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Doing Global Sociology: Qualitative Methods and Biographical Becoming after the Postcolonial Critique – An Introduction

*Johannes Becker & Marian Burchardt**

Abstract: »Globale Soziologie als Forschungspraxis: Qualitative Methoden, Biographieforschung und postkoloniale Kritik«. In this issue we frame Global Sociology as a critical perspective on *doing sociology* on a global scale, considering the specificities of societies worldwide as well as global interrelations, and involving areas and sociologies that are only insufficiently represented in the discipline's mainstream. Thus, we consider Global Sociology as a practical as well as critical approach to sociology. We argue that there is a need to strengthen the contribution of empirical, especially qualitative sociological research *on* and *in* societies of the Global South to general sociological theory-building. Global Sociology requires, first and foremost, the methodologically informed development of conceptual tools for understanding contemporary, globally entangled social worlds through theory-building based on empirical research in the Global South. Taking, in this way, biographical research as an exemplary field of qualitative research in the contributions to this issue, we suggest three research strategies: *First*, the scrutinizing of the universality or applicability of existing concepts from the North, when applied elsewhere; *second*, charting the challenges that emerge for biographical research on the one hand from the transregional entanglements of societies and from the unfolding of processes of biographical becoming across different geographical spaces; and on the other from a comparative perspective, i.e., identifying the differences and similarities between the structural forces that shape biographies and their narrative articulations in different regions. And *third*, scrutinizing the ways in which the location of societies in the Global South at the margins of global systems of domination in history conditions the possibilities and forms of biographical research via (post-)colonial entanglements.

Keywords: Biographical research, Global South, postcolonial theory, research strategy, comparison.

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1. Introduction

For over two decades, increasingly intensifying debates in sociology have turned to a series of specific challenges to the discipline. These discussions center around the shortcomings and parochialisms of its dominant theories, paradigms, and narratives about the historical emergence and development of modern societies and modernity itself. Many of the critiques put forward in this context have pivoted on sociology's Eurocentrism and the absence of large parts of the world – most importantly former colonies – from the theories and themes that are central to the discipline. Against this backdrop, the notion of Global Sociology has been suggested as a remedy and project to produce sociological knowledge that accounts for the critique.

The critical interrogation of sociology's standard assumptions and the post-colonial questioning of Western epistemologies more broadly, and of the conditions of sociological knowledge production, has surely produced a sense of crisis regarding the validity, usefulness, and justifiability of theoretical paradigms, concepts, and narratives. However, rarely have scholars extended these interrogations into the realm of sociology's methods and methodologies (but see Tuhiwai Smith 1999). If sociology's theories can be criticized in this regard because they are based on flawed understandings of agency, action, social relations, and so on, what about the methods through which we gather data, interpret these data, and theorize them through practices of generalization and abstraction? Are all methods equally valid and justifiable in all cultural and geographical contexts? What does it mean for sociology on a global scale to account for the existence of divergent methodological approaches and the different forms of concept-building that arise from them? What kinds of methods and procedures of comparison, context variation, and so on enable us to generalize findings and to produce hypotheses, arguments, and formulations that make research in one site or society relevant for research in other sites and societies in our globalized world?

These questions are even more urgent, given that a substantive part of the sociological community shares the epistemological commitment to revised, reconstructed, and contextualized notions of universalism, or what Hanafi (2020) described as moderate universalism.¹ With perceptive clarity, Hanafi outlined three conditions for a concept to be a universal, which are worth quoting here:

the first is it being the outcome of a quasi-cross-cultural consensus, and not by generalizing or universalizing values embedded from the Euro-American context. Second, it is not a teleological concept, but a historical experience [...] that gets its normativity as a result of a collective historical

¹ The debate on universalism in sociology is too complex to be described here in any meaningful way. For a good account, see Chernilo (2013).

learning process (inherently open-ended). Third, its universality is impossible except as an imaginary; a general, wide, flexible concept, not a model to be exported. (2020, 14)

Importantly, other voices in the debate on post-Eurocentric sociology have remained critical of universalism. Critics of universalism such as Rehbein (2015), for instance, hold on to a concept of universalism that is taken from physics, logic, and the laws of nature. Instead, Rehbein suggests that, within the realm of a properly Global Sociology, “all that is possible is to establish configurations, contrast them with new empirical cases and conflicting theories and improve them by removing shortcomings and discovering blind spots that become visible from other perspectives” (Rehbein 2016, 219). Contrary to Rehbein, we suggest that this “kaleidoscopic dialectic” can surely be viewed as form of contextualized universalism.

Calls for moderate universalism have emerged from a period in which sociologists from the Global South especially have defended the development of indigenous and autonomous sociological traditions that ought to address social life in its different regional contexts, focus on regional experiences, and refrain from ambitions to produce overarching abstract theorization (Akiwowo 1999; Alatas 2006). However, as Bhambra (2014, 227) argued, “there is little discussion of what the purchase of these autonomous traditions would be for a *Global Sociology*, beyond simple multiplicity” (italics in original). If, contrary to that, one remains committed to a universalism that is freed from its problematic operationalization in modernization theories but instead based on conceptualizations of a shared human condition, the question remains: What are the consequences and implications of the idea of Global Sociology for qualitative research methods? Which methods appear to prove suitable in our globalized and interconnected world? What kind of reach and generality can qualitative social research claim, and through which procedures do sociologists establish generality? And what level of formality is necessary and desirable in this regard?

This HSR Special Issue takes up the challenges of *doing Global Sociology* by focusing on biographical research as an exemplary approach in qualitative sociology. Taking a globally comparative perspective, we illustrate ways of doing Global Sociology after the postcolonial critique. A central tenet of Global Sociology for us is the observation that there is a need to strengthen the contribution of empirical, especially qualitative sociological research *on* and *in* societies of the Global South to general sociological theory-building. As already mentioned, the continuous dominance of sociological theories of Western origin has been widely addressed and criticized, especially within postcolonial approaches and their attempts to de-center the Global North as a privileged place for world history and knowledge production. At the same time, however, the visibility of theory-building processes from the Global South based on qualitative empirical research and their confrontation with

the Western sociological theoretical canon are still in their initial stages. Nevertheless, our argument is that Global Sociology requires not only, or not even primarily, a critical engagement with the discipline's past and the systematic erasure of many non-Western collective experiences from mainstream narratives of modernity, as others have argued. Crucially, we argue that Global Sociology requires, first and foremost, the methodologically informed development of conceptual tools for understanding contemporary, globally entangled social worlds through theory-building based on empirical research in the Global South.

Our entry point in discussing the potential of biographical research in doing Global Sociology are processes of what we call "biographical becoming." By that we mean the evolving forms of subject formation that emerge at the juncture of individual agency, collective history, and the structural forces they embody and shape, which acquire their particular shape through their temporal genesis and narrative elaboration. By focusing on the ways in which people become who they are, we build on sociology's tradition of biographical research (see Apitzsch and Inowlocki 2000; Becker, Pohn-Lauggas, and Santos 2023; Rosenthal 2024), suggesting that this tradition is especially suitable for the critical reassessment of methodology in the light of Global Sociology. Developed in the Global North, biographical research surely reflects the conceptualizations of actorhood, subjectivity, and individualization that emerged with Western modernity. Comparative engagement with biographies on a global scale thus enables us to concretize the critical questions on research methodology and theory-building raised above.

In this vein, the authors in this special issue scrutinize the differences, similarities, and applicability of sociological concepts of biography, life course, self, and narrative. They raise questions about the extent to which these concepts remain regionally specific and tied to the contexts in the Global North where they were developed, or can be taken up, reformulated, or adapted elsewhere, or need to be discarded. Procedures of qualitative comparison thus demonstrate the specific ways in which concepts can be universalized in the sense discussed above. Hannah Schilling's article, for instance, explores the different ways in which kin-based economic relations shape the lives of young workers in digital platforms in Abidjan and Berlin, specifying how the meanings of kinship develop in relation to the question of to whom to lend money. Similarly, in their article, Burchardt and Becker examine divergent articulations of the concept of religious agency in the Middle East and South Africa, demonstrating how each of these articulations is tied to gendered forms of authority in religious contexts. While all contributions agree that the analysis of life courses and biographies is a suitable methodology for studying the lived realities of individuals, they also critically engage with the shortcomings and epistemological questions that surround terminology and assumptions of biographical research in southern contexts.

The broader aim of this special issue is to contribute to the emerging discussion of Global Sociology and qualitative methods after the postcolonial critique, a project which unites the focus of all its authors.² Using qualitative methods on a global scale in a reflexive manner, we set out to identify research strategies that promise to be helpful in developing approaches for grasping globally entangled social worlds and to aid theory-building that rests on empirical research in the Global South. We identified three research strategies that we see as central results and crucial gateways for this project: (1) Biographical research as social analysis in the Global South, testing the applicability and adaptability of Northern concepts or the need to discard them; (2) comparative and transregional biographical research; and (3) biographical research, local histories, and postcolonial entanglements.

The *first* strategy is about scrutinizing the universality of existing concepts related to biographical research. Along these lines, Gérard Amougou's article aims, in his words, "to reinforce the universal nature of the concept of the subject" by charting the ways in which, in their biographies, Cameroonian "subject-entrepreneurs" constitute themselves on the margins of a totalitarian society. Other concepts taken up by different authors include Western criminological concepts (Martín Di Marco), Bourdieu's theory of social fields (Daniel Bultmann), and conceptualizations of the life course (Swetlana Torno).

The *second* strategy is about charting the challenges that emerge for biographical research from the transregional entanglements of societies, the unfolding of processes of biographical becoming across different geographical spaces, and the comparative perspectives that seek to identify the differences and similarities between the structural forces that shape biographies and their narrative articulations in different regions. Thus, Joschka Philipps traces the ways in which radical uncertainty shapes the biography of a woman as she migrates from her native Guinea to France, whereas Johannes Becker and Marian Burchardt compare the biographical careers of religious specialists in the Middle East and South Africa with regard to the interplay of personal autonomy and institutional constraints.

Finally, the *third* strategy is about scrutinizing the ways in which the location of societies in the Global South at the margins of global systems of

² This HSR Special Issue is the first joint initiative of the members of the scientific network on "Qualitative social research and transregional theory-building in the context of Global Sociology(ies)," which we, the guest editors, coordinate. Funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), project number 452021398, this research network seeks to advance sociological theory-building that is based on qualitative research in societies of the Global South and thus to contribute to emerging conceptualizations of "Global Sociology." By initiating scholarly exchanges and collaborations among sociologists from Europe, Africa, Latin America, and Asia, it contributes to interrogating ongoing Western-centrism and to advancing self-reflexive sociological concepts that account for societies' increasing transregional entanglements under the global condition. See: <https://global-qualitative-sociology.net/>.

domination in history conditions the possibilities and forms of biographical research. In their contribution, Nkululeko Nkomo and Sibusiso Nkomo seek to retrieve the biographical dimension from the newspaper publications of an ordinary Black South African whose voice had been suffocated through racist oppression. And with a comparable aim, Fabio Santos discusses the potential of Saidhya Hartman's concept of critical fabulation for a sociology of slavery in the Caribbean.

In the remainder of this introduction, we trace the history and changing connotations of the term "Global Sociology" and its complex connection to related sociological terminology (2), before pointing out why biographies are a suitable field for a global comparative sociology (3) and providing an overview of our three conceptual areas and the ways the various authors approached this challenge (4).

2. Global Sociology as a Problem-Space

The term "Global Sociology" has been debated for several decades, but its use has been inconsistent. It is not clear whether Global Sociology refers to a paradigm, a theory, a debate, a conceptual perspective, or a research theme. It also stands in an unclear and often ambivalent relationship with other terms that refer to a global frame, such as postcolonial sociology (Bhambra 2014), the sociology of globalization (Schuerkens 2003), and development sociology (Neubert 2003).

Based on a short historical discussion of its emergence and changing use, we will frame Global Sociology as a critical perspective on *doing sociology* on a global scale, considering the specificities and complexities of societies worldwide as well as global interrelations, and involving areas and sociologies that are only insufficiently represented in the discipline's mainstream. Thus, it is seen as a practical and critical approach to sociology at the same time.

2.1 The Genealogy of Global Sociology

In a recent intervention, Ivan Kislenko (2021) distinguishes two periods that frame the history of the term "Global Sociology." The first period was marked by concerns over the particularism and universalism of sociological theories and emerged in the context of the idea of "autonomous sociologies" or "indigenous sociologies" in the regions of the Global South (Akiwowo 1999; Alatas 2006). In this context, in 1991 Margaret Archer argued that sociological theories should avoid both uncritical universalism and relativizing particularism and that such positioning was especially warranted by the global integration of national societies as the rising theories of globalization suggested during

this period: “Instead of endorsing either unity or diversity, the task of international sociology is to specify how global mechanisms combine with regional circumstances, in non-uniform fashion, to shape new trajectories and novel configurations” (Archer 1991, 131).

During the subsequent period, according to Kislenko (2021), greater emphasis was placed on the political implications of Global Sociology. Michael Burawoy especially highlighted the unequal economic conditions that shaped sociological knowledge production and helped reproduce Northern dominance. Behbehanian and Burawoy (2011, 1) argued:

While Global Sociology may be a novel enterprise in the Global North, it might be said that sociologists in the South have always had to take a global perspective, insofar as they have long been acutely aware of how their societies are shaped by forces emanating from the North, whether through forms of violent subjugation or the more subtle forms of hegemony. Paradoxically, Northern approaches – with their universalizing mission – have nonetheless often dominated Southern sociology, if only for the reason that leading sociologists in the South have largely been trained in the North. There is a profound imbalance, therefore, between, on the one hand, the sociologies of the North backed up by enormous academic capital and, on the other hand, emergent, indigenous sociologies of the South, bereft of material and intellectual resources. For the most part, this imbalance has led to a struggle on the terrain of Northern sociology rather than a frontal assault against its universalizing tendencies.

Many of these discussions took place in the institutional context of the International Sociological Association, which emphasized the collaboration of sociologists worldwide (Burawoy, Chang, and Hsieh 2010; Patel 2010). Burawoy (2000) also inspired efforts to globalize research in the realm of methodology through his conceptualization of global ethnography and the extended case method. He emphasized that qualitative research must take the social embedding of its phenomena seriously in order to represent different parts of the world properly and effectively.

In parallel to this, discussions gravitated towards concerns with “Southern Theory” (Connell 2007). This term not only suggested that geographical location matters in knowledge production, raising questions about generality across the boundaries of both geographical and cultural areas. It also criticized the ongoing binary construction of the North as the production site of theory – the refined, grand, and more valued work of sociology – and the South as the source of data as the raw material of research. Clearly, this recent engagement with questions of “Southern Theory” makes explicit how closely the debate about Global Sociology and postcolonial approaches are entangled. Indeed, both postcolonial theory and Global Sociology seek to describe and dismantle the multiple distortions of dominant sociological theories and perspectives, especially their Eurocentrism and metrocentrism. They also aim to interrogate global disparities and their spatial articulations and

explain them as based on the legacies of colonialism and slavery. One main difference is, in our view, that postcolonial sociology places greater emphasis on a critical assessment of the sociological canon and the marginal role of non-Western societies and thinkers in it – more generally, that is, on a critical reassessment of the discipline's past (Bhambra 2007) rather than on research practice, on what we call *doing sociology*, itself.

2.2 Postcolonial Sociology and Global Sociology

To understand this differentiation, we need to briefly assess the critical reading of sociological history which different proponents of postcolonial approaches in sociology introduced. Born out of the spirit of the Enlightenment, sociology in its early days was first and foremost devoted to Western industrial societies, their structural features, historical development paths, and the social struggles that accompanied their emergence. Socio-historical developments in non-Western contexts were primarily a foil of contrast on the basis of which the characteristics of the West were elaborated.

This is particularly evident in the work of Max Weber. His comparative sociology of domination, economy, and religion in particular, guided by the method of the ideal-type, operated with the model of identifying all that is missing in societies outside the West. That is, the absence specifically of certain structural prerequisites, conditions, or carrier groups (*Trägergruppen*) for the rationalization of the economy or the monetary system, which were given in Europe but were absent in non-Western societies, thus became the central descriptive categories of the entire world of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Julian Go (2013, 32), citing Chua (2008, 1183), calls this the Orientalism of classical sociology and writes, “Marx, Weber, and Durkheim [...] effectually portrayed non-Western societies in their theories as homogenous essences, blanketing over ‘intergroup complexities and differences’ and transforming the non-West into a ‘generalized other.’” And further: “They likewise portrayed non-Western societies as static and backward, hence reserving dynamism, social creativity, energy, and enlightenment for European societies alone.”

Out of the totality of these elements – structural features, carrier groups, and developmental trajectories – sociology developed narratives of modernity, or modern society, as a scheme of observation that then enabled both sociologists and other members of society to make specific assessments of social events. Postcolonial perspectives have formulated three central critiques in response to this situation:

(1) The critique of Orientalism is directed against the stylization of the West as having unique human achievements that were possible only in the West, as well as the associated devaluations of non-Western societies.

(2) The criticism of Eurocentric universalism is directed primarily against the privileging of Western historical experiences in the formulation of grand

theories, and against the universalization of concepts, theories, and narratives derived from these particular experiences. As Shalini Randeria (1999) and others have shown, this stylization of the West was already inherent in the disciplinary fanning out of the study of social and cultural processes in the early 20th century into sociology, cultural anthropology, and oriental studies, with sociology as responsible for Western societies, anthropology as a subject for the study of scriptless cultures, and oriental studies devoted to non-Western advanced cultures.

(3) The critique of the notion of an autonomous developmental path of the West, in turn, is directed against ignorance of the ways in which colonized societies were involved in the enabling and constitution of Western modernity, combined with a critique of the lack of attention to, or almost complete absence of, the history of colonialism and slavery in the classical theories and narratives of modernity. This too is a matter of “deconstructing the West.”

Beyond this, however, postcolonial perspectives, with their critique of Western notions of rationality, are also directed against the privileging of specific forms of Western scientific knowledge production, including sociological methods and claims to objectivity (Mignolo 2009; Viveiros de Castro 1998). However, suspending the concept of rationality always leads to difficulties and inconsistencies in the formulation of an epistemological standpoint, as Julian Go (2016), for example, has shown. Hubert Knoblauch (2022) too has argued recently that the outright rejection of science as Western and of scientific inquiry as inseparable from Western culture and ideological domination leads into performative aporia. Knoblauch demonstrated how Walter Mignolo’s strategy of suspending Western scientific rationality and his demand of epistemic disobedience followed the standard conventions of the ancient and French philosophy in which he was trained (*ibid.*, 111).

Postcolonial analysis also inspires and interacts with more recent conceptualizations of Global Sociology (e.g., Connell 2013; Go and Lawson 2017; Hanafi 2020). Many of its representatives agree that theories of Western origin, which are mostly based on empirical work in Western societies alone, continue to hold a dominant position in international sociological discussions (Chakrabarty 2000; Comaroff and Comaroff 2012; Gutiérrez Rodríguez, Boată, and Costa 2010). In many cases, sociological theories formulate more or less explicitly claims of universality that either remain unquestioned or are justified via master narratives based on modernization theory (Keim 2011). Such claims of universality are problematic from the standpoint of Global Sociology because of the inadequate consideration of (a) research findings from non-Western societies and (b) the conceptual and theoretical orientations developed from these findings within non-Western sociological traditions.

For Global Sociology, the postcolonial critiques are thus, on the one hand, a compelling and necessary starting point. On the other hand, however, in their radicalized ontologizing variant they lead to a dead end if empirical

findings are always read as a function of specific (hegemonic) concepts, and if all efforts at overarching theory-building are interpreted as an expression of European (and Eurocentric) knowledge regimes that need to be provincialized. Questions about the similarity and difference of social structural features, including those due to spatial locations, are then hard to answer. While in our perception the “provincialization of Europe” (Chakrabarty 2000) must primarily aim at articulating and making visible other, non-Western historical experiences, it is precisely the renewed focus on Europe in central strands of the postcolonial debate (Bhambra 2009; Boatcă 2021) that leads away from this concern.

The central focus on European history in what Bhambra (2014) calls a “Post-colonial Global Sociology” indeed, seems to suggest that social life in the Global South only matters for sociological theory, or general sociology, inasmuch it is located at the receiving end of global commodity chains, the forces of extractivism and other power structures. This seems to suggest that in Global Sociology we would only need to pay attention to structural features in the Global South and the social practices that produce them if, and to the extent that, they are linked to and sustain structural features *elsewhere*, within the framework of global orders of different types (Burchardt 2022).

The articulation of non-Western historical experiences must take into account the “coloniality of power,” as not only Quijano (2000) but also the new sociology of colonialism and imperialism (Steinmetz 2014) have shown. But Global Sociology should certainly not subordinate all power relations and forms of domination to the concept of European colonialism. It must take into account the profound experiences with the history of European expansion in large parts of the world, but at the same time it must make conceptual space for other empirical examples of colonial constellations and forms of enslavement, such as the role of Japan in Asia or Arab slavery. The postcolonial focus on Europe in the sociological study of the history and present of the colonial paradoxically perpetuates the polar dichotomy of West/non-West that it was supposed to decenter. In our view, however, there can be no such thing as a “sociology of the Global South” in the strict sense, just as there can be no such thing as a sociology of Western society.

2.3 Global Sociology and the Pitfalls of Polarization

We suggest that a more empirically oriented Global Sociology can counter the dangers of these two polar tendencies of sociological theory. There are sufficient reasons why these two positions – the continued dominance of Western-universalist theories and the generalized suspicion against theory-building as per se particularistic and Eurocentric – are insufficient for understanding the contemporary world and its genesis.

Firstly, global societal changes have led to the claims of Western socio-political leadership being questioned, while Western models of society have lost some of their attractive appeal. In particular, the economic rise of China, India, and other so-called emerging economies points to serious changes in global power relations. These shifts have indeed been reflected in recent reformulations of the theory of modernity (Featherstone, Robertson, and Lash 1995; Gaonkar 2001; Therborn 2003; Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012). In much qualitative sociology, however, these had little resonance.

Secondly, globalization processes, in particular the expansion and intensification of global communication, have strengthened the interdependencies among nationstates and world regions and have also brought historical dependencies and reciprocal political and cultural influences to the fore. It is thus clear that the historical development paths of Western societies are also shaped by interdependencies with the non-Western world (Therborn 2003).

Third, these worldwide social changes are accompanied by processes of change in the academic environments surrounding sociology. For example, in historical scholarship and regional studies, the paradigm of *global and world history* (Bayly 2004; Osterhammel 2008) has led to important reevaluations of historical grand narratives, especially the notion of a self-sufficient, autonomous path to modernization in the West. At the same time, the rise of academic fields such as global studies and transregional studies points to the increasing recognition of transregional interconnections, which sociology cannot ignore.

We thus argue that conceptualizations of Global Sociology have the power to move beyond these binaries of universalist theory and the generalized suspicion against theory. Following constitutive contributions in this field (see Burawoy 2008; Cohen and Kennedy 2013; Go 2016; Hanafi 2020), we hold that Global Sociology integrates postcolonial critique, but at the same time advances towards sociological theory-building that is capable of widening its geographical scope.

On this basis, in this special issue we turn to the question of the possible thrusts of Global Sociology from a decidedly methodological perspective. We ask which approaches allow Global Sociology to overcome the unequal focus on the Global North in research practice, critically reflect on the inequalities of power in the production of knowledge (and methods), and reconstruct life-worlds in different contexts from a perspective that corresponds to the principle of openness (Hoffmann-Riem 1980) – the hallmark of qualitative inquiry – without having ready-made explanatory patterns at hand. At the same time, we adopt a transregional comparative perspective. We suggest that empirical and conceptual distinctions and contrasts are central elements of sociological work. It is not a matter of preventing them, but of placing them on a basis that is collaborative on the one hand and empirically saturated on the other, of

linking them with the comparative reconstruction of different lifeworlds and thereby reformulating them in a multiperspectival way.

3. Biographical Research and the Question of “Transcultural” Research

Concepts of individualization and biography have been perceived as closely linked to modernity; it was only the history of Western modernity, sociologists such as Joachim Matthes (1985) argued, that made it possible for individuals to see themselves as unitary and independent, to experience a consecutive biography and to narrate it. It is therefore not surprising that the use of these concepts in relation to people in other regions of the world – often perceived in the frame of cultures – was frequently questioned.

In anthropology particularly, a prominent line of argumentation refers to the discussion about different concepts of personhood. It was argued (especially until the 1980s) that in the West a rather ego-centered idea of personhood was dominant, whereas other regions of the world were characterized by a socio-centric idea of personhood, as articulated, for instance, in the African notion of *ubuntu*. The best known polarizing pair of terms in this debate was that of individual vs. dividual (Strathern 1988), which was supposed to express the fact that people in other cultural contexts were only constituted as existing in connection with others. The problem then identified – like the arguments in sociological debates – was that the existence of the individual was assumed to be a standard from which people in non-Western regions were regarded as deviating, the assumption being that they lacked the ability to feel themselves as individuals. The related question was which cultures shape people in such a way that they can see themselves as ego-centered persons. In the meantime, this anthropological discussion has moved away from such schematic West/Non-West thinking, gravitating towards the assumption that there is no purely geographically and/or culturally determined scheme of individual or dividual persons (Smith 2012). Nevertheless, especially in anthropological discussions, a certain uneasiness often arises when the added value of biographical research in the Global South is debated.

In the formative period of sociological biographical research itself, biographies were first and foremost perceived as an object bound to the experience of Western modernity (Hahn 1982; Kohli 1985). Though rarely made explicit in this early period, there was the question of whether or to what extent the study of biographies was transferable to other cultures that were considered as less modern. That is, in the case of biographical research, a limitation of the world was made, focusing on modern cultures in the West, where people have biographies, usually ignoring other regions outside the West. This

resonates with the formation of sociological theories on the basis of the experience of modernity, already mentioned.

We would like to discuss one influential early text by Joachim Matthes that in fact did reflect on biography in relation to non-Western contexts on the basis of concrete biographical research. Matthes (1985) critically examined the narrative-analytical and interactionist assumptions of biographical research in sociology against the background of research in Singapore. He argued that the way life stories are told is subject to cultural differences and that personal and chronological narration is not a universal basic form. To this end, he employed a polarization of West and non-West:

Particularly in the material of life-historical narratives, it can finally be (laboriously) seen that one cannot simply assume without question the “all-round competence” of the individual narrator, which can be assumed in Western cultures, for the narrative reproduction of the sequences of events that are linked to “his” life. (Matthes 1985, 315, our translation)

Moreover, according to Matthes, in other cultures the social situations within which (life history) narratives are possible differ, often, he argues, only being possible within the family. He writes that in non-Western contexts, for example,

the questioning behavior of the interviewer, which demands information and is pursued with (varying degrees of) persistence, can be just as strange (even repugnant) as a cultural pattern of communication outside the Western cultural area [Kulturkreis] as, conversely, the answering behavior of an interviewee who is willing and able to provide information. (ibid., our translation)

The idea of the interview situation as an intimate two-way conversation between researcher and biographer, argues Matthes, cannot be transferred from the West to other cultures, where it is not so easy for people to open up to strangers and where trust does not develop so quickly due to cultural barriers. Matthes recognized that his observations strongly emphasized cultural differences. He pointed out that there may be social groups or milieus, especially in urban contexts, for whom these distinctions do not apply so strongly because of increased intercultural exchange. But he insisted on the continuing relevance of this distinction, at least in rural areas. To early biographical researchers like Matthes, deviations from an expected form of narrative interview, from the narration of one’s life and from an intimate interaction between researcher and interviewee signalled that the narrative approach was not an easily applicable universal approach as some had hoped. Only later was a more open perspective on differing self-presentations and interview situations adopted in biographical research, weighing *different* hypotheses as to why interviews turn out differently.

In more recent periods, as in other sociological areas, postcolonial approaches have increasingly influenced the discussion in biographical

research about power relations in research and theoretical blind-spots. In biographical research, postcolonial concerns are chiefly about representation and othering in European contemporary societies. Critical questions were asked regarding the lack of representation of those who are discursively marginalized. It was emphasized that the analysis of life histories in biographical research carries the danger of exposing what are considered differences – for example, of migrants – and that the interviewees' own voices were not sufficiently taken up and valued (Lutz 2010; Tuijter and Lutz 2018; Gutiérrez Rodríguez 1999). These interventions were important for discussions of marginality involving the Global North. However, in replicating such discussions within postcolonial sociology, this important introspection and critical engagement with knowledge production has not been linked to a stronger conceptual emphasis on taking into account the biographies and social worlds of people outside Europe.

4. Biographical Research as a Perspective in Global Sociology

At the same time, over the past two decades, biographical research has become increasingly popular among sociologists working in the Global South. What they, including the contributors to this special issue, have in common is that they are not primarily concerned with the cultural differences of the respective societies under research, nor do they limit themselves to processes of othering and representation in the Global North. Rather, through the gateway of life histories and life stories, they address the complexity of societies in the Global South – both historically and in the present – and the ways they have been transformed through transnational and transregional connections. They do so by drawing on, amongst others, globalization theories, global history, postcolonial theories, Global Sociology, and transnational and transregional approaches, which emphasize connections and interconnectiveness over notions of relatively closed or bounded cultures.

Approaching biographies in such a way as social constructs, the contributors to this special issue see biographies as a starting point for social analysis on a global scale when they are not analyzed in isolation, but in their interrelation with socio-historical processes, and when no standardized format of narrative answer is expected. Asking for biographies is connected to the openness to different ways of engaging in biographical interviews and of answering when asked about life stories.

We argue that biographical research in sociology, in all the different forms employed in this special issue, has a range of characteristics which makes it a quintessential gateway to Global Sociology, taking up the postcolonial

criticism mentioned above and moving forward to translating it into productive research strategies. These are:

- 1) Taking the case level of the individual offers the opportunity to counter two key dangers of modern sociology: methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick-Schiller 2002) and groupism (Brubaker 2002). By following biographical trajectories and narratives, the self-evidently assumed central importance of nations and groups is tested and often questioned, reflecting the fact that affiliations and belonging do not remain static throughout the life course.
- 2) This quality allows for the inclusion of marginalized and outsider voices to a much greater extent; as often (but not exclusively) biographies are also the case level, those who fall in between commonly employed strategies to approach stratification are often important voices in biographical research. Taking seriously the interrelation of society(ies) and the individual, biographical research nevertheless opens a window to reflect on social transformation processes on a “macro” scale without falling into the trap of a static description of non-Western societies.
- 3) Biographical research has an inherently historical orientation. This implies the necessity to include *previous* relations of domination in the analysis, for example, precolonial and colonial constellations and their interrelations with family histories and biographies. Biographical research can thus address a concern which scholars committed to postcolonial theories have criticized: The fact that Western sociological theories bear the imprint of very particular historical trajectories towards modernity (Bhambra and Holmwood 2021). Biographical research is perhaps the only sociological approach that allows historical depth to be combined with an orientation towards the practices of everyday life. Although in general it does not produce knowledge on trans-epochal change, it does offer insights into transformations that span three to sometimes five generations (Becker 2021; Rosenthal and Worm 2018). Particularly in societies where archival documentation is wanting or incomplete, e.g., due to military conflicts, biographical research provides the basis for sociological theorizing that goes beyond the present temporal conjunctures.
- 4) The methodological approach, highlighting biography and family, refers to concepts that are assumed to have a high degree of transregional variation in their subject matter. Thus, the meaning of the nuclear family and extended family, kinship, clan, or local communities varies in different regional contexts. At the same time, however, sociological research cannot be limited to identifying regionally hegemonic family forms or “normal life courses.” Instead, we suggest studying the diversity and progressive differentiation of these concepts *within* regions, e.g., in different urban milieus. This also includes the transregional comparison of

changes with regard to these concepts. For sociological theory, research on biography and family opens up the possibility of reconstructing process structures and comparing them with the sociohistorical structures with which they are interwoven (Rosenthal and Bogner 2017).

On this basis, biographical research *on the one hand* provides a gateway to analyzing the difference in life trajectories as they are (to a certain extent) determined by the socio-historical position a biographer is in. Biographical research can thus be considered as a way to diversify research in societies in the Global South. Zooming in on different milieus, classes, and urban and rural contexts through the study of life histories means taking seriously variations within these contexts. In this respect, biographical researchers critically reflect on culturally relativistic conceptions insofar as the latter take sufficiently into account neither processes of internal differentiation within societies nor the interdependencies between societies and world regions. Such internal differentiations become especially apparent in the articles by Worm (in this issue) as well as Bahl and Berger (in this issue). Both contributions discuss the biographical trajectories of refugees, and both emphasize the hugely divergent ways in which social status and family context shape these trajectories and the extent to which people succeed in establishing new lives.

On the other hand, life stories open a window on different forms of self-presentation and framings of what actors consider their lives to be about. They show “how the people themselves are the actors and authors of their history and their stories” (Rosenthal and Bogner 2017, 9). This becomes visible in the way middle-class individuals in Cameroon authorize their own subject positions as subject-entrepreneurs in their confrontation with highly authoritarian state structures, as explored by Gérard Amougou (in this issue). It is also apparent in the ways in which Vil Nkomo – the main protagonist in the article by Nkomo and Nkomo – pursues his biographical trajectory through his publishing activities in apartheid South Africa. Likewise, such concerns are reflected in how Hiroshi Hasegawa, a gay artist and editor in Gaku Oshima’s contribution on HIV/AIDS-activism in Japan in the 1990s and 2000s, turns his biography into a poem, at the same time mourning his dead friends and celebrating life. There is yet another level of articulation here, when sociologists write and analyze the story of their own lives, as in the article by Michael Okyerefo. Pinpointing such forms of authorhood in relation to one’s own life, as Rosenthal and Bogner argued (*ibid.*), the methodological genre of the interpretation of autobiographies by the sociologists who authored them implies that subject, biographer, and analyst are different roles embodied within one and the same person.³

³ For a famous exploration of the pitfalls linked to autobiographies as a methodological genre, and to biographical research more generally, see Bourdieu (1988).

5. Three Ways of Engaging in Biographical Research for Global Sociology

In this special issue, our aim is to spell out the different ways in which biographical research can be recruited for the project of critically discussing the methodological challenges of Global Sociology. As mentioned above, we identify three specific ways of doing this: (1) Biographical research as social analysis in the Global South, testing the applicability and adaptability of Northern concepts or the need to discard them; (2) comparative and transregional biographical research; and (3) biographical research, local histories and postcolonial entanglements. While many of the articles build on more than one of these research strategies, each article highlights one of them in particularly salient ways. Therefore, we have organized the articles into three respective sections.

5.1 Biographical Research as Social Analysis in the Global South

The special issue opens with an article by *Gérard Amougou*, who explores the ways in which individuals constitute themselves as subjects on the margins of Cameroon as a totalitarian society. Amougou builds on various strands of Western sociological theory, especially on Michel Foucault's ideas of subjecthood as based on agency, critical self-relations, and the engagement with systems of domination from which they emerge. Through his engagement, Amougou seeks to free these theoretical concepts from the limitations that hail from their embeddedness in European history with a view to opening them up towards the analysis of African cases while simultaneously insisting on the universality of sociology's core terms. Amougou's particular contribution, the foremost achievement of his theoretical work, is the notion of the subject entrepreneur. By using this term, the author draws attention to the creative, agentive, and assertive aspects of the formation of the lives and identities of the middle-class Cameroonians he interviewed. These assertive aspects are played out in countless acts of micropolitical resistance against dominant forms of belonging, affiliation, and categorization. At the same time, these are people whose identity and form of subjecthood has been shaped profoundly by migration. As Amougou therefore argues, "The commitment of the subject-entrepreneur is structured by his ability to articulate the Western influence that has made it possible to see that another world is possible with the other intellectual figures who are influential in the Global South and have reinforced belief in the utopia of another humanity." (p. 45)

In the subsequent contribution, *Martín Di Marco* takes the sociological engagement with Northern concepts one step further by looking not only at how they influenced sociology in other parts of the world, but also at how these

concepts shape the role of narratives in institutions. The article focuses on the lives of South American criminals who are serving time in prison. The author is particularly interested in how psychological theories shape understandings of the role of offenders' biographies – especially their childhood and family upbringing – in leading them towards criminal careers. Di Marco demonstrates how offenders' narratives – the way they tell their life stories to prison staff and psychologists, to themselves, and to the sociologist who has come to interview him – change over time. The article offers a fantastic example of reflexive engagement with sociology's methodology, showing how the very practice of biographical interviewing and biographical storytelling shapes the inner world of the prison system and the lives of those inside it.

In his contribution, *Daniel Bultmann* uses the tools and ideas of Global Sociology to critically interrogate Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social fields and combines this critical appraisal with an analysis of the life stories and status transitions of members of Cambodia's military forces. Bultmann argues that Bourdieu's theory of social fields suffers from methodological nationalism in that his notion of a field lacks an understanding of how field boundaries may not coincide with national boundaries, and of the transnational connections that shape them. He also takes issue with the economistic understanding of social relations that seemingly undergird Bourdieu's notions of capital and social practice. He then demonstrates how a diachronic approach to life stories may help to foreground the temporal elements of social fields, thus leading to a more dynamic understanding of fields. He also highlights how the Cambodian data show that the strategies and practices of social actors in fields cannot be reduced to investments in status gains.

Taking the quintessential question at the centre of her chapter, namely whether the life-course paradigm can be taken up when studying research contexts outside the Global North from which the concept stems, *Swetlana Torno* approaches a central question for this special issue on Global Sociology and biographical research. Based on intense fieldwork among families in Tajikistan, she focuses on the position of older women and their role in shaping their children's life trajectories. She suggests that the concept of *linked lives* especially and that of the relations of *individual, family, and historical times* have an ongoing potential for analysing Tajiki families if they are thought through from this regional position: "When applying concepts in another region (or another social group), we need to reimagine them from the point of view of different lifeworlds and in light of the logics of local value systems, social structures, power hierarchies and ideas of the person, as well as economic, political, institutional, religious and demographic particularities" (p. 124-5). Taking the example of Gulbahor, an elderly Tajik woman, she analyses the way in which she is invested in the life decisions of her children regarding their education and marriage.

5.2 Biographical Research, Transregional Analysis, and Comparison

This section opens with the contribution “Subjects of God? Rethinking Religious Agency, Biography, and Masculinity from the Global South” by *Marian Burchardt* and *Johannes Becker*. They critically engage with concepts stemming from the sociology of religion such as “religious agency” and “lived religion” in their transregional, South-South comparative study of religious specialists. Introducing the biographies of Brother Michel, an Eastern Catholic monk in the Middle East, and Father Sumzi, a Pentecostal pastor from South Africa, they analyse the different ways in which agency is enabled and embedded in the diverging institutional and societal surroundings of these two religious specialists. They argue that previous approaches to religious agency neglected its inherently processual character, as well as its material and institutional constraints and its gendered nature. Crucially, for the realm of Global Sociology, they suggest moving beyond the hitherto binary discussion of religious agency either being relegated to the fulfilment of pious obligations or as a potentially resistant religious practice. They do this by moving towards a multi-dimensional and globally comparative concept which “requires a thorough societal reconstruction of concrete social phenomena in the respective geographical surroundings” (p. 153).

Similarly placing her research in two geographical locations, *Hannah Schilling* traces the lifeworlds of young people who work in precarious jobs in Berlin (Germany) and Abidjan (Ivory Coast). Consciously starting her comparison of airtime sellers and food-delivery riders from the perspective of inequalities and work settings in Abidjan, she turns around the often criticized process of applying Northern research results to Southern contexts. The study rests on recent approaches to comparative urbanism which emphasize including cities on a global scale in comparative projects. For the discussion of Global Sociology and biographical becoming, Schilling’s contribution brings in a novel way to bridge perceived contrastive notions of lifeworlds of South and North when a focus is placed, in both cities, on “mechanisms that can explain *how* work matters for reproducing inequalities and experiences of precarity for some of the young residents” (her emphasis) (p. 159).

Arne Worm engages with Global Sociology from the perspective of the sociology of migration and biographical research. Crucially, he highlights the importance of migration for global research: “Migration phenomena are a significant field of research for Global Sociology. Global Sociology is highly significant for migration research” (p. 179). However, Worm argues that this consideration needs a high level of reflexive engagement in order to recognize the social constructedness of migrant terminology and designation today, which is characterized by migration regimes, discourses, and social conflicts. Biographical research is a suitable approach for this, Worm argues, as

it allows “migrantisation” to be analysed “as a multilayered and complex process” (p. 180). To this end, the author introduces a typology of self-presentations of migrants, including an “*individualized type*” and a “*we group-oriented type*,” to better understand the self-positioning of people engaged in migration.

Joschka Philipps uses biographies to bridge the established boundaries of his research field. While focusing initially on post-truth politics in Sub-Saharan Africa, the analysis of biographies enables him to situate this phenomenon in a globalized world. Based on his long-term collaboration with N., a transnationally well-connected woman from Guinea, Philipps traces her life history, as well as the ambivalent ways N. talks about it. “Whose Uncertainties? Dealing with Multiple Meanings in a Transnational Biography” has as its central theme “uncertainty,” not only in the sense of unclear perspectives in life or insecure social environments (which he does not solely interpret as negative), but also in the qualitative research process. In this vein, Philipps critically engages in the way N.’s biography is jointly translated by N. and the researcher and used for his academic writings, though always hedged around by uncertainties and misunderstandings. After finally reflecting on the uncertainties of research when trespassing across disciplinary borders, he argues that uncertainty should be taken as normal, not exceptional, in the research process.

5.3 Biographical Research, Local Histories, and Postcolonial Entanglements

The contribution by *Eva Bahl* and *Yvonne Berger* connects the theme of local histories and historical entanglements with the previous section on transregional analysis. Entitled “Processes of South-South Migration in Their Historical Context: Biographical Case Studies from Brazil and China” the authors analyse the cases of a Syrian refugee who migrated to Brazil and a Chinese educational migrant. They argue that the very diverse contexts of these two cases actually contribute to identifying regional similarities and particularities. For instance, in this South-South comparison they see common denominators between the two cases, namely the interrelation of social and spatial mobility, negotiations of middle class-belonging, and transgenerational mobility. For Global Sociology, they argue that an understanding of South-South relations and the historical embedding of migration and mobility need to be connected with an understanding of the experiences and perspectives of the actors themselves.

Nkululeko Nkomo and *Sibusiso Nkomo* trace archives from a very personal position. In their contribution, they uncover their grandfather’s writings in South African newspapers in the 1930s, skilfully connecting their analysis of them with his biographical trajectory. Analysing his active engagement with

the growing policies of racist separation, Nkomo and Nkomo portray the confident voice of their grandfather in a situation in which the societal position of Black South Africans became further marginalized. The authors argue that their project contributes to the task of Global Sociology “by illustrating the value of an emotive lens for reading an author’s body of work as an archival source from which we can derive a biographical life story” (p. 287). It is this personal connection and sensitive analysis which characterizes their text, “Melancholy as Witness and Active Black Citizenry in the Writing of A.S. Vil-Nkomo.”

The theme of *Gaku Oshima’s* contribution is the AIDS activism of gay people living with HIV in Japan in the 1990s and 2000s. By employing different concepts of biography, on the one hand he traces the life histories and life stories of activists in the marginalized gay community whose members were often terrified by the disease, which was untreatable in this historical period. Specifically, he analyses the biography of the founder of a gay content magazine and his community activism. On the other hand, Oshima shows how biographies were used in gay publications to spread hope and empowerment in the community at this time. He also contributes to Global Sociology by introducing the concept of “societal envisioning,” which has been prominently discussed in Japanese sociology in the past 40 years, highlighting the engagement of people in moving forward and in changing the lives of marginalized and oppressed people for the better.

The specificity of *Michael Okyerefo’s* contribution, “The autobiographical Self as an Object for Sociological Enquiry,” is that he refers to his own life experiences in exploring the theoretical and conceptual possibilities which the turn to biographies brings with it for Global Sociology. Engaging in a conceptual discussion of the application of biography in the history of sociology, he first discusses how classic canonical authors define the role of biography by situating it in its constant interrelation with the social structure. Second, he skilfully connects these reflections with, on the one hand, his academic and non-academic life course, which was shaped by regional belonging, religion, literature, and international migration, and on the other hand his reflections on the histories of knowledge production on the African continent and the relevance of approaches to Global Sociology and Southern theory.

Finally, *Fabio Santos* engages in the topic of biographical becoming and Global Sociology from the perspective of decolonial strategies and a historical sociology focusing on power relations. He argues for a “radical re-thinking of sociological and archival theory, methodology and epistemology against prevailing Eurocentric assumptions and the active production of absences through the silencing of inconvenient histories” (p. 331). Recalling the foundation of modern societies on the exploitation of slaves forcibly taken from sub-Saharan Africa, he traces sociologists who come from slave backgrounds and who have worked on this theme, especially asking after the importance

of family and kinship. In addition, he introduces Saidhya Hartman's "critical fabulation" as a way of looking beyond established historical and archival records and invites us to include the analysis of contemporary art to enlarge our view on the histories and contemporary relevance of slavery.

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- An Introduction.

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