Central and Eastern European Employment Relations in Perspective

University of Greenwich

30 January 2015

Lives Out of Balance: the Lived and the Narrated Experience

Aniko Horvath
Postdoctoral Research Associate
King’s College London
aniko.horvath@kcl.ac.uk

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Lives Out of Balance: the Lived and the Narrated Experience

Introduction

During the past century in Romania, pre-communist, communist, and post-communist governments and state administrations were among the most influential actors in (re)valuing skills and assets, such as land and housing. However, the primary aim of state regulations and policies was not always to (re)value skills and assets (although they often did), but to shape the processes that impact the reproduction of the labor force and to eventually bring about and/or contribute to labor market reforms. The immediate effects of most of these policies were often an increase in labor market competition, rural-urban and transnational migration, and a restructuring of the urban population and space.

This paper, from the perspective of one family’s life history, focuses on how politico-economic and administrative changes influenced the social and economic standing of people that have, for decades, faced precarious livelihoods and impoverishment in urban Romania. Taking an ethnographic approach, it examines the ways in which families have been able to create or seize ‘openings’ in structures of power and thus shape the ‘time-spaces’ of their lives. At the same time, by reflecting on the many spheres of everyday urban life it uncovers the ways in which layers of inequalities have been produced and superimposed upon local actors, often deterring and limiting their efforts to ‘get by’ in their everyday lives.

The paper makes clear that the difficult conditions in which many families found themselves at the time this research was conducted in 2007-2008, was not ‘new poverty’ – as it is often argued when only statistical signifiers are taken into account – but was the result of a combination of long-time inequalities in education, employment, housing, healthcare, social networks and the changes that took place after 1989 in the socio-economic space in which families were/are embedded. Against this background, the paper examines how changes that reorganized ‘objective’ capital relations, also impacted on personhood and understandings of the self and others, creating divisions and unequal power relations even among kin, neighbors and colleagues – people who previously perceived each other as being equal.

Anca

This paper examines Anca’s life events in their broader socio-economic and political context, touches on the history of three generations of her family, and situates her in the circle of her friends and neighbors. Without losing sight of the larger forces that shaped their lives, the paper portrays Anca and her family’s and friends’ lives in ways that offer insights into their everyday routines and their relationships as they evolved over time, highlighting how interdependent and interconnected most processes are that create and/or reproduce inequalities and poverty.
Throughout, I endeavor to understand how certain conditions in Anca’s life defined the choices and opportunities Anca had available to her, the coping strategies she developed under the existing circumstances, and the ways in which these strategies contributed to shaping her life. The paper, although theoretically informed, is not structured along theoretical arguments; it rather reflects the kind of non-linear narrative – interwoven with my analysis and ethnographic data – that emerged during conversations with Anca, her family, and other district inhabitants. As such, it follows an emotional logic that proceeds from the more public dimensions of an individual’s life – housing, education, employment – to the more private and intimate dimensions: family, children, and friendships. This is not to suggest that the public and private domains of one’s life can be separated. It is rather to emphasize and draw attention to a distinction made by Anca herself between the spaces in which she felt she had power to change and influence events, and the spaces she did not.

Anca was born in the early 1970s, into a brick factory workers’ family in the Iris district of Cluj, the second largest city of Romania. Both of her parents came to Cluj from nearby villages during the 1960s, and both of them began working at the brick factory almost immediately after their arrival. They met and liked each other there, and got married after a few years. They had five children, three daughters and two sons; Anca was the oldest among them. Anca’s mother was employed as an unskilled worker at the brick factory for more than two decades before she found other employment in the city, while her father retired after a life spent in the same unskilled position. Anca, even though she tried to pursue a different career path, was just one among many other brick factory workers’ children who ended up continuing their parents’ employment patterns. She started work at the brick factory in October 1987, after her vocational school graduation, and remained employed there until the factory was closed in December, 2000.

Anca lived in the Iris district for most of her adult life. This was where I met her during my fieldwork, in November, 2008. That year was a very busy one for Anca; she was working two shifts at a single-use camera recycling factory and was orchestrating her family’s move from the flat they used to rent from the brick-factory to a new one, which they bought in September of 2008. This was the reason that – even though I spent most of my time in that neighborhood and I had already met Anca’s two sons on several occasions – it took me almost a year before I met Anca. She barely had time to come and visit Ioana – our common friend – or any of the other neighbors I knew and spent time with.

Then finally, on a Sunday afternoon in mid-November 2008, Ioana introduced me to Anca. The 37-year-old Anca had golden blond hair, blue eyes, delicate features, and pale, translucent skin. She wore glasses with strong prescription lenses set in light-colored plastic frames. Tall and thin, Anca moved quickly when she was walking or working, but she sat unusually still when we talked about her life, showing no facial expressions and making almost no gestures. She just held her cigarette – lighting one after the other – and refilled her coffee mug whenever it was empty. However, her animated voice, silences, mumblings, humor and the use of irony and sarcasm in relation to her situation said a lot about her personality and the feelings she tried to keep in check while talking about her life.
Soon after she invited us in, Anca told Ioana – factually and without much emotion in her voice – she had learned a few days earlier that as of the first of December, after more than five years, she would be laid off from the camera factory. Then she switched topic, and asked me about my work and the people I met in the district. After a while, as we continued talking and realized that we had many common friends and acquaintances, Anca visibly relaxed and felt more comfortable about my presence. It was only then that she talked about how uneasy she felt about losing her income, even if she was eligible for unemployment benefits and her husband was working at the time. She also talked about how this present redundancy brought back many of her anxieties from the past. In 2000, when the brick factory – her first and longest place of employment – was closed down, both Anca and her husband were made redundant on the same day, December 22, 2000. This happened to them – she recalled – even though it was against the law to fire members of the same family at the same time, especially if they had minor children. “It was our worst Christmas ever, we thought at the time, but this year is probably going to be even more dreadful.”

“…my friends are all from around here…”

When I started my fieldwork in the fall of 2007 Anca and her family still lived in the courtyard that used to belong to the brick factory. There were four such neighboring courtyards, a total of eleven buildings, housing 44 families, all former employees of the brick factory. The small, one story houses were spread along one of the main streets of the Iris district, a few tram stops away from the square considered to be the district center, and close to the fringe of the city. They were at the foothills of a small clay mine, the former mining site of the brick factory. On the opposite side of the road stood the industrial buildings of former communist factories, none of them operating.

Although the brick factory workers’ houses were not clearly separated from other parts of the district, due to their location, they stood a bit apart from other neighborhoods. This slight isolation was also reflected in the networks of the people living there. While most of those with whom I talked said they had their “best friends” outside this circle, it was clear that their most frequent contacts involved spending time with their neighbors, hanging out together in the courtyards. In decades past it was not at all uncommon for the children of these courtyard families to marry each other and establish their own families there.

For the most part, sharp differences in the standard of living of the 44 families were not obvious, with the exception of three families. One of the families was much better off than all the others (both in terms of income and housing), while two families were in a financial situation that made it difficult for them to secure sufficient daily food for themselves and their children. Most adults in the 44 families had jobs in the mainstream economy (skilled and unskilled), with working contracts, healthcare and pension benefits. In most cases their salaries were very low, not more than the national minimum wage. The amount of money earned, even where all adults in the household worked, made it impossible for them to get by without constant struggles. It was rarely possible to accumulate any savings or make
investments that could have improved their standard of living. The majority had experienced unemployment during the previous 4-5 years, none of them felt that they were likely to be employed long term, and most of them tried to supplement their income through various additional, informal activities.

In the fall of 2008 this neighborhood – where many of the residents had lived for decades – was suddenly broken up. The houses and land that once belonged to the brick factory were bought by foreign investors and the former brick factory mining sites were turned into a large shopping center. All families from Anca’s courtyard were ordered by the new owner to move out, or else they would be evicted forcibly.

Anca believed that the eviction from their old, rented, brick-factory flat marked the beginning of her family’s “real hardship”. Before, she said, “we always got by somehow”, “we always had what we needed” and “we were actually better off than many other families I know”. According to Anca, the fact that they had to move from flat to flat many times over the years, that they never had a proper holiday or were able to afford travel, that they were unable to save money or improve their economic standing – for the most part – caused them no extreme stress. “Most families I know are not able to afford such things either” Anca said at one point in our conversations, “so why should our situation be different?”

Former brick factory houses, and the new shopping center built in the place of the former brick factory’s houses and clay-mines

However, not long after we met and talked for the first time in 2008, Anca said that she and her husband felt “cornered” when – after losing their much loved, rent-subsidized courtyard flat – they were pushed into buying a brand new flat:

We had no other choice than to buy this new flat offered to us as a replacement for the old rental. There was no other place we could have moved into with the two kids. My mother sold her flat to my sister; my husband’s father lives in a far away village… we couldn’t move in with any of them. Rents in Cluj are very high, and we could not afford renting. Or if we did, we would only have been able to pay for a year or so, using up the money I received from my mother for my share in the flat she sold to my sister.
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But that would have been stupid, that would not have been a long-term solution. We asked the city council as well, but they told us they no longer had social flats. So we bought this flat, even though we knew that we would be in big trouble paying the monthly installments if one of us lost a job. And you know I did lose my job, and for my husband it is also more and more difficult to find employment either here or in Italy… (Fieldnotes, AH, December 2008)

Anca’s family was not alone in this situation: all her friends and their families in the neighborhood also lived under the threat of eviction.

“…this is our house now, but not our home…”

It was immediately after moving into their recently purchased 42 sqm one-bedroom apartment that I first met Anca. During our conversations Anca emphasized repeatedly – as did many of her neighbors – that they bought these flats in a newly built apartment house not because they wanted to, but because they had to: this was the flat that was offered to them as a replacement by the company that evicted them. Although they felt cornered and forced into buying, after consulting with their families, Anca and her husband decided to go ahead. They applied for a loan at a local bank and for their downpayment used all the money Anca received from her mother when Anca’s sister bought-out her siblings’ portion of their parents’ flat. To supplement this money, Anca also asked for a loan from her sisters who were working in Italy. When they got loans from both the bank and her sisters, they decided to proceed with the purchase, completed the paperwork with the bank and the building company, and in October 2008 they moved in.

But Anca’s husband never really lived in their new apartment: In order to be able to repay their debts, a few days after they moved in her husband left to work in Italy. They had not even arranged the flat with him in mind: there were only two single beds in the apartment, placed either side of the bedroom window. One bed was for Anca and her younger son, the other bed for her older son and the son of her brother who was in Anca’s custody at the time. Between the two beds, in front of the window, there was a small desk where the children did their homework. These three pieces of furniture almost filled the room. When Anca showed me the flat for the first time she said, “When my husband comes home we will need to reorganize everything, but I don’t know how yet.” Her concern was understandable: the bedroom was 7 sqm, with no room for a third bed. The living room was only 5 sqm and because of the positioning of the windows and the door there was no room for a bed or a sofa so they were using the room as a walk-in-closet. There was a disproportionately large, 14 sqm windowless hallway along which all the apartment’s doorways were located. They set up this space as the living room with two armchairs and a small table, but apparently nobody ever used it for sitting and talking. Anca always invited visitors to sit in the 12sqm kitchen that was the homiest place in the flat. Anca arranged the space with a good sized table and a comfortable seating comprised of a sofa and some chairs (made by Anca herself), placed close to the window. There were some climbing plants around the window. The walls were light green and the afternoon sun shined in. When I asked her about the blues, greens, light reds, and yellows on the walls of the flat Anca said, “We hate white walls. We wanted to
have colors in the house, so my husband re-painted everything before we moved in.” The rooms always looked nice and tidy and everybody visiting Anca congratulated her on their new apartment, but it was apparent that she had very ambivalent feelings about the new flat.

Anca – when telling the story of their eviction and the reasons why they bought this new flat – emphasized on many occasions how much she loved their former courtyard, the garden and the 25 sqm, single-room rental flat, allotted to them by the brick factory. Their former apartment was in a long, one-story house, built at the beginning of the twentieth century, opposite the brick factory, situated in a courtyard with a big garden.

For a long time the building was used as offices for the factory. In the late 1960s, when the offices gradually moved out, it became a dormitory for factory workers, and then in the late 1970s it was transformed into small flats consisting of one-room and a kitchen. A very advantageous rental contract – low rents and other benefits – was worked out for the families that moved in. In the ten years Anca lived there they had seven other families as neighbors, all of them employees of the brick factory.

The building and the flat were run down; no refurbishing had been done for decades. The apartments had no running water or inside toilets; instead, a few wooden lavatories had been placed in the back of the courtyard. Still, Anca and her husband felt extremely privileged that they were the ones to receive the flat.

“An old couple died and so the flat became empty. But there were 30 applications for this one flat. And some of the applicants were engineers working for the factory”, Anca told me with traces of pride in her voice. “But we received it because we had a paper from our dorm administrator that we had to move out in a month’s time. We were staying in a men’s dorm. And we had two small kids.” (Fieldnotes, AH, 2008)
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Anca told me later that they actually “astutely” used their contacts to get the flat: in fact, they did not really have to move out of the dorm, but she “arranged this with the dormitory administrator”: 

“He knew that our housing situation was unbearable. The four of us were living in a small room in a men’s dorm in the Iris district, with shared kitchen and bathroom on the hallway of the dorm. It was better than the previous places we stayed at, but still, it was unbearable. And so we tried to do whatever we could to get this flat.” (Fieldnotes, AH, 2008)

However, this was far from being the first time they had moved from dorms to flats and back again. Anca and her husband – as well as most of their friends and acquaintances – had no place of their own when they got married in 1991, and so they moved several times until they settled on the flats allotted to them by the brick factory. Anca and her husband started married life in a few square meter men’s dorm room in the Iris district, allotted to Anca’s husband by his then workplace, a heavy machinery factory. Their first son was born there. After two years they moved to a colleague’s house, where they did not have to pay rent, but had to take care of the owner’s five pigs. After living there for a year they were told by the owner that they were going to open a restaurant in the rooms used by Anca’s family. The five pigs were slaughtered and, with just a week’s notice, Anca’s family was asked to move out. As she says, “Twelve years passed and the restaurant never opened. Even now, the wind is blowing through the rooms from which we had to move in such a rush”. 

Out of necessity, they moved in with Anca’s parents and four younger siblings. They lived with them for a year and a half – eight adults and two children – in a 60sqm flat. Anca said, “It was hell. Constant tensions and daily fights…”. Thanks to Anca’s dorm administrator friend they were able to move from her parents’ house to a men’s dorm again. Their second son was born there. Finally, after two years in the dorm, in late 1997, they received the flat from the brick factory, their “real home”, as Anca called it.

She showed me the many photographs they took during the decade they lived there, and she told me that these years were probably the happiest of her life. Although the flat was small, they never really felt crowded, because the kids spent most of their time outside in the courtyard and the garden. Both Anca and her husband worked, and although their salaries were not high, they had no financial difficulties during that period. She recalled, “Even after the brick factory was closed and both of us were unemployed, the cost of living was not so high and so we were able to buy the basics.” When they could afford a small luxury they sent their younger son to a school summer camp at the seaside. Anca very much wanted him to go, to have at least somebody in the family who saw the Black Sea. Neither Anca nor her husband had seen the Romanian seaside. There was no bitterness in her voice when she said that they could never afford to go anywhere for holidays. “But none of our friends, colleagues, neighbors or acquaintances ever took a vacation” she added. According to Anca, the family’s prospects changed for the worse when it seemed it would not be possible, as they had hoped, to buy the 25sqm flat from the brick factory for less than the market price.
“…it was our fault; we should have paid the bribes…”

Legislation instituted in Romania after the fall of communism in 1990 made it possible for tenants to buy what were formerly state-owned apartments in which they lived at the time of, or after regime change (Laws 61/1990 and 85/1992). The prices of these apartments were not determined by the real estate market, but established through a 1995 law setting prices at much lower levels (Law 112/1995). Basing their claims on these three laws Anca and 43 other families from her neighborhood requested that they be allowed to buy their flats from the brick factory. For years, their claims were denied by the factory’s board of directors on the grounds that the property status of the brick factory and the houses they were living in was still unclear. However, while the factory management refused workers’ requests on numerous occasions, the “unclear” status of the factory property did not impede management’s privatization of the company between 1990 and 2000, and the sale of its holdings – including land and buildings – to national and international enterprises.

In 2003, when land prices started to sharply increase in Cluj, and when Iris became more and more important as the site of new housing and commercial development, the company’s management started to put pressure on the former brick factory worker tenants, trying to force them to move.

The former brick factory management no longer accepted rent and cut off gas, water, and electricity to the houses, services provided previously through the brick factory’s supply system. When tenants turned to utility companies directly to make new contracts for these services, their claims were denied on the basis that they were unable to provide a valid rental contract or property ownership documents. Since there was no hope of making an informal agreement with the brick factory, in the spring of 2004 the 44 families affected by this situation decided to go to court to settle the issue. Coincident with this, they organized a protest at the city hall and also turned to the media. By then they had been without gas, water, and electricity for more than a month. As a result of the protest the city council intervened, and they were finally able to contract individually with the utility companies. However, they
could no longer extend their old rental contracts with SANEX, the parent company of the brick factory, because the company refused to cooperate.

Things did not go well with the lawsuit. Differences arose among families on how to deal with this issue, which lawyers to hire for the task, how much, if any, bribe to pay to judges and other court people. As a consequence, the 44 families did not submit one unified claim, but went to court with three different lawyers, and had three different trials. To the great surprise of the families involved, the results of these three hearings, all of which were based on the same legal grounds (Laws 61/1990, 85/1992, and 112/1995) led to very different outcomes. One case is still pending as of this writing, because it was decided in favor of SANEX, but the tenants appealed the decision and requested the case be forwarded to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. One case was decided in favor of the tenants, and thus four families were allowed to buy their flats. One case was decided in favor of SANEX, and the tenants – Anca’s family among them – were told to move out of those houses.

The irony of the situation was that SANEX – a company established by the communist state in 1970 and bought by an Austrian porcelain manufacturing company in 2004 – won its lawsuit against brick factory workers by making reference to the law on the restitution of nationalized property. That is, the lawyers of the Austrian company – owner of the communist state-established SANEX – based their arguments on a law that normally would not have applied to this case. However, they implied that SANEX was one and the same entity as the brick factory that was established in the early 1900s, had been nationalized by the communist state in 1958, and closed down definitively in 2000. And although there was no continuity among these three entities in the ways the law seemed to require, the court accepted this as a valid argument, giving its consent to the eviction of more than 30 families.

Even before the lawsuit was decided, part of the land on which some of the brick factory workers’ houses stood was taken over by the Romanian Commercial Bank in lieu of payment of SANEX’s debt, while the rest of the land and houses was sold by SANEX to the international METRO Group. In 2007-2008 METRO built a huge shopping center on part of the land. After the lawsuit was settled, METRO Group prepared to demolish the old houses to further extend the parking lot of the shopping center. Anca’s family was living in one of the houses that were to be demolished.

However, even though the companies had won their case, the local city administration did not allow them to evict tenants without offering them comparable replacement housing. The court decision stated that if the company fulfilled this obligation, tenants were obliged to accept the offer, or move away and solve their housing problems on their own. But, since the clause “comparable replacement housing” did not specify anything in detail, a negotiation process between tenants and the company started.

1 Details of the law suit and why the company could take the steps they took, to the detriment of the tenants, were analyzed in detail in my PhD thesis (currently in the process of being rewritten in form of a book).
The company promised tenants that they would build a new apartment block, not far from the original courtyard, and sell them the new flats at the very advantageous price of 100 Euros per sqm. Most tenants, not seeing any other viable solution, agreed to the deal. It was only after this that the company showed them the floor plans and told them more about the architectural plans of the building and the flats.

The one story apartment house was located at the foot of a hill in the path of rainwater runoff. It was made of wood and had electric heating. The floor plans of most flats (especially the smaller ones) were not designed in a way that the space could be efficiently used by the owners, but rather to make construction as quick, inexpensive, and easy as possible. Insulation was of poor quality and made of materials that did not allow the walls to “breathe”. The plastic windows had no drain holes, so the walls around them became moldy within a few weeks after people moved in. The laminate floor was not installed properly and, after the wood dried, cracks and gaps appeared between floorboards. After families moved in it became obvious that there was no sound insulation in the interior walls, so neighbors could hear each other clearly from one apartment to the next. In two apartments the ceiling fell down after a week because the water pipes in the upstairs apartments were not connected properly and water leaked into the walls. There was no proper road leading to the house, and there was no parking at all for cars.

There were two other problems as well: Most families moved in October and they were horrified to see that as a result of improper insulation and the installation of an inefficient electric heating system, they had heating bills that were well beyond their ability to pay. Further, families not only had to put up with the very poor quality of the house, but they also learned after the building was ready that instead of the originally agreed upon 100 Euro/sqm they would have to pay 475 Euro/sqm. They tried to appeal the price increase in court, but their complaints were turned down with explanations about inflation over the previous two years, and rapidly increasing real estate prices.
As I was told in private conversations, most families that were affected by eviction did not want to buy these new replacement flats. They hoped to be offered the possibility of continuing their rental contracts, either with support from the national and local state administration, or getting subsidized rental flats from the company that evicted them. However, the company was interested in selling these low-quality flats as soon as possible, while Romanian state administration had no existing support schemes for people in such a situation.

The causes for the lack of state support and affordable rental flats were manifold. Ideologies that saw housing solely as a commodity became increasingly widespread in post-socialist Romania. Starting in the late 1990s and early 2000s, real estate had been advertised by banks, international developers, and state/nonprofit actors as an “investment in one’s future”. Mainstream discourse often presented renting as “shortsightedness”, as something “irresponsible”, and renters (other than students) who did not own a flat were portrayed as people who lived only for the present. To make matters worse, several other parallel processes were working against those who needed a flat: after 1989 the house building industry collapsed creating a huge shortage of affordable flats, and state decision-making on housing policy radically changed. In the early 1990s, formerly communist state properties were almost completely privatized which led to the disappearance of socialized flats, state-subsidized rents, and affordable rental housing. There was a constant shortage of rental

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2 “By the early 1990s, there was a tenure structure throughout the transition economies, with very high rates of private-owner occupation. Thus the transition countries were able to move relatively swiftly towards a privatized housing market with high ownership rates without first establishing much of an institutional structure that is normally associated with a private real estate market. These very high rates of owner occupancy have largely been maintained due to a number of factors, including the lack of rental alternatives.” (UN Housing in ECE, 2005:4) “The lack of a well developed rental market, especially for low-rent accommodation, further restricts mobility. Privatization reduced the properties available for rental, as tenants became owners.” (UN Housing in ECE, 2005:5)
properties in big cities that caused the price of rental units to rise. As a result, an informal and unregulated nationwide rental market developed, in which families with limited resources were greatly disadvantaged. Although the homebuilders industry started to pick up in the mid-2000s, the gradual increase in supply did not result in the lowering of prices. House prices in Cluj went down significantly only after the global economic crisis hit Romania in 2009.

When I started my fieldwork in Cluj in 2007 rent for a 28 sqm studio flat varied between 100-200 EURs for a month, depending on location, quality of the flat, and the extras provided (for comparison, Anca’s monthly salary at the camera factory was approximately 130 EURs). Rents were required to be paid in foreign currencies, most commonly in EURs, but occasionally US dollars or Swiss francs were also accepted. The preference for foreign currency most commonly depended on the type of loan the owner took out on the flat. Foreign currency made it possible for landlords to shift their currency exchange risks to the tenants. In addition, no legislative framework was in place to protect either the rights of the landlords, or the tenants. Rental incomes were not reported and most landlords paid no income tax to the state. Under such circumstances almost all landlords in Cluj were looking to rent their properties to students or young, childless professionals, seeing these populations as less risky or complicated than families with several young children and unstable employment prospects. It is easy to see that people in Anca’s situation were deprived of real options in terms of housing, stigmatized for not being able to take part in the shared “societal dream” of full ownership, and were pushed into decisions that often made their present and future extremely difficult.

It was not necessary to ask Anca or others how they felt about this, because all evicted families were talking continuously about what happened. They thought that a great injustice had been done, talked about corruption infiltrating and controlling everything, and said that they felt they were not able to control any aspect of their lives. However, although Anca took part in these conversations and often repeated these narratives, she also blamed herself, saying it was their own fault, because they should have known how the system worked and paid the bribes, just as those few neighbors did who had won their cases. As often happened when she thought there were things in her life she could not control, she said that there was “no point in talking about it anymore” and “nothing to be done”. So I asked her, if this was how she felt, than why wasn’t she – at least to some small degree – happy with their new flat: it was bigger, was in better condition than the previous one, and although it was more expensive than what they expected, it was still well under the market prices for that area³. She could not or did not want to explain her feelings, so she just mumbled something about missing the big garden and courtyard they used to have “over there”, and the family feeling better in the old place.

The humiliating legal procedures and the injustice they felt they had suffered explained part of Anca’s aversion. The anxieties that resulted from losing the benefits that came with factory

³ They paid 475 euro/sqm, while other newly built flats in the neighborhood started at 750-800 euro/sqm.
housing (i.e. subsidized utilities, low rental fees) and her fear of defaulting on the mortgage of the new flat also contributed to her feelings of insecurity and isolation. But still, I felt there was a more personal side to her story. She and her family found themselves in a paradoxical situation: here they were, owning a brand new flat bought in a brand new development, the first big thing they ever owned, everybody was congratulating them on their new apartment, and she was crying over her old, rented, run down 25 sqm flat. It was clear that these things were not about property or ownership for her. Home ownership, as such, was never a goal in itself. They wanted a home they felt they could afford, be that owned or rented. And their old flat was exactly that. The social pressure for owner-occupancy had no meaning or value for them as such. What seemed to outsiders – banks, entrepreneurs, politicians, administrators – to be a sensible and good choice, an improvement in the situation of these families, for Anca and most of her neighbors was just a further limitation on their choices, a worsening of their situation.

The thought that in this new flat they would struggle each and every month to pay their tremendous electricity bills and mortgage rates, created anxieties for Anca and her husband that were hard to live with. At the old flat there were no such bills and payments. While living in their old home they only rarely had to make a choice between eating and paying bills. Now, this had become a daily issue. Anca felt caught in circumstances she did not create or control, “I haven’t slept for weeks; I just lie in the bed and think about it over and over again, what to do…” She could not see a way out. It was a situation about which she thought the sacrifices required were disproportionate to the benefits. Living in their old home did not force them into situations that went from bad to worse. Although they were always living from one month to the next, Anca and her husband felt they had choices when deciding to do or not to do certain things. Before, her husband could choose not to leave his family behind and go to Italy, he could decide not to take jobs he felt were beneath him, and they could choose not to ask for money from family members who they knew would humiliate them and criticize their decisions and lifestyle, as Anca’s sisters did when Anca asked them for a loan for their new flat.

For Anca and her husband to be forced into buying the flat meant loosing this freedom and their self-esteem. The only occasions when Anca used the term “poor” in relation to themselves, were when she felt the loss of their self-esteem was at stake. “I’d rather remain poor, than be beaten or humiliated” she said when talking about her former husband who abused her, or her sister who humiliated them by making rough and vulgar remarks about Anca’s husband. Dissociating herself so clearly from poverty shows that “being poor” was perceived by Anca as a stigma, and the only way for her to accept that such a stigma might be attributed to her was when a positive quality was associated with it. In this case she felt that she was among the “deserving poor” by preserving her integrity and dignity, feeling that she was not selling out for money and financial security, and not compromising the values she tried to live by (and thought society believed in).
Remains of Anca’s house after it was demolished

The paradox of her situation that gnawed at Anca, although she never said it exactly this way, was that she always struggled to live a “normal” life, a life where she would not run afoul of social norms and conventions, for example the norm of living within one’s means. And even though she thought she had done “everything right” according to her own and the larger society’s value system and social practices – went to school, worked, got married, established a family and raised children responsibly, sent them to school, tried to pay her bills on time, never borrowed in order to buy expensive things – against her will and all their legal struggles, she was forced into a situation where she had to forsake many of these values. Borrowing meant more to Anca than just being in debt: It made her feel she was becoming a bad mother who was unable to provide for her children. She felt she was a bad wife by accepting the ‘sacrifice’ her husband had to make by living abroad without his family. She thought she was a bad sibling because she borrowed money which she knew she might not be able to pay back by the time her sisters might need the money. She felt she “had become” something she never wanted to be, and she was suffering not only because of the insecurity the next day might bring, but also from not being able to erase, for either herself or her family, the stigma attached to being labeled as “undeserving poor”, of having and not paying back debts and not caring ‘properly’ for her family. Even though they now “owned” a flat, she continued to feel that slowly her family had slipped from being part of the “deserving poor” into the group of “undeserving poor”. As she expressed it, “We own this flat now, but that is only theoretical. Practically speaking, the bank owns it. This is why I can’t see it as our home; Instead, I feel it’s a trap. And God save us from not being able to pay the monthly mortgage installments and losing our house again…”
“…it was hard work…”

In previous years Anca felt trapped on many other occasions. But most situations limited and determined her choices in less obvious ways than this present one. And since the possible consequences of earlier events were not immediate, but distant in time, neither Anca nor her parents felt any urgency to make different choices than the ones that were readily available to them at particular moments. Both of Anca’s parents, even though they were practically illiterate, put an emphasis on education. She told me stories about how her father tried to help her and her siblings with religious education, and how her mother begged them to study and not to drop out of school – wanting them to succeed both in their studies and life. However, they could not give Anca the daily support she would have needed. She managed to study on her own until fourth grade, but was unable to go further. It was the late 1970s and the family – two adults and four children – lived in a 30 sqm flat. Her father had drinking problems and often was violent with her mother. Anca was “stressed by the atmosphere at home” and the school system failed to assist her with any of her problems. As a result, regardless of what Anca and her parents wanted, in fifth grade she was classified as a child with learning disabilities, and transferred by her teachers from a regular to a so-called “special” school, for “disabled children”.

Although she once said that school was different during communism, and that there was no support for students like nowadays, she still perceived what happened as her own and her family’s failure. She did not see that it was actually the educational system that had failed her and her siblings. None of them has more than an eighth grade education – notwithstanding the fact that three of her siblings were sent to normal school, and that two of them – born in 1978 and 1986 – were already schooled in the “new system” which Anca praised. Although she knew that many of the children from their neighborhood had educational histories very similar to her family’s, she did not realize that this was not the result of individual failings, but rather the result of accepted social and institutional practices at that time. For Anca and her younger sister – both of whom attended a school for “disabled children” – the system went so far as to promise good outcomes. Anca’s parents were told that transferring the two girls to this “special” school was the best thing for them, because it would make it possible to successfully pass through the state education system and acquire marketable knowledge and skills. And this decision indeed seemed to be a good one for years: when Anca and her sister started to attend the “special” school, they did not find the everyday interactions unbearable at all. Anca even said they liked it very much there. Based on the many details she gave me about their school days it was clear that in this school they felt no pressure. On the contrary, they felt that they had escaped the unpleasant aspects of the regular school environment, primarily the tensions created by not living up to the expectations of that environment. Their new school did not make them feel worthless and inadequate. The family also received some financial help, free lunches at school, and subsidies for school books and supplies.

Anca only started to realize that not going to regular school may have greatly disadvantaged her – limiting her employment choices and stigmatizing her for the rest of her life – after she graduated from vocational school and learned that there was only one place in the city where
her vocational school credentials were accepted, the furniture factory where she was unable to find employment. But even when faced with this situation – her mother telling Anca that she was not able to “arrange” employment at the furniture factory because she was asked to pay a bribe the family could not afford – Anca acted as if she still believed she had reasonable alternatives. “Damn him!” she said about the furniture factory’s director, implying that she did not need his or anybody else’s goodwill saying, “I will go to daddy and see if they are hiring at the brick factory, I’ll start working there!” And she indeed got a job there as soon as she could.

However, her narrative about her employment at the brick factory was rather confusing: From what she told me it seemed that she did not have to find work immediately after her graduation. According to Anca there was no pressure on her from her family to get a job – “I had my salary, but it would not have been a problem even if I would not have worked! My mother wouldn’t let me down anyway.” She also said that her mother asked her not to take up work at the brick factory – “It was hard work. She used to work there, got sick, and so she didn’t want me to…” Knowing all this it was difficult to understand why Anca decided to do very hard unskilled work after all. Why didn’t she wait longer and try to find work in a job for which she had been trained? Or why didn’t she look for some less physically difficult job? She had no real answers to these questions. She just said she wanted to finally have a job, whatever that job was.

Trying to find an explanation for Anca’s decision it seemed to me that this specific situation was just one of the many where only false choices existed for people like her. In 1987, when Anca entered the employment market, she lived in a communist country where formal work was “the right and the duty” of all adult citizens, being imposed by law and enforced by the authorities. People of Anca’s social status who were of working age and were found not to be working were risking imprisonment. It happened to Andrei, one of Anca’s neighbors, and it also happened to a few other people I met during my fieldwork. And regardless of how restricted or widespread this police practice was, common knowledge treated it as something real. I heard from many older and middle-aged men and women that “under communism it wasn’t like nowadays, at that time you were imprisoned if you didn’t work.” Although Anca was probably not exposed to such a risk in any way, she once told me that she feared this could have happened to her as well if she stayed at home. The episode with the furniture factory made it clear to her that they had neither contacts nor enough money to get her employment in a place where work was easier. Nevertheless, even under such circumstances it would have been possible for Anca to remain at home. But not finding employment and not starting work after graduation would just have meant further stigma for her: being non-productive and lazy. It seemed to me that she felt that people in her social status were always expected to prove, both to themselves and society, that they were not trying to avoid work: “It was very hard work…” she told me about the brick factory “but I liked it this way…” She emphasized on several other occasions that she always was a “hardworking” person. And while she seemed to be aware of the hypocrisy and duplicity that existed in the system – the promise of “employment for all”, contradicted by the reality of being unable to find work based only on skills and credentials – she also seemed resigned to things as they were. “Of
course you had to pay! You had to pull strings, pay bribes … It was like that everywhere.” However, her knowledge did not translate into her being better able to negotiate her way through the system. On the contrary, it made her feel insecure, and convinced she needed to take the first job she felt she could get. And it was beyond ironic that after what had happened to her at the furniture factory she even felt lucky that she was given the opportunity to work at the brick factory: “If I hadn’t had somebody working at the brick factory, I couldn’t have gotten in…”

However, while working at the brick factory brought some stability and security to their life, it also led to new disadvantages for Anca. Even though she was able to stay at home for seven years out of the thirteen while she was on the brick factory payroll (including two extended maternity leaves), during the remaining six years when she actually worked in the factory her health significantly deteriorated. Because of the toxic environment and the physical difficulty of the work she became blind in one eye, sight in her other eye weakened considerably (-9 diopters), and she developed a very severe form of rheumatism which disabled her for weeks at a time. By the early 2000s, when the brick factory closed, she not only lacked the educational credentials needed to find a better job, but – because of her deteriorated health – she was in no physical condition to work in many positions that were available to her. In this context it was really difficult to understand why she talked about her former work at the brick factory as something she loved and greatly missed. Obviously, there were many factors that contributed to such feelings: the sense of job security for more than a decade; the decent income that made basic, everyday life affordable for her and her family; and the additional benefits of affordable housing and subsidies for utilities bills. All were things they never benefited from again after the brick factory closed. But, none of these were sufficient to explain the level of nostalgia she expressed, especially not when one saw the limitations the state of her health imposed on her life. Anca’s strong positive feelings were, most likely, rooted in the increased self-worth and self-esteem she felt she had gained while working at the brick factory. Although the work she did was considered low-skilled, she had to perform well in a “men’s world”, where women – if they met the requirements – were respected and paid equally to men. Anca, by emphasizing what muscles she made there, and repeatedly talking about the fact that her husband earned less money than she did, positioned herself in relation to some of the dominant “male values” of the larger society – bodily strength (muscles) and a person’s role as breadwinner in a household. In this context the low-skilled work she performed in the factory was detached from its low-social-status-job image, and was reinterpreted through the new values she attached to women work in male environment. This approach was not hers alone. Other women and men I talked to in her neighborhood also shared these views.

Listening to her employment history and to all the details she gave me about her different workplaces – the brick factory, a wine bottling company, a second hand appliance shop, the disposable camera factory, and cleaning she had done at different apartment blocks – made me realize that there were probably other things she greatly valued in the work she did at the brick factory, and missed in most of her subsequent jobs. Her stories about the brick factory evoked a mixture of feelings that she was never really able to express. However, her constant
references to these feelings – as well as her emphasis on the lack of the same experiences in her other workplaces – became dominant themes in her narrative. By pointing out that her parents, siblings, friends, and neighbors had all worked at the brick factory at one time or another, she was expressing a feeling of continuity and belonging, just as she did when she talked about the high levels of sociability and cooperation the work permitted. Anca fondly recalled that she and her co-workers had made bricks that were being used to construct new buildings all around Romania. All this was in sharp contrast to the ways Anca talked about her later employment, especially at the disposable camera factory. She described in detail the process of alienation she went through there:

I was not allowed to stop, to look around, to talk. You know, that was the management’s working principle, what they followed. So I just looked in front of me and worked quietly, and they were watching us, and sometimes they said “this women stays, this one can go”…. And they hired me based on that… Each of us worked individually, you know. They brought you big boxes with the returned single use disposable cameras and you had to disassemble them. A few parts were reused, while many parts were just thrown out…You had 1500 cameras. That was your daily quota. To disassemble 1500. I disassembled 3000, 4000, 5000, depending on the type of camera…And what did you get for them? 10 or 20 lei in addition to your monthly salary? (5 EUR) So it wasn’t worth it.

So it was not worth working hard?
No, but what could I do? I finished my 1500 in two hours. And what do you do after that? Because if they would have let me go home… but you had to stay till 2pm, you know? So you kept on working, there was nothing else to do…

And how were your coworkers?
OK.
Was there anybody from your neighborhood?
Maybe, but not in my building. Because we were working in six different halls. We didn’t really know each other.

Apparently, Anca accepted the isolation imposed by the factory’s leadership, and also conformed to their expectations of not developing strong relationships and ties with her coworkers. She also tried to come to terms with things that seemed completely meaningless to her, such as setting of the daily productivity at a very low level (1500 cameras to disassemble). Although, as a "hard-working person" she continued to disassemble as many cameras as she could, she started to question the relevance of the values she traditionally attached to work. “Hard work” and “productivity” lost their positive connotations in this new context:

Everybody disassembled that many cameras?
M: No, only a few of us, five or six people. Others were struggling to make their quota. They were the ones that worked like in a slow motion film. But I envied them so much!

So there was no motivation to work more or harder?
M: Oh, no, not at all!

And how did they pay or increase salaries?
M: Everybody was paid the same amount. And salaries were increased only by the rate of inflation. But it hardly reached the national minimum wage.

In her perception, the value of one’s work – and indirectly of that person – was partly “measured” by the amount of money paid for a task performed, often regardless of the type of work the person did. When I asked her how her husband felt when he had to leave the skilled
job he liked and switch to unskilled jobs he did not like, she replied that her husband did not mind that “because he earned much better, you know? And that was the important thing. At the brick factory we had higher salaries.” In this context the value of her work at the camera factory was defined by the fact that it paid only the national minimum wage. Her feelings were further magnified by the fact that they were producing nothing else but human “waste”. As she said, most of the pieces they disassembled were “just thrown out”, so she felt her work was meaningless and her energy was being spent on unproductively.

“…I just want to have a normal life…”

While Anca seemed often to conform to the rules imposed upon her by the “outside” world, in her personal life she still tried very hard to “do things differently” than her parents did. As I got to know Anca better, she once said that the only thing she always wanted was a “normal” life. And she often phrased things in terms of “normalcy” when she talked about her life or answered questions. I once asked why she took so many photos (several hundred) of her kids, and other aspects of their life: birthdays, cakes, gifts, family reunions, holidays, their old flats and their furniture, her family members, as well as her workplaces. I said that as far as I knew not many people in her neighborhood had so many photo albums, and that paying for the developing of all these photos had to be a considerable financial burden on their family budget. She replied, “It was, but still, that is normal. I want my kids, and also us, to remember these things. It is normal to have memories of our celebrations, of the relaxed moments of our life together.” And indeed, on the occasions when the family got together, and sometimes even when friends or neighbors visited, they took out these photographs and almost ritualistically relived these ‘key’ events in the life of the family, reinforcing the memories of their happy moments – and in doing so, placing in perspective and ‘forgetting/silencing’ the unhappy and problematic memories.

It was the same desire for “normalcy” that led Anca to buy relatively expensive gifts for her loved ones; to take on family obligations when she was asked to; to try to pay for the kids’ school holidays; or, when needed, to finance her younger son’s sports aspirations. “It is normal to do these things for your family” she replied when asked why she was taking on these commitments, doing all these things, although they required many sacrifices on her part. It seems “normalcy” for her meant living by a set of rules – “social norms” – that she believed would help her integrate into society in a way that might erase the stigma she felt was attached to her because of her troubled and abusive childhood, and her fragmented and disadvantaged educational and employment history. She tried to create and validate a “persona” – even if that meant extreme sacrifices from time to time – she hoped would not be rejected in the environment in which she lived and would be radically different from that of her parents.

Taken together, when her remarks on the subject were placed in context, it was clear she definitely did not think of her childhood as being “normal”: She said once that there were almost no memories from her childhood she wished to recall or share. She had only a few
pictures from her youth, and none she wanted to show. Listening to stories about her early life the most striking aspect was the lack of “family” in her narrative. She had stories about her mother taking care of them; stories about her father teaching them about religion; memories of herself and her sister going to the special school together; some memories about her grandparents on her father’s side after a few summer weeks she spent with them in their small village in her early teenage years. But no memories of them, as a family, doing things together. The few occasions when she mentioned her parents being together involved violence, the “atmosphere at home” from which she tried to run away. The “things happening at home” from which she did not really understand why her mother never walked away. Her descriptions gave hints of an everyday life that on the surface seemed to be dominated by males, who were forcing things on women both by sheer physical force and by being the main breadwinners. However, as Anca put it, the women were the “tough ones”, keeping families above water, not letting their kids down and caring for their husbands.

Part of Anca’s adult life was characterized by efforts – as in the case of many other women I talked to in her neighborhood – to break behavioral patterns “inherited” from her parents. As she grew up seeing how her mother was always the object of her father’s violence, she especially wanted to avoid this happening to her and her children. She desperately wished to have some control over her life. And although she said she felt she did not succeed in doing this in the public domains of her life, she wanted to keep things “straight” at least in family and personal matters where she felt she had some power to change things.

At the first signs that her life would mirror that of her mother’s – when her first husband hit her – she ended the relationship, got a divorce and had an abortion. Terminating the pregnancy resulting from a relationship with a violent husband was another way of taking more control over her life and body. Although she conformed to and accepted the gender roles and values prescribed by her social environment which would make her the object of male sexual desires – youth, beauty, long hair, dress codes, virginity, fertility – she resisted the absolute right of her husband over her body, saying things such as, “Sorry, but nobody hits me”, and “I did not want to have his baby” and “I wanted to have no connections to him anymore.” From her point of view having her first husband’s baby – not their baby or her baby – would have meant that, even if she divorced him, it was still possible for him to have a claim over them and their bodies.

However, it was clear Anca still internalized many of the normative inhibitions prescribing a woman’s behavior. These inhibitions led her at first to recount the story of her abortion in a way that left room for her to back out of her role as active initiator/creator of events and be able to distance herself to some degree from her own actions: “I was pregnant when I divorced and I lost [destroyed] the pregnancy.” The Romanian expression she used to describe what happened, “Eram însărcinată când am divorțat și l-am pierdut…” has a double meaning. The first and most commonly used meaning of the verb “l-am pierdut” is “I lost it”. In Romanian, in cases when a woman had a miscarriage, this was a common way to refer to what happened. However, the verb has a second, rarely used, but very powerful meaning as well; “destroying/annihilating/eradicating” something. The choice of wording seems to make
clear Anca’s ambivalence about what happened: on the one hand, it indicates that she still experiences “losing” the pregnancy and her marriage as accidental to some degree and therefore beyond her immediate control. But, on the other hand, the choice of words – the use of a verb that has two relevant meanings in this context – reveals her extremely strong negative feelings in relation to the pregnancy and her very strong wish to retain control of her body. And, taken in the overall context, the less common meaning of the verb – “destroying/annihilating/eradicating” – likely best represents her feelings. Although Anca could have said from the start that she decided to have an abortion, only later, when she talked about the legal implications of abortion during communism, she finally directly stated she had “arranged for an abortion”.

“…I do not know how it is going to be…”

Just as many other life history narratives I collected in the district, Anca’s narrative was framed by her feelings of being trapped: as we began our first conversation she talked about losing her job and not knowing what to do. Our second conversation ended the same way, with Anca saying she could see no way out of her family’s current situation. Although I did not indicate that I wished to end our conversation, Anca drew it to a close by saying “I do not know how it is going to be” and signaled that she had nothing more to say.

Given the frame of her life history, the meanings she attached to her life throughout the conversation – attempting to construct a ‘narrative of inclusion’, as I will argue below – were rendered largely irrelevant. With her closing sentence Anca seemed resigned to the impossibility of successfully pursuing a “life plan” (Hareven 1982:360) for the future of her family. As she gave voice to her history, the journey went from the very factual account of losing her job, to her deeply emotional account of feeling powerless in her own life and isolated even from her siblings. As the telling of her life history progressed, she placed ever more emphasis on being trapped and less emphasis on those aspects of her life that highlighted the ways she had, over decades, successfully negotiated difficult situations.

Vieda Skultans in his analysis of Latvian narratives argues that many of her informants, in closing their narratives, often used patterns such as “now my life is over” or “that’s what my life has been”. In Skultans’ interpretation such formulas often signaled failures to achieve explanation and were part of a “shared conceptual strategy which has its roots in the violent events which have dislocated lives” (1998:48). In Anca’s case, the function of such a closing is similar: signaling her failure to explain the discrepancies she felt existed between her continued efforts to become ‘included’ and the recurrent fears and anxieties of risking being ‘excluded’. As for Skultans’ informants these strategies were born out of a need to explain their dislocated lives. Anca’s strategies can, in part, be located within the broader and shared conceptual strategies employed by people who struggle to break the cycle of poverty. As Anca’s life history reveals there are important contradictions between the narrative account of her ongoing (and so far successful) efforts to keep her family afloat and maintain/achieve social inclusion, and her framing that focused on her emotional distress and the lived
experience of social exclusion, conditions that – she implied – characterized and summarized her life trajectory.

Although it could be argued that these contradictions in Anca’s narrative were only a result of the timing of our conversations – for example, she had recently lost her job – in Anca’s narrative ‘feeling trapped’ and struggling to find a way out also appeared on numerous occasions in relation to much earlier life experiences such as when she talked about her educational history. However, talking about the consequences of her being pushed into attending a school for children with learning disabilities, Anca rarely argued – even in retrospect – that her family should or could have made different choices than the ones they believed were available to them at the time. Rather, she chose to emphasize how she successfully avoided remaining unemployed even though vocational school greatly limited her choices even in securing employment for which she had been trained: Instead, Anca emphasized how quickly she found a solution by immediately obtaining a job at the brick factory, where her parents worked.

This is where the duality in Anca’s narrative is confusing: she portrays herself both as having and lacking agency. While human agency is relational and thus always needs be examined and validated in the interplay between the structural constraints and the respective (re)actions of the individual, in Anca’s case it is noteworthy that she often discredited as essentially meaningless many of the actions she took on her own behalf (i.e. she felt she had no agency to change her own position in social space). When she talked about her school years she presented herself as a child with no agency; she studied as much as she was able to on her own, but after a while – with all her family problems of an alcoholic and violent father – she “failed” to fulfill basic academic requirements and was moved to a school for children with learning disabilities. Thus, Anca felt that the external limits to her agency – the fact that parents, teachers, and schools made decisions on her behalf – left her with no choices and unable to change the course of events. This narrative framing – being a victim of forces beyond her control during childhood – is important because feeling powerless in controlling certain dimensions of her life is among the most lasting memories she carried into her adult life. When we talked about opportunities that might exist for her in adult education and retraining for other jobs, or finding work abroad as her siblings did, Anca always argued that she no longer had either the power and health or the means to change things in her own life. This argument, where she uses the narrative pattern that references the passing of time and suggests that “it is too late” for her to change things, reinforces perceptions of having time-specific ‘limits’ on her life and agency.

However, there is a clear discrepancy between her feelings as represented in the narrative of her own education, her narrative about her children’s education, and her actual everyday practices as I observed them during our time together. On the one hand, when it came to her children’s education, Anca’s attitudes were very different than those she said she had in relation to herself. In her life history she talked at length about how she supported her children in being free to choose what they wanted to study, but they did not have the choice to drop out of school. And her engagement did not stop there; she was actively involved in
their education. Although she did not talk about this during our conversations, I saw her on many occasions sitting and helping the younger children with their homework. In addition, she was also an active and leading member of the Parent Committee at her younger son’s school, negotiating many delicate issues with the school administration on behalf of children and parents. When asked about her involvement, she said that as a parent it was her responsibility to actively support her children in their education.

Emirbayer argues that “As actors encounter problematic situations requiring the exercise of imagination and judgment, they gain a reflective distance from received patterns that may (in some contexts) allow for greater imagination, choice, and conscious purpose.” (1998:973) In Anca’s case, the framework offered by ‘motherhood/parenthood’ and the feelings of responsibility that came with it (as she expressed it, “women are the ones who hold families together”) brought about such a reflective distance from some of the received patterns and allowed for a change in her attitudes towards educational structures. So while she maintained the feeling that she was not able to study for her own benefit, she felt empowered to fight for her children’s education. Anca’s active engagement with her children’s education, at the same time, clearly contradicted the message of ‘having no future’ as she implied in her final statement: investing time, money, and energy in her children was part of a “life plan” that suggested that Anca did project a future for herself and her family.

As Anca’s life trajectory reveals (contrary to what she stated about her inability to learn new skills) she exhibited an extreme flexibility and openness to mastering new skill sets, and adapting to new jobs and working environments. She talked a lot about her long working days over many years, and the reasons she liked working hard instead of just trying to look busy. Nevertheless, since these efforts were not sufficient to be promoted, earn more, and improve her family’s economic and social standing, Anca felt powerless to turn her life around. This, in turn, led her to conclude that she and her family were somehow ‘undeserving’. It was clear that she was struggling with such issues, and engaged in a dialog with broader discourses on poverty and the poor: She routinely linked her narrative of becoming poor to not accepting the idea that poor people necessarily have to lose their independence, self respect, and dignity. But Anca was in an extremely difficult and delicate position, because her feelings of inadequacy and humiliation were reinforced not only by the broader social discourses on the ‘undeserving poor’ but also by her own siblings, who argued that it was Anca and her husband’s fault that they had not been able to improve their financial situation over the years.

Emirbayer argues that focusing on human agency as it works in practice and as it is embedded in social interactions helps researchers better understand “the interplay between the reproductive and transformative dimensions of social action” (1998:973). He also posits that “All social action is a concrete synthesis, shaped and conditioned, on the one hand, by the temporal-relational contexts of action and, on the other, by the dynamic element of agency itself. The latter guarantees that empirical social action will never be completely determined or structured. On the other hand, there is no hypothetical moment in which agency actually gets ‘free’ of structure.” (1998:1004)
Anca’s life – as revealed in her life history narrative and coupled with ethnographic data – exemplifies well Emirbayer’s argument. Although Anca’s narrative suggests otherwise, it is misleading to explain her actions only as the result of reproducing behavioral patterns she had internalized earlier in her life. For example, while many other children in the neighborhood were school dropouts or had educational histories similar to Anca’s, her sons succeeded in school, in large part due to Anca’s commitment. However, despite her many successful strategy changes, Anca’s overall feeling continued to be that she was ‘trapped’ in circumstances she could not overcome and faced an ongoing risk of becoming ‘excluded’ from mainstream society.

Although soon after our conversations Anca’s husband’s persistence enabled him to find a job in Italy and Anca, who applied for various positions in Cluj, was able to secure a night job at a company where she counted and bundled money, by the time they thought they had stabilized their financial situation in early 2009, the global economic crisis hit Romania and the country’s currency collapsed, sending exchange rates sky-high. Between November 2008 and March 2009 the Romanian Leu depreciated by 23% in relation to the Swiss Franc, and – as the Leu continued to weaken – by August 2011 it was worth 63% less in relation to the Swiss Franc than it was in November 2008, when I recorded Anca’s life history. Since the loan on Anca’s flat was in Swiss Francs, their fragile household finances once again collapsed, putting them at risk of losing their flat and becoming homeless.

**Conclusion**

The chain of events in Anca’s life history and her reactions to these events exemplify well how the interplay between structural factors and human agency can constrain or enable change in family life histories. Anca’s case study also highlights that in hierarchical and/or unequal structures and relationships, while focusing on narrative and individual level analysis is important to our understanding of some of the factors that enable change and cause reproduction at the micro level, having insight only into these aspects of a life cannot explain the ways in which social change and reproduction are facilitated by broader socio-structural processes.

Throughout this paper I have tried, in part, to reveal the tensions that surfaced between the ‘ideal-typical’ categories and ‘norms’ to which Anca said she wished to conform, and the everyday realities where she and her family struggled to find coping strategies and create ‘in-between’ spaces that opened up new opportunity structures for them. Just to reflect on a few of these ‘tensions’: Anca was successful in her desire to remain a virgin and have children only after she was married. Soon after, she was confronted with the reality of a violent husband, and so divorced him after nine months and terminated her pregnancy. This sequence was soon followed by Anca’s second wedding – where she was six months pregnant and had a huge belly – something harshly judged within her environment. Nevertheless, she chose to take the risk of being shamed as a ‘fallen woman’ rather than endangering the health of her future children by having a second abortion. Another such situation emerged when Anca – in
order to remain a ‘deserving’ person – decided to take a job at the brick factory as soon as she graduated from school, but then – trying to escape extremely difficult working conditions that damaged her health – she twice took the opportunity of extended maternity leaves and stayed home with her two sons, even though that meant she needed to get medical documents that (temporarily) categorized the two boys she dearly loved as “children with severe disabilities”.

Another such situation in Anca’s life emerged in relation to her self-perception as a ‘hard-working’, self-reliant person. Although it caused her extreme anxiety, when she and her husband were made redundant at the brick factory, they decided to stay at home for three months and use up part of the money they received as compensatory salaries, just to be able to spend some time together, something they had previously never been able to do. Further, although Anca tried to conform to the law and be a good citizen, she occasionally ‘gamed’ the system by taking jobs in the informal economy, when the mainstream economy did not pay enough to cover their living expenses.

In order to understand the complexity of such decisions and the contradictions and discrepancies that emerged between Anca’s discourse, her aspirations, and her actual coping strategies, we need to understand that divergences appeared not because Anca and her family were part of a different and non-mainstream ‘culture’ (as it is often claimed) but because the conditions they had to face often did not make it possible for them to act in accordance with the ‘ideal-typical norms’ that would make a ‘normal’ life possible. Nevertheless, as illustrated in this paper, in order to cope with their fragmented and complex life events, for most people it was established practice, not the exception, to develop coping strategies that diverged from the ‘ideal-typical’ categories which they reproduced at the discursive level. In no way did this mean that they were part of a ‘culture of poverty’ or an ‘underclass’ that was disconnected and excluded from the mainstream. Fear of becoming ‘excluded’ was an everyday reality for most of my informants; however, even the families that were ‘pushed out’ of the city and ended up living in absolute poverty in far away villages, remained embedded in their old networks and continued to reproduce such ‘ideal-typical’ categories at the discursive level.

As Erik Harms argues, as social scientists, instead of helping to reproduce such categories, we should attempt to understand “how people deploy them to achieve material gain, construct meaningful identities, and carve a space for themselves within society.” (Harms 2011:5)

In this context, it is important to recognize that, based on the ‘hard’ (statistical) facts that categorized Anca as poor – illiterate and poor parents, many siblings, education in a school for pupils with learning disabilities, unskilled positions throughout her employment history, a husband in a similar socio-economic position, loss of their home and the purchase of a new flat through bad credit constructions – she might well be found in the ‘exemplary’ category in policy makers’ statistical tables. However, when examined in detail, her life history is not just a product of these “statistical components” but instead is a constant flow of events coupled with her reactions to these events, enduring the consequences of her decisions, creating interpretations of what happened and why, then following up with new decisions and strategies to adapt to constantly changing circumstances.
As such, Anca’s life has never been and it is not now, a closed ‘story’ in which the outcomes can be predicated upon such statistical markers. As Anca said in our interviews – and this demonstrates how contextual and subjective poverty can be – even with all the struggles and difficulties they went through, she felt that her own life trajectory and especially that of her children was actually an experience of upward mobility. She indicated that over the years her living conditions improved compared to what she experienced in her childhood; and that she thought her children lived much better than she or her husband used to live when they were their children’s age. In this context, it is also important to recognize that while statistical factors most often exclude extended kin from such examinations, when upward mobility and an (even temporary) improvement in economic status occurs anywhere in the network, its effects often migrate well beyond the nuclear family of husband-wife-children. Anca’s life history is but one among many in which a family’s extended networks of support are effected, both positively and negatively, by changes anywhere in the kin network.

The paper also makes clear that the difficult conditions in which Anca and her family found themselves at the time this research was conducted, was not “new poverty” – as it might appear at first, if only statistical signifiers are taken into account – but was the result of a combination of long-time inequalities (in education, employment, housing, social networks, etc.) and the changes that took place after 1989 in the socio-economic space in which Anca’s family was/is embedded. Without taking into consideration and understanding the entire constellation of factors, it is impossible to have a clear understanding of socialist and post-socialist (re)production of inequalities and poverty.

References


