

NARRATIVES ON THE CHOICE OF STUDIES AS CULTURAL STORIES

ON THE EXAMPLE OF INTERVIEWS WITH THE ALUMNI OF THE WARSAW SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS

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In this article, I am going to present some results of the study titled *Management Theory between Science and Practice: The First Professional Experiences of the Graduates of the Warsaw School of Economics*.¹ The text will begin with a discussion of important issues related to the methodology of the research mentioned above, then I will present the preliminary results of the analysis of the empirical material and describe narrative models—patterns of stories about choosing the studies that emerged from the content of the interviews conducted by me.

Research Methodology

In my doctoral dissertation, I tackle the problem of the extent to which the training in the area of management offered by the Warsaw School of Economics (SGH, commonly referred to as *esgielha* due to the pronunciation of the abbreviation) can be put into use in the professional practice of its graduates. The analyzed material consists of narrative biographical

¹ This is a title of a research project carried out in the School of Social Sciences of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw, and also the subject of my doctoral thesis prepared under the supervision of professor Barbara Czarniawska (University of Gothenburg) and professor Andrzej Rychard (Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, the Polish Academy of Sciences).

interviews with the students of the last year of studies at the School and also with its graduates. The interviewees were chosen via the snowballing technique (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). In the first place, I turned to the people that I know from studies at the School. The business environment is fairly tight and therefore difficult to test. That is why I decided to take advantage of contacts gained in the social space already during my own studies. Before each interview, I explained that I would like the interlocutors to tell me what they did during their studies and what was their career path like after completing the education at SGH until the present moment. The structure of the interviews was organized according to four general questions: 'Why did you choose SGH?' 'What did you do during the studies to learn how to manage and to prepare for professional life?' 'What do you do now?' and 'What elements of the education acquired at the studies are useful to you in management or in business and where do you get the knowledge from now?' The framework of interviews designated by the four questions was supplemented with additional questions. Open-ended questions, when used during the interview, allow for disclosure of unexpected responses, although, as noted by David Silverman (2006, p. 125), even unstructured interviews are a form of social control. My intention, however, was to avoid forcing the interviewees to provide answers characterized by 'suggested' form and content. The collected material was analyzed according to the grounded theory method (Charmaz, 2006).

The modest volume of the text presented here allows for the presentation of the methodological assumptions only in the outline, nevertheless I have to make here a significant remark. In the Polish sociological tradition, it has been customary to relate the term 'biographical narrative interview' to the methodology developed by Fritz Schütze in the 1980s (when the most important works of the German researcher were published). As is widely known, Schütze proposed a compact design of a study on life-stories, which consists in "a specific technique of gathering the material, as a result of which we obtain the so-called life narrative and the method of analysis based on coherent theoretical assumptions" (Kazmierska, 1996, p. 35). On the other hand, researchers whose considerations were the key inspiration for me developed different tools of conducting narrative biographical research (cf. Linde, 1993; 2001; 2009; Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001; Czarniawska, 2004; Bamberg, 2008).

There are some fundamental differences between these approaches (for the purpose of my article, I propose to refer to them as 'the bio-narrativist' approach and 'the narrativist' approach). In both types of studies, the role of the researcher is determined in a different manner, and the ways of analyzing the registered narratives are also different. In 'bio-narrativist'

studies, conducted following the method proposed by Schütze, the aim of the interview is to get the story depicting the whole life, whereas the researchers whose works I refer to focus on examining “small stories” (cf. Bamberg, 2008; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008). Except for the situation when the overall narrative is forced by the fact of participating in the research, one usually does not present the entire history of life. On the other hand, we create and present “small stories” every day when we are asked: ‘How was your day?’ ‘What happened today at work?’ ‘What are you doing now?’ ‘How was your holiday?’ In response to these and similar questions we produce stories that are not only the carriers of individual and social meanings, but also, and perhaps primarily, *interpersonal spaces in which meaning is created* (Bamberg, 2008, p. 184). The narrativists focus on studying such stories. The differences between the above-distinguished approaches also reveal at the level of analytical procedures. Bio-narrativists use a relatively codified procedure (Prawda, 1989; Kaźmierska, 1996), while narrativists link their method to the grounded theory (especially in its constructivist variant) and use the concepts of narratology (I mean here the so-called second generation of narratological research (cf. Nash, 1990, p. xiii; Owczarek, 2001, p. 15)).

Small Stories: Why SGH?

I opened each conversation with the question concerning the reason why my interlocutors chose SGH. Some responded to it in a few sentences, while others developed a longer story. Answering this question often involved defining who they are and what their purpose in life is. The justification of the choice of studies is a story repeated many times, we could even say—‘rehearsed.’ ‘Sensitizing’ to some schemes of the story probably begins already in the circle of friends in high school, when a choice of what one will do after graduation becomes one of the topics discussed most often. The question of why it is worth studying at *this* university, at *this* faculty, is also repeated in everyday conversations at the beginning of the studies. Talking about why we got *here* is a way to ‘break the ice’ among the first-year students. In the course of subsequent conversations, often conducted within a peer group, the story is maturing and is subject to social development. Over the years, the frequency with which one goes back to these issues generally declines, although sometimes the story needs to be ‘refreshed,’ for example for a job interview. That is probably why, despite the elapse of years, my interviewees presented the story ‘about the beginning’ without much difficulty, and similar themes came up repetitively in their narratives.

Free Nodes and Grouping the Nodes

All interviews were transcribed by me and coded on the ongoing basis. I used primarily the NVIVO program, but I also printed individual interviews or sets of interviews and coded them manually, on paper, to have a better understanding of the emerging categories. I started coding the stories using the free nodes (unordered codes, assigned to separate portions of the gathered material), and then grouped them under more general categories and created node trees. The program used for this purpose allows for a very efficient arrangement of the material, and this process is also a kind of interpretive work. I compared excerpts of interviews coded in the same way and worked on the saturation of the selected categories.

Most of the free nodes, used to code the interviews tackling the reasons for choosing a university, were grouped according to three categories: (i) *environmental factors* (e.g. encouragement from family members; a graduate of the Warsaw School of Economics in the family; “my colleagues also decided to sit up for the exams to this university”); (ii) *ideas about studying at the Warsaw School of Economics* (e.g. prestige; “this school will teach me”; the possibility of shaping the individual learning path; a high level of teaching foreign languages), and finally (iii) *interests and abilities* (e.g. “I wanted to be a businessman”; “I have a scientific mind”). Other nodes were covered by two additional categories that I titled ‘*plan B*’ (consideration of alternative educational pathways, such as economical studies at another university, polytechnic) and *problematic issues* (which will be discussed further on). Applying such devices made it possible to isolate the factors affecting most strongly—as it seems—the decision on the selection of future university. These included, among other things, the following criteria: the prestige of the facility, a wide range of educational opportunities offered by it, and practical orientation of the studies. A significant impact on the undertaken decisions was also exerted by ‘counselors’—the interviewees signaled the influence of their peers (“my classmates also chose this school”), encouragement from parents and/or older siblings who also studied at the School. Many interlocutors emphasized the role of personal attributes or lack thereof (‘innate’ entrepreneurship; “I did not know what I wanted”); and the interest related to the sphere of economics and economy.

The method of analyzing the material, the result of which is ‘specific’ data in the form of a table of factors, certainly has many advocates and similar results could be fully satisfactory for many researchers. This way, characteristic for the survey method, of describing the decision-making process of young people and explaining what determines the popularity of certain educational institutions, has strongly dominated evaluation

studies or research of the fate of graduates. My doubts regarded the fact whether this is all that can be said on the basis of the interviews. I think that, with high probability, we can assume that a similar set of factors (perhaps with the exception of the option to shape one's course of studying or being interested in economics) could be distinguished by researchers conducting interviews with the alumni of any academic center, occupying, as is the case of SGH, a high position in the rankings of Polish universities. I wondered, however, whether there is something special in the responses of the SGH graduates that cannot be captured by a statistical analysis.

The Choice of the University as a Cultural Story

I decided to treat the induced narratives as cultural stories. The latter, as suggested by for instance David Silverman (2006), are constructed according to certain cultural models—they are the expression of a particular way of understanding the reality, certain ways of categorizing or expressing experience (Wolanik-Boström, 2008, p. 515; see also, Lalak, 2010, p. 155). Thanks to the existence of this type of schemes it is known who is the good and who is the bad character, and the actions and motivations are clear and strictly defined, since they lead to a predictable conclusion.

I used the instructions provided by Silverman (2006, pp. 133-143), who encourages the researchers to look for, in the course of the analysis of the interviews, the answers to both the 'What?' questions, which concern the identity, and the 'How?' questions related to narrative structures. Silverman cites the words of Jody Miller and Barry Glassner who explain the nature and meaning of cultural stories: "Interviewees deploy these narratives to make their actions explainable and understandable to those who otherwise may not understand" (ibid., p. 134). Barbara Czarniawska (2004, p. 50) also emphasizes that the use of conventional cultural narrative stories is the only way to meaningfully express one's point of view, even if these schemes are used subversively—in order to dismiss or deny them.

I looked again at the gathered answers, but this time I concentrated not on extracting the individual factors in order to identify those which are mentioned most often. Instead, I was pursuing *ways in which they are combined into meaningful wholes*. Simultaneously, I was not interested in whether the presented accounts actually correspond to what guided my interlocutors at the time of choosing the future studies; what was much more important for me was how these issues were outlined during a conversation (cf. Linde, 1993, p. 68).

A look from a new perspective on the analyzed stories revealed several sense-making devices that organize the justification of choice and allowed

for the division of the utterances into four groups. The first of these is made up by stories about the 'early vocation and entrepreneurship'; the second—by narratives presenting the decision to study at the Warsaw School of Economics as a 'rational choice'; the third—by stories of 'searching for one's own way'; while the last is composed of 'problematic' narratives.

The narrative models distinguished in this way are presented in the sections below.

Narrative Models in Stories about Choosing a University

'Cause I've Always Been Entrepreneurial'

The main motive organizing the narratives on 'early vocation and entrepreneurship' is an interest in business and economic issues revealing relatively early in the life of the interviewees: *"My dad bought me some participation units in a fund when I was probably in the second grade of the elementary school... so mega early, [...] but it somehow translated into the fact that I became interested in the stock market [...] already in the elementary school I had some small investments performed on my own,"* said one of the interviewees [i2].² Equally early there also appeared the conviction that SGH will be the right choice of studies. This type of narratives I refer to as narratives about 'early vocation,' rather than narratives about 'emerging interests,' because a strong point in them is a discovery of a 'knack' for entrepreneurship and taking up a decision on realizing the business career, often combined with a dream of opening one's own enterprise or pursuing the managerial path in a large, international organization:

Already in the elementary school I knew that I would go to esgieh, because my teacher of Mathematics she told me about it. In the elementary school I was pretty good at Math and generally I had quite a progressive class. Our Math teacher was very ambitious and reasonable and she—so to speak—directed us. Her son chose a similar path, that is, he graduated from X high school and went on to esgieh. He knew that he would go to esgieh, that he would have good results in Math, and that he had such inclinations to management—so he "went into management." [...] When I was very little, my mother taught me, giving

² I conducted the research from October 2009 to April 2011. It consisted in 33 interviews (lasting one and a half hours each on average) with the last year students and the graduates of the Warsaw School of Economics, whose course of studies was largely associated with management. The transcripts were drawn up taking into account the basic principles of conversational analysis, but the excerpts of the interviews contained in this paper are presented in the form meant to facilitate focusing on the content of storytelling. Each interview is marked by a letter 'i' and the individually assigned number.

me some books to read. As soon as the biography of Lee Iaccoca was published in Poland—you can check on which day and in which year it was—she gave it to me to read and I swallowed it. I liked the idea of being such a grand president and managing everything, and that everything can be done better. A huge part of the biography is about his transition to Chrysler, which was badly managed, and he changed it all. I was very inspired and decided that I want some day to follow this... And besides, I was also interested in cars, so I wanted to get into managing cars and so on. And so I was somehow inspired by it. [i5]

In the above utterance, just as in the previously quoted passage of an interview, there are important figures of significant actors—those who shape the choices: the teacher, the parent, the older friend. In most narratives on ‘vocation,’ there appears a figure like this—the person who awakens some ideas about the world of business and studies at the Warsaw School of Economics. This may be a student or a graduate of SGH or a parent running his/her own business. What is important, is the ‘personal testimony’ submitted by the hero/heroine. It is worth noting that among those presenting the history of their choice of university in a similar fashion, there was only one woman (at the time of conducting the study she was a co-owner of a company).

‘Because I Wanted to Do Something Specific’: A Rational Choice

Many of my interviewees presented the decision about taking the exams to SGH as a ‘rational choice’—it is the second narrative scheme distinguished by me in the course of analysis. It ranks in some sense between the two poles, determined on the one hand by the narratives of ‘vocation’ and, on the other, by the stories of ‘finding one’s own way.’ This is the dominant model of narratives.

The interviewees emphasized the prestige of SGH and the fact that choosing this university—in their opinion—was to ensure a solid professional preparation that later on would facilitate their finding a “good job.” In several speeches, a “good job” was defined as such that guarantees high earnings (financial justification appears only in the narratives of the ‘rational choice’). The interviewees often mentioned that they wanted something “concrete,” “useful,” and in their opinion, SGH ensured a chance to gain practical tools necessary for work. One of them gave me the following explanation:

This was not a great interest in the business since the very dawn of time, but rather a practical look at the scope of knowledge you can acquire at a given university. I considered the studies completely unrelated to business: linguistics, cultural studies and different studies related to the humanities. All of them seemed to be too limited and not giving knowledge about the business or about

the professional work in the future, so for instance linguistics did not give any substance knowledge. Cultural studies gave nothing at all—it was not preparation for the profession, but rather a certain hobby. So I went to esgieha. The flexibility of this university—at least at that time—was widely known, so I decided to opt for this university and not any other economic academy still run in the standard, schematic way. [i23]

This raises the theme of meticulous comparison of various available courses of education and evaluation of the perspectives they entail. Instead of choosing something that could be enjoyable and interesting (cultural studies, which can be regarded as a hobby), the narrator decides to pick up something that is to provide market-attractive education and a solid foundation for the profession. This person compares the offer of various courses in economics and justifies why his/her choice was the most advantageous one. In this way, the narrator showcases his/her decision as sensible and mature, and presents himself/herself as a person that is responsible and thoughtful as regards the future. What is important in this case is the element of agency—considering various options in order to make the best choice and realization of the decision taken. It is worth noting that in the narratives of the ‘rational choice,’ there can be observed the strongest motif of adopting ‘plan B’—namely, taking exams ‘just in case’ to a different university, which is treated as a kind of ‘lifeline.’

The quoted excerpt from the interview is in one respect different from other stories of the ‘rational choice.’ It lacks the element of ‘action’—there are no events. It is rather a reconstruction of the reasoning—an objective comparison of alternative options. In other cases, the explanations were more a storytelling than an argument, but in the example analyzed above, this second element was the dominant one, as shown below in the following citation:

I had no plan B at all. Esgieha—it was my dream [...] practically all through high school I instilled in myself the thought that I would study at esgieha, because graduating from this university guaranteed me, at the time when I was still in high school, let’s say, a good, ambitious, quite well-paid job. But, times have changed a little and—as it has turned out recently—the crisis, and some collision with the reality have turned out to be brutal. In high school, I had a feeling that it is the best university in economics and wanted to develop in this direction, so there was no other plan: from the beginning I was focused on esgieh. As were many of my friends. I attended a high school, which [...] in these rankings was one of the highest ranked one in ‘my city,’ so we also had quite a weird marketing, [...] that everyone should already be focused on some studies and should know their entire career path, for the whole lifetime, if possible. Also, we were forced to think seriously about the future, so this esgieh had been instilled in me earlier. [i20]

The narrator recalled certain states of mind, some ideas: "it was my dream," "instill the thought," "I had a feeling." There are three elements of justification. The initial parts of the narrative are interleaved with the evaluation of the argument (a guarantee of good job) from today's perspective (the crisis). In the final parts, the narrator presents herself as a member of a community of people in the same circumstances, thinking alike ("as were many of my friends," "so we also had quite a weird marketing," "we were forced to think seriously about the future"). The explanation is closed with the words: "this esgieh had been instilled in me earlier." This wording is seemingly contradictory to what the interviewee declared at the beginning: "it was my dream." However, I think that we should not be reading this as the truth disclosing the earlier lie. I would rather see here the evidence of the influence exerted by the school policy—shaping life attitudes of pupils, indicating potential career paths and fostering ambition. What is socially defined as 'decent' and 'appropriate'—getting accepted at a good university, which guarantees employment—is internalized and becomes an individual value and purpose to fulfill. The reference to other people who have taken similar decisions, or in some way approved of them, is a way of symbolic assigning a kind of social support to the decision taken.

'Cause I Didn't Know What I Really Want'

"I think esgieh is a university for people who do not know what they want to do in life, but they are clever enough to be able to get here and there, and there, so just in case they go to esgieha," explained one of my interlocutors [i10]. Some explained their choice first of all by the fact that SGH allowed them to postpone the decision about the major practically until the submission of the M.A. thesis.³ These narratives strongly emphasize the prestige of the university and its flexibility with regard to forging one's own path of studying, but the dominant element here is the figure of 'the lack and uncertainty.' This is the main thread of the narrative 'of finding one's own way.' The interlocutors presented SGH as a reasonable choice for someone who does not have clearly defined plans for their future career, who is still looking for the path of development. However, this search is not

³ While my interlocutors were studying, all students at SGH had individual curriculum. There were no groups that would be assigned a specific schedule of classes. In the Primary Course of Studies, lasting three semesters, each of them had to pass compulsory subjects, but they were able to choose lecturers. As part of the Graduate Course of Studies, each student had the opportunity to compose an individual study path. The declarations concerning the choice of a major (SGH was then a university with no departments) were submitted only with the M.A. thesis. The studies were considered to be completed after passing the defined program minimum.

expressed in terms of individualism; it rather arises from the lack of clear patterns and models of a business career that could be followed:

It was so, that for many years I really wondered what I wanted to do in life and I really did not know and going to esgieha, I still did not know that. What's worse: graduating from esgieha, I still did not know! And it is precisely this kind of uncertainty, and it is that I haven't somehow decided for one particular major—that I definitely want to be a doctor or a journalist or a sportsman—this meant that I was looking for something more universal, which would make it possible for me to go later in different directions, which would give me some basics there, but it would be so flexible that I could later use it in different areas. Well, esgieha was a sort of a natural choice due to the nature of the university. [i9]

This attitude is accompanied by reluctance to follow the trail closely defining the nature of the profession to be performed in the future. For some, the decision to choose a university is associated with the elimination of subsequent possibilities that for certain reasons, in the assessment of the interviewee, did not suit his/her interests or skills. It ought to be noted that the types of studies mentioned as potential educational paths can hardly be included into the spectrum of economic sciences. They definitely make an extensive search area. The interlocutor considered, *inter alia*, law, international relations, journalism, medicine, and therefore quite a diverse range of majors, which have one common feature, though. All of them are considered in Poland as ennobling studies and also requiring a lot of preparation effort from the candidates. These explanations, therefore, contain some hidden message that could be closed in the formula: 'among the most prestigious studies, I chose SGH'—this message undoubtedly serves as a symbolic appreciation of the decision taken.

Problematic Narratives

The last group covers the 'problematic' narratives, certain separate cases, which fit into one of the three main types of narratives, but also contain a 'mismatched element' which is not present in the model variants of the stories. The problematic nature of these narratives lies in the fact that "[t]he narrator's particular story is not identical to—and may even depart radically from—what is 'storyworthy' in his or her social context" (Chase, 2005, p. 662). Each autobiographical story is subordinated to certain rules, which will enable it to be understood. Through the operation of these rules the story-teller is able to present himself/herself as a member of a particular community, a representative of a given culture. However, apart from these predictable elements, the stories comprise some motifs that make

them unique, individual, and therefore worth telling (Bruner, 2001, p. 30). Not every act of exceeding this canon sheds the value of 'tellability' onto a story, it needs to be followed, at the same time, by the element of surprise, but one not depriving the story of the matrix thanks to which we will understand its message. In other words—a breach of the convention must also be conventional!

The example quoted below contains a number of elements that can be found in the above-mentioned model narratives: significant actors (parents, who are mobilizing to learn), entrepreneurship, but also the lack of a clear idea of what we can do after the studies at SGH. The way in which the narrator begins her story proves that she is aware of the fact that it is somehow different from the stories of her fellow students:

I think I have a pretty unusual story to tell, because I am from a very small place. My parents were born in Silesia and my whole family comes from Silesia. But, because of some bizarre student fantasy, they decided to take up agriculture and [...] they just finished the school to have a diploma of a manager of pegieer,⁴ as it was still popular in those times. Then, they moved to this microscopic village inhabited by 100 people... After a year, pegieery collapsed, so this was the end of their career in this area. Well, but they found a shop and opened their own business, so I grew up [...] in such post-PGR conditions, and frankly, I think it is a pretty hard environment to enter the adult life, especially a business life. Most of the people that I remember from class, even though these were smart kids, good pupils, but with no prospects, without such faith in oneself... or the parents' faith in the fact that they can go on to college, learn, go to a larger facility... most of these girls now have a child after a child without a husband, or at best some left for Ireland, because it's already been a great opportunity for them. [i16]

This narrative breaks down the conventions that organize the types of stories presented earlier. It is focused around the explanation of how, despite the highly unfavorable life circumstances, the interlocutor succeeded, in her opinion, in achieving a success. She situates her place of birth rather in a particular social space than any geographical one. This place is significant and determines the course of her life. The next part of the story comprises a number of passages about gaining knowledge with real passion, embellished with perseverance and hard work. Although the narration does not entirely fit into 'classic' stories about choosing SGH, it reminds well-known success stories. An example of the manifestation of similar structures is for instance Benjamin Franklin's autobiography, considered by many to be the canonical story of a man who earned his success

⁴ PGR (pronounced in Polish as: 'pegieer'), a State Agricultural Farm, was a form of collective farming similar to the Soviet sovkhoz and the East German Volkseigenes Gut.

himself. Another good exemplification of a “from rags to riches” story is the autobiography of Lee Iaccoci—a corporate self-made man (Grzeszczyk, 2003, pp. 25-34 and 77-87).

An extremely crucial motif in the case of ‘problematic’ narratives is the emergence of specific predispositions:

In addition to this, in high school, I participated in a program of running a company—now I remember. We had a company that produced Christmas cards and also very artistic origami roses, which were sold for Women’s Day. It was a very clever idea, because we sold them at wholesale prices to boys from another class, so everyone could give them to a girl, to the girls from their class, so it was a pretty good business. And it seems to me that I held there a more managerial function. I never had the talent to shape the stuff of paper, so I was rather responsible for bossing around. So that is something in the area of such experiences, scientific and organizational.

And now I also remember... Recently I realized that in fact my first experience in marketing—because now I work in marketing—I already had in the shop in the elementary school. At some point I started to run it with my friends and one of my first moves was that [...] I did a great advertising campaign of a wafer: (draws a bar in the air) super fragile and delicate, and ‘now there is a 10-grosz⁵ discount—only this week!’ And it was fun and it worked, so I had a lot of joy with this shop. [i16]

Similarly as in narratives of ‘vocation,’ also here the ‘knack’ for entrepreneurship is revealed. Realizing the existence of certain predispositions is combined with the action—taking up the first marketing projects. The things that happened in the past are presented as a harbinger of the future career, as entering the way that the narrator is following today. As I mentioned earlier, the story about why someone chose SGH very often involves an explanation of who one is. In this way, coherence is introduced into a biographical narrative: the past is a predictor of the future and they are both linked in the presence.

This case is obviously only one of a few similar accounts. Another interviewee began his unusual story like this: “*This beginning was very funny, because it was like this that in the second grade of high school I completely had no idea what studies look like. I’m even the first person in the family, that graduated from a university*” [i17]. The narrator pointed to the lack of role models, and at the same time strongly emphasized the interest that economic issues (“*I was not thinking so much about management then, generally I was not quite sure what it means*” [i17]). Two interviewees (women) shifted the agency and decisiveness on other actors and presented themselves as individuals

⁵ Grosz, a coin used in Poland as a hundredth part of 1 PLN.

subordinating to the 'external' choices: *"First, it was the choice of my father, and second, it was the choice of most people from my high school," "it was not my decision but somehow somewhere I was directed to the appropriate tracks" [i28], "I went to esgieh because my friends went there" [i11].* In two other stories, one more 'strange' theme is manifested—'being a humanist' and 'not coping' with mathematics.

The featured examples visualize the parts that do not fit the model narrative and thus allow to understand what elements should be found in it: the models, in particular, role models, agency of the narrator (he/she makes choices, even if he/she consults others), and—to put it metaphorically—'scientific mind.'

Summary

I presented two stages of conducting an analysis of autobiographical narratives, which—to some extent—may be treated as separate, yet complementary ways of analyzing data. The first stage was associated with free nodes and grouping the nodes. As a result, I could outline the structure of the factors influencing the choices made, just as it is done in survey-based studies. In such research, however, assumptions are made about the shape of the factors structure and in the course of the study only their influence is checked, which is expressed as a percentage. I, on the other hand, distinguished various categories of the analyzed material.

The second stage involved the analysis of the narratives recognized as cultural stories. To sum up: the narrative of the 'early vocation' includes such items as—relatively quickly developed—interest in the business, stock exchange or finances; they are accompanied by dreams about starting one's own business; there are significant actors, shaping the ideas of the narrators about the world of business and studies at SGH. The extremely important aspects here are the patterns of thinking instilled by the members of the immediate family. Narratives of the 'rational choice' accentuate the prestige of SGH, the opportunity to gain practical tools and good preparation for the working life. The theme around which the narratives of 'looking for one's own way' are constructed is the lack of a strict, explicit vision of the future. It is a search for something that corresponds to the predispositions, and in which 'one can find his/her place.' This freedom to choose was linked by the interviewees with the lack of targeting interests or skills, which limited their room for educational maneuvering. Choosing SGH was supposed to act like a temporary 'safety brake,' enabling the interlocutors to try their hand at operating within various domains. In all types of stories, there appear themes related to taking exams to a 'plan-B university.'

The Polish Law on Higher Education, revised two years ago, (2005; amendment—2011) requires universities to monitor the professional path of their graduates in order to “customize the fields of study and training programs to the needs of the labor market” (Article 13a). Most universities have implemented research programs concerning their graduates. All studies that I know of used for this purpose a quantitative research tool. The results of analyzes are presented there in the form of tables and graphs. In contrast to this, narrative biographical research facilitates conducting an in-depth analysis of the motivation and cultural patterns emerging in the course of storytelling, which I try to portray in my research work.

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