

Agnieszka Golczyńska-Grondas
University of Lodz, Poland

Badges of Social Valuing and the Biography. Natalia's Interview in the Perspective of Sociologist of Poverty and Social Exclusion

Abstract The paper presents an attempt to analyze the interview with Natalia within the framework of sociology of poverty and from a social exclusion perspective. The information about the origins of Natalia's interview is delineated. In the main part of the text, the author refers to the concept of *the badge of ability*, described by Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, as a tool of social categorizing and valuing and introduces the corresponding notion of *the badge of inability*, ascribed to the unprivileged group members. Furthermore, the influence of both kinds of badges on the situation of Natalia's family of origin, on her life course, and self-description are indicated with some remarks on the narrator's biographical and identity work. The last part of the paper presents the narrator's understanding of the world of poverty and social exclusion, its mechanisms, and conditionings.

Keywords Biography; Poverty; Marginalization; Social Valuing; Stigmatization; Badge of Ability; Badge of Inability

Agnieszka Golczyńska-Grondas, PhD, a Sociologist at the Department of Applied Sociology and Social Work, Institute of Sociology, Faculty of Economics and Sociology, University of Lodz, Poland. The main area of her research interests covers the phenomena of poverty and social exclusion, she is especially involved in biographical studies with underprivileged collectivities.

email address: agrondas@uni.lodz.pl

Introduction – Natalia's Interview Origin

The interview with Natalia comes from my project entitled *Institutionalized identity? The processes of identity development on the basis of biographies rendered by adults raised in residential child care homes*.¹ The project planned to be conducted from 2011 to 2014 has been aimed at the analysis of life stories and identity

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development processes of adults living in residential care institutions in their childhood and/or adolescence, as well as their identity work in adult life. I have also been interested in the social world of children's residential care homes. The triangulated data sources constituted the empirical basis of the project: 46 narrative / biographical interviews were collected. The narrators – presently adults in their 30s and 40s – were institutionalized in residential children's institutions² located in one of the large Polish cities and its area during the period from 1970-1990. Considering the fact the narrators are in the traumatized group bracket, due to traumatic memories from childhood and/or from institutionalization period, two types of interviews were applied³ – the classical narrative interview (in the form elaborated by Fritz Schütze and his co-workers [e.g., Schütze 2009]) and the in-depth biographical interview. It was the narrator who decided on the form of interview applied. Interviewees were also asked to fulfill a Twenty Statement Test in the starting phase of the interview. Furthermore, accessible interviewees' data files stored in the archives of children's residential care homes were scrutinized. The final results of the project are presented in the book *"We were brought up by the State." About the identity of the adult leavers of children's residential care institutions* (Golczyńska-Grondas 2014).

Getting in touch with potential narrators occurred to be a very complicated task. At the beginning, I followed the snowball strategy, which shortly appeared to be inefficient due to the limited network of mutual relationships of institutional leavers.

² The narrators were institutionalized mainly in state children's institutions, six interviewees were placed in family-based small group homes.

³ In order to ensure the maximal sense of comfort and safety to the narrator.

Thus, I decided to ask collaborating children residential care institutions under study for the list of the leavers born in 1960-1975. The official university invitation letters were sent from the Institute of Sociology to the individuals from the list. Natalia was one of 8 persons who reacted directly to the invitation letter – she called the Institute office and said that she was willing to tell me her story. We met in August 2011 at my office. In the starting phase, I supplied Natalia with the most important information about the research, its aims, and forms of results dissemination. Because of the narrator's interest, I also presented some details of my own life story. Natalia preferred to be questioned according to the in-depth biographical interview scheme. In the ending phase, we had a short conversation about institutional leavers' fates. At the very end of the meeting, I obtained Natalia's consent to analyze her files at the disposal of the children's group home she was placed in, thus, this paper also contains some information additional to the main interview.

What was the researcher's reason for selecting the interview with Natalia from the rest of the collected interviews to be discussed and analyzed with other social scientists?⁴ First and foremost, the interview with Natalia is the most difficult interview I have ever conducted due to narrator's deep suffering while she was talking about her family of origin and her childhood experiences. Even though I consider myself a good listener – empathic and supportive

⁴ I would like to express my profound gratitude to Professor Kaja Kaźmierska who is an initiator of the idea of conjoint work on Natalia's interview, the organizer of "Natalia's session" at ESA RN03 Midterm conference in Lodz, September 2012 and the editor of our collective work presented in this journal. I would also like to thank all colleagues, the authors of the papers on Natalia's interview – Johanna Björkenheim, Gerhard Riemann, Sylwia Urbańska, and Katarzyna Waniek.

– there were moments in Natalia's story that were extremely strenuous for me – in some parts of the interview the level of stress resulted in my spontaneous and unconsidered interventions.⁵ Observing Natalia's behavior and emotions, I made the deliberative decision to break the planned interview scenario and close the threads regarding Natalia's family of origin⁶ before questioning about the main elements studied within the project – for instance, the narrators' own life history. Secondly, Natalia is an extremely insightful narrator with a reflective attitude towards her own biography, its fundamental conditionings and processes, taking up biographical and identity work. Thirdly, Natalia's case representing the success story in the project contradicts the stereotype of a "typical" life course of an institutional leaver (perceived as a person with limited abilities to live an independent adult life, liable to suffer defeat) existing in professional discourse (see: Sajkowska 1999; EUROCHILD WORKING PAPER 2012), popular literature, and mass-media.⁷ There-

⁵ For example, the question about the exact year of the little sister's death.

⁶ As the member of the sociological team researching poverty and social exclusion I am interested in the intergenerational transmission of these phenomena. In this very project the questions about family of origin members, especially siblings, were designed to gain the additional, comparative data on institutional leavers life courses.

⁷ There are many works in the area of popular literature and film presenting former orphanages and modern children's residential care institutions, and the individuals placed there (e.g., Charles Dickens' *Olivier Twist*, with several screen versions; *The Magdalene Sisters*, drama by Peter Mullan; horrors, like *El Espinazo del Diablo* by Guillermo del Toro, *El Orfanato* by Juan Antonio Bayona). Although the writers and directors focus on depicting rather power relationships and/or individual and collective functioning in the institutions, there are also some books and films in which we can follow the portraits of children's homes leavers. For example, in Agatha Christie's novels some of the characters involved in criminal activities were raised in residential care institutions. In the last decade in ITV (UK), such characters were presented in one of the episodes ("Little Lazarus") of criminal drama series *Vera* based on Ann Cleeves' books. Both the victim of the murder, the single mother who was not able to adapt to the society, and her killer were placed in their childhood in the group home.

fore, the group work on this interview not only gives an opportunity to conduct analysis both within the social sciences framework, and in the area of helping professions but also to reflect upon the methodological and ethical issues of biographical interviewing.

The Possible Analytical Directions of Natalia's Interview – The Standpoint of the Social Exclusion Researcher. In-lead in the Subject Area of the Paper

The possibility of conducting multidimensional analysis of the data is one of the most important and unquestionable advantages of the biographical method. When we approach Natalia's biography as the main research *topic* (Helling 1990), we can consider, for example, the narrator's life course and life strategies, her biographical and identity work, the interplay between personal identity and significant others, or Natalia's self-description contrasted with the characteristics of the narrator's siblings. However, in the area of the research on social exclusion – the main field of my sociological interest – Natalia's life history can be treated rather as a *means* (Helling 1990). On the basis of the interview supplied with the documents from Natalia's files, a researcher can be tempted to describe such phenomena as the portrait of the family living in an impoverished neighborhood in a big city, deprived of institutional support, and the family structure and functions. A scientist can also dwell on the problems of child neglect, of interrelations between poverty and gender, for example, female and male roles in the social world of poverty, or consider other important phenomena, like stereo-

typing, labeling, and stigmatization, manifesting in everyday reality of marginalized individuals and groups. Taking into account not only cognitive but also utilitarian dimensions of social research, the recognition of factors crucial to the process of breaking through the vicious circles of poverty, social exclusion, and stigmatization is one of the central problems here.

The collectivity of children's residential care institution leavers is recognized as strongly endangered by marginalization processes due to high statistics of school dropouts, risk of unemployment, homelessness, criminal behavior, and limitations in playing social roles of key importance in adult life (EUROCHILD WORKING PAPER 2012:9). Accordingly, the individuals raised in institutions – likewise members of other marginalized groups – become susceptible to both informal and institutionalized stigmatizing, in this very case evinced in multiplied tribal stigma (Goffman 1981). For centuries "dysfunctional" families members have been perceived as members of the lowest social stratum collectively affected by blemishes of character; this phenomenon was also observed in the Polish society in the years of Natalia's institutionalization:

[i]n socialist regimes from Central and Eastern Europe, "dysfunctional" families and individuals were often perceived as not willing to be integrated into society. Parents' difficulty to care for their children was seen as an individual failure to be solved through State intervention, with public authorities openly encouraging parents to place their children in the institution and even as using it as a measure to sanction dissenting behavior. (EUROCHILD WORKING PAPER 2012:6)

During childhood and adolescence, the negative labeling of children brought up in multi-problem families results from the characteristics ascribed to their parents and other family of origin members by the *normals* participating in the mainstream society, particularly employees of institutions constituted for exercising social control. The primordial stigma interlinked with beliefs referring to the mechanism of genetic or social inheriting is intensified by placement in residential care settings. The claim that "institutions often put a label of stigma on children – regardless of their age or circumstances" and reduce their chances of successful future integration (EUROCHILD WORKING PAPER:8; see also: Sajkowska 1999) relates not only to the impact of institutionalization, formative for individual biography, personality, and identity, but also to the acts of social classifying, stereotyping, labeling, and valuing.⁸ The limited social, cultural, symbolic, economic, and emotional capital of de-institutionalized individuals can also provoke the acts of stigmatizing at the beginning of institutional leavers' adult life. At the level of mezzo and macro structure, collective acts of categorizing, especially the ones performed by formal institutions (agencies of the State and local governments), legitimize the spectrum of individual participation in different spheres of social life and influence social actors' life chances (Strauss 1969). Therefore, my study of Natalia's case pertains to the concepts of

⁸ The narrators share the opinion about specific attitudes of others towards individuals who grew up in the institutions. The informants mostly mentioned negative stereotypes, but some of them also referred to some kind of "interactionally experienced" empathy or mercy. In the individual narrations, one can also find descriptions of the acts of self-stigmatizing. Self-stigmatizing had sometimes been used as a kind of "currency" in difficult situations, i.e., in job applications or in the search for the proper flat.

the badge of ability and *the badge of inability*⁹ related to the phenomena of social categorizing and valuing, significant for the analysis of institutional leavers' biographies and their identity construction. I will refer to the influence of socially ascribed badges on life course and status of Natalia and the members of her family of origin, on the narrator's self-description, and perception of her relationships with intimate significant others. As Natalia's case constitutes the pattern of a biography of a person who – by undertaking biographical and identity work – has managed to “overcome” the vicious circle of poverty, marginalization, and stigmatization, but is still rooted in two social worlds, in the last part of the text, I will also relate to Natalia's subjective perspective and present her as an interpreter theorizing on the conditionings and factors of poverty and social exclusion.

The badge of ability and the badge of inability

While considering the interlinks between social exclusion and social categorizing and valuing, the researcher can address a few theories and concepts. Some of them, like labeling “theory”¹⁰ or Goffman's stigma, are deeply grounded in sociological and psychological traditions, still, in the very text, I will recall the concept which does not seem

⁹ The notion of *the badge of inability* and its interconnections with the social classification processes are presented in a more developed way in my work on adult institutional leavers' identity (Golczyńska-Grondas 2014).

¹⁰ In the “Introduction to Polish Edition” of Becker's *Outsiders. Studies in Sociology of Deviance* Elżbieta Zakrzewska-Manterys writes: “[l]abeling theory is not a theory. However, not due to the reasons enumerated by representatives of conventional sociology but for the characteristic traits of symbolic interactionism that is to say “non-theoretism” [“nieteoretyczność”] of theories providing the sensitizing concepts...” (2009:XV [trans. AGG]).

to be broadly discussed within the framework of social science. In 1972, two American sociologists, Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, published the book entitled *The Hidden Injuries of Class*¹¹ in which they introduced the concept of *the badge of ability*.¹² Whereas within the framework of the labeling “theory” the authors consider the impact of the social response to violation of social norms, and whilst stigma is defined as a kind of attribute ascribed by the *normals* discrediting an individual or a group (Becker 1966; Goffman 1981), *the badge of ability* concept focuses on acts of classifying and valuing others, which refer to the domain of social inequalities and are based on institutionalized procedures both influenced by and influencing the perception of a social actor. *The badges of ability* are ascribed to the individuals with particular talents, “standing out from the mass,” mostly within the systems of education and professional certification. Assigning *the badges of ability* is rooted in a class order, predominantly this marker becomes the attribute of the individuals from upper social strata. For example, in educational and professional settings students and employees from middle and upper classes are classified by teachers as more talented, more intellectually developed, with better cognitive skills than their peers from the lower social strata. According to Sennett and Cobb, *the badges of ability* confirm the social value of upper classes members, constitute the basis of their personal dignity and others' respect, and delimit the area of person-

¹¹ I would like to thank my colleague, sociologist Magdalena Rek-Woźniak, who recommended this book to me.

¹² I have not found any papers discussing *the badge of ability* concept within social sciences although the term of badge is used in educational sciences (“educational badges” as a tool of alternative assessment [see, e.g., Abramovich, Schunn, and Higashi 2013]) and in behavioral ecology (“badge of status” [see, e.g., Nakagawa et al. 2007]).

al freedom. Furthermore, *the badges of ability* are converted into the tool of power legitimatization. A person who “wears” *a badge of ability* can fulfill the role of an expert entitled to categorizing and valuing others, thus, the attribution of this badge gives the power to assess the abilities of the lowest social strata members to participate in mainstream society and to control them. However, in the cases of individual upward social mobility badges of ability ascribed to a person coming from an underprivileged group, the badges become a source of individual feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, and/or powerlessness. Such feelings can result either from the perception of upgrading individual treated as an usurper encroaching a new social world or from the individual sense of guilt and betrayal towards old friends, acquaintances, or relatives, or from the sense of disappointment of upper class members' image and activities (Sennett, Cobb 1972).

Following Sennett and Cobb's considerations, it is possible to introduce the notion of *the badge of inability* as a term opposite to *the badge of ability*. The authors of *The Hidden Injuries of Class* apply the term *the signs of unequal ability* (Sennett and Cobb 1972:68) in the description of school teacher categorizing children from working class as individuals with worse adaptation abilities, lower aspirations, and limited willingness to task fulfillment. The expectations towards children coming from lower social strata can release the mechanism of self-fulfilling prophecy – thus, in the adulthood, the children from underprivileged groups (with minor exceptions) turn into invisible mass, the backdrop for possessors of *the badge of ability* (Sennett Cobb 1972; see also: Burnham and Hartsough 1968, Rosenthal

and Jacobson 1968, Good and Brophy 1972 as cited in Meighan 1993; Jacyno 1997).

The badge of inability can be therefore defined as a kind of negative marker attributed to marginalized individuals and families – via institutional rituals of degradation (Garfinkel 1956) – by institutions and organizations of social policy system. Social workers, probation officers, health visitors, teachers, and other institutional experts perform the evaluation of the individuals and families who ask for intervention themselves or who have been reported to the authorities by others. Such an assessment can be founded on professional expertise and knowledge but also on arbitrary perception rooted in cultural values and norms or even in stereotypes, personal beliefs, and prejudices. For example, sociologists analyzing Polish social work institutions point that relatively often clients' assessment is made on a basis of observation of the living conditions. The attention of an expert is paid especially to the level of hygiene and tidiness of the household and its inhabitants, which seems to be treated as the main premises in the generalized assessment of a person or a family:

[f]or many social workers, the ability to keep a flat in order and neatness becomes a synonym of the ability to cope, despite very low income...then, a dirty, neglected flat with old, devastated furniture happens to be proof of idleness, and waste of funds, still, more often it is an indicator of problems different from poverty – depending on the interpretation – helplessness, apathy, particular value hierarchy, or a problem of alcohol addiction in a family. (Kalbarczyk 2013:243 [trans. AGG]; see also: Golczyńska-Grondas 2014)

Another indicator, important in the process of assessment in social work, can be the functioning of a diagnosed individual, his/her family members' behaviors, or even the behavior of other persons living or temporarily staying with the family. The negative results of the observation and assessment supported by institutional experts' opinions legitimize *the badge of inability* assignment. Obviously, without thorough, multidisciplinary complex analysis of a particular case, it is not possible to decide whether the assignment of *the badge of inability* results from the professional knowledge, is a kind of malpractice, or even professional mistake, however, it is worth noticing that differentiated connotations and ideologies are ascribed to *the badges of inability* inbuilt in the explanatory theories and narratives within the area of poverty and social exclusion. Within conservative, moralizing discourse, the scientists and practitioners indicate the interlinks between social exclusion and personal deficiencies or faults of character (supporter of this discourse will assess individuals or families as "pathological" or dysfunctional"), whereas the adherents of structure narrative or social change model underline the influence of macro-social factors (the adjectives such as "shiftless," "inefficient," or "not capable" can be used in this case) (Golczyńska-Grondas 1998; Kalbarczyk 2013; Krumer-Nevo and Benjamin 2010 as cited in Tarkowska 2013; Tarkowska 2013). Putting aside the issue of assessment reliability and accuracy, since the interest of the institutions concentrates on individuals negatively perceived and valued in their environment due to their being "destructive" or "anti-social," the basic sense of *the badge of inability* is the statement that an individual is not able

to "properly" fulfill social roles, functions, and tasks (Golczyńska-Grondas 1998). Consequently, *the badge of inability* attribution legitimizes institutional activities, entitles professionals to intervene in marginalized individuals' and families' life, and into their privacy.¹³ *The badge of inability* also causes that personal traits and activities are subordinated to social classifying and re-classifying based on stereotyping and retrospective reinterpretation of social roles, which strengthen the power of this badge.

To conclude: With references to "classical" sociological theories, *badges of ability* and *badges of inability* can be described as the tools triggering off the acts of labeling and stigmatizing within the framework of social scheme of values and – at the same time – they are the important social markers and factors influencing individual lives in processes of social exclusion and inclusion.¹⁴ Both kinds of badges are grounded in formal regulations but also in informal process of assessing and valuing individuals and groups who "wear" them; these badges strongly influence their everyday reality and life course in any type of society or group.

¹³ Obviously, the strategies applied by the employees of helping and correctional institutions differ, beginning from far reaching interference, like punitive regulation of poverty (Wacquant 2001), through depersonalizing treatment, to empowerment settled on mutual partnership.

¹⁴ In the class society *the badge of ability* is the source of individual value: "in this society, rich and poor, plumber and professor, is subject to a scheme of values that tells him he must validate the self in order to win others' respect and his own" (Sennett and Cobb 1972:75). Sennett and Cobb applied the term of *badge of ability* in the analysis of American society in 70s, but it seems that the concepts of *badge of ability* and *inability* can be deployed in a much more universal dimension.

Badges of Inability and Ability in Natalia's Interview

Natalia's Family of Origin Story – The Way to Social Exclusion and the Badge of Inability

The authors of *The Hidden Injuries of Class* state that in the 20th century the extender family becomes the source of personal humiliation rather than of collective strength (Sennett and Cobb 1972:107). In Natalia's life story her family of origin turned into the source of jeopardy for all its members. We do not know much about Natalia's ancestors' history, but it is possible that in Natalia's maternal lineage we face the case of intergenerational transmission of poverty and social problems:

[m]y grandmother worked hard throughout her whole life, uhm... she had four children, one child actually died shortly after birth somehow... my grandmother uhm... became a widow at a young age since her first husband simply drank himself to death, such are the alcoholic genes. ...just so (((ironic laughter))) from generation to generation, already so deep so... my mother's father drank himself to death, my grandmother was left alone she brought up two children it was not easy for her she worked her whole life in [name of the workplace] plant. ...she got married and gave birth to a son who at the age of 24 was killed and uhm... then her second husband also died and she was actually alone. (see: "Transcript of Biographical Interview with Natalia" in this issue of QSR, p. 151, lines 13-24)

Natalia was born in a small village – her father's place of origin. Presumably, the narrator's family living in a rented room in poor conditions differed from the village community and from the father's relatives. The father's mother – a local farmer – did

not accept her son's marriage, she suspected that Natalia's older brother was born out of wedlock. When Natalia was 5 or 6 years old, the family moved to a big industrial city and settled down in one of the poor quarters. Natalia's mother "broke into some squat" (p. 127, line 2), and the family obtained the administrative permission to occupy a 30 m² apartment placed in the so-called "commune flat."¹⁵ The flat was situated in an old, devastated tenement house:

for many, many years, there was only one room, there was no toilet. The toilet was in the street/ in the yard, so the conditions were hardly any. There was no bathroom, just an old dirty sink and uhm... and a pot for children to piss in... at night or in the evening. Generally, one went there to the end of the yard to the toilet and so it really looked like to the end this uhm... this is our home. (p. 152, line 34 to p. 153, line 3)

Such lodgings have been relatively often domiciled by inhabitants living at the margins of mainstream society. The neighbor next door was an alcohol-addicted man, for this man Natalia and her siblings used to collect cigarette butts in the streets. After the neighbor's death, the family took over his room, expanding their living space, extremely needful for parents and their six children. Natalia's family entered into a scheme of socially excluded family units from impoverished neighborhoods, becoming one of the typical representatives of the social world of poverty. In material dimensions, poor, overcrowded, cramped housing,

¹⁵ "Commune flats" were popular in socialistic countries – separate rooms in previously large-sized flats situated in tenement houses were allocated, on the basis of administrative decision, to non-related persons/families who shared a hall, a kitchen, and a bathroom. This solution is still popular in Polish cities, especially, in the old, impoverished areas.

lack of separate space for adults and children, and insufficient income could be observed. Malnourishment and low hygienic standards influenced the family members' health; the level of deprivation was significant, worsened by both parents' harmful use of alcohol. The family lived under day-to-day pressure, time was structured by the phases of parents' constant drinking. Natalia's closest relatives lacked the competencies indispensable for effective social functioning (Potoczna 1998; Jankowski and Warzywoda-Kruszyńska 2010).

The interview mirrors the deepening process of child neglect. In Natalia's early childhood: "in the 80s...the conditions were good enough that this care was... and the money... it was enough. I remember we used to go to the cinema and for ice cream and... and generally it was, it was okay" (p. 117, lines 27-30), but in the following years the parents were gradually withdrawing from satisfying the children's basic material and emotional needs. In particular, in the "jag" periods untended children used to organize their daily activities:

I remember once there was this situation that my mother locked us up...and went out. This, she was out for like two or three days. People gave us food through the window... well it wasn't any fun. In any case, we had stupid ideas because the age difference was, I don't know, say from 13 to 5 or 4 years. We organized a cool party at home... of course, with the house locked up. Our friends, boys and girls came in through the window/ and we had such a large tin bath... and decided to melt in all the plastic things that come to our mind, so we would have also probably burnt the house uhm... ... [w]e set fire to plastic stuff and so it flowed nicely, flowed into that bowl. There was terrible smoke, the police arrived, fire bri-

gade and all, so there all the crackpot you can imagine uhm... (p. 120, line 30 to p. 121, line 6)

Children suffered from domestic violence – the rules of upbringing were based on corporal punishment, the drunk father maltreated his spouse and children, mostly boys, but there is evidence in Natalia's file that the narrator was also a victim of her father's aggressive behavior. Finally, the family's flat turned into a place of alcohol illegal trading: "both the district [name of the impoverished neighborhood in the city] and the conditions were friendly to that mm... to start such illegal alcohol trading, commonly it is called a den" (p. 118, lines 4-6). It seems that Natalia's parents perfectly adapted to the environment and its norms, moreover, the family could have achieved relatively high status in the neighborhood:

there was a den at home and forever some uhm... men came, older or younger, came for the alcohol, so well super (((with irony))) in particular that we often served the ((laughs)) the client, yes. So, so the contacts were such, let's say that we all were known in the streets and uhm... okay, no one touched us there ((laughter)). (p. 130, lines 16-19)

Natalia's interview also gives the evidence of the special role of the oldest generation in socially excluded families – another phenomenon typical of the social world of poverty (e.g., Potoczna and Warzywoda-Kruszyńska 2009). For many years Natalia's grandmother was the only person who was supporting the family – supplying them with food, giving children a shelter, and trying to influence her daughter:

[m]y grandma tried to intervene a little bit, because my grandmother is a very much of an okay person,

that is, my mother's mother. It was also all very hard for her. She brought us food, but unfortunately, she failed to bring up mom and – she didn't have any influence on her, although she sometimes she hit her on the head with an umbrella, but it didn't restore her reason. (p. 120, lines 26-30)

The father's mother did not participate in her son's and grandchildren's everyday life but she supported Natalia in critical situations, temporarily taking care of the narrator in her early adolescence.

At the beginning, the family malfunctioning did not provoke any institutional reaction, in Natalia's opinion, this lack of interest in family situation contributed to her little sister's death: "it seems to me that if, if anybody had had an interest in this child earlier, she wouldn't have died. Cause this meningitis purulent uhm... certainly had been developing much, much earlier, and in my opinion, this child was neglected" (p. 119, lines 11-13). The first tracks of institutional attention, which can be the evidence of *the badge of inability* attribution, are related to the narrator's early educational career. School certificates in the narrator's file prove that in the first years of primary school Natalia had quite good school results but in the 4th grade she began to skip classes, the problem deepened the next year when she missed almost 300 hours. Because of poverty and physical neglect Natalia and her siblings might have been stigmatized by schoolmates and teachers:

my mother didn't pay attention to look after us so that we had clean neat things. It was all washed but it was washed in such a way that it was thrown into one washing machine, so these things were so, well, uncool. Generally, always, I don't know, maybe it wasn't lice but there were always some scabies uhm...

And being at school, there it was a bit uncool, cause there were such uhm... nursing controls and so on so it didn't belong to cool things, cause in class one may have not uhm... not been someone, that is been some kind of person rejected from the group, and one always made up for this with one's character and I don't know, somehow it.... it was okay. But it never was so that we had time to learn super-extra so that we would be among the school class leaders – there were just such different trappings. Sometimes there was no lunch but there were organized some kind of school lunches, free of charge. (p. 118, lines 18-27)

Broad-based process of the institutional assessment of the family began as a result of the grandmother's (the mother's mother) intervention, when Natalia's father was sentenced for two years in prison for illegal alcohol trading and her mother "went partying hard" (p. 120, line 25). The professional evaluation effected in parental rights limitation and children's institutionalization, Natalia's sisters and brothers were placed in different children's group homes, 12-year-old Natalia, as the only one, was put into her grandmother's custody and she spent two years in her house in the father's home village.

The next phase of *the badge of inability* attribution was interlinked with Natalia's suicidal attempt after her homecoming.¹⁶ In 1990 – the critical year for Natalia's life course – the family situation became an object of formal assessment by the school staff. The flat was described as a dirty and messy place equipped with only basic furniture. Parents "overusing alcohol, do not tend to the children. Natalia takes care of her siblings. She often does

¹⁶ "[M]y dad left this prison and came home... he came for me... and said that everything will be okay and everything and I... I came back here, to [the name of city]" (p. 121, lines 27-29).

the cleaning and cooking. The material situation of the family is difficult, the family remains constantly under the school supervision"¹⁷ [trans. AGG]. The hospital psychologist concluded that the suicidal attempt was caused by difficult family situations, quarrels, the girl's unsatisfied emotional needs, and her sense of being rejected by the parents. In the psychologist's opinion, the return to family home could have resulted in subsequent suicidal behaviors – Natalia was afraid of "the rejection and punishment for her suicidal act"¹⁸ [trans. AGG].

Natalia preferred to be placed in a children's group home; during her institutionalization the progressive process of family members' malfunctioning became a deciding factor for *the badge of inability* assignment. Since Natalia's leaving home all her siblings have been diagnosed by experts within social welfare and/or jurisdictional system and temporarily placed in residential care or correctional institutions, nowadays, all of them are *the badge of inability* possessors. Their negative markers have been sealed by the certified professionals – experts holding *the badges of ability*. It is difficult to find out if the negative evaluation of Natalia's relatives was followed by any attempts of professional social work (besides institutionalization) or any other kind of help, or if such probable efforts were ineffective, but all Natalia's siblings reproduced the life strategy of their parents. Sennett and Cobb states: "[h]ow, when you feel vulnerable in relation to people who are 'respectable,' do you protect yourself? There is the old way

¹⁷ Notes from Natalia's institutional file made available to the researcher.

¹⁸ Notes from Natalia's institutional file made available to the researcher.

to do this, which is to withdraw into an enclave" (1972:113). Indeed, Natalia's brothers and sisters living in the impoverished neighborhoods, supported by social welfare, and/or making their profits from criminal behavior are now trapped in vicious circles of social exclusion, but as the individuals who do not belong to society, they are in a sense "protected" from the society members who cannot hurt them by the acts of labeling and stigmatizing (Sennett and Cobb 1972). Natalia has been the only child in the family who has succeeded in the battle for "normalization," but she pays the price for her victory.

Natalia's Story – The Way to Normalization and the Badge of Ability

At the beginning of the interview Natalia says: "[g]enerally I come from a pathological family, which is why, uhm... I ended up in the children's home" (p. 117, lines 23-24). It seems that the narrator began to perceive a counter-normality of her family everyday reality and the distinctness from peers' situation when she was an adolescent girl:

[a]t the time when uhm... my dad went to prison I was at sixth grade primary school, that is, I was already such a big girl and thinking. I took care of the younger siblings I had... though I didn't always like it, because I was already at an age that, I don't know, well, it would be nice to run somewhere to the park with the girls, with the girls play after... whatever, and not all the time ask "Mom, can I go?," "Take, you know, your brother, sister with you," and so on. So I was, let's say, a nanny for the younger siblings, which I did not like because... (p. 120, lines 14-19)

Two years spent with the father's mother strengthened the negative picture of family home: "[a]fter

those two years when I lived at this grandmother I got very unused to dirt, to these alcohol bend-ers, whatever" (p. 121, lines 30-31). Although the grandmother was tough, demanding caretaker, possibly classifying her granddaughter as the possessor of tribal stigma or *the family badge of inability*¹⁹: "my grandma more than once reproached me on my room, that I am like my mother. Once I even got it on the face for, stuff like that" (p. 121, lines 16-17), Natalia could live a relatively "normal" life. It is possible that she happened to be a smart, good pupil – in the narrator's file there is a note from the primary school in a big city, written at the time of Natalia's institutionalization, in which the grade master stated that Natalia had good notes, was talented and ambitious. The teacher also wrote:

[s]he wanted to achieve the best results in her education, but she is too overwhelmed with obligations at her home. She must take care of her younger siblings, do time-consuming housework ... she emphasized many times that she wants to learn more but she does not have good conditions for this.²⁰ [trans. AGG]

"Stabilized" situation at home – constant alcohol overuse, conflicts and domestic violence, father's failures to keep promises, Natalia's hopes for a proper home and "normal" reality, and the narra-

¹⁹ Let me recall Natalia's description of the paternal grandmother's negative attitude towards her son's marriage: "[a]nd when [my father] married my mother, which my grandmother didn't like much, I don't know why, but looking back, maybe she had some reasons. Then he was generally in such a... in the background completely, and they wanted to move out from there. Grandma uhm... often said there... that the first child, that is, my older brother is a bastard, that he's not, uhm, the child of uhm... my dad's, and stuff like that. So I think that he didn't have such an easy life there with his mother" (p. 126, lines 15-20).

²⁰ Notes from Natalia's institutional file made available to the researcher.

tor's sense of otherness were the decisive factors for Natalia's desperate suicidal attempt:

I hoped that when I get back it would all be well and at last this family of mine/ but I already, uh, I could see I couldn't live like this. I freed/ I/ for two years I was gone and I just stopped to accept things, it was very very difficult for me... and I remember that (((with hesitation in her voice))) no, I don't remember at this point yet, so I don't remember for sure, but it all got one thing on top of another.... and... and these quarrels... such fights, it's probably, I mean adolescent age also played a role, I mean once, umm... enough of this all... enough of this life here in this house of drunkards (((strong emotions))). And... well I didn't want, uhm... again these lice, this dirt and and generally such old habits of the family that, uhm... I don't know. Once I don't really remember the reason yet, that was the last straw and I had swallowed the some pills that I found in the cabinet and decided to poison myself. (p. 121, line 33 to p. 122, line 7)

As we already know, Natalia did not want to come back home: "I can't live like them. I just cannot and that is, it seems to me, that is the reason why I found myself in the children's home" (p. 120, lines 9-10). She was placed in one of the best "children's group homes" in the city. Although the narrator appreciated very much this very institution as good, calm place, the beginnings of her staying there were difficult – Natalia underlines her longing for the family, especially siblings. We also read in the interview that the family reacted negatively to the narrator's decision. In a few months after Natalia's placement in the institution her father did not accept the daughter, documents in the file state that during Natalia's visits at home he was aggressive and violent, orally abused the narrator. Such behavior can possibly be interpreted as the result of Natalia's "betrayal,"

the perceived "otherness" of the daughter but also of Natalia's intervention in family life undertaken for the sake of her siblings. Parental rejection caused deep suffering of the narrator strongly connected to her relatives, hoping for their love, understanding, and acceptance:

I rebelled, it cost me a lot, because I don't know, perhaps only God knows how many nights I cried the whole night through... cause I felt rejected and when there is/ I don't know, whatever this grandma would be, whatever this father would be, one loves them and wants such uh... such acceptance from them. (p. 125 lines 11-14)

In the first year of institutionalization Natalia was at risk of obtaining *the badge of inability*. She stated herself that she was not a very disciplined resident:

I also had silly ideas too... There were various flip-outs, the girl from there, from this children's home, we came from different families, so we bought some wine too, we drank in parks, then we threw up till we dropped well... [A: ((laughter))] I also don't know, I learned to smoke cigarettes on a park bench. (p. 123, lines 14-18)

There are notes in Natalia's file about her late returns to the institution, short desertion without official permission, and alcohol drinking. The narrator made an attempt of taking up the education in a secondary school but she failed and decided to continue education in the vocational school. The children's home headmaster wrote in her opinion for the family court:

in the first semester [Natalia] got mostly failing grades. She attends the high school very reluctantly, she purposefully does not want to work. Next year

she wants to change the school for the vocational one with our full support.²¹ [trans. and underlining AGG]

With the reference to *the badge of inability* concept, the potential interpretation of quoted assessment is that the headmaster and institution staff perceived Natalia's learning difficulties as "normal" and opted for the educational path typical of institutionalized adolescents those times.²² There is also a possibility that Natalia did not want to differ from other children in the institution. In the 80s and early 90s, adolescents placed in residential children's homes graduated from primary schools followed the path of a vocational education career, the few forerunners were mobbed by peers.²³

Presumably, in the last two years of Natalia's institutionalization the narrator's relationship with the relatives become more stabilized, she was often visiting parents and siblings. The institutional assessment of Natalia's behavior also changed in the first year of her education in the vocational school – the narrator worked hard, both in the children's home and the school she was given an opinion of the "right-minded, very sensitive, and helpful girl"²⁴

²¹ Notes from Natalia's institutional file made available to the researcher.

²² In the 80s, 99% of children placed in residential care graduated from vocational schools (Raczkowska 1983). Secondary schools were regarded as the institutions appropriate for adolescents from upper social strata, the graduates were supposed to continue their education at the university level.

²³ "The child try to win respect from a figure of power, alienating his peers but confirming to the judge that here is an individual who is going to make something of himself in life, i.e., move up socially. The child can try to win respect from his peers, but in that case he feels that he has not developed the abilities within himself that would earn him the respect of the powerful person in higher class" (Sennett and Cobb 1972:88).

²⁴ Notes from Natalia's institutional file made available to the researcher.

[trans. AGG]. When three years later Natalia was graduating from the vocational school, she was awarded for good school results. Anyhow, as early as in the adolescence period, in the interactions with her relatives and peers in the institution, Natalia had to cope with feelings of inadequacy and powerlessness, which, according to Sennett and Cobb (1972), are the common experience of individuals moving upward in their relationships with the social world of origin.

Five years of institutionalization founded the background of the narrator's life course normalization. In the children's home Natalia experienced a "completely different life" (p. 122, line 35), she had "a nice room" (p. 122, line 34), there was a canteen serving "normal food" (p. 122, line 35), children could do their homework and play. The narrator met there the "true caregivers" (p. 138, line 18), who become *constructive, institutional significant others* (Golczyńska-Grondas 2009), trustful "warm persons" interested in her problems, supportive, and offering "some kind of love, friendship" (p. 140, lines 10-11). It seems that the caregivers in this very children's group home were able to establish the partnership with, at least, some of their pupils – Natalia mentioned that they taught her independence and responsibility. Some of the staff members invited the pupils to their private flats – "[they] showed us what a normal home looks like, how life should be...they showed us what was missing in a family home" (p. 140, lines 8-10). Thus, in Natalia's case, the institution turned into a model of "such a normal home" (p. 123, line 20) where she could "normally function" (p. 123, line 3), find inner peace, and where she was given the patterns to

follow in her adult life: "[they] showed me, uhm... how to live"²⁵ (p. 123, line 23).

As a 19-year-old person the narrator got a flat in the same house where her parents lived and started the independent existence. Following the interview text, we can observe how Natalia was building, step-by-step, her life – by occupational work, by gaining subsequent levels of education within the framework of part-time studies, by partnership with her future spouse coming from "the normal family," by parenthood, by forgiveness and re-establishing relationships with her parents. In adulthood, Natalia achieved the standard of normality²⁶ defined by her in the interview course:

I do live, say, not for today, but just so normally as a normal person. I have a regular job, I have a husband, I have a home, I have bills that I have to pay, which is not cool but, but that's the way life is (p. 119, lines 23-25). [S]ometimes it happens that it's a weekend we go to a barbecue and also drink some alcohol, but, but then comes Sunday, then Monday and one comes back to normal reality and goes to work, has some responsibilities. (p. 132, lines 28-30)

Natalia's present-day lifestyle is typical for middle class representatives – in the mornings, jogging in the park with the dog, buying fresh bread in a local bakery, coffee with the husband, everyday work,

²⁵ Natalia's institutionalization experience is unique in the project. Most narrators describe residential care institutions for children in the scheme of Goffman's total institutions, their assessment of the children's homes and the staff is either ambivalent or negative.

²⁶ The notion of normality is very important for the narrator (and other narrators representing in the project the cases of "relative biographical success"). The word "normal" appears very often in the interview in different lexical and grammar forms (42 indications), especially, in the parts in which Natalia opposes the reflection on her biography and identity with the consideration about her family of origin.

books, and TV in free time, meeting friends at the same age, with similar interests, weekends and holidays in the countryside, previously – before the decision to build a house – holidays abroad. We can assume that Natalia played an important role in motivating her husband to take up the effort of graduating from secondary school; thus, as his significant other, she contributed to upgrading the status of her own family.

Due to the normalization of the narrator's biography in the private sphere and her educational career Natalia managed to obtain *the badge of ability* – the marker confirming the narrator's value in the processes of social categorization. Natalia's intellectual potential and abilities have already been diagnosed by the group home staff who initially supported the narrator in the decision of taking up education in the secondary school. The next person who appreciated Natalia's abilities was her mother-in-law who patronized the narrator in her own business. Later on, Natalia was defined by the manager of the company she was working in as a talented person who was worth being supported financially in her educational career; the university bachelor diploma contributed to her professional advancement and upgraded the narrator's social status:

[a]nd I went to the studies due to my work really, because my former manager motivated me “Natalia go, go because you're wasting yourself here, go study, come on, I'll help you here, maybe the company will sponsor something” and indeed in the first year I got some money to go to the studies...and pay for them. I went to extramural studies... and then I started to, uhm, and then changed my position for a little bit higher, then even a little higher, and now I'm actually an office employee. It's an engineering position,

but, well/ we reached this current point. (p. 150, lines 11-17)

Natalia is a person who highly esteems the idea of life-long learning – she continuously develops her abilities and competencies:

[n]ormally during the school year I go twice a week, I go to the English language course because I forever study ((laughter)), well say for three years I've been continuing all the time, it's not like I rest on my laurels, I don't lie down. (p. 154, line 35 to p. 155, line 3)

The badge of ability protects Natalia from stigmatizing potentially resulting from the *badge of inability* and the tribal stigma incumbent upon her parents and siblings, although early interaction with her husband's family showed the narrator its potential influence on the way others might perceive her:

maybe there were some problems with my current mother-in-law at the beginning uhm... meaning ((laughs)) she didn't want her son to date a girl from a children's home, and maybe she just had a different future in mind, but we dealt with her ((laughs))... (p. 144, lines 17-20).

[I]t was such a normal family there wasn't anything missing, they lived in a block of flats, three rooms with a kitchen, nicely furnished, well I absolutely didn't fit into this family because I was just a poor orphan from a children's home ((laughter)), with such a past with some round-the-bend family, and sometimes it was a horror to meet one of my brothers in a dark street. But... but my husband's family was normal. (p. 145, lines 11-16)

At the same time however, in terms of the relationships with her family of origin, Natalia's normality and abilities are the source of emotional burden and

specific self-description. The bonds connecting Natalia with her parents and siblings are very strong but in a sense “one-sided,” it is the narrator who loves her family very much. The closest relatives' destructive lifestyle, serious differentiated troubles and problems experienced by the partners and children, their inability to follow mainstream society patterns, the situation of advanced marginality which Natalia's family has been durably trapped in cause the narrator's deep suffering. Moreover, Natalia's position in the family is of a double nature. On the one hand, the narrator's mother (in the past the late father also) and siblings, due to Natalia's *badge of ability*, expect from and oblige her to far reaching support and services:

now uhm... because of that I am, let's say, an educated person, normal, very much is required from me, more than from them all because I have to deal with - because I have to do, I don't know what, I have to organize, I have to go make an appointment, I don't know, I have to do everything. (p. 128, lines 26-29)

On the other hand, Natalia, who “will never renounce [her] family” (p. 120, line 8) and is constantly ready to help them, defines herself as “a bit of an outcast in the family” (p. 120, line 7) and “such uhm... perhaps the black sheep of the family of mine” (p. 128, lines 24-25), a person who does everything in “the opposite way than everyone would want, would wish” (p. 128, lines 25-26). She does not feel well with the fact that, in her opinion, she is categorized as someone who patronizes her relatives:

I was so normal... and they always think that I look down on them because I work, because I have a normal house ((with an ironic laughter)), because I want

to achieve something and I don't roam the streets with them. (p. 132, lines 25-28)

Thus, in Natalia's biography the price for normality is the sense of inadequacy and inequality in relationships with her relatives, although the split began many years ago, at the moment of Natalia's suicidal attempt and institutionalization. For the socially moving up individuals, who – like Natalia – as the only ones from the family manage to break the vicious circle of poverty and social problems, de-marginalization is equalized with marginalization in their primordial social world.

Natalia, as it was stated previously, represents the “success story.” On the basis of all data collected within this project framework it is possible to conclude that the probability of overcoming previous generation's biographical patterns and of achieving biographical success depends on the possibilities of contesting the trajectorial potential handed over by preceding generation(s). According to the scheme of biography analysis, the change of biographical process structures (Schütze 2009)²⁷ of adults grown up in the institutions results from the narrators' biographical work and identity work. The concepts of biographical and identity work, originally elaborated by Anselm L. Strauss and colleagues (1985), are particularly explored in the studies conducted with the use of autobiographical narrative interviews. Biographical work can be understood as

²⁷ There are four elementary biographical process structures identified by Fritz Schütze: 1) biographical action schemes (an individual actively shapes the course of his/her life), 2) trajectories of suffering (an individual can only react to overwhelming traumatic events), 3) institutional expectation patterns (an individual follows institutionally shaped and normatively defined courses), and 4) biographical metamorphosis (an individual faces unexpected events or new opportunities triggering off inner development) (e.g., Schütze 2009).

autobiographical recollection, reflection about alternative interpretations of one's life course, tendencies, self-critical attempts of understanding one's misconceptions of oneself, self-chosen and self-erected impediments, assessment of impediments superimposed by others and structural conditions, imaging future courses of life...deciding on the next steps of that unfolding, and permanently evaluating the outcomes in terms of the overall distinguished gestalt worked out by recollection, analysis, and imagination. (Schütze 2009:160; see also: Corbin and Strauss 1988)

On the basis of the interview we can follow Natalia's efforts of biographical work undertaken during her life course, starting from the traumatic turning point after the suicidal behavior when she decided to leave her relatives and – in a sense – started a biographical action scheme which was continued in the next years, mainly at the beginnings of her adult life. Protecting oneself from *the badge of inability* heritage was a demanding task. Natalia had to plan and invest into her educational career and to consider the possible direction of her vocational development. While constituting the intimate relationship with her spouse and her daughter, she must have faced some emotional difficulties resulting from her childhood trauma. In her adult life, the narrator constantly copes with her mother, brothers, and sisters who attempt to involve her, again, in the family of origin system.

Since adolescence Natalia has been constantly working on her identity, as well. Again, following Schütze's definition (2009) of identity work, we observe how the narrator shapes her self-concept by understanding herself as a positively developing, unfolding, unique identity (self-description vs. description

of her parents and siblings, the presentation of herself in her basic social roles – as loving partner and mother, good employee); how she discovers potentials, mechanisms, impediments, and dead ends of this unfolding (the impossibility to overcome the self-concept of an outcast and black sheep in the family, the uncertainty regarding her identity as an alumni of the institution: “[i]n fact, I don't, uh, boast that I am from a children's home. [p. 159, lines 22-23] I don't want anyone to know anyone judged me in some way, that here this poor girl... or that someone said, maybe don't hang out with her or something” [p. 160, lines 7-8]); how she decides the next steps for accomplishing development (presentation of self as “an eternal student” [p. 146, line 21] who does not want to “rest on my laurels” [p. 155, line 2-3]). Concurrently, the narrators representing the cases of “biographical defeat,” identified in the project, rarely commence biographical and identity work. Like Natalia's intimate significant others, they are trapped in the biographical trajectories of poverty and stigmatization.

Natalia's Interpretation of the Conditioning Typical of Social Worlds of Poverty and Social Exclusion

The analyses and references to the subjective perspective of the research participant are one of the imperatives of interpretative sociology. Therefore, let me address this issue in the last part of the text and consider Natalia's understanding of the phenomena typical of poverty and social exclusion. Natalia is a person who has been functioning in her life course in two social settings – the social world of marginalization and the mainstream society. De-

spite the narrator's emotional involvement in her family relationships, she is the competent informant, additionally – due to her *ability badge* – she becomes the reliable and plausible interpreter for the listeners. As a discerning observer she notices much more than an average participant of this world, moreover, she is also able to keep the distance towards the depicted reality. While comparing her own life course with the siblings' lives, Natalia:

- characterizes her siblings, especially her brothers as sensitive kids, deprived of parental love and support, dreaming about the decent life: “these were really...good boys” (p. 124, lines 28-29), “he was such a sensitive kid” (p. 124, line 15), “we had such...children dreams ... that when we grow up...we will open a shelter for poor, homeless dogs” (p. 124, lines 20-26);
- is aware of the influence of parents' neglect and maltreatment of her siblings' development: “the boys suffered terribly” (p. 124, line 9), “he suffered such terrible harm ... and now unfortunately... it is as it is... And really my younger brother, who wanted to help animals so much when he was little, now he doesn't think rationally, doesn't think normally” (p. 124, lines 19-31);
- shows us the importance of environmental conditionings in the socialization process in the impoverished neighborhoods:

I think very differently from my parents now and I regret that I couldn't do anything for my family, my brothers and sisters so that they would be in the same situation as me. Cause I don't/ I mean it is

difficult to raise boys, especially in the neighborhood where uhm... at the time when parents are drinking and do not pay attention to anything it is obvious that kids get different ideas coming to their mind, and when they get into some bad company they try to dominate or show, hey, I'm cool too and good, and this isn't directed toward any real good, but unfortunately toward... toward the evil and... Well so they ended up in prisons and it seems to me that it was due to the fact that they hadn't experienced this love in the family. No one was specifically interested and if uhm... and if any of us, I don't know, didn't do homework or got b/ bad marks at school, or if, I don't know, if they caused any trouble, there was no such understanding, there was no question Why? there was just some punishment or something. (p. 123, line 34 to p. 124, line 9);

- highlights that the lack of any (institutional or informal) intervention intensified the environmental impact on her siblings life course: “I think to myself now that if really ((cries)), if someone had guided this these kids, if there had been just a little bit of love in this family, none of them would be in prison now for sure” (p. 124, lines 26-28) and contributed to the deepening of her family malfunctioning: “earlier there were such situations, that if perhaps social care had been more often interested uhm, in depth and probably earlier, everybody would have ended up in children's home and this may have been better for us” (p. 118, lines 11-13);

- points to the inefficiency of penitentiary system: each such stay in penitentiary...assures him [the brother] that there is no other life than life in such a criminal world. It is untrue that... that prison resocializes. ... when you fall into one hole, then the more such sentences you have the more you are important

in this criminal world. He has plenty of friends, colleagues, but these these are all so I don't know... a little bit different-minded people and for sure ... ((sniffs)) and certainly don't want to uhm... to return to a righteous life. (p. 124, line 31 to p. 125, line 2).

Natalia demonstrates why no one from her closest relatives had any chances for biography normalization:

when the boys grew up and had as if their own life, they went away from home, anywhere because no one provided them with a normal home, and as I was growing up, they just wandered somewhere. Or when...my brother...returned from the detention home...he lived a bit in their house, but he, they, no one was very happy with this, so he – they looked for something on their own. And it was obvious to them that... from such nor/ normal work and normal functioning there would not be anything, so you must steal, you must have contacts, you need to stay at somebody's place somewhere out there in some uncool, uhm... area. And...also with rather with uncool people, because nobody normal would agree to have some stranger from the detention home living with him, her, and all. Also... let's say they coped on their own, from which, from which emerged that this is how they ended up in prisons. (p. 130, line 28 to p. 131, line 3)

In her way of argumentation and explanation of the sources of social exclusion Natalia thus acts as an adherent of environmental strands. In my interpretation, the narrator's art to reflect upon the social exclusion phenomenon and to build the argumentation explaining problems of her family of origin, besides her intellectual, cognitive skills, has its origins in the narrator's two special attributes – the empathy and the ability to forgive (let us recall the fact that the narrator did not disclose to her daugh-

ter the reasons for institutionalization, knowing it might affect the emotional ties and good relationship between the narrator's mother and daughter). Natalia really loves her multi-problem family, but she is absolutely aware of her relatives' negative attributes, she indicates this in the last sentences of the interview:

I think that such a summary of the whole story of mine would be that, despite the fact that uhm... some harms were done to me in my life I have not experienced such a full family and and I forever was (xx) I really love my parents. And I think that probably, just probably, we all are this way. It's there where love is not actually shown that someone becomes so committed, I don't know, well, that's my feeling that now when one can do more, when one is competent, has the power, although sometimes one shouldn't because, because if one looked at it and took a piece of paper to summarize the pluses and what my mother gave me, except that she gave birth to me there would be probably more minuses. But we still forget about it and, uhm... we think only of the positive things, and this strengthens us and gives us the power to help these parents and love them. (p. 161, line 31 to p. 162, line 5)

Conclusion

The badges of ability and *the badges of inability* seem to be the powerful tools in the processes of social categorizing and valuing. *The badges of inability* resulting from the negatively perceived and assessed attributes of individual/family functioning sustain the negative mechanisms of their possessors life courses and force individuals into biographical traps. Natalia's example depicts that the children (and also adults) from the underprivileged groups who want to change the patterns transmitted in their families

for some generations and to adapt to the models of mainstream society have to make an enormous effort to do it. The "normalization" of biography and attribution of *the badge of ability* require social re-classification. The individual doing biographical and identity work needs the support of the informal and institutional environment, empowerment to resist the power of tribal stigma, to get rid of prejudices and beliefs, and to be ready to notice and re-assess his/her talents and potential. Besides cognitive value, the notions of both badges have also some

practical implications. Although the classical work on labeling and stigma by Edwin Lemert, Howard S. Becker, or especially – Erving Goffman, are transmitted within different educational settings, and it seems that experts and adepts of helping professions and education are familiar with them, it appears, at the same time, that the tendency to arbitral ascribing of both badges is very strong. Perhaps the awareness and further development of Sennett and Cobb's concept will have some impact also on the more practical dimension of social reality.

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