

# “WORKING LIVES”: THE USE OF AUTO/BIOGRAPHY IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

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**ABSTRACT.** This article critically evaluates the attempt of the authors to develop a sociological imagination within first-year undergraduate students studying the discipline of sociology at a British university. Through a sociological analysis of biography and autobiography (of both teachers and students), we attempted to create a quality of mind that would provide our students with the necessary sociological skills to critically interrogate different sociological forms, and allow them not simply to understand the subject as an academic discipline but also as a personally transformative experience. It was evident from the feedback from a number of student cohorts that the connection between sociology and the lived experience and personal consciousness had a profound and empowering impact on those who came to develop that quality of mind.

**“WORKING LIVES” : UTILISER L’AUTO/BIOGRAPHIE POUR DÉVELOPPER UNE IMAGINATION SOCIOLOGIQUE**

**RÉSUMÉ.** Dans cet article, nous évaluons de manière critique la démarche de développement d’une imagination sociologique que nous avons entreprise auprès d’étudiants inscrits en première année du baccalauréat en sociologie d’une université britannique. Effectuant une analyse sociologique de biographies et autobiographies de professeurs et d’étudiants, nous avons tenté de créer une qualité d’esprit pouvant donner aux étudiants les compétences sociologiques nécessaires à l’examen critique de différentes formes sociologiques. Ainsi, nous leur permettons non seulement de comprendre la sociologie en tant que discipline académique mais également comme expérience personnelle formatrice. Selon la rétroaction obtenue auprès d’un grand nombre de groupes d’étudiants, il apparaît évident que la relation entre la sociologie, l’expérience vécue et la conscience personnelle a eu une influence profonde et stimulante sur ceux ayant développé cette qualité d’esprit.

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.

(Marx, 1907, p. 13)

As teachers of sociology, we have become increasingly concerned by the apparent lack of knowledge or understanding of the social world in many of our new sociology undergraduates, a fact that has been recognized by others (see Castellano, DeAngelis & Clark-Ibanez, 2008; Dandaneau, 2009). Even among those who had studied the discipline before entering university, few demonstrated any real understanding of the life-affecting interrelationships between “social structures” and individual and group “agency.” Like McKinney, Howery, Strand, Kain and Berheid (2004), we believed that sociology graduates should be able to apply sociological principles and concepts to their own lives.

In order to address the situation, we decided to construct an introductory course that would both instruct our students and, at the same time, provide them with an opportunity for practical experience that would “enable them to illustrate their understanding of... and demonstrate skills in asking sociological questions” (McKinney et al., 2004, p. 68). The course we named “Working Lives” was a compulsory course within the first-year teaching program of a sociology degree program located in the Faculty of Social Sciences of a university in the northeast of England. The students in the cohort ( $N = 30$ ) that is the focus of this article were predominantly working class. The majority was female, and all but three were British (the exceptions were Chinese students studying in the UK for a year). Only one of the British students was classified as a member of a Black or Ethnic Minority Group and, in terms of age, the majority of the cohort was classified as “mature” (over the age of 23), which made the cohort atypical within the Faculty.

This article explores our development of the teaching, learning, and assessment strategies for that course. Using biographical and autobiographical methods, we were attempting to develop, within our students, a “sociological imagination” that could then be used to critically interrogate different cultural forms in order that they not only understood sociology as an academic discipline, but also possessed the tools with which to “read” the wider social world.

For those unfamiliar with the term “sociological imagination,” it was first used by C. Wright Mills (1959) to demonstrate that the only way the individual can understand her or his place in society is through an understanding of the “intricate connection between the patterns of their own lives and the course of world history” (p. 4). Mills explains:

Ordinary men do not usually know what this connection means for the kinds of men they are becoming and for the kinds of history-making in which they might take part. They do not possess the *quality of mind* [emphasis added] essential to grasp the interplay of man and society, of biography and history, of the self and the world. (p. 4)

We also recognized, as had Kebede (2009), that this sociological imagination, or quality of mind cannot be developed simply through teaching, but “can only be acquired when it is practiced” (p. 353). Sociology, therefore, offers us

the opportunity to understand our own lives and actions, as well as the lives and actions of others in wider and inter-related contexts of group membership, institutions, hierarchies, ideologies, and material and social inequalities. As such, sociology can be personally transformative in a way that no other academic discipline is, or can be, which is both the promise and purpose of sociology (Mills, 1959). In terms of our own definition of the sociological imagination, our views match those of Dandaneau (2009), as the possession of such an imagination provides enlightened self-consciousness and self-formative potential or to put it another way: emancipation through sociological enlightenment.

Meeting the challenge of encouraging a sociological imagination in the consciousness and understanding of our own students involved ensuring that they made sense of both individual and groups actions, within the broad context of social structure. “Social structure” is, of course, not one but a variety of entities (material, institutional, and ideological), and the “hand” of social structure is often invisible to those who experience it. In addition, while this hand acts upon us, we, as individuals and in social groups, simultaneously make or reaffirm this hand, often unconsciously. We reaffirm inequality and injustice, accepting our own position or that of others as a result of a lack of consciousness, confidence, participation, apathy, or neglect.

To fully understand the role of social structure in the world we have collectively created, the sociology student must develop the quality of mind to critically explore all facets of social life – historical and present – from social institutions, ideologies, politics, and culture to the labour process in all its complexities. As Mills (1959) told us: “neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both, and in order to do so the sociologist requires an informed consciousness and set of skills embedded in that ‘sociological imagination’” (p. 5).

In writing *The Sociological Imagination*, Mills (1959) was challenging the orthodoxy of what he called the “grand theory” in that by concentrating on abstract discussions of a general sociological theory, the everyday lives of ordinary people trying to make the best of the situations they found themselves in were being ignored (p. 26). Indeed, he went on to suggest that this grand theory was no less than an attempt to make sociology a specialized endeavor distinct from economists and political scientists and also written in exclusionary language that disallowed “ordinary” people from understanding it (p. 35).

The grand theories now used to explain (also in exclusionary language) the social and political environments within which we currently seek to teach our students are also counter to Mills’ assertion that private tragedies can be properly understood as public issues. In the political, economic, and sociological contexts of neo-liberalism, “structure” is marginalized and choice, it seems, is king. The areas of interest for the social sciences generally tend towards post-modernist views of culture and subjectivity, while issues of burgeoning social

inequality, criminality, vulnerability, and social unrest are explained away as the unhappy coincidence of thousands of private tragedies and/or ineptitudes. Our response to these concerns was to provide the students with a sociological imagination that would enable them to understand that structure is as important as agency.

To be judged successful in our endeavors, our students will have graduated with the vision and promise of sociology to “understand life’s great challenges and... to confront them and make every effort to shape history” (Scanlan & Grauerholz, 2009, p. 3). We end this introduction with a quote from Mills (1959) that encapsulates our *raison d’être* for developing the course in the way that we did:

The teacher is something of a model to his or her students, whose job it is to reveal to them as fully as he can, just how a supposedly self-disciplined mind works.... The art of teaching is in considerable part the art of thinking out loud but intelligibly. (p. 79)

#### WHY WORKING LIVES?

In order to address the lack of understanding of sociology as a discipline outlined above, we decided to develop a course that would challenge the prevailing neoliberal view that sees choice as the predominant explanation for any or all social actions or inactions (Feigenbaum, 2007; Hoop, 2009). Taking this point further, Lawler (2008) argued that through such a limited neo-liberal lens, even the structures of class are frequently dismissed as the product of a series of poor choices or poor taste. If sociology is to survive as a credible discipline, and as our current students are tomorrow’s teachers, researchers, and policy makers, such superficial views must be challenged and the realities of “choice” exposed. Our intention was to demonstrate to our students that Mills’ assertions that private tragedies can be properly understood as public issues were correct; that social inequality, criminality, vulnerability, social exclusion, and social unrest cannot simply be explained as the unhappy coincidence of thousands of bad choices or individual tragedies. To do so, we needed to develop a course that would offer alternatives to those narrow neoliberal and post-modernist views of society.

From the developmental stage of the course, our intentions were to challenge the ideological and theoretical foci, outlined above by Feigenbaum (2007) and Lawler (2008), in order to provide our students with insights into experiences and contexts that were well beyond individual choice. We also wanted to present sociology as a self-reflective discipline that would challenge how we view ourselves and the social world around us, providing us with the tools to develop our understanding of our place within the wider social world.

Our response to the challenges outlined above was the development of a teaching strategy, which drew upon critical self reflection through the “voices” of both students and teachers in terms of a critical sociological exploration of working life (auto)biographies. Mills (1959) put this succinctly in his argument for a sociological imagination, which, he suggested,

enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two in society... no social study that does not come back to the problem of biography, of history and of their intersections within society has completed its intellectual journey. (p. 4)

Our choice of Mills’ sociological imagination as an inspiration for our teaching methods, and indeed the use of biography as a tool to such an end, is not unique (see special edition of *Teaching Sociology* [Macomber, Rusche, & Atkinson, 2009]). Biography as both a research tool and teaching strategy offers the opportunity for critical self-reflection, the development of an understanding of change over time, as well as the opportunity to link choices and decisions to wider social forces. As Plummer (1982) has suggested, a biographic methodology allows the researcher to see the world through the experiences of the research subject, thus challenging the possible assumptions and preconceptions of the researcher. This is particularly important when the biographer is dealing with a close family member, where assumptions and preconceptions will abound. Autobiography, as a methodology, is helpful to the individual involved in that it encourages a reflection of the factors that influenced and shaped their life experiences. The students were also required to locate their chosen working life within a particular theoretical framework they had been exposed to on social theory courses elsewhere in their sociology program, and to justify those choices during the assessment process.

Our teaching strategy also drew on feminist approaches that suggest that personal experiences are legitimate sources in both research and teaching (see Letherby, 2003, and for more recent examples, Davison, 2011 and Davies, 2011). Feminist pedagogy sees student and teachers ideally entering a partnership in pursuit of the development of knowledge and in the development of the critical faculties necessary to connect personal experience to social relations (Larson, 2005). Rather than the student being given tasks with set answers and the teacher holding all the answers, assessment is student-centered, reflective, and offering the opportunity for self-actualization. This was facilitated, in part, by the teaching team through reflection on their own biographies. As they were of different genders and ages, valuable insights were offered into the gendered experience of work and into the importance of social, historical, and geographical contexts.

We chose work (both paid and unpaid) as the primary contextual focus of the module for two reasons. Firstly, work continues to be critical to the human experience: determining status, income, and life chances; how we see ourselves and are seen by others; providing us with the scope for satisfaction

and achievement; and goes a long way to determine the overall quality of our lives. Second, work was the primary focus of all of our other teaching, and the focus of our individual and collective research.

While we were primarily directing the students toward a sociological imagination, we were also concerned to make them aware that culture is one of the primary structures within any society and any workplace, and that a cultural imagination would be a complementary tool to use. The influences that external cultures, gestated within geographical traditions and historical experiences, impact on the workplace (Roberts, 1997; Wray, 1996) can also impact on the wider society (Stephenson & Wray, 2005).

Following Mills' (1959) point that biography, history, and society "are the co-ordinate points of the proper study of man" (p. 143), our aim was to use a biographical methodology as a mechanism to identify and examine the complexity of the relationships between individual actions and the structured nature of the wider social world, all through the lens of work. Our intention was to encourage our students to think critically, particularly about what they already knew, and to overcome the problem that some come to university better prepared to study sociology than others, a situation noted by Hoop (2009) following a reflection on her own teaching. The use of biography (and autobiography) as the initial teaching strategy would specifically require our students to confront both diversity and common experience, explore different research contexts and methodologies, be critical, and, crucially, make links between private worlds and public contexts. We had also recognized that many students simply "give them [teachers / assessors] what they want" rather than engaging fully in assignments, or as Hoop (2009), drawing upon Graff (2003), describes, some of her students are very good at doing school without ever "getting it," understanding the sociology as a discipline (Hoop, pp. 48-49). We felt that the personal, and/or familial nature of the first assessment would go some way in overcoming this problem.

## **SEMESTER ONE**

Having made the decision to use biography to demonstrate the links between "social actions" and "social structures," we made the presentation of a biography of a working life the assessment for semester one. Each student was required to present either a detailed biography of the working life of a family member or friend, or the autobiography of his or her own working life. The choice to take either a biographical or an autobiographical approach to the assessment was usually, though not always, determined by the age of the student. In most, but not all cases, the mature students presented an autobiography. With younger students, the choice was primarily a biography, though again there were some exceptions. Mature students were between 25 and 60 years, whereas younger students were between 18 and 25 years old.

The presentation would center on an annotated poster outlining that working life, which would be assessed along with the verbal presentation. Through the use of this biographical method, it was our intention to demonstrate that while we all appear, as individuals, to choose our own career paths, those choices are determined by factors such as class, race, gender, social and geographic contexts, and inequalities, etc., all within an historical dimension. The historical dimensions of such intersections are important, especially in terms of how they are understood by the subjects of the biographies at different points in their narrative. As Mills (1959) suggested “no social science can be assumed to transcend history” and “all sociology worthy of the name is historical sociology” (p. 146).

We required our students to not only sharpen their critical thinking skills, or to “get it” as Hoop (2009, p. 48) describes, but also to utilize a range of different sociological skills. Researching, contextualizing, and analyzing a biography requires of the student a critical understanding and application of research methodologies, the understanding and application of social theory, and the ability to understand individual actions within economic, historical, political, and social contexts. A subsidiary benefit of the assessment was that *Working Lives* became a skills development course for study elsewhere in the sociology degree program by providing the students with the opportunity to “do sociology,” requiring them to call upon theoretical and methodological knowledge and skills, at the same time developing the creative and imaginative sides of the discipline.

As we were requiring our students to present a biography, we felt that we, as the teaching team, should do likewise. Through presentations of our own autobiographies, we were attempting to make visible the nature of what appeared, superficially, to be individual problems and choices in our own working lives, and to identify the nature of the structures, contexts, and ideologies which limited our own responses to these. In short, we were presenting to the students our own individual attempts to complete the “intellectual journey” of our own working lives. In other words, we were demonstrating to the students how, through a sociological analysis of our own working lives, we had, as individuals, come to understand how our lives had evolved and developed as our life courses navigated between the forces of structure and agency.

By taking a sociological approach to our own autobiographies, we were acting as Graff (2003) suggested we should, as “avant-garde artists, de-familiarizing a familiar subject, and making what is unproblematic, problematic” (p. 43). Our intention was to challenge the idea that situations “just occur” or that the approach to understanding the course of a developing working life should take the narrative form of “and then, and then, and then,” or as Kebede (2009) put it, “a biography needs to be constructed not merely narrated” (p. 361). By presenting our own working lives as more than a simple series of private

problems or unconstrained individual choices, we were seeking to evoke in the students a critical curiosity about their own lives and the lives of others (see Harding & Thompson, 2011).

We were also seeking to demonstrate how work is vital to the way in which social life is experienced, particularly with regard to social inequality and identity. Work (or its absence) is the context within which individuals and groups collide with barriers and limitations, cultures, institutions, and ideologies in very direct ways. Through our varied autobiographies, we were attempting to identify the experience and reproduction of social divisions, as well as the importance of differing social, political, economic, and cultural contexts. Our autobiographical presentations were also undertaken, in part, to develop a trust between the students and ourselves; if we required the students to be publically self-reflective, it was important to create an environment within which they would feel secure (Coop & Kleinmann, 2008). The presentation of our autobiographies inevitably involved a reflection on our own relationships with sociology. Sociology had, after all, become our work and was a personal and political tool kit for the explanation of our relationships with the social world, prompting our questions and our own individual search for answers.

We realised that revelatory pedagogies of this type are not without risk, and the decision to share our biographies with the students was not taken lightly. Such a self-reflective, autobiographical approach challenges the traditional divide between teacher and student, stripping away the security blanket of anonymity and the cloak of academia. We were revealing ourselves as, at times, vulnerable, different, struggling, and/or juggling what were less than linear approaches to our own working lives. In taking this step, our aim was to allow an insight into how our own sociological imagination had fundamentally altered how we saw society and our places within it. During our presentations, we deliberately made arguments in ordinary language in an attempt to demonstrate that academics are not geniuses, born to speak a strange and obscure, not to say exclusionary, language (Graff, 2003). This process of exploration and presentation of the self was directed toward lessening the students' own anxieties about the processes of biographical research and its presentation. It was also a political step in that it revealed the self as a legitimate ground for sociological investigation. In our presentations, we were cautious not to give away too many personal details, particularly of family life, and while we were prepared to discuss aspects of this in seminar situations, discussion was not encouraged outside of the course context.<sup>1</sup>

The generational, geographical, and gender differences in our individual autobiographies offered clear illustrations of the ways in which structure and action coincide with and impact upon the lives of everyone. Despite the obvious differences in our life stories, they had much in common: we were all born into the white working class, each had left school early with few academic qualifications, and each came from families with no prior experience of higher education.



Our lives have been unorthodox (but by no means unique) in regard of taking different routes to academia, playing catch up with education after periods of work and unemployment. Our autobiographies were presented individually, and in chronological order, in the first weeks of the lecture program, followed by a seminar led by the autobiographer, who allowed students to pursue their own questions. While our gender, age, and geographical contexts identified clear distinctions between us, in reality our autobiographies exhibited many similarities. Work (or the lack of it) had been a formative context in all our lives, and our consciousness about our class positions as well as the impact of sociology had united us as a likeminded teaching team. Consequently, we were concerned that the students should not see our autobiographies as a limiting template where only white, working class, and politicized biographies have validity. These concerns were addressed throughout the teaching program by ensuring that students were aware that all social distinctions, particularly those of class, race, and gender, were equally valid.

Through the presentation of our autobiographies, we were attempting to explain our lives in terms of the opportunities and constraints that had either limited or enhanced the choices we subsequently made within the labour market. Through our collective experiences, we were able to demonstrate that we were less in control of our own destinies, but rather social agents attempting, where possible, to make decisions, even if they were sometimes bad ones. Our working lives were therefore revealed, not so much as blueprints for living, but rather as case studies of “what we could do, given the circumstances.” It was the significance of those “circumstances” that we wanted to emphasize and draw out from the students’ own experiences. For example, whilst class and gender were significant influences in our opportunities and choices in relation to work, it was only through sociological reflection after the event that we were able to make sense of the trajectories our lives had taken. We were not seeking to present simple uncritical narratives of our working lives, but how exposure to sociology as a discipline had allowed us to critically evaluate our own lives. In this way, we were able to demonstrate that sociological theory can be applied in ways that are relevant to different individuals and in different contexts. Through our autobiographical narratives, we were able to demonstrate our own individual learning processes, and admit that we did not “get it” either until sociology provided us with the tools for critical self-reflection.

The remaining lecture and seminar program in semester one addressed the historical, political, and gendered concepts of work in order to provide insight into how these had changed over time and how sociology has viewed such change. The students were also introduced to a range of biographies available in literature, and were encouraged to see biography as a useful research method in a range of differing contexts. Geographical diversity was explored through the examination of “biographies of place,” and the subject of work and the complexity of experiences of it were addressed through lectures around the range and forms of work generally found within the labour process.

In terms of assessing the presentations, our expectations were that students would demonstrate critical understandings of the relationships between biography and social history, the tensions that exist between structure and agency, and identify and assess distinctions between private troubles and public issues. We also required the students to demonstrate a clear understanding of the sociological theories and concepts that they had used in contextualizing the biography presented. These criteria were also used in the assessment of the essays required in the second semester, which we discuss below.

## STUDENT AUTO/BIOGRAPHIES

Throughout semester one, the students were made aware that ethical research practice is essential, and were required to complete the ethical approval process of all social researchers associated with the university. Their choice of biography also had to be agreed to by the teaching team in order to avoid any potentially dangerous or harmful research. To ensure this, we reminded them that research should always be ethical, that ethical codes do exist, and that they should follow the advice given by Israel and Hay (2006), who suggested that the ultimate purpose of research ethics is to do good and avoid harm. Students were also directed to the British Sociological Association and the American Sociological Association as sources of advice on research ethics, particularly in terms of the imbalances of power between researched and researcher. Those choosing to follow the autobiographical route were also advised against self over-exposure.

As well as presenting a working life, many of the students included reflections on the process, and their consequent insights into the life they were presenting (often their own) – reflections that can only be seen as transformative.

When I undertook the biography of my grandfather, I came to see the importance of time and place. He grew up in a town with a steel works and coalmines, and as he put it “a job in this town was a birthright.” When I left school, the steelworks and the mines had all closed and the town had become a dormitory town for workers working elsewhere. The fact that my grandfather left school at fourteen, and I am now at university, is another example of the significant social changes that happen over time, and how life chances are affected by those changes.

Before doing my autobiography, I had never really questioned how my life had developed. Being introduced to feminist ideas changed all that. I realized why my father had never encouraged me as he did my brothers. He wanted a career for his sons but probably saw me simply as a future housewife.

It was only when I started to put a timeline together for my autobiography that I started to see that there were certain things that were happening outside my life that were having an effect on my life. Until then, I had not really understood what sociology was, until I saw it was about experiences, about how my experiences were different from someone else's, but that all those experiences were taking shape within society as a whole.

Many of the presentations have provided insights into lives that are normally hidden from view, neglected, or of people from social groups that are often described as “hard to reach”: one Chinese student, studying in the UK for one year, provided an autobiographical insight into her employment in a city centre department store as a cleaner, having to begin work a 6 am, working for 2 hours for the minimum wage, before commencing her studies. Set within the context of female migrant labour, her presentation graphically illustrated the difficulties experienced by such workers of working in a different linguistic and cultural milieu.

Some students, often with surprise on their part, presented biographies of family members whose ambitions had been thwarted by class or gender, or forced on them by the expectations of others. In presenting the working lives of fathers, mothers, grandparents, etc., many reported that they had “no idea” of the working life of that person, but they now had “a new respect” for them because of the problems they had faced and overcome, or of the sacrifices they had made to achieve their ambitions. Few of the working lives explored were “exciting” or “high powered” but where the sociological imagination was used, the apparently mundane was never ordinary. Those students who “got it” were demonstrably able to unpick the turning points in the biography they were presenting, and to place that working life historically and within its relationship to wider political and social forces: the train driver who had to spend a long period away from work following a suicide in front of his train; the office administrator who realised that her trade union activism had been promoted by watching a TV “docudrama” on homelessness. Most presenters were able to identify the trigger points in the life being presented, and were then able to present a good “sociological analysis” of that life to the rest of the student body. In this way, the students not only learned through their own research, but through the research of their classmates.

Inevitably, for some students, narratives can continue to be just that: narratives with limited or little analysis or even evidence of curiosity beyond the personal. One presentation, for example, focused on the student’s grandparent and their personal and geographical journey from a Muslim family in India in the 1940s to being presented to “Lady Diana” at the opening of a mosque they had designed in the UK. The relationship with the monarchy and the attitude towards it was an interesting one in a post-colonial context. However, there was also a much wider context that was developed during the subsequent seminar and covered the partition of India in 1947, the Bangladeshi war of liberation in 1971, and the expulsion of Asians from Uganda in 1972 – all of which had been experienced by the grandparent.

**SEMESTER TWO**

Having guided the students towards the development of a sociological imagination of their own, the assessment for semester two required them to use that imagination to critically assess how work is represented in a range of cultural forms including film and television, photography, art, music, and literature. By means of a 2,000-word essay, the students were required to critically examine their chosen representation of work, outline how that representation presents work, and conclude how accurately that representation portrays the realities of work in the real world. Teaching in semester two was based on two-hour weekly workshops, which focused on a specific cultural form, during which we provided examples of how these could be read sociologically. Our intention was to “show how it is done” in the sense that, having given them the tools in semester one, we needed to provide guidance on how those tools could best be used. We also highlighted the strengths and limitations of source material beyond the conventional texts, for example, what a work of fiction can offer toward a sociological understanding of an issue or context. The discussion of the various representations of work were directed toward helping the students see beyond the obvious, making each workshop an environment for serious sociological inquiry. In our case, the inclusion of such media was not as a mechanism to increase engagement (or even attendance, Smith, 1982), but to provide them with a wide-ranging cultural environment within which to test their ability to sociologically “read” a particular cultural form that was, in some way, representative of work.<sup>2</sup>

The free choice of cultural forms for sociological assessment provided us with the opportunity to address the global limitations of semester one as it brought an international perspective, though to some extent limited by linguistic issues. As well as sociological discussions of literature, film, and music from the more developed world, we were presented with material representative of the “global south,” particularly photographs.

The assessment was directed toward how well the students were able to use their sociological imagination to bring relevant sociological theories to bear on the worker and/or the workplace through an analysis of the ways that each were represented in their chosen cultural form. In other words, to critically assess how the individual worker (or group) is shown to relate to the wider social and structural landscapes of the workplace. In doing this, we were acutely aware of the warning offered by Knowles and Sweetman (2004) that when we write about or create images of the social world, we are ourselves reformulating that world. In other words, we cannot accurately interpret the work of others without some understanding of the intentions of those producing it, a point also made by Prendegast (1986).

In order to address this issue, we directed the students to the work of Knowles and Sweetman (2004) and their approach to the difficulties in understanding and interpreting photographic images. They identify three theoretical

paradigms that have been used in the past to understand images: the realist paradigm that sees images as evidence, a true record of events or phenomena; the post-structuralist paradigm that sees images as helping to construct reality, a reality constructed by both photographer and viewer; and the semiotic paradigm that sees images as texts, embodying ideological and other messages that need to be uncovered. In response to the problems offered by the above paradigms, Knowles and Sweetman (2004) offer a research process paradigm that sees images as a basis for generating analytical and theoretical insights, creating new primary data as well as the conceptual analyses and interrogation of existing material (pp. 5-6). We presented these paradigms to the students at the beginning of the second semester in the belief that the concerns raised by Knowles and Sweetman (2004) regarding photographic images were equally applicable to other cultural forms, as they are apposite to all visual, audible, and textual cultural forms.

As with all academic assessments, the work submitted varied in quality, with some of it outstanding. Some had linked a series of different cultural forms to provide a more comprehensive and critical assessment of a specific issue. For example, one student linked Steinbeck’s novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, with photographic images of the Dust Bowl and Guthrie’s album “Dust Bowl Ballads” to assess the impact of the ecological disaster that occurred in the USA in the 1930s and the consequences of that disaster for agricultural workers. Others used multiples of a single cultural form in order to provide various insights into a specific issue; for example, one student used Springsteen’s “Youngstown,” Cormier’s “Now that the work is done,” and Purdon’s “Farewell to Cotia” to compare and contrast the consequences of deindustrialization across two continents and three different countries at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Most, however, chose to use one example of one particular cultural form, but were in no way hindered by doing so. Perhaps the best piece of work presented across all years was the assessment of the children’s animated film, “The Incredibles.” Within the storyline of the film, the student identified and then critically examined with a well-tuned sociological imagination and within the appropriate literature: gender roles and responsibilities within the family and workplace, issues concerning unemployment and underemployment, organizational dysfunction, and the need for individuals to gain satisfaction in work by maximising their potential.

## STUDENT REFLECTIONS ON THE MODULE

In order to assess the course from the student viewpoint, each year following the submission of the second assessment, we asked students to submit their own reflections on the course. Broadly speaking, student feedback has been very positive, though predominantly concentrated on the first semester and the use of biography. The presentation of our autobiographies, and the “ordinariness” of our backgrounds as they saw them, gave the students the opportunity to see

themselves as equally valid sociological products for investigation. In sharing our autobiographies, we had made their autobiographies, or the biographies of family members, legitimate and therefore worthy of sharing with their peers. As one student reported:

The impact of the course initially came from your [the teaching team] sociological insights into your own working lives, to show that within one's own personal history lies the constraints and opportunities one is born in to, which gave me permission to explore my own life. The sociological theories then fell into place.

Another reported that:

From starting university, I wanted to "do sociology" and this module offered me that chance, allowing me a degree of creativity where other modules asked for traditional essays. I saw doing the biography of someone as an interesting and creative way in which to view the world of work I knew little about.

Some reported that the work for the semester one assessment had led them to reevaluate the concept of choice in their own personal lives or those of their family. Some commented on previously unexplored gender relations, while others reflected on the wider structural, social, and economic changes which have influenced the lives of their families. The following comment illustrates these points: "I looked at my father through the biography of his working life and I had no idea about the forces that had made him change his job and his life and therefore mine."

What was gratifying in the feedback was that the majority of students were able to link the working life presented to the "constraints and opportunities" that surrounded that life. For those choosing to present their autobiographies, the assessment offered an audience, which made at least one student feel valued, in herself and her own experiences. The fact that others were listening meant that the student's position within higher education became legitimate, overcoming earlier doubts. This critical self-exploration had revealed hidden injuries both of class and gender, and this critical self reflection had enabled her to drop the "false self" that acted as self protection and embrace a curiosity about her "real self" (Sennett & Cobb, 1972).

It was only when I was up there and doing it that I realised that my working life was not so much about my decisions, it was about where I was in my life, about where I was in society, and that's quite sobering.

Such a process was not without discomfort. Speaking to one of the teaching team, this student recorded some anger at the disruption the sociological reading of her previous life had caused, although she managed this with humor, stating that there "should be a health warning on sociology, how dare you do this to me?"

Overall, the feedback identified that the course was unlike any other they were studying, and that they valued the choices they had been given regarding their assessments: “The module has been extremely enjoyable and has provided two extremely interesting assessments giving freedom of choice in topics of personal interest.”

## OUR CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

Like the students, we will concentrate our reflections on the first semester, and the use of biography as a pedagogical tool. As a teaching team, we recognize that the teaching strategy explored here is laden with risks and is the product of a particular teaching team, with particular sets of students, in a particular geographical location. Not all academics will be comfortable with this self-revealing approach for a variety of reasons; not least because it offers significant disruption of the distance between the student and the teacher.

By presenting our ordinary lives made “extraordinary” through a sociological imagination, we were acknowledging that the “ordinary” takes many forms. For example, age was a significant factor in terms of how the biographical assessment was approached. Mature students were more likely to use an autobiographical and auto-ethnographic approach, as they had more scope with which to make the connections with past working life experiences. Critical self-reflection for mature students was a more obvious process, as they could recall past events that impacted their own working lives. Students direct from school had less experience of the workplace but, crucially, some were able to reflect on their relatively limited working experiences and produce some excellent work.

The autobiographical and biographical approaches offered different learning experiences. Both offered opportunities for revelation and transformation, but the autobiographical approach offered those that chose it the opportunity to cast off the impact of often unrecognized injustices. For some, this meant they became “interesting,” even “self indulgent,” as they spoke of themselves and were listened to, and, as a consequence, came to see their experiences as valuable.

We found the impact of the module differed depending on the starting point. For the student who had come from a politically active family of trade unionists, the notion that lives were inextricably bound to wider social and political forces came as no surprise. The course confirmed what was already known and became for this student just another course. By contrast, the student who had moved between several jobs and felt undermined by family expectations and disappointments found the module personally transformative, not least because, for the first time in her life, she had been listened to. The revelation of injury for this student was intense, but ultimately the move toward a critical and analytical approach to the self and society was welcomed.

Where we saw students struggling to make connections between agency and structure, we came to recognize that, while this might be the result of a weakness of sociological knowledge or imagination, there may well be other dimensions to this. There may well be familial reasons for a student's struggle to make sense of a life in relation to the wider social context. For example, in the case noted above of the grandfather who left both Pakistan and Uganda during periods of political upheaval, might these actions have been re-imagined within the context of his family as a strategic choice? It would not be unusual for the labels "asylum seeker" or "refugee" to be rejected, and for a family history to be subsequently obscured. Had the student been better informed of these momentous events, they may have dug deeper but the costs and consequences of that for them, and their family, may have been significant.

In recent years, our commitment to discussions with students around ethics, disclosure, and exposure have heightened in order to protect students and subjects alike. It became clear to us in the teaching of the course that the political awareness and values of the students on entering the sociology program (often emanating from their families) had an impact on how far the module moved their thinking on.

Finally, the first assessment strategy raised questions for us in relation to both the presentations themselves, and how we might account for a biography of which we clearly knew nothing, other than what was given in the presentation. We could not know what had been excluded nor why a particular account had been used, so we could only assess in relation to how well the biography had stimulated the sociological imagination in terms of linking the "private problems" to "public issues." It is impossible to quantify how many of our students did, finally, "get it." We are confident they had the opportunity to do so, and it is clear that as students progressed through their university program, that the sociological tool kit that Working Lives provided had assisted many of them. However, we cannot know for how many the impact of "doing sociology" was as significant as it had been for the staff teaching Working Lives.

## CONCLUSION

For sociologists, the idea of being "within" our research is nothing new, and in the teaching approach explored here, we purposefully and critically placed ourselves in our teaching and asked our students to join us there. We were, indeed, in it together. Hoop (2009) suggested, in a truly engaged pedagogy, both student and teacher should be self-actualized: each gaining as a result of the process. Through this approach, we sought to provide an environment within which students could discover an innovative approach to the sociological study of work, and the development of critical faculties by reflecting on their own working lives or those of others. We wanted, as far as possible, to enter this as partners with students, leading us to our decision to share our



autobiographies, and our sometimes limited understanding of them. We very much wanted our students to gain in terms of knowledge and critical understanding through the partnership offered by our pedagogy.

In the development of this biographical approach, we sought to present sociology as a central aspect of human life, and if it is to flourish as a discipline, it must engage with everyday life experiences. Within our classrooms sit future generations of PhD students, researchers, and teachers, and if they are not suitably moved by sociology at an academic level, then the discipline will decline. What is more, sitting in our classrooms are future policymakers, community workers, social workers, journalists, etc. It is our belief that if they are not armed with a critical sociological imagination as they take their place in the wider society, the likelihood of progressive social change is reduced.

This article, and our teaching approach, are underpinned by a commitment to a particular form of sociology: a sociology which does not simply record facts but one that holds within it the possibility of transformation – of the self and of society. We hoped to engender in our students the possibility that sociology can play a part in the development of alternatives to the way in which society is currently experienced. At the same time, we, as teachers and sociologists, sought to challenge the marginalization of the radical forms of sociology and return it to the center of the curriculum. We also sought to challenge a particularly prevalent form of sociology that presents “facts” about the social world but does not seek to change it.

For Mills (1959) and for our arguments here, there is no distinction in the sociological imagination between sociology as a discipline and those who teach and study the subject. The subject is “ourselves” and *our* “situations.” We must include ourselves in any discussions on the teaching of sociology and, at the same time, situate what and how we teach in the social, intellectual, and institutional context within which the subject has its day-to-day existence.

#### NOTES

1. All three authors came to work in academia from non-traditional routes, and after spending considerable time working in other occupations. A decade separated each of our entries to higher education.
2. For a wider view of the value of such cultural forms in the development of a sociologic understanding see among others: Prendergast (1986), Kaufman (1997), Ahlqvist (1999), Hanson (2002), and Castellano et al. (2008).

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