

## **ABSTRACT**

### **The Autobiographical Self as an Object for Sociological Enquiry**

(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.

In this inaugural lecture, I examine this concept of the interaction between the individual's life course and the social world further, drawing on my experiences of teaching and researching in different societies. I examine an example of autobiography intertwined with social structure which shapes academic life and discipline through socially constructed networks. I argue 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. I rely on different facets of my life to reflect on my many years of engagement in teaching and researching sociological material and of my inner longing to unravel the eternal interconnectedness between the personal and the social.

My goal is to achieve at least three things in this Inaugural Lecture: First, to convince you that autobiographies or biographies and social structures intertwine, as my own life illustrates. This makes the biographical method in sociology a useful platform where structural and individual circumstances coincide to nurture social actors. Second, and flowing from the first, the biographical method can make sociology a discipline tenable in all societies and cultures. Third, to inspire you, especially young people aspiring to read sociology, that the discipline arouses one's curiosity to understand oneself in relation to society. The individual develops an appreciation for the constant symbiotic interaction between social structures and social actors in an ongoing dynamic that can be observed and explained within historical and contemporary events. In short, I aim to engender an awakening of your 'social imaginations' about the sociological endeavour that is true of our society, and any society for that matter.

I draw on my life course and research corpus to depict how stories/narratives/biographies are central to critical and 'decolonial' research methods. Rather than deploying the time-worn approach of 'decolonizing' knowledge, which continues to define and denigrate a peoples knowledge production with reference to a single historical event and process that subjugate them, their thought process can be understood by interrogating their biography as impacted by their space, place and time. More explicitly in this context, biography serves as a mirror to envision African Social Thought to nurture a critical 'African emancipatory sociological imagination'. The centrality of creativity and relationality in African and Indigenous Social Thought gives prominence to an African emancipatory imagination.

The lecture underscores the interplay between autobiography and social structure. It argues that the social world, created by social actors, shapes the social actor, thereby making the (auto)biographical approach to sociological discourse an important global sociological enquiry. Drawing on the autobiographical self, this conceptual lecture reflects 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. The fact that the biographical and the structural are inherently connected in a continuously and eternally dynamic symbiosis is thus laid bare.