# Role Models and Value Patterns which Shape the Academic Career Path. Case-study: West University of Timişoara

## Simona Adam

*West University of Timişoara, Department of Teacher Training, e-mail:*
*simona.adam@e-uvt.ro*

**Abstract:**
An academic career can bring many satisfactions, but it also involves major challenges. This study analyses the academic career from a constructivist perspective, which sees it as an evolutionary process influenced by a variety of macro and micro-social circumstances. I have used a qualitative methodology based on the narrative and comparative analysis of in-depth interviews with 30 former professors from the West University of Timişoara. The semi-structured interviews were taken several years ago by a team of researchers from the same university. The main goal of the project was the construction of the history of this institution through the memories of its key members. The interview guide, which comprised of 46 questions, was divided into 6 main themes: professional formation; the beginning of the academic career; hierarchical and horizontal relationships; the influence of the political and ideological context; professor – student relationship and professional identity. Being shaped by socialization and early work experiences, the academic career path is often influenced by mentors or role models. I analyse the influence of these role models in various stages of the academic career and the retrospective valorisation of these models. The second dimension analysed in the study is the core value system which defines the professional identity of the academics. The value patterns are directly connected with their attitudes towards students or other members of the academic staff. The core values are also visible in the process of self definition, and these are, according to our interviewees: humanism, respect towards the students, objectivity in assessing student's activity, scientific knowledge and research expertise.
**Key worlds:** *academic career, role models, values, professional identity*.

## *The academic career as a socialisation process – theoretical perspectives and research outcomes*

Career choices are shaped both by personal and environmental factors. Bruss and Kopala (1993, p. 686) define professional identity as "the formation of an attitude of personal responsibility regarding one's role in the profession, a commitment to behave ethically and morally, and the development of feelings of pride for the profession." Lindholm (2004, p. 203) uses a historical perspective in classifying the theories that examine vocational outcomes: the first theories (from the 1950's) included developmental approaches, personality-based theories, typological theories and self-concept theories; in the 1970s and 1980s new theories emerged, including social learning theory and Bandura's self-efficacy theory. As Lindholm observes, very little research has focused on the mechanisms that shape individuals' decisions to pursue academic careers. However, the author mentions studies focused on issues related to the underrepresentation of women and minorities within faculty ranks, the professional socialisation of graduate students and challenges determined by the changing academic labour market (Lindholm, 2004, p. 204).

Theories of career development argue that the adult years are not a static phase of life and describe a career as an evolutionary process. Reybold and Alamia (2008, p. 114) comment that the professional identity of academics becomes more resilient and less reactive to external circumstances as the individual achieves professional maturation. The authors explain professional maturation in terms of professional equilibrium – described as a faculty identity that is focused on balance and stability. For many academics, the balance is achieved through role symmetry – maintaining a proportional sense of faculty self with regard to their roles and responsibilities, and equilibrium between teaching, research, and administrative duties. (Reybold & Alamia, 2008, p. 118).

Academics' socialization into the professorate establishes the norms and expectations for future professional behaviour. The process of faculty preparation and socialization has been described by Tierney and Rhoads (1993) as a linear progression from anticipatory socialization to organizational socialization. The anticipatory stage describes how "non-members take on the attitudes, actions, and values of the group to which they aspire" (Tierney & Rhoads, 1993, p. 23), whereas the organizational stage involves initial entry into an academic position and the continuance of the faculty role.

Theories of academic career socialization imply that an individual's understanding of the faculty career begins with the graduate school experience or even earlier, not with the first faculty position. Austin (2002, p. 96) describes this process as a preparatory experience, which may begin prior to the graduate school, in which the students are exposed to the skills and expectations likely to confront them in the future academic career. The anticipatory socialisation may start even earlier, as research has proven that professors are more likely to come from families that stress the value of intellectual pursuits and academic achievement (Finkelstein, 1984, apud Lindholm, 2004, p. 605). The ones who pursue academic careers usually "tend to prefer intellectual (as opposed to action-oriented) modes of mastering experiences and to display a noticeable sense of "apartness" from their peers, preferring solitary, autonomous activity" (Lindholm, 2004, p. 605).

Anticipatory socialisation is often shaped by the influence of role models. Generally defined as people who influence the individual in specific life decisions, role models can also be described as adults who are worthy of imitation in some area of life or, as the American Psychological Association states, they are "real or theoretical persons perceived as being ideal standards for emulation in one or a selected number of roles" (apud Nauta & Kokaly, 2001, p. 82).

In an extensive literature review on role models, Nauta and Kokaly (2001) quote Bucher and Stelling's classification of role models.

According to them, role models can be partial, charismatic, stage (influencing others in a particular point of their socialisation), option (providing alternative views or patterns of behaviour) and negative (apud Nauta & Kokaly, 2001, p. 82). How do role models influence career development? In the Social Learning approach, new skills and behaviours are learned by observing and reproducing relevant role model behaviours. Role models set norms, attitudes and values, inspire others to behave in certain ways or assume certain roles, and also affect occupational outcomes indirectly through their influence on the interests, self-efficacy, and outcome expectations of the protégée (Nauta & Kikaly, 2001, p. 82).

Academic success is strongly related to the availability of "career relationships" including mentors, peers, and contacts in professional organizations. As some authors notice, "the value of a good senior mentor to the career advancement of a faculty member is unequivocal" (Levinson et. al, 1991, p. 425). A mentor is often described as a veteran professional who takes an active interest in the career development of a younger professional. Mentors follow most of these principles: (a) they encourage the dreams, and support the career aspirations, of their protégés, (b) they provide opportunities for their protégées to observe and participate in their work, and (c) they help their protégés become aware of the unwritten rules and politics involved in the profession (Bova & Phillips, apud Wright & Wright, 1987, p. 204).

Wright and Wright mention, among the benefits of a mentoring relationship in an academic career, (Wright & Wright, 1987, p. 205):

- *Career development* – the mentor can teach the protégé the technical aspects of the profession, including development of writing and research skills; he helps the protégé to reach his goals and connects him with financial or publication support. The mentor can also play the role of protector in defending the protégé's abilities and attitudes.
- *Networking* – mentors can help the protégés to establish a professional network and they can increase their visibility by

including them in discussions with peers or they can bring the protégé's work to the attention of respected scholars in their field.

- *Professional development* – mentors have a long term influence in professional development of the protégés, helping them in developing a sense of direction and long-range research goals.
- *Personal identity* – the mentor influences the protégé's self-image, providing confirmation of his abilities and by increasing his self-confidence. He can also provide support and counselling in work-related and personal issues.

## *Methodological Design*

This research is based on the narrative and thematic analysis of 30 semi-structured interviews made between 2011 and 2013 with former professors from the West University of Timişoara. The interviews, conducted by a team of researchers from the same university, were part of a larger project on institutional history. The first corpus of interviews was taken under the project "*Teaching Values by Role Model Examples*", coordinated by Otilia Hedeşan and Dana Percec, and marked the 55$^{th}$ anniversary – "LIT55" - of the Faculty of Letters of the West University of Timişoara. Members of the academic staff of this faculty were interviewed between 2011 and 2012. Then, between 2012 and 2013, the archive was expanded through interviews taken with academics from all the faculties, aimed at reflecting the academic diversity and celebrating 70 years – "UVT70" (2014) since the West University of Timişoara was founded. The main goal of the research was to reveal the way in which the University had developed during the communist period and the mechanisms of surviving the ideological pressures of the political system or the administrative challenges nowadays.

Moreover, the research revealed the voices of the main actors of the academic life. The interviewees were key figures in the history of

the West University of Timişoara. Almost all of them had retired by the time of the interview, they used to have important administrative positions (former deans or vice rectors, head of departments and so on), or they were some of the most successful professors of the University, both in terms of their didactic prestige or their research expertise.

The semi-structured interview guide was expanded by a small team of researchers which included the author of this paper, under the coordination of Smaranda Vultur, who had a vast experience in life-story and in-depth interviewing. It comprised of 46 open questions, structured in 6 main thematic sections:

1. *Professional formation* – graduate education years, role models, influences on choosing an academic career, etc.
2. *The debut of the academic career* – criteria of entering the academic career, social capital (people who offered support to the interviewee);
3. *Hierarchical and peer professional relations* – what were the relations with the management of the faculty, was the interviewee part of the managerial team, how are the relationships with his / her colleagues described.
4. *The political influence during the academic career* – the impact of the ideology in academic life during communism, personal strategies in coping with the political pressure etc.
5. *The student – professor relationship* – how did this relationship change or develop over the career path, what were the expectations of the students and so on.
6. *Professional identity* – self description as a professor, the merging of the two important academic roles: teaching and research, accomplishments or failures to achieve fulfilment.

The interview duration varied between 90 and 150 minutes, and in total, the interview transcripts were summarised in more than 400 pages. Having such rich archive material, I chose a qualitative approach to analysing the data. I started from a constructivist perspective, seeing

the interview as a product of symbolic interactions. A constructivist treatment of the subject begins with the premises that multiple realities exist and that the data collected reflects a mutual construction born out of the interaction between the researcher and the interviewee.

The coding of the data followed the steps of the constructivist grounded theory approach, moving from empirical observations toward abstract concepts. I have started from a partially drawn up conceptual frame (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 45), sketching a few main characteristics of the narratives. The coding of data followed two phases: initial coding and selective/focused coding. While the initial coding has the goal to discover significant themes or categories, focused coding is supposed to organize data in categories more appropriate to the theory. The initial coding allows the researcher to identify the main events and meanings presented in the interview, helping the researcher to discover the interviewee's point of view. In focused coding, the researcher uses the initial codes that are repeated to sort and synthesize large quantities of information. Focused coding is more abstract, more general and allows a more productive analysis than the initial codes.

Studying more interviews helps the researcher to stay close to the empirical reality that was researched. By comparing the data to discover similarities and differences properties that highlight the generality of categories can be generated. Through the comparative method the properties of categories are defined and step by step, the categories are transformed into theoretical concepts.

The grounded theory analysis was undertaken in parallel with a narrative analysis of the interviews. Narrative analysis focuses its attention on subjectivity, which is the manner in which each of the interviewees portray themselves as related to social structure. It reveals the manner in which the respondent has negotiated his own position towards the social situation. Narratives are ways through which we organize, perform and create meanings to our experiences, underlining at the same time a coherence of the life-line. Miller (2000) calls this

process 'a double hermeneutics'. This way the interviewee's answers are influenced by the subjective perception of the place which he occupies in structures and social relations and the way that he portrays himself to the researcher. People think, perceive reality and make moral choices according to narrative structures. Through narratives we create sense in life and we build our identity. Experiences gain significations only when they are integrated into narratives. Personal narratives not only describe experiences, but they give form to them. The relationship between 'live' and 'tell' is a dynamic one. Personal narratives are built in the general social context; they produce and are produced by the dominant cultural meta-narratives (M. Andrews, apud Sclater, 2004, p. 78). The most crucial information resides not in the answers given to specific questions, but rather in the narrative organization itself.

## *Discussion*

How did the academics interviewed perceive their personal and institutional past? The first feature of the interviews that were analyzed was the tendency to idealize the past – what Bourdieu called "the biographical illusion" or Halbwachs terms as "nostalgia for the past". Present time becomes a comparative term, being most of the time devalued in relation to the past. Our interviewees' identities were formed in the first decades of the communist regime, many of them being students in the '50s and '60s. All of them spoke passionately about their graduate years, mentioning inspirational professors who became their role models.

What were the qualities of these role model professors? How can they be described in terms of their teaching style? As Hedeşan observes, they were usually charismatic personalities, providing not only knowledge, but behavioral examples (Hedeşan, in Hedeşan et. al., 2016, p. 68).

> *"What we liked the most? The course of Professor T... We used to applaud him at the end of the course. He had a special oratory talent..."* (I.C.)

*"As a teaching assistant, I assisted in the courses of some great professors. Prof. G.I. was overwhelming because of his erudition and the quality of information[...] Prof. S.M. was a model of equilibrium. He put the scientific information in an accessible language [...] Prof. G.I.T. was a great orator..."* (V.T.)

The choice for a discipline tends to occur earlier then the choice for an academic career, and it can also be influenced by good teachers:

> *"My professor had not only pedagogical talent, but also an exceptional erudition. I started to love Romanian literature because of him and I decided choose this field for my bachelor studies"* (V.T.).

Among the persons who influenced the participants in choosing an academic career, especially in the case of women, were members of their family. In a doctoral thesis about the women with academic careers in Timişoara, G. Panu noticed that, for women, the parental authority was more influential than other factors in the choice of an academic career. She describes academic endogamy as one of the ways in which social capital was transmitted from one generation to another (Panu, 2016, p. 131). Higher education is not simply an avenue for upward mobility for whoever desires it, but a filter that promotes some and excludes others. In some cases, the attraction to an academic career came from early family experiences:

> *"I think that it counted that my father studied in France and he received a Ph.D. in law at Paris. So, the premises were present in my family..." (M.T.)*

In many cases, the professors who were chosen as role models became mentors for the interviewees, having a great influence in the development of their academic careers. They encouraged the dreams and supported the career aspirations of the interviewee:

> *"I had a very good collaboration with prof. Z.[...] I wrote to him once, to ask for his opinion, and he answered: "Professionally, I would advice you to go to Bucharest, where you would have more chances to succeed. Emotionally, I would like you to remain in*

*Timișoara". I listened to his advice and I am very happy that I made this choice"* (Z.S.)

Academic life is imbued with socializing experiences. The interviewees learned a great deal about academia as soon as, if not before, they became students. The mentors helped the interviewees to become aware of the unwritten rules and politics involved in the profession. As Tierney states, "institutional pecking orders, the importance of research, how one works with one's colleagues, what is and is not important, are all lessons that individuals learn" on their academic route (Tierney, 2008, p.36). Although these lessons were frequently implicit, rather than explicit, one should not overlook their symbolic importance, as one of the interviewees found out:

> "*When you climb up the hierarchical system, don't forget that you will pass through the same people as you will pass when you come down". (S.Z)*

Even in the communist regime, an academic career offered freedom and allowed the interviewees to pursue their individual work, needs, and interests. The participants often mention their genuine enthusiasm for teaching and research and the privilege of being engaged in intellectual activities during a time when censorship was omnipresent. On the other hand, the interviewees frequently mention their feelings of frustration generated by the fact that they did not have the freedom to travel abroad or to be connected to their foreign colleagues. The few academic travel opportunities were intensely valorized and they are narrated in detail by the interviewees.

An academic career was always perceived as an elitist one, despite the political regimes. The respondents were aware of the social status they had in the society and they were deliberately trying to conform to this ideal image:

> "*Your image, as a professor, in the society, is influenced by your behavior. You have to prove that you deserve this status"* (Z.S.)

Analyzing the narratives, we can notice the need of retrospective coherence: the interviewees' discourse emphasizes a core value system of the academic profession.

1.    The top value is *humanism*, described by our respondents in various social situations, but mostly in the interaction they had with their students:

> "*You have to love the people in order to be a good teacher" (S.Z.); "In your teaching activity resides the dialogue and the human interaction that gives you professional satisfaction" (M.T.)*

The professor – student relationship develops during an academic career. At the beginning of their teaching career, inexperienced academics often fall into one of two opposite patterns in their interactions with students. The first relational pattern is characterized by greater social distance and an authoritarian teaching style. Some of our interviewees who fell in this category explain this tendency by mentioning their anxiety about not being able to gain the respect of their students. The second pattern is the one of the "friendly professor", who is kind to the students and is often perceived as a friend or an older colleague rather then a professor. This closeness was facilitated by the specific activities of the communist period, in which the students and professors were supposed to take part. The agricultural laboring, which took place in early autumn and lasted for a couple of weeks was a good opportunity for socialization between students and their professors. Study trips, cultural events and literary retreats were only a few of the multiple activities in which mainly young academics were expected to participate along with their students.

Advancement in the academic career came with socio-cultural changes which had an impact on the student – professor relationship. The majority of the interviewees compare the post-communist period with the communist one, emphasizing the different expectations of the students nowadays.

2.    Another important value is *respect*, which is deeply connected to humanism:

> "*The student must be respected for what he is, no matter how good or bad he is" (N.A.)*

An academic position implies, in the participants' view, not only respect towards others, but also to be respected and valued by the people who are interacting with you. We asked our interviewees to describe the relations they had with their colleagues, and they unanimously characterized these relations as respectful and ethical. These qualities were also valued in their role models. On the other hand, when talking about other members of the academic staff, fierce competition can sometimes be spotted. As Hedeşan notices, "sometimes, the interviews leave the impression that the relationships between prominent academics were competitive and sometimes even tense" (Hedeşan, in Hedeşan et. al., 2016, p. 65). The internal fight for privileges or positions, although only sporadically mentioned, seemed to be more frequent than our interviewees were willing to admit.

3. Among the core values of the academic career, our respondents mentioned *objectivity* in assessing the student's activity:

> *"...if you fail in proving this, the student's respect towards yourself would be affected."(N.A.)*.

Objectivity is reinforced by the professor's ability in recognizing their students' performances and capacities. All the respondents recalled the best students they had during their academic career, and many of these students later became their colleagues.

4. *Scientific knowledge* is also part of the value system of academics:

> *"your scientific knowledge has to achieve the standards you impose to your students" (N.A.)*.

Their scientific capacity is often mentioned as a prerequisite for entrance into an academic career. All the interviewees describe themselves as being very good students, with exceptional results. They often emphasize the fact that they were "chosen" for an academic career by the faculty management. During the communist period, entrance into an academic career was often the result of a process of centralized national distribution, in which the best students were directed towards universities or research institutes. Although it is widely acknowledged

that advancement in the academic hierarchy is often facilitated by extrinsic circumstances, our interviewees emphasize their intrinsic characteristics: they perceive themselves as "matching" the academic work environment – "the academic prowess enhanced confidence in their self-perceived ability to successfully construct an academic career" (Lindholm, 2004, p. 618).

5.   The choice of an academic career versus any other career path is strongly related to an intrinsic interest in research, so the *research expertise* is also mentioned in the value system of the academics:

> "*in order to be a good professor, you have to be a good researcher. [...] In my faculty research was always encouraged*" (N.A.).

Our interviewees' narratives provide many references to the research interests of the respondents. They emphasized their dedication to research, which on many occasions competed with their personal lives. Some interviewees talk about the tremendous amount of time spent in research activities, others about the variety or complexity of the research projects they were involved in, and almost all of them about the accomplishments generated by their research work. Some of the respondents stress the originality of their research, others its utility for the scientific community:

> "*almost all the researchers who were interested in that topic used the results of my research*" (R.S).

At the end of the interview, the participants were asked to talk about their regrets or any lack of fulfillment in their academic career but also about their greatest satisfactions. All the respondents said that they did not have major regrets or dissatisfactions in relation to teaching or research activity. However, some of them mentioned the massive load of administrative work when they occupied managerial positions in the University. In their opinion, the administrative duties took a lot of energy that could have been used better in research or teaching. The comparison between past and present sometimes reveals

a trace of sadness or nostalgia. One of our respondents spoke about students nowadays having a decreased level of knowledge:

> *"We are forced to build on a "sandy foundation", because our students don't have a solid foundation" (S.Z)*.

The respondents often mentioned the prizes or distinctions received for their research activity or the papers published in prestigious international journals as among the greatest satisfactions related to their academic careers. They displayed an ascendant career path and were proud of all the steps they made throughout it, emphasizing the mix of factors that helped them achieve their goals. Their personal qualities are always related to luck, good circumstances and good professional relations.

## *Conclusions*

The thematic and narrative analysis of the interviews allows us to add more substance to the institutional history of the West University of Timişoara. The narratives of former professors reveal models of professional socialisation, academic values, and behavioural patterns. Their answers were influenced by the context of the interview and by the fact that the dialogue was between two different generations of academics: the interviewers were all very young academics or doctoral students, while the interviewees were retired professors. The interviewees were doing their best in order to set a good example for the young generation. We can talk in all the cases about a very positive image of the Self and a need for retrospective coherence.

Overall, participants spoke passionately about their work. Almost without exception, they emphasized the inherent "fit" between themselves and their jobs, especially with respect to the opportunities that academic work offered for fulfilling their individual needs and ambitions. Even if they stressed external factors that facilitated their successful academic career, such as providential help, luck,

circumstances, mentors and so on, the backbone of the narrative construction is given by their hard work, ambition or diligence.

The process of anticipatory socialisation had an important role in their career development. For some of the interviewees, this process started very early, in their own families, while for others, the undergraduate experience or the graduate years were the key moments in choosing an academic career. Role models and informal mentors were mentioned by all the respondents and their impact was vividly recalled. Among the most influential persons in our respondents' career path were their own professors. The interviews portray a colourful image of the academic staff, in which many types of professors are vividly described such as the charismatic professor, whose lectures are compared with a stage performance, the "absent-minded" professor, who is present in anecdotes, the severe professor or, in contrast, the friendly professor

All participants highlighted their personal needs for autonomy, independence, and individual expression and the general allure of the university work environment, even in times where these values were generally denied by the socio-political context. Nevertheless, there is a clear distinction between communist and post communist academic life, although the interviews do not draw an overly negative image of communism.

Almost unanimously, the respondents spoke of how they have long resonated with the more general atmosphere of university environment. They have a positive retrospective self image, which emphasizes a successful and meaningful academic career path.

## References

Austin, A. (2002). Preparing the Next Generation of Faculty: Graduate School and Socialisation to the Academic Career. *The Journal for Higher Education*, 73 (1), pp. 94-122, Ohio State University.

Bruss, K. V., Kopala, M. (1993). Graduate school training in psychology: Its impact upon the development of professional identity. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training, 30*(4), 685-691. American Psychological Association.

Glasser, B.G., Strauss, A.L. (1967). Discovery of Grounded Theory: The Strategies for Qualitative Research. New Jersey: Aldine Transaction.

Hedeşan, O., Percec, D., Panu, G. (2016). Valori şi modele umaniste în instituţii din epoci de criză. Analize de caz [Humanistic Values and Role Models in Institutions during Ages of Crisis], Timişoara: West University Publishing House.

Levinson, W., Kaufman, K., Clark, B., Tolle, S. (1991). Mentors and Role Models for Women in Academic Medicine*. Western Journal of Medicine*, vol. 154 (4), pp. 423-426, accessed online on PubMed (https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/1877183).

Lindholm, J.A. (2004). Pathways to the Professoriate: The Role of Self, Others, and Environment in Shaping Academic Career Aspirations. *The Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 75, No. 6, pp. 603-635, Ohio State University Press.

Miller, R. (2000). *Researching Life Stories and Family Histories,* London: SAGE.

Nauta, M. M., Kokaly, M.L. (2001). Assessing role model influences on students' academic and vocational decisions. *Journal of Career Assessment, 9*(1), pp. 81-99. SAGE.

Panu, G. (2016). *Cariere universitare feminine în perioada comunistă. Timişoara: 1965-1989*. Teză de doctorat. [Women Academic

Careers in Communism. Timişoara: 1965 – 1989]. Doctoral Thesis.

Reybold, L.E., Alamia, J. (2008). Academic Transitions in Education. A Developmental Perspective of Women Faculty Experiences. *Journal of Career Development*, 35 (2), SAGE.

Sclater, D.S., Antrews C.S. (2004), The Uses of Narrative: Explorations in Sociology, Psychology and Cultural Studies.Transaction Publishers, New Jersey.

Tierney, W.G., Rhoads, R. (1993). Enhancing Promotion, Tenure and Beyond. Faculty Socialisation as a Cultural Process. ERIC Higher Education Reports, Washington.

Tierney, W. G. (2008). Trust and Organizational Culture in Higher Education. Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis: University of Southern California.

Wright, C.A., Wright S.D. (1987). The Role of Mentors in Career Development of Young Professionals. *Family Relations*, vol. 36, no. 2, National Council of Family Relations, Saint Paul.