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# Reflexive subjects: Exploring the narrative habitus of self-aware interviewees

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**Abstract:** The notion of ‘self-aware interviewees’ contains two features that emerged when studying early career professionals in the United Nations headquarters in Geneva and Vienna. First, it entails considerations on the researcher’s positionality vis-à-vis the ‘reflexive subjects’ encountered in the field. It also considers the benefit of ‘para-ethnographic sensibilities’ and the related re-negotiation of the relationship informant-ethnographer. Second, it addresses the narrative habitus encountered among UN neophytes. This paper ultimately states that analyzing the self-aware interviewees’ (auto-)narrations implies reflections on power relations in a particular research setting.

**Zusammenfassung:** In diesem Beitrag verbinde ich den Ausdruck von ‚selbstbewussten‘ oder ‚sich selbst bewussten‘ Interviewpartnerinnen und -partnern mit zwei Besonderheiten: Zum einen untersuche ich Para-ethnographische Sensibilitäten von Berufseinsteigerinnen und -einsteigern bei den Vereinten Nationen (UNO) in Genf und Wien sowie das damit verbundene Aushandeln der Beziehung zwischen Interviewten und Ethnographin. Zum anderen gehe ich der Frage nach, was bei den UNO-Newcomern den spezifischen narrativen Habitus ausmacht. Die Analyse der (Selbst-)Erzählungen von selbstbewussten und sich selbst bewussten Informantinnen und Informanten impliziert dezidierte Überlegungen zu Machtverhältnissen in einem spezifischen Forschungskontext.

## 1 Interviewing self-aware informants – an introduction

According to official numbers, approximately one third of UN staff is employed in the headquarters context.<sup>1</sup> Drawing from my work experience in this field of research and based on interviews I conducted in the continuation of my internship

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<sup>1</sup> <https://careers.un.org/lbw/home.aspx?viewtype=WWA> (18 August 2017).

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at the Vienna headquarters, I hereby provide insights in one particular site of the UN universe and the narrative strategies of what I call ‘self-aware interviewees’. The exemplary figure of a self-aware interviewee addresses some aspects that particularly however not exclusively can be understood as consequences of what Laura Nader (1972) once framed as a *studying up* circumstances.<sup>2</sup> In my ethnography, the *studying up* consists of conducting a qualitative study in the international research setting of the UN. It is a field of study that itself is highly critical and sensitive to power but also represents a competitive organizational culture. Against this backdrop, two aspects of what I refer to as self-aware interviewees are relevant to the present study and will be examined hereinafter.

In the first section, I address, on the one hand, the persisting challenges of research up situations and the resulting effects for the fieldwork and data collection.<sup>3</sup> In that respect, I will reflect on my access to the field of research and how this influences relationships in interviews, in particular, how my informants present themselves to me, the interviewer. To be precise, many informants demonstrate strong self-confidence in our interviews. It seems that I, the female academic who grew up and is currently working in the Western hemisphere and who is more or less the same age as her interviewees, am often perceived as a potential competitor in the working world of international cooperation and policy making. On the other hand, and this could be seen as a potential side-effect of *studying up*, the feature of self-aware interviewees alludes to them as being very much aware of themselves as highly skilled individuals<sup>4</sup> with a privileged migration background that enabled them to become international civil servants belonging to a global bureaucratic elite. Many of them being trained in social sciences, they reflect their positionality in the complex field of power repetitively and very accurately. This finding can be identified as para-ethnographic knowledge (Holmes & Marcus 2005) or para-ethnographic sensibilities (ibid. 2012).

Para-ethnography is the reconceptualization of fieldwork in what the authors Douglas R. Holmes and George E. Marcus define as highly professionalized ‘cultures of expertise’. As it recognizes the quasi-ethnographic sensibilities, knowledge and interpretations ethnographers are confronted with, this concept allows a new process of negotiation of the relationship between the researched and the researcher at the methodological but also at the analytical level, albeit

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2 I emphasize that similar narrative strategies can also be encountered in other field contexts.

3 I use the terms *researching up* and *studying up* interchangeably.

4 I am aware of the ongoing debate about the definition of ‘highly skilled’ individuals. To go more into details would, however, transcend the scope of this article. For further reading cf. Nowicka 2014; Raghuram 2004.

focusing almost exclusively on research up settings. Furthermore, proceeding the approach suggested by Holmes and Marcus, I recognize the self-aware interviewees as ‘reflexive subjects’ who are members of epistemic communities “in which ‘research’ [...] is integral to the function of these communities” (Holmes & Marcus 2008, 82).<sup>5</sup> The para-ethnographic observations of self-aware interviewees are therefore useful to gain a deeper understanding not only of the complex ‘world’ of the United Nations but also to increase the clarity regarding the question why and how my informants often present perfectly smooth images of themselves. However, the clear difference between the para-ethnographic knowledge that is still identified as a lay perspective and the anthropological analysis needs to be emphasized (Wolanik Boström & Öhlander 2015).

The notion of self-aware interviewees represents an analytical category. It refers to the narrations of early career UN professionals as informants who speak about their work and life situations with apparent routine and control, as can be seen in the second section. In other words, I, the anthropologist, encountered informants who already presented a well-defined narrative of their lives, more precisely, biographies almost free of any doubts, insecurities or frictions. Thus, that feature of self-aware interviewees becomes apparent in informants’ ability to auto-narrate their individual self which is identified as a crucial ability when working in the highly competitive professional environment of the UN. In that regard, it should be noted that the latter is entangled and embedded in the (self-) image of a larger community of ‘young’ highly skilled and highly mobile professionals. It refers to their specific narrative habitus (Frank 2012) when the interviewees express their insights into their current life and work situation. Thus, at the beginning of their careers, these reflections can assist them in finding a way to auto-narrate their individual selves into the general self-perception of UN staff.

Taking these interrelated features of self-aware interviewees as points of departure, I aim to contribute to the ongoing discussions in narrative analysis in Cultural Anthropology and European Ethnology providing insights in a field of research where respondents are not only highly skilled but especially well trained in presenting themselves in, amongst others, job interviews and other professional situations. They belong to what could be framed as the ‘contemporary interview society’ and a working world that is shaped by Western ideals of the New Economy (Sennett 2006). It is thus the ethnographer’s task to continuously reflect on the interviewees’ interview skills. The argument is underlined with ethnographic data collected during the research process. This includes participant

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5 Moreover, Holmes and Marcus (2008, 82) underline “the analytical acumen and existential insights of our [research, LM] subjects to recast the intellectual imperatives of our own methodological practices, in short, the para-ethnographic practices of our subjects”.

observations documented in various field diaries and semi-structured interviews with early career professionals conducted in the continuation of the fieldwork.

## 2 Self-aware interviewees in research up field contexts

Several decades ago, Laura Nader (1972) stressed the importance of opening up new fields of research when conducting research in post-industrial societies and focusing on what might appear as ‘secret’ communities. The present study on early career professionals in the United Nations seeks to give “access” (Nader 1972, 294) to the bureaucratic work and lifeworld of a major international organization the aim of which is to foster international peace and development. Since Nader’s call, ethnographers have indeed entered large institutions and companies and conducted research on white collar staff. They discussed the asymmetric relationship between the researched and the researcher and even reflected on their “fear” when researching up (Warneken & Wittel 1997). More precisely, this asymmetry is characterized by the difference in status, power and interests that are generally in favor of the large institutions, organizations and corporations to be investigated. The resulting greater or lesser distance in proximity to the field and the actors to be researched together with the unclear level of transparency potentially reduces the autonomy of the researcher.<sup>6</sup> Authors of recent researching up ethnographies, however, reject the overcautious approach towards influential subjects and/or powerful objects of study. In turn, they make the case for anthropologists who aim to meet their research field and their informants on equal footing (von Dobeneck & Zinn-Thomas 2014). In addition, this methodological strategy of studying through “avoids presuming a hierarchical relation between policy makers determining policy and implementing it on the governed” (Wright & Reinhold 2011, 101) and follows emerging issues across time and space. Therefore, the studying through concept entails, as coined by Marcus (1995), a multi-sited ethnography or, as it was further developed, the “anti-structural concept” of assemblage (Marcus & Saka 2006, 101).

In a nutshell, Nader’s call has led to considerable research on venerable and powerful institutions and opened up new fields of anthropology such as the anthropology of (international) organizations (cf., for instance, Garsten & Nyqvist 2013), the anthropology of labor in large corporations (cf., amongst others, Götz

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<sup>6</sup> It has to be noted that researcher also face similar challenges in research down situations. The seemingly easy access is not always guaranteed.

2013) and policies (cf. Shore, Wright & Però 2011). Anthropologists even seek new forms of collaboration (Holmes & Marcus 2012; 2008; 2005) as will be outlined later. In recent decades, anthropologists (Fresia 2014; Abélès 2011; Nowicka 2006) became interested in organizations and agencies of the United Nations system, which are seen as “nouveaux lieux de pouvoir” (Abélès 2011, 19). Abélès put emphasis on qualitative research methods applied over a considerable period of time, such as participant observation. This approach offers valuable insights in an area of research that traditionally has been investigated by other disciplines. Yet, the possible ways to study international organizations and its’ employees are not equally accessible and realizable to all ethnographers as the chosen modes of access and methodology depend on the researchers’ academic status and career stage.

Despite of all the research experiences collected in the above-mentioned studies, where the relationship between the researcher and the field of research seems to be less of an issue, (young) anthropologists at an early stage of their academic career who aim to conduct qualitative research in large corporations and international organizations, are still confronted with considerable challenges. In fact, physical access to these sites might be restricted as it is the case of the UN where the headquarter buildings are exclusively accessible to assigned persons (may they be staff or visitors). Furthermore, actors in powerful institutions are difficult to approach due to their many responsibilities, tight working schedules and their awareness of status differences. For the anthropologist, it is challenging to get into contact on a more personal level of conversation and exchange. Furthermore, informants from this professional background are also considerably aware of the potential (mis)use of personal information. All these factors significantly affect the field entry and approach of informants as well as the data to be collected.

Unlike Abélès (2011) and his colleagues who were invited to conduct their research on the World Trade Organization (WTO) by its director general (Holmes & Marcus 2012; Abélès 2011), I did not approach my area of investigation through a senior UN official serving as a gatekeeper. Being a cultural anthropologist interested in institutions and particularly in its employees and their culture(s) of cooperation, I started a three months graduate internship at a UN agency headquartered in Vienna. Soon, I found myself in a working context full of contradictions: I was part of a large group of ‘young’ highly skilled individuals impressed and amazed by the facts of being employed by this prestigious international organization and by working colleagues from all over the world. The minor but effective detail that most of the interns were (and still are) not paid, which for many of them meant working under highly precarious living conditions, seemed (at least in the eyes of many of my colleagues) to be a fair deal. I worked in a team,

belonged to a unit, a branch, a department and was therefore part of a particular UN sub-organization of the larger entity referred to as United Nations system. My task was to contribute to a project of international cooperation that was implemented in a UN member state of the so-called Global South. Local stakeholders were present in regional or local offices in the respective member states but the project was monitored (and financed) by the UN headquarters. In my function of an intern at the Vienna International Center (VIC), I attended meetings and official events but I was also engaged in more informal situations like lunch and coffee breaks, leisure activities, excursions to vicinity of Vienna and parties. In both contexts, I collected valuable insights in the lives, self-images and imaginaries of early career UN professionals, which enabled me to design my research project.

By doing so, I followed a bottom up strategy combined with a partially investigative research attitude (cf. also Fresia 2014, 516–517; Shore 2007, 180). Thus, I could enter a field of research that for me as a young anthropologist otherwise would have been extremely difficult to access. I am fully aware of the ethical questions that might arise in consequence of my quasi-investigative research approach. At this juncture however, I must underline that I informed both my supervisors and my colleagues about my research interest – even long before it was clear that I could actually realize a research project. This motivated some of them to provide information that they thought must be of interest to me. Others, in turn, were more wary and skeptical when I was around and treated me as ‘the anthropologist who was curiously nosing around’. They, for instance, would not go into details when talking about difficulties when cooperating with other branches and colleagues or challenging issues regarding the progression of their project work. During my internships (I did another one and was therefore able to experience and observe the work and lifeworld of one UN headquarter for approximately thirteen months in total), my role was always a double one: On the one hand, I was part of the staff and motivated to productively contribute to the organization’s work; on the other hand, I was a researcher collecting ethnographic observations. Without having the initial intention, the intern-self was all of a sudden accompanied by the researcher-self, which started pondering about a potential research study on the daily practices in a major and powerful international organization. I found myself in the situation of what David Mosse (2006, 935) referred to as the “participant-insider” who, in her ethnographic study, was given para-ethnographic insights by the informants themselves.

Holmes and Marcus (2005) encouraged fruitful debates on challenges faced in studying up research situations when noting that

[...] ethnographers trained in the tradition of anthropology do not approach the study of formal institutions such as banks, bureaucracies, corporations, and state agencies with much confidence. These are realms in which the traditional informants of ethnography

must be rethought as counterparts rather than ‘others’ – as both subjects and intellectual partners in inquiry (Holmes and Marcus 2005, 236).

With the concept of para-ethnography, they address contemporary research challenges (but also potentials) linked to the role of ethnographic researchers and how they approach their fields of interest, in particular, their informants:

Making ethnography from the found para-ethnographic redefines the status of the subject or informant, asks what different accounts one wants from such key figures in the fieldwork process, and indeed questions what the ethnography of experts means within a broad, multi-sited design of research (Holmes and Marcus 2005, 236 f.).

The two authors problematize the fact that especially in studying up situations and when investigating powerful institutions and ‘expert cultures’, the subjects in the field we study actually grapple with similar questions we, the researchers, are interested in. As ethnographers, we can build upon the “para-ethnographic knowledge” (Holmes and Marcus 2005), or as I prefer, “para-ethnographic sensibilities” (Holmes and Marcus 2012) encountered in professional or expert communities.

In their ethnography of Polish physicians in Sweden, Katarzyna Wolanik Boström and Magnus Öhlander (2015, 7) show how their informants “[...] try to understand the new settings where they work and live – and to understand themselves in the process of adjusting.” What they frame as “mobile everyday ethnography” refers to the “ethnography-like descriptions, made by reflexive subjects” (Wolanik Boström/Öhlander 2015, 18), in other words, the highly skilled mobile individuals’ process of grasping and adjusting to the realities of life and work in a new country and their corresponding narration thereof. Self-aware interviewees can be seen as epistemic partners whose (auto-)narrations have to be analyzed carefully. In sum, the challenge to decode sophisticated work and life stories in researching up situations remains even if (or because of the fact that) the interviewees are highly self-aware. My informants, ‘young’ UN professionals, who are confronted with language and its symbolic power (Bourdieu 1991) at a daily basis, actively use the narrative strategies in interview situations. Therefore, it becomes challenging to decode their statements. In the subsequent session of the present paper, this challenge will be approached by following Arthur W. Frank’s concept of ‘narrative habitus’ (Frank 2012).

### 3 The narrative habitus of young UN professionals

Self-aware interviewees are able to formulate and narrate sophisticated stories which constitutes a specific narrative habitus. According to Brigitte Bönisch-Brednich (2016, 201) “[...] ethnographically based narrative inquiry deals with

personal experience as it is memorized and narrated [...]”. Bönisch-Brednich (2016, 201–202) continues that the paradigms in cultural anthropological and related disciplines “are framed by viewing narratives as embedded in cultures and societies and lives lived” and that narrated stories are understood “as a mirror of history and present, of collectively lived lives, collective belonging and the rupture and frictions in such collectives. [...]”. Thus, narrations and stories report people’s belonging, yet also “mirror and guide [their] not-belonging” (Bönisch-Brednich (2016, 202). Indeed, it has been shown that telling one’s own story is a practice of consolidating the narrative identity (Lucius-Hoene/Deppermann 2002) and offers the narrating subject a possibility to word personal agency (Lucius-Hoene 2012; cf. also Meyer 2014; 2015). Even if the narrator’s narration is provoked by the researcher’s interest, narrating one’s own story fosters mechanisms of personal affirmation (Lucius-Hoene/Deppermann 2002, 87). The individual biographic and narrative identity as it is encountered in the narrative interview (and, as I claim, in the semi-structured interview) is, firstly, based on the temporal dimension, say the “historicity of identity” (Lucius-Hoene/Deppermann 2002, 89, my translation). Second, this interview situation also enables the interviewee to construct the narrative identity vis-à-vis the listening researcher. It is the “social dimension of the narrative identity” (Lucius-Hoene/Deppermann 2002, 89–90, my translation), a process of re-negotiating the respondent’s past and current identity during the interview, that goes along with the “self-referential dimension” (Lucius-Hoene/Deppermann 2002, 90, my translation) of the narrative identity.

Such constructions of narrative identities also appear in interviews conducted for my study on early career UN professionals. Moreover, I observed that some of these particular narrative patterns encountered in the interviews with my respondents are part of everyday interactions among colleagues. They are part of everyday professional life in the UN context. My interview partners who aim to establish themselves as international civil servants are used to having (job) interviews and presenting themselves on a regular basis. Correspondingly, they approach (and eventually embody) a specific narrative habitus (Frank 2012, cf. also Meyer 2014, 250 f.). Frank (2012, 2) argues that “stories inform in the sense of providing information, but more significantly, stories give form – temporal and spatial orientation, coherence, meaning, intention and especially boundaries – to lives that inherently lack form.” Based on Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, he conceptualizes the idea of ‘narrative habitus’, meaning “the embedding of stories in bodies” (Frank 2012, 52) and, more essentially, “knowing a corpus of stories (and not others)” (Frank 2012, 195). He identifies four components of the ‘narrative habitus’ that take effect in a particular environment: a specific *repertoire* of stories; the *competence* in telling and use them; the *taste* disposed by the ‘narrative habitus’; and the tacit knowledge (when being a listener or reader) that

enables to predict the continuation or end of an unfinished story (this is what Frank calls '*predictable plot completions*') (Frank 2012, 53 f., italics in original, cf. also the contribution of Silke Meyer in this volume).

### 3.1 How self-aware interviewees (re-)negotiate narrative positions

After finishing my field research, I started conducting semi-structured interviews (Schmidt-Lauber 2007; Spiritova 2014) with early career professionals. At the moment of the interview, the informants were between their late twenties until their late thirties, working in the UN only for a short time (approximately one to five years). Most of the time, they were employed in the UN headquarters, yet in different positions. In UN language and staff hierarchy system, the early career professionals who became my informants are called 'entry-level professionals' and belong to the 'professional and higher categories'. Being assigned as 'professional staff' means to be responsible for management and operational tasks in, inter alia, social and economic development, political processes (oriented in occidental ideas of democracy), maintaining peace and security, legal issues, public relation activities. I interviewed UN employees who are (now) still at an early stage of their career and hired as project managers. Their task is either to monitor projects in the member states of the United Nations or implement projects within the UN, such as HR management systems, IT solutions or press reports. They both interact with stakeholders from outside their organization, but also closely cooperate with other UN staff.

At the moment of the interview and in my role of a researcher, I asked about the informants' family and educational background, their current personal and employment situation, their role as international civil servants, to name a few topics of the semi-structured interviews. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Many of my early career informants I had met during my internships. Others were introduced to me via the snow-ball sampling (Atkinson/Flint 2001), a strategy that multiplied my contacts through people I had already interviewed or knew my research interest. Only a few interviewees were recruited via social media, in particular networking platforms such as LinkedIn.<sup>7</sup>

With few exceptions, the interviews took place during the informants' spare time. Only two interviews were recorded in the working context, which had an

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<sup>7</sup> On these websites established for (online) networking and presenting one's work biography it is easy to contact potential informants. It is, however, difficult to establish a relationship that is based on a sufficient basis of trust and confidence, which is essential for any interview but particularly for field in work in a competitive and fast-paced area of work like the UN.

influence on the length of the conversation. With 45 minutes, these interviews were short in comparison with others lasting up to three hours. Even though I am interested in the informants' work environment I intentionally conducted the interviews outside the working context. According to the circumstances, this often allowed long and open conversations of relatively deep, however constantly negotiated trust between the interviewee and the interviewer and produced richer data as there was more space to go into details and to ask further questions. With few exceptions, the interviews were held in English because English – although only one of the official languages of the UN – is actually the *lingua franca* most used in the UN. As one of my informants who works as a public information officer expressed, this leads to a particular feeling of community:

*We all speak this weird English and that makes me feel like [...] I am on another planet, you know, in the international world. [...] I don't feel uncomfortable with English in an international atmosphere. I don't feel it's an alien thing. Actually, it's more home. [...].*<sup>8</sup>

Speaking “this weird English” is already part of the narrative habitus discussed here: English is the language of the community in question and also emotionally close to the individuals (“it’s more home”).<sup>9</sup>

During the interviews, it became visible or rather audible, that the informants had a “conscious knowledge of one’s own character and feelings”<sup>10</sup>. The informants are self-confident and conscious about their appearance and also often act with full awareness and control during the interviews. To be more precise, my informants applied and employed specific communication strategies and discursive practices simply because working in this competitive work environment is about being self-confident and insisting on one’s expert knowledge vis-à-vis complex questions of global inequality and injustice. There were, for example, respondents who, before agreeing to participate in the interview, thought out loud whether or not they would constitute adequate subjects of study for my methodology.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, some of my interviewees then actively sought to control the interview situation and negotiate our roles of interviewee and interviewer. There was, for instance, one interviewee<sup>12</sup> who refused to be recorded. Instead, she wanted me to take handwritten notes. And, more surprisingly, she further announced to take notes herself, too. Of course, I agreed to her conditions. With

<sup>8</sup> Informant D (f, 27, public relations officer), conducted in May 2016.

<sup>9</sup> With this quote, I also would like to make the case for investigation beyond the researcher’s linguistic origin and reality (cf. Griffin 2016).

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/self-aware> (25 August 2016).

<sup>11</sup> E-mail correspondence with informant O (f, 33, project manager), August 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Ad hoc protocol, interview with informant B (f, 31, project manager), interview held in May 2016.

the time, she seemed to be more relaxed and even forgot to take notes, but she would always pause during the interview waiting for me to write down every single word. After the interview, she congratulated me on my interviewing skills. Other interviewees make clear that they gladly collaborated in order to do science a favor and support me in my research.<sup>13</sup> These statements reveal the informants' self-perception of having a supportive role for humanity. This self-perception is surely influenced by the image promoted by the UN itself. In this context, I refer to a promotion series published in social media by the of the UN's human resources organ *United Nations careers*. Here, UN staff serve as role models when stating slogans such as: "I believe the essence of what we do [...] is to serve others."<sup>14</sup>

The narrative position of the interview partners was also determined by their self-reflective habitus. The informants, who by profession hold a certain expert position and are in some cases even trained as social scientists, insist on the power of interpreting their live stories with the interviewer as a guide. It is striking how several informants and interlocutors in the field present their stories announcing a dramatic construction of their narrative by commenting on a meta-level: "I tell you this because it is important for you to understand what I am going to tell you next." They guide the interviewer by controlling the choreography of the interview content and by firmly stating and commenting on the relevance of the information. With these evaluative meta-commentaries ("Now this is important"), they insist on maintaining agency within the interview situation and position themselves as confident and assertive conversational as well as epistemic partners. In other words, they actively think about what might or should be interesting for an ethnographic study – or not.

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**13** Cf., for instance, recent correspondence with informant O; interview with informant E (m, 30, project manager), conducted in May 2016; interview with informant H (m, 30, project manager), conducted in July 2016, and others.

**14** Facebook website of *UN Careers* (accessed 28 January 2017, emphasis in original). An additional aspect why my informants agree to participate in the interview and exchange ideas with me can be explained by their explicit curiosity in a better understanding of the setting they work and live in. They admit that they often ponder about their current situation and possible future scenarios of their careers and lives and discuss it with close friends. As Holmes and Marcus (2005, 250) noted, many anthropologists today "are dealing with counterparts rather than 'others' – who differ from us in many ways but who also share broadly the same world of representation with us, and the same curiosity and predicament about constituting the social in our affinities."

### 3.2 “Everything was just aligning.” – The importance of linearity in the UN neophytes’ narrative

In addition to establishing epistemic partnership, there are a number of strategies which constitute the narrative habitus of UN neophytes. Particularly for somebody who does not entirely feel part of the new organization, the telling and re-telling (Mishler 2004) of selected sequences of their life consolidates the self-image when presenting themselves to colleagues. When answering the frequent questions like ‘where do you come from?’ and ‘what is your background?’,<sup>15</sup> they learn that different stories have different communicative functions and values.

In the context of career advancement and promotion prospects, a first aspect is the linearity of those stories. Young UN professionals present their lives as an (almost) chronological line of successful dispositions, encounters and events. Evidently, the career development is generally not easy and involves a lot of flexibility on the side of the aspiring professionals. However, difficult situations and problems are rarely mentioned, and if they are, they are transformed into challenges. Informant E, for instance, who recalls a phone call from a UN organization when he was offered his first position – in case he could start immediately:

*[...] And then he [the hiring manager, LM] told me ‘I offer you an internship if you wanna start next Monday’ and this was like a Wednesday. So, this is how I started. I applied for this internship, I got a phone call, a very brief interview, and I started the following Monday.*<sup>16</sup>

The ordering principle in this most certainly chaotic situation is clear and simple linearity: “this is how I started”. When I asked how he could begin his new position so quickly, he responded: “I was also finishing [the university exchange, LM] in Geneva, so it worked out, in terms of timing it worked out. I was lucky, it could have been in the beginning and I would have to.. you know.. I would have.. It worked out, that’s the thing. Everything was just aligning.” This informant hints that this unexpected and quick start presented a challenge he mastered with his flexibility and determination to join the UN. The story he tells almost puts him in the fairy tale role of the chosen one (“I was lucky”) whose career simply had to take this course. The ‘once in a lifetime opportunity’ makes out the reportability of the moment and is heightened by direct speech (“I offer you an internship if you wanna start next Monday”). Even if in reality, the career development depends on external factors and actors – mentors who support careers and enable to develop personal networks to other senior staff, HR recruiters, and others – in the competitive work environment of the UN, it seems to be important to stress that the career was determined to be.

<sup>15</sup> Field note, August 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with informant E (m, 30, project manager), conducted in May 2016.

The situation thus worked out for the interviewee “in terms of timing”. The supposed difficulties with moving house and home within a few days are not deemed reportable. Drawing on my experience and observations during my stay in the field, it can be assumed, however, that accepting this internship offer was a stressful moment for the quoted informant who at that time was just about to finish his exchange semester in a third country. As he presents it, there was no place not for doubts nor hesitation. He had to move from one city, in fact, from one country, to another in only a few days. The assumed troubles and problems that come with such a sudden move, however, do not seem worth mentioning. They are simply the price he was willing to pay in order to not miss this opportunity – something he apparently does not dare to express when pondering what kinds of decisions he might have taken when the internship offer would “have been in the beginning” of his studies. Here, his speech becomes fragmented (“and I would have to.. you know.. I would have.. “), as if an alternative course of events was unspeakable. It is a narration of a self-determined young professional who was in the right place at the right time and, most importantly, with the right attitude. The point of the narrative is thus to describe the determination in the turn of events. This can also be seen in the last passage: the evaluative comment “that’s the thing” rounds up his main message: “It worked out.” Interestingly, in this context, the interviewee forgoes any markers of his own agency. It is not up to him and his flexibility anymore, rather: “Everything was just aligning.” The expression of aligning, again, points to linearity as a dominant principle of structuring a narrative.

### 3.3 “Somehow to travel and to be useful.” – ‘Doing good’ as a dominant subject position

Another aspect in the narrative habitus of the young professionals is the way personal interests and ambitions are balanced with a humanitarian attitude of serving others. This subject position is undoubtedly the dominant one in UN discourse, repeated in countless slogans like “I believe the essence of what we do [...] is to serve others.”<sup>17</sup> I will frame this narrative as envisioning of ‘doing good’ or ‘helping others’ in the humanitarian sense and interest and see it as another essential positioning strategy among early career UN professionals. Those words (“to serve others”) were repeated to me in the interviews, for example, by this female informant. When invited to tell me something about her background, she

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17 Facebook website of *UN Careers* (28 January 2017, emphasis in original).

emphasizes her family's stances and influence in her interest in international politics and social issues:

*[...] and I was just reflecting on what you asked and I think I come from a family that has always been, for a long time, engaged in politics, like in social life and very interested in social policies, yeah, in life in the community. And.. ah.. on my dad's side. So, it has always been very, very important to know what's going on and yeah, to participate. And on my mom's side it's very social, so, everyone is always interested in helping others and contributing to society in that way. [...] And on the other hand, I think I had a very large influence from my grandmother who always wanted to travel but could not really [travel, LM] until she was pretty old. So, there was always this appeal to go internationally and discover the planet, so. Also, on my dad's side a lot of people have been working as delegates for [the international organization X, LM]. [...] So, I think that was also something that always appealed to me, to.. yeah, somehow to travel and to be useful. So, this combination.<sup>18</sup>*

In this narrative, the personal wish to “discover the planet”, is underpinned with the family's tradition in “participating” politically (“on my dad's side”) as well as socially (“on my mom's side”). Her own ambitions are further grounded on the humanitarian interest “in helping others” and the personal experiences of the grandmother who wanted to but could not travel. Her grandchild, however, is offered the opportunity and takes it, almost as if thereby, she can make up for her grandmother's generational limitations. Moreover, the tradition is intertwined with the fact that several family members already work in an international environment. It can therefore be assumed that this respondent could rely on the family's accumulated cultural and social capitals (Bourdieu 1986). The attempt to underline the personal contribution to the privileged position among young internationals I see related to what the German sociologists Manfred Moldaschl and G. Günter Voss (2003, cf. 25–56) termed ‘subjectification of work’ (in German: Subjektivierung von Arbeit) in the era of Post-Fordism. The notion of ‘subjectification of work’ refers not only to the tendency that companies and employers do not only demand the working subject's full engagement (such as specific know-how, self-organization, the capacity to take initiative and to be innovative and creative, etc.). Subjectification also implies that employees aim to receive rewards from work that go beyond a salary and economic privileges (such as career prospects, autonomy, team work, interesting and satisfying tasks, etc.). The latter is shown in the above-mentioned quote; it expresses the personal satisfaction “to travel” and justifies this privilege with being “useful” for a larger global society. The privileged position of belonging to an international (elite) bureaucracy is narratively negotiated with the subject position of “helping others and contributing to society in that way”. “Somehow to travel and to be useful”,

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**18** Interview with informant M (f, 34, project manager).

“this combination” provides the foundation for her narrative construction of identity as an international civil servant.

### 3.4 The ability to “tell your story” in ‘competency-based interviews’

Dealing with language as a means of identity formation and as symbolic power (Bourdieu 1991) at the same time, constitutes a daily experience for UN employees. According to Bourdieu, the phenomenon of legitimate language is one of the vehicles that reproduces and perpetuates existing power relations and structures (see introduction to this volume). In the social field of the UN, legitimate language does not only depend on the cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986, 254–256) and the accumulated knowledge of technical vocabulary and acronyms in the official UN languages, which for many UN employees are not their mother tongue. Legitimate language also comprises the social competence of establishing and incorporating the right narrative habitus the individual can build upon in the new work environment. As we have seen so far, the narrative habitus of young UN professionals is often linear and almost teleological. Mostly, it does not entail any doubts, problems or frictions.<sup>19</sup> Candidates accordingly present themselves as ‘super humans’ who, thanks to their cosmopolitan diligence and humanitarian enthusiasm, merit to be part of the UN staff.

This finding, namely the fact that self-aware interviewees re-narrate specific forms of stories, is reflected in the a new trend of the recruitment process in the United Nations system.<sup>20</sup> The UN recently started to hire new employees on the parameter of so-called ‘competency-based interviews’.<sup>21</sup> This particular form of job interview is based on the assumption that “[the] history [of the interviewed person] tells a story about [them]: [their] talents, skills, abilities, knowledge and actual experience in handling a variety of situations.”<sup>22</sup> The interviewed applicant is asked to respond to questions like: “Tell us about a situation when you

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**19** This positivistic narrative is reflected in the UN’s narrative. In organizational meetings, staff members hardly talk about ‘problems’ but prefer to talk about ‘challenges’. For the characteristics of the diplomatic jargon in the UN environment, cf. Groth 2012.

**20** To name the bureaucratic apparatus of the UN as a system is based on the self-denomination ‘United Nations system’.

**21** The ‘competency-based interview’ is also known as ‘behavioral interview’ or ‘criterion based interviews’.

**22** The quote is as follows: “[Y]our history tells a story about you: your talents, skills, abilities, knowledge and actual experience in handling a variety of situations.” <https://careers.un.org/lbw/home.aspx?viewtype=AYI> (21 March 2017, my emphasis).

went above and beyond your manager's expectations."<sup>23</sup> The aim is then to offer (and guarantee) future performance that is based on past success stories, the life story becomes a currency on the job market. The form of recruitment and the idea that there is 'the right story' therefore further facilitates the narrative habitus of the early career aspirants.

### 3.5 "If I would be a true UN" – A counter-narrative

Narrative analysis works with comparison and contrast, that is, when there is a right story, there must be a wrong one, too. Variation analysis is a helpful tool in distinguishing what can be said from what cannot be said in a particular group like the young UN professionals. Informant A who graduated in Pharmacy and now works as a health specialist positions himself as quite the opposite of the typical UN person by choosing different narratives. He starts out by marking his family background as non-international and non-elitiste: "my grandfather used to work in the fields [...] that is to say that I didn't grow up in an international environment [...] I don't have any diplomat in my family or anyone who had an international civil career." His way into the institution was thus different, he never assumed he would make this kind of career: "I really mean, to be honest, I never thought I would end up with the UN. It came up a little bit by chance." Almost in a confessional mode ("I really mean, to be honest"), he admits that his career was more of a coincidence than a plan: "Yeah, actually, to be honest, this never crossed my mind, international studies. I thought I would end up in international things anyhow. [...] I wanted to get specialized in something very concrete."

Along those lines of the non-elitiste and the concrete, he also describes himself as "competitive" ("it was not just about playing, it was about winning" when referring to his past as a young basketballer) and ambitious as well as "humble" and down-to-earth. All these attributes are set as an opposition to the typical UN professional. The same pattern can be found in his attitude to the international background of most UN professionals. In contrast to them, the fact that he lived in the same city for 24 years of his life, makes him "connected". Whereas colleagues are "a little bit ahm.. not lost but eh but they are ... they have no strings", he does "have strings (laughing) ... very strong ones." Being connected to his origins makes him special in the international world of the UN: "I realized that having such strong roots with a place would make me more interesting to others than being ... living here and there." He deliberately chooses a counter-narrative to the self-representations of his colleagues and thus makes his

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23 <https://careers.un.org/lbw/home.aspx?viewtype=AYI> (21 March 2017).

story an individual one (Bamberg/Andrews 2004). The informant even comments on the stereotypical story pattern of his colleagues from which he wishes to distinguish himself. While colleagues chose to explain and justify their career paths by the motifs of ‘doing good’ and ‘helping the people’, he explains:

*I am fully aware that for instance my program will have very little impact on cancer patients. Because those... we cannot replace the role of the local professionals, so we are there to assist them, the professions and the country. But we... we are not there to solve the problems for them. So that's why I don't say 'the people'. I could say that, for instance, my biological mother died for cancer and I am now working in the cancer— it actually happened. If I would be a true UN, this is what I would say. No. It was a casualty, you know, ending up there. And I don't say I'm there because I think [care, LM] about the cancer patients. Yes, I think about the cancer patients, but as a health professional, I know that this is not my role. Everybody has a role and this is the role of the clinician. So my role is to advice and to... to work with the countries to make better investments, to achieve better results. But they are responsible, they are doing it. We cannot do it for them. So that's why I don't say 'the people', 'help the people'. It's very abstract.*

Again, he chooses a counter-narrative to stand out from the UN crowd and intentionally contradicts the institution's common ground, ‘helping the people’.

According to A, the narrative habitus of the UN is also reflected in conversational styles and manners:

*Like... for instance... this mentor I had... is a person that is known for being very harsh, for telling things as they are. So, in the UN world this is very rare. So if... Because in the UN world everybody says 'many thanks', everybody says that they are greatly appreciated, everybody says 'great, amazing', you know, very little people say 'This is shit', you know. So when you have a person like this and another person like this saying 'Okay, you know what, you can trust me, he's reliable'.*

Using direct language, here emphasized in direct speech and with a swearword, is translated in being “reliable” and trustworthy. The appreciation and politeness which characterizes the UN language is, in contrast, seen as superficial and meaningless. He extends this observation to the conversational culture in the UN:

*So you always tend to always have something to say. Being silent is perceived as being an idiot. Sometimes if you don't have [any, LM] input to make, in certain cultures you just don't make it. You listen and then you make you make your contribution when you think you add value. In certain cultures like (laughing) in the US you need to be (quoted?, unclear audio). If you go to a meeting and you do not open your mouth, you didn't fulfill your role in the meeting. So these are things I noticed.*

Having something to say seems to be the dominant position rather than adding value to a debate. The counter-narrative here points towards careerists who overestimate their own self-importance.

## 4 Self-aware interviewees – concluding remarks

‘Self-aware’ informants are very cautious in showing their stories. This is a result of the highly competitive professional environment they work in. Very early on in their careers, they learn and internalize the narrative habitus of the UN that comprises self-aware presentations of biographies and, in particular, of personal career intentions. The narrated story and self-image has to be of direct and good use within the professional life, be it within the dominant or a counter-narrative. The message about the narrator is addressed at the interviewer, but could also be directed to a hiring manager, HR staff or colleagues. The self-aware narrative habitus also means to avoid sharing information that, one day, could be used to disadvantage (such as irregularities, insecurities, frictions or failures). Often, UN careers are not as linear as presented, also because of the high competition and the (for many early career professionals) crucial edge of social capital. Key topos in the self-presentation is the wish to be ‘useful’ to society rather than being overly-ambitious or career-oriented.

To conclude, the ethnographer needs to be aware of the sometimes highly sophisticated narrative skills of informants and reflect on the consequences thereof when interviewing informants socialized in an ‘interview society’ that is oriented towards values of successful performance in a professional (elite oriented) environment. Reflecting on both methodological issues of field entry and data gathering as well as on empirical findings encountered in the interview content, I aimed to shed light on specific communication strategies, discursive practices and narrative patterns found in my ethnographic data. Addressing the negotiable relationship and role of the interviewer (who might be perceived as a competitor to the researched subjects) and the informants (who are recognized as epistemic partners), I showed how conducting interviews is a balancing act for both parties. In particular my informants expose themselves to a conflict of loyalty between their own and the UN’s interest when participating in an interview. This, on the one hand, could be shown with the dominant narratives following the UN’s ideals and, in particular, the recruitment practices which call for the ‘right’ story of an international civil servant. On the other hand, there are counter-narratives presented by international civil servants who aim to position themselves opposite to the first narrative pattern and insist on their positionality as experts in a specific area used in the field of international cooperation. This finding is one explanation why moments of friction in the narrations of early career professionals in the UN context are so rare and so telling.

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