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Abstract

In this chapter, we make the case for using *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* to teach introductory sociology classes. While *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is an autobiography and not a novel, we summarize the literature on using novels in sociology and compare this literature to our own experiences using autobiographies in the classroom. We then describe how autobiographies are particularly helpful for introducing students to the concept of the “sociological imagination” before highlighting this with an in-class exercise. Finally, we discuss student feedback and some of the drawbacks to using autobiographies and the extent to which these drawbacks can be mitigated. [*excerpt*]

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Malcolm X, sociology, education, learning techniques

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Using *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* to Teach Introductory Sociology

Brent Harger and Tim Hallett

INTRODUCTION

Sociologist Joya Misra has argued that the success of introductory sociology classes hinges on making concepts lively and “real” (346). This can be problematic, because many students find the textbooks that are associated with these classes to be intimidating and dull. Informal classroom polls and feedback on student evaluations support this contention, suggesting that students will avoid reading from textbooks if at all possible. A study by Jay Howard found that only 40 percent of students “Always” or “Usually” read a traditional survey textbook when paired with a reader featuring common articles (200), and Hu and Kuh have found that over 18 percent of college students are academically disengaged (555). Combined, these findings highlight the importance of using readings that engage students. Textbooks are unlikely candidates, and some scholars have argued that instructors and students would be better off if textbooks were abandoned altogether (Westhues 92).

In our introduction to sociology classes, we have found that applying sociological concepts to the events in a book that students are interested in reading and eager to discuss is an effective way to make sociology lively and real. While much of the sociological literature focuses on the use of novels, we argue that both novels and autobiographies can engage readers and provide students in a diverse classroom with a common ground for the application of sociological concepts. Novels and autobiographies also provide instructors with a level of flexibility that is lost in the constraining organization of a single textbook (Westhues 89–90). Moreover, learning to apply concepts to the characters and events in a book eases the transition to applying these concepts to the students’ own lives and provides a basis for class discussion about topics that not all students have personally experienced. Not every student will have experienced poverty, for example, but all students can apply concepts relating to poverty to the experiences of a character in a book, and in doing so gain a better sense of the different social contexts that others face.

In this chapter, we make the case for using *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* to teach introductory sociology classes. While *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is an autobiography and not a novel, we summarize the literature on using novels in sociology and compare this literature to our own experiences using autobiographies in the classroom. We then describe how autobiographies are particularly helpful for introducing students to the concept of the “sociological imagination” before highlighting this with an in-class exercise. Finally, we discuss student feedback and some of the drawbacks to using autobiographies and the extent to which these drawbacks can be mitigated.

THE USE OF NOVELS IN SOCIOLOGY

The idea of using novels to teach sociology is not new. Various authors have described using novels in courses ranging from introduction to sociology (Laz, Lena and London, and Hartman) to social theory (Gotsch-Thomson) and the family (Clear, Cosbey, and Hall). Recently, a novel titled *The Dancer’s Gift: An Introductory Sociology Novel* has been written specifically for use as an introductory reading (Kennedy, Zusman, Schacht, and Knox). Given this body of literature, it is clear that one need not reinvent the wheel when deciding how to implement books like novels into course readings.

Importantly, the literature also notes some of the drawbacks associated with choosing a novel over a textbook. Chief among these drawbacks is the amount of time and labor involved (Westhues 90–91). Time is needed to read potential works before a selection can be made, and a considerable amount of effort is required to prepare lectures that tie into specific events in a book and to organize lectures so that each reading corresponds to a day of classroom lecture and discussion. Another downside is that students themselves will not have a desk reference for class concepts and definitions, necessitating that a portion of class time be dedicated to teaching, learning, and documenting them in note form. To alleviate this issue, we use a form of “guided notes” in our classes (Heward). Guided notes are essentially partial lecture notes that we make available to students before each class. These notes are partial in the sense that two or three words that are important to understanding each concept are omitted and replaced with blank lines. For example, our definition of human agency is “The actions of individuals or groups in society.” In the guided notes that we provide to students, this definition is replaced with “The _____ of individuals or groups in _____.” Students then bring these partial notes to class, where they complete definitions and add examples as concepts are discussed. By providing students with partial lecture notes, we allow students to spend less time copying word-for-word definitions and more time focusing on examples and class discussion, while ensuring that students who do not come to class will not have the same notes as those who do.

While using a novel may make class preparation more challenging (especially the first time), we feel that the benefits—such as increased student interest and the broadening of student horizons—outweigh the costs. Lena and London, for example, describe beginning their classes by having students read *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* as early as possible, helping generate “immediate

interest and enthusiasm” among their students (125). In her family course, Hall uses the novel *A Thousand Acres* to connect course themes and allow her students to apply the knowledge they have gained about topics such as family violence (370–71). Fitzgerald argues that novels allow students to gain a greater understanding of other cultures, stating that students “can learn and understand the basic sociological concepts while discovering how a people live and why they make certain choices” (244). These types of benefits have prompted us to exclude textbooks from our own introduction to sociology classes. Because events in novels often build on one another, we feel that novels can help students better understand complex issues such as racism. Rather than a single example of racism, then, students can see the way that one instance of racism affects a character’s opinion toward another instance of racism, helping students to see the way that the social structure of racism is affected by individuals and, at the same time, constrains the options available to those individuals.

BEYOND NOVELS: AUTOBIOGRAPHIES IN THE CLASSROOM

While much of the sociological literature on using novels in the classroom focuses on specific books that can be used with specific courses, Hill provides instructors with suggested criteria for choosing a “sociologically useful” novel (39–40). Instructors, Hill argues, should find books that describe an array of major social institutions; represent diverse groups through well-defined characters; illustrate processes of social change, cooperation, and/or conflict; and utilize actual historical situations and events. In light of these criteria, we argue that autobiographies, in addition to novels, can be highly effective teaching tools.

The use of autobiographies is not unprecedented. Clear, for example, provides a list of fictional, biographical, and autobiographical works that are useful for teaching the sociology of family (218). A footnote to this work states:

While technically biography is outside the field of imaginative literature, Professor Clear could not be persuaded to distinguish between novels and biographies except by asterisks, which he reluctantly added to nonfiction items in his reading list. Since the line between modern novels and highly moving autobiographies is indeed at times a fine one, editorial yielding on the point will perhaps be forgiven by our readers. (217)

Clear recognizes that autobiographies, like novels, present students with interesting characters whose lives can be examined from a sociological perspective.

We argue that autobiographies are ideal teaching tools because sociology requires students to examine the intersections of human behavior with large-scale social structures and institutions in a way that they have likely never considered. Reading about real people and events helps to provide a concrete basis for students to see the world through the lens of sociology and to increase their levels of understanding. Discussing the effects of poverty on a character in a work of fiction, however compelling, may lead students to dismiss the relevance of social structures such as the economy or the education system on the basis that it is just “made up” by an author. The autobiography of a noted historical figure that lived through poverty, on the other hand, provides a concrete connection to the

topic and allows for further contextualization through other historical information such as newspaper and magazine articles or documentary films. This contextualization, coupled with autobiographical description, fits Misra's argument that we need to make concepts "real" to students.

Autobiographies and the Sociological Imagination

Making concepts such as class, race, and gender real is only a small part of what we hope to accomplish in teaching introduction to sociology. Our overarching goal is to teach students to think sociologically and become, by the end of the semester, elementary sociologists in practice. This involves getting them to see the connections between social structures and the actions of individuals in society, what C. Wright Mills calls the sociological imagination. To quote Mills:

The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society . . . It is the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self—and to see the relations between the two. (6–7)

The sociological imagination is a recognition that an individual's outcomes in life are not based solely on that individual's qualities. Rather, individuals are shaped by social structures just as the actions of individuals shape social structures. Mills provides unemployment as an example, noting the difference between one unemployed citizen in a city of 100,000 and 15 million unemployed citizens in a nation of 50 million. While the situation of the former may rightly be due to individual qualities, the situation of the latter is much more likely to be the result of the structure of opportunities, such as the economic and political institutions in a society.

In our classrooms, we use autobiographies to help students see the interplay between social structures and the agency of individuals. Like Mills, we view this interplay as the heart of sociology. For many students, seeing things in this way is difficult. Because American society privileges the ideology of the individual over a holistic knowledge of the social whole, thinking with the sociological imagination often seems "unnatural" to students. Using autobiographies to prompt students to think about the social whole instead of individual parts is a useful means to make thinking with the sociological imagination more natural and "real." The goal of our introduction to sociology classes is to use autobiographies to help students acquire the sociological imagination by examining the lives, experiences, and social contexts of the authors.

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MALCOLM X

In our classes, we have found that *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is an especially useful means to teach the sociological imagination. As a starting point, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is a captivating, well-written book. Even before the students turn a page, the book piques their curiosity because, though they often know that Malcolm X was somehow controversial and that Spike Lee made a movie about him, they know little or nothing about who he really was,

what he did, and why. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is ideal for sociology because it is partly a story about individual transformation and change—Malcolm journeys from a rural hick to an urban hipster to a hustler, incarcerated criminal, minister in the Nation of Islam, pilgrim and follower of Orthodox Islam, and finally a Civil Rights leader—but it is also a story about the social structures that enabled and constrained this individual journey—institutional racism, the criminal justice system, religion, and social movements.

The actions and experiences of Malcolm X necessitate looking past the individual to see the social structures at work in the background, and the controversial nature of his life forces students to question their assumptions about society and their (typically privileged) positions in society. Early in the semester, we make a point of stating that students are not required to *agree* with Malcolm's worldview. Students are, however, required to think sociologically in an attempt to *understand why* Malcolm's experiences with social institutions prompted him to act and think as he did, and in turn, how his actions and thoughts transformed society.

To demonstrate the utility of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, we now discuss one of the (many) highly salient excerpts from the book and how we use it in class. During Malcolm's youth, one particular encounter with a teacher had a large impact on his life. Malcolm was in seventh grade at a school in Lansing, Michigan, where he was one of the only African American students. Nonetheless, Malcolm was among the best students in the school, was popular and well-liked, and was even voted class president. We quote this excerpt at length, as to best illustrate how we use it in class:

Somehow I happened to be alone in the classroom with Mr. Ostrowski, my English teacher . . . I had gotten some of my best marks under him, and he had always made me feel that he liked me. He was, as I have mentioned, a natural-born "advisor," about what you ought to read, to do, or think—about any and everything . . .

I know that he probably meant well in what he happened to advise me that day. I doubt that he meant any harm. It was just in his nature as an American white man. I was one of his top students, one of the school's top students—but all he could see for me was the kind of future "in your place" that almost all white people see for black people.

He told me, "Malcolm, you ought to be thinking about a career. Have you been giving it thought?"

The truth is, I hadn't. I never had figured out why I told him, "Well, yes, sir, I've been thinking I'd like to be a lawyer." Lansing certainly had no Negro lawyers—or doctors either—in those days, to hold up an image I might have aspired to. All I really knew for certain was that a lawyer didn't wash dishes, as I was doing.

Mr. Ostrowski looked surprised . . . He kind of half-smiled and said, "Malcolm, one of life's first needs is for us to be realistic. Don't misunderstand me, now. We all here like you, you know that. But you've got to be realistic about being a nigger. A lawyer—that's no realistic goal for a nigger. You need to think about something you *can* be. You're good with your hands—making things. Everybody admires your carpentry shop work. Why don't you plan on carpentry? People like you as a person—you'd get all kinds of work."

The more I thought afterwards about what he said, the more uneasy it made me. . . . What made it really begin to disturb me was Mr. Ostrowski's advice to others in my class—all of them white . . . They all reported that Mr. Ostrowski had encouraged what they had wanted. Yet nearly none of them had earned marks equal to mine.

It was a surprising thing that I had never thought of it that way before, but I realized that whatever I wasn't, I *was* smarter than nearly all of those white kids. But apparently I was still not intelligent enough, in their eyes, to become whatever *I* wanted to be.

It was then that I began to change—inside. (Haley 43–44)

We begin the class exercise by having two students read this excerpt aloud in class. One student reads the dialogue from Malcolm, another student reads Mr. Ostrowski's dialogue, and the instructor acts as the narrator. (In the class exercise, we strike the offensive word “nigger” from the text, substituting it with “n—ger” and we refrain from saying it aloud. We also explain doing so to the class before the reading. This allows the class to recognize the historical context and the sensitive racial legacy of the word without using it in a hurtful way.) Next, we have the students form groups and discuss three questions: (1) Where in the excerpt can we see individual actions and decisions? (This is the class definition for “human agency.”) (2) Where in the excerpt can we see the weight of society, things that are beyond one's immediate control but that exert a force on one's life? (This is the definition for “social structure” in the class.) (3) How can we understand the relationship between the two? (Thinking with the sociological imagination.)

The students are immediately able to recognize and discuss a number of individual actions and decisions in the excerpt, though they begin to do so from a limited perspective. They tend to focus on Malcolm and recognize the individual intelligence and hard work that led him to get some of his “best marks” in Mr. Ostrowski's class and to be one of the school's “top students.” They also note Malcolm's effort and desire to succeed in school and become a lawyer. Finally, they note that, after this painful interaction, Malcolm “began to change.” This interaction is prominent in the book, because afterward Malcolm decides to leave Lansing for Boston, embarking on a path that would lead him to a life of crime, incarceration, and eventually to the Nation of Islam and his controversial views on race before finally taking on the role of a Civil Rights leader.

At this point the classroom discussion slows until we ask, “Who *else* in this excerpt is acting in important ways?” Then the students begin to think beyond Malcolm and focus on Mr. Ostrowski. They note that Mr. Ostrowski belittles Malcolm by calling him a “nigger,” and telling him to be a carpenter rather than a lawyer. The students are typically angered by this individual action, since Mr. Ostrowski supported the other (white) students, and since Malcolm *was* smart and hard working.

To prompt the students to think further about these individual actions, we ask, “What could Malcolm and Mr. Ostrowski have done differently?” The students comment that Mr. Ostrowski could have supported Malcolm as he had supported Malcolm's white classmates. They also comment that Malcolm, instead of leaving Lansing and embarking on a life of crime, could have stayed and continued to work hard to become a lawyer in spite of people like Mr. Ostrowski, or he could have decided that Mr. Ostrowski was “right” and tried to become a carpenter.

Once we have gotten the students to think beyond the actions of a single individual, we follow up with the question about the weight of society. In

looking at the excerpt, the students recognize the social inequality that existed in the labor market at the time. Malcolm admits in his own words that Lansing “had no Negro lawyers—or doctors either—in those days.” The jobs that were available for African Americans were menial ones, such as Malcolm’s job washing dishes. These kinds of labor market effects were beyond Malcolm’s (and Mr. Ostrowski’s) immediate control. The students recognize that this entire excerpt took place in a school, and though Lansing was in the North, educational opportunities were still limited for African Americans, despite their best individual efforts. At the time, Malcolm could have gotten straight As and still been denied admission to a good college, making his effort to become a lawyer impossible, regardless of his own actions or Mr. Ostrowski’s.

Finally, we talk about the connection between these individual actions and social structures. One of the interesting quotes in this regard is Malcolm’s comment on Mr. Ostrowski: “I know that he probably meant well in what he happened to advise me that day. I doubt that he meant any harm. It was just in his nature as an American white man.” By acting as he did, Mr. Ostrowski was acting under the weight of, and in accordance with, social structure. Mr. Ostrowski’s words were cruel, and they reflected the cruel reality of society. In fact, it is through Mr. Ostrowski’s actions that Malcolm *feels* the weight of social structure. By trying to become a lawyer, Malcolm was acting against the limited opportunity structure of that social era. However, in response to this negative interaction (and the social structure behind it), Malcolm gave up on the goal of becoming a lawyer. As he said, “I began to change.” Ironically, though he did not decide to become a carpenter, by going to Boston and becoming a criminal, Malcolm was still acting in a way that reflected and maintained the limited opportunity structure that confronted African Americans. Fortunately, in the end, his actions as a Civil Rights leader went far in the effort to change this social structure for generations to come.

Once we have gotten the students to begin thinking with the sociological imagination, we use this excerpt to bring four additional concepts to life: prejudice, discrimination, racism, and institutional racism. The discussion involving these concepts and this excerpt is among the most lively and engaging of the semester. First, we define prejudice as “holding preconceived ideas about a person or group,” literally to prejudge (Giddens 401), and we ask the students if they think Mr. Ostrowski was being prejudice. Because Mr. Ostrowski seems to hold onto a limited view of what African Americans can do (“A lawyer—that’s no realistic goal for a nigger. You need to think about something you *can* be”), *despite* the fact that Malcolm was a top student, the vast majority of the students in our class argue that Mr. Ostrowski did have preconceived ideas and was indeed prejudice.

Then we define discrimination as “behavior that denies the members of a group resources or rewards available to others” (Giddens 397), and we ask the students if Mr. Ostrowski was discriminating. The students soon realize that the key to this argument is the extent to which the support (in the form of “advice” and “encouragement”) that Mr. Ostrowski gave the white students but not to Malcolm “counts” as an important resource or reward. Most students argue that this kind support *is* an important resource, the very type of thing that can help

someone get into college and eventually law school. A smaller segment of the students argue that, because this support is “vague” and not material in nature (like giving or withholding an actual job), it is not discrimination. Throughout this discussion, what we are most excited to see is how the students use the concepts and the text to make arguments and think critically. We force them to be skilled in their arguments and to support their view, but we do not force them to interpret the excerpt one way or another.

Next we define racism as discrimination against the members of a racial group by a powerful other, or “a special form of discrimination based on race” (Henslin 210). The student’s arguments in this regard usually flow from the earlier discussion of discrimination. If the students felt that Mr. Ostrowski was withholding important resources from Malcolm, the excerpt provides them with considerable ammunition to argue that this discrimination was based on race.

In discussing racism in relation to this passage, another interesting issue arises that involves “intent.” Some students use the excerpt to modify the definition of racism to focus on intentional efforts. For these students, though they uniformly feel that Mr. Ostrowski was “wrong,” they focus on Malcolm’s comment “I doubt that he meant any harm.” To these students, the larger issue is the limited opportunities provided to African Americans at the time, and not Mr. Ostrowski’s painful advice to Malcolm. As instructors, we use this opportunity to introduce the concept of institutional racism, which we define as “patterns of discrimination based on race that have become structured into existing social institutions” (Giddens 401). The concept of institutional racism brings the class back to the earlier discussion of social structure, and the racial inequalities that had been built into the job market and the education system. Whether or not the students think that Mr. Ostrowski’s actions were malicious, the students can see that Mr. Ostrowski’s actions were indeed in response to, and effectively in support of, institutional racism.

Through exercises like these our students start to acquire the sociological imagination, and they are better equipped to read the rest of the book holistically. While this excerpt on its own does not reveal why Malcolm advocated the controversial views expressed later in the book, students can see this excerpt as one piece of a larger sociological puzzle that reveals how the social structures of racism and discrimination influenced Malcolm’s thoughts and actions. By connecting Malcolm’s experience as a child when his father was murdered by white supremacists with this interaction with Mr. Ostrowski and the examples of institutional racism throughout the book, students begin to see how social structures placed a limit on what Malcolm was able to become. They are better able to understand why Malcolm dropped out of school and gave up legitimate work for a life of crime. By making these connections, they are able to *understand why* Malcolm came to accept the Nation of Islam’s teaching that “the white man is the devil” before he reversed his views in light of his experience with Orthodox Islam. They are also able to see how, over time, Malcolm’s actions helped to change the structure of institutional racism, which limited his own life chances. Even though students do not have to agree with Malcolm’s final view of the “race problem” in America, they are able to understand where that view came from and its implications for society.

It is through reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* with this kind of sociological imagination that students *become* sociologists. This interplay is developed further through the use of concrete examples from the 1950s and 1960s. Because Malcolm X was a real person, we are able to provide students with historical newspaper accounts of the events he describes in his autobiography and show video clips from his speeches. We are able to provide additional context to help students see how structure and agency intertwine not just for Malcolm X, but for all people, past and present. This approach is similar to those that Kaufman (309) and Hanson (235) advocate—that is, providing students with historical documents to demonstrate the impact of social structures on the lives of individuals—to help students understand the sociological imagination.

Once students have started to think sociologically, this thought process extends to essays, written exams, and papers where students further cultivate their sociological abilities. A short essay assignment, for example, might ask students to compare the social structures that Malcolm faced in the 1960s with those that African Americans face today, prompting students to make explicit connections between historical events, social change, and their own social worlds. This is reinforced when students take the first exam and answer essay questions asking them to examine a social structure such as the education system or the criminal justice system and discuss how it affects the actions and life chances of individuals. In a question like this, students may draw on Malcolm's negative and limited experience in the formal education system and compare this with how he educated himself during his time in prison, while reflecting that Malcolm's informal but extensive self-education was only possible after he had been moved to a medium-security prison that operated without bars and where Malcolm had constant access to an extraordinary library. In the final paper for the class, students are required to use course concepts as a means to think with the sociological imagination while comparing and contrasting their lives to the life of one of the main characters in one of the autobiographies that we read over the course of the semester. Despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of the students in our classes are white, most students choose to compare and contrast their lives to Malcolm X. The sociological imagination helps them to see that, although in many ways their lives are different from Malcolm's, everyone feels the weight of various social structures, and everyone acts in relation to those broader structures. Thinking this way helps students to uncover unexpected similarities to a radical black man living fifty years ago, and to think about their own lives in a richer, broader way.

STUDENT FEEDBACK

When asked informally at the end of the semester what they will take away from our classes, students commonly mention *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. We have examined formal data from departmental student evaluations to determine whether students enjoy reading autobiographies as a part of the class. These evaluation data cover eleven class sections from the fall of 2003 through the summer of 2006 and contain responses from 560 students. In response to the open-ended question "What did you like most about this course?" 22.1 percent

of students responded that they liked the readings most and an additional 6.1 percent noted that they liked not having a textbook. Comments in response to this question included one student who said, “I enjoyed the practical application—applying the sociology concepts to the real lives of different people across society.” In line with this comment, another student noted that it was beneficial not having a textbook because students “could actually apply what we learned in class to readings and life.” These comments support our contention that students prefer autobiographies to traditional textbooks as well as our belief that these books help students understand the sociological imagination.

In response to another open-ended question asking students to list any readings that they thought were valuable, 43.9 percent responded that they thought *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* specifically was valuable and another 15.1 percent responded that all readings were valuable. Combined, these responses indicate that 59.1 percent of students considered *Malcolm X* to be particularly valuable. Conversely, only 5 percent of students stated that they thought either *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* or all readings were unsatisfactory. In response to these questions about whether readings were valuable, one student stated that the “use of autobiographies [was] better than standard textbooks [and] made lectures more interesting.” This student also noted that the use of autobiographies made it “easier to provide examples for terms.” Another student wrote that *Malcolm X* was valuable “although I didn’t agree about anything he said. It made me try to see things in other views.” These comments also suggest that *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is a particularly strong book for use in teaching introductory sociology despite the fact that students themselves might not agree with the words or actions of Malcolm X.

Considering how much student opinion tends to vary, with one student often enjoying an aspect of a course for each student who dislikes that same aspect, these results suggest that students do enjoy these kinds of readings and exercises. When coupled with the learning that we see in the essays, exams, and final paper, we are confident in our conclusion that *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* provides students with an excellent introduction to sociological thinking.

Drawbacks

While we believe that autobiographies are excellent tools to help introduce students to the sociological imagination, it would be naïve to think that there are no drawbacks, and it would be unfair if we did not discuss them. Among these is a problem related to the charge that novels are “just made up.” While supposedly based on facts and actual events, we recognize that there is an amount of fictionalization involved in writing an autobiography. This fictionalization may involve condensing numerous secondary characters into one, changing information about individuals the author does not wish to identify, or simply fleshing out conversations that are only partially remembered. While we have never heard students use these criticisms, recent news stories surrounding James Frey’s book *A Million Little Pieces* suggest that we may have to address them in the future.

To some extent this problem is mitigated by the fact that Malcolm X was a public figure, so book facts can be checked against those of newspaper reports

and arrest records. In the classroom we acknowledge that Malcolm's perspective of certain events may be different than that of others at the time. By providing historical newspapers covering some of the same events, we invite students to examine differences in perspective without claiming that any view is "right" or "wrong." In many cases, students find that events in the book are depicted by Malcolm X in the same way as by reporters for the *New York Times*, supporting his credibility.

Another drawback to using autobiographies or novels is that some students simply do not enjoy reading. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is 523 pages and, though we break it up over a number of weeks, some students will lose interest. We try to decrease this problem by putting statements about the required reading in our syllabi and discussing it on the first day of class. We also note that reading fifty pages of an autobiography is generally more enjoyable than reading a thirty-page textbook chapter. Nonetheless, in a class of eighty students, it is not unusual to have ten students withdraw after seeing the required readings on the syllabus. Students who add the class late then face the challenge of catching up on these engaging but lengthy readings. And, like other more traditional classes, there are always students who stick with the course but react negatively to any sizable reading. For these students, we can only hope that our classroom examples and discussions will spark an interest that makes them want to do the required reading. We do believe that our classes have helped students who had not been "readers" to become so.

There are also drawbacks to using *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* in particular. Malcolm X continues to be a controversial figure and his statements are often offensive. Making disclaimers before embarking on the readings are helpful in this regard. However, there are always a handful of students who are unable to set aside their personal views about Malcolm X to see the bigger picture. Malcolm X's rhetoric puts the white students in our classes on guard. The defensiveness of the white students has the unfortunate unintended effect of making the minority students uncomfortable at times. We protect against this by emphasizing that minority populations are heterogeneous in their views, and as examples such as Martin Luther King Jr. attest, Malcolm X does not represent the views of all African Americans. Since minority students may be reticent to express their thoughts and feelings in this context, we do our best to informally gauge their feelings and to talk with them in less-intimidating contexts, for example, before and after classes and in office hours.

We do not want to overstate these challenges. They are real but infrequent, and if the benefits of teaching autobiographies did not outweigh the costs, we would have changed our approach long ago.

CONCLUSION

In sociology classes, the use of autobiographies provides the instructor with opportunities for increased flexibility and additional contextualization and provides students with a common ground for the application of course concepts and a potential bridge to the understanding of their own experiences through the sociological imagination. Class evaluations and informal conversations support

our contention that students enjoy learning about sociology in this way. The added possibility for contextualization with autobiographies and the fact that they are based on a person's life experiences make them ideal for introducing students to sociology, because students in our classes are being introduced to ideas that may seem counterintuitive. In situations such as this, we believe that the more contextual information we can supply to support students' developing sociological imaginations, the better.

Autobiographies can help students take the first step toward thinking holistically about the interconnections of social structures and human agency in their own lives and those of others. And yet, in the literature about teaching sociology, autobiographies are largely ignored. One possible reason for the lack of attention given to autobiographies is their functional similarity with novels. Because many of the teaching methods, benefits, and drawbacks associated with novels also apply to autobiographies, instructors who use autobiographies can refer in part to the existing literature. Despite these similarities, the literature can benefit from further classroom experimentation and scholarship on the use of autobiographies and the similarities and differences between teaching novels and autobiographies.

Although we have discussed some of the drawbacks to using novels or autobiographies in the classroom, we believe that the included example of Malcolm's interaction with his teacher Mr. Ostrowski demonstrates the potential for learning that these books hold. At the same time, the detailed nature of this exercise shows the amount of time and work it takes to prepare class exercises without the support of a textbook. The question, then, is whether student engagement and learning are increased enough to justify the added time and effort spent on class preparation. For us, the answer comes both during the semester as we see students begin to apply the sociological imagination to the readings and at the end of the semester when students reflect on what they have learned. On evaluations and in informal conversations, students frequently cite *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and the focus on applying concepts to real events as one of the highlights of the course, noting how beneficial these techniques are in developing their understanding of sociology. We have never heard a student describe a textbook as the highlight of a course.

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