

**WOMEN'S ROLES FROM A SOCIOLOGICAL AND
ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

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Interview Analysis Along the Dimensions of Value Sociology

My PhD research thesis, a project currently in the planning and data collection process, focuses primarily on Hungarian women above the age of fifty and their prospects on the graduate labour market. A successful analysis of such phenomenon requires the collection of interview data that will later constitute the basis of qualitative research. The following paper, therefore, analyses a single life course interview given by an informant; a first-generation female intellectual, shaped by her surrounding society and the values of the Kádár regime. This provides the basis of a value analysis conducted by dissecting the interviewee's core value system, her value conflicts and changes with special attention to Hungary's socio-economic shift from socialism to global capitalism.

In addition to György Csepeli's value sociology lecture series, my research relies heavily on Elemér Hankiss's 1974 sociological study, a project dedicated to uncovering the ways in which people viewed themselves and their fellow human beings.

The formal framework of this paper only allows space for the description of a single case study. Thus, the outcome of my research is based on the analysis of the underlying value systems of a single individual.

Research methodology: I have attempted to raise open and flexible interview questions in order to collect as much primary material about the value system of a selected interviewee as possible. The aim was for a given case study to reveal its underlying variables, correlations and core systems which were then to be examined during the content analysis process. Accordingly, I have conducted a three-hour long life course interview with attention to lifestyle, work, income, leisure, family, childhood, religious identity, social issues, relationships, etc. As I have known my interview subject for years, I had the opportunity to observe her actual style of living, her social attributes, her behaviour, and most importantly, her system of values.

Primary Sources

In order to gain a thorough insight into the system of values and identification points of my interviewee, Ágnes F., I organised the various elements of her self-assessment into value categories outlined by the life course interview. These interview fragments thus form the primary source base for the qualitative analysis of values.¹ All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated

Pragmatic qualities: *I'm fast, my brain works fast and I'm not lazy. I'm perfect. I had a great career I was going up like a rocket. I had a great salary. I had to make responsible decisions. I have expectations. I'm a goal-oriented, motivated, strong personality, a perfectionist, always aiming for perfection. Trying my luck. I'm rich in experiences. I wouldn't do anything all over again.*

Intellectual qualities: *When I got into 'Közgáz'², that's where everything opened up for me. Since then, I've been interested in politics, economics, and the arts. In music, the theatre, the visual arts. The internet is important, I gain information, this complete independence, this great freedom that I don't have to adapt. I'm very happy on my own too. Alone. I read a lot. I've got a network, acquaintanceship. I still keep in touch with my university course mates. I maintain these connections, you have to, without these, you grow lonely. Travelling! Thank God I earn enough money that I can fulfil my passion for travelling. And that's it. I'm not waiting for great things to happen.*

Personal qualities: *I value myself highly, appreciation is important. I do soul-searching. Be honest with yourself, that's how you maintain the order, and that's how you keep your inner structures intact. I realise certain things immediately.*

1 This and all forthcoming translations, both from primary and secondary sources are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

2 Hungarian abbreviation of the word '*közgazdaságtan*' meaning 'economic sciences' or 'economics'. In this context the word refers to the Karl Marx University of Economic Sciences (1953), today known as Corvinus University of Budapest.

Moral qualities: *I'm able to finance my life back home, I sleep sound, I pay my taxes over there in April, everything's paid, pension, health insurance, everything. 'Blackwork'³, that's the biggest misstep. I live up to my own expectations. My own. I don't even know, why am I still voicing my opinions? Improve yourself. In-depth soul-searching, facing one's own self, and all these reflections... holding your head high. I constantly control myself. Yes, I want to do everything perfectly, always. That's my gage, you need to have a gage. Cause I do learn from my own mistakes. I have to account for myself, not for other people. I have to prove myself for myself, I tackle my own self every single day. For the longest, I couldn't care less what other people say. They have no influence over what I do.*

Sociable qualities: *I aid my children. Is there a more noble act than to help your fellow men? I have a broad network, I am welcoming. In romantic relationships it's important that the other one knows one more thing than I do. Cause that's what I can look up to, that's someone I can learn from.*

Familial qualities: *My mother, she was incredibly smart. I was five years old when she told me that a child has to do three different things besides going to school. Firstly, to learn an instrument, secondly, to do sports and thirdly, to study a language. Getting a bad grade was simply not an option! There were expectations. No academic report card under a 4,8 average.⁴ Study! It can be done, you just have to study, my mother said. It's easy as that, you need to study! Activity and engagement, those are vital. I clean the house, cook, buy groceries, I would go mad without doing anything, without activity.*

Work attitude: *And then I said to myself; both my hands work, and my brain, I'll go and earn some money. No matter what field I'm in, I need to be the best. And I'll have to make the most of that situation. When I left for Austria, I didn't make that choice gladly, only to have*

3 From the Hungarian 'feketézni' or 'fekete munka' meaning illicit, undeclared work. Loan translation from the German 'Schwarzarbeit'. According to German etymology, the adjective 'black' ['schwarz'] suggests a type of illegitimate employment that had to be carried out during the night, in the dark or in 'blackness' (Kluge, 2015: 659).

4 Academic grading in Hungary measures performance according to a 5-point system, which ranges from grade 1 ('elégtelen' or 'insufficient') to grade 5 ('kiváló' or 'excellent'). A report card over a 4,8 average grade suggests a consistently high-achieving academic performance.

any employment at all! Something I have money from. With time I learnt that this can be done smartly and that you can technically earn good money from this. If you speak German, if you're smart. Nothing is failure, it's only an experience. I always do a hundred percent, 24/7, I leave no chance for failure.

Societal perspective: *Everything became so ill in Hungary, and nothing is normal. Rotten selfishness in everybody. There used to be some sort of unity. I don't like it here anymore. I'm not needed here. It'd have to be some great opportunity for me to say I'm moving back for good. If I could do something that I truly love. Cause of the injustice, that was done to me, I turned away from this country. I'm not religious, I don't like extremes in anything. I know that my father's family was protestant and that my maternal grandmother would take me to the Cistercians for the Christmas Mass. if I could choose, I'd be a Buddhist, that's so peaceful. I believe in myself. Everybody should believe in what they want. I've got no problem with that.*

Prejudice: *It's really not easy to stomach the Austrians. You reach this point that you hate your compatriots for how they've changed, for what they have become. And then you start working in Austria and after a time you realise that it's refreshing to come home! So when you'd assume there's no lower than that! There is! There is! And that's the Austrian! The Austrian, that typical 'kleinkariert'⁵. A little nationalist, chauvinist, a little fascist, terribly narrow-minded, yet so proud and dedicated to keep it that way. This tiny little country, the same size as Hungary is divided into nine, smaller, little countries, nine little 'Lands'⁶. Each one has its own dialect, its vernacular, accent, the Tyrolean, the Styrian, the 'Oberösterreich', and the 'Niederösterreich'.⁷ And that's what they are wanking over? That their food is different from what you can get 200 km away from there! They can go fuck themselves! Disgusting!*

5 German adjective, used when describing someone who is petty, small and narrow-minded. Traditionally associated with the attitude of citizens from a '*kleinbürgerliches Milieu*' meaning a 'petty bourgeois' or lower middle-class standing.

6 The Republic of Austria is made up of nine '*Bundesländer*', literally 'meaning federal states'.

7 Four of the Austrian federal states: Tyrol, Styria, Upper-, and Lower Austria.

Aesthetics: *My own health, my own condition, that's very important. I exercise every day. How I feel is much more important than how I look. I distance myself from this image dictated by consumerist society, that you have to look a certain way. Cosmetic surgery, that's nice sometimes. Cause it somehow brings back something that's somehow began to fade. After all, it doesn't concern me 'cause I know that's the order of things. But at first, when I decide, alright, I'll have something done... But it's not a habit. I get something done but then I don't think about it for two-three years. I don't know, I'm just happy for each passing year.*

Future orientation: *And what about next year? And what about five years from now on? We don't think about that, we live for today. I've never been like this, never. It's a necessity to make use of the years that are given for active employment, so during these years one can gather that financial reserve of which you can say, whatever happens, it's there besides your low pension and God forbid you supplement it with some other work. So I wouldn't give up this living standard, which, by the way is not too extra. But it has to cover certain things!*

Opportunistic qualities: *I work on the tills. The tills! That's it. Below a day-rate of 85 Euros I won't leave the house. I won't pull myself together for that little. Cause at that point, I'm like, if am already going, then I'll be working the tills anyways. And if it's more difficult, then that's what we are doing. It totally doesn't matter, cause only money is decisive here, cause I sacrifice the same time even if I get 50 Euros and even if I get 85. So why not choose 85? But for that you have to know German, for that you have to have a brain, you have to see it through. You wouldn't be able to get off the streets because of your age. You have to be smart about it and with that you can practically make good money. So this also came with sacrifice. It takes imagination.*

Analysis of Values and Attributes

The attempt of self-realisation and the successful development of inner skills and abilities play a crucial part in Ágnes F.'s personal goals, objectives. When classified within the Weberian typology of *Idealtypen* (Ideal Types) Ágnes' behavioural patterns align with the category of *Zwekrationalität* (goal-rationality). Weber understands *Zwekrationalität* as the rationally purposeful social action, which entails the complicated plurality of means and ends. Goal-rational action then is conducted merely in accordance with ends and purposeful outcomes through the rational collation of means and goals (Weber 1978: 24).

When facing the true hardship and ‘reality’ of existence, she is capable of actualising herself as a ‘fighter’. Work and productivity are the core virtues in Ágnes’ personal value system. She is a strong personality, able to land on her feet even amidst adverse circumstances, turning disadvantages into assets. In a fast-changing, contradictory world, wherever life takes her, she preserves the core values of her existence, such as: pragmatic quality, honest work ethic, freedom, independence, self-discipline, the need for social equity, health, financial stability, family, humour, sanguinity, and leisure.

Childhood plays one of the most influential roles in shaping a person’s value system. The chances of one’s self-realization thus depend more on where and what family they are born into – what kind of resource portfolio they ‘inherit’– than on strong willpower and the ability to perform (Éber 2020: 217-221). During the life-course interview my interviewee spoke of a positive childhood experience. The greatest parental value of her orderly family life is the child itself, whose well-being, education and upbringing are given top priority. Furthermore, the pillar of her parents’ value strategy is an honest work ethic, consequent financial security, and relative prosperity. Religion, as a defining aspect of culture, does not play a significant role. This pattern of values is then inherited and consistently followed by Ágnes throughout her life, who, as a single child, receives maximal attention. In terms of the parents’ education, the father is a skilled labourer, the mother is employed as a laboratory assistant in a basic intellectual quality. The family life centres around Ágnes’ ability to obtain a university education and degree. ‘The difficulty and indispensability of physical work is one of the main foundations of working-class consciousness, yet intellectual work – the means of greater financial security and better social opportunities – is set as the primary goal for the children of the working class’ (Hankiss 1977: 368).

Positive values prevail in the first major stage of Ágnes’ young adult life. She holds prestigious, high paying positions within the social hierarchy and division of labour. Compared to her father’s, Ágnes’ financial and intellectual prosperity signal a great rise in social status. Naturally, this rise then defines her value consciousness, as well as the held significance of achieved social status. By the time of the Regime Change, Ágnes becomes the mother of two children, though she separates early from her husband. As a single parent she provides her children with everything she is able to. They are never short of material goods, live in a stable, prestigious home and keep a high-end car. Her sons,

however, never graduate university and are employed in atypical work. Ágnes is unsuccessful at passing onto her children the parenting patterns she inherited and continuously pursued.

In the second half of her adult life, long after the Regime Change, a series of negative experiences follow: career loss, grievances, conflicts. At the age of fifty, Ágnes loses her high-prestige job and with that her upward career trajectory. Despite her many attempts, she is incapable of finding secure employment that matches her abilities, qualifications, education, and professional knowledge. As a result of the value dilemma her situation brings about, Ágnes is forced to leave the country. Her outward mobility is motivated by feelings of injustice and lack of social respectability. Status inconsistency occurs, a situation in which highly educated individuals experience frustration due to lack of success, eventually choosing to blame the socio-political system they are subject to (Treiman 1970: 104).

Ágnes decides to open a restaurant in Mexico then moves to Austria a few years later to take a job as an elderly caregiver. Though her current employment does not align with her personal calling, she makes a comfortable living. Ambitions towards a prestigious, professional career are overcome by the efforts of money-making, saving, and financial rationality. She travels between Budapest and Austria in three-week shifts, so she is able to maintain the living standards of her former senior management income. Financial stability and the deriving monetary independence both strengthen her sense of freedom. When asked about her current situation, she either speaks appreciatively or chooses not to go into details. In his 2019 lecture series, *The Sociology of Values*, György Csepeli situated the concept of hypocrisy among other difficulties of accessing value in society: 'People often put themselves in a better light than how they really are: their words do not match their actions.' Yet in the case of Ágnes, this behaviour is easy to understand and explain..

She saves up most of her income, spending most of her free time on travelling, culture, home refurbishment, fashion, cosmetic treatments. Instead of a professional career, this is currently a very important part of her self-realization and personality development. 'The "life-fulfilling", "personality-fulfilling" momentum is most characteristic of the value system of the intellectual strata. (Hankiss 1982: 25). The habit that Hankiss classified as 'life-fulfilling' might not only be an educational indicator, but a consequence of Ágnes' current socio-economic circumstances. As shown in the interview,

her relationship to cosmetic enhancements, weight, and appearance is consciously detached from consumer society-driven beauty standards, yet at the same time she likes to *'get something done'* every two to three years. This aspect of Ágnes's value system, according to her own account, does not stem from a compulsive compliance with the rapidly evolving beauty ideals of global capitalism (slenderness, feminine figure, trend-following appearance), but from a sort of self-improving, self-care focused attitude. However, this phenomenon might also be identified as a symptom of 'self-care' culture that has gained traction since the 2010s. While turn-of-the-century marketing strategies sought to determine the individual's beauty and self-image in a normative manner (Burton and Netemeyer 1995: 60-75), today's beauty industry promotes 'feminine confidence' and 'unconditional self-love'. Within this new system of values, all cosmetic enhancements (breast augmentation, derma fillers) are then viewed merely as self-fulfilling consumer activities. So for the consumer attitude followed by Ágnes, *'how I feel is much more important than how I look'*.

Already during the interview, then later in the text analysis, it became clear to me that my interviewee's thinking and way of life are mostly characterized by pragmatic qualities. Her relationship with work and a strong purpose of money-making motivates her on every step. High levels of **pragmatism** and **intellectualism** might be classified as the defining components of Ágnes' value system. She is a strong, independent, purposeful, self-assured personality with an overall positive self-image. This also entails her attitude towards work: wherever life takes her, she stands her ground and makes herself useful. *'And then I said to myself; both my hands work, and my brain, I'll go and earn some money.'* The notion of selection hides within the depths of human existence: our hierarchy of values is associated with our instinct of survival. Value then consistently maintains the space that orients (Csepeli 2019). Ágnes' interview reveals that in her situation, the target value is financial gain which is then achieved through the asset value of working. She strives for a good life quality and therefore she is willing to take on any well-paying employment regardless of the location. The ability to progress with change requires a serious process of adaptation, making it the very means of survival. This constant change of circumstances and its related need for adaptation constitute the notion of natural selection. Opportunity is always given to those who are capable of successfully adapting to the changes of a given environment (Csepeli 2019). Considering her education and

previous managerial position, Ágnes does a simple but difficult job, as it is momentarily the most profitable. Social, economic and political changes force her to make important decisions, therefore her judgement is not motivated by career ambitions. She measures her success in material gain, in generating profit. 'Money-making [...] in the modern economic order is the reward and manifestation of good work' (Weber 1995: 43).

For Ágnes, the success of adapting to the changes of the labour market is defined by her ability to generate profit. This financially motivated value system might be explained, among other things, by the mentality of her parents, whose values have not only determined Ágnes' previous career choices, but also the later development of her life. Her parents prioritise extracurricular activities (violin, German language lessons, ballet) and later persuade her to obtain a degree from a prestigious university. A series of thoughtful, rational decisions offers a reliable career path for the future. This momentum of her childhood testifies to a neoliberal upbringing, a transgression of the Kádár era, according to which *'nothing is failure, it's only an experience. I always do a hundred percent, 24/7, I leave no chance for failure.'* Ágnes' work culture adapts to the changing economic system its object to. In the Hungary of her childhood, a good degree, education and intellectual career planning proved to be profitable, therefore, similarly to her parents, she prioritizes these cultural values. In her current life situation, however, her survival is tied solely to money-making, so she prioritises generating profit, just like the economic structure she is the subject of. Ágnes is diligent with an honest work ethic, she tracks her expenses, income and investments, manages her time, avoids debt, plans and calculates in advance. *'It totally doesn't matter, cause only money is decisive here, cause I sacrifice the same time even if I get 50 Euros and even if I get 85. So why not choose 85?'*

Her **personal qualities** are only voiced in a positive tone. She is self-assured and confident in her ability to do the best. When she is wrong, she is capable of realizing and resolving her conflicts without needing the input of others. She often says of herself that she is 'perfect', as she dedicates time for self-examination and soul-searching, as well as exercises radical honesty with herself. Ágnes tries to maintain an order inside and out. She avoids all negative value judgments against herself. Her system of values stems from her very self and is only determined by the positive values she chooses to focus on, continuously rejecting negativity and judgement from the outside. She fulfils her social obligation, follows norms, pays her taxes, refuses undeclared, undocumented work. She is often critical towards others as she does not like to be contradicted.

Ágnes' **family life** and **childhood** are spent in relative happiness, she talks about her parents with great respect. She takes care of her own children, aiding and financing her own sons. She treats housework as a hobby, cooks with pleasure and – similarly to all other aspects of her life – she strives for perfection. She enjoys welcoming guests and hosting dinners. Common interests, cohesion, reciprocity within the family, and her small circle of close friends prevail. Despite this environment, Ágnes is unable to pass on to her children the value system she was brought up with. For this however, her parenting patterns and practices do not bear sole responsibility. The transfer of values between generations is object to new-found challenges. Value disruption occurs when the real, actionable content and normative power of a value system is obscured, or when existing values do not provide an acceptable orientation and new value alternatives are not foreseeable (Váriné 1987: 242). Ágnes's sons are not socialised in a labor-value-centered state socialism and are unwilling to enter the Hungarian labour market for low pay. They do not obtain a higher education or university degree. Travelling in and out of Hungary, they spend months and years abroad with temporary work or studying. 'Young people from former socialist countries entered adulthood during the period of post-regime change uncertainty of emerging capitalism (ELTE Tátk 2014).

Ágnes' previous image of society changes after she fails to get a job corresponding to her education and professional abilities. She does not feel societal respectability in Hungary, her general trust in the state and its people is broken, eventually motivating her to leave the country. Her value system undergoes a serious crisis. "The consciousness of national belonging means the natural rejection and conscious adoption of certain values" (Csepeli 1987: 107). The awareness of this 'belonging' plays a key part in Ágnes' ways of identification. The ways in which she discusses Hungary's current socio-political situation testify to this: *'I don't like it here anymore. I'm not needed here. [...] Cause of the injustice, that was done to me, I turned away from this country.'* This negative sentiment might be explained by Ágnes' involvement in a serious labor dispute with her last Hungarian employer, a lawsuit she believes she loses due to injustice and corruption. 'Crisis phenomena are characterized by a lack of morality, which is to be attributed to rapid structural change' (Bauer 2004: 34). The above explained injustices together persuade Ágnes to leave the country. Value crises arise in the most diverse spaces and permeate both private and public life (Váriné 1987: 17). Ágnes understands her personal crisis of values as a result of societal unfairness and lack of social solidarity. She is very critical of

Hungarian socio-political conditions. At the same time, she plans her future with a self-fulfilling, definite ambition. Ágnes attaches value to the notion of future, she is happy to restructure her personal ambitions, to set new goals for herself.

Her opinions and experiences of other nations, social groups are often critical and arguably prejudiced. 'There is not a society without a prejudiced person, and there is no person in whom there are no prejudices' (Csepeli 1987: 107). Ágnes' view about Austrian people and their culture testify to this. Though not articulating it in an open manner, her prejudices are simultaneously motivated by a sense of superiority in relation to others who are less qualified or hold a different mindset. From this viewpoint, the nationality or ethnic identity of a given person is irrelevant.

Overall, 'social inequalities determined by birth are very difficult to overcome in relation to housing, material and financial resources, while schooling offers mobility channels that open up the possibility of excellence and upward mobility for the disadvantaged through the increase of cultural capital' (Székelyi, Örkény, et al., 2005: 99). Ágnes's parents have to sacrifice a lot for her successful upbringing and schooling. Educational mobility, one of the most prominent indicators of social mobility, is clearly visible in her case: Ágnes' university degree far exceeds her father's education as a skilled labourer. During the years of state socialism, the father is able to hold a leadership position. Similarly, Ágnes is also employed in a senior management status until the age of fifty. Another important factor of social mobility is settlement structure. Accordingly, the father's social mobility might be approached not only through occupational structures, but also by spatial mobility: Ágnes spends parts of her childhood in Budapest, Pécs, Hódmezővásárhely and the GDR. She holds advanced language skills in three different European languages: German, English and even Spanish. Her diligence and compatible character facilitate a highly successful career start. Already as a young adult she is the owner of a private flat and a car, later she inherits her parents' property.

The second half of her life, however, comes with drastic changes, most importantly the loss of employment and the inability to secure a new position. She is forced to look for opportunities abroad.

In his 2019 lecture series, Csepeli speaks of the structural disintegration of a given, reliable order. Though the framework of Ágnes's life is disintegrating, she is capable of rapid and efficient adaptation, of finding radically new answers in her new situation, as

well as successfully resolving conflicts on her own. Undoubtedly, she chooses one of the most successful solutions for the above-mentioned conflict situation. In *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* Durkheim (2003: 265-274) writes that societal disturbances, rapid change, sudden increase in economic or political power all tend to trigger prominent waves of declassification within society. Certain individuals might find themselves in a lower social status than before and are forced to limit their needs: their moral values and ethical education need reconfiguration. Crises, that is, 'disturbances of the collective order', lead to a general imbalance. High emigration rates might function as a safety valve for severe poverty, which then plays a crucial role in preventing suicide.

'It is clear that all research on values leads to a density of social problems' (Hoppál 1987: 19). With rapid societal change, the circumstances and social importance of middle-aged women are devalued. In order to make and sustain a comfortable living, these highly educated but insufficiently rewarded women look for new opportunities abroad. The aging tendency of Western societies has created a vacuum of values. As the need for women over the age of fifty depreciates in the East, it simultaneously gains significance within the social division of labour of the economic West. Adept and energetic middle-aged east-central European women with a university education and advanced language skills often find employment in elderly residential care. Leaving their family, friendships, relationships, and homeland behind, these women adapt to new situations, into new families, and different cultures. They maintain contact with the ones they had to leave behind. Depending on the geographical distance, they commute between two countries every two to three weeks, every six months, or every year. Change also brings innovation, introduces these women to new cultures, lifestyles, habits, and establishes new relationships. 'Real heroes and strong people are those, who, torn out of their usual environments, ways and order of life, are capable of maintaining a system, as well as finding new, alternative patterns of life. They refrain from becoming temporarily, or even permanently indifferent (Hankiss 1987: 62).'

These middle-aged, active women do their best to thrive, above all, in Hungary. Their decision to migrate is predominantly driven by structural constraints such as unemployment, the scarcity of employment or other means of livelihood, the housing crisis, and most importantly, the threat of pauperisation. Those who choose to move abroad aim to liberate themselves from such constraints, hoping to improve their financial circumstances, to find a higher income abroad and with that, existential security.

Resolute and persistent work ethic is what characterises these women. Contrasted with their former Hungarian conditions, they earn well and are capable of saving large portions of their income in order to provide some support for their adult children who often stay home. They make a comfortable living and consciously choose not to identify with the type of expulsion which primarily forced them to leave their home country.

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