

Anne Buttimer's *The Practice of Geography*: Approaching the history of geography through autobiography

Michael Jones

Department of Geography, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, NO-7491

Trondheim, Norway

E-mail: michael.jones@ntnu.no

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Abstract

The article examines the autobiographical approach presented by Anne Buttimer in her book *The Practice of Geography* (1983) and traces its influence on geographical historiography. Anne Buttimer contributed to the history of geography through histories of ideas, biographies, and autobiographical interviews. Derived from the International Dialogue Project at Lund University, Sweden, *The Practice of Geography* pioneered systematic publication of autobiographical essays and interviews with geographers. The article surveys how her work has inspired further use of autobiographical approaches to the history of geography both within and beyond the Nordic countries, including recent work on theoretical issues. The survey adopts a gender perspective. The article discusses finally some methodological and ethical implications of autobiography.

Keywords: Anne Buttimer, autobiography, history of geography, *The Practice of Geography*

Introduction

The publication thirty-five years ago of *The Practice of Geography* by Anne Buttimer (1983a) presented autobiography as a radically new approach to the historiography of the discipline of geography. She wrote: 'Autobiographies can ... shed light on essential questions about the history of the field, and social construction of its thought and practice, thus offering a critical complement to conventional approaches which rest on archival records' (Buttimer 1983b, 5).

Anne Buttimer (1938–2017) was born in Cork, Ireland. She took an MA in geography at University College Cork in 1958, and a PhD at the University of Washington in Seattle in 1965. Her thesis explored the conceptual and methodological foundations of social geography in France, demonstrating her early interest for the history of geographical knowledge, and was published in expanded version in 1971.¹ Then, critiquing conventional theories and practices in geography for their insensitivity to contextual variations, she pioneered the idea, now widely accepted, that all knowledge arises from particular sets of values (Buttimer 1974).

At a conference in Budapest in 1973, she met Torsten Hägerstrand, who invited her to visit the geographers at Lund University later the same year and again in 1976. She held research fellowships at Lund in 1977–1979 and 1982–1988, enabling her to cooperate with Hägerstrand on the International Dialogue Project. This project involved interviewing colleagues in different countries about their work, working methods and lives in order to identify common denominators in their varied careers, seek the bases of mutual understanding, and improve communication between social and biophysical sciences. The project included more than 70 video-recorded interviews with leading geographers, many with Anne Buttimer as the interviewer. *The Practice of Geography* was one of the results. Through her engagement in this project, she made a significant contribution to the history and philosophy of science, particularly geographical thought and practice. In 1991, she became professor and head of the Department of Geography at University College Dublin. She was president of the International Geographical Union 2000–2004, the first woman to hold this position. In 2014 she received the Vautrin Lud International Prize for Geography, often referred to as the ‘Nobel Prize of Geography’ (Alcoforado and Jones 2015; Clout 2017; Ferretti and Jones 2018).

Anne Buttimer’s contributions to the history of geographical knowledge included histories of ideas, biographical articles, and the autobiographical project. Her study of the French geographical tradition (Buttimer 1971) brought concepts of social geography to the attention of North American geographers and introduced ‘social space’ as an intertwining of subjective attitudes, perceptions and experiences of place with the objective physical environment (Mels 2011, 93). Using concepts developed in the International Dialogue Project, she surveyed ideas about humanity’s relationship to the natural environment (Buttimer 1993), followed by a history of geographical thought and practice in Sweden (Buttimer and Mels 2006). One chapter contained a transcript of Anne Buttimer’s interview with Torsten Hägerstrand in May 1979. She also co-edited two volumes that focused on the significance of regional context for the history of geographical thought and practice (Buttimer, Brunn, and Wardenga 1999; Buttimer and Wallin 1999).

Anne Buttimer was a member of the International Geographical Union’s Commission on the History of Geographical Thought 1968–1996 and its secretary 1988–1996 (Maddrell 2009, 754). One of the commission’s projects was *Geographers:*

Biobibliographical Studies, beginning in 1977 and is still continuing. The series presents through biographies the contribution of prominent, deceased researchers to the development of geographical thought. Buttimer (1987b, 2003, 2007) contributed the articles on Edgar Kant, Thomas Walter Freeman, and Torsten Hägerstrand. Other biographical articles included a short account of the Irish geographer Estyn Evans in *Irish Innovators in Science and Technology* (Buttimer 2002), the entry on the British geographer T.W. Freeman in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Buttimer 2004), an article on Edgar Kant and his contributions to geography in his native Estonia and his adopted Sweden (Buttimer 2005), and the entry on Alexander Von Humboldt in the *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography* (Buttimer 2009). She compared the careers of Humboldt and the Finnish geographer J.G. Granö in another article (Buttimer 2010). She also wrote briefly on Yi-Fu Tuan when he was awarded the Vautrun Lud Prize (Buttimer 2012).

Anne Buttimer's interest in biography went hand-in-hand with her interest in the autobiographical approach, which is the topic of the present essay. The aim is to present her work with autobiography and to examine its influence on later geographical historiography. The essay begins with a presentation of the International Dialogue Project and the autobiographical material published from it. The inspiration of the project for later research using autobiographical methods is then examined. Although Anne Buttimer was not motivated by an explicit feminist agenda, a gender perspective is adopted here as an added dimension. Theoretical issues are considered, including a presentation of typologies of autobiography discussed in the geography literature. This is followed by a discussion of methodological and ethical implications of autobiographical approaches.

The International Dialogue Project

In the International Dialogue Project, Anne Buttimer and Torsten Hägerstrand invited senior colleagues to relate their personal histories, experiences and views as practising geographers. Between 1978 and 1989, career stories from 150 scholars, both geographers and others, were collected in the form of autobiographical essays, sound or video recordings of individual interviews and group conversations, archived at Lund

University Library.² Of the 74 videos with geographers, eight were of women, while six were from the Global South (Buttimer 1993, 4–6, 11–38, 223–239).

Anne Buttimer (1983b, 3–16) explained how the project took form through seminars and recordings, stimulating dialogue with students and colleagues. Scholars could reveal through autobiographical accounts how sensory perceptions, affective bonds to places and regions (often with roots in childhood experiences of places, events and people), experiences from story books, stamps or maps, or oral transmissions of thought through field excursions, laboratories and seminars contributed to their choice of geography. Explicit or implicit concerns were the relationships between knowledge and understanding, experience and expertise, and dreams and reality, as well as the contexts promoting or inhibiting scholarly creativity. Buttimer identified three interlocking interpretive themes in the narratives: *meaning*, which incorporates values and convictions concerning the practice of geography; *metaphor*, relating to modes of expression and argument; and *milieu*, referring to physical, historical, social, linguistic, and political contexts. Elaborating on these in later publications, she added *horizons*, the scale of concern in space and time (Buttimer 1993, 11–38; Buttimer and Mels 2006, 125-153).

In *The Practice of Geography*, Buttimer (1983a) presented autobiographical essays by twelve European and North American geographers. Two of them were women. One was Aadel Brun Tschudi (1983), who described how her birth and upbringing in China as the daughter of Norwegian missionaries influenced her later pioneering research in the field of development geography in Norway. The other was Jacqueline Beaujeu-Garnier (1983), the first French woman to gain a doctorate in geography and in 1960 appointed the first female professor of geography at the Sorbonne. Besides Tschudi, autobiographies of three other Nordic geographers were included: Ilmari Hustich (1983) in Finland, and William William-Olsson (1983) and Torsten Hägerstrand (1983) in Sweden. In addition, there was an autobiography by the British geographer and Nordic specialist, William R. Mead (Bill Mead) (1983).³ Mead (1993, 2002, 2009) went on to write three autobiographical books on his experiences in Finland and Norway, and his school days in Aylesbury, England.

Another product of the project was a series of brief autobiographical essays in which six geographers - two from Finland, two from Sweden, one from Germany, and

one from Norway – as well as a Norwegian philosopher were asked to give their personal reflections on the significance of particular places for their creativity.⁴ The Norwegian geographer, Aadel Brun Tschudi, was the only woman (Buttimer 1983c: 65–90).

In 1988 Hägerstrand and Buttimer edited the book *Geographers of Norden*, containing twelve autobiographical presentations in which retired colleagues in the Nordic countries – three from Denmark, two from Finland, one from Iceland, two from Norway, and four from Sweden⁵ – reflected on their career experiences. The only woman was Gerd Enequist (1988), who in 1947 had become Sweden's – and the world's – first female geography professor and the first female professor in any subject at Uppsala University. The self-portraits give the reader a picture not just of the twelve individual geographers but also of similarities and differences between geography as practised in the Nordic countries. Gerd Enequist (1903–1989) and Aadel Brun Tschudi (1909–1980) were the only female geographers at professor level in the Nordic countries before the mid-1990s.

An autobiographical interview with Anne Buttimer, conducted in 2006 by the British geographer Avril Maddrell, was published in 2009. When asked if the inclusion of women geographers in *The Practice of Geography* and *Geographers of Norden* was a conscious decision, Anne replied that this reflected “the actual ratios of male to female in university employment of the generation which retired in 1980. I tried to include women, but it was not easy” (Maddrell 2009, 755). Maddrell noted that although Buttimer did not deem herself a theoretical feminist, ‘her work has shown sensitivity to gender issues through her concern for the human perspective on geographical issues and knowledge’ (741).

Inspiration for later use of autobiography in geography

Autobiography in the form of personal memories has been used to throw light on the history of Swedish geography departments. Without referring directly to the International Dialogue Project or *The Practice of Geography*, Gunnar Olsson (1998) compiled a book of memoirs written by those, still living in 1997, who had completed doctoral degrees at Uppsala University up to the end of the 1970s – 18 in all, of whom three were women – as well as three honorary doctors in geography.⁶ Following Gerd

Enequist, these were the only other women to complete doctoral degrees in Sweden before 1975. From the 1990s, the Uppsala department stood out from the other Swedish geography departments in having a particularly high ratio of women to men taking doctoral degrees, many continuing into prominent academic careers. In order to identify the reasons for this, Gunnel Forsberg (2016, 2017) has prepared a collective memoir based on autobiographical interviews with 11 of those who completed their doctoral degrees in Uppsala between 1975 and 2004. In another context, Mats Widgren (2014) has given an account based on his personal memories of fifty years' history of the Department of Geography at Stockholm University. Both Forsberg's and Widgren's accounts made reference to the volume on the making of Swedish geography by Buttimer and Mels (2006) as a background for their work.

The work of Buttimer and Hägerstrand has inspired other Nordic scholars to adopt autobiographical methods as an approach to the history of geographical knowledge. Their work provided the inspiration for the Danish geographer Sven Illeris, who edited in 1999 a work on Danish geographical researchers. This presented 20 biographies of deceased Danish geographers (all male), together with 16 autobiographies of living senior geographers, including three from abroad who had worked in Denmark over a long period of time.⁷ The book included one woman, Kirsten Simonsen (1999), who had become Denmark's first female professor in geography in 1996. The biographies and autobiographies presented the subjects' research and other academic work, providing information on their careers, influences on their work such as their upbringing, studies, families, colleagues, and other social networks, as well as societal context and academic debates.

The pioneering work of Buttimer and Hägerstrand also inspired projects in Australia and New Zealand using oral history methods to investigate the history of geography. Elaine Stratford at the University of Tasmania initiated the Millennium Project on Australian Geography and Geographers in 1996 and, during the following six years, she and others in the Australian geography community undertook 21 interviews with senior geographers, including three women (Stratford 1998, 2001). The New Zealand Geographical Society Oral History Project 'Profiling New Zealand Geographers', initiated in 2002 by Michael Roche at Massey University and colleagues, interviewed six retired geographers who had been active in newly established university

geography departments, two of them women. The project stimulated further work on departmental history and personal autobiographies, and the setting up of an archive (Mansvelt 2003, 2006; Pawson 2003; Roche 2003, 2006, 2011).

In 2002 Peter Gould and Forrest R. Pitts edited a collection titled *Geographical Voices* containing autobiographical essays by 14 men, who had worked in the USA and played a central role in the recent changes that characterized the discipline of geography (among them Gunnar Olsson from Sweden). The editors were inspired by the autobiographical essay written by Torsten Hägerstrand (1983) in *The Practice of Geography*.

Hägerstrand's essay was also an important source for the British geographer Robin Flowerdew, who wrote short biographies of Torsten Hägerstrand in *Key Thinkers on Space and Place* (Flowerdew 2004, 2011) and the *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography* (Flowerdew 2009). As the most prominent internationally known geographer from the Nordic countries, Hägerstrand was the only Nordic researcher in the first edition of *Key Thinkers*.⁸

The inclusion of autobiography as an integral part of understanding a discipline has reached textbooks. In *Approaches to Human Geography*, edited by Stuart C. Aitken and Gill Valentine (2006), nine contemporary geographers – five men and four women – explained how events in their lives had influenced their approaches to theory and practice in their academic careers. The autobiographies indicated some of the personal factors that influence how geographers 'come to know the world', showing how their work 'has been shaped by their academic context, place, and personal experiences'. It was argued that personal writing is an important means of challenging 'the disembodied and dispassionate nature of much academic writing' (Aitken and Valentine 2006, 169). All the autobiographies were by researchers attached to institutions in and working in the English-speaking world, principally North America. The second edition (Aitken and Valentine 2015) contained autobiographies of seven men and two women. Due in part to difficulties in getting updates, the imbalance between male and female autobiographies unexpectedly increased.

In Norway, Asbjørn Aase published in 2012 a book combining his personal academic autobiography with a history of the Department of Geography in Trondheim, where he was the founding member and first professor. I contributed to this book an

introductory essay on the autobiographical approach (Jones 2012). Inspired by the work of Anne Buttimer and the projects in New Zealand and Australia, I have undertaken several autobiographical interviews with colleagues at the Department of Geography in Trondheim (Jones 2012, VI–VIII). Asbjørn Aase was the first colleague whom I interviewed. I have conducted autobiographical interviews with four other colleagues at the department and been interviewed myself by a colleague outside the department. The department has had since 1995 an equal number of female and male full professors, a situation that remains untypical of geography departments in the Nordic countries. A current project involves autobiographical interviews with the female professors to gain insights in how this came about (Berg et al. 2017). The interviews are intended as potential sources of departmental and disciplinary history. They aim to illuminate factors that have influenced the academic choices made by individual researchers and which have left their stamp on the department's scholarly profile and hence on the development of geography as a discipline in Norway. The interviews are loosely structured, allowing the interviewee flexibility in deciding the content. They are primarily conversations that present life histories with an emphasis on the scholarly dimension (Jones 2014, 312). The interviews are intended as archive recordings and as such not edited. A condition of the interviews is that permission is required from the interviewee if extracts are to be included in a publication. So far, extracts from one of the interviews, that with development geographer Ragnhild Lund, have been published (Jones 2014).

Theoretical considerations

Conventional presentations of scientific history and practice have been challenged by feminist ideas, which have criticized such accounts for often being presented as 'objective and disembodied' (Aitken and Valentine, 2006, 2). The Canadian sociologist Dorothy E. Smith (1988, 1990, 2005) has critiqued presentations of knowledge that purport to be abstract, objective and universal, and examined knowledge formation in relation to her own lived experience as a woman situated in a patriarchally dominated system of power. Similar arguments for the situatedness of science have been advanced by the US-American biologist and social scientist Donna J. Haraway (1988, 1991) and by the British geographer Gillian Rose (1993). The growing number of women entering academic research has brought 'distinctive understandings of and perspectives on the

world ... based upon women's places, experiences and training' (Nash 1994, 55). The feminist critique of claims of universality and objectivity has drawn attention to the ways in which social relations, including gender dynamics, affect the research process (Gilbert 1994, 90–91). Autobiography can be used to integrate the personal element into research historiography by providing an understanding of how the lives and experiences of individual researchers play an important part in the history of ideas (Jones 2014, 308–309).

Anne Buttimer's work was a source of inspiration for *Placing Autobiography in Geography*, edited by Pamela Moss (2001a), which included autobiographical accounts by five men and four women. Anne's own chapter was a reworked version of an earlier autobiographical article (Buttimer 1987a, 2001). The contributors were based at universities in North America, Britain or Ireland. Moss (2001b) presented eight different uses of autobiography in research: as self-absorption, to give legitimacy, as self-portrayal through a life story, to capture daily life and individual experience, to express positionality, as critique, and as a means of exploring subjectivities and identities. Moss (2001b, 2001c) further discussed three ways in which autobiography and geography came together. First, the history of the discipline concerned not only the geographical literature as such, but also the people who have produced it. Second, reflexivity and positioning on the part of the researcher, which received attention especially in the 1990s, focused on how the personal element in the collection of information affects the research process and its content. Third, personal life stories of those being researched served as a form of data collection.

For the first time in a geographical encyclopedia, the *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography* included in 2009 an entry on autobiography. The author, Mark Purcell (2009), quoted a statement by Moss (2001c, 190) that “‘autobiographical approaches are not widely accepted as a standard method for geographic research’”, due in part to a lingering positivism that devalues autobiography as not producing ‘objective’ research (Purcell 2009, 235). Purcell suggested that although claims of an ‘autobiographical turn’ (Daniels and Nash 2004) may be premature there is nonetheless growing interest in autobiography in geography. He distinguished between the use of autobiography as data, where the researcher uses others’ autobiographical accounts in similar ways to other forms of qualitative data, and the use of autobiography as method,

in which one narrates elements of one's own life as part of the research process. He further distinguished between four approaches to autobiography as method: the 'great man' approach; phenomenology; reflexivity; and 'insurgent autobiography'.

Butz (2017) approached autobiography slightly differently in his entry in *The International Encyclopedia of Geography*. He argued that although biography and autobiography both focus on what he calls 'life-writing', autobiography has more in common with in-depth interviews, oral testimony, ethnography, storytelling, and autoethnography. Autobiography, he wrote, enables 'the communication of personal experiences, situated understandings, subjugated perspectives, self-reflexive analyses, emotion, and affect, all of which are gaining legitimacy as aspects of geographical knowledge and expression.' Butz categorized autobiography as academic practice into four different types, which he termed humanistic, reflexive, generative (of social, political, and intellectual change), and affective autobiography. However, Butz admitted that autobiographical accounts are not unproblematical as 'many geographers continue to find first-person self-narration too personal, subjective and self-indulgent to be useful.'

Methodological considerations

Anne Buttimer did not discuss in *The Practice of Geography* methodological and ethical questions in conducting autobiographical interviews. Both autobiographical essays and interviews are likely to be affected by vagaries of memory, and by whether memory aids such as diaries have been used. The questions asked or other circumstances such as current events, media, reading or conversations may trigger particular memories. Autobiographical presentations are not given once and for all. Self-interpretations may vary with age and may be subject to reassessment over time in the light of differing circumstances. There may be a desire for self-justification or to present certain aspects of oneself while overlooking, downplaying or ignoring other aspects. There is the danger of emphasizing the successes of one's career, while undercommunicating failures and unsuccessful research projects. However, autobiographical interviews differ from independent autobiographies in that the content will to some degree be steered by the questions asked. There will also be a difference between spontaneous interviews and interviews where questions and answers have been prepared beforehand.

The interview situation and general discourse will inevitably be influenced by the personal relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee. An interviewer and interviewee who are close colleagues will generally have a degree of common understanding of the discipline's history and context, with the result that certain things may be left unsaid and taken for granted. Power relations between interviewer and interviewee, including factors such as gender, age and ethnicity, may affect the result. It may be difficult to contest hegemonic discourses and to question tacit values and ideas. Details skipped, words unspoken, and points hinted at but not specified may make for problems of interpretation and analysis (Adriansen and Møller 2009).

The intended final product and the degree of editing may affect the result. There will be differences between a video or sound recording intended for the archive and one published on the internet. These may again differ from interview extracts in a written publication. Kristin Bervig Valentine (1998) raised some ethical issues in the transcription and publication of personal narratives, such as whether the interviewee should be given the opportunity to correct a transcript (which then departs from the original interview and may open the possibility of censoring), and who owns the published product of what is essentially a co-creation.

Like other sources for the history of knowledge, autobiographical material must be interpreted and placed in context. At the same time, autobiography can bring out information that is not reflected in other sources.

Concluding remarks

Through the International Dialogue Project and *The Practice of Geography* during the 1970s and 1980s, Anne Buttimer pioneered systematic publishing of autobiographical essays and interviews. Previous autobiographies by geographers were individual undertakings and relatively few in number. Autobiographies can show how scholars' personal life histories both reflect and affect the development of a discipline. Systematic autobiography and autobiographical interviews serve not simply as a supplement to conventional historiography but complement it by bringing out the personal and subjective elements in the development of ideas and by taking full consequence of the fact that knowledge is socially situated.

Most of the autobiographical conversations undertaken by Anne Buttimer were with men, although not exclusively. This reflected that fact that the overwhelming majority of academic geographers until the last two decades of the twentieth century were men. However, the development of feminist ideas in academia in this period has led to greater awareness of the gender dimension in historiography and helped give greater visibility to women academics. As a result, a slowly increasing number, although still a minority, of autobiographical studies present the careers of women geographers.

Recent discussions of autobiography in geography have focused on theoretical issues, principally presenting typologies that differentiate between different types and purposes of autobiography. However, much remains to be done on methodological and ethical issues. There is need for further discussion of issues related to memory, conscious and unconscious selection of information, and differences between independent autobiographies and autobiographical interviews, with the latter raising questions concerning the editing process, the influence of personal relationships on the result, and questions of ownership of the final product.

Autobiography has in recent years found a place in geography encyclopedias and textbooks. As autobiography becomes increasingly accepted in mainstream Anglo-American geography texts, it is timely to remember Anne Buttimer's pioneering contribution.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Stuart C. Aitken, Gunnel Forsberg, Hugh Clout, Jennifer Moore, Michel Roche, Elaine Stratford, and Anngret Simms for help with supplementary information regarding details in the article.

Notes

¹ A Spanish translation of *Society and Milieu in the French Tradition* was also published in 1971.

² Fifty-seven video recordings from the International Dialogues Project can be viewed on the IGU Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC1WzSi02jYP3QgiseHxKB3g>.

³ The other autobiographical essays were by Clarence J. Glacken (USA), John B. Leighly (USA), T. Walter Freeman (UK), Hans Bobek (Austria), Gerrit Jan van den Berg (Netherlands), and Wolfgang Hartke (Germany). A Russian translation of *The Practice of Geography* was published in 1990.

⁴ Stig Jaatinen and Kalevi Rikkinen from Finland, Hans Aldskogius and Torsten Hägerstrand from Sweden, Wolfgang Hartke from Germany, and Aadel Brun Tschudi and philosopher Tore Nordenstam from Norway.

⁵ Viggo Hansen, Johannes Humlum and Nikolay Knattrup from Denmark, Stig Jaatinen and Oiva Tuominen from Finland, Sigurdur Thorarinsson from Iceland, Axel Sømme and Ludwig H. Herzberg from Norway, and Karl-Erik Bergsten, Gerd Enequist, Gunnar Hoppe, and Karl Gustav Izikowitz from Sweden.

⁶ The three women were Maj (Ohre) Aldskogius, Margareta Hassbring-Wolf, and Lena Gonäs. The men were Gunnar Lindgren, Erik Bylund, Sölve Göransson, Ragnar Bergling, Erik Berggren, Harald Rydberg, Gunnar Norling, Hans Ylander, Gunnar Olsson, Hans Åkerlund, Hans Aldskogius, Carl-Eric Ericsson, Lennart Bäck, Sune Berger, Christer Nilsson, and the three honorary doctors, Bill Mead, Bill Wonders and Björn Bosæus.

⁷ Autobiographies were written by N. Kingo Jacobsen, Harald Svensson, Sofus Christiansen, Ove Biilmann, Sven Illeris, Poul Ove Pedersen, Johannes Krüger, Christian Christiansen, Christian Wichmann Matthiessen, Christopher Jensen-Butler, Jesper Brandt, Kirsten Simonsen, Kenneth R. Olwig, Henrik Breuning-Madsen, Peter Maskell, and Bent Flyvbjerg.

⁸ The second edition of *Key Thinkers on Space and Place* included a biography of Anne Buttimer, assessing her work in the International Dialogue Project and other contributions (Mels 2011).

⁹ The interview with Asbjørn Aase was conducted in 2006 on behalf of the Forum for the History of Knowledge at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, one of a series of interviews with senior professors in different disciplines arranged by the Forum, which also supported the publication of Aase's scholarly autobiography and departmental history.

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