

## ACCEPTABLE AND UNACCEPTABLE SOURCES OF INEQUALITY IN ROMANIA. A VISUAL STUDY

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**Abstract.** The paper submits the results of a visual research on the perception of inequality within Romanian society. The data were collected by means of drawings, an uncommon method used in studying social stratification. The analysis was applied to 82 drawings obtained from 41 Romanians (and 16 drawings obtained from 8 Italians added to the former, in an attempt to explore differences cross-nationally). The results refer to the resources that are perceived to be unequally distributed in Romania, to the acceptable sources of inequality in Romania and, in exploratory terms, to the comparative analysis upon the perception of inequality in Romania and Italy. The commonest inequality perceived in Romania is the economic inequality. Here, one of the acceptable sources of inequality is related to the prestige of professions, and one of the unacceptable sources of inequality is the qualitative dimension of lifestyle: dissatisfaction, discontent, unhappiness.

**Keywords:** inequality, visual research, drawings, social stratification, social classes, status beliefs, qualitative research

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### 1. Introduction

The paper submits the results of a descriptive research on the perception of inequality in Romania. I have tried to discover the subjective perspectives of inequality (whether there is inequality in Romania, which are the unequally distributed resources and which are the unequally, yet acceptably distributed resources, in Romania). What is new about this paper consists both in the methodological approach (perception of inequality, qualitatively studied, by means of the visual method) and in its results (by the richness of details with which inequality is described). I have also attempted to compare the perception of inequality in subjects from two different societies: Romania and Italy. This attempt has resulted in a few hypotheses (to be tested in wider representative

studies), which aim at explaining the differences in the perception of the inequality sources, as well as the differences in terms of inequality acceptability.

In Marshall (2003) inequality is defined as “unequal rewards or chances offered to society’s groups” (p. 288). Cherkaoui (1996) shows that “any uniform distribution of a resource is unequal. Inequalities are basically social, as they are related to some economic, political, prestige stratifications, or of other nature” (p. 133).

I tried to discover the structure of inequality in contemporary Romanian society, from the perspective of my subjects. **Which resources are perceived as unequally distributed in Romania?** Which are the features of social stratification, according to my subjects; which are the status-related beliefs they share?

I likewise tried to discover **which are the resources perceived as unequally distributed, yet acceptably, in Romania?** Where applicable, **which are acceptable sources of inequality?** Kerbo (2009) posits that “social stratification means that inequality has been hardened or institutionalized and there is a system of social relationships that determines who gets what and why. When we say institutionalized, we mean that a system of layered hierarchy has been established. People have come to expect that individuals and groups with certain positions will be able to demand more influence and respect and accumulate a greater share of goods and services. Such inequality may or may not be accepted equally by a majority in the society, but it is recognized as the way things are” (p. 10).

## 2. Theoretical framework

Sociology offers an abundance of literature with respect to inequality. Kerbo (2009) posits that social inequality results from the people’s differentiated access to resources and services. When referring to inequality, most authors bring into question other related concepts (most frequently social stratification or social classes).

Any sociological analysis related to social stratification starts with Marx. In Marx’s conception, stratification is underlain by the economic dimension of social life: “property is the origin or, at least, one of the foundations of the inequality between people” (Cherkaoui 1997:113). Marx envisions 3 types of property: labour force, capital and land.

Marxist tradition of thought relative to stratification was supplemented by Weberian tradition (equally strong and prestigious in the sociological theoretical frame of inequality). Unlike Marx, Weber posits that, in describing social stratification, we must consider not only the economic aspects, but also some other types of resources. The 3 dimensions of social ranking envisioned by Weber are: economic, statutory and political, wherefrom the class, status and political hierarchies ensue.

Most subsequent studies on inequality started from the aforementioned traditions. Most researches on inequality have focused on social classes and identified

various types of resources that generate cleavages. Then there are authors who claim the disappearance of social classes (if not those *in se*, at least those *per se*, where class awareness exists). There are some others who completely doubt the existence of classes, even if they admit the existence of inequality in society. According to the syntheses made by Revilla *et al.* (2013), some theoreticians consider that today social inequalities no longer define distinct social groups.

With reference to the social-differentiation criteria, Robert and Keller (2011) show that, in modern societies, the components of social stratification may be either vertical (occupation, education and income) or horizontal. The vertical components have lost their relevance in modernity, when the social differentiation is made according to one's lifestyle and consumption level (which are horizontal dimensions). In this way, the low consumer spending is characteristic of the lower class; whereas the choice of one's lifestyle is specific to the upper class. Bourdieu shows that there is a connection between consumerism, lifestyle and social position: the class condition generates the class habitus and taste, which produce the lifestyle (hence the necessity habitus of the dominated class and the distinction habitus of the dominant class).

When we refer to subjective social hierarchies, we refer to status beliefs. Ridgeway (2001) defines status beliefs as "widely shared cultural beliefs that people in one social group (professionals, men, whites) are more esteemed and competent than people in another social group (service workers, women, people of colour). Status beliefs can be held as people's perceptions of what 'most others' believe or as what people themselves believe. As their definition suggests, status beliefs are cultural representations of the evaluative relationship between social groups or categories of people in a society. Status beliefs construct and justify inequality between social groups by asserting differences between them in social worth and competence" (p. 324).

The researchers on the toleration of inequality have concluded that there are significant differences between contemporary societies in the acceptance threshold of inequality. For instance, Ladd and Bowman consider that "there can be and is variation around the world with respect to the level of inequality that is found acceptable" (Kerbo 2009:448).

Here are a few variations: "the typical American is willing to tolerate substantial inequalities in power, wealth, or prestige, if the opportunities for securing those social goods are distributed equally across all individuals" (Grusky 2000: 2817). Other research results (see Alves and Rossi in the 1970s) highlight that "higher-class people are more willing to accept inequality based on merit, while lower-class people are more willing to accept inequality based on need" (Kerbo 2009:448). Here are some others from the 1970s (Robinson and Bell) and 90s (Kelly and Evans) show that "in USA the young, minorities and those lower in occupational status are more likely to favour greater equality" (Kerbo 2009:448).

People decide whether inequalities are acceptable or not depending on subjective assessments and perceptions: "the tendency to accept inequality in a particular society may also be related to a person's perception of the degree of

inequality that exists in that society. In other words, people may believe the level of inequality that exists is legitimate because they underestimate the degree of inequality in the society” (Kerbo 2009:448).

Most researches referring to social stratification are surveys. The characteristics and distribution of social classes are unveiled by sophisticated statistical processing of different combinations of variables (e.g. occupation, income, education etc.).

The study of inequality in Central and Eastern Europe has followed the same path. The existing studies are extensive surveys dedicated to measuring inequality (usually focused on its distinct components: health inequality, income inequality or educational inequality) or they are statistical processing of the various national or European barometers. Heyns (2005) makes an inventory of the researches measuring the income and wage inequality in Central and Eastern Europe from 1989 onwards. They show inequalities to have risen (especially the ones in terms of age, education, region of the country or state of health); yet, the gender-related inequalities seem to have decreased. Robert and Keller (2011) show that the researches on social stratification have reported a low level of social differentiation, in terms of vertical hierarchy (occupation, education, income); yet, that the studies on the lifestyles have generated proofs of the special forms of social inequalities in Central and Eastern Europe. The explanation provided by the authors for these discoveries is that the communist policies eliminated the usual forms of social inequalities existing in market economies, but could not standardize the lifestyle, and its effects on inequality could not be reduced just as much.

Binelli et al. (2015) process data collected from 12 countries throughout Central and Eastern Europe, with a view to measuring social inequality, on three dimensions: income, education and health. The authors conclude that the countries characterized by low social inequality have high levels of human development, economic performance and political stability. Rose and Viju (2014), in a cross-country research (13 countries throughout Central and Eastern Europe) show that income inequality has risen in these countries since 1990 and they test a series of factors impacting on inequality. Tufiş (2012), processing international comparative-research databases on social inequality, measured the main parameters of status attainment in 1992 and 1999 for a group of East-European countries, in comparison with a group of capitalist countries. The author was interested in finding out whether socialism produced similar processes of status attainment, in the societies across Central and Eastern Europe; and whether those possible patterns were radically different from those within Western capitalist countries. The researcher concluded that there was similarity between eastern societies; yet that there was not a single pattern for the capitalist societies, as regards the status-attainment processes.

A research project funded by EU and led by the University of Oxford (Eurequal) in 2007, revealed, as a result of 15 000 interviews in 12 countries throughout Central and Eastern Europe that, in post-Communist countries, the perceived social inequality dramatically increased (<http://eurequal.politics.ox.ac.uk/>). Inter alia, the study set out to discover whether the citizens of the aforementioned countries

believed inequality to be excessive and why (Loveless and Whitefield 2011). The researchers discovered that more than half of the respondents in all countries (except Romania) considered there was too much inequality within their society; they further discovered that social inequality is related to the distribution of social goods, such as access to health services, education and other cultural goods; and especially that there was little connection between the 'objective' measuring of income inequality and the perception of excessive social inequality. In other words, the ones in more equal societies, in terms of income inequality, rather perceive social inequality as being excessive. This study shows, *inter alia*, that the perceptions of social inequality are as important as inequality itself, as these perceptions generate attitudes (for instance, the one towards market economy).

Also with reference to the perception of inequality and in an extensive study of the survey type, with over 4000 respondents, Verwiebe and Wegener (2000) show how just income inequality is being perceived, depending on a few individual characteristics: people with higher education and those working in the private sector support income inequality, whereas the unemployed, the women and the elderly people deem income inequality to be unjust. Therefore the higher somebody's social position is, the less probably will (s)he perceive income inequality to be unjust. Hence, an exploited dimension in international researches refers to income inequality and its legitimacy (see also the large, representative national sample surveys in nine nations conducted by the International Social Survey Programme, Kelley and Evans, 1993).

Robert and Keller (2011) show that there are two classes of theories about the evolution of social stratification in Central and Eastern Europe, compared to Western countries: theories of convergence (the social stratification in former communist countries will start to resemble the one in capitalist countries) and theories of non-convergence (they claim the absence of a common model of social stratification – as social and cultural inheritance determines unique characteristics in each society).

In Romania, there are few studies on social stratification, focused specifically on poverty and social exclusion. For instance, Voicu and Vasile (2010) explain the rural/urban inequalities of access to tertiary education in Romania, and their dynamics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; or Pasti (2003) analyses gender inequalities, showing that Romanian society is patriarchal. Most of the studies are also sociological surveys upon numerous groups of subjects. For instance, in 2010, an extensive research was conducted at a national level, involving 4500 persons, with a view to finding an answer to questions such as: which is Romania's social structure in contrast to other countries of Central and Eastern Europe and to developed EU countries and how is social inequality being distributed nationally and regionally? Along with the survey, some other 30 in-depth interviews, of the life-story type, were applied. The results are to be published. See the project site: <http://stratificare-sociala.ro>. Other studies are processing national databases. For instance, the study on the form of social structure in Romania (Vasile 2008), which proves the existence of social classes in this country; or the study on the

income inequality in the Romanian households (Molnar 2010), which proves the rise of inequality in 2006, as against 2000.

In Romania, there are no qualitative studies on status beliefs; worldwide, the qualitative researches on status beliefs are limited to their particular dimensions (for instance health, see Williams and Elliott 2010, or gender status beliefs, see Rashotte and Webster 2005 or Ridgeway 2011). Moreover, most qualitative studies of status beliefs are feminist. For instance, Reay (1998) proposes the combination of the quantitative and qualitative approaches, in studying how the class and the inequalities it generates are experienced in 'gendered and raced ways'. Travers (1999) also proposes a few modalities of approaching the study of the classes, as an ethno-methodologist; yet qualitative researches of inequality are quite hard to find in the literature.

However, one cannot talk of complete methodological approach of social stratification without its qualitative research. Do regular people (not theorists or researchers) believe there is a social structure? Which are, from their viewpoint, the criteria for social class-formation? The existing studies propose measurements of the inequality, as it is conceived by theorists or as it is built, more or less arbitrarily, by researchers. Therein lies the novelty of my study: I attempt to build the concept of inequality with the help of my subjects, without suggesting them what it might contain (inductive conceptualisation).

Hence, I endeavour to complete the existing knowledge about inequality with a new perspective; to privilege the subjects' viewpoint, by describing and explaining inequality without preconceptions, so without a priori elaboration of hypothetical propositions in its regard. I want to find out how inequality is seen through the eyes of ordinary Romanians. I will try to point to the resources that are perceived by subjects as unequally distributed within Romanian society, which are the status beliefs shared by my subjects with reference to the upper and lower classes from today's Romania. I will also try to highlight which are the unequally albeit acceptably distributed resources in my subjects' perception.

Romania is one of Eastern Europe's typical countries. What makes it special is the high inequality level (Romania is one of the EU member states with the highest inequality level) as well as the relatively low number (in comparison with other Central and East European countries) of citizens, who consider the inequality within their society to be excessive (see Eurequal). Therefore, the study of inequality in Romania is not only of local, but also of regional interest.

Qualitative studies are indispensable to knowing in-depth the society; and, by this study, I attempt to make a first step towards the 'qualitative' knowledge of inequality.

### **3. Methodological framework**

My study is a novelty not only because of the qualitative approach of the perception upon social inequality, but also because of the application of the visual-

research methods. There are no publications that describe previous visual studies with reference to social stratification. Yet there is an extensive visual research underway at Transilvania University of Braşov (coordinated by Professor Gheorghe Onuţ) where data have been collected, as drawings by children aged of 5, 7 and 9 years old, in 2002 and in 2012. Each child was asked to draw, on three different sheets: a 'man of fortune', a 'poor man' and a 'man like my parents'. The project "Inequality drawn by children" is in the data-collection stage; they have not yet been analysed and interpreted.<sup>1</sup>

Inspired by this project, I set out to discover some everyday Romanians' perception on the social structure of our society, resorting to drawings as a visual method of data collection.

Holm (2008) shows that visual methods, as part of data collection in social sciences, have risen in popularity over the last 10 years; however, in most cases, visual data are seen as supporting, completing verbal data and not the other way round. In the present study, the main data-collection method was the visual one.

As regards drawings, Bagnoli (2009) shows that they are mostly used in the case of children or in cross-cultural researches, under the assumption that it is hard for the participants to verbally express themselves. The researches in whose framework drawings were used as a data-collection method, and which had children as subjects, are quite variegated – studying childhood (Elden 2013), describing pain (Kortesluoma *et al.* 2008), or the children's wishes and ideas, in terms of motion, game and sports activities, in the school setting (Kuhn 2003). Nevertheless, drawings may be useful when broadly applied on persons of all ages. For instance, Galman (2009) conducted a study on the development of one's identity as a professor (graphical stories on how they prepared themselves for teaching); similarly, Kearney and Hyle (2004) studied the experience of changing the boss, by asking the subjects to draw an image or a series of images by means of which to describe what this change meant to them. Many of the researches in whose framework drawing is being used, study themes that would be otherwise difficult to approach with one of the classical data-collection methods (for instance, in understanding disease (Guillemin 2004), the experience of chronic pain (Philips *et al.* 2015), the knowledge on HIV/AIDS (Mutonyi 2011) etc.).

I think it is necessary to supplement the knowledge of social stratification with outcomes of qualitative researches, due to the richness and diversity of the collected data. They complete knowledge with unpredictable aspects. I also consider visual data a precious information source, which reveals deep aspects of stratification (either because they seem unimportant to subjects, or because they are not aware of them). Moreover, visual data can be also used in order to stimulate interviewing, in researches related to social stratification and other researches – see graphic elicitation.

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<sup>1</sup> The database "Inequality seen by children. Data base on visual Sociology" with the drawings is available online at <[http://acum.sociologie-brasov.ro/en/page\\_Inequality%20project\\_16.html](http://acum.sociologie-brasov.ro/en/page_Inequality%20project_16.html)>. Accessed on 03.11.2015.

Therefore, I decided to bring a novel methodological element into the study of social stratification, through the application of visual methods of data collection. I asked my subjects to draw the social stratification in Romania. I collected 82 drawings from 41 subjects, whereof 18 male subjects and 23 female subjects; 19 youths below 25 years old, 14 adults between 26 and 50 years old, 8 seniors over 50 years old; 11 had primary education, 17 had secondary education and 7 had higher education. The subjects include pupils, students, retirees and employees, with occupations such as barman, waiter, salesman, educator, nurse, cook, worker, cameraman or engineer. The income earned by each of them is medium (around the average national salary). All subjects live in the urban environment in various Romanian regions. Unfortunately, the subjects are homogeneous, in terms of their social class. They are neither in the lower, nor in the upper class (by the criteria discovered in their drawings). One of the limits of this study and also one of the suggestions for future studies is tracking the changes in the perception of inequality, depending on the social class that the subjects belong to. This study remains however relevant for the status beliefs of Romania's middle class. See the definition of the middle class, in Mărginean (2011).

I divided a white sheet in two, by tracing a visible line. Atop the first section, I wrote "Typical Romanians for the lower class of today's Romania", and atop the second section, I wrote "Typical Romanians for the upper class of today's Romania". The subjects were instructed in very few words, and they were not guided at all (it was not suggested what to draw). The subjects were told that in the past years, something called visual research had developed and that we would test it together. I asked them to imagine that we split the Romanians of our days into two categories: the upper class and the lower class; and then I asked them to draw, on the sheet prepared beforehand, typical Romanians for each category. I only told them that the drawings might contain anything deemed of relevance for the proposed theme, that they would not be evaluated according to their artistic skills, that I was not interested in the aspect of the drawing, but in its content. I let them know there would be two series of drawings, but I did not tell them from the beginning the theme of the second drawing. The drawing instruments (pencils, felt tip pens, watercolours etc.) were the subjects' choice. Depending on the subjects' wish, some drew on the spot; others were urged to complete the task in at most 3 days.

I took into account the specifications in the literature with reference to the interpretation of the drawing by the subjects themselves (see Kearney and Hyle 2004). Therefore, the subjects were asked to explain what they drew. I told them I did not want to misinterpret their drawings or not understand them at all. The interviews were exclusively guided by drawings: "Please explain me each drawn thing: what did you draw, what do the constituents represent, what did you want to convey by each drawn element?" As they were explaining, I only asked clarification questions.

After the interview, I urged the subjects to perform the second task. I prepared a similar sheet of paper, only the texts atop the page were: "Typical Romanians for



the lower class of ideal Romania”, respectively “Typical Romanians for the upper class of ideal Romania”. Then I followed exactly the same procedures as for the first set of drawings.

The sampling was theoretical. In the first phase of the data collection, the subjects were chosen by age (they had to be capable of understanding and complying with the task – the youngest subject was 11 years old, the eldest was 70 years old). The second criterion was for the subjects to be all different from each other (in terms of gender, schooling level, profession, material condition etc.). Being a qualitative research, I did not formulate hypotheses, before going into the field and collecting data. Thus, I did not think that any socio-demographic variable might bring significant variations in the perception of inequality. Therefore, I did not a priori assume that a criterion for the selection of the subjects is more relevant than another one; and I tried to discover patterns in the data collected from highly different subjects. After collecting the first 20 drawings, I analysed them in terms of content or varied subject categories. I did not notice significant differences among sub-groups, but I continued the group selection, guided by 3 criteria that seemed to bring about small variations in content: gender, age and schooling level. I followed therefore the characteristic procedure of grounded theory. The hypotheses resulted after the analysis of the first 20 drawings were tested, by analysing the remaining drawings. The variations that found confirmation are enumerated below, in the paragraphs devoted to the results.

I decided to collect data with the aid of field operators. I had 8 research assistants, who were instructed to choose subjects as different from each other as possible, among persons they know. I considered the subjects would be more diverse, if chosen by different researchers; likewise, given the novel character of the task required from the subjects, I considered that if the field operators appeal to known persons, they will encounter fewer refusals to participate in the research.

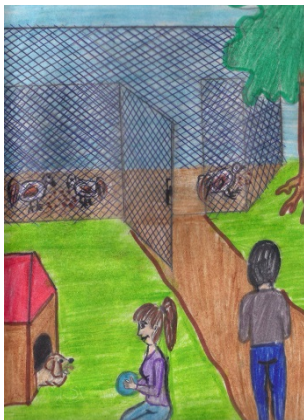
The drawings were analysed by means of the qualitative analysis methods and techniques and with NVivo 10 software, which allows not only text analysis, but also image analysis. Even if qualitative analysis methods were developed for texts and there are no specific methods of qualitative analysis for images, I succeeded in applying the coding procedures on the drawings. I used the coding procedures specific to grounded theory: open coding, axial coding and selective coding. I discovered over 100 categories and subcategories with component codes (a few codes – in the form of drawing clippings – will be reproduced in sections 4 and 5).

#### **4. How social stratification is perceived in Romania**

In today’s Romania, there is inequality, according to my subjects. These results do not coincide with what Revilla et al. (2013) claim; at least in the subjects’ perception, social inequalities define distinct social groups in contemporary Romania. As also claimed by Vasile (2008), according to my subjects’ perception, there are social classes in Romania. The structure of social classes, as shown by the drawings, is described through specific categories of people.

#### 4.1. Social categories specific to the lower and upper classes

The lower class in Romania is associated with peasantry (there are also other authors who have shown that there is rural/urban inequality in Romania, by the differentiated access to various resources and services – see Voicu and Vasile 2010). Typical Romanians are depicted in the open air, in the rural environment, working the fields with traditional, rudimentary tools.



Besides peasants, the lower class seems to comprise other integrated social categories: families with children or elderly people, but also deviating categories: offenders, beggars or alcoholics. Rather than otherwise, men reckon the category of the elderly people to stand for the lower class; and subjects over 50 years of age add families with children to the lower-class category.



The social categories constituting the upper class are not equally well distinguished. However, most drawings capture the upper-class Romanians in urban environments, performing office work. A few are assigned leading positions, and some others obviously have professions that require higher education. Hence the inequality in terms of power and of skills and qualifications appear quite seldom. Power and education are allegedly less important or less visible sources of inequality in today's Romania.



The resources perceived as unequally distributed in Romania are not manifold and variegated. The most important social-stratification generating resource seems to be material capital. I grouped the results referring to this resource under the concept of lifestyle with its two dimensions: life satisfaction degree and living standards. It is the lifestyle that essentially distinguishes social classes in my subjects' drawings.

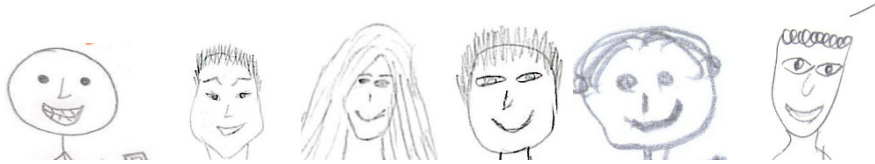
#### 4.2. Social ranking according to the economic dimension

The inequality in Romania is visually represented by illustrating the lifestyle specific to representatives of the aforementioned classes. The lower class of today's Romania is mostly depicted in terms of the qualitative dimension of its lifestyle (satisfaction degree). The lower class appears to be characterized by sadness, unhappiness, dissatisfaction.



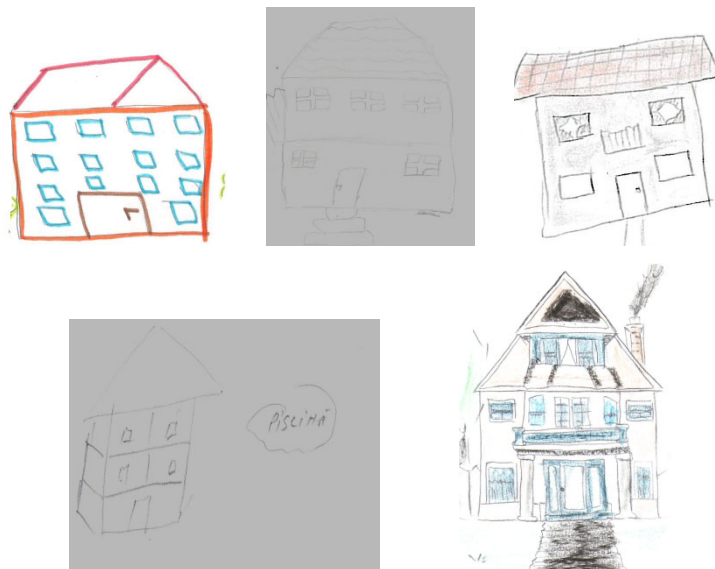
Most frequently, sadness can be seen on the drawn faces; however, there are situations where their unhappiness is emphasized by nature's gloominess: either it rains, or the sky is cloudy, or the sun seems upset.

The upper class seems to be characterized by feelings of satisfaction, contentment. Furthermore, women add the qualitative dimension of satisfaction to the features of the upper class.



However, the upper class of today's Romania is mainly represented by the quantitative dimension of the lifestyle (living standard). Hence, the most frequently perceived inequality is of economic nature. The subjects' perception of inequality coincides, in this way, with its definitions given by Marx, who considered inequality to dwell upon property. The upper class differs from the lower class in terms of assets – from real estate values to various accessories. The subjects chose to describe the economic difference between the two classes by manifold details. The drawings depicting the upper class are much richer in real estate-related elements.

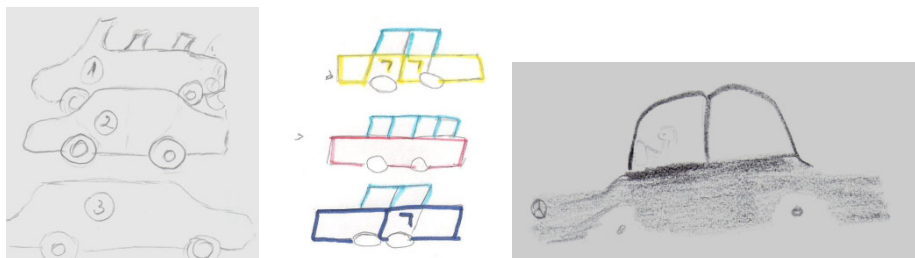
The upper class holds or can afford to live in multi-storey villas, in houses with loft extensions and pools. These are stately homes where entries are marked by columns: “the single most powerful expression of social status may be one's address” (Sernau 2011:172).

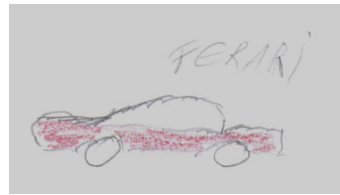


The lower class holds or lives in much smaller houses, sometimes in blocks of flats. The houses are unpretentious, with few rooms, and they do not stand out at all. Women, not men, are the ones who add this characteristic features to the lower class - dwelling in small houses. On the whole, the house is a distinctive element rather for the upper than the lower class. Sometimes, the absence of the house is characteristic of the lower class. One can notice, with respect to the houses owned by the Romanians that belong in the lower class, that their doors are sometimes open (which probably suggests the absence of luxury goods in these houses).

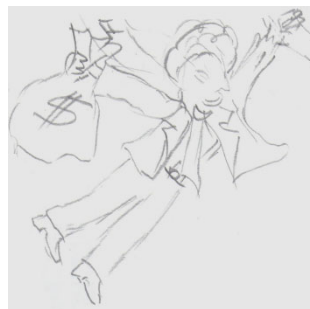
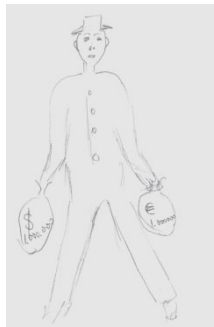


The cars owned by the upper-class members are highly expensive. Most often, their brand is specified. These people do not possess a single car, but two or even three cars, which suggests not only abundance, but also that the car is not merely a necessity for this category. The absence of the car is characteristic of the lower-class members (it is not depicted in the subjects' drawings).





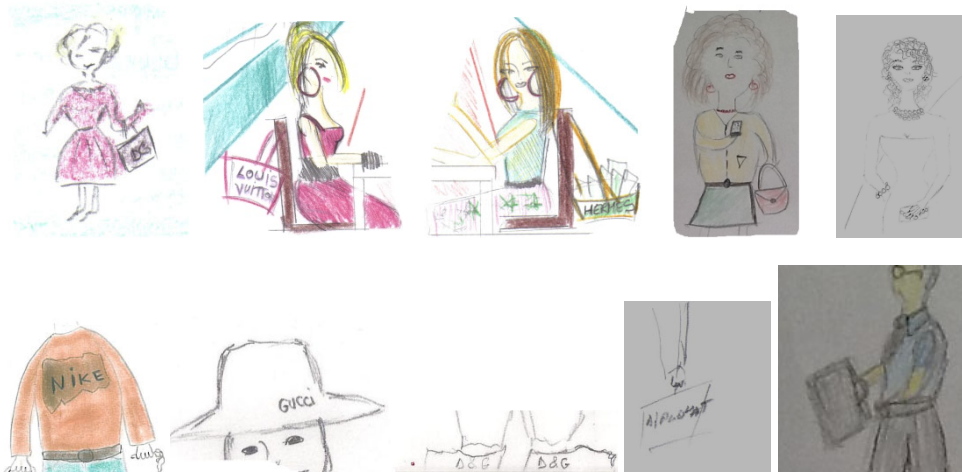
Wealth is also represented by bags of money, as the upper-class members seem to be millionaires in foreign currency.



The upper class owns even the banks that credit the lower-class members:

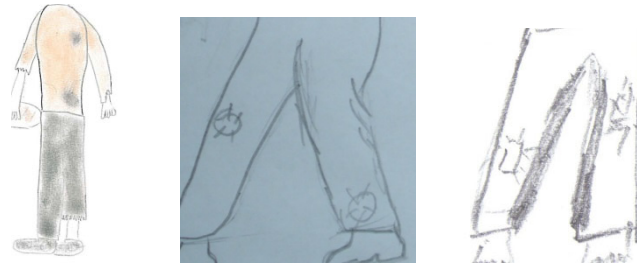


The expensive accessories in the subjects' drawings complete the image of the economic inequality between the two categories. The upper-class women have handbags (DG, Louis Vuitton, Hermes), earrings, beads, bracelets, designer clothes, watches; and upper-class men wear shoes (DG), hats (Gucci), chains, belts, suits, cufflinks and briefcases (diplomat). For the most part, details related to the upper-class clothing are noticeable in the female subjects' drawings: "Lurie notes that humans have always used clothing to make statements about social position. Labels are also particularly useful for distinguishing high-status leisure clothes from those that carry less prestige" (Sernau 2011:173).





Typical lower class Romanians do not stand out through their accessories. Most of them have strictly utility value: sticks for elderly people, sun hats for those who work in the fields. For the main, clothes are not carefully drawn, they are discoloured, sometimes torn.



Consequently, lifestyle illustrates the inequalities perceived by subjects in Romanian society. There is inequality in the living standards and, implicitly, in the life satisfaction level. Property appears to be the distinguishing mark of the upper class, and labour characteristics the distinguishing mark of the lower class.

The lower-class members perform heavy work. There are many drawings that insist on the exploitation of the lower class (heavy labour, fewer rewards) and on undeserved privileges for the upper class. I reckoned them undeserved because most upper-class members are not captured working, but rather amusing themselves; they are too young to have earned by labour the privileges they enjoy.



The heavy labour performed by the lower-class members is visually represented by field or mining work tools and by perspiration.



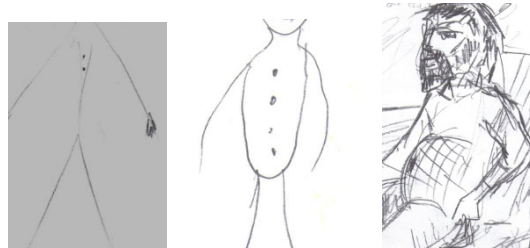
The upper-class members are mostly captured in leisure activities.



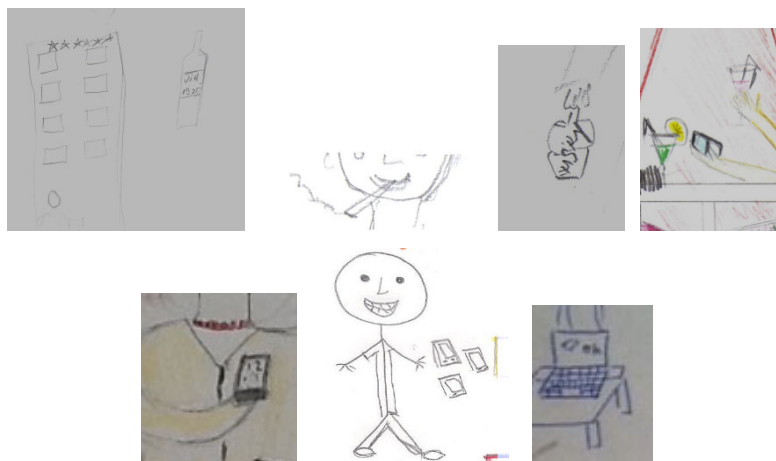
The material asset and cultural-good consumption differs for the representatives of both classes. The lower-class members' bags contain the bare minimum (usually water and bread); the upper-class members have full bags.

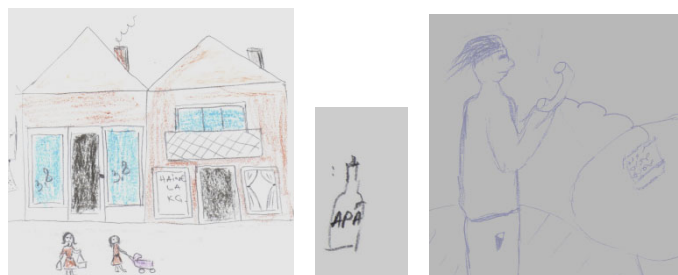


The lower-class members are thin; the upper-class members are fat:



The upper-class members drink whisky, cocktails, fine old wine; they smoke cigars; they are accommodated in flashy hotels; they have telephones and laptops; whereas the lower-class members drink water, speak over landlines and buy their clothes per kilogram from second-hand shops: "in many ways, social status is defined by the social relations of consumption" (Sernau 2011:172).





One category travels by bus, the other category travels by taxi or personal jet. In this way, the subjects define inequality by suggestive graphical elements, which complete the definitions in the literature – inequality as differentiated access to resources and services (Kerbo 2009).



Therefore, the upper class differs from the lower class by consumption patterns (as claimed in the literature). The ostentatious consumption (see Veblen 2009) of the upper class is shown by choices of residence, fashion and leisure (see Sernau 2011). It is interesting that, in the subjects' perception, the ostentatious consumption and the habits of the upper class rather require money than education: the upper class goes to clubs, bars, mall; it lazes on the poolside; and the mobile phones and laptops are not used for professional purposes, but are displayed on streets or in parks.

The findings may be fitted into what Bourdieu called necessity habitus (for the lower class) and distinction habitus (for the upper class).

#### 4.3. Social ranking on prestige dimension

The economic differences between the representatives of the two classes were quite easy to visually represent. They referred to one of the social-hierarchy dimensions tackled by most social-stratification theorists. However, prestige, as a subjective aspect of stratification, is an abstract concept, hard to describe in words and even harder to visually represent.

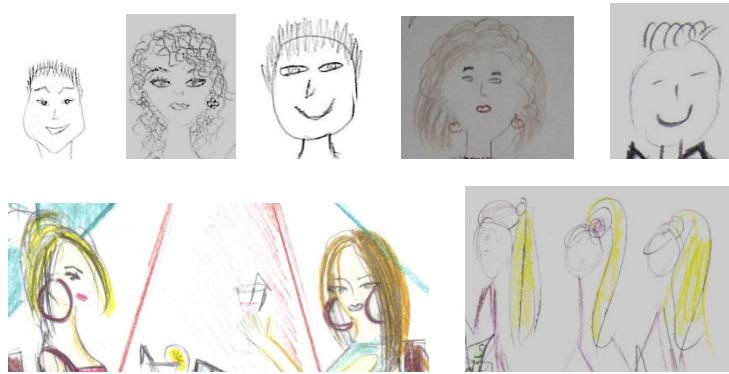
There are startling graphical elements, which refer, in my opinion, to status and power inequalities. For instance, the differences in hairdressing or covering/uncovering the head.

The lower-class members' hair is floppy, stuck to the head, crop-eared, simple, not styled.

Hair seems to be a visual indicator for social position, for importance. If we were to consider history, hairdressing has always been used by the upper class as a marker of wealth and status (it takes others to do your hair, hence you have the possibility to pay for being served and not to work hard, if you have time to take care of hair styling; nor is your work too physically demanding if you succeed in both working and keeping your hairdo).



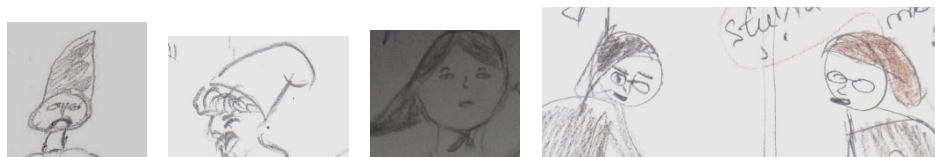
The lower-class members' hair is combed up, dressed, often curly and in the case of women, either long or of medium length. The women's hair is sometimes dyed (usually flecked blond) and they wear makeup.



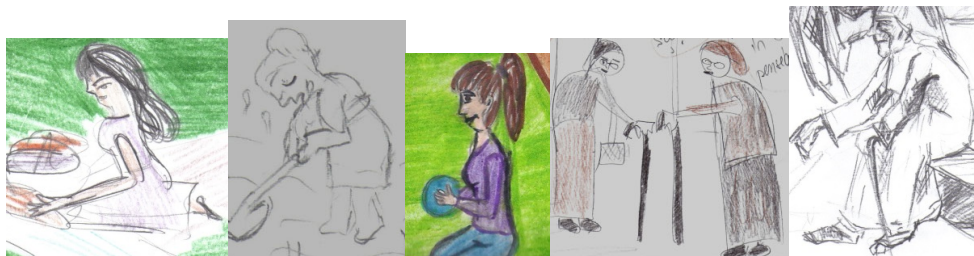
Another distinctive symbol of the upper class seems to be the headwear (usually hats).



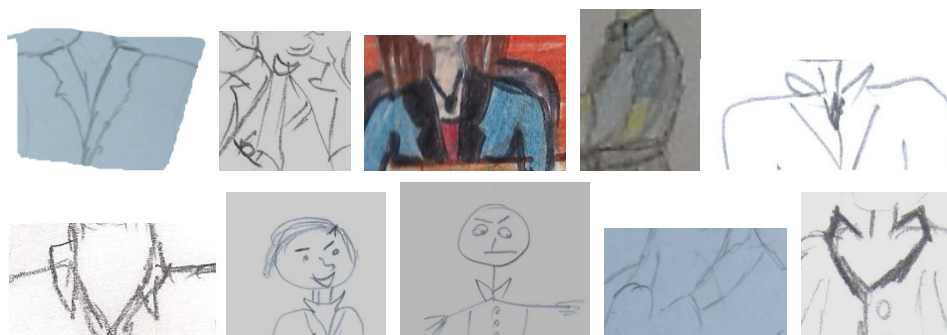
An uncovered head may imply submission and a covered head – power. Higher status is allegedly suggested by the hat size (height). When wearing headgear, the lower class resorts to peasant hats for men and headscarf for women.



In the case of male subjects, one often comes across subordination positions in their drawings: the lower-class members appear either bending or kneeling (which seems to be another reference to the power dimension of inequality).



Besides hairdressing and wearing headgear, a frequently encountered symbol of the upper class is the collar, the lapel jacket. Most drawings show the representatives of the upper class in today's Romania wearing a suit or high-collar shirt (suggestive of high social position). This feature of the clothing seems to refer to prestige elements afferent to professions. Thus, the subjects perceive social hierarchy on two of the dimensions presented in Weber's theory (economic and statutory).



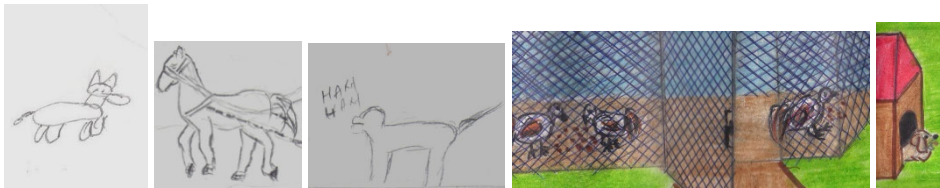
The lower-class members are sometimes depicted unclothed, barefoot or unclean, messy.



#### 4.4. Social ranking according to the dimension of the relational capital

To the economic and status dimensions of social ranking, another social-stratification generating resources is added: relational capital. A peculiarity is that the dimension of relationship establishing and maintaining no longer follows the

same pattern as one's position in social hierarchy. According to my subjects, in today's Romania, the lower-class members have larger relational capital than the upper-class members. Nevertheless, relationships are traditional, emotional (usually family or close friends), not rational, utilitarian (for instance community or profession, of the type social connections network). Hence one can see several characters when depicting the lower class. Its representatives appear quite often in the bosom of their families or surrounded by animals (dogs, horses, hens).



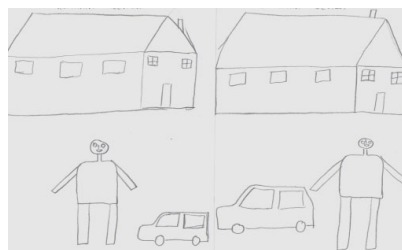
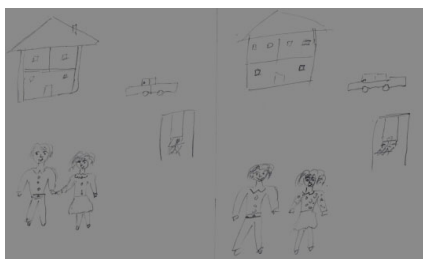
The upper-class members are mainly depicted by themselves (for the lower class, there are 13 drawings where at least 2 persons appear; and for the upper class, there are only 7 drawings where at least 2 persons appear).

### 5. Acceptable inequality sources in Romania

In order to answer the question referring to the nature of the resources that are perceived as unequally distributed, yet in an acceptable manner in Romania, I resorted to the drawings where the subjects depicted the lower and upper class in ideal Romania. I compared, for each subject, not only the 2 classes shown in the drawing of ideal Romania, but also the 2 drawings – today's Romania / ideal Romania.

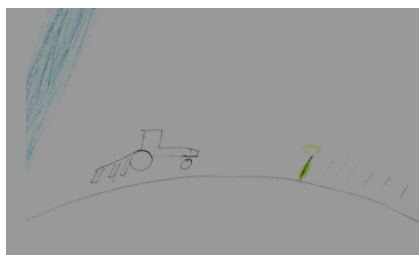
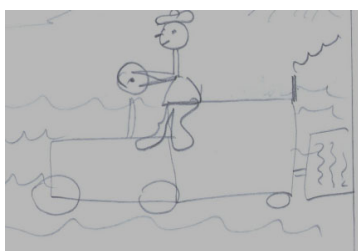
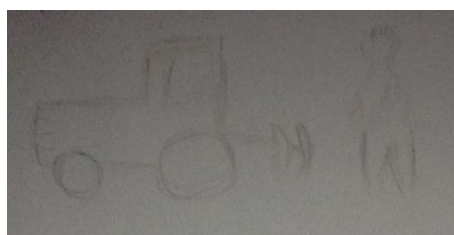
Only 4 (of 41) drawings of ideal Romania do not contain traces of inequality. The other subjects allegedly consider inequality as inevitable, but the differences between the two social categories significantly fade away.





The lower class is no longer characterized by sadness, but by happiness; the rudimentary tools are replaced by cutting-edge equipment; the lower class owns a house and car; its representatives no longer appear kneeling and dirty.

The lower class in ideal Romania is not easy to recognize either. There are drawings that still identify peasantry to the lower class (especially in the case of the male subjects, of those with secondary education and of those aged over 50). Yet the peasants in ideal Romania are no longer working with rudimentary tools, they are no longer perspiring and in the field (only a few are captured working and they are performing easy work).



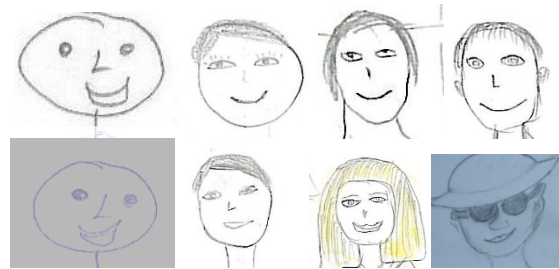
In most drawings, the lower-category members are no longer referable to a distinct social category. Families with children are captured in both series of drawings (especially in case of the subjects aged between 26 and 50):





Nor can the upper-class members be placed in distinct categories.

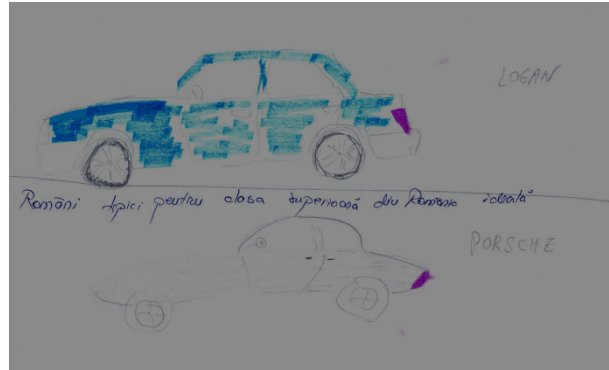
The most frequent elements in the drawings about the inequality in ideal Romania refer to the lifestyle. However, the dimension of the satisfaction no longer differentiates the two categories. Both the lower-class and the upper-class representatives are happy:



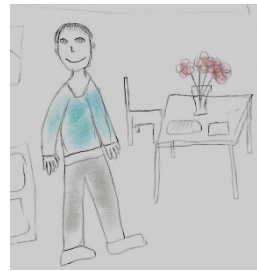
Therefore, one of the inequalities deemed unacceptable seems to be the qualitative dimension of the lifestyle: dissatisfaction, discontentment, unhappiness. Especially the women draw features related to happiness, both for the upper and the lower class.

In ideal Romania, differences in terms of quantitative dimension of the lifestyle still persist, yet much attenuated. Therefore economic inequality is acceptable, yet reduced.





The lower class possesses the bare minimum (house and car), its basic needs are fulfilled (they are captured while eating or with filled bags; they are dressed and no longer have torn clothes); and the upper class is more decent in wealth (usually they have a bigger house and more than one car).



What else appears to be unacceptable is the ostentation of the upper class. In ideal Romania, this class is much more decent in clothing (less revealing dresses, longer skirts), accessories (less flashy jewels, handbags without a brand name), cars (no longer convertible), money (less filled bags).



In ideal Romania, the upper-class members are no longer alone. Most frequently they are accompanied, sometimes they have children. For the lower class, there are 12 drawings, in which at least 2 persons appear, and for the upper class, there are 13 drawings, in which at least 2 persons appear. Hence there are no longer differences between the two categories as regards relating with one's peers.

In ideal Romania there are no more symbolic differences in terms of covering or uncovering one's head, the lower-class members are not depicted bending or kneeling (hence no symbolic inequalities of power). Likewise, the status inequality is symbolically limited by the absence of the differences in terms of hairdressing. The only status-related symbolic inequality that persists in ideal Romania results from drawing collars (especially by male subjects aged over 50; and in other studies, the men are those who support inequality, rather than the women – see Verwiebe and Wegener 2000). Their presence is allegedly related to professional prestige, since it is associated to the diplomat briefcase that contains variegated documents:



It seems that in the Romanians' view, inequality is a normal aspect of society. The acceptable inequality sources appear to be in terms of living standard (yet inequalities need not be extreme) and of professional prestige (which seems to be a merit-based inequality, given by education, training, financial return, related to the complexity of one's labour).

Comparing these results with what is claimed in the literature, I can say that my subjects (members neither in the lower nor in the upper class) accept inequality – both on merit and on need (see Kerbo 2009). The results complete the findings of Lovelles and Whitefield (2011) who showed that, unlike the other Central and East European countries, in Romania people consider that in their society inequality is not excessive. Yet, by means of the results I obtained, the aspects considered by my subjects as acceptable inequality and excessive inequality can be also identified.

#### **6. A few comparative considerations upon the perception of inequality in Romania and Italy**

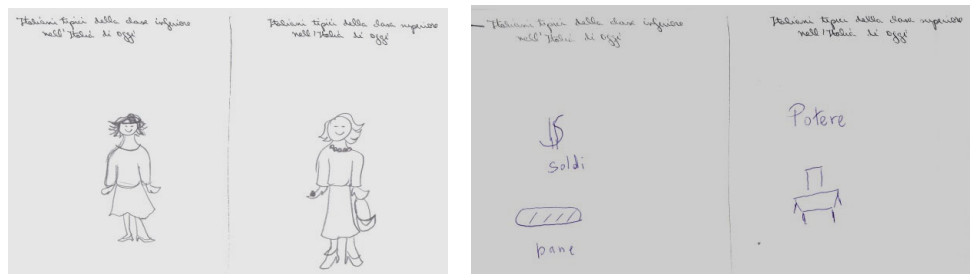
I tried to conduct a comparative study, because most times, by comparison, researches acquire significance and further value. I thought the discoveries related to the representation of social stratification in Romania would be much more interesting, if compared to the representation of stratification in another society.

As drawing is an uncommon data-collection method, I could not compare the results of my research with those from other countries worldwide. Therefore, I tried to collect data, observing the same procedure, in a West-European country. According to the EU-commissioned studies, Italy ranges among the West-European countries with the highest income-inequality level. Therefore, I deemed a comparison between the two countries to be relevant. In a documentation internship carried out in Italy, I managed to collect 16 drawings from 8 persons, mostly women between 26 and 71 years old, most of them being university graduates. All subjects perform office work in an NGO and earn average incomes for the Italian society.

With respect to the study conducted in Romania, the results can be extended to other persons of the same socio-demographical profile as my subjects. The research carried out in Italy was only an explorative study. Although the number of Italian subjects was low, I could notice significant differences between their drawings and the Romanians' drawings.

In Italy, the differences noticed between the 2 social classes are allegedly much lower than in Romania. I could not identify social categories specific to the concerned classes; and the economic distance between the two is very short. The lower class members do not have many accessories, yet money and the bare necessities are available to them. The representatives of the two classes in today's Italy look like the representatives of the two classes in ideal Romania.

Note that, unlike Romania, the upper class in Italy is distinguishable by its political power. This dimension of stratification did not occur in Romania.



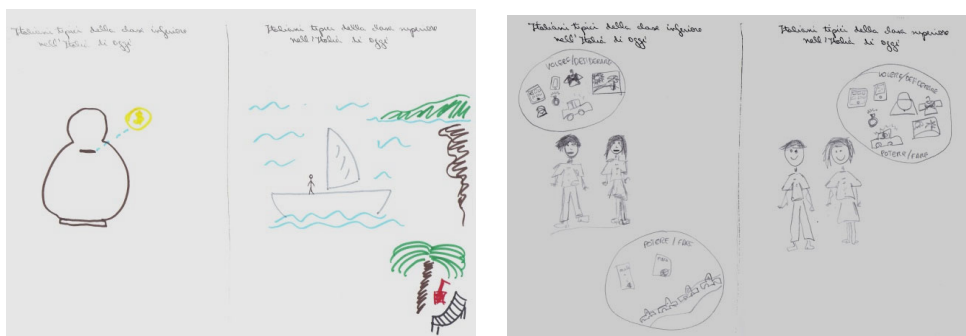
The idea of political power is also shown subtly, metaphorically.



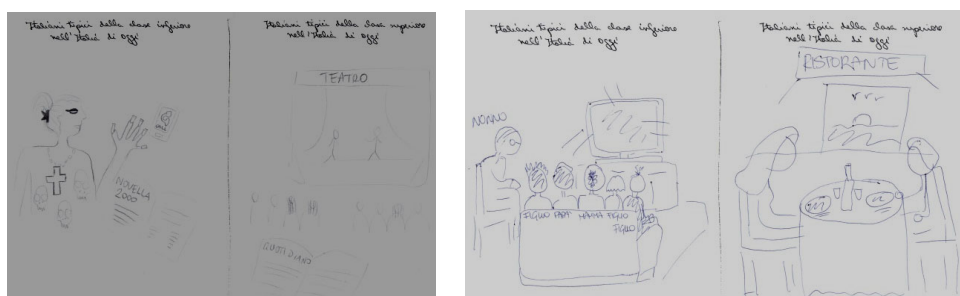
Comparative observations allowed me to formulate a hypothesis. There may be a hierarchy in the perception of the dimensions of social stratification (perhaps given by the hierarchy of human needs). This way, if large inequalities affecting the economic dimension (basic, 'inferior') are perceived in a society, the perception of other inequality sources is blurred (for instance cultural, political sources, etc.). If the perceived economic inequalities are low, people tend to perceive 'higher' sources of inequality. My hypothesis is therefore that inequality sources

are hierarchically perceived. I am convinced that in Romania there is political-power inequality, too; yet its perception is hindered by the existence and perception of extreme economic inequality.

The Italian subjects reveal differences in the relation between aspirations and possibilities. The upper-class members can have and do whatever they want, while the lower-class members nurture unfilled desires.



In the Italians' case, the idea of desire stands out, while the lower-class Romanians seem resigned, reconciled with their low possibilities. The Italian subjects highlight lifestyle-related inequalities. However, it is choice, not penury, which distinguishes the two classes. The lower-class members choose to spend their time watching TV, reading tabloids; the upper-class members choose to go to the restaurant, theatre, to gather information from daily newspapers.



In Italy, inequality is allegedly perceived rather at a personal level (it is a matter of unfulfilled desires, conscious choices) and in Romania, at a social level (a matter of constraints, of membership).

The most interesting ascertainment deals with the acceptable inequality sources in Italy. In the Romanians' case, 4 out of 41 subjects found inequality unacceptable in society; whereas in the Italians' case, 6 out of 8 subjects; for the latter, the lower class has exactly the same characteristics as the lower class within ideal society.

In Italy, the acceptance level of social inequality is much lower than in Romania. This ascertainment is consistent with the observations of the previous studies, which show that the acceptability threshold of inequality differs between contemporary societies.

It can therefore be posited that within a given society the lower the perceived inequalities between social classes, the less acceptable they become. Therefore, large differences between the social classes in Romania seem to make the Romanians to consider the existence of inequality as acceptable, and small discrepancies between social classes seem to make Italians consider inequality as unacceptable. There is the idea already enhanced by researchers on inequality, that the tendency to accept inequality is correlated to the perception of the degree of social inequality (see Kerbo 2009). However, the hypothesis above contradicts the existing studies that claim “people may believe the level of inequality that exists is legitimate because they underestimate the degree of inequality in the society” (Kerbo 2009:448). Hence, my hypothesis is that the perceived level of inequality determines its acceptability (the higher the perceived level of inequality, the more acceptable it becomes).

## **7. Conclusions**

I tried to complete the existing studies referring to social stratification with the ordinary people’s perspective. We often distributed people in classes resulted from statistical processing of socio-demographic variables and we seldom asked ourselves how they actually picture social stratification. Therefore I tried to discover the resources perceived by my subjects that generate inequality. In my opinion, it matters less whether an inequality exists or not in a given society; what really matters is the discovery of the inequalities perceived to exist and of the perceived inequality degree. Note that these perceptions (regardless of their accuracy) generate behaviours, attitudes etc. (see the conclusions of the research conducted by Loveless and Whitefield 2011).

The results coincide with the claims of Robert and Keller (2011). It seems that in Romania (on my subjects’ perception level) the vertical social-differentiation criteria are not relevant. What does distinguish social classes is the lifestyle (which is a matter of choice for the upper class) and consumption (which is low, for the lower class). Likewise, the representatives of the social classes, as drawn by my subjects, have the same characteristics as the representatives of the social classes, delimited by objective indicators (according to Mărginean (2011); in Romania, the lower class consists of peasants and workers; whereas the upper class consists in wealthy owners).

The literature claims that inequalities in Central and Eastern Europe are on the increase since the fall of communism. I cannot make assessments on the extent to which the perceived level of inequality in Romania has either risen or fallen; given that this research is not diachronic; also, it is quite hard to compare the results I

obtained with the objective indicators of social stratification (figures and percentages), since my research has a completely different nature than the existing researches. As I do not have another qualitative research, with which to compare the results I obtained, I can only ascertain that some inequalities measured by the researchers, by means of surveys, do not appear in my subjects' drawings – for instance, the gender inequality or the inequality in terms of access to health services (see Heyns, 2005 and Pasti, 2003). This does not mean they do not exist, but only that they either are not perceived by the subjects, or they are less important from their viewpoint. Nevertheless, the drawings show inequalities in terms of age, education, region of the country (see Heyns 2005, as well as Voicu and Vasile 2010) or in terms of income (see Rose and Viju 2014). The results also unveil an inequality-generating resource, which appears neither in theories, nor in the previous researches: the relational capital. Yet in my subjects' perception this one varies, is inversely proportional with the class: it is higher for the lower class.

These findings confirm the need for qualitative studies on social stratification (its inductive conceptualization). Without them, the classical, quantitative measurements might bring results unrelated to interests, preoccupations or even wellbeing of those we study.

I did not obtain spectacular variations on subgroups bound by similar age or education. The status beliefs do not seem to depend on these variables. The genre variable might nevertheless generate differences in the perception of inequality. Thus, in the female participants' drawings, more graphical elements that differentiate the social classes, appear – for instance, details related to the upper-class members' clothing or to the upper class' expression of satisfaction. It is possible that these differences are generated by women's keener sense of observation, when it comes to items of current concern in daily life: fashion style, dwelling etc. or that the visual method of data collection is less adequate in the case of the male subjects.

For further studies, I set out to follow other sampling criteria, so that the research might provide a complete overview on the perception of inequality, for instance, the dwelling-related criterion (adding subjects from rural areas) or the monthly-income criterion (adding subjects with earnings above the average). In fact, one of the limits of my research is sampling. I should have added more diversified participants, on the relevant dimensions to the study of stratification (representatives of the Romanian upper and lower classes, whose occupations range across several levels of the prestige and power hierarchy).

I applied an original method to study the social stratification. From my perspective, visual methods efficiently and unexpectedly complete the classical data-collection methods. They are also original for the subjects and usually stimulate their interest in research. They evince expressiveness, contain stupendous details, lead the subjects to aspects they would not talk about in interviews. Yet the great advantage of visual methods is their amazing relevance when applied in cross-cultural researches. Linguistic, cultural barriers are



eliminated, which enables researchers to collect, analyse and interpret data from variegated societies without special efforts and with less research bias.

I attempted to explore how inequality was perceived in different societies. In further studies, the procedure described in this paper may be applied to comparative researches on social stratification. A simple exploration yielded interesting results and challenging hypotheses (it is possible that the sources of inequality are hierarchically perceived and that the perceived level of inequality determines its acceptance). Therefore, I trust the originality of the results obtained from visual cross-cultural studies on the perception of inequality.

The obtained results seem to contradict the theories of convergence (social stratification in Romania does not resemble the one in Italy) and fit those that claim the absence of a common model of social stratification – the path dependent theories (see Robert and Keller 2011 and Tufiş 2012). And if there are no common models of stratification, then the universal measurements of inequality are not justified either, or the application of the same instruments in different societies, or the choice of the same inequality indicators. This is also because there are great difficulties in measuring; for example the choice of the most adequate inequality indicators (see Molnar 2010) or the cross-country comparison of the inequality, on various dimensions – education, income, occupation (see Tufiş 2012).

The results I obtained confirm the results obtained by a more extensive research (see Loveless and Whitefield 2011). Although the inequality is much lower in Italy than in Romania, the Italian subjects consider it rather unacceptable, compared to the Romanian ones. In this way, no connection seems to exist between the objective measurements of income inequalities and the perceptions of excessive inequality; and rather those in more equal societies seem to perceive social inequality as being excessive.

Another limit of my research refers to the sampling of the Italian subjects. They are few in number and quite homogeneous in characteristics. This is why I only attempted to explore the perception of inequality in this country, and to formulate hypotheses in order to explain the ascertained differences. In future studies, interesting comparisons on subgroups of subjects from these two countries will be made (comparative perception differences, according to different socio-demographic variables). Then, of course, the study may be extended to other societies.

Another limit of this research could be the almost exclusive focus of the study on the visual method (given that one of my goals was to prove the novelty and originality of this method, as well as its remarkable results). The triangulation in the collection of the qualitative data would provide more numerous, diversified and complete data (by the combined application of the varied observation and interviewing techniques).

In conclusion, I tried to draw attention upon the application of visual methods in social-stratification studies, to show the nature and value of the results obtained from such studies. In addition to the originality of the applied method, the novelties brought by my study are: qualitatively approaching a phenomenon whereof we only have quantitative data; and inductively constructing the concept

of inequality, as perceived by participants who belong to Romania's middle class. The literature almost exclusively dwells upon statistics and their processing, in a cold and schematic description of social stratification; the inequality being thus expressed in figures obtained from surveys measuring dimensions that are a priori presumed to be inequality generating. My study presents inequality as perceived by subjects, on the dimensions they deem to be inequality-generating, with fine details, which complete the concept and facilitate the comprehension of the phenomenon.

In my opinion, to overlook the qualitative research in the study of inequality is an error. More extensive survey-type researches should be completed with qualitative studies, in order to ensure the correct description and explanation of social stratification.

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