



## Truth or story or true story? The self in the interview situation

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### **Abstract**

*This study is a methodological inquiry into how individuals present themselves and picture their identity in the life-story interview situation and which are the settings which have a say in this presentation. In order to achieve my goal, I resort to life story interviews that I conducted with students coming from different parts of Romania to study in Bucharest. I pay close attention to how they order the events in their lives, what are the most common themes that appear in their discourse. I am particularly interested in scripts they employ and how the content of their narratives is a matter of co-authorship between the person telling the story and the one listening to it – interaction based on mutually understood knowledge of what the student experience means. In the light of the popularity narrative methods have in the social sciences, I address the problem of what kind of account social scientists actually obtain when conducting research based on narrative methods. I argue that this knowledge is situational and constructed in the interaction between narrator and interviewer.*

### **Keywords**

*Life story, narrative research, social scripts, co-authorship, biographical illusion*

### **On narratives**

One of the greatest merits of narrative research is that it allows access to the most personal aspects of the lives of participants in the inquiry insofar as they accept to let the researcher in. Probably the greatest merit of the narrative approach lies in the fact that it manages to encompass the individual in instances that go beyond the reach of their institutionalized selves (researchers get an account that goes further than knowledge on

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the individual embedded within the structures of social institutions – the name, institutional belonging, status within a social setting), without ignoring it: more than I, the person who works in a given place, more than I, the student at the Department of Sociology. Still, there is a lot of arrogance in playing the “expert” with other people’s lives and claiming to have the credentials to impose a verdict of truth or verisimilitude in the stories people tell about their lives. The aim of this study is to analyze social truth in the construction of identities in the interview situation. My analysis is based on life story interviews I conducted with students coming to university in Bucharest from province towns and cities in Romania.

What kind of information do researchers reach when basing their inquiries on narrative techniques? The answer to this question is contingent upon the researcher’s view on the participants in the research. For instance, in the interview situation, will I be looking at my interviewee as the vessel of the one true and accurate answer, or will I be seeing him/her as an active participant in the research (Holstein & Gubrium 1995). If I project an image of objectivity on the respondents, I am bound to consider myself – the researcher – as a possible factor of error and bias on the interviews. Therefore, I need to be very careful as to how I ask the questions, to present myself in a proper manner to avoid influencing the answers I receive. In the second version, the active interviewing approach, the interview results in the form of situational knowledge created in the interaction between the interviewee, the interviewer, and the situation framing the interview. A clarification is required here. Setting and situation refer to the positions of each of the participants at the interview both in the interview situation and outside of it (the interviewee and how he/she perceives his/her position within the interview and in the world; the same thing stands for the interviewer), how the interviewee presents his/her case dependent on his/her own agenda, on the perceived agenda of the researcher. At the same time, how the interviewer positions himself/herself in the interview situation depends on how he/she wants to be perceived, on the perception of how he/she is perceived, on his/her own agenda as well as on the perceived agenda of the interviewee. Also very important in the interaction is the physical setting in which the encounter takes place: it is determinant for the power relations and it gives a pretty important pulse to the interaction (Goffman 1964).

There is, of course another way of looking at the account of the life story interview, and that is to assume that the interviewee might be lying to me, and presenting an untruthful version of their life for reasons of desirability or maybe because they can’t remember how things actually happened. In this case, what is actually important is to understand why such account is provided and not to dismiss the account as unreliable (Mishler 1991).

The analytic lens I am going to use is set within the active interviewing perspective (Holstein & Gubrium 1995, Holstein & Gubrium 1997), a stance which holds that the interview situation is an active and interactive process during which meaning is created and conveyed both ways: from the interviewee to the interviewer and the other way around (Mishler 1991). The exchange of knowledge between agents (narrator and listener) is a reflection upon the shared character of the knowledge both interviewer and

interviewee partake as members of a group, a typified knowledge that cannot be misunderstood in the interaction (Schutz 1954: p. 7). Storytelling is an everyday practice that is enforced by a social bracketing of the resources (everyday life events and the way they are presented) encompassed in the narrative (Gubrium & Holstein 1998: 164). These narratives are rehearsals of life stories told in different situations, to different people and thus with different contents but the same value – truth (Jarvinen 2000: p. 385).

When it comes to the knowledge one has access to on one hand, and helps reconstructing on the other, by means of narrative methods, we might say there is a consensus within the scientific community. There is a widespread adherence to the constructionist perspective amongst academics conducting narrative research (Gubrium & Holstein 1998; Jarvinen 2000; Bruner 1991; Bruner 2004, Mishler 1991). Thus, interviews, life stories, life histories, diaries, autobiographies are theorized as more than just the individuals accounting for events that happened at a moment in time in their lives, being an act of interpretation (Bruner 1991; Bruner 2004; Bourdieu 1986; Holstein & Gubrium 1995; Pavlenko 2002). For Norman Denzin (1989, 1990), a narrative reflects the textual (and situational) representation of an individual's story in a given time and space, shaped by the cultural imperatives of its time. That is, the story is told in a frame conveying sense – told in the form of fragmented or unitary scripts which taken together or separately, make sense for the audience of the story. Thus, there are facts and there is facticity, that is, there are historical phenomena and narrated historical phenomena – an expression of individuals' account of their life, completely immersed in their own temporality, the present – through scripts, an account constructed over and over again through rehearsal and interaction.

Bourdieu (1986) pinpoints that biography and, even more, autobiography are mere biographical illusions. In his view, life presented in the form of a story is an artificial *post-hoc* and *ad-hoc* event at the same time, a logical exposition of chronologically ordered events in a manner meant to make sense both for the subject and for the object of the biography (both the interviewer and the interviewee). Thus, according to Bourdieu, the biographical endeavor pictures life as a coherent whole, a continuous path, a meaningful unidirectional trajectory. This is proven wrong by history, as the narrator finds meaningful links between disparate events of his/her life and becomes the ideologist of his/her own life course.

Jerome Bruner takes the argument one step further and claims that there is an entire process of narrative construction of reality (Bruner 1991), as narrative is a conventional form, which is passed on culturally and limited only by narrators' levels of mastery in accounting for their lives. When it comes to assessing the information derived from narrative research, it cannot be subject to empirical demonstration, but only to the principle of “narrative necessity”, not falsification and historical verification. Furthermore, autobiography should be viewed as “a set of procedures for life making” (Bruner 2004: p. 692); there is no life in itself, but arbitrary selections performed by memory in situationally defined settings.

In dealing with the relation between life history and the actual life-as-it-happens (translated in facts, not their account or interpretations), Paul Ricoeur (1991) advances

the concept of narrative identity. It refers to a dialogical relation between the history of one's life and the fiction (the interpretation) on the events in one's life. Thus, Ricoeur asserts that knowledge about the self is, in itself, an interpretation of events which finds in narration the mediator perfectly combining history and fiction, making life stories "*a fictive history or a historical fiction*". (Ricoeur 1991: p. 73) Moreover, the condition that the self needs to meet in order to make sense for the one narrating the life history is to be in accordance with the principle of permanence in time, that is, to respond to the recognizable features (*habits*) of the agent telling the story (Ricoeur 1992: p. 119).

### **The research**

The grounds of my article lay on life stories of students coming from provincial Romanian towns to study in Bucharest. I intend to see how a great number of changes are integrated by students in their own definition of who they are and what their life is like. Coming to study in Bucharest includes a great number of other shifts: a change of status, former high-school students are no longer teenagers, they are supposed to grow up, mature and take care of themselves. Other important implications are leaving their home towns and their families, their parents and siblings, coming to a new city with no or very few acquaintances, faced with the challenge of building a new life, at least for the time spent as students in Bucharest. All these transformations and many more need to be integrated so that they make sense into a pool of fears, beliefs, hopes, dreams and problems. The main interest of my research is to see how exactly life in Bucharest is experienced, how it is constructed and how it is presented: what is the main pillar that retrospectively supports students' image of their own lives.

I address here some of the problems I was confronted with while conducting the interviews. The first striking thing was how difficult it is to obtain a life story, since the narrator needs to be filling you in with his/her private emotions and thoughts and, to those who are more open, to their most intimate experiences. I have seen this for myself, as I found it very hard to recollect things that had not crossed my mind in years and to record very pleasant or really painful moments in my life.<sup>2</sup> Unproblematic as it might have been with the moments that I periodically recollect and reflect upon, it was very difficult to bring back to my mind all the details necessary to give an account of my entire life. This situation brought some very troubling questions to my attention: what will I do if I find people who are not used to telling their stories? What if I don't find people willing to tell me their stories or if I can't complete my research? A very important aspect when conducting interview-based research, as part of the relation between the researcher and the interviewee resides precisely is the process of attributing competence to the interlocutor (or to a type of interlocutor) and denying it to others. What makes certain people more appealing than others? What determines some researchers to show more

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<sup>2</sup> Due to some problems that I encountered during my first interview, I decided that I had to tell the story of my life, so that I can see what my respondents were going through. I didn't tell it to myself, I had a colleague take it to me. I am using this as a tool for getting a better understanding of what the students were going through at the moment of the interview, when they were recollecting their own lives and telling their own stories.

interest in certain categories than in others? In order to avoid silencing anyone I decided to grant equal narrative competence (Holstein & Gubrium 1995: p. 25) to all university students in Bucharest coming from another city and tried to select them depending on the field they studied, not on some personal idiosyncrasies regarding competence.<sup>3</sup> I did not pay attention to things such as: the size of the home town, whether they came from a rural or an urban area, the distance of the home town from Bucharest or the area they were studying. I did no checks regarding the religious background, family of the respondents, their own values and beliefs. I tried to exercise as little control as possible over these aspects, in order to avoid falling into my own categories before I even began the research (Garfinkel, Rawls 2002: p. 116; Bourdieu 1990: p. 26). I conducted nine interviews and they all took place in Bucharest, in different settings such as cafés, restaurants, and even my home – the dorm room. Although I did not intentionally look for it, the interviewees include students with very different experiences both with regard to their life in Bucharest and to that from before coming to Bucharest, belonging to different parts of the country: a Roma student, a student with abroad migration experience, a student that abandoned high-school and went back to finish it, a student with a chronic disease that has a great influence on the way she looks at her life, a student with Erasmus experience. Some of them are working, others are not; some of them live in a dorm, others have their own place or live in a rented apartment, some are drivers and car owners, while others bus or sub-way takers. Some of the students I already knew – I myself am such a student, leaving a small province town to come to study in Bucharest, and to those I didn't know, I presented myself as such in order to reduce the potential peculiarity of an interrogation situation with a stranger. Their fields of study are quite diverse: from the technical field to the medical science, all the way to humanities. All life story interviews were conducted in one session, with one exception, which required two meetings, as what this student was telling me troubled her a lot and she said she would prefer to stop but would be willing to meet me another day.<sup>4</sup> My attention was focused on life story as a framework, with particular emphasis on high-school, deciding to come to the university, to Bucharest and what their lives as students in the capital city meant for them.

When listening and, later on, analyzing the life stories of the students, I was interested, on the one side, in the actual events they recalled and more so, on the other, on the meaning they assigned to those events. I placed special focus on their behavior

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<sup>3</sup> There has been an ulterior motive for this. I thought that if I were to choose only students from fields which might have suggested great narrators (from the humanities especially), I was denying students from other fields maybe their natural gifts as narrators. Another underlying assumption that I had was that the organizational culture (the academic milieu in which my respondents shaped their identity as students) might have an impact on how the story is told and I wanted to hear diverse stories, so I could make sure I could hear them all.

<sup>4</sup> In analyzing the interviews, I will not be trying to build categories or to draw typologies of students. Of course there are traits that even the students that I interviewed share among them and there are countless others that have these features, but it would not be a surface that I could afford exploring for the purpose of this study – seeing how identity is negotiated and narrated in the interview situation.

and their actions, how they explained those things to themselves and how they considered these events shaped the lives they lived at the moment of presentation.<sup>5</sup>

### **Co-authorship<sup>6</sup>**

The instances which incite us to tell our life stories have multiplied over the years and we feel encouraged to do so. Church (through confession), schools, therapy, and family-planning – they all call for our stories, for a bit of our self. Now, how many of my interviewees have previously been acquainted with this? One of them told me, after I turned the recorder off, that he kept telling his story into his mind, but that nobody had listened very attentively to what he had to say. Moreover, every act of communication is an interactive moment between the participants in the encounter. There is interaction and there is exchange, and the way people tell their stories vary according to the situation they find themselves in. This means that the way people want their story to be perceived is different with each situation and it is highly dependent on the interlocutor and the way people want to be perceived, as well as on the way they think their interlocutors want to be seen (Mischler 1991).<sup>7</sup> More importantly, the life story doesn't actually mean that an individual will tell the entire story of his/her life. There are always events, persons, processes that are bound to be omitted from the story. The assumption I am working here is one of confidence. I don't mean that the interviewees gave me an exhaustive account but that the omissions were not meant to limit my gaze into their lives. These omissions were tools for building a self-coherent life story. The narrative self is an interactive construct resulted at the intersection of more than one entity and more than one encounter and whose only constraint is to remain consistent with itself in time and to make sense for the person narrating and for the one listening to the story. It is here that the problem of how the events presented in the life-story interview situation are selected and why those and not other events are told.

The way stories are narrated is situational; beyond the person of the interviewer there is also the position of the interviewer, the social presence that he/she entitles. If another Sociology MA student should be taking these interviews, the narrative he/she

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<sup>5</sup> Although I will be resorting to fragments from the interviews translated into English, I have to mention that the interviews were conducted in Romanian. The translation is mine and I will do my best to be loyal to the initial phrasing of the fragments.

<sup>6</sup> The idea of this subsection of my paper is that the narrative emergent in the interview situation is not an inventory of historical facts, but a construction resulted in the interaction between multiple processes, events and entities. This means that culture, history and socially accepted discourse is at play, in the interview situation, together with the interaction of the persons of the people involved in the interview (Holstein & Gubrium 1995; Knudsen 1990). However, in this section, I will only be emphasizing the co-authorship dimension in the interplay between interviewer and interviewee. -- I think that this is an important point, thus it might be added in the body of the text

<sup>7</sup> Altering life stories dependent on the entities people enter in interaction with doesn't mean that these stories differ in content, but there are nuances that people want to highlight in some situations and want to keep idle in others. Thus, each act of communication, each social encounter is an act of picturing an image of the self that people think is suitable in the situation they find themselves in, but also, and most importantly, that people think the other actors that they interact with find suitable for the situation.

were to listen to should have been quite similar to the one I did. Should the interviewer have been a person perceived as representing who knows what authority and claiming they were after the same things I was, there is a great chance the scripts that the students employed might have been quite different. Of course, this should not be surprising since conversation analysis studies have clearly shown that even conversations based on more or less standardized formats rarely lead to the same results and they are as situational as any other event of interaction. Take, for instance, the case of visits to the doctor in which patients have to make a compelling argument that they need a medical consult and that the symptoms they are experiencing are worth worrying about, constructing their case in a convincing mode so that the evaluation of their case by physicians is favorable and coincides with their own (Heritage & Maynard 2006). This is also the case with life stories, where people present their lives structured in the form of culturally, socially and historically available and sanctioned scripts – common sense ideologies – and make of these tokens of themselves to those who are listening. This is how life stories given at a moment in time appear: as instantiation of someone’s life course with events and interpretations on these events as paths to how individuals want to be known by the others.

I will proceed to analysis with the words of one of the interviewees, who said that telling her life story felt very good, because she actually got to understand things that had never crossed her mind.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, getting to the bottom of a life history lies beyond the endeavor of obtaining a stock of information to use later on with the purpose of building social types – theoretical constructs. Rather, this is in depth knowledge regarding the views of the individual staying in front of the researcher with respect to what their lives have been, what were the principles that guided them throughout their lives, principles that they might have just arrived to. On the other hand, it is also a process of construction on behalf of the interviewer who just has some questions to ask, but the interviewee won’t simply answer (Mishler 1991). One of the things that surprised me the most was how often I was put in the situation of asking a question which had not been clearly understood and still answered (Pasupathi et al 2009). One of the interviewees mentioned that his idea of university was nothing like what he found when he actually arrived there. Thus, I asked him to expand on this distinction, and he started to talk about the imaginary university and how this was actually an illusion, something that is not possible. After giving this answer, he just asked: “Or I don’t know, what do you want me to say, or how do you want me to say it?”<sup>9</sup> Helpful as these “divagations” are, they pose challenges to the interviewer. There is a whole debate of whether to let the interviewee take charge over the course of the discussion, or try to keep him/her on the path that the researcher is interested in (Tripp 1983). Although I tried to allow my interlocutors the freedom of telling their stories, I also

<sup>8</sup> “This is great! I feel really well now that I told you all these things, because there are a lot of things that I forgot about. I fell like I understand and I realize a lot of things that I’ve been missing until now. (A.D., MA student)

<sup>9</sup> “You just go to the university and you just hear the general issues, and you know that you want to build a plane, but it’s still you doing it in the end. I don’t know, what do you want me to say, how do you want me to say it?” (A.C., 4th year student, Politehnica University)

chose to follow my own line of questioning, so that I could see how they addressed different topics. In the same line were the questions addressing topics they had never thought of. Thus, inquietudes that were unanswered found a response in the line of questioning.<sup>10</sup>

What was very interesting during my interaction with the students were the emergent power relations within the interview situation. As I already mentioned, I knew some of the respondents, while others were complete strangers to me (I will call them first-date students from now on). It is in the case of interviews with the latter that I noticed the emergence of these power relations (Alex & Hammerstrom 2008). Each encounter is a process of positioning: picturing an image of the self, trying to convey a discourse meant to reflect this or that image of the self. I interpreted the interaction with my unknown interviewees at the beginning as a way of establishing power relations: is it the one asking the questions or the one answering them? One of the first position-establishing techniques that appeared was for them to refrain from giving me any detailed account unless I asked for it. "I could talk about this all day, but you don't have time for this. Why don't you ask me some questions instead?" (C.V., 1<sup>st</sup> year student). Another way was to make it really difficult for me to find out very important details, defining details of their way of being known to the world (Pasupathi et al 2009). This is what, for instance, another one of the "first-date" students did, hiding from me that his greatest dream is to write a book to make him famous.<sup>11</sup> Yet another technique of taking control in the interview situation was for the first-dates to try to establish the pace and rhythm at which questions were asked. Each time they thought they were done with answering one of my questions or telling about a chapter in their lives, they kept saying: "Next question" or "Go ahead" and so on.

Leading answers are another aspect that trouble social scientists when conducting interviews, partially addressed in the introduction: the interview as an active process of meaning construction, as the result of a specific interaction between my interviewees and myself. I might have led them in the sense that some of the words and phrases I employed have suggested what I expected to hear and, this led to presenting student life according to this. I asked one of the students about the "myths and legends" in the department and her story was dominated by unveiling informal practices in her department. From that point on, all my efforts of guiding the discussion on other paths have been futile. In this sense, there is co-authorship, as how I presented myself and my own interests to my interlocutors led them to meet what they thought were my expectations.<sup>12</sup>

Conducting life story interviews put me in the position of thinking about the narrative resulting in the interaction. This was not an inventory of facts and events told more or less following a temporal logic. Rather, this was a creation of the interplay between two people who found themselves in a setting, each of them trying to convey

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<sup>10</sup> "See, I never thought that her [her mother] could be blamed for that. But now that I come to think of it, I realize this is how things are." (A.D. MA Student)

<sup>11</sup> "Why didn't you tell me anything about this? Well, because you didn't ask me to!" (A.C. 4<sup>th</sup> year student)

<sup>12</sup> "Is this example any good, or should I think of something else?" (O.O., 5<sup>th</sup> year student)

toward his/her listener a comprehensible, meaningful message that would result in a definition of how they want to be seen and how they want their story to be heard.

### **Social scripts: explaining the self<sup>13</sup>**

Life stories are accounts of our lives up to the moment we tell them and incorporate all the events we find relevant to tell in a given situation. Still, not all events are accounted for, and this selection made more or less consciously bears the imprint of the setting the story is told in. It is all the more difficult when people are not used to telling their stories, not to themselves and especially not to others. For this, when laying the entire story of their lives, people might be surprised what the result is. If I equate my own self with my life's story, I can state that my own sincere self from now is really different from what it used to be years ago: my childhood, my high school years, my first years as a student. Although I don't have the possibility of assessing these changes for the interviewees, I can surely tell that accounts change and they are not necessarily consequences of desirability, but result in another form of interaction, a precise encounter: two students sharing an experience up to a point. It has been very difficult to take a step down from my own student shoes and achieve my goal. This was to manage and take the content of the interviews as pieces in a discursive puzzle that put together composed the identity of the students – *vocabularies of students' motives*, using Wright Mills' (1940) concept. Had I not been so close to the experience of being a student, probably a lot of the things that I missed in my analysis might have been depicted.

This section is concerned with bits of student narratives – the *scripts* students tap on each time they talk about their experience as students. Scripts are meaningful narratives that define students' stories and integrate them into a wider discourse covering all the aspects of coming to study to another city (Vanclay & Enticott 2011). Social scripts are cognitive tool individuals resort to in different social situations, they are common sense ideologies whose meaning is intelligible for all the participants to a setting (St Clair *et al* 2005). They were useful in understanding the resemblance between students' complaints – of those who had already been enrolled in higher education for five years to those with a student experience of less than a few months. As with most concepts referring to shared meaning attributed to experiences and social processes, social scripts can only be assessed by learning about everyday practices and accounts on these practices.

When asked to talk about what the university meant for him, and the impact it had on his life, one of my interviewees (C.V., 1<sup>st</sup> year student at the Politehnica University)

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<sup>13</sup> The idea of scripts relies on the existence of recurrent themes within a discourse. My familiarity with this topic is not only given by my own experience as a student (which is, in this case, rather a shortcoming than an advantage in grasping the scripts), but also by my participation as a co-author on a research on students' life style and approach to higher education and the Romanian system of education that took place in the summer of 2010. This research allowed me to have an insight on how the students saw their condition, their situation and on their views on their experience of students: what leaving home meant, how they managed to handle the financial situation and how they viewed the university as a gate toward the future.

started a plea for the importance of education in a person's life. Before going into more detail with his account, I have to give some more information on this particular student, a first-date student. He comes from a mixed family (his father is Roma) and became involved in development projects dedicated to Roma issues even before finishing high school.<sup>14</sup> He spoke with great pride of his Roma background and the dominant figure in shaping his success was his father, his mother being mentioned only as a gentle being.<sup>15</sup> I considered it important mentioning him being a Roma activist because the impression he seemed to want to leave on the story of his life was that he had been constantly trying to combat all prejudices about the Roma community. When I asked C.V. to tell me about the university and what it meant to him, he started his account by saying that he never went to kindergarten and that this was a shortcoming as he realized that he had lived a very isolated infancy and had had no contact with society.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, he said that he was very happy when he went to school for the first time, as it was the only way of "breaking the circle of poverty, through education." Furthermore, he insisted on how his experience in school was very difficult at first, but he managed to integrate there and after a short while he became one of the favorite students of his teachers in primary and secondary school.<sup>17</sup> His account taps on scripts with no ordinary characters: the people highlighted in his accounts are all special: a special teacher, an extraordinary professor, a great man. There is an individualization of all the exceptional figures that impacted his life and gave it a turn for the best – the opportunity of entering in contact with "society" and a chance to make a difference in the community, a discourse that is not present in the case of any other student, but is salient in his, suggesting that access to education is not as unproblematic for Roma children as it is for non-Roma.<sup>18</sup> The image he was conveying was that of a young person who has been confronted with a lot of hardship but still managed to succeed because an opportunity came his way and now he wants to return this opportunity back to the community.<sup>19</sup>

Each life story is filled with encoded and long-lived knowledge of what life has been for them. To put this in just a few words: the student leaves home, comes to Bucharest, a

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<sup>14</sup> This is a bit surprising and worth mentioning because none of my other interviewees mentioned their ethnicity or made any comments on the matter.

<sup>15</sup> "My mother has always been this gentle person, but she is a homemaker, with a modest intellectual level. My relationship with her is really good."

<sup>16</sup> The way he thinks of society is very interesting, because he seems to be looking at people from outside his "restricted circle", which means members of his family and people close to them.

<sup>17</sup> "I remember having real problems the first month, I mean my teacher would complain that I am not respectful, that I kept messing up my notebooks and so on. There were also my colleagues, who had the advantage that they knew each other from kindergarten. I only had one good friend, my desk mate. The rest of them were really mean. [...] I met students that had teachers as parents, but were not model students. But I always felt embarrassed when a teacher went to my father and told him: look, your son didn't come prepared to class, he got a low grade. This really motivated me, every little thing mattered."

<sup>18</sup> "The alternative was for me to finish high-school, to find a low-paying job in my hometown and to be satisfied at this level.."

<sup>19</sup> He has a very interesting position: when he was a child he had very little contact with "**society**", meaning that he had little contact with a world that he perceived as exterior, that was not actually verbalized in the discussion, but that he feels he found when getting to school and the "**community**" to which he wants to have the chance to give back, to make a mince.

large city with many people. Students find it hard at first to cope (it is harder for those who don't have any family or friends at the beginning), but get used to it in time (most of them do). The Whys and the Hows of coming to university, leaving their hometown and getting to call another place home (if they arrive to the point when they can call it that) belong to "performances that they have practiced many times before with others" (Jarvinen 2000: p. 384). When asked why he chose this university, one of the respondents, a senior student, said: "again with this question? I thought I got rid of it when the first year ended". In order to escape this "criticism" from the students, for the discussion that followed I asked them whether they had been asked about the reasons why they made their choices, and what answers they provided. One of the students said she simply had to find an acceptable answer for the situation, because telling the professors that it was easier for her to come here because this is where most of her friends came was unacceptable.<sup>20</sup>

This particular setting – the class, invited a particular account. Not a false account, but one that goes in this setting: a negotiation between the one asking the questions and the one answering. Aside from defining an asymmetrical relation, it is a statement of how vocabularies of motive come in play: institutionally different situations call for different vocabularies of motive (Wright Mills 1940: p. 906), as "the situation in which individuals find themselves translates the question of why into a how that is answerable in terms of a situation and its typical vocabulary of motives, those which conventionally accompany that type-situation and function as cues and justifications for normative actions in it". The situation in which a story is told has a great say on what it is like. Basically, once a script is institutionalized (when a precise group of transmitters convey similar content to a precise group of receivers and is accepted as legitimate – as is the case of the aforementioned student-professor interaction), we can say that the story is true regardless of its relation to historical facts. It is so because it confirms social order within a setting and it allows interaction by acknowledging that all agents are legitimate agents, as their stories can circulate, although admitted to be false by all participants in the encounter (Goffman 1983: 6). If it is accepted that a sincere life story as told see it at a given moment in time is the reflection of people's view on themselves in a precise situation, then it needs to be taken at face value the idea that the way people's perspective on past events in life changes reflects the way people change.

The life story, more than a chain of events meaningfully ordered, depicts a reflection on and of the self: experiences narrated through the lens of personality traits. Focusing not so much on the events per se, but on students' traits and with reference to events mostly meant to help me understand what they mean, I did not emphasize the historical logic of events as they happened; the temporal aspect is removed from the story and history in itself is only present through the scripts: time-structured narrative

<sup>20</sup> "It was pretty hard. It was my first year and everyone started asking questions: why did we come, why here and not anywhere else? How was I supposed to know? I mean, I did choose to come here, but how could I tell my professors I made this choice because most of my friends came to Bucharest? So I started saying about the prestige of the university and that it was the oldest in the country, the best known in the field and so on. They acted like they didn't know that we had no idea what was happening." (O.O., 5<sup>th</sup> year student)

frameworks which provide the skeleton for the students of this time to place their stories on. Thus, the self is constructed and explained through the personal interpretation of timed scripts: the glory of the past and the decadent present, intergenerational conflict, excellence obtained by individual effort, while through institutional means only mediocrity can be achieved, or university graduation seen as a formality, obtaining the credentials for accessing a well-paying job (which can be also considered a contemporary script<sup>21</sup>). The self is explained and embraced by the mere exposition of events, a reach to the one listening to the stories and each story needs to make sense. And as long as the account makes sense for both the narrator and listener, there is certainty that truth is being told.<sup>22</sup>

Students rely on existent narrative frameworks, and fill them with personal details and nuances which, in analysis, come to support my claim that the stories heard fall into a pattern: even when presenting an individual solution to an everlasting problem, it is presented as if it obviously meets the consensus of the “wide public.” The most divergent facts and evaluations are thus presented as self-evident. For instance, what for one of the students seemed to be an exit from a situation generally reported as unwanted, meant the reproduction of why the Romanian education system could never be saved for another one. The story goes like this: one of the interviewees felt that the university was a different experience for him than for other students (who were, from his perspective, doomed to mediocrity since higher education is not interested in generating performance) because his father was a professor in that university and could help him access the resources that were harder to access for the other students there. In his words, this is not nepotism, but creating better opportunities. Another student who complained about the vagaries of the university system said that there was no interest whatsoever in students’ needs and that only those that had a special relation with professors, relations that were rarely based on students’ merit and almost always on other grounds, had access to these resources. Available events are thus interpreted according to particular biographies. The self is explained, justified and rationalized in relation to the person listening, who, one might be sure (as was the case here), knows exactly what one is talking about. Self-constructing accounts are broken into pieces: “this is where I stand because this is the situation” and rebuilt in front of the audience. Few are the situations which cannot be explained and each “Why” question is followed by an expert “Because”. There is no surrender to the “I don’t know”, as students are the experts of their own lives.

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<sup>21</sup> The literature on the Y Generation and what is characteristic to its members is very informative on this topic and especially on the scripts of the students, but it is not the aim of this paper to approach this subject.

<sup>22</sup> “I had a practical reason in mind when I decided to come to the university. I knew it would be easy for me to find a job in the field and to solve all my financial problems and after that, I knew I could focus on other stuff that I want to do in this time. It’s a formality, basically.” (A.C., 4th year student).

### Story as order: life story as ordered sequence of events

Asking somebody to recall the story of their entire life requires a great effort: first, the mnemonic act and second, the effort of telling these facts, conveying them in a way that can make sense for the person listening. What is more important is how the process of narrating reflects on the narrator. Telling the story of one's life means putting order in the events in one's life, presenting them in an orderly fashion, so as to make sense of them and of oneself. The way stories are told defines the narrator not only toward the others, but it also feeds into hi/her own image of his/herself. What is the logic according to which this process – the constant monitoring of how the defining acts of identities are told to those who provoke – takes place? My basic assumption is that there is no truth or lies, but only the self, put in different situations and subjected to the-taken-for-grantedness of what both I and my interviewees had in common: coming from another town to study in the largest Romanian city. There is no “objective truth” which is to be found out as result of my interviews, but only the result of the interaction I had been engaged in with “my” students. Thus, I claim that the interviewees are not exposing their lives as they were, but interpreting their life experiences according to the already existing social scripts: a personal interpretation of a particular story, embedded in one's own life events (Bruner 1991: p. 7).<sup>23</sup> It is the story of the student leaving home, stepping away from his/her family and becoming acquainted to and calling home a whole different place. This is the script on which the interviewees and I interacted in the construction of their narrated self as they told their lives' stories – a form of typified knowledge, relevant and understandable both for myself and each of the participants, accepted as shared meaning and filled with personal, yet socially retrievable details (Schutz 1954: 10).<sup>24</sup>

My interviewees were asked to tell me their life-story so that I could understand it, so that I could get to know them through their story. The challenge that I put them through was to give me an accurate picture of their life in a way that would make sense to me. This is how a long journey began. It was here that the biographical effort started: lives were split into chapters, mostly infancy, teen years and student years. Sometimes, as I emphasized that I was especially interested in finding out how they decided to come to university, life was split into the period prior to kindergarten, kindergarten, primary and secondary school, high-school and university. Then each chapter was detailed: events, facts, important people, turning points, *identity defining events* (Pasupathi et al 2009) or *epiphanies* (Denzin 1989) were put on the table and identities were shuffled under the overwhelming power of the recorder. The recorder turned out to be a very important piece of the puzzle, as the interviewees cared about whether they could be heard or not. When they felt there was too much noise, they leaned in order to be closer and to be heard. Of course, this is easily explainable since most of the places we were in were cafes and restaurants, where there was a lot of music and noise. I preferred having

<sup>23</sup> Which I will use with the sense of shared knowledge on what being a student that left home means, a socially constructed framework for an individual plot.

<sup>24</sup> “typical constructs have to be formed in accordance with the system of relevances accepted from the anonymous unified point of view of the ingroup.” (Schutz 1953: p. 10)

the discussions in public places and especially in cafes precisely because these are places that invite to telling stories and engaging into casual talks about life. Had they been only in isolated places the interaction might have been a bit too tense, might have lost its casual character (although this might be a little ironic, as it is not everyday life activity for people to talk about the entire story of their lives).

The metaphor that I hold to be the closest to what life stories are is Bourdieu's *biographical illusion* (1986), following the pattern of a chronological ordering of life events and important persons in somebody's life. Thus, when asked to talk about chapters in their lives, these chapters are always chronologically ordered, regardless of the criteria they are subordinate to: it doesn't matter if they follow the logic of formal education years, life stages (infancy, teen years, etc.) or that of life changing people or events. So life is pictured as a trajectory, as a continuous path, and the mechanisms that make it a coherent story convert the narrator into *the ideologist of his own life* (Bourdieu 1986). Thus, the interviewees bring sense and logic within the events in their lives and also create motives for why they have proceeded in certain fashion or for why things happen the way they do. Therefore, scripts are put into practice, values are converted into life principles, scapegoats are found and explanations are always given.

E.P., second year student is very keen on the idea of social justice and social equality, while really tormented by the thought that rules are not seen as absolute standards, being always subject to negotiation and change.<sup>25</sup> She speaks of herself as someone who is very discontent about the issue of social injustice and that gender inequalities are what annoy her the most. What is very interesting resides in the linguistic mechanisms she employs in proving her case. She emphasizes this activist quality of hers to have been with her the entire life and that she is bound to stick to it forever: "feminism and atheism and political issues, this is what I was always passionate in fighting for." She is representing herself as a radical feminist and as a militant for the non-intervention of the church in the private sphere. Moreover, she is working as a consultant for an NGO that protects LGBT rights and this aspect is granted a very important place in defining her in her life-story.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, throughout the endeavor of narrating the events in our lives and that of reflecting upon them, people are put in the situation of becoming the ideologists of their own lives.

## Conclusions

The quest I put myself to through this study has been manifold: firstly, I tried to see how students coming to Bucharest from other towns and cities structured their discourse on the story of their lives. Secondly, I wanted to find out how they put all the pieces together in a coherent unity and gave meaning to their life narrative, at first for themselves and then for the person listening to this story. The stories were constructed

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<sup>25</sup> "What I didn't like at the university was that rules were set during the game, that some of the professors weren't serious enough, that one thing was what they said and a very different one what they did. Also, the rules were not the same for everybody."

<sup>26</sup> "Before I was really worried that I couldn't lose weight, but now I realize that you aren't happier if you are twenty kilos thinner. Now I say: I am different and I pity those who can't see that."

in the interview situation and the students became ideologists of their own lives: they know now what they've always been like, what they always believed in, this has been with them throughout their entire life. What I found out through my research was that through the act of narrating their lives, students asserted principles and virtues or defects that have characterized them all their lives and are bound to stick with them all their lives, the only principle to which they were pressured to be faithful to throughout the discussions being that of self-consistency. Discourse on life before and at the university is transformed, with all the changes it involves: how they arrived at choosing a university over all the others, what it meant for them to be studying in Bucharest not in another Romanian city. The discursive scripts they acted upon when they presented themselves as students and as persons (taking into consideration the fact that I presented myself as a student coming to study to Bucharest from the province) relied on common sense philosophies of what student life in Romania is like – the problems and the good sides of the system, a form of structural nostalgia – new generations are worse than old ones, before it used to be better. What resulted was a complex narrative, the act of co-authorship between narrator and interviewer, an ordered story as it needed to make sense for the one soliciting it and based on familiar ideologies turned to matter of factness that both participants to the interview understood perfectly and knew what they implied. It is still open for discussion whether the fact of me being also a student coming from a province town to study to Bucharest was a strong point or a drawback in my analysis of the interviews. On the one hand, this surely helped me understand better the narrative logic the students were conveying my way. On the other hand, me being so close to this experience could have actually prevented me from seeing a lot because I am also taking them for granted and not viewing them as units in a discourse.

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