PRACTICING SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION THROUGH WRITING SOCIOLOGICAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY*

Sociological imagination is a quality of mind that cannot be adopted by simply teaching students its discursive assumptions. Rather, it is a disposition, in competition with other forms of sensibility, which can be acquired only when it is practiced. Adhering to this important pedagogical assumption, students were assigned to write their sociological autobiography. While in the process of establishing a connection between their biography and social history, students were encouraged to narrate their life stories using sociological language. After completing the project, they were asked to comment on their work. Student responses show the positive dimensions involved (including unintended therapeutic consequences) and the major hurdles that they experienced in executing the assignment. In the latter case, the major problem was writing a sociological autobiography qualitatively distinct from what might be referred to as "plain autobiography." Results reinforce the idea that sociological instruction is better handled when sociological imagination is viewed as a linguistic habitus which serves both as a medium of communication and an intellectual instrument of looking at the social world.

ALEM KEBEDE
California State University-Bakersfield

THE QUESTION OF IMPARTING the salient assumptions of sociological imagination (Mills [1959] 2000) to students is an important didactic issue that sociology educators have dealt with in various ways (Adams 1986; Bidwell 1995; Dandaneu 2001; Eckstein, Schoenike and Delaney 1995; Kaufman 1997; Leming 1990; O’Flaherty 1992; Persell, Peeiffer and Syed 2007). A critical reading of these important pedagogical notes and studies offers two significant lessons. First, an effective way of igniting and reinforcing sociological imagination should not be premised on the idea of merely “teaching” it. A learning process in which there is a one-way relationship between the instructor as a narrator with a privileged intellectual position and the student as a passive listener may not bring the desired outcome (See Auster and MacRone 1994; Walker 1996). A one-sided instructional relationship diminishes students as active agents of learning. Thus, it is insightful to view the instructor as a facilitator who is both resourceful and acts as a devil’s advocate in the development of sociological imagination. By so assuming, we can put into practice the critical and creative proc-
esses that the term imagination suggests. Secondly, Mills’s expression of sociological imagination as a quality of mind needs to be taken seriously. As both a practical and discursive consciousness, sociological imagination cannot be achieved in short order. It needs to be nurtured overtime through multiple steps, two of which have a notable place. In one of them, the instructor engages students in an intellectual space in which they are able to see the qualitative difference between sociological imagination and other forms of sensibility. In another one, students are offered the opportunity to practice it through various ways, including the examination and interpretation of feature films (Prendergast 1986; Tiemann and Tipton 1993), literature (Sullivan 1982), photographs (Chad 2002), instances of racism (Haddad and Lieberman 2002), social objects (Kaufman 1997) and others. Indeed, sociological imagination, as a creative act, is best internalized when it is practiced.

More exactly, it is when sociological imagination is viewed as a disposition that one can better be prepared to deal with the challenges of instruction. Sociology instructors can be effective educators when they are intent on considering the intricacies involved in the adoption of sociological disposition. Sociological imagination may not be embraced instantaneously even by those who are attracted to it because nurturing it implies that the person in question needs to go through some form of re-socialization. And old habits do not go away easily. To use Pierre Bourdieu’s expression, since one’s habitus is an enduring embodied sensibility, although not a permanent one, it cannot be abandoned every time we are exposed to new ideas even if they are earth-shattering (Bourdieu 1992; see also Brint 2001). Hence, it would be unwise to aim at destroying an old habitus in one stroke. Instead the instructor should pave the way for embracing sociological disposition alongside with other forms of sensibility. In this sense, sociological imagination involves the ability to move between sociological consciousness and other forms of cultural and social viewpoints. Such a view under-scores the idea that the possessor of sociological imagination can be engaged in “double hermeneutics” (Giddens 1984): one can make a good interpretation of how individuals make sense of their social world.

There are various techniques through which sociological imagination/disposition can be cultivated or exercised. One such important technique is writing sociological autobiography (Adams 1986; Berger 1990; Dunn 1994; Long 1999; Merton 1988; Miller and Miller 1976; Myers 2004; Shostak 1996). Autobiographical writing is an important step in the development of 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, as Mills ([1959] 2000) calls it, could be viewed as a journey into a familiar social world via a new route. In this journey, the autobiographer objectifies the familiar and the taken for granted while at the same time being immersed in it. By acting as a detached observer and someone who has a firsthand exposure to his/her own life story, the autobiographer examines the role of “external” social forces thereby delving into an understanding of intra-personal dynamics. Yet the autobiographer, who sees his/her biography as one among manifold intersecting biographies, is able to demystify “the increasing sense of being moved by obscure forces” (Mills [1959] 2000:13).

Although sociological autobiography involves the process of putting the personal under sociological scrutiny, it is not meant to demonstrate a deterministic stance. Individual behavior takes place in a social context, an environment which is also produced and reproduced by the very people who are conditioned by it (Giddens 1984). Writing sociological autobiography then allows the author to grapple with what Jeffrey Alexander (1988) calls “the tension between social order and freedom.” The autobiographer not only deals with the impact of transper-
sonal processes, but also deals with the problem of how he/she reacted to those conditions. The author moreover seriously considers the interactive process between him/her and other social actors. Thus since his/her life story is inseparably related to the story of others, the sociological autobiographer is a raconteur of social history.

THE ASSIGNMENT

To reach this realization of the placement of one’s own autobiography within a larger context, students are guided through a carefully crafted assignment. The assignment, under the title “Sociological Autobiography,” was given to junior and senior level students as a partial fulfillment for the requirements of a 400 level class at a state university. The main goal of the assignment was to understand contemporary social reality as an historical present through the examination of one’s self. In the class, with a particular focus on social movements, we examined the origin and nature of social changes in the United States and other parts of the world. As background information to the assignment, we had the occasion to discuss the difference between sociological autobiography and other forms of autobiography. In this discussion, I insisted that, although there are various legitimate reasons to write an autobiography, only those authors who put their lives in a social and historical context qualify as sociological.

Accordingly, and for the sake of convenience, I made a distinction between what I refer to as “plain autobiography” and “sociological autobiography.” Plain autobiography tends to be atheoretical and ahistorical. This is not to suggest that plain autobiographies are not premised on a set of assumptions. There is no writing without some sort of perspective. Generally speaking, however, what makes the two autobiographies distinct is that plain autobiography involves narration in which the author does not situate the personal within the social or historical. He/she is merely bound to the personal. Consequently, plain autobiography and sociological autobiography differ from each other because the former is a first-order interpretation of one’s life while the latter is a second-order interpretation of individual life history. The term first in “first-order” is meant to suggest that authors are merely stepping in their autobiographical data, that is, they focus on self-reflection and the construction or reconstruction of their biographies without theory. On the other hand, the authors of sociological autobiography take a second step: They have to be “ghost writers” of their own life story equipped with a set of sociological assumptions. That is, they step in and step out of themselves in order to see themselves in a social and historical context. By objectifying themselves and by consciously making use of both social and historical data along with sociological concepts and principles, sociological autobiographers are able to examine the course of their life in a manner which plain autobiographical writing does not permit.

In order to facilitate the students’ writing of a second-order autobiography, I did four things throughout the quarter. First, background information on the concept of sociological imagination was provided. In this case, the intersection between “biography” and “social history,” and the relationship between “private troubles” and “public issues” à la C. Wright Mills ([1959] 2000), were explained and discussed in class. Together with these, how sociological imagination is antithetical to “grand theory” (theory construction without regard for empirical data) and abstracted empiricism” (data analysis without theory) were the subject of deliberation. Accordingly, students were advised to examine the inter-

2A sociological autobiography need not be written by an individual whose profession is sociology. There are quite a few biographies authored by non-sociologists which qualify as sociological biography. Even plain biographies, as one of the reviewers has aptly noted may contain important information on social history, can be useful in understanding the intersection between biography and social history.
section between their biographies and social history and the relationship between their personal troubles and public issues. They were also warned not to write grand-theory-like biography in which concepts overshadow the biographical narrative, or abstracted-theory-like biography which is devoid of sociological perception and language. Second, background information on major social and cultural transformations in the United States was provided. Based on the textbook I used in class (Harper and Leicht 2006), augmented with other sources (McMichael 2007; Vago 2003), we had the occasion to deliberate over major social and cultural trends in the United States. Third, I attached a brief note on my biography to the class syllabus. Later, I provided detailed information on my intellectual biography in which I emphasized the social circumstances that led me to where I am now. In this, I focused on the major social events that had an indirect or direct bearing on constraining or enabling me as an actor. Finally, students were repeatedly reminded that their papers would be evaluated for style and grammar and, most importantly, for using appropriate sociological language in their interpretation of their autobiographical data, the wealth of both personal and social information presented, and the attempt made in examining the intersection between biography and social processes. In this regard, they were encouraged to get the most out of the sociology classes that they have taken. Students were also reminded not to put personally sensitive material in their autobiographies if they thought that they could be harmed by doing so. To encourage disciplined and focused attention, we held several brief discussions over the term, reviewing the specifics of the assignment, what it means to think sociologically, how to link data and theory, the role of historical data in social research, and the writing process. Taken as a whole, students’ papers came to constitute a rich body of data.

**DATA AND INTERPRETATION**

Data for this study was based on information collected from students who have taken an upper division level class at a state university. The class is entitled “Social Change and Social Movements” (SOC 444). Almost all students who took the class had a minimum of four sociology classes prior to enrolling in SOC 444. After completing the aforementioned assignment, as a partial fulfillment for completing the class, students were asked to answer a set of questions meant to assess the significance of the assignment and the problems that they have faced while working on their projects. I was encouraged to collect further information after quite a few students brought to my attention that the assignment was either one of the hardest or the most interesting projects that they had during their college experience. A total of 76 students participated in the study. Out of these only 7 students were not sociology majors. Five questions were emailed to students after they completed their research projects. The questions were discussed in class for further clarification and in anticipation of forthcoming questions. The questions were intended to gather information on: 1) impressions of their work; 2) the steps that they used in the construction of their biography; 3) the sociological concepts they used; 4) difficulties they encountered; and 5) the positive outcomes of their project. Every student was obligated to answer the questions as part of fulfilling the requirements for completing the assignment. In order to avoid bias and exaggerated statements equal number of points was given to all students.

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3This was not meant to discourage students from addressing sensitive personal issues. The note was meant to address to student privacy rights. Yet few have refrained from discussing their personal troubles. The same notes were so informational that they have affected my pedagogical views.

4I cannot claim that I have successfully avoided all conditions that might have contributed to exaggerated statements. To minimize bias, students were informed that I would read
The answers to the questions ranged from 3 to 15 lines. Although most of the answers were informative, not all students addressed all aspects of the questions. In some cases, the answers were not only brief, but they were also devoid of useful content. Accordingly, in selecting quotes for this article, the substance, and not the style of the answers, was the main criterion. Where grammatical errors occurred, I took the liberty to insert appropriate terms. In addition to reading student papers, the discussions that I had with students both in and out of class were important in my second-order interpretation of student responses. Information collected in these venues was systematically recorded in my “Student Comments on the Autobiographical Assignment” notebook. Yet my interpretation was secondary in importance and the results stated herein are largely based on student responses.

RESULTS

In answering these five questions, students generally described their experience as positive, appreciated the opportunity to engage in a systematic reflection on their lives, and noted the welcome but unexpected therapeutic consequences of their self-deliberation. Most followed a chronological approach to their autobiography, although some focused on analyzing pivotal life events. They noted the difficulty of choosing both a focus and specific details, as well as the special challenge and reward of applying sociological concepts to their personal experience. The following presents students’ responses under three themes: Student Impressions and Outcomes; Choices and Difficulties in Constructing Autobiography, and the Challenge of Applying Sociological Concepts.

Student Impressions and Outcomes

Most students reported that they were able to see themselves deeply and were passionate about their work. One student stated, “The autobiography that I completed was an in-depth view of my life. I was able to fully understand who I am and what I am about. I feel the work I completed was passionate and truthful.” A good number of students indicated that they found the assignment to be unique as was the case for the student that wrote, “This paper was unlike any paper I had ever written.” The uniqueness of the assignment lay in the fact that in their own projects they played the position of double subject. First, they were the subject of analysis—the project was about them and their related-others as made clear in the following, “It was about me and not just simply about using sociological terms in a long paper.” Secondly, they were active subjects, for they were the ones who did the reflection. In the words of one student, “I reflected back on my life and made an effort to remember the social events that took place during my lifetime and how those events affected me.” The act of being a double subject had a dual advantage to students. In the first place, the project permitted students to explore domains that are often left to the background. One student enjoyed this assignment because it allowed [me] to dig into areas of history and life that [I] haven’t thought about....” Secondly, they were pleased that they were offered the opportunity to explore their life from a perspective that they had not considered before, “I’m pleased with the work that I turned in because I worked hard and did my best to tell my life story with sociological perspective.” Given the fact that students have taken numerous classes and yet express themselves in this fashion is telling. It underscores the idea that sociological imagination is not merely to be learned but needs also to be practiced in order for one to claim that he or she possesses it.

Furthermore, that students were writing about themselves had important consequences, noting that taking a sociological view of their own lives was a new experience. The autobiographical papers that I have read, in spite of their shortcomings,
reflect that students have exerted a good deal of effort towards their completion. To express the matter in the words of one of the respondents, “I think that if someone enjoys what they are doing they do a better job.” On numerous occasions, students have brought to my attention that most of the time they consider writing assignments boring because they are too remote from their personal lives or they can hardly relate to them. Students feel that they are obligated to do their assignments for the benefit of the ritual, the ritual of meeting requirements. In contrast, the sociological autobiography project focused on students’ lives, yet it was also challenging. According to one student, “It was one of the most difficult assignments I had to do in my 4 and half years in [this university].” Students had to stretch themselves in trying to understand how the private, public, and scholastic worlds intersect. Another student stated, “[T]he autobiography assignment . . . manages to be both personal and academic in a way that made the completion of the project interesting to me.” These comments demonstrate that class assignments can both be personally related and intellectually challenging.

Because the sociological autobiographical assignment was both pleasurable and challenging, a good number of students felt that the project was worthwhile while at the same time acknowledging that their work was far from perfect. One student explained, “My impressions of my work are that although I did the best I could, and although I tried to incorporate sociological terms and concepts to my autobiography, I feel that I could have done a better job.” Students did indeed make significant alterations to their final papers before they submitted them to the instructor. One student noted, “After writing it and going over the whole paper, I thought about making multiple changes and perhaps changing the chronological structure somewhat.” This is a clear indication that the assignment was taken seriously. And this has two important implications. It suggests that the more students worked on their assignments, the more they took the challenges of sociological imagination in earnest and as a result the assignment left a lasting impression on them. On numerous occasions students have mentioned to me that the assignment was unlike other assignments that they have completed and forgotten afterwards.

Students’ perception of their completed autobiography as a work in progress rather than a definitive product provides another reason to believe that the assignment held significance for them. The perception resulted from two factors: shortage of time and lack of experience. A representative response of the latter case reads thus, “I am not sure if I discussed in full detail my autobiography. Personally, I found it difficult to write about myself, because I have never written an autobiography.” But there is another layer added on top of the absence of a writing experience. Students had to make the effort of writing a systematic sociological autobiography. They had to learn how to establish the connection between historical events and biography. One student expressed difficulty with this, as follows, “I experienced a little frustration because I was not sure how to approach the assignment. I had never thought about the effects of different historical events. . . .” Or, students have to know themselves better before they even deal with the problem of the intersection between biography and history. On this issue, one student noted, “I believe the final product can be considered a work in progress, because there is a lot more that I still need to learn about myself and how I relate to society.” Indeed finding the answers as to how one’s life history is related to social processes is not a onetime activity. The analysis takes different forms and carries one through a series of chains. And the undertaking cannot be pulled off in a short time, nor can it be described fully in a short piece. The statement, “I feel that I did a good job for the amount of time we had to complete this assignment” appropriately fits here. All things considered, we can safely conclude that the autobiographical paper that students have written is something that
they can hardly forget in part because they have gone through a learning process that took multiple forms.

Some students learned the impact of social events on their lives during the process of writing the assignment. These students note how difficult at first it was for them to write sociological autobiography because of their inexperience in utilizing the methods of sociological imagination. But once they began working on their projects, the concepts that they learned started to make sense. As one student concluded, “[W]orking on the project was hard for me at first, but the more I thought about it the more I realized that I am a product of my surroundings.” In some cases, rereading first drafts provided an additional sociological moment, “What I realized while I was writing, and even more after reading the paper again, was the fact that the people in my life were molded by social events and the effect of those events on them have trickled down and as a result made me who I am today.” In extreme cases, some students at the outset felt that they did not have much to say about their life, “When I first heard about the assignment I was a little confused. It was hard for me to write about my life because at first I didn’t believe that I had eight or more pages to write about.” In contrast, others thought that the assignment would be an easy one. However, as they wrote their papers, the process went in an unexpectedly different direction. One student expressed his/her experience thus, “Originally I thought this paper was going to be easy to write. As I started to write down my life experiences on paper, I realized this assignment was going to be very challenging.”

Overall, most students reported that the outcome of the assignment was positive. The word “fun” appears very often in their responses. The fun aspect seems to come in part as a result of their sense of overcoming what seemed to be a formidable task, “It was a challenge completing this assignment but I have learned a lot.” To a large number of students, the impact of the assignment was more than what they expected; and, as demonstrated in the following quote, some even suggested that the assignment is appropriate for a capstone class, “[B]y the time I was finished I found myself thinking, ‘Wow, that was one of the best assignments I’ve had in six years of college.’ I think this assignment was very fitting for the end of my career [here in this University].” Some students were so happy about the assignment that they suggested a class on sociological autobiography in its own right, “I enjoyed doing the paper, and I have come to the conclusion that there should be a class devoted simply to constructing a sociological autobiography. . . .”

The most commonly cited reason why students were pleased with the outcome of their assignment has to do with the understanding both of themselves and others. The positive outcome is noted by one student as follows, “It allowed me to look at myself differently than I previously would have.” Another student was much more sociological, “It amazes me . . . how human beings are so formed by systems. To really understand people you really have to look at them from a sociological perspective.” These comments are indicative of the transformation process that students have gone through. To some, the move was from an “individualistic” way of viewing their lives to one where the impacts of larger social processes are recognized. One student explained this transition as follows, “I guess I have always tended to view my problems and experiences as unique to myself; however, the problems I have experienced can be viewed in a larger social context. . . .” One can gather from this and other comments that there is a tendency for students to view sociological imagination as an outer-directed intellectual process applied to the understanding of others. After the exercise, a different form of understanding with dual dimensions emerges. Not only are the lives of others considered from a sociological vantage point, but also students extricated themselves from a solipsistic image of themselves. This point is best exemplified through the words of the student that noted,
“This paper taught me to not only view the world around me with a sociological imagination but to use that same imagination to understand my past, present and future.”

To others, the transition was from an understanding of oneself to the understanding of others. As the following quote shows, to these students, the assignment provided a rare moment of self-reflection, “I am excited that I completed the assignment, because it was an opportunity for me to write down my own life experience that I would not have done otherwise.” This led to a better understanding of who they are and how they were shaped by social processes, “I not only learned more about sociology by reviewing my textbooks, but I learned more about myself.” Then the self-reflection motivated them to adopt an extra-personal perspective. That is to say, the process not only made them establish the relationship between their personal autobiography and social history, it also provided the occasion to see the lives of others from a sociological perspective, “By using my ‘sociological imagination’ for one of the first times in my life, I was able to better understand my present character and the world around me.”

Although there are two-way processes (from self-analysis to the understanding of others and vice versa), the assignment by and large made students understand better what sociological imagination is all about, “This paper was actually a lot more than I expected. I was not expecting to learn as much about the sociological imagination or myself as I really did.” To memorize sociological principles is one thing, but trying to apply them to real life situations is another. As noted by one student, the latter does indeed add another layer to an understanding of the social world, “The [project] helped me to be able to look at my life from a sociological perspective. It has made me think more analytically and critically and how society affects you and those around you.” Yet, despite these important notes, there were some important elements missing. For example, very few students got the most out of the social psychology class they had previously in spite of the fact that the assignment was about self and society. The impact of globalization on their lives was not the subject of discussion either. Only one student stated the importance of global processes, “Not only does what happens [sic] in American society affects [sic] me but events in remote parts of the world can have an affect on me also.” While these shortcomings in student papers were disappointing, the assignment also had an expected yet welcome result.

In some cases the exercise had a cathartic effect. Mostly accessing some information, which they had not dealt with in a long time, was an important process with significant consequences, “I told a classmate that the assignment was like therapy. I was able to come to terms with many experiences that I had overlooked or intentionally placed in the back of my mind.” Another student noted, “This paper was almost a healing paper for me. I think, to write an autobiographical paper, especially a sociological autobiography is like going to a therapist. It really helped me to get a new perspective on past events.” Although it is very difficult to tell the long range impact of the therapeutic effect, some students remarked that the writing process made them be qualitatively different. In the words of one student, “All in all, I very much enjoyed [writing] this paper and feel the experience was necessary in helping me grow even more as a person.” Some felt that this is something that needs to be done often. As another student stated, “I learned that I need to spend time periodically and examine myself in order to make adjustments to the direction my life is taking.” By and large, students were pleased with the assignment for its enlightening consequences, systematic self-reflection, and cathartic effects. But this was not accomplished without encountering difficulties in constructing their autobiographies.

**Choices and Difficulties in Constructing Autobiography**

Student responses clearly indicate that auto-
biography is not merely narrated. It needs to be constructed. Students used three different methods in the construction of their autobiographies. Most simply followed the chronological step—describing their life history from birth to the present. Others concentrated on the most important social events that have occurred in their lives and then proceeded by describing how they have been affected by them. Finally, few dealt with their project by focusing on important single issues that they believed had played an important role in their lives.

The following two quotes reflect the method followed by most students, “The break-down that I used to illustrate my life was a linear model. The stages included: Childhood, adolescent and early adulthood, and adulthood.” “I chose to do everything chronologically starting with my grandparents and ending with me.” Students who included the cases of their grandparents had a better chance of putting their autobiography in an historical context, for they had to deal with a trajectory of multiple social events. By and large, the linear approach seems to be much easier to follow than any other method except for the challenges students encountered in determining the weight of each stage in their life history. While in most cases the chronological narrative ended in emphasizing their present condition, some students chose to concentrate on their childhood days. And, like this student, they had a good reason, “I decided to describe my childhood first because... I could not explain who I am today without analyzing the society which I experienced [during] my childhood days.”

Others focused on social or historical events that they thought had an important place in their lives. Here there were two categories of students. There were those who first selected important events and then organized their narration around them. This is exemplified effectively by the student that wrote, “The first step that I used in trying to organize my essay was to find out what social events took place during the years and then I wrote my essay in order of the events as different ideas came up to my mind.” These students were simply interested in the relationship between important events and the development of their lives without privileging one historical instance over another. On the other hand, other students selected pivotal events on the basis of the extent to which these episodes had important bearing on their life course. For instance, one student stated, “I wanted to write something about where I was at... and what led up to the individual that I am [sic] today, so I [relied on] instances that dramatically affected my life.” These events, in the eyes of these students, were so visible and consequential that they had an almost direct impact on their life and the lives of their significant others.

Almost all students who decided to focus on a single issue discussed their autobiography around family. Some concentrated on single issues for organizational reasons. One student explained his/her reason as follows, “By doing it that way, [focusing on family] it made it easier for me to stay on track. Otherwise I would’ve been all over the place.” Some focused on family because they thought of it as the center of socialization, as in the case of the student that explained, “I basically began with my family and worked it up to my birth. . . . It was necessary for me to begin with my family in order to paint a clear picture of my own socialization.” Others concentrated on family because of their relatively old age, “Since I am older than most students in this [sic] class I [had] . . . to focus on an important part of my life and not my entire life. Therefore, I narrowed my autobiography down to family.” A good number of students followed the chronological order while at the same time putting their families at center stage, “I broke it down by first talking about my grandfather’s life and, then talking about my father and the moments that he went through, and finally talking about myself [sic] as I was growing up and the experiences I had.”

Obviously, constructing the autobiographical narrative was not an easy thing.
Students pointed out multiple reasons for this. The first problem—although not the most difficult—they dealt with was the process of selecting what was relevant from what was less pertinent. Perhaps the following quote is an extreme instance but it reflects the problem that students encountered, “The most complicated [part of dealing with the project] was keeping the paper to 12 pages. I did not complete this task as I wrote 21. I had so much to say and felt that all of it was relevant.” Indeed constructing biography involves different processes, including condensing available material, excluding what is considered to be too personal and making sure that the sociological gaze is appropriately utilized. Students, accordingly, had to follow various steps in dealing with these issues. Some students mentioned that they were forced to abridge their work once they knew that they had exceeded the requirement, and in the process they ended up rethinking the extent to which their work was sociologically sound. One student explained this process as follows: “This [condensing the paper] proved to be very difficult as I was forced to scrutinize each experience that I had discussed and determine if I was successful in examining the event in terms of its sociological significance.” Even after making the decision on what was pertinent, students had to establish connections among the different moments in their life history. Certainly, the autobiographical sketch is not a mere cluster of different life events. To someone who is trying to make sense of his or her autobiographical chapters, he/she has to consider their interconnectedness and how previous moments had a bearing on subsequent ones.

Most students have indicated that the least difficult part of their paper was writing about their personal lives, “The least difficult experience is that it was about my life not another [sic] topic.” Quite a few students noted how the burden of writing a sociological autobiography was lessened because it involved self-reflection. The words of one student make this clear, “I love writing about myself and loved thinking back on my life and exploring my own socialization process.” As a result, some students were able to meet the page requirement effortlessly, “The least difficult experience was getting the right amount of pages . . . because once I started to write the words just started to flow. . . .” With older students meeting the page requirement was even easier. An older student spoke to this matter when he/she stated, “So much has taken place in my life and in society that I had more than enough material to put in the paper.” All in all, to most students the assignment was an important exercise that made them realize—contrary to what they had thought originally—that they had much to say about themselves. The more they wrote, the more they were able to continue writing.

However, due to personal reasons, for some students information for their projects was not always easily accessible. These students noted that it was difficult for them to revisit memories that they had intentionally suppressed. As one student explained, “For me it was very hard to write this paper because there were things from the past that I had to remember. . . . Many of these things I had blocked out and even though I did not speak of some of these events in my paper, I remembered many of them in the course of writing it.” On the other hand, in addition to their “ontological security” being challenged as a result of recollecting past experiences, some students felt awkward talking about issues that they normally keep to themselves. One student explained this discomfort as follows, “The most difficult part was writing about things that I keep private to myself. What I wrote in the paper is stuff I would not tell everybody, but I included it anyway because it is stuff that has formed the way I am today.” Consequently, maintaining a balance between writing an autobiography and not getting too personal was a dilemma these students dealt with. One student got at the heart of this dilemma when he/she opined, “The most difficult part of the paper was to not
get too personal. I understand it is an autobiography, but I am a private person.” One student was much more specific, “The most difficult experience in writing my paper was making sure that I didn’t get too personal. I didn’t want to talk about my emotions too much when I was talking about my parents’ divorce.” Some were caught between keeping it to themselves and writing about something which they believed is sociologically important, “Some of [my] personal experiences were painful, yet they were vital to include for the reader to understand my position.” In the end, to these students, although the process of writing their autobiography was punctuated by interruptions due to the recollection of unpleasant memories, the completion of their project was in their best interest. One student expressed this paradox by noting, “I had to take many breaks in order to gather myself [sic]. I feel that this paper has helped me to understand many things about myself and has helped me confront some past demons.”

Indeed writing about personal troubles is not easy. However, what was really difficult for most students was writing an autobiography which is sociological in nature. The following quote represents the feelings of many students, “The entire time I was writing the paper I was worried that it wasn’t sociological enough. I didn’t know whether or not I had to point out what exactly was sociological about the paper.” Student comments such as this one imply two things. For one: students were determined to meet the parameters set for the assignment. They wanted to make sure that their autobiographical note was truly sociological, and the efforts that they made allowed them to rise to the level of an appropriate understanding. Second, students’ reservations demonstrate that the possession of sociological gaze involves more than memorizing its core ideas. Practicing sociological imagination is not easy even after taking various sociology classes. Sociological imagination is a “linguistic habitus” (Bourdieu [1991] 2001) that can only be mastered over time. In other words, to speak sociological language is much different than being its listener, for the former requires an act of both effective reflection and communication. Only when one actively speaks the language of sociology can he/she gain from the instrumental value of the discipline. Sociological language makes the user see his or her life in a different light and raises some critical questions that were not previously available. One student spoke about his/her experience along this line, “... I didn’t really think of them [memories of my life] in sociological terms. But, once I applied the sociological terms... the terms provided structure and meaning to the sequences of my life.”

Students provided different explanations for why it was hard for them to write a sociological autobiography. The difficulty emanated largely due to a pseudo-psychological approach to writing one’s autobiography that this society encourages and the usage of sociological terms, a topic that deserves a separate treatment.5 With regard to the former, students reported that it is not easy to distance oneself from an individualistic gaze. As one student explained, “... I operated under the perspective that I was responsible for where I was in my life, there were little or no social factors influencing my life. It was tough breaking away from this [individualistic] perspective.” The problem of avoiding an “individualistic perspective” was further aggravated by lack of preparedness in relation to what it means to write a sociological autobiography. Students were not mentally ready to take the challenge of transcending the traditional way of narrating their life history. Most students reported that they underestimated the challenge of writing sociological autobiography, as evidenced in this student’s comment, “When I learned that our assignment was writing an autobi-

5 Although not mentioned by students, as noted by one of the reviewers, the vast amount of sociological jargon makes the understanding of social processes difficult. Students are forced to memorize concepts rather than focusing on how to use them in real life situations.
ography I thought it was going to be easy, but when it was time to begin the assignment I realized it was harder than what I thought.” It should be noted here that, although a cautious mind-set may have a positive impact, transcending a plain autobiography can only be possible when one puts sociological imagination in motion. Only practice makes sociological imagination fruitful. And in this practice, the utilization of sociological concepts appropriately is critical—a practice which most students were not in a position to carry out effortlessly.

The Challenge of Applying Sociological Concepts

Even when students had a cautious mind-set, finding suitable sociological terms and making them congruent with their essays was not an easy task as explained in the following student quote, “The most difficult experience [sic] I had were using sociological terms, fitting many years of experiences in a 10-page or less paper and explaining how changes in society shaped my experiences.” While reading student papers, on numerous occasions, I encountered sociological terms that were tangentially related to the autobiography. The terms were indeed related to the experience that they were explaining, but students had trouble in establishing an organic link between concepts and the autobiographical material. As one student explained, “I tried to apply the terms as best I could, but I found that it was hard to explain the term without sounding like it was out of a dictionary.”

Despite the aforementioned problems, virtually every student used a minimum of four sociological terms (at least in passing) while narrating the trajectory of their lives. On average, students utilized seven sociological terms. The following are the most frequently used terms: "gender roles," "privilege," "social and cultural trends," "class," "economic system," "structural change," "elite," "social institutions," "ascribed status," "achieved status," "ethnicity," "race," "identity," "discrimination," "prejudice," "stereotype," "status," "patriarchy" "class mobility," "socialization," "gender stratification," "self-fulfilling prophecy," "feminism," "norms and values," "stratification," and "social movements." Occasionally used terms included: "paradigm," and "brain-drain." While most students in their post-assignment responses did not specifically address the terms that they used, few students exclusively focused on concepts related to certain areas of the discipline as in the case of one student who dealt with “the self and identity.”

On the other extreme, there were students who abandoned the idea of writing a sociological autobiography altogether and used sociological terms only aberrantly. They thought that just narrating their autobiographies in spite of sociological language was enough to earn a passing grade. These students decided to write plain autobiography despite my insistence that they should abide by the premise of sociological imagination. Others had their own justification as to why they did not venture into the business of using sociological terminology. These students felt that they should not use terms for the benefit of the ritual. One student explained, “I thought that there would have been ample opportunity for me to utilize my sociological vocabulary, but when I tried to plug in words the paper felt forced.” One student even felt that the usage of sociological terms acted as a hindrance in the process of writing his/her paper. His/Her argument, however, was not based on the epistemological position that concepts may hinder us from going into areas beyond what they depict. This student wrote, “Using sociological terms in my essay was very difficult for me, due to the fact that these terms are not in my everyday vocabulary. I did not [find] using them as an aid, if anything they were a hindrance.”

On the other hand, most students were not only well aware of the fact that they were expected to write a sociological piece, but they also worked hard toward attaining that end. The following comment is repre-
sentative of what respondents felt about using sociological terminology, “Using sociological terms in my paper, I felt, gave a little more credibility to what I was saying—like going one step past opinion.” Most students also thought that with more time they could have used more concepts, “I felt that I used a decent amount of sociological terms. However, I felt that I could have used more. The part which I struggled with was implementing terms in scenarios which I lived.” The difficulty comes in part as a result of the distinction students made between their school work and their personal lives. One student spoke on behalf of most students when he/she said, “I realize this is a sociology class, so the inclusion of [sociological] terms is fine, but I did not want to go overboard . . . I enjoy sociology very much, but I do not use these terms out of class.” It is not uncommon for students to wrongly assume that sociological terms are meant to be used in a classroom setting only. This compartmentalized view has important implications which sociology instructors have to consider seriously.

Even when sociological terms are used, students are not sure if they applied them fittingly. As one student expressed, “I really had a difficult time adding sociological terms. It seemed that when I used [them], even in the correct context, they didn’t seem to flow with the rest of the paper.” Accordingly, in order to avoid the ambivalence of using terms appropriately or not using them at all, some students decided to play it safe. One said, “I tended to use basic sociological terms; in-groups, out-groups, social factors, social norms, nothing too complex.” Or students were forced to consult their sociology textbooks to make sure that they were not misusing concepts. Quite a few students indicated that they consulted their textbooks to find out helpful terms, for the sociological concepts were not coming to them naturally. One student expressed surprise at this when he/she stated, “After taking so many different sociology courses I believed that using sociological terms would be an easy task. . . . I had to look in the glossary of prior textbooks to remember any terms that are directly [related] to my personal experiences.” The advantage of referring to textbooks is that students learn more as they try to make sure that they use concepts appropriately. However, there were exceptions to the rule. In some instances, students felt that using sociological terms was not as difficult as they first thought it would be. In the words of one respondent, “At first, I thought this task [using sociological terms] would be very difficult. However, it wasn’t as hard as I initially thought it to be. . . . A concern I did have was that I was not sure if I had used an ample amount of terms.”

CONCLUSION

The data recounted here is informational both in terms of its pedagogical implications for teaching sociology and the personal advantages for those who take the challenges of examining the intersection between autobiography and social history. In general, the data clearly indicate the importance of engaging students in a reflective assessment of their own learning. Thus assessors need to consider the views of students rather than acting from outside. More specifically, the pedagogical implications are centered on three issues. First, sociological imagination is not simply about understanding how society works or how social forces influence the individual or how the autobiographical and the historical intersect. There is no doubt that understanding these features of the social world is important. Grasping the principles of sociology is indeed the first and a decisively important step. Yet it is not enough. We cannot judge students on the basis of only a set of questions that we write to “measure” their knowledge. Only by setting it in motion in the minds of those who are interested in it can we pave the way for the attainment of sociological consciousness. Hence, acquiring sociological

6On this point, I am grateful to one of the reviewers who brought it to my attention.
imagination is a developmental process. It involves at least two steps: understanding its discursive principles and then examining how these principles work in real life situations. Failing in either one of them makes one vulnerable to a pseudo-sociological reasoning. More than anything, the possession of sociological imagination implies that one has an active mind-set that allows him or her to participate in sociological storytelling. This storytelling is different from ordinary narration because the sociological narrator does not merely repeat the story that he or she has heard from instructors. Those who have the sociological disposition are able to construct a different story without betraying the discipline’s critical precepts. Put differently, they can improvise using their sociological language.7

Secondly, sociological imagination should be viewed as a disposition, a mind-set, in competition with other forms of understanding. Students who come to sociology classes do not drop very easily their previous dispositions, even after taking various classes. The instructor should bear in mind that there are obstacles to possessing sociological imagination. It is worth reiterating that its possession requires more than the acquisition of sociological concepts. The student of sociology must be able to speak the language of sociology. But language acquisition is a process that takes a good amount of time. If indeed sociological imagination is a form of linguistic habitus, it can only be learned over time. We should bear in mind that students struggle with the old habitus as they try to develop a new one. The speaker of the new language becomes successful only when he/she suspends the old language and speaks the new language without confusing the modes of operation of the two. And in the process of teaching sociological language a one-way direction is not fruitful. The distinction between the instructor who acts as the speaker of sociological language, and students, who are on the other side listening to the same language, must change. The instructor must play the role of facilitator, and students must be required to be active listeners who are on their way to sharpen their sociological language. Active listening is not enough. Students must become practicing speakers whose newly acquired language is both a medium of communication and a disposition to view the social world with a different perspective.

Third, assignments should be both interesting as well as challenging.8 Indeed it is not easy to find topics so close to the students’ lives like the sociological autobiography. Nonetheless, an effort must be made in order to make the assignment as exciting as possible. This can be done by showing them the relevance of what they are doing and by making it closer to their personal lives. The entire project may not be centered on their autobiography. But a great deal can be accomplished by at least adding a section devoted to this purpose. For instance, an instructor who teaches social movements can give his/her students assignments that motivate students to examine the impact of social movements on them or at least they could be encouraged to find the indirect connection between them and their autobiography.

With regard to personal advantages, two points are worth noting. First the sociological autobiography assignment had results that were not intended. It never occurred to me that the exercise would serve as both an instrument of self-reflection and healing. Student responses clearly indicate that by understanding the intersection between autobiography and social history we can be

7Speaking sociological language does not mean merely using sociological terms. Sociological language is different from ordinary language since it involves the willingness to consider new data and the keenness to view social processes in a different light.

8This is by no means to suggest that only assignments that are interesting are fruitful. Nor is it intended to imply that all learning can be reduced into an interesting exercise. It is not unusual for me to hear from my students that the theory classes that I teach are too dry to be taken seriously.
more contented personally. Sociological self-reflection does have a therapeutic effect. Sociological reasoning is not just about considering the impact of social forces on the individual. The individual that possesses sociological imagination can be enabled in his/her private life in so far as he/she puts personal issues in perspective. Hence, by understanding the role of societal factors, the individual can be empowered, a lesson which is often underemphasized by sociologists. Secondly, by sharpening one’s sociological imagination one can be well positioned in the processes of social interaction. Sociological imagination does allow the possessor to act effectively in the processes of interacting with multiple others. An understanding of one’s biography can help in the process of establishing meaningful relationships with others. A better understanding of oneself means a better understanding of others. If one can take “the perspective of the other” on oneself, one can very easily take “the perspective of the other” on others. Thus the sociological autobiography does not only increase one’s cultural capital, but it can be an effective disposition in our engagement with others.

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**Alem Kebede** is associate professor of sociology at California State University, Bakersfield. His research areas include social theory, social movements, and cross-cultural encounters. His articles have appeared in *Sociological Perspectives*, *Sociological Inquiry*, *Sociological Spectrum* and *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change*. His recent article dealing with “decentered movements” has been nominated as one of the best papers of the year published in *Sociological Spectrum*. Currently, he is conducting research on the social origins of dictatorship and the Ethiopian Revolution of 1974.