

Hidden traces: Writing sociologists' wives into existence

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sor**Rosalind Edwards**

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Abstract

In this article we draw on our investigation of the un- and under-acknowledged contributions of major post-war sociologists' wives to the development of the discipline in the post-war period, as well as others' accounts of recovering wives of academics from obscurity. In the first part of the article we show how legitimisations of wives' invisibility are sustained through an essentially empiricist approach to evidence of their intellectual endeavours, alongside the gendered politics of the intellectual great man narrative and of the institutionalised status of wifehood. The second part is a retrospective reflection on why and how researchers are enabled to write the wives' involvement into existence using slivers and scrappy traces of their presence and contributions. We argue that feminist relational sensibility comprises a critical edge: reading against the grain as well as with it, and paying conceptual not just empiricist attention to the wider social, economic and political conditions of institutional and interpersonal power relations of post-war wifehood. The lens of these broader gendered relations enables informed analysis and plausible interpretations of the contributions of the wives of influential sociologists to disciplinary knowledge.

Keywords

feminist relational sensitivity, great man narrative, post-war sociology, sociologists' wives, wifehood

Recovering wives' efforts

The contributions of wives, 'office wives' (secretaries), mistresses, daughters and mothers to the career trajectories and achievements of prominent men are features of recent

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and growing disciplinary investigation and debate in, for example, anthropology, archaeology, literary studies, philosophy, politics, social policy and science as well as sociology (Belisle & Mitchell, 2018; Carver, 2018; Dresvina, 2021; Esterson & Cassidy, 2019; Forestal & Philips, 2018; Funder, 2023; Hanke, 2009; Mahal, 2024; Oakley, 2021; Renwick, 2023). Our own research: the ‘Academics’ Wives’ project, has explored the contributions of sociologists’ wives to their influential husbands’ work and careers, with a particular focus on the post-war period when sociology was expanding and flourishing as a science of society for understanding everyday lives and for a rebuilding of British society (Scott, 2020). The project began in 2022 as a small case study investigation of the role that post-war sociologists’ wives played in community studies, forming a gendered bridge with community for their husbands’ research and thus aiding scholarship. Along the way, we came across other instances of unrecognised contributions by sociologists’ wives, as well as wives from other disciplines (we note the serendipity of discovery later in our discussion). The issue fascinates us and we have lost ourselves for hours at a time chasing glimpses of leads and tracking down information. We now hold what we regard as a collection of examples of academics’ wives, ranging from brief mentions to more substantial cases, and to which we add continually as we discover more wives’ contributions. We do not expect to reach a definitive end point with this endeavour.

The stories about the work carried out by academic men’s wives are bringing to light these women’s undervalued labour, nurturing and scaffolding their husbands’ careers – the thankless tasks of domestic servicing and household management, cooking and cleaning, child and elder care, delegating, keeping track, planning, emotional support, and in some cases financial breadwinner support. But more than this, wives’ behind-the-scenes input to their husband’s academic endeavours is being uncovered: not only typing, editing and proof-reading, but also research data generation and analysis, intellectual conceptualisation and authoring. These investigations consequently raise the significance of wives in the development of disciplinary knowledge.

In this article we consider the un- and under-acknowledged contributions of sociologists’ wives to the development of the discipline in the post-war period. We use both fragmentary traces and more substantial cases from our ever-in-progress collection, as well as others’ accounts of recovering wives of academics from anonymity, to consider and illustrate why these women’s involvement has been ignored and obscured. In particular we consider the knotty epistemological process of quite how researchers may go about writing them into existence. That is, how we can attempt to reconstruct the part that the wives of major disciplinary figures may have played in their husbands’ intellectual endeavours when unambiguous evidence often is patchy, concealed or missing. Indeed, rather than just waiting in the wings to have the spotlight shone upon them, there may well be no remaining traces of wives’ efforts at all. The incorporation of wives’ input to their husbands’ work was an unremarkable expectation of the period, and any evidence of this was usually not regarded as worth retaining where the papers of a major academic figure were deposited in an archive. We address these legitimisations of invisibility in the first part of this article.

Where we do have it, the materials that we and other researchers piece together is often fragmentary and scrappy. It is most likely associated with marginalia and paradata connected to the research process: fieldnotes, correspondence, notes in margins of data

generation schedules or instruments, etc., photographs, handwriting styles, progress reports for funders, and other ephemera or by-products of social research (Edwards et al., 2017), as well as footnotes and acknowledgements in manuscripts and books, and references in newspaper cuttings and auto/biographical publications. Rather than writing up straightforward findings from a defined population of interest and from material available in archives then, we have been engaged in the task of how to write the wives into existence. The second half of this article is a discussion of that process: a retrospective reflection on what largely is the absence of sustained evidence of the significant intellectual role of wives, and why and how we (researchers) are enabled to leap across that gap to make relationally-based arguments about their presence and contributions.

Generally women's contributions to society have been 'hidden from history' as the feminist historian Rowbotham (1973) evocatively put it. There is, however, something about the position of wife that erases women who inhabit it, and incorporates them into men's work (Finch, 1983). As we elaborate, this can take on a particular form where they are married to academic stars. We begin our reflections by considering the interplay of empiricism and the disciplinary great man narrative that legitimates the invisibility of wives' contributions. That is, we attempt to account for the only occasional glimpses of wives before we reflect on the process that enables us to work across that patchy evidence to write their involvement into existence. Both the accounting and the process are linked by our feminist perspective on gendered politics and relationality.

The legitimization of invisibility and under-interpretation

One of the most common reactions we get to this project [recovering 'wives of the canon'] comes in the form of a question: 'Okay, but what did she *do*?' (Forestal & Philips, 2018, p. 588)

The response that Jennifer Forestal and Menaka Philips receive to their efforts to examine how gender norms underlie what is considered to fall within the realm of philosophical scholarship and intellectual labour is one that we recognise. They point to the reification of philosophers of the canon to the status of heroic intellectual individuals and the reduction of wives to biographical background, and the assumptions thereby revealed about how academics traditionally determine what stories are worth telling. Clear empirical evidence is required to show that wives might have had a part in the husband's intellectual achievements, or that where they appear to have worked together she was doing anything other than ancillary helping of her husband.

The controversy over the role played by theoretical physicist Albert Einstein's first wife, Mileva Marić, is a case in point (and one we return to below). They met as undergraduates on a university physics programme, but ultimately Mileva was unable to pursue her scientific interests and faced a traumatic pregnancy. Einstein's time with his first wife coincided with a period of prolific scientific output which has led to questions about Mileva's part in this. Esterson and Cassidy's (2019) book, *Einstein's Wife*, presents itself as a clear-headed assessment of contentions that she made an unacknowledged scientific contribution to his work, pointing to the lack of any direct evidence. Essentially, the authors of this book take an empiricist approach to what they regard as speculations and circumstantial arguments, to conclude that while Mileva Marić could have influenced

Einstein there is no fact-based evidence that she did. But what about the contribution that disciplinary imagination and theoretical perspective can play in such scholarly assessments, of the type we consider below.

Lending unspoken legitimacy and authority to the idea that true knowledge comes from empirical evidence alone as an approach to investigating wives' contributions to their academic husband's work, is the construction of the tropes of the intellectual great man and detached theoretical analyst. The giant whose shoulders we are said to stand upon is a gendered concept that is one element in the condition of the absence of recognition and silence about their wives. The view seen through the individualised 'great man producing great works' lens enforces an incuriosity that marginalises women and invisibilises gendered partnerships (Carver, 2018) – an issue of gendered politics that we return to below. The idea that academic knowledge is produced by self-sufficient individual academic men is misleading. As Forestal and Philips argue, and as our Academics' Wives project demonstrates, while the reification of greatness privileges abstract and theoretical approaches, texts and thinkers do not spring into the world fully formed: they are made, situated and supported in interdependent lived realities.

Mention of 'thanks to my wife. . .' in books is ubiquitous, and indeed this often forms the only publicly visible evidence that wives have played a role in their husbands' scholarly endeavours. Nonetheless, even when such a trace of wives' efforts is displayed in footnotes or the acknowledgement pages of texts, the wives of sociologists can remain unnamed, with the anonymity of 'my wife' implicitly framing the work as unimportant (Bridges, 2017). Such under-acknowledgement has been made visible in contributions to the #thankstotyping hashtag on Twitter (now X) that trended in 2017. The content of acknowledgements may refer to typing but can also provide a general indication of research and intellectual input.¹ There is, for example, sociologist of race James E. Blackwell in *Mainstreaming Outsiders*: 'I am especially grateful to Myrt, my wife, for the myriad roles she played throughout this project. Her contributions as a research assistant, reader, and critic, and her abiding faith in the importance of this undertaking, as well as her humaneness and understanding, were of inestimable importance to me' (1987, p. 4).

Feeding this identified great man/invisible wife gendered coupling is the underlying institutionalisation of marriage and the status or role of wife, where the structures around which the husband's work is organised may encroach into the wife's life, incorporating her into her husband's work domestically, administratively and/or intellectually and so on (Finch, 1983). Further, a structurally and culturally generated 'two-person single career', where wives can become invested in advancing their husband professionally, simultaneously requires a wife's participation and devalues it (Papanek, 1973). It is sobering to note the effect that acquiring a wife can have on academic men's good intentions. The sociologist of modern life Lewis Mumford remarked negatively on wives' dimming themselves so that their husband's light could shine. Once he was married, however, it seems his views did not apply to his own relationship with his wife, Sophia Wittenberg, who supported Mumford's academic output domestically and commented on his drafts (Christensen, 2021). Similarly, renowned sociologist of post-World War II society C. Wright Mills stated pre-marriage that his second wife, Ruth Harper, would be his professional partner but this did not extend beyond mentioning her (clearly

extensive) research and writing contributions in his book acknowledgement pages once they were man and wife (Edwards & Gillies, 2025).²

In her book *Forgotten Wives*, sociologist of gender Oakley (2021) argues that the condition of wifehood was and continues to be: ‘a political filter through which women’s lives are passed so as to yield a product which only partially records what they actually did. . . . Wives are especially likely to be forgotten, more likely than other women’ (pp. 2–3). We would attribute such continued passing over to the way that family forms and gendered relationships have been regarded as subject to a ‘detraditionalisation’ process, moving from the post-war period into modernity (despite the persistence of gendered patterns of inequality in household labour [Edwards, 2021]). As part of this intellectual shift, perceptions of contemporary gender equality and new, fluid family types may have left the ‘older’ notion of wife as helpmeet as untouched, with the idea of wifehood remaining subject to gendered assumptions about what wives do. This is the lens that Oakley asserts makes a ‘subterranean industry of wifely labour’ so unremarkable that is not recognised as there at all (Oakley, 2021, p. 19). It may also lead to a contemporary underrating or dismissal of wives and other women who do not achieve in their own right, whatever their supportive and intellectual contributions to the achievements of husbands. Oakley’s identification of the forgetting of wives is thus a systematic phenomenon.

The contributions that wives make to their intellectual giant husband’s work may be forgotten, but also – more actively – their involvement may be ignored, marginalised, distorted or erased by researchers. Yet the work that the husbands produce would be very different and perhaps not exist without their wives. Not least, there is the effort that wives may expend to ensure the reputation and intellectual legacy of their academic husbands, such as Kay Titmuss’s ‘two-person-one-career’ careful curation and guarding of leading social policy academic Richard Titmuss’s reputation and legacy (Oakley, 1996). Such efforts may also involve intellectual labour and authorship. Edith Hanke has detailed the way that the wife of one of the ‘founding fathers’ of sociology was absolutely core to our recognition of him as such. Marianne Schnitger spent years intensively working on assembling, completing and editing Max Weber’s body of work: ‘As a consequence of her efforts the posthumous works of Max Weber were substantially and reliably established for posterity. In so doing she performed a service to scholarship’ (Hanke, 2009, p. 354).

There is also the contribution that wives may have made to the husband’s intellectual brilliance. Shalin (n.d.) identifies the role that social interactionist Erving Goffman’s first wife, Angelica Schuyler Choate-Goffman, played in his disciplinary outputs, actively bringing her own intellect to bear, and trying to find ways to complete her PhD research and pursue an academic career while also holding responsibility for family life. More passively, his wife’s condition also influenced how Goffman theorised mental illness:

Angelica Schuyler Choate was an intellectual in her own right . . . she defended an M.A. thesis on the personality characteristics of upper class women where she quoted her future husband, a fellow U. of C. student (Goffman-Choate, 1950). The two shared an interest in class status, which first surfaced in the paper Erving wrote for E. W. Burgess (Goffman, 1948) and which became the subject of his first professional publication (Goffman, 1951) where alongside Lloyd

Warner, Robert Armstrong, and Tom Burns, Goffman credits for critical feedback ‘Angelica Choate.’ A further clue to the intellectual kinship of Goffman and his wife is found in *Presentation of Self*. In the acknowledgement section of his celebrated treatise Goffman (1959, p. ix) states: ‘Without the collaboration of my wife, Angelica S. Goffman, this report would not have been written.’ . . . Of particular interest for the present endeavor is a lesser known work, ‘The Insanity of Place’, a study that Goffman published in 1969 in the journal *Psychiatry* and then reprinted in his book *Relations in Public* (Goffman, 1971). . . . Although the author does not make direct references to himself, he appears to be drawing on his own painful experience. Goffman’s wife, Angelica Schuyler Choate-Goffman, committed suicide in 1964 after a long bout with mental illness. (Shalin, n.d.)

In an assessment of Esterson and Cassidy’s arguments (discussed earlier) about a lack of evidence that Einstein’s first wife worked with him scientifically, Frappier (2019) points to the dangers of under- and well as over-interpretation in attempts to reintegrate women into our historical narratives: ‘Such an empirical approach is intrinsically limited. It demands that, when faced with missing evidence, we remain silent. But as the adage goes, “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence”’ (p. 136). Under conditions of absences and gaps where gendered social relations create the invisibility and paucity of material around particular sets of experiences, researchers have countered the dangers of under-interpretation through ‘reading against the grain’ (Burton, 2010) aided by disciplinary imagination and theoretical grounding (Taylor, 2010). Hartman (2008) has discussed the violence and exercise of power that is registered in the silences and omissions in archives and historical records of slavery, where the voices of slaves themselves are missing. Hartman developed the phrase ‘critical fabulations’ to capture the way that redressing inadequate slivers and traces of material requires imaginative weaving of the experience,³ while Tamboukou (2022) considers the role of the creative imagination in working with archival fragments of knowledge about a person’s biography, generating the conditions for critical analyses and interpretations of what material there is for us to work with.

The material we are working with

The material that we are working with is patchy in two ways. First, as we have described, we hold an ever-growing collection rather than a (unattainable) complete and representative data set. The collection as it stands at the point of writing includes both fragmentary traces and some extensive examples. It includes wives from both working- and middle-class backgrounds, but reflects the longstanding racial demographic composition of sociology, where staff overwhelmingly are White (Joseph-Salisbury et al., 2020). The traces and cases of sociologists’ wives that we use to illustrate our points in this article are not representations of a profile of a defined population. Rather, they represent exemplars of the conceptual and methodological processes of writing wives into existence where evidence is ambiguous, sparse, obscured or omitted that we discuss in this article.

Second, the reasons for missing or patchy traces of empirical evidence for significant wives’ contributions to their academic husbands’ intellectual work, and for the veiling of any traces of their input there may be within the archive collections of their male partner

(Oakley, 2021; Renwick, 2023), are rooted in the conventional idea of what should be collected and archived. That is, what is considered worth retaining from an academic's papers and depositing in an archive for posterity is shaped by the great man narrative. The archives of great men 'shout loudest' in Wulf's (2024) expressive term. Gendered power-knowledge relations control the traces of the past, privileging some stories and marginalising or silencing others.

Over and again, it seems that coming across evidence of wives and their contributions can often be by serendipity or accident. For instance, amongst the archived papers of the influential sociologist and social policy academic Peter Townsend, Chris Renwick unexpectedly came across acute observational notes on interviews and a pilot time use diary made by Ruth Townsend. Renwick (2023) refers to Peter Townsend's first wife, Ruth, as 'one of the most important but overlooked figures' in her husband's early career (p. 3). Another example is Robert Smith (1990) only realising the extent of Ella Embree's contribution to her anthropologist husband's research in Japan when, investigating John Embree's work, he contacted her and she handed him a box of documents. It transpired that under the terms of her husband's research grant, Ella Embree held specific responsibility for collecting information on the lives of women and children, and that she had kept a diary as material to support John Embree's research and eventual classic book on the topic.

A further example of the serendipitous uncovering of wives' contribution comes from our own work. While exploring interview notes in relevant projects from several major post-war British sociologists for our historical comparative research on parenting (Edwards & Gillies, 2013), we came across several references to 'see Pat's diary' written in the sociologist of education Dennis Marsden's own field diary for one of his ethnographic studies. We mentioned this to a colleague, who put us in touch with Pat Marsden, Dennis's first wife. Pat kindly lent us the ethnographic diary she had kept in the expectation it would help inform her husband's analysis (Edwards & Gillies, 2024). Subsequently, we were able to identify versions of Pat's diary remarks about the built environment and its challenges for mothers and young children in an interim report Dennis submitted for his funder. We also found a 'thanks-to-my-wife' footnote in an unpublished manuscript among Marsden's papers, as well as recognising Pat's handwriting on interview notes for various studies.⁴ It was also through Pat that we heard about another academic wife, Sheila Jackson/Abrams's significant input to both her first and second sociologist husbands' scholarly endeavours, and who forms a case study following on this section.

The above are examples where there is at least some evidence that wives had played a research-based role in their academic husband's career which can be accessed by researchers if they are prepared to search for this in the archives of their high-profile male partners. Yet even in instances where traces of wives' incorporation are available, biographers and researchers of the great man's achievements and legacy can display a remarkable incuriosity. For instance, Terrell Carver (2018) castigates biographers of the foundational philosophical and sociological figures Marx and Engels for obscuring their gendered intellectual and political partnerships: in particular Marx's wife, Jenny von Westphalen, but also a series of Engel's sexual and household partners: Helene Demuth, Mary Burns and Lydia Burns.

Jon Lawrence's (2016) reanalysis of fragments of interview notes from sociologists Michael Young and Peter Willmott's groundbreaking study of family and community in 1950s East End of London makes no reference to or discernible use of Willmott's wife Phyllis's field journal, even though it is relevant to his endeavour. Lawrence's concern is with the implications of Young and Willmott's prior commitment and political investment in the idea of working-class community and kinship demonstrating a decentralised social democracy based on self-servicing, and how this had led them to play down 'aberrant' interview accounts that ran counter to this image. Phyllis Willmott's journal provides an unparalleled gendered and embedded view on everyday community life and, alongside traces of Phyllis's empirical and intellectual engagement in the ideas of the men, there is clear evidence that Phyllis kept the journal as data for Young and Willmott's research study (Edwards & Gillies, 2024). This oversight may be because Lawrence focuses on fieldnotes and interviews archived in Michael Young's papers whereas Phyllis Willmott's journal is deposited in the Willmott collection, and it may mirror Young's later forgetfulness that Phyllis's detailed journal was kept at his and Peter Willmott's behest (interview with Paul Thompson 2001).⁵ Lawrence's deconstruction of arguments put forward by two major post-war sociologists thus remains within the well-rehearsed boundaries of the great man narrative even if critical of their work.

Moving beyond the 'orthodoxies, well-rehearsed narratives, entrenched taken-for-granted truths' (Stanley & Temple, 2008, p. 279) invested in the disciplinary great man requires a letting go of these tropes and a re-reading and re-evaluation of the available material through a different lens. Revelation of hidden traces provided by attentiveness to gendered politics is indicated in Chris Renwick's contribution to a podcast discussion,⁶ in which he talks about his uncovering of the significance of Ruth Townsend for Peter Townsend's early intellectual and research contributions to her sociologist/social policy academic husband's career (as well as her crucial social and domestic support):

The Peter Townsend biography that I've worked on most recently, a number of historians have written about that. But they were looking at those papers for specific reasons. And when I've gone back and looked at them, for the reasons that I had . . . I found things in there which weren't of interest to historians who have looked at those papers before . . . sometimes historians will write about there being a home life and a professional life. And it's still the wife who runs the home life, and this kind of provides the platform as it were for the husband to kind of go off and be brilliant and think brilliant things and do brilliant things . . . [but] if you are looking instead for the ways in which there is actually an important role that the wife plays in the production of sociological knowledge you often see something quite different.

Our perspective and consequent research interests shape what and how we see. It is not just a question of empirical traces then, but one of being able to piece these patches together and make them visible through a lens that makes evident that which is so taken-for-granted that it is not seen. How the interlocking ideas discussed above concerning the category of wife, the great academic man narrative, and the value judgements in archiving, hide academic wives' contributions can be brought to life through an in-depth case study from our academics' wives collection. We look at the significant input of Sheila Jackson/Abrams into both her first and second sociologist husbands' scholarly endeavours. The traces and trail of Sheila's input to disciplinary knowledge is more evident in

the empirical sense than for many other academics' wives. Yet these indicative traces are under-acknowledged and even forgotten – which we can only understand conceptually if we are not to treat it as anything other than ancillary help from a wife and under-interpret it.

Hidden sociological traces: A case study – Sheila Jackson/Abrams

As referred to earlier, we learnt about Sheila Jackson/Abrams from Pat Marsden, then wife of Dennis and writer of a diary to support his research. Sheila was married to two eminent sociologists: Brian Jackson and Philip Abrams, and played a significant role in both of their research trajectories and in the status attributed to these influential sociologists. We pieced together the patchwork of traces of her contributions. We first saw mention of Sheila in the acknowledgement for Jackson's (1968) book: *Working Class Community*. Unlike many other thank-yous from academics to their wives of the time, this was with the consideration of being named: 'I don't suppose I would have stuck at the project at all had I not only had the initial help from Sheila Jackson with the fieldwork and writing up, but generous and selfless encouragement all the way through' (p. vii). The grant application to the Frederick Soddy Trust for this research, archived in Brian Jackson's collection at the University of Essex,⁷ states: 'The enquiry would be carried out by myself together with my wife Sheila Jackson . . .'. Sheila's incorporation coalesced further into view on investigation of papers in both the Brian Jackson and Dennis Marsden collections archived at the University of Essex.⁸ She carried out interviews and supported fieldwork for their classic and highly influential study, *Education and the Working Class* (1962). Sheila Jackson's field involvement in these studies is not in doubt, and we wonder what some of the material would have looked like without her presence. Further light is thrown on what might have been her intellectual input after her second marriage, to Philip Abrams.

Sheila Jackson/Abrams is a wife who is concealed in the archives and publications of great intellects. Her role in generating disciplinary knowledge with Philip Abrams is not to be found in a husband's archive, however. Rather her formative part in the generation of classic sociological knowledge is hiding in plain sight in Abrams's influential publications. The preface to the book *Communes, Sociology and Society* (1976) acknowledges that Sheila (named) had the idea for the research in the first place, stayed in communes, conducted interviews, analysed questionnaire responses, and kept track of the organisation of the Commune Movement: 'it would have been very difficult for us to understand the groups we have written about in this book without this further work on the wider alternative society movements' (p. vii). She also had input to writing the book, although Philip Abrams and the other male researcher took lead authorship while Sheila and the other female researcher's efforts were indicated as lesser through authorial use of the term 'with' rather than 'by'. Sheila also was formative in Abrams's posthumously published work on neighbours, written up by Martin Bulmer in 1985. Bulmer noted Sheila's major influence in his introduction, acknowledging her extensive intellectual and fieldwork input. But in great man narrative mode, the study is regarded and named as Philip Abrams's achievement. A University of Durham (1982) *Gazette* obituary for Philip

Abrams, which made clear his significant contributions to sociological knowledge, ends with a reference to 'his wife, Sheila Abrams, who herself had shared directly in so much of his recent work' (p. 9).

After Abrams' death, Sheila sought further funding for and continued working on a study of married daughters caring for elderly mothers, which both she and Philip had embarked upon. Dennis Marsden stepped in to support Sheila with the study. If you wish to consult the research project papers, however, you will find them archived under the Marsden collection of papers (see footnote 4) as if the study was his alone. It was not until we investigated the content that we could see that Sheila held the grant for the study and corresponded about it. Once again, she is concealed in the archive of a major male disciplinary figure, albeit not her husband's.

Sheila's sociological contributions have fallen prey to the interlocking of invisibility and marginalisation. As we now discuss, to reveal her and other sociologists' wives' roles in their husbands' achievements requires a feminist relational perspective and an awareness of gendered partnership politics to enable the critical leaps that recompose their role.

Traces of the past and critical leaps

The slivers and traces of sociologists' wives such as Sheila Jackson/Abrams that are available to us may be in hard copy or digital form, and it is easy – we know – to be seduced into a feeling that these sources are a direct line to the person and into the past with the potential to provide in the quest for clear evidence. That is especially the case where we are touching and reading pieces of paper that wives have sat down and written using a ballpoint pen, fountain pen or pencil: Phyllis Willmott's handwritten annotations on her typed up journal, Pat Marsden's handwritten fieldwork diary, and so on, and where potentially their fingerprints may be revealed with dusting powder. Digital forms can render the wives more accessible through searchability, and can democratise access to material about their lives. As a by-product of our research both of these wives' chronicles have been digitised, able to be reached remotely and downloaded from archives. But like archived paper collections, digital copies are subject to selective judgement about what is important enough to digitise (Bishop, 2017). And ultimately, digitised documents are representations of representations (Moore et al., 2017).

As Niamh Moore et al. (2017) remark, the idea that we can make direct contact with the reality of the past is a fantasy and illusion (see also Tamboukou, 2022). Carolyn Steedman (2001) referred to this notion as the performance of positivism, whereby claims to know have to be rooted in actualities – the empiricism that can lead to under-interpretation when it comes to identifying the contributions made by the wives of great men that we have already raised. Rather, we are dealing with the remaining, incomplete signs of bygone people, relationships, events and times. We have hints and scrappy traces of the past, but what has been ignored or forgotten is wider than the trace that has been accessed. As our foregoing discussion shows, it is the contributions of wives such as Sheila that are likely to be passed by. It is the creative interpretation of those fragments that are present that is the issue in making the case for the part played by wives in disciplinary knowledge. The empirical traces cannot stand on their own. Our scholarly labour

and informed activities of investigation, reading, reflexivity, thought, analysis, interpretation and so on are our efforts to fill in the gaps between what remains and write the wives into existence. Underpinning this making of knowledge is a leap from the fragmentary and partial that is rooted in a feminist relational sensibility.

Our reflection here is concerned with how we can move from the uncertainty of gaps and missing information to writing the wives into existence. How can we make a critical leap from book acknowledgements, diaries, fieldnotes, correspondence, notes in margins of data generation schedules or instruments, etc., photographs, handwriting styles, progress reports for funders and other ephemera, to the production of knowledge for our research about sociologists' wives? Any critical leap in the absence of complete certainty cannot be made from nowhere (to borrow from Möllering, 2006). As reflexive and rigorous researchers we need to be able to specify the process by which we move from empirical scraps to produce informed analysis and plausible interpretations. The somewhere from which we are looking at traces and constructing our arguments about the disciplinary developmental role that sociologists' wives have played is informed broadly by a feminist relational sensibility.

This sensibility, as we bring it to bear on re-apprehending the patchy materials about wives, has informed our arguments about the implications of the disciplinary great man narrative combined with the institutionalised invisibility of wives and their labour. It is tied into our own sociological biographies, to our theoretical influences and conceptual approach to understanding the social world. Liz Stanley (1993) developed the notion of intellectual autobiography 'to put such precepts concerning reflexivity in feminist research processes into analytic practice, in particular by focusing on the processes by which evaluations, interpretations and conclusions have been reached from whatever "data" I have worked on' (p. 44). Highlighting researchers' intellectual autobiographies is about revealing the process of interpretation. It involves making visible and accountable what is usually and conventionally hidden for readers – the active process of understanding by a person with a particular intellectual positioning from which s/he is understanding. Stanley (1990) argues that the labour process involved in constructing texts and producing accounts of lives is often ignored. Researchers revealing and addressing their interpretive process denotes 'an analytic (not just descriptive) concern with the specifics of how we come to understand what we do, by locating acts of understanding in an explication of the grounded contexts these are located in and arise from' (p. 62).

Exploring the patchy material about wives from a relational feminist point of view or lens means re-reading against the grain as well as with it. It involves paying conceptual not just empiricist attention to the wider social, economic and political conditions of institutional and interpersonal gendered power relations of incorporated wifehood in which the wives were embedded. These conditions, implicitly or explicitly, are inscribed in the material traces we explore. Acknowledging this means that researchers are applying a lens that identifies the hidden presence and forgotten traces of academics' wives and their contributions. Feminist and gender-aware enquiry has provided much evidence of the dominant gendered division of labour, the implicit division of public and private spheres, the effects of patriarchal attitudes to women, the institutional parameters and strictures of marriage and wifehood – and the tensions, ruptures and exceptions – in post-war Britain (e.g. Finch, 1983; Gavron, 1966; Lewis, 1992; Oakley, 1981).

Awareness of gendered politics and relationality as inherently constitutive provides a critical edge, and means that the taken-for-granted individualism of the narrative of a self-sufficient great man is called into question. And it is awareness of dynamics of gendered inequality as this is situated in structural interpersonal relations that alerts us to the institutional and relational positioning of wifehood and implications for what wives are able to do and the lives they are able to lead (Koggel et al., 2022). A focus on empirical evidence alone as somehow detached, outside of the structural and relational dynamics that it is located within, ironically means actuality is silenced. It is the knowledge that the contributions of the wives of disciplinary great men must be accessed, located and analysed within broader relations of gendered labour, in the undergirding relational conditions, context and circumstances, that is the grounding that enables the leap from fragmentary traces of sociologists' wives across to pointing to their contributions to their husband's disciplinary endeavours.

Conclusion

Making visible the slivers and traces of academics' wives in the past, and writing them into existence, enables contemporary scholars to understand the importance of the part played by the wives of major figures in disciplinary endeavours. Rather than hidden, forgotten or ignored incorporation, a feminist perspective on relationality and gender politics highlights how, on many levels, wives helped to build the reputations and careers of their academic husbands. As our own and others' work in this field reveals, the men often appear to have produced foundational disciplinary insights and achieve academic recognition on their own or in collaboration with male colleagues, while the piecing together of representations of scraps of the past reveals this as propped up by input from wives. The aim of this endeavour is not to undermine the brilliant men and the knowledge they generated that has had such important effects down the disciplinary generations, but to bring to bear a feminist sensibility that reveals the gendered politics of relationality that is part of their (and others') lives.

Managing the uncertainties and nuances of the by-products of social research that contain traces of wives' contributions to the career trajectories and achievements of prominent academic men, or extrapolating from mentions in book acknowledgements, involves reading between the lines. It involves re-reading against the grain in the knowledge that the individual brilliant man is a construct propped up by unacknowledged work of wives and other women behind the scenes.

The recovery of wives and investigations of archival and other material from the past is always read and understood from the present moment, not least because of the concerns that have led researchers such as ourselves to recognise and investigate it as a topic. But there are caveats here. A question that has often been put to us after presentations of our work is, shouldn't the husbands have noted their wives as co-authors on their publications? But the writing of sociologists' and other disciplinary giants' wives into existence is not about using a present-centred lens to make a judgement about the past. The endeavour is more about acknowledging and identifying the work that wives have put in, their contribution to disciplinary knowledge, and especially about identifying the collective relational nature of the academic endeavour rather than the myth of the brilliant man.

Recovering and recognising the contributions of wives to past scholarship also alerts us to the erasures that continue today. In an academy facing a crisis of contingent labour and precarious employment the story of academics' wives and their unpaid or underpaid work is an issue with significant contemporary resonances. Precarity intersects with gender to shape inequalities in the way that academic staff and academic knowledge production are understood and enacted. Women academics and those from minority backgrounds are more likely to be on short-term contracts that do not allow much space to write and publish, to be allocated and take on a disproportionate amount of 'academic housework' (non-research, collaborative and service responsibilities), and less likely to be successful in securing research funding and to be invited to take up knowledge gatekeeper roles (Bacevic, 2021; Read, 2025). Further to these academic role mechanisms, there is also epistemic positioning where the identity of 'knower' devalues the knowledge they produce: 'Emphasizing the relational and performative nature of forms of positioning highlights the need to rethink our own practices, and how they relate to the complex intersections between recognition, promotion and inequality in the context of increasing precarity and competition in knowledge production' (Bacevic, 2021, p. 1133). In the traces and cases of the sociologists' wives considered in this article, this has taken the form of quiet epistemic erasure involving non-attribution of their part in the generation of knowledge (beyond book acknowledgements).

There has long been an economic and social undervaluing of women's labour and of women undertaking the necessary but thankless tasks without which universities would be unable to flourish. If we do not tell the story of these contributions, then as the stories of the wives of great men show, it will be as if they do not exist.

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Notes

1. We have not, as yet, come across any examples of wives thanking their husband for typing, for coming up with ideas, or for doing research for them.
2. Einstein also wrote about his hopes for a scientific partnership between him and his wife-to-be, Mileva Marić.
3. Our thanks to Lebogang Mokwena for drawing this work to our attention.
4. The Dennis Marsden Collection, 1960–1983. University of Essex Special Collections. GB 301 Dennis Marsden
5. Thompson, P. (2019) *Pioneers of social research*, 1996–2018 (data collection), UK Data Service SN: 6226.
6. Thanks for Typing podcast, episode 3 'Wives in the archives': <https://thesociologicalreview.org/podcasts/thanks-for-typing/wives-in-the-archives-researching-wives-contributions-to-their-husbands-work/>
7. The Brian Jackson Collection, 1960–1982, University of Essex Special Collections. GB 301 Brian Jackson, file C1.
8. See footnotes 4 and 7.

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