How I Performed 'Story-Telling'. A Confessional Story

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How I Performed 'Story-Telling'. A Confessional Story. The article deals with the subject of *story-telling* as a way to interpret qualitative data. It describes the manner in which this is accomplished (passing through the stages of data collecting and analysis) as well as the difficulties the researcher meets when trying to perform a story-telling. The article is actually the confessional account of the development of a story-telling. It is a story made of other accounts (with different manners of writing: realist, descriptive and interpretative) about 'what and how' the respondents would have liked to be (sociologists which have become teachers and engineers which have become businessmen).
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Introduction

In 2006 I was part of a research team together with other fellow professors (most of them sociologists). We were interested in the sociologist's profession and occupations. I was the only one of the team concerned with qualitative research.

I must add here that in Romania, sociology has had a troubled history (especially during 1948 – 1989). One could not study, write or research whatever he/she wanted; (from 1978 to 1990 the universities have even been forbidden to educate sociologists). Thus, sociology has regained its rights only after 1990. Subsequently, the interest in the qualitative research has developed with the due delay (the first volume signed by a Romanian sociologist on the topic of qualitative was published in 1997 – *see* Ilut). Since then, the qualitative research is 'tolerated' but not much loved. For instance, I am introduced to other fellow professors and sociologists in the following manner: after a succession of appraisals and mention of qualities, they say – 'she's got but one flaw, she's into qualitative research'.

So, I fell hopelessly in love with qualitative methodology (after having strongly criticised it for a few years, after having discovered more and more shortcomings to quantitative research and also after having found into a library, full of dust, the books of Denzin and Lincoln (1998a, 1998b) and Flick (1998)).

From that moment on my concerns have been the following: to understand the manner of performing qualitative research, to apply this methodology and to teach others to do so. I have also read and written books on the 'qualitative' issue, I have held courses and conducted seminars on the methodology of

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qualitative research, I have used the topic in the research conducted for my PhD thesis (defended in 2009), and I have written articles on the different aspects of the qualitative methodology and so on.

Thus, I was the only one in our team concerned with qualitative research and at least partially connected to it. Therefore I have been given the task to show the other members of our team what story-telling is and how it is performed.

I try with this article to describe the story-telling procedures and techniques and to underline its importance and relevancy for achieving knowledge in social sciences. I would like to show how the work is in a qualitative study, how look like the results of such a research attempt. I would like you to feel the way I felt during my study, I would like you to understand my subjects, to know them without meeting them, in short I would like to familiarize you with the beauty of the qualitative research, with the very significant data obtained by this methodology, with the extraordinary meaningful results achieved by putting them in a story form.

This article may surprise because of its self-reflexive style of writing. The public texts resulted from social researches, according to post-modern tendencies, must contain detailed descriptions of the research methodology. The public texts resulted from qualitative researches must contain also information about the researcher role, his or her experiences in the field. This is because the researcher has a more active role in the field, spend more time there, has multiple and closer relations with the subjects, and because, in qualitative research, "the researcher acknowledges that research is value laden and that biases are present" (Creswell, 1998: 75). Thus I chosen this self-reflexive style in order to respect the implications for practice of the axiological assumption formulated by Creswell and I will "openly discuss values that shape the narrative and include own interpretation in conjunction with interpretation of participants" (p. 75).

What is 'Story-Telling'?

From what I understand, researchers can show the world they have studied (through the methodology of qualitative research) in the form of stories. They can therefore recount what they have seen, what has happened to them on the field, what they have discovered about the people and phenomena they have studied. This way of interpreting data is based on the idea of worlds 'built' through language. Usher (1997: 35) shows that 'what's going on is not simply a matter of representing, reflecting or reporting a world that already exists. Research therefore does not passively reflect, it actively constructs / but it does so in a particular way'. Berger and Quinney (2005: 9) add that 'in the story-telling sociology, writing is recognised as a part of the research process. It is

not, by far, a "report" of somebody's observations, but an integrating part of the process of creating meaning'.

Story-telling as acquired and qualitatively analysed data interpretation is proper to researches in which the collected data have no precedent and are compelling and the people, the phenomena or the events which are subjects of study are unusual, spectacular, less common and less accessible. One can list here some famous studies: Street Corner Society (William Foote Whyte), Tearoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places (Laud Humphreys), Asylums (Erving Goffman) and so on.

Denzin (1998: 377) exposes three styles of writing stories: the central tendency, the interpretative and the descriptive styles. In the central tendency style, the story is objective, with no judgments, no bias, no criticism, no feelings; it implies 'short descriptions of the observed world (events, people, and experiences). It also implies that the author can offer an objective portrait of the individual or group reality'. In the interpretative style, the author 'introduces his/her personal interpretations regarding the events in the life of the observed people; the experience and its significations are filtered through the eyes of the researcher and not through those of the subjects''. In the descriptive style, the author allows the world he/she'd studied to speak for itself (the story is told through the subjects' voices).

Flick (1998: 242) lists more possible styles of writing, but he describes more accurately three of them, which, although slightly different, can superpose over the ones exposed above and taken from Denzin. Thus, in the realistic story the 'author is absent from the text (the observations are reported as facts, while the interpretations are not subjectively expressed)'; there are emphasised the typical forms resulting from the study of the phenomenon; 'many details are analysed and described'; 'there is an emphasis on the points of view of the subjects'. In the confessional story, the 'author shows the role he has played in the observed events, in the interpretations and in the formulations'. The subjects of description are 'the object of study and the researcher's experiences during this study'. The views of the author are treated distinctively in the presentation (as well as the problems he faced and the errors he committed). And the impressionist stories possess 'a dramatic form and put the reader in the situation existing in the field', in the world of the story. He is also 'allowed to see, hear, and feel what the researcher saw, heard or felt'. Important sources for the achievement of such a story are the notes taken on the field, the daily records of the researcher.

I should also mention that one and the same study, research, data can generate stories written in different styles (one can build various 'worlds' starting from the same data, collected and analysed, but interpreted differently).

Berger and Quinney (2005: 9) argue that in the 'story-telling sociology the measure of "truth" is given not by conventional scientific standards – validity and fidelity – but by the power of the stories to evoke the liveliness of the lived experience'. What really matters in story-telling is 'the authenticity, which is the degree in which the story captures the essence and resonance of the experiences of the people involved and the perspective over the details of the action and the thoughts shown in this context'.

I will show in this article how I performed story-telling in a training course situation. I would like to describe in detail the way a qualitative research as story-telling is performed, I would like to answer some questions: what the researcher had to do in order to produce a story-telling interpretation, what kind of data he/she had to gather, what are the analysis procedures he/she had to apply. I would like even more to answer the question: what are the difficulties a researcher has to face when performing a qualitative research in general, and especially when performing story-telling?

I will illustrate all these methodological issues (and some results) adopting a qualitative form of presentation (a confessional story). I will show the way writing styles mentioned above can be used and I will try to convince you that these stories have a great power to evoke the field and the people in it.

How did I perform 'Story-telling'?

In my opinion, a too brief presentation of the methodology of research (by insisting almost exclusively on the results of investigation) brought great disadvantages to quantitative sociology. Quantitative research methodology has no longer undergone critical analyses and has no longer brought to the fore its weaknesses. These have been hidden; they haven't been discussed and have no longer been corrected (for instance, the criterion validity – in the absence of some objective criteria the selection of a reference theory is achieved arbitrarily or in a value-oriented manner; or, the construct validity – the choice of indicators for measurement is arbitrary or refers to value as it is not achieved on the basis of an exhaustive deductive operationalization and so on).

I wish the qualitative researcher didn't make the same mistakes; I also wish that we could show openly how the methods and techniques of collecting, analysing and interpreting data are applied. This way, qualitative research will be open to criticism, growth and improvement.

I shall further describe a few methodological elements related to the achievement of 'my' story-telling (particular emphasis will be placed on the features of the subject I chose). Story-telling can only be achieved in the context of the existence of a qualitative database and as a consequence of the latter's analysis. In order to show the members of my team how story-telling is performed, I needed a generous subject which would allow me to collect the

qualitative data necessary to work on. How I came to the subject of story-telling will be described in the corpus of the confessional story. I shall start by exposing the requests addressed to the respondents:

'As you already know or you are going to find out, at our future meeting, scheduled for the 24th of July, a training session on *story-telling* will take place. In order to try to show what and how much I know about this subject, I thought to perform a story-telling under your very eyes. You must help me with one thing: you have to fill the attached form [the document contained a blank sheet with the title "I wish I had been..."]. So as to fill it you don't need to make research on the topic of *story-telling* (I make the story, you just have to help me collect the data on which that will be based). The document is entitled "I wish I had been..."

Here are some instructions (please, follow them):
– Fill a page (not much more or less than that);
– Don't ask what to write (any additional information on the responses would redirect your answer);
– Don't ask other member of the team or outside it about "what to write".
– Take care to hand me the document by Monday, July, 17 the latest, at our weekly meeting/ But the sooner, the better.
Other additional details:
– What you shall write will only be read by me and not in face of the group (yet, in the final story you may find some of your expressions, without the others knowing that they belong to you);
– You don't have to sign the papers, you can keep them anonymous, by leaving them discreetly on my shelf in the Department;
– If you choose to contact me by email, please make sure that you send the document on my individual email address and not on the group address.

On July, 17, you'll receive the documentation on *story-telling*. And by July, 20, I'll send you a list of the topics for our meeting on the July, 24. These discussions will be preceded by the reading of the story/stories that I'll write on our now familiar "I wish I had been..." topic'.

Therefore, I used the collecting of social documents produced at the researcher's request (personal, non-numerical, unofficial documents – *see* the social documents classification in Chelcea (2001)).

I managed to collect – during the short interval I had – nine documents (seven from sociologists and two from engineers; the manner in which I found these respondents will be detailed in the confessional story). All the respondents were Romanian (colleagues and acquaintances). I shall describe below how the analysis of the collected data was performed.

First of all I must add that together with the data collected from the respondents I made an inventory of field notes which became precious data in

the economy of this micro-study. I speak about the researcher's daily records to which I added observation notes from 'the field' and general observations resulting from data analysis and interpretation.

Here are some examples of observations I made:

– The absence of firm instructions made the respondents confused; the importance of their confessions overwhelms them.
– Although I see that ideas are accumulating, sometimes I am afraid that nothing will come out of this, that what we have in common is too little in comparison to our differences.
– For the engineers I had to open new topics: materialism, happiness.
– The subjects write about *what* they would have liked to be and about *how* they would have liked to be, but not about *whom* they would have wanted to be like.
– The discourse of the engineers is egocentric, while the sociologists speak more about other people.

As a strategy of data analysis I used, according to Huberman's and Miles' instructions (1998) the interactive synthesis. This implies the production of summaries on individual cases, then of the stories of the cases (topic-based), then their condensing in a singular story and its comparison with the summaries of the cases so as to make sure that it suits each case.

So I made a summary of each material, then I made a general inventory of the topics by the use of a global analysis (I have identified topics which were present in the documents of each subject). The dominant themes were: aspirations (desires) and regrets (unaccomplishments), then values and lifestyle. I also made an inventory of the most commonly used words and phrases as well as of those special, rare, but extremely suggestive ones. For instance: 'desperate identity', 'I'll be a fabulous grandparent', 'the mediocrity of my path in life', 'I have lived in a postmodern manner' and so on. These expressions are extremely valuable in story-telling. By using them one can maintain the authenticity and flavour of the respondents' texts'.

For a detailed global analysis, I performed a thematic coding (I did a rigorous inventory of themes or sub-themes or sub-categories present in the collected texts). Here are some of these categories: profession and occupation, hobbies, personal characteristics (with the following sub-categories: temperament, IQ, relationships with the others, physical appearance), materialism, happiness, analogies with plants or animals.

The next step was the writing of stories for each category and subcategory (a story for each respondent that mentioned the respective category or subcategory). For example the story on the profession and occupation one of the sociologists would have liked to have sounds this way: 'he would have liked to be a great scientist, man who works hard but with great passion. He

would have been able to spend a lifetime in his lab, trying to discover fundamental things for humanity, which would have made him famous. Although he would have been known by many people, he would have been discreet and avoiding exposure. He would have wanted to be a chemist and find cures to serious illness or an astronomer, discovering stars and galaxies or a writer and write about love, suffering and God'.

I made such stories in each category identified for each respondent separately. The interactive synthesis consisted in an attempt to reunite in one story all the stories in a category, coming from all respondents. A synthesis of all syntheses followed, in the attempt to make a story which should include all the other category syntheses.

Of course, it was all about making an interactive synthesis on types of subjects: one for the sociologists, respectively one for the engineers (in order to analyse and interpret them comparatively).

As I was working with the texts, knowing that I was going to perform a story-telling and being aware of the styles of writing that I could use, I made an inventory of the themes I could describe in a certain style. Thus, I found that there are certain topics that can be best described in the confessional style: for instance the daily records. In the end, I split the interactive syntheses to be told in the most adequate style, showing the members of the team how the stories can be written in different styles.

As I was working at the data analysis and interpretation – as story-telling – I faced numerous methodological problems for which the literature of the discipline could not offer me answers. For instance: how to build the final story? From the common aspects that I identified? And what happens to the contradictory or particular aspects (mentioned only by certain subjects)? And if the tone or style of the documents is emotional, involved, nostalgic should I reproduce it in the final story? Then, which is the limit of the researcher's involvement? What and how much is his contribution? What the researcher constructs does not modify the discoveries? For instance, an ironic tone of a story can disqualify the 'nicest' respondents, while a sweetened one can excuse the most 'unpleasant' ones… Then, if the researcher does not interfere how much of this is still his/her research? Wouldn't the final story become just a simple collage of the respondents' documents? But what if the discoveries are unpleasant to the respondents? What if the story makes them uncomfortable?

There are many methodological dilemmas that I briefly identified and treated within the confessional story. I want by this article to reveal some methodological problems a qualitative researcher may face when he or she attempts to perform story-telling. I reproduce below the confessional story as it was written for my team-mates. Its purpose was to introduce them in the process and secrets of performing a story-telling. Actually, this means

presenting of the results of collecting and processing data. The results are exposed as story-telling (the confessional style). I placed in it some research results described in different styles of story-writing (realistic, descriptive and interpretative).

Confessional Story

I was told that I must do the training regarding the story-telling, also that I may think to an innovation, at a special training session.

I thought about how a training that I would like to take part in should be like. It would mean that I'd understand a lot, seeing how this are done, not just reading about…, that it would be attractive, interesting, and not very technical and that it would not involve a lot of work on my behalf etc.

Since I've learned what to do it was the only thing I thought about. I walked home so as to put my thoughts in order; the rhythmic walking seems to settle them. The ideas came, combined, and completed each other. Five kilometres. That's the distance to walk home. When I entered the door, the plan was ready: I pictured the development of the training, the topic of the story-telling, even the guidelines for my colleagues.

The plan was the following: each participant to the training session is required to contribute with data that will be the base of the story-telling made by the trainer; each participant reads the documentation and the story-telling; the training session is a discussion on that basis, with a few compulsory topics raised by the trainer and made available to the participants before the session.

I had this in my mind: the story-telling is a method of interpreting of some qualitative data that have been collected and analysed through specific qualitative methods and techniques. Thus, the story is the result of qualitative research. Therefore, in order to perform the training I had to improvise a small qualitative research.

I had to collect data on a certain topic. It had to be one that would mean something to all of us. A common experience, rather personal – to make everybody involve and search (then found) themselves in the final story. It had to be something relatively intimate and rather new – I needed data as authentic as possible, I also needed a topic that should keep my subjects from using clichés and desirable answers.

It had to be sufficiently vague so as not to suggest the answer but also clear enough not to create a total divergence of answers. Then, it had to be unfamiliar to me, unexploited, a topic that I should know little about so as not to search in the materials things that I'd expect, that I had already in mind. Thus 'I wish I had been…' was born…

Before releasing the topic to the 'field', I made an attempt with my aunt, engineer and businesswoman. I discovered that she could make the exercise

with no problem and no need for additional guidelines. Then an idea hit me. What if I'd do a comparison between the dreams and unfulfilments of professors who were also sociologists and engineers who were also businessmen?

What I did was an exploratory research. I didn't discover in the collected documents a problem that I could make my research goal and which not to quit until I found a solution (by repeated returning to my subjects, by collection of new data, by gradual structuring of the research instrument and so on). I fund a number of issues deserving attention and which could become topics of future research. My goal was to show how a story can be made through qualitative research. So, the story only claims to function as training, through the exploration of what the professors-sociologists and businessmen-engineers would have wanted to be. Even if I'd pursuit an answer to one of the questions asked in the research, the small number of subject wouldn't have allowed me firm conclusions, of which I had no doubt or shame. Seven sociologist and two engineers did not lead me to the saturation of neither categories. Although, in the case of sociologists, the last materials I gathered left me an impression of familiarity.

The subjects, my fellow sociologists, received clear instructions, that each of them broke. To my mention: 'don't ask me to tell you what to write!' I received the question 'should I write who or what I wanted to be?' To my instruction 'send me the completed document on my personal and not on the common email address' I invested them with confidence for four days. Only afterwards I suspected them (but not of carelessness) and after two days of public exposure I deleted from the common address a 'lost' document. To my mention 'do not ask the others' advice on what to write' do you think that the document lost on the specified address – with the mention 'to Florentina' – remained unread? Three of the respondents answered to my request: 'I would be grateful if you filled the document as rapidly as possible'. How many of them were on time? Exactly five of them. I discovered that sociologists can be difficult subjects. And a little bit unsure: they asked me if what they had written was alright, also called me to hear if I liked their answers, announced on the top of the document that their exercise didn't turn very successful. The engineers thought it was all a joke and treated me ironically, saying that I should pay them for these services. They threatened me not to make harsh comments on the small dimensions of their notes and not to label them as too sick. They expressed at the end of their documents the hope of not being misunderstood; they were worried that the content of their notes disappointed me. I had to ask them repeatedly to fill the documents and they warned me not to put pressure on them.

The normal state of mind of the qualitative researcher is not to expect something in particular from his/her subjects and to not know what to expect from a 'field' experience. I imagined that I was going to find out the crazy dreams of sociologists, that they were going to play describing or inventing the characters they would have liked to be, in a childish and cheerful style. When I started to do the exercise myself I realised that it could turn differently. After the first forays to stars and galaxies, I slipped to a serious and thorough self-criticism. But, anyway, I didn't expect what followed.

I put a lot of feeling and impatience in the doing of my small 'research'. I could hardly wait to see how it's received and what will become of it. I would check my email several times a day. And I was disappointed each time I didn't find novelties. I waited anxiously. And I discovered with every 'I wish I had been…' people full of regrets, frustrations, nostalgia, sincere people taking the matter seriously and made an evaluation of their lives and selves, sometimes in a harsh manner. It was a unique spectacle. People confessing, things written that were so personal that I had a feeling of embarrassment; I entered into some intimacy that I provoked without intent. Meeting the subjects after the 'confessions' was strange to me. I was a little shameful, but when I saw them careless about it, I got over it. Still, they had a little to comment – between the written dreams and unfulfilled desires – that I made them think too much of their lives for such a technical application or that they didn't write such a thing since they were 13 and had a diary…

I had no expectation what so ever concerning the engineers. I had no idea what they were going to write and I was quite curious. Yet, I hoped they'd write in a different manner and also something different than the sociologists.

After receiving each document, I 'sank' in it, reading it several times: once in ordered to discover it, then to search for the major themes, then to be attentive at the language they used, then to analyse it, find its characteristics, capture its essence, keep its authenticity, capture its message as well as the feeling it transmitted. I think that the best way to work with the texts from the field is to take them one by one and not read them all at once. So, one has the time to deepen them all. I got to learn the texts by heart. In a conversation, one subject reproached me that in his text there are no frustrations. I quoted exactly, without having his text in front of me, a sentence saying the contrary.

For a half-page text, the analysis took several hours. I think that even if one doesn't need all the texts resulting from the research, the analysis have to be done so as to 'enter' the text or the other way round. I wonder how working with really bulky materials is like. One needs qualitative data analysis software in such a case.

But I worked with great passion. I haven't felt this effervescence since my college years. The experience is similar to what I've been reading in literature.

I followed the steps as I learned them and put my personal touch on style wherever possible. And in qualitative research this is possible at a great extent. I made summaries of materials, global analyses, thematic coding, interactive syntheses, lists with relevant phrases, general remarks regarding the texts, analysis and interpretation, lists with the methodological issues that I gradually faced, field observations and the researcher's daily records. Data analysis is not difficult to achieve, but it is thorough and requires a long time.

I wasn't able to analyse more than two documents per day. And after a few days of such occupation, the last documents made me physically sick. I was kind of tired of the same procedures, I impatiently wanted to pass to the next stage, to complete the story for once! I think this is a danger for the researchers. They can hurry the data analysis, be impatient, skip important data or worse, can decide to stop the collecting of data. They can say that they have enough data just because of they feel sick of it, not because they reached theoretical saturation.

The comparison of materials can also raise problems. With the first two, it wasn't difficult. I discovered what made them similar, what distinguished them, I got curious ideas. It was more difficult with the following ones. I had to compare each with each. I wrote every idea, every observation that was going through my mind. I discovered patterns, enjoying them as a child and I feared not to be destroyed, shattered by the following documents. This is not an appropriate attitude for a qualitative researcher, but is a human one.

Precisely the fact that the qualitative researcher can afford to be human and is recognised the right to be human in his activity, is also, I believe, his great misfortune. This way, his laziness, his tricks and exhaustion are legitimised. It is possible that, in the case one discovers something in the data, to be blinded by it. One can also be so in love with the idea or with the idea of discovering itself that one shouldn't see the data contradicting the finding or desperately to look for confirmation (even where it isn't, and instead provoke them).

I could hardly wait to finish the analyses and work seriously on interpretation. From time to time I wrote fragments of story and I was thinking (with concern) on how the next document, coming from my colleagues, will modify them. I was thinking on who is left to send the 'I wish I had been…' I made his profile in my mind and I got anxious when I realised that there people who seemed different, special were still following. In general my fears were unnecessary (or I just want to see them that way?). The discourses didn't differ fundamentally and more, some passages were frighteningly similar, identical phrases, similar emotions and anxieties. Isn't it strange to discover at two different people (two out of seven) that they would have liked to play the piano or to be great writers or that they would like people to listen to them or that they would have liked to be dogs or flowers? Isn't it strange that a word,

so rarely heard in the everyday life is to be found in two different documents: 'fabulous'?

I worked desperately. Sometimes I had the feeling that I discovered great things, and then I saw the same things as simple despiteful trivialities. Sometimes I was thinking that I worked too hard, doing useless analyses, other times that I don't do enough to achieve adequate results for a research, be it even qualitative. I think that this feeling torments any researcher who was once a quantitative researcher. One feels ashamed, it feels bad to draw conclusions from comparing just a few cases. One doesn't care so much about what others may think, but one feels that is doing something wrong, almost illegal. One cannot stop wondering: 'If I had had one more subject, would the result have been different?'

I was going gladly on, towards new discoveries! The thought that I wasn't finding a great deal was my primary concern. That maybe, if I asked a common person, the finding relating to the sociologists was also true for him/her, that my 'discoveries' are generally human. This way I came to the first really important revelation.

The engineers' texts. They struck me through a totally different style and content. I had to develop new categories of analysis for them (entirely new, with no connection to those developed in the sociologists' texts – materialism, happiness). I was now analysing speeches that were centred on money, after 'bathing' in poetry and poignant regrets.

After the analysis of the first material I discovered a few major topics gathering all the information in the text. These major topics were to be found in each new analysed material: aspirations (desires) and regrets (unfulfilments) on one hand, and values and lifestyle, on the other. Within each major topic, I treated distinct themes, typical to each case: profession, occupation, personal features, reference group etc. Each specific theme was narrated by reflecting what each subject mentioning it transmitted. Trough an 'interactive synthesis' of these stories (first on themes and then on reunited themes) the common story – Story-telling – comes to an end.

This story can take various shapes. For what I decided to do I concluded that the most adequate style is the confessional one. The researcher relates what and how he discovered, the difficulties that he faced, the errors that he committed, but also the results. Nothing more appropriate for a training session! I decided, therefore, to make a confessional story and in order to illustrate the other styles I thought that, in presenting the results, I could also use the realist, descriptive and interpretative styles. I found that actually the experience in qualitative research can provide data with a different character. Some are easier to transmit trough a simple description, others are more suggestive if are dramatically expressed etc. By choosing a single style of

presentation or writing one could be forced to left behind some of the data, to work hard to try to adapt these to the chosen style (and therefore loosing the flavour of the original text).

There were two weeks of turmoil (how long a real research would last?). I imagined the moment when I'd read the story to my colleagues. I pictured them sometimes amazed, sometimes disappointed. Some other times I was thinking that they might feel offended. Late at evenings I was going to bed. A few minutes later I rushed to turn on the light and sit at the desk to write another idea. I was afraid I'd forget it until morning. Ready! Again in bed, and afterwards again the lamp and the desk, a new idea again! The third switch kept the light on for two hours (until around 3 o'clock a.m.) I had a picture in my mind of the confessional story… I had to write it down.

As I was going on methodological problems were also haunting me: what should I write in the final story? Just the common things? What about the differences, are they worthless? The instructions and answers to these questions from *Grounded Theory* came to my mind. For the story-telling the only applied instruction was to make interactive syntheses. This meant bringing together all that could form a whole through interactive comparison between documents. Then I wondered how to do the story, if to reproduce the tone found in most of the documents? Ironical descriptions of sentimental texts were the only things that came to my mind. This is another problem of the qualitative researcher who has a past in quantitative research. One feels suddenly too free in performing the research. The rules are few and even those are not universally valid but situational, and even open to change or improvement. Worse: it is perfectly possible that should change them yourself! You feel the need of an author to correct you in an authoritarian manner, to get you out of insecurity and from the danger to be stupidly mistaken. I had one more source of stress: the fact that I had a few documents from the engineers. I was also worried about gathering more. But I lacked time and desire. I was also tormented for a while by the choice of the appropriate style of writing. Normally, the realistic story would have been the most adequate for the theme of research, but I was getting a lot of ideas of descriptive stories, in which the sociologist and the engineer speak about themselves through my 'mouth'.

The confessional story was, however, the most appropriate for the training and had one more advantage: it reduced the feeling of embarrassment, from the feeling that I possess intimate information on my colleagues. I wanted to give something on return. My own troubles, the insides of my work.

In a story-telling training I should show how one can deal with each of the writing styles. That is why I divided the results in relation to the most adequate styles to communicate them: ideas to interpret in the confessional, realistic, descriptive and interpretative style. What I told here so far hardly would have

been possible to narrate in a story written in a different style. What I can tell about sociologists and engineers, following the analysis of the 'I wish I had been…' documents will be told bellow in the styles not yet approached. If I was to narrate in a realistic manner, the story will be like that:

The sociologist-professors describe what and how they would have wanted to be. They would not have wanted to be like somebody else, they have not such models. They enumerate professions that have nothing to do with their current profession. They are not even from connected areas, but rather from the exact sciences or art. They would have liked to be a scientist, a chemist, a medicine doctor, a professor, judge or simply the President of Romania or the Prime Minister. But the enumeration is not easy. They wouldn't have wanted all these as such. They wouldn't have wanted to be a chemist or another, but one that would discover cures for serious illnesses, not a common writer but one of the greatest in the world literature, not a common doctor, but one of those at whose door people queue to enter, not a common judge, but a great justice maker. These are great, dignified, high destinies. They would have been famous; they speak in a way or another about immortality, by leaving behind of something fabulous. Their reference groups come from the area of the 'eternal ones' – artists, writers, football players or from those of the people who are remembered the entire life: doctors, primary school teachers, presidents.

But their motivation is perfectly humanitarian. People would have needed them: they would have helped them to win disease, they would have given them back the aspirations, given them ideas of life, changed their destinies, influenced them always in a positive manner.

As if they would have something Christian in their desires: they want to give to the others, the entire speech is centred on 'giving'. They want to have a positive effect upon the others and this assures a moral comfort: I want to be the best, I feel very good with my deed. The positive state of mind as well as their regrets is related to the others.

And if they would not have been human, they would have liked to be a flower, a dog, a guardian angel, an oak, a spring or a bridge suspended over precipices. And all these to make the people in love, the lonely ones, the children, the tired or the thirsty happy. They are the Saviours.

Thus, the sociologists ignore what they are; there are no references to their current profession and less to its improvement. No aspiration or regret is connected to sociology. They do not mention that they would have liked to be a better sociologist or a famous one or one who would have discovered some important theory which to explain a certain behaviour.

The sociologists are or want to be a cultivated person. They recognise spiritual, artistic, cultural values. They speak of American poets, Russian novelists, painting, classical music, European films. Or say clearly that they

would have liked to be cleverer, more cultivated, with more history readings. Actually, they are not lenient with themselves; they do not hesitate to make a serious self-criticism, going so far as to talk about their own mediocrity.

If they have hobbies, they are overwhelming, they dedicate years to them or to dream of them.

Generally, the discourse of the sociologists is nostalgic, self-critical, rather sad, emotional, centred on the past.

The businessmen engineer would not have wanted to be something in particular (they do not mention professions, do not make analogies with plants or animals), neither somebody in particular, they do not have models either. They also don't have problems with themselves. The problems in the area 'I wish I had been somehow' are few and rapidly concluded: I manage, the unfulfilments and unaccomplishments appear seldom and disappear quickly, I feel good to myself. If there's no self-trust, then there are certainly justifications of problems and the guilt is pinned on external factors: I was raised this way, I wasn't taught, I was poor.

The speech is centred on money. They are very little embarrassed of the orienting towards 'having', they justify it or simply demonstrate that the money are very important in life, contrary to 'what people say'. They do not move away from the idea of money, no matter what they are saying. Everything has to do with them: happiness, love, study, and career. All satisfaction has to be blended with material satisfaction.

They are more lenient with themselves, more at peace with themselves; their self-criticism is friendly. They don't speak about the others unless for attributing the guilt for the unaccomplishments or for contradicting them. In general they wait to be given or take themselves. The speech is centred on the present.

I found that the engineers are somehow puzzled with the topic. It's not easy for them what I asked them, drawing them out from what they are, forcing them to be otherwise than they are. They even confess that I push them to focus on what they didn't manage to do and this thing does not suit them, they have no regrets and do not waste their time with such a thing. At the same time, the sociologists left the impression that they were waiting for this; they cried gladly on my shoulder.

The engineers seem less open, less willing to talk about themselves, not because they want to hide but because, simply, they don't think too much about themselves (what they are not, what they missed to do). The sociologists seem to be in a permanent race of self-evaluating.

If I were to tell the story in the descriptive style, the story will sound like that:

I am a sociologist but I don't say much about it. It seems that when I do it, I reaffirm my desperate identity. It seems as if I were ten: I can, still, become anything, my destiny is open. Precisely the eternal promise makes it about nothing. It, my profession. Perhaps that is why I would like to be famous in a recognised work, in which all people know what is valuable. Eventually I think I could become anything. But I lack courage. To take decisions all by myself or from the bottom of my soul… Not to listen all the people who wish me well: my mother, the other people, reason, common sense… I wish I had more daring and madness, impulsivity and nonconformity. To move through life with all senses open, to do things as I want and exactly when I want and not how and when I must. What a life this would be… And if all these are no longer possible, I cannot longer desire, I look back with nostalgia, dearly and tenderly, proudly and ironically towards the incoherence, foolishness and poetry of my life from the time I could live like that.

Even so clumsy, I have power and intelligence. I could measure many anytime, but in which battle?

Reading the sociologists, the image of Don Quixote came to my mind and no longer left me.

I am an engineer. Here's all that I wish I were and I am NO YET, but I am sure I'll be: rich. All these disgusting nonsense that still my time: unpaid bills, the furniture I didn't buy yet, the walls I didn't build yet… But I don't make a tragedy out of it, on the contrary! The most beautiful of my forms is that in which I struggle to solve my problems, to fulfil my dreams; the state I feel best in is that in which I develop strategies and scenarios to turn my dreams true. And usually I succeed!

With the rest of things I manage, I find happiness everywhere: in the flower growing next to me on my office, in a look, in a gesture… I don't want to choose between money and happiness, I want them both.

I am neither insensitive, nor ignorant. Maybe I would have liked not to depend so much on 'having'. But I have got an excuse: I became like that because I was poor.

Reading the engineers' texts I told to myself that mental health has to look like that.

If I were to narrate in the interpretative style, I should add interpretations to my observations on sociologists and engineers. I'll 'narrate' these observations and I expect you to fill them more with their sociological interpretations:

The sociologists give more space (in writing) to their personal discontent and aspirations, then to the professional ones. It's possible for the sociologists to be more discontent or more interested in their own development (accumulating knowledge, cultivating oneself, changing the attitude towards the others, changing some temperamental and life relating features and so on)

than in their professional development. It is possible for the sociologists to be content with their profession or disconcerted about it (and therefore to be difficult for them to be better sociologists because they don't know what this means). The 'openness' of sociology could also contribute to the sociologists' remaining in a mediocre state, to stop their fulfilment; they feel that they know a lot of things but in a wrong manner, but they know that they can do more than that. Maybe that is why they want to have had more 'closed' professions, in which to have been good. The sociologists show themselves as generous, good, and helpful with other people. They often mention them in their discourses. They want to help them; they want to have professions which should make them available to them. Even the most individualist of all messages is softened by the conscious of having the status of the saviour of an exceptional child who was treated unjustly.

Behind this attitude there is also a consciousness of their superiority to other people. The sociologists realise or just believe that they are special. This thing shows their (justified?) arrogance. They were a great promise as a child and insist in bringing evidence of their value: they were awarded for artistic creation, also in maths or physics national contests, they were the top of the class and were successful at their graduating exam. Their grandparents and parents saw them as a 'great' person. Since they were a child they have sought the confirmation of their superiority: they felt great when, as a child, people used to stare at them when they were reading foreign newspapers on their way home or were the happiest when they could gather all the other children and made them listen to them, and theirs greatest joy was when children recognised them as their 'teacher' (who evaluated them and awarded them, depending on their merits!). They are sorry even now that they didn't become a doctor so as to have people queuing at their medical office to ask for advice and listen to them. And, as professors, they are proud to offer their students the best thing you can offer somebody: aspirations. And they carefully mention that the others should feel threatened by their position of a person with an open destiny. They know they are essential to the others: no matter how much they dislike it, they know they'll have to accept important positions.

Their successes, their accomplishments come from the same direction. They exist if they are recognised by others. The world must know and appreciate them, be grateful to them.

Maybe not gratitude is the most important, but the idea of power which enchants them: the facts that they can change destinies, that can save lives, bring balance and so on.

I've wrote the stories during many hours. The words seemed already made somewhere, coming easily. I felt no need for breaks – to have some water, look on the window or other 'deserved' rewards, as it always happens in this kind of

works. It was exciting. The most difficult to write was the interpretative story. It takes longer time and one has to be more careful because one doesn't show just findings and doesn't describe only what one discovered. One has to accompany every observation with its interpretation, its significances and implications. This is the moment of a consistent return to the literature, in the case that one hasn't got 'in one's pocket' too many theories. This can be the unpleasant moment of uncertainties and inabilities. But it can also be the moment of wonderful hypotheses!

I thought that I would be unpleasantly surprised to discover that I didn't capture in my stories a great deal from the authenticity of the materials. But looking to the texts from the field or to the summaries I made, I found that I didn't leave aside too many things. The stories were making themselves up in my mind as I was reading and analysing each document. And they were fully accomplished.

I don't know how much from the story on sociologists had existed in my mind before the exercise. My feeling is that I added nothing (except my personal document 'I wish I had been…'). The final material suits me very well, I find myself in the sociologist's story. I am very curious if somebody else feels the same about this. And I ask you seriously and with great interest to signal the 'spots' where you feel that it has nothing to do with the sociologist-professor or businessman-engineer that you are. I engage to defend every bit of text, but also to hear and understand your arguments.

I don't think I deviated from the recommended procedure, but I fear that I am so involved in this story that I might not see the slippages. This was the story of conducting a story-telling. I wish I had so many documents that I could be proud of firm conclusions. And I'm afraid that, as a consequence of my presentation, some of you, my colleagues, are falling too for qualitative research and for story-telling and that you could 'rob' me of my subject of teaching and research.

Story-telling – a great tool for social research

Even since 1981 Bertaux sustained that 'sociology is not much read these days. And this is a paradox. If sociology were a specialized science like, say, biochemistry or electronics, one could understand that none except specialists would read about it in specialized publications. But sociology is not that. Its contention is that it deals with institutions, cultures, forms of social life, social relations, in other words with the very texture of social life as people live it. And yet it seems that these very people who should be primarily interested to hear what we have to say about their societies, turn instead towards reading history or anthropology, not only because it is "dépaysant" (exotic), but also

because the discourse of these disciplines makes quite often for highly enjoyable reading" (p. 32).

These days the situation is pretty much the same. But the story-telling form of writing the research results can bring the public back to sociology. Bertaux argued that 'the two forms through witch sociology is expressed these days, namely the "scientific" form that the quantitative empirical discourse invariably takes, and the philosophical form of abstract theoretical discourse, are both obsolete. They are responsible for the desertion of the public, even more so than is our usually rather dull style of writing. I have come to the conclusion that we should try and develop a different form of discourse, namely "le récit" (narration)' (p. 43).

I think that the sociological discourses have become too technical (see the opinion pools results). Some of the sociologists slip away from the public deepening into statistic operations. Others write very difficult to read books (*see* Jean Baudrillard, Juergen Habermas and so on). For whom do we write? For whom do we research? If we write in a technical manner, if we write in a philosophical one, if we write theoretical sentences with no field checking up, how could we expect people read us, appreciate us or benefit from our work?

Everyone can see that story-telling is a very different discourse (it has no numbers, it has no percentages, no graphics etc.). It has more meaning, it has more sense and savour. It has more to do with people, with the research subject's feelings, thoughts, attitudes and so on. One could understand better from my story-telling who are the Romanian sociologists, what are their regrets and aspirations than from a no matter how well done statistic. And this is because the writing style of the research results is enjoyable (and the researcher is free to use narrative tools and any writing expression tools he or she considers necessary).

Of course there are situations when we need a survey to accomplish our knowledge goals (for example when we have to know with whom people will vote). But there are also situations when we have to know the way electoral preferences are settled (and in this case we need focus-groups) and situations when we may want to show to the voting people the process they went through deciding if and with whom to vote (and in this case we can perform a story-telling). And of course story-telling is more suitable in some cases. 'You can choose to interpret your data by story-telling when the information you gathered from the field are astonished, unaccustomed, when the collected material presents spectacular, uncommon, non-accessible people, events or phenomenon' (Scârneci 2006: 512).

Together with the students whom I coordinate, we develop every year very impressive descriptive stories (which make the voices of some forgotten, marginalized or even discriminated subjects heard). It's about the stories of

cancer patients (who speak about how they deal with the disease, what keeps them alive, what bother them about the people who interact with them), stories of women abused by their husbands (who speak about shame, about their mothers that taught them how to endure), stories of Roma children (who talk about their first days at school and how they discover at 7 years old that the water can 'come from the wall') and so on. These stories are more suggestive than 1000 statistics and the help offered to such persons can be 1000 times more efficient after the reading of such a story than after reading some cold, dry, theoretical or numerical observations, in a professional language.

With these stories everyone can be there, in the field, everyone can understand what is going on, how one thinks, how one reacts at something and why, one can find a detail image of an event, one can get inside someone's mind, heart, one can feel the way somebody else is feeling and so on. I cannot think of a tool more valuable for the social research. If the research aim is to produce social knowledge then story-telling is a very strong instrument for understanding social situations, for knowing the social reality in its live form.

We can find beautiful and recognized story-telling studies in sociological literature. Nobody questions their value or their scientific form. For example, every one of us heard about Erving Goffman, most of us appreciate his work. "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" and "Asylums" are beautiful stories enjoyed by people (not only specialists) from all over the world. Even story-telling is closer to literature it is still science. If we write the research results in an attractive form, for a broad public, we do not diminish its value.

The post-modern sociology claims for qualitative research (the accent is more on context, process and local). We can no longer rely exclusively on surveys and its results, we cannot trust exclusively experimental situations in studying people. I think that is not appropriate to exclusively adopt a positivist perspective on studying socio-human field. Our subjects are talking, are thinking, they can lie, they are affected by the social desirability effect, they are concerned with their prestige and image etc. They are not substances, numbers, electric circuits etc. A completely objective form of knowledge in social sciences is, in my opinion, impossible to reach. Thus is more productive to give more attention to a different form of studying the social realities: qualitative research. It is not looking for objective realities outside the subjects, but seeks for human subjectivity, for the world of meaning and interpretations of everyday actions and concerns. It is about understanding people, about the way they define the situations, about the way they explain their actions, not about searching laws concerning classes of people and phenomena. It is not a picture of reality, but a film of it. It is about complex, deep and rich data not about simple facts and opinion. And one of the most impressive and suggestive way

to express the results of a qualitative research is story-telling (along with other artistic expressions: photography, film, play, drawing etc.).

One can choose among the writing styles according to the research problem character. 'For example, if you are a welfare worker and you study the homeless children you should choose the interpretive writing style (because of its intervention practical value). Or, if you work for an institution that wants to improve the gypsies life it's better if you present their world applying the descriptive style (because of its authenticity and value neutrality features)' (Scârneci 2006: 512). Of course writing styles can be combined, other writing styles can be invented and used. Story-telling is a reliable tool for understanding society and the way it works.

The purpose of this paper was not to present some research results but to remind the sociological community (especially the one coming from east and central Europe where the qualitative approach is not much appreciated) about story-telling existence and its value for the social knowledge. Anyway the stories presented above illustrated some important and significant differences between people with a different background. People with a socio-human academic culture teaching in university react in a special way to a task, think in a special way about themselves, about what they have become, about what are their regrets and unfulfilments; they use some words defining themselves, they have a special way of thinking about self-realization, about what is important in life; they have a special way of dealing with problems, and in general, with life. People with a technical academic culture doing business seem to be very different from the ones already mentioned. They react differently, they think about themselves differently and so on. Also the confessional story above presented the experience of a researcher with the task of doing and explaining the way of doing story-telling. It contains the theoretical, methodological and practical difficulties a researcher face when performing story-telling. I cannot think of a more suggestive way of teaching but presenting in a confessional form the research process, the things that will happen in it, the feelings that will probable appear during it.

Anyway, like Bertaux's conclusion, we should tell stories; 'not only the life stories of various people but also the story of such or such a pattern of social relations, the story of a culture, of an institution, of a social group; and also, our own story as research workers' (1981: 44). And these stories are different from the ones we ordinary write because they are more authentic, more suggestive, more alive (through the artistic expressions we use, the subjects words and way of talking, the natural way we recognize where we were wrong and so on).

Conclusions

Story-telling as a way to interpret data is very challenging. Especially if you enjoy writing, this is the most pleasant part of the research. It is also very suggestive and this increases the applicability of the research results.

In Romania the qualitative research is not on the place it deserves; the story-telling even less. In my opinion, the story-telling needs more attention, needs to be analysed more closely by the qualitative researcher and to be more clearly explicated for those who want to study and apply it. And that's because story-telling is an interesting and a challenging method for the social researcher in general (even he or she is a sociologist or a welfare worker, linguist, historian etc.).

Story-telling does not benefit of the deserved attention. The descriptions of the methodology for achieving these interpretation modes are few, unclear. There are still many unsolved dilemmas related to techniques, ethics or deontology. I wished, through this article, to remind that the method exists, that it is feasible, exciting and useful.

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