The Autobiographical Self as an Object for Sociological Enquiry

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Michael P. K. Okyerefo [*]

Abstract: »*Das autobiografische Selbst als Gegenstand soziologischer Untersuchung*«. (Auto)biographies are not accidental products; instead, they are shaped by the social world which gives birth to them. Societies inherently impact an individual's life by means of their very social structures, which are themselves created through the interaction of social actors within and across a society's history. In other words, the constant symbiotic interaction between social structures and social actors is an ongoing dynamic that can be observed and explained within historical and contemporary events. Consequently, the different social worlds in which an individual grows up and lives impact that individual's life course. This conceptual paper draws on my experiences of teaching and researching in different societies. It examines an example of autobiography becoming intertwined with social structure in a way that shapes one's academic life and discipline through socially constructed networks. It argues that social worlds shape the social actor regardless of society, lending credence to the necessity for biographical and oral history, or "narrative" approaches to sociological discourse across societies. In this paper I rely on different facets of my life to reflect on many years of engagement in teaching and researching sociological material and of the inner longing to unravel the eternal interconnectedness between the personal and the social.

Keywords: Autobiography, construction, creativity, narrative, Global Sociology.

1.   Introduction

This study is about connecting the dots and drawing upon the assemblages of the past, present, and future in order to understand the individual's make-up, consisting in the methodological approach dubbed biographical research. Biographical research is a sociological construction of the (auto)biographical narrative as the subject of analysis, which encompasses the (auto)biographer's "present," "past and perspectives for the future" (Rosenthal 2004,

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50). The biographical approach facilitates an exploration of the relationship between the individual and society, while avoiding the dichotomy between the "subjective experience" and the "objective social structure," thereby regarding this relationship as dialectical and examining it as such (Becker, Pohn-Lauggas, and Santos 2023, 555). Indeed, autobiographies and biographies are not produced in a vacuum but are instead generated from within complex and interconnected social worlds, making them rich material sources that invariably engender sociological knowledge. Life as we live it often seems frustratingly disconnected and discombobulated. It feels more like a condensation of stories from multiple social worlds that seem disjointed and unable to fit together. From a distance, all others can see is how the individual's life, with all its achievements and disappointments, is pushed in one, and sometimes many directions. It is only when one starts joining up the dots of one's life that it starts to make sense, giving air to Soren Kierkegaard's description of life only being understood by looking backward, but lived by looking forward (Bouchier-Hayes 2005). Conducting autobiographical research can be highly fascinating, not least because it emerges not from a place of accidental production, but rather because it is inherently shaped by the social worlds and systems that give birth to it. Often understood methodologically as inquiries into individuals' whole life stories of themselves, that is, benignly, it is a research process providing vivid (re)constructions of the personal, subjective perceptions and experiences of the individual in such ways that constitute the reality of the "subjects' worlds of knowledge as affirmed and transformed within the dialectical relationship between life history knowledge and patterns presented by their society" (Fischer-Rosenthal and Rosenthal 1997, 138). What else would an (auto)biographical reflection be, if not to discover the intricacies of the relationship between individual and structural forces? Individual predicaments on the one hand, and individual pleasure on the other hand? The complexities of the social being that are intrinsically linked to social structures in such ways resonate with C. Wright Mills's idea of "personal troubles" being eternally linked to "public issues" (Mills [1959] 2000, 8).

Liz Stanley (1993, 43) reminds us of Robert Merton's (1988) emphasis on the importance of the sociological "autobiography as a text [...] for investigation in its own right." This involves constructing and interpreting "a narrative text that purports to tell one's own history within the larger history of one's times" (Merton 1988, 18, cited in Stanley 1993, 43). Stanley (1993, 43) cites Merton's (1988, 19-20) definition of the sociological autobiography as a "constructed personal text of the interplay between the active agent and the social structure." This elevates the sociological biographical work to the level of a credible source of understanding both the socialized actor and the social structure(s) in which the agent's self-construction takes shape. Stanley (1993, 44) argues that "reflexivity" also augments "the relationship between individual

practice and social structure," both in "relating selves to social collectivities" and "recognising the part that selves play in constructing structures as well as being mediated by them." Thus, "'Reflexivity' [...] is located in treating one's self as a subject for intellectual inquiry, and it encapsulates the socialised, non-unitary and changing self." Hence, the self and the social world in which one's self is moulded become useful analytical categories for understanding the cross-fertilization that affects not only the "self" but other "selves" as well. Hence, knowledge generated through an (auto)biography amounts to critical material for investigating the social world and its producers.

In the same vein, Judith Adler argues that Robert Nisbet's idea of "Sociology as an Art Form" conceives the discipline, and the other social sciences, as having "to depend for a long time on the charisma of the individual teacher and his own particular mission" (Adler 2014, 9). Nisbet believed that theory and method were important, but Georg Simmel's attention to the "small and the intimate," the importance of "concrete individuals in his analyses of institutions," ensured "that his work would remain alive" and "lasting in social thought" (Adler 2014, 10). Consequently, the individuality, personal style, and creative work of thinkers is fundamental to social theory. After all, C. Wright Mills' ([1959] 2000) invitation to creativity, the sociological imagination, continues to inspire many sociological works. Sociologists, "like novelists or painters," Adler (2014, 15) opines, have the propensity to produce creative works. The autobiography or biography is a creative work of immense sociological import as it is concerned with reconstructing social reality. It links agent and structure, through which the "public-private" dichotomy is a "blurred binary," seeing in the intellectual biography or the life of the sociologist C. Wright Mills rich material for the very discipline he lived and worked for (Brewer 2005, 661).

C. Wright Mills is thus acclaimed for having obliterated a stark distinction between personal troubles and public issues, thereby establishing sociology as "the study of individuals within their social structural context" (Brewer 2005, 662). In that context, public issues cause people's private troubles at the same time as the latter become former. What is more, if sociologists addressed "the private troubles of ordinary people," their discipline itself would be "employed publicly in a manner to erode any false separation between people's private lives and the public realm" (Brewer 2005, 662). While there have been conflicts over the use of biographies by sociological theories, the discipline has seen renewed interest in the analysis of biographies of ordinary people (Brewer 2005, 663). To this end, Brewer asserts that three forms of "intellectual biographies" have been postulated. The first locates "the subject's work in terms of their precursors," the second in "its social context," and the third in "the subject's 'inner life.'" These correspond to "the history of

ideas approach," "the sociology of knowledge approach," and "psychobiography" respectively (Brewer 2005, 663). By making "connections between his 'inner life' and work," C. Wright Mills "was not only made in Texas, but he also turned Texas into sociology," Brewer (2005, 671) observes.

C. Wright Mills' seminal work, *The Sociological Imagination,* could therefore only have resulted from such a creative enterprise steeped in a reflection on the "self." John Goodwin (2016, 978) affirms that "for Mills this constant reflection, review and recording were a key driver for his sociological imagination, and it underpinned much of his sociological practice." That is why Alem Kebede (2009, 354) holds that autobiographical writing is a creative process that helps to develop the "sociological imagination primarily because it is an intensive act of self-reflection in which one's autobiographical data is examined on the basis of transpersonal assumptions." This "intersection of biography and social history" is "a journey into a familiar social world via a new route." Drawing on Mills' sociological imagination, Kebede (2009, 355) makes a distinction between "plain autobiography" and "sociological autobiography." The former focuses on "self-reflection and the construction or reconstruction of their biographies without theory," while the latter demands that authors be "ghost writers of their own life story equipped with a set of sociological assumptions" and steeped in both "a social and historical context." In view of Kebede's interpretation, therefore, we are able to subject the intellectual biography of academics to analysis, situating them within the social circumstances that shape their actions, such as the impact of their research, work, and the networks they forge. In fashioning these out, the sociological biography is not a "mere narrated" but "constructed" (Kebede 2009, 361) undertaking, heeding what Jeffrey Alexander terms "the tension between social order and freedom" (Alexander 1988, cited by Kebede 2009, 354). In the same fashion, Norbert Elias "differs from the more physicalist understanding of sociology by including, through Literature, emotions, perceptions, cultural interpretations and definitions of the situation" (Okyerefo 2001, 36). Indeed, John Goodwin declares that "Norbert Elias also enables the sociologist to view their 'individual' story not simply as something 'personal' or unique but instead as a 'process', as part of a web of continually changing relationships" (Goodwin 2016, 976). In his greatest work, *The Civilizing Process,* Elias traces "the 'civilizing' of manners and personality in Western Europe since the late Middle Ages" and shows "how this was related to the formation of states and the monopolisation of power within them" (Okyerefo 2001, 36). Elias's work reiterates the importance of the interaction between auto(biography) and social structure (1997).

The point of departure of this paper, therefore, is how an (auto)biography becomes intertwined with one's academic discipline through socially constructed networks. Drawing on the author's disciplinary experience, teaching, research, and academic networks nurtured through a multi-layered life

course, this paper argues that social worlds shape the social actor regardless of society, lending credence to the necessity for biographical and oral history, or "narrative" approaches to sociological discourse across societies. Biographical research can help us understand how social networks impact the life course, steeped in the constant interaction between biographical courses and social structures. (Auto)biographies allow the individual to leave something meaningful of their life behind, a little bit of immortality revealing the hidden side of our lives, experiences, evaluations, and knowledge. These are connections that, when not made to unravel the personal links to underlying socio-cultural and political structures, stand the risk of examining individuals as free-floating actors.

2.   Autobiography, Social Structure, and Sociology

Conventionally, where a person is born, lives, and grows up has been determined as having a fundamental impact on the quality of their life, their life choices and chances, opportunities, and even their life expectancy. It is this physical embodiment of the interaction of a person with society and nature that leads to the ingraining of habits, skills, and dispositions in a way that shapes the individual's experience and resonates with Bourdieu's (2002) habitus. To this end, an individual's life orients to the social world through a system of durable, transposable, cognitive "schemata or structures of perception, conception and action" (Bourdieu 2002, 27) that become steeped in the social construction of their lives, much more than their genetic constitution. This reveals an often unconscious but established certitude that, while nature forms the basis of one's life, nurture determines the outcome. In terms of the ultimate constructions of the individual actor within their social realities, social structures matter, and they matter greatly. It is therefore social forces that shape the life of the individual. However, various people may in the Parsonian sense navigate a similar social structure differently based on the options and choices that society provides them with. Accordingly, C. Wright Mills's ([1959] 2000) famous observation, that an individual's personal troubles are eternally linked to public issues, underscores the robust extent to which social structure has as much prevalence as individual agency in forming social actors. As such, the sociologist requires the propensity to fathom the inner workings of the interaction between social structure and individual life in a way that can be synthesized to reflect the duality of structure. In Mills's observation, this proclivity is what is required of the sociologist in understanding the fact that "the most fruitful distinction with which the sociological imagination works is between 'the personal troubles of milieu' and 'the public issues of social structure'" (Mills [1959] 2000, 8).

Public issues can be at the macro-level when they take on a global character, such as the COVID-19 pandemic; at the meso-level when they have national or social impacts, such as bad governance and its debilitating economic effects on the citizens of a country; and at the micro-level when they are related to the familial, i.e., issues connected with family and friendship networks. All three levels are both independent and interdependent, invariably influencing each other. For example, a family's decision to educate its child can be impacted by the quality of educational institutions in the country where that family resides, as shaped by the policies of its government. In the same way, the economic opportunities of the family and its network of friends are linked to prevailing national and global economic conditions. Ultimately, for better or for worse, the individual's life is impacted by the public issues associated with all these levels.

The individual is not a passive player in the sense that the social structure is deterministic, a view that Parsons (1937) attempts to resolve by introducing choice and options in his analysis of what he described as voluntaristic theory of action. The Parsonian argument is that individual choices in specific social contexts cannot be explained or understood solely in terms of the internal psychological processes of the individual but must be contextualized within social structures that invariably determine their actions and affect the decisions or choices they make. Implicitly, the active role played by the individual is always within the ambit of social forces that can be both constraining and liberating. Mills, however, presents an onerous truth within this debacle of social forces and individual agency when he asserts that the human person "lives out a biography […] within some historical sequence. By the fact of his living, he contributes, however minutely, to the shaping of this society and to the course of its history, even as he is made by society and by its historical push and shove" ([1959] 2000, 6). This means that humans are active participants in the creation of social structure in their interactions with each other and their environment, while social structure in turn exerts an overpowering influence on individual lives. For Mills (ibid.), then, the "sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society." Grasping this reality is both the "task" and the "promise" of the sociological imagination, and the sociologist ought to have the ability to "recognize this task and this promise." Possessing such imagination can come about through the fecundity generated by many years of work as well as a reflection on one's autobiography in relation to the society of which one is a part, or even serendipity, which is a kind of stumbling upon profound thoughts wrought within the inner cravings and deliberation around which the individual comes into their place in the world.

This work is a reflection of many years, of the inner longing to unravel the eternal interconnectedness between the personal and the social, and of the coming into being of a young boy with aspirations who found his place in the

world. It is the result of over two decades of engagement in teaching and researching sociological materials. It represents an insatiable quest to introspectively understand a life, an autobiography, in its relation to the biography of others and how that life has been performed through the prism of social forces and actions that were considered both voluntary and involuntary in the choices that were made. It is an inspiration strongly nurtured rather early through reading, particularly works of fiction, and especially the African novel of the African Writers Series. It is also a reflection of the indelibly deep and lasting impressions that interactions with family, friends, and social relations at large have made on me.

The instrumentality of novels, specifically African novels, cannot be discounted in the development of my precocious imaginings of the social structures of unknown societies. A love of reading transported my young mind into states of the vivid imaginings of societies I knew or knew not personally, giving rise to a curious desire to understand not just the societies, but more importantly the prevailing social systems that gave birth to these creative works. To this end, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) or Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) ushered my mind into vivid imaginings of Igbo society in Nigeria and Ghanaian society respectively. The same can be said of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* (1965) and *Weep Not Child* (1964), Kenneth Kaunda's *Zambia Shall Be Free* (1962) and newer works such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), or *Purple Hibiscus* (2012) and many others. Imagining the societies that gave rise to these creative works generated a powerful effect on my young mind of a sort that no "sociology" text or book has ever done. And just as the characters in the books are peculiarly shaped by the social structure of the setting of these works, so was my young mind and imagination. Undoubtedly, this creative nourishment, years later, launched the platform for a postgraduate work that investigated the cultural crisis of Africa as depicted in the novels (Okyerefo 2001). It is a work that unlocked the boundaries of my sociological mind and eye to see beyond the horizon into the lives of the social actors and societies described in the novels. Bringing it all together into my mind's eye are the structural patterns underlying the very existence of these societies and the meaning to the actions of their social actors explained through the interconnections between social structure and social actor. The underlying inquisitiveness in studying these novels revealed that these works of fiction mirrored the societies that gave birth to them. Revelling in this imaginative moment finds harmony in Mills's ([1959] 2000, 14) assertion that "Novelists – whose serious work embodies the most widespread definitions of human reality – frequently possess this imagination," thus giving credence to my sociological undertaking as going beyond just writing up works and reports by using the mere collection of data and interviews.

Mills ([1959] 2000, 15) underscores the fact that the sociological imagination is the "quality of mind" par excellence, "that seems most dramatically to promise an understanding of the intimate realities of ourselves in connection with larger social realities." Consequently, nothing can arrest such endeavour; it transcends cultures and people; it can be sought and cultivated by any individual with the aptitude for ingenuity and the patience to probe into life and what shapes it. It is a kind of enlightening insight variously termed the "aha reaction," an "aha moment" that impinges on one's autobiography at any point in time.

What qualifies as sociology, therefore, cannot be the preserve of any society or culture, nor can it be dictated by any specific methodological or theoretical processes. Herein lies the necessity of seeing in the sociological endeavour as such what some scholars refer to as Global Sociology. Arguing for the need for a Global Sociology to transcend the provincial sociology of the Global North, Julian Go suggests "the Southern Standpoint approach" as an extension of the already existing movements of "Southern Theory," "epistemologies of the South," or "indigenous sociology." Go defines his "Southern Standpoint approach" as "a social science from below," "a sociology that starts not with the standpoint of the metropole but with the standpoint of subjugated groups," which he grounds "in a philosophical framework" he calls "*perspectival realism*" (Go 2016, 2). Clearly, Go is at pains to develop this perspective because of the very social realism that dichotomizes the social world into the "superior" and "subaltern," with the former denying the latter access, space, and opportunities for it to realize the full potential of its very capability and the use of its creative mind to contribute to knowledge and its production. It is the daubing of a people's very history and intellectual capacity within global spaces as a distraction from structurally violent yet deterministic interactions that are expressed in the social categorization of the superior's realities as "noble" and the subaltern realities as "inferior." Perhaps the question one should be asking is whether the problem lies in the non-existence of sociology as such, consisting of various methods of articulating and analyzing social interaction, or the deliberate exclusion of the so-called subaltern's means of doing sociology from a particular canon. If this situation is one of marginalization, then the very characterization of sociology from a southern or northern standpoint should be dealing with the realism of social cleavage much more than the existence and articulation of sociological knowledge in various societies.

Sociology has always existed in the creative works of actors in African societies, for example. This is spurred by the sociological imagination and can be noticed in the intricate descriptions of social interaction in biographical works, including characters in novels, for instance. This remains the case unless one limits the sociological understanding to the provincial methodologies of the Global North through the abject denial of the fact that knowledge

production has always taken place in every society. How would any society exist without the production of knowledge to aid its adaptation to its environment? "Northern Studies" are not used to refer to the sociological enterprise in the Global North, although such knowledge production emanates from the North and constitutes a flip side of Wiebke Keim's (2016, 3) "enactments of southern standpoints." In relation to the North, any such reference would be understood as "enactments of northern standpoints," for that matter. Sociological knowledge from the West is rightly considered sociology as such, implying that the universality of such knowledge and its source is taken for granted in northern settings. The problem must be with the "expectation" that all other sociological imaginations need to be viewed through the lenses of the northern standpoint, making it vital for Global Sociology to be driven within a particular epistemological framework again. Meanwhile, one would have expected that original thought should be the essence of any scientific discipline that is subjected to observation and analysis for objectivity. As Wiebke Keim (2016, 4) rightly observes, "the truth or falsehood of a scholarly statement has particular implications." The "Northern-dominated mainstream," or any other geographical standpoint for that matter, "has to take the intellectual achievements of" any "scholarly communities into account" in order to "avoid gradual provincialization." What is more, relativistic tendencies are highly unlikely to be unidirectional in a divided scientific community.

The argument, then, should go beyond efforts at "Indigenising Eurocentric sociology" to discourse on uncovering the sociological imagination, an imagination contemporarily akin to the crippling of the "captive mind" (Onwuzuruigbo 2018). Julian Go is obviously aware of the gatekeeping that impedes the various movements of indigenization from advancing, thereby proposing his *perspectival realism [...] to advance a Southern standpoint approach that draws upon the indigenous sociology and Southern theory movement without resorting to essentialism or relativism*" (Go 2016, 3). It is interesting to note, however, that the centuries-long hegemony of the Global North guarantees the mainstreaming of some "essentially" hegemonic concepts and categories that "no longer qualify" as "relative" to a certain global audience, but inherently gain universal recognition and traction. To this end, it is assumed that every thought should employ specific concepts, even those that subjugate such thought, to advance its own acceptance. After all, Julian Go himself expressly recognizes the persistence of Eurocentrism in social science in "the tendency to take the categories, concepts, and theories developed and deployed of and for the specificities of Anglo-European modernity and uncritically apply them everywhere" (Go 2016, 4-5). At what point would the human mind anywhere be so liberated that its own imaginative self-expression and description of social realities would be taken for granted without reference to any self-appointed canon? The local in any circumstances,

baptized as universal, would surely constitute an over-reaching conceit and self-aggrandizement.

Drawing on Sari Hanafi's vision, then, Global Sociology should be coterminous with a continuous engagement of local sociologies in conversation, thereby mitigating "some of hegemonic and androcentric sociology's shortcomings by reading Ibn Khaldoun with Max Weber, Fatima Mernissi with Nancy Fraser, Karl Marx with WEB Du Bois, and José Rizal with Frantz Fanon and not 'either/or'" (Hanafi 2020, 14). To this end, Global Sociology should consist in the freedom to breathe, the openness to engage in a synthesis of ideas regarding how societies anywhere operate, the commonalities they embrace, and the divergences that challenge them to seek to collaborate as well as cross-fertilize them. There is a "need to keep the encounter between different forms of knowledge production, without framing this debate as only about emancipation from the colonial condition and Western knowledge production hegemony" (Hanafi 2020, 15). In that case, the characterization of "global" is superfluous, since Julian Go's proposed "Southern standpoint" (Go 2016, 14) implies the Global North's "Northern standpoint," which has dominated sociology since the 19th century. Both perspectives highlight "the *social situatedness* of knowledge" (Go 2016, 14), justifying the claim "that knowledge is always *perspectival* yet also *objective*" (Go 2016, 15). And this means that "there can be multiple truths" (Go 2016, 16), since different perspectives may offer partial but true knowledge of the same reality. To this end, Go advances the plausible argument that, with respect to social science, what is referred to as a "perspective" "is the *social entry point* of analysis" or "the *standpoint* of analysis" (Go 2016, 17). Nonetheless, the different entry points or standpoints are of the same reality, which in this case is sociology, thus aligning well with Michael Burawoy's opening claim that "global ethnography can only be an oxymoron" (2000, 1). The subject matter of sociology, which is social interaction, emanates from the individual's (auto)biography and social structure at the same time.

3. The Impact of the Autobiographical Self on my Work

An upbringing within the open-minded and welcoming home of Edmund and Margaret Okyerefo, my parents, shaped the intellectual world view of a young and inquisitorial mind. The privilege of travelling with the family through other parts of Ghana and interacting with people of diverse ethnic and social backgrounds (Okyerefo 2013) was as experiential as any sociological fieldwork could provide. These cross-country travels provided unique opportunities to acquire a fluency in the speech and thought of several Ghanaian languages, including Siwu, Sefwi, Fante, Twi, Ewe, and Lelemi, apart from Sɛkpɛle, the language of my kin and ancestors. With the acquisition of these

languages came an appreciation of different cultures and world views. A chance opportunity to navigate a variety of cultures cannot be taken for granted, especially within artificially crafted nation states incorporating several ethnic groups that western colonialism and imperialism have forced to live together and understand themselves as nations. Ghana, the place of my birth, for example, has a total population of 30,832,019 as of 2021 (Ghana Statistical Service 2021, 2), speaking approximately eighty-one (81) languages. The languages consist of seventy-three (73) indigenous languages and eight (8) non-indigenous languages (Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig 2020).

Although English is the official language, it is mostly spoken by that segment of the population that is literate in it, which means speaking a variety of Ghanaian languages presents the individual with the advantage of exposure to people of different backgrounds. This acquaintance has the benefit of social interaction with a larger segment of the population. At the same time, however, the artificial construction of nation states like Ghana has built-in tensions and implosions that have been witnessed in Africa and elsewhere. This is even more reason why social interaction among people of a wide-ranging ethnic background, including marital alliances, is necessary to ensure peaceful coexistence. The first President of the Republic of Ghana, Osagyefo Dr Kwame Nkrumah, had a great appreciation of this fact, leading him to establish boarding schools across the length and breadth of the country, bringing young people from different ethnic groups together to foster camaraderie towards understanding ourselves as a nation. It is this nationalistic consciousness of creating young leaders with a sense of loyalty to the nation that led to my attending two such boarding secondary schools, albeit established by the Roman Catholic Church. My world view, forever shaped by these formative experiences, nurtured within my thought a value of respect for different people and an immense appreciation for their different ways of life. The parental discipline imbibed during the long periods of socialization in childhood, was pivotal in making this happen, and was further enriched by an early education. There were also the immense contributions and mentoring from some significant individuals, as well as a substantial part of my tertiary education in Europe, travels, and experiences that benefited me in this regard. As an introspective reflection, there is no doubt that my autobiography has been shaped by these social realities.

Indeed, (auto)biographies emerge not from a place of nothingness, but out of interactions and engagements produced from within social worlds, thereby making them rich sources of sociological materials that invariably engender sociological knowledge and its production. (Auto)biographies therefore represent the descriptive reflections of individuals' life, which Znaniecki (1936) referred to as the "humanistic coefficient" bridging actions and interactions to legitimize a performance. To this end, the (auto)biograph-

ical exercise in some "sense demonstrates that we cannot fulfil ourselves unless we are members of a group in whom there is a community of attitudes" (Horowitz 1977, 174). Bertaux (1981, cited in Merrill 2020, 18) prompts us to recognize that, whereas (auto)biographical projects seek in all cases to "uncover the social, economic, cultural, structural and historical forces that shape, distort and otherwise alter problematic lives experiences," they nonetheless, and more importantly, highlight the two fundamental foundations of sociology – agency and structure. Merrill (2020, 18) puts it succinctly as follows: "a person's life is never fully agentic or structurally determined but rather [there is] an interaction between the two although at certain moments one aspect may be more dominant."

I began studying sociology in September 1986 at St. Peter's Regional Major Seminary at Pedu, a suburb of Cape Coast. That year, Dr. John Hodiak Addai-Sundiata of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Cape Coast, taught us Introduction to Sociology. Dr. Addai-Sundiata, as I later discovered, had studied at the University of Heidelberg in Germany, and therefore spoke German and apparently French. This later explained my admiration for his pronunciation of notable names of influence on the discipline, such as Simmel, Weber, Diderot, Montesquieu, Saint-Simon, and Comte, with the kind of accentuation I believed at the time and discovered later was near the native speakers' pronunciation of these names of the said thinkers. Apart from leading us through the classical introductory theses of 19th-century sociology as resulting from the social upheavals of Europe such as the Reformation, the French Revolution, and the Enlightenment, whose brainchild the modern discipline of sociology is (a term coined by Auguste Comte), Dr. Addai-Sundiata made a lasting impression on me by going on to refer to the 14th-century Islamic scholar Ibn Khaldun, who, he said, deserved to be given the real credit for the foundation of sociology as a discipline. Dr. Addai-Sundiata challenged the idea of Europe taking credit for every development in our world. That challenge would inspire a journey into the discovery of an analysis of social interaction in African sources such as novels during my postgraduate work. Dr. Addai-Sundiata's introductory class provoked in me a "discovery" initially identified in the African novels that were read in Monsignor Rudolph J. Apietu's (my mentor's) library and at school. A discovery that transported me into the cultures of the societies in which these novels were written, it ignited the spirit of dreaming and doing sociology in a creatively different way. Dr. Addai-Sundiata inspired in me admiration for the person of Ibn Khaldun of Tunis and the exemplification of the enormous possibilities of knowledge generation on the African continent, feeding into global knowledge production rather than basking in the myth of Africa being at the receiving end of foreign knowledge.

However tenable or contentious his thought, the sociological foundations laid down by Ibn Khaldun form an undoubtable basis for the discipline, and

learning about him was a turning point in the development of my sociological imagination. It provided the urge, as a young man growing up in Ghana, to recognize the global implications of sociological thought and to dream about participating in it as such, rather than succumb to the comprehensive capture of the discipline by the West. Indeed, in his *Applying Ibn Khaldūn: The recovery of a lost tradition in sociology*, Syed Farid Alatas (2014) has argued poignantly for the need to reconstruct modern sociology from the writings of Ibn Khaldun, who Alatas says has been neglected as a theorist. The neglect, Alatas argues, stems from the fact that non-Western thinkers do not enjoy the same attention as is paid to those of Western origin. This is a reality in both the Western and non-Western worlds, in view of the fact that many parts of the world have inherited their educational systems from western colonialism. He "suggests that multicultural sources of sociological thought and theory should be considered" (Alatas 2014, 2), thereby re-centring Ibn Khaldun in the sociological discipline "through the systematic application of his theory" (Alatas 2014, 3) "of state formation to empirical historical situations" (Alatas 2014, 2).

The social contexts in which ideas thrive benefit from preceding backgrounds and experiences. Acknowledging this fact can lead to a fruitful cross-fertilization of different thoughts. Ibn Khaldun, for example, flourished in the Islamic culture of North Africa, which took hold of the region from the 7th century A.D. and nurtured a vigorous intellectual culture. The significance of prior interactions, cultural engagements, and fluid exchange with North African Indigenous thinkers, actors, and everyday peoples, however, should not be underestimated in the influence early Christian thought had on the region from the end of the 1st century A.D. through to the 2nd and 3rd centuries, particularly through works from Clement, Origen, Tertullian, and Augustine. In fact, St. Augustine, known as one of Christendom's most influential and profound thinkers, is argued to have had an overwhelming impact on North African cultural and intellectual discourse (Mazrui 2005, 73). Islam, moreover, was influenced by this rich and evolving intellectual discourse and culture, when its invaders confronted the Church's monasteries, institutions, and libraries during its North African conquest, beginning with Egypt from 641 A.D. through to the 9th century of the largely Christianized Nubia, with which Islam nurtured social, economic, and political intercourse (Michalowski 1981). Islamic scholars, including al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, Ibn Haytham, Ghazali, Ibn Khaldum, and many others, absorbed and instilled knowledge traditions and critical thought of the cultures Muslims inhabited, such as Greek, Indian and others, to strengthen and expand Islamic thought and tradition (Moosa 2015, 51-2).

Therefore, out of this cultural bricolage in North Africa emerged some of the oldest centres of higher learning in the world, such that the University of Al-Kairouine in Fez, Morocco, established in 857 A.D. by a woman, Fatima al-Fihri, and "is often claimed to be the oldest continuously operating degree-

granting university in the world" (Peters 2019, 1069-70). It therefore precedes the University of Bologna, established in 1088 and the oldest in Europe. A recognition of such historical reality should lead one not to hesitate to draw on different sources of knowledge. To this end, the period of my postgraduate studies in cosmopolitan Vienna and Cambridge would particularly help me hone my skills in understanding how different social worlds shape a social actor, which is true of how other social actors are shaped by other social forces.

Indeed, the opportunity to study in Vienna, made possible by the sponsorship of Frau Karoline Oberhofer and the Austrian Bishops Conference, is an indication of how autobiographies can become intertwined. And studying in Cambridge afterwards was to a large extent influenced by my mentor, Monsignor Apietu, who was himself at Oxford. This personal experience regarding the opportunity to pursue postgraduate studies underscores the pivotal role social networks play in the lives of individuals and groups.

Put together, my experiences in Europe would align, in general, with those of Chinua Achebe's protagonist Michael Obi Okonkwo, whose words I read in Achebe's novel *No Longer At Ease* when I was 15 years old. Chinua Achebe describes the experiences of the main character of the novel, Obi Okonkwo, thus:

> It seemed more like a decade than four years, what with the miseries of winter when his longing to return home took on the sharpness of physical pain. It was in England that Nigeria first became more than just a name to him. That was the first great thing that England did for him. (Achebe 1963, 12)

Achebe describes a feeling that seemed to reflect my own realities as not just a Ghanaian but as a person of African origin during that time. Already at the time of reading the book I had a faint understanding of these words as echoing the debilitating blow which "otherness" had dealt this African migrant in the metropole. Since then, many important aspects and stages of migration would find a place in my own self-expression and work, as migration presents an opportunity to understand a particular autobiography or biography as socially constructed within particular or different social worlds. I have spent many years as a cultural sociologist, studying African migrants in Ghana, Austria, other parts of Europe, other parts of Africa, Canada, and the United States, and I have noted how migrants' lives are constructed. With specific reference to African migrants, for example, this construction includes how they are seen, how they see themselves, and how they see both their host and their native societies. I use "construction" here in the sense that "the migrant experience" is not a given but is a meaningful interpretation that various social actors confer on their and others' experiences (Weinberg 2014, 5). The social construction of migrants as "others" is common in our world.

Undoubtedly, the literary works I read at an early age would become pivotal to my social and intellectual development. This, in addition to the many languages learned in moving throughout Ghana, contributed to my autobiographical development and underscore my conviction that infusing the Ghanaian curriculum with such education is necessary, given how that has impacted my life, research, and teaching trajectories.

I have explored the topic of migration from several angles in my work. Among other projects, my research on Ghanaian Pentecostal Churches and their transnational missions in the Global North (Okyerefo 2008) revealed that religion both helped and hindered African immigrants in their attempts to live as *Ausländer* in Austria. On the one hand, the social capital they generated in their churches was an effective coping mechanism against the rejection they commonly faced from native Austrians. On the other hand, increased interaction among their own kind made it hard for individuals to sink roots in Austrian society. As a result, no matter how long African migrants live in a European setting, an overwhelming majority of them, even those who have attained European citizenship, do not feel they belong to Europe (Okyerefo 2015). The individual reasons vary, which is why they claim a range of identities, such as "Austrian," "Austro-Ghanaian," "Ghanaian-Austrian," or "Ghanaian." Meanwhile, their struggle to belong to the host society sometimes estranges them from their homeland, contributing to a popular misunderstanding of Africa's internal and international migration dynamics (Okyerefo and Setrana 2018). Most discussions of migration emphasize international and South-North migration and pay less attention to internal and South-South flows. This leads to the misconception that migrants want to flood Europe and the West in general when, in fact, migration currents are stronger within the poorer countries of the Global South. These countries harbour a disproportionate number of refugees – far more than the richer countries in the Global North. Undoubtedly, migration has deep implications for both individuals and societies. In analyzing Benjamin Kwakye's novel *The Other Crucifix*, Helen Yitah and I (2016) discovered migration's impact on cultural memory and identity. The novel explores the relationship between cultural memory and belonging, focusing on the tensions that shape African identity in America.

In another project, a team of us drew on interviews carried out in Ghana, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Senegal, Canada, and the US to investigate the degree to which African academics living in the diaspora could strengthen African universities through research collaboration with their counterparts on the continent. Our research (Gueye et al. 2019) on the possibilities of mobilizing the African diaspora for the benefit of the African continent and its academic institutions revealed that most scholars in the diaspora engage only sporadically and marginally in the life of African universities. This is not out of personal choice. It is because African scholars in diaspora are highly integrated

into Northern educational and research structures, which prevents them from devoting time to working with African colleagues. Their posts depend on their continued quest for the so called "excellence," which their institutions define as work in Northern settings.

These works produced a rich trove of data on the themes of migration, diaspora, and identity that shape both individuals and societies. They consist in data and themes that portray how "the migrant" is socially constructed, both by the self and by others. Laura Wiesböck, one of my acquaintances who commented on my initial thoughts on this work, is a senior researcher at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Vienna and author of *In better company: the self-righteous view of others*, says that what she finds particularly interesting is the question I raise regarding the interaction between how one sees oneself and how one is seen by others. For example, she would say the following in reacting to the question of who is considered a "migrant." White Americans working at the UN in Vienna are not considered migrants, but expats. Top African professionals going to work in Europe are not considered expats, they are migrants. So, the specific term is used (1) to represent how "desirable" the person moving is for the country of destination, and (2) depending on social class, country of origin, colour of the skin, and economic status. One can assume that this has an impact on how migrants see themselves, especially when the comparison group is the population of the country of residence (not the country of origin).

My works are replete with these dynamics because they resonate with my own autobiography. As pointed out earlier, I have also engaged with other people's biographies or life histories as exemplary instances of the migrant-self through research interviews I have conducted with respondents in some of the works referred to above. These works express a feeling of fitting in neither the country of destination nor the country of origin. Laura Wiesböck was also stunned at how academic connections and boundaries have to be marked off in order to establish oneself as a scholar in the northern hemisphere and what this says about the elitism of the academic system, as well as the devaluation of "the South" in general. All this is fed by the populist misconception that migrants want to "flood" Europe. At the same time, the intentional use of metaphors of natural catastrophes such as "flood" or "waves of immigrants" drives home fear in people on a cognitive level, a strategy often employed deliberately by right-wing populist parties in characterizing the social world in which the biography of migrants is crafted.

It is important, therefore, to be cognizant of the public issues that shape personal (auto)biographies and how to navigate the thin line between subjectivity and objectivity that life histories entail. Why, for example, would some be considered immigrants and others expats, even though both groups of people may be of similar socio-economic but different racial backgrounds who have spent the same length of time in the land of destination? Edmund

Gordon and Mark Anderson would point to a defining reality, "racial terror and marginalization based on internationally held racist ideologies of Black inferiority" (Gordon and Anderson 1999, 285). The authors indicate that the problem emanates from the public issue of racism; "racial identities are not given in nature but are constructed, ascribed, affirmed, and denied. The creation and expression of identities occur under local conditions yet take on diasporic dimensions" (Gordon and Anderson 1999, 294). Where such public issues as racism shape a social structure, individual autobiographies or biographies cannot escape the effect. After all, "Mills's vision for sociology can be understood as an autobiographical comment on the collapse of the public-private binary in his own life" (Brewer 2005, 674). Indeed, the profundity of sociology lies in life itself.

4.   Conclusion

This work has underscored the interplay between autobiography and social structure. It argues that the social world shapes the social actor, thereby making the (auto)biographical approach to sociological discourse an important global sociological enquiry. Drawing on the autobiographical self, the work is a conceptual essay reflecting on how the personal life course is shaped by the social world, thereby impacting later years of teaching and researching sociological materials inspired by what nurtures the autobiographical development. The (auto)biographical approach thus emanates from a creative sociological imagination that situates the individual's personal history within society's public issues, thereby blurring a binary that is central to the very sociological endeavour.

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