life over the last few decades - the reflexive, confessional, mobilities and other turns - can all be seen as part of the seismic changes associated with the growth of interest in biographical and narrative ideas and topics. While by no means confined to sociology or the social

sciences, biographical and narrative work has taken a particular direction here. This has in particular been through connecting narrative with qualitative and interactionist approaches and methodologies, and focusing attention on life histories and life stories as a way of engaging with the interpretive understanding of people as experts of their own lives and experiences (Berger and Berger 1976; Bornat and Chamberlyne 2000; Riessman 2008; Merrill and Prior 2009).

3.2 In such work, the oral accounts and stories that people provide in research have been a focus of interest, along with attention to the role of the researcher in impacting on these through their presence as interlocutors in the research context. In this frame, there has been some work on letters as a topic, and in a more passing way in theorising stories and testimonies of both written and verbal kinds, although letters have not been of particular concern (Roberts 2002, 2006; Roberts and Kyllönen 2006; Merrill and Prior 2009).

However, there has been a strong emphasis on an engagement with biography because of its illumination of the relationship between social structures and social processes, with Mills' (1959) dictum concerning the centrality for sociology of the relationship between biography, history and social structure being a stimulus for much work in this vein. This has in turn provided a basis for the subsequent sociological engagement with epistolarity along with the associated growth of feminist sociology and an interest in reflexivity (Stanley 1993).

3.3 For some working in this tradition, letters have been seen as recalcitrant and subject to 'bias' because expressing a particular viewpoint and therefore being unamenable to addressing research questions (eg. Roberts 2002). However, for others, letters are important in biographical terms because they are 'naturally-occurring' rather than researcher-initiated, involve people representing their own interpretations of the relevancies, and show how everyday communications between people interface with events and social changes (eg. Goodwin 2012; Valles Martinez 2011). And while perhaps

the majority of work on letters in this frame has focused on content, an influential sub-strand has concerned structural matters including authorial 'voice' and the dialogical aspects of letter-exchanges (see contributors on letters in Godwin 2012, volume three).

3.4 As with most areas of academic work, there are different and sometimes conflicting strands within biographical sociology and its ideas and research have developed in different directions over time. Biographical sociology originated from a number of initially separate strands of work, starting with a biographical approach to doing sociology (Berger and Berger 1976). It was followed by influential accounts of the 'lives of sociologists', exploring the factors which led the sociologists concerned both to enter the discipline and to engage in the particular kind of research and publications they did (eg. Riley 1988). Letters have featured as a sub-set of this, regarding identity construction and also how ideas have been shaped and communicated in letter exchanges and how this has been involved in the production of the writer's sociological work (Brewer 2004, 2005, 2007a, 2007b). However, perhaps the most important connection with letters has been through the early 1990s development of the idea of 'auto/biography' (Morgan and Stanley 1993b; Stanley 1993; Chappell and Parsons 2018).

3.5 The term 'auto/biography' is a conceptual and methodological recognition that the different forms of life-writing are interconnected and boundaries between them frequently traversed, and it has also emphasised that people's own accounts of their lives should be central in sociological enquiry (see contributors to Morgan and Stanley 1993a). Key ideas here include the turn to textuality and seeing written texts as social products with 'voice' and performative aspects, the importance of single lives for understanding social structures, the complex relationship between descriptions and events, the social construction of temporal orders, and intertextual aspects of representations of reality. Some of this research has concerned letters and letter-writing, although the emphasis has been more on biography, autobiography and formal narratives. This work has treated

letters mainly in the context of considering the range of different kinds of life writings and their interconnections and argued for the looseness and transitional character of genre distinctions. In addition, it has used letters along with other sources in both individual and group biography (the latter sometimes referred to as prosopography).

3.6 The state of play presently is that biographical sociology has developed more in the direction of mainstream disciplinary concerns, although auto/biography has continued to flourish mainly outwith sociology (Chancy and Hipchen 2016; but see Dickinson and Erben 2016 for a sociological example and particularly Chappell and Parsons 2018 for an overview). There is however now more interest in letters specifically, although this has occurred largely separately from biographical sociology, connecting instead with other new developments and in particular work on 'documents of life' within sociology and, outwith it, interdisciplinary epistolary theory.

4. Letters as documents of life

4.1 A 'documents of life' approach is in some respects part of biographical and narrative sociology, although also influenced by symbolic interactionism and life story approaches in oral history, and has been particularly associated with the work of Plummer (1983, 2001). It is characterised by its distinctive focus on a particular kind of social data, with 'documents of life' consisting of naturally-occurring written, visual, oral and other representations that in a broad sense 'document' or represent aspects of social life and are read and used as part of its fabric. Such things saturate everyday life and include diaries, autobiographies, memoirs, biographies and also letters; photographs, portraits and oral recordings; life histories, testimonies and other formal accounts; and also a range of 'found' documents including advertisements, road and traffic signs, bill hoardings, instructions on consumer items, and many more (delineated in Watson 2009, 7-36).

4.2 In initial work here, letters were seen as lacking specific focus because grounded in an ongoing dialogue between addressee and signatory, being emergent rather than to the point, and containing 'dross' because failing to address research questions but instead those of their writers and addressees (Plummer 1983, 21-24; Plummer 2001, 53-55). However, subsequently there has been recognition that these features are actually strengths and point to what is particularly fascinating and engaging about the epistolary form, that is, their heterotopic 'world in a grain of sand' and over time aspects (Tamboukou 2011a).

4.3 Another trend in this approach has been to grasp the nettle of the co-existence of many different kinds of documents of life and overlaps in how people produce and use them, with research exploring such documents in a range of social and historical contexts (see contributors to Stanley 2013). Consequently work on letters herein has drawn on ideas and methodologies from across the other strands of sociological work overviewed in this present discussion, as well as locating letter-writing in the broader context of how documents of life are produced, read and circulate. Some of this has seen letters as sources and focused on their content, while some has been more concerned with matters of form or structure (see for example Salo 2013). And notably, the covering term of 'documents of life' has placed on the agenda that thinking about different kinds of documents in genre terms can be overly limiting, and what is more productive is investigating the situations and contexts of their production and use. Among other things, this has shown the considerable fluidity of how representational genres are produced and deployed in everyday life and that they often take transitional forms and can morph into each other.

5. Letters as sources

5.1 Thomas and Znaniecki's *Polish Peasant...* can be seen in empirical terms as the use of letters as a data-source, although this would miss its crucial programmatic concern with establishing a new methodological basis to sociology around retrievable epistolary communicative exchanges – letters – which act, through changes in the formalities or structure of how they are written, as a proxy for investigating changes occurring more generally. With some limitations, it succeeded in emphasising the need for working with epistolary sources on a large-scale, and combining this with close readings of individual texts. While a reference point since ‘rediscovery’ in the first Plummer (1983) book on documents of life, this details of approach were not used elsewhere until the development of computer-based data-management systems for handling large qualitative sets of data in the recent period, indicating something of why some of its methodological strategies were problematic (the Whites Writing Whiteness project, however is attempting something similar; see www.whiteswritingwhiteness.ed.ac.uk).

5.2 There are also other trajectories of work focusing on letters as sources that have a long-term presence in sociology. For example, there has been considerable work in editing and publishing the letters of well-known sociologists, something which can also be seen as a contribution to biographical sociology (eg. the various collections of Theodor Adorno letters and a project recording all those of Max Weber). Connected with this is the sociological input to the cross-disciplinary 'letters and lives' tradition, something that involves focusing on letter content, often in edited secondary source editions, as a means of interrogating a particular sociologist's theoretical and substantive work. This has largely treated letter content ‘as fact’ even if sometimes of a faulty kind. However, the approach in recent work instead explores the ways in which letters and other self-writings help to construct a public sociological persona and how ideas and facts are shaped in such exchanges (eg. Brewer 2005, 2007a). Another trajectory, regarding migration letters, has developed as a fast-growing and now interdisciplinary

area of activity involving researchers from sociology and other disciplinary bases and is considered below.

6. Migration and diaspora letters

6.1 International migration and transnational diasporas are the concerns around which sociology began to engage with letters and correspondences, in the work of Thomas and Znaniecki. A good deal of recent sociological work has been produced in respect of migrant letter-writing, including its role in the maintenance of emotional bonds across time and distance and the construction and negotiation of new identities (eg. Cancian 2010). An important strand here has seen the migrant letter as a distinct genre with its own conventions including that a 'third space' is constituted in the transnational context that exists neither in the homeland nor that of resettlement but which is both simultaneously (Gerber 2008; Elliott, Gerber and Sinke 2006). As a result, it sees the migrant letter as having characteristics that position it as distinctively different from letters generally, as a separate genre (although this is rebutted in Stanley 2016).

6.2 The emphasis on theorising migration letters as a distinct genre has somewhat inhibited cross-overs with ideas and debates in epistolary theory more widely. Recent developments, however, have brought together ideas from migration studies and from epistolary scholarship in a fruitful way (Davis 2010; DeHaan 2010; Middleton 2010; see also contributors to the special issue of *The History of the Family* on migrant letters edited by Cancian and Gabaccia 2016). This work has re-positioned migrant letters within the framework of letter-writing more generally while also emphasising the importance of contexts of migratory departures and arrivals in influencing both structure and content (Gabaccia 2000). As a result it resists over-generalisations about 'the' migrant letter and recognises instead the complexities of such things as location, place of origin and reasons for migration.

6.3 There has also been a strand of migration letters activity involving the collection and conservation and also analysis of migrant letters en masse in the US context. Thus the University of Minnesota Digitizing Immigrant Letters Project (<http://archives.ihrc.umn.edu/dil/index.html>) is making available on-line digitised letters from different sources written between 1850 and 1970 by immigrants (referred to as ‘America letters’) and sent to immigrants (‘homeland letters’). This combines historical and sociological ideas and is enabling exploration of the socio-cultural dynamics of US migrant letter-writing from many different places and over a considerable time-period as well as distance (Gabaccia and Cancian 2013). Among other analytical concerns, this too opens up for consideration in what ways distance and specific location might make a difference to structural aspects of letters, as well as their content.

6.4 A related recognition here is that, certainly in the past and to an extent presently, many migrants were not fully literate although very competent in the functional literacy sense of being able to communicate in a basic way on paper or its proxies (contemporaneously, including text and email). This has implications for thinking about the formal features of letters, for the ‘expected’ conventions are often departed from in a range of respects, indicating the considerable fluidity with which genre categories are used in practice. It also emphasises the importance of the social aspects of the letter-writing practices engaged in, including communal ways of both writing and reading letters. These matters have also been the topic of sociological and interdisciplinary work on letter-writing and literacy practices, now discussed.

7. Letter-writing and literacy practices

7.1 The origins of work on letter-writing as a social practice are in studies of ‘local literacies’ and the role of reading and writing in people’s everyday lives, work which has used a broadly ethnographic approach framed by the theory of literacy as social practice

(Barton and Hamilton 1998; Barton and Papen 2010; see also Lyons 2007 for a complimentary historical approach). As perhaps the most pervasive literacy activity, and crossing formal and informal contexts, letter-writing and reading are widespread across most domains of social life; they are socially-situated activities and the emphasis here has been on exploring this across the range of situations they occur in, because situation does indeed make a difference and sometimes a marked one (Barton and Hall 2000a, 2000b). This has had significant impact on sociological work on letters, though the research itself is located within a New Literacy Studies interdisciplinary framework, illustrating something of the difficulties in pinning down disciplinary specifics with regard to interdisciplinary areas of academic work. It has also had considerable influence on theorising letters more generally.

7.2 This emphasis on letter-writing and reading as embedded in social situations has brought to attention not only that the details of content do indeed make a difference, but also that how form and genre conventions are perceived and used is situated rather than being normatively standard (Jolly and Stanley 2005; Stanley and Jolly 2017). It has also shown that a range of proficiencies exist and that for the people concerned these may not be experienced as deficient but viewed as sufficient and appropriate in context (Barton and Hamilton 2000). There are also variant practices anyway, with the conventions being rather different across the generations, in different locations, and also regarding different kinds of letter-writing, such as personal, business.... Another significant contribution has occurred here, around the exploration of under what circumstances and in what ways letters meld into other forms, such as bank notes and scientific reports, with this influencing both documents of life work and epistolary theory more generally (Bazerman 2000).

7.3 The idea of letter-writing as a social practice that is situationally embedded and which includes a range of conventions, and the correspondingly complex interface with

genre definitions of the day, has now become part of the 'air we breathe'. The most notable contribution of this work is perhaps in bringing to attention the necessity to recognise not only the importance of social embeddedness and situation, but also that 'correct' form is itself situationally-configured and specific. This raises the idea that 'the letter' generally should be seen as by nature a transitional genre and the need for epistolary theory to explore the new forms it is taking (Jolly and Stanley 2005; Stanley and Jolly 2016).

8. Epistolarity: Sociology and theorising the letter

8.1 Issues in pinpointing specific disciplinary contributions to researching and understanding the letter have already been alluded to. This is important because work on letters and letter-writing is a notably interdisciplinary arena for both substantive research and theoretical development, and thus there are also implications for assessing the contributions of sociology vis a vis that of other disciplines. Sociological work on letters interfaces with interdisciplinary epistolary theory and analysis, with the result that these are difficult to prise apart. Treating the sociological input to epistolary theory as a closed box is therefore not an option, and nor is reviewing the totality of epistolary theory, for word space reasons and also because this would make invisible the particular role that sociological contributions have played. Discussion therefore proceeds by focusing on areas where sociological work has made a distinctive contribution.

8.2 As a broad (over-) generalisation, overall interdisciplinary work on letters has either concerned small sets of letters, often by famous or otherwise well-known people, that have been analysed in depth, or less frequently has concerned letters at volume analysed more thematically, with theoretical developments occurring around both. An epistemological break here has been signalled in both conceptual and methodological

terms around the idea of the 'epistolarium' (Stanley 2004, 2011; Stanley, Salter and Dampier 2012; Jolly and Stanley 2005; Stanley and Jolly 2016; Tamboukou 2011a, 2012). Conceptually, this is concerned with re-thinking letters in their entirety as written by a particular person and their correspondents, regarding such things as changing composition over time, flows and ebbs of exchanges with particular people, the dialogical properties of particular correspondences, the importance of networks of letter-writers, and other emergent aspects of the serial character of large letter collections and meta-collections (Hetherington 2014; Tamboukou 2008; see also Gabaccia and Cancian 2013). Developments of this have occurred around recognising the different kinds of epistolaria that exist including the 'scriptural economy'; the heterotropic aspects of letters and correspondences; and the epistolary spaces opened up by successive new technologies, including frequent postal services and speedy deliveries and more recently electronic and social media (Tamboukou 2010, 2013; Stanley 2015b; How 2003; Stanley and Jolly 2016).

8.3 Methodologically, it involves working iteratively across individual and small sets of letters to large collections and from this to someone's letters in their entirety, including by utilising computer-based technologies for data-management purposes and analytic support (Stanley 2015c). It also emphasises the importance of the close analysis of individual letters for understanding and theorising an epistolarium, and not just modelling this at scale. Here ideas about re-reading, reading against the grain and 'surface reading' have been involved, in combining different forms of close detailed reading with tools from the sociological method of documentary analysis (Dampier 2008; Salter 2011; Stanley 2016b; Tamboukou 2013; see also Petersen 2008).

8.4 In addition, related work in analysing the editorial role in assembling letters in researcher-initiated collections and meta-collections has developed the idea of cultural assemblage to signify that the activity involved shapes what 'the letters' are seen to be

(Tamboukou 2011, 2012; Stanley, Salter and Dampier 2013). This impacts on and complicates notions of authorship and readership, and indirectly also helps shape secondary scholarship (Stanley, Salter and Dampier 2013; Salter 2016). It also highlights that it is this activity which makes possible thinking of 'the epistolarium' as a conceptual tool. That is, 'in life' such a thing never existed for a letter-writer and their correspondents, because these letters were written specifically in order to be dispersed, by being sent to different people, located in many places, for different kinds of purposes, over sometimes lengthy periods of time, and would never have been assembled in one place and available together at one point in time as 'the letters of X'.

8.5 Letters are obviously a representational form; but as with diaries, autobiographies, testimonies and other life writings, this is complicated by their origins in and engagement with the life of the writer and the other people they are writing about and to. Within the sociology context, debates surrounding the referential/representational relationship with regard to letters have not seen these as either/or positions. Instead they have been treated in an 'and also' way, recognising that in letter-writing materiality and referentiality are tied together and also bound up in representation, point of view, ways of seeing and also the specifics of time, place, context and situation (Milne 2012). This has been particularly associated with sociology's emphasis on 'ordinary letters' and the variety of ways these combine the referential and the representational (see WWW; see also Whyman 2009 and Lyons 2013 for complimentary historical work).

8.6 In considering letter content alongside the conceptual and structural aspects of letter-writing and exchanging, sociological work on epistolarity has recognised not only the relational, dialogical and emergent but also the performative aspects of letters. That is, most letters are written to comment on or to expedite activity and many have strongly performative aspects – they are 'for' something, they accomplish activity of different kinds and which is not confined to just prompting a letter in response. The cultural and

political as well as social uses and impact of letters have been a particular focus here (Stanley and Dampier 2012; Tamboukou 2010a, 2010b; Stanley 2016a; WWW), and has included work on letters by particular individuals and those written and exchanged in networks and political and community contexts (Stanley and Salter 2014; Tamboukou 2016; Hetherington 2014). This attention to situation, context and the purposefulness of letter-writing has emphasised that as a consequence 'the letter' can take sometimes very different forms, including oral and visual ones such as drawings and photographs (Drucker 2014).

8.7 This has raised questions about what 'the letter' is in a more fundamental sense than treating its core attributes as readable from prevailing conventions. That is, recognising the importance of situation and the representational media used has some profound implications, because necessitating conceptualising structure or form in a more expansive way. As a result, sociological work here has asked the key question of whether the letter is necessary in order for 'letterness' to exist.

8.8 'Letterness' at basis involves communicative intent, from one person to another (both of which may be plurals), in situations of separation and/or distance, also usually dialogically around the possibility of response (Stanley, Salter and Dampier 2012; Poustie 2014). Discussion here has proposed that, while the death of 'the letter' may in many parts of the world be in sight, nonetheless these more fundamental features of epistolary intent are flourishing in other media and other genre-forms that are related to the transitional aspects of the letter but not coterminous with these (Stanley and Jolly 2016). They include, for instance, text, email and various forms of social media.

Rejecting claims that 'the letter is dead', there is instead an emphasis on the communicative purposes that underpin the letter as a genre and the ways in which new and different means of expressing epistolary intent are increasingly favoured (Yates 2000; Milnes 2012; Stanley 2015b).

9. Letters, specialisms and sociology: In conclusion

9.1 Difficulties in separating out the specifically sociological – and other disciplinary – contributions to thinking about the letter exist because of the growth of interdisciplinary work, as already noted. Consequently the strands of work discussed here have parallels and overlaps with researching and theorising letters in interdisciplinary contexts, and also in other disciplinary contexts too, for few frontiers regarding ‘the letter’ are not now crossed. In addition, although originating in the broad order discussed, these all now co-exist, something made visible when looking across the range of work by particular people and at projects with a number of interconnected trajectories of activity (see here for example the Olive Schreiner Letters Online at www.oliveschreiner.org and its editorial, publishing and outreach concerns).

9.2 As commented at the start of this overview, sociology has developed, as with many other disciplines in the European and North American context, around areas of specialism which now have their own research communities, courses, textbooks, journals and so on. The development of a specialism on letters connecting with narrative and biographical sociology, and which interfaces with interdisciplinary parallels, is therefore indicative of the wider pattern. The question then arises as to whether and in what way this work connects with and influences wider formations of sociology.

9.3 Responding raises some complexities. Albeit with shared core ideas, national sociologies take rather different forms and have within them different emphases, ways of working and organising. As a consequence, making generalisations about impact needs to be cautious and take this into account. In addition, while an interest in letters might perhaps seen by some sociologists as a niche activity, an interest in biographical and narrative sociology and in documentary analysis would be perceived as of more general interest. Also, the specific topic importantly influences reception, and so some

substantive focuses on letters would be seen as mainstream ones even though using letters as a data-source might be unfamiliar. A further complication is that while some published sociological work on letters appears in mainstream and also more specialised sociology journals, it mainly appears in interdisciplinary ones (and sometimes those of other disciplines), with consequences for how familiar other sociologists are likely to be with such work.

9.4 However, the influence of work on letters on the related specialisms of documents of life and narrative work, biographical sociology, and cultural sociology more widely, is easier to pin down through tracing collaborations and also cross-referencing. This suggests that perhaps its greatest influence within sociology to date is neither theoretical nor substantive but methodological. Through the development of QLR approaches, a new form of biographical sociology has come onto the disciplinary agenda and the seriality of letters in correspondences along with other longitudinal data is receiving considerable interest (eg. McLeod and Thomson 2009; Holland and Edwards 2014; Stanley 2015c). It has also helped to encourage a wider appreciation and use of mainly 'found' and 'naturally-occurring' documents of life, with letters among them, so that in the future an increased interest in the letter can be expected more widely within sociology.

9.5 There is now a vibrant sociological engagement with the letter and an ongoing active contribution to epistolary theorising, with this located mainly in narrative, biographical and cultural areas of sociology, although as noted, some wider methodological interest around the serial aspects of letter-writing and the possibilities for qualitative longitudinal research is now beginning. These areas of specialism are still in development and there is already significant work on the letter in all of them, and so this can be expected to increase as part of their wider continued development and growth. There are also other new developments around which a further increase in sociological interest in 'letterness' if not in conventional letters is likely to occur, in particular regarding the rapid growth of

interest in 'big data' (Tinati et al 2014), with one aspect of this concerning text and related forms of social media as well as email, that is, areas in which the letter is transitioning into cognate forms (Stanley and Jolly 2017). What does the future hold? Most probably an upsurge of sociological work on these new forms of epistolarity now flourishing world-wide.

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