

# Chapter 14

## Teaching in Higher Education as a Vocation: Lessons and Insights From a Subaltern African Immigrant's Experience

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### ABSTRACT

*Quantitative method of research has been used to produce generalizations about the experience of immigrants that are applicable across diverse people, places, and times. While there are great insights and lessons that such studies have produced, ultimately, all immigrants must out of their relative obscurity critically reflect on their diverse life conditions and situations in order to construct nuanced meaning for their immigrant experience. Using the life history method of research in narrative form, this chapter highlights lessons and insights based on the life history and experience of the author migrating to the United States to pursue graduate studies and subsequently taking a fulltime faculty position. The lessons and insights will help the reader appreciate the challenges faced by a minority immigrant faculty from West Africa while highlighting some coping strategies that can help ensure the thriving and flourishing of such a faculty person as an immigrant.*

### INTRODUCTION

Human beings have a life that compels them to interact with others in the social world in a manner that involves relationships that are complex in nature. The complex nature of the relationships has prompted critical theorists to highlight the limits of using positivist (statistical) method of analysis to study and understand the ways and manner that humans interact with the social world and make meaning out of it. In particular, critical theorists are of the view that the statistical method of analysis is incapable of being reflexive, even though reflectivity is central to understanding complex human relationships and the social world (Gaskew, Lee-Johnson, & Winkle-Wagner, 2019). The statistical method of analysis

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also fails to capture the emotional dimensions of human life, which means that in its mode of analysis, there is no room for the sociology of emotions as a paradigm for knowing and understanding the social world. It is this situation that has led to the call for sociological imagination to inform how human social relationships are studied by focusing on the intersection of biography of people and the history of a society (Mills, 2001). In this respect, in studying the personal biographies of people, their personal troubles become a medium for engaging public issues because personal history is always embedded in societal history. It is the pursuit of this line of reasoning in social science research that has led to the emergence of the life history method of research and analysis. The pacesetters in this tradition of research were the works of Thomas and Znaniecki (2015) of the Chicago School of Sociology, where in order for them to explain the experience of migrants in Chicago, they felt that the statistical method of analysis would not provide a rich account of the immigrant experience because the method fails to provide personal flesh to the abstractly documented immigrant experience.

Life history method uses narrative as a strategy for documenting and highlighting the lived experience of a person in the form of the historical trajectory of sequence of events and circumstances that define the life of an individual or people (Maynes, Pierce, & Laslett, 2008; Lewis-Beck, Bryman, & Liao, 2003). Positivism in pursuit of quantification ignores and diminishes the epistemological significance of human subjectivity in understanding and interpreting the lived history of people. We have arrived at a point in the field of the social sciences where an explanation of human behavior that totally ignores human subjectivity cannot be considered to be adequate. It is this realization that brings to center stage the use of life history method, which I have chosen to use to inform the writing of this chapter (Mertova & Webster, 2020). Using the life history method, the reader will encounter how diverse stories can be ordered in a narrative way to provide a coherent and meaningful trajectory of life ((Goodson & Sikes, 2001). I used this method to interpret my life experience as a subaltern immigrant minority faculty member in the United States with the hope that this will provide inspiration and guidance to some immigrants who are also trying to make meaning of their immigrant experience as minority faculty in the higher education industry in the United States. Hopefully, the chapter will also help those who are not immigrants and not minority persons to appreciate some of the struggles and challenges that subaltern immigrants pursuing teaching in higher education as a vocation experience in their lives.

Through life history story telling in the form of narrative, I engaged my experience as a subaltern minority African immigrant. By reflecting deeply on my past, I interrogated myself to find out whether there is any inherent meaning built into my life experiences as a human being (Polkinghorne, 1988). I problematized whether the meaning I am constructing out of my life experience was only made possible by the very nature of the kinds of events that I have lived through and have selected from my past as part of my struggle to make and construct meaning for my life, especially given space constraint? ((Goodson & Gill, 2011). To be human, one cannot avoid being guided implicitly or explicitly by certain value orientations geared towards making meaning of one's life. This in turn leads to the selection of events and structuring them in a manner that creates plots in the life history narrative, which in turn articulate a particular kind of discourse about life. In my assessment, what I wrestled with in writing this chapter using the life history method is an existential challenge and struggle that every reflexive and reflective human being confronts in trying to make meaning out of his or her history and existence. Building on insights from the work of Hitchcock (2016)), my use of the life history method in narrative form has enabled me not only to deeply appreciate my life journey and experiences in the past, but also enabled me to confront my present life as a step towards how I reflexively strategize about approaching and con-

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