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Educational decisions landscapes of meaning

among contemporary Russian youth

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1. Introduction

Educational choice is a crucial nexus in the reproduction and overcoming of inequality. The decision made at a critical juncture is influenced by the distribution of economic and social resources. However, as advanced research in the sociology of education has shown, this is not the only factor (Kurakin, 2020).

Despite seemingly similar socio-economic circumstances, individuals in comparable situations may choose different paths. Even when selecting the same opportunities, individuals in similar socio-economic conditions can experience these decisions differently. Perceptions of education and available opportunities are shaped by what individuals observe or fail to observe in their surroundings. These perceptions are filtered through the interpretation of what they see or do not see. The interpretation also extends to what is perceived as attractive or not. For instance, cultural narratives, such as the "American Dream," influence levels of motivation and the appeal of certain elements in social reality. From the perspective of social structure and institutions, individuals may engage in similar actions, such as pursuing higher education, yet the experiences they have and the way they interpret them can differ significantly, leading to diverse career trajectories.

These differences are explained by the cultural system, which creates an internal environment for action (Alexander, 2003). It is the cultural mechanisms that shape the outcomes of individuals' decisions, leading to different trajectories even in seemingly homogeneous social conditions.

The argument about the autonomy of culture and its significant role in social action has been extensively developed within the strong program of cultural sociology and applied to the study of major social phenomena, such as political elections (Alexander, 2012), declarations of war (Smith, 2005), civil society (Alexander, 2006), and cultural trauma (Alexander, 2004). It has also been used in research on more localized social processes, such as the passion for opera (Benzecri, 2011), the popularity of independent music labels (Bartmanski & Woodward, 2020), and the rise of musicians' popularity (McCormick, 2015). However, this approach to conceptualizing the role of culture, which considers the interpretive aspect of choice and the diversity of cultural forms, has not yet been applied to the study of educational and career decision-making.

This work contributes to the field of youth social mobility studies, specifically focusing on educational choice and its connection to mobility. We propose examining social mobility from a cultural sociological perspective, as we believe this approach can complement the dominant structural and economically-oriented frameworks for studying mobility, shedding light on mechanisms that have

long remained outside the research focus. To conceptualize this cultural dimension of educational choice, we employ the notion of the "landscape of meaning" as proposed by Isaac Reed (Reed, 2011).

1. Landscapes of meaning encompass various cultural forms, such as narratives, metaphors, binary oppositions, and others—they represent a specific constellation of symbolic elements.
2. Landscapes of meaning allow us to distinguish between both the horizontal dimension of meaning structures and the vertical one, meaning we can also speak of deep and surface meanings.

In this dissertation, educational choice is examined as the result of the workings of "landscapes of meaning." However, in relation to specific decisions, we will focus on individual elements of these landscapes, addressing only the horizontal, surface-level dimension of meaning. This work aims to uncover the landscapes of meaning—the cultural mechanisms surrounding educational decisions and perceptions of education. To address this question, we studied the choices made by ninth-grade students in order to describe the primary mechanisms behind these choices and their connection to interpretation. We explain educational choice as the result of interpretation. We investigate individual elements of the landscapes of meaning and determine which symbolic structures shape the existence and interpretation of objects and opportunities in education, and how they connect with trajectories that enable social mobility.

We rely on the definition of culture provided within cultural sociological theory, which views culture as a set of symbolic mechanisms operating according to their own internal laws (Alexander, 2003; Smith, 2010; Reed, 2011; Illouz, 2013), rather than as a homogeneous environment tied to a specific social group. We chose the concept of "landscapes of meaning" as the title of this work because it allows for a substantive integration of various dimensions of the symbolic environment of action (in this case, choice). We based our approach on empirical data to identify the cultural mechanisms of choice most closely related to the empirical material. In our case, the mechanisms identified include cultural narratives and symbolic horizons.

Through the reconstruction and interpretation of landscapes of meaning, it will be possible to establish a connection between the underlying structures of meaning and the motivation for individual action, as well as to uncover broader meaningful structures within which educational decisions are made. As a result of this work, specific aspects of the landscapes of meaning related to educational decisions, unique to the Russian cultural and historical context, will be revealed. The cultural mechanisms and elements motivating various educational choices will be identified, which either

contribute to the reproduction or the overcoming of inequality in education (social mobility through education).

The results of this study are significant for both fundamental research on the reproduction and overcoming of inequality among youth and in education, as they will contribute to the development of a culturally sensitive theoretical approach, and for empirical research, as they represent unique data. This research is also important for educational and social policy, as it can inform the development of support measures and interventions for youth.

The text is structured as follows. Section 2 is dedicated to describing the research problem and its objectives; it presents the research gaps addressed in the dissertation, as well as the context of higher education regulation in Russia. Section 3 focuses on the research design, theoretical arguments, methodology, and data used in the study. Section 4 outlines the content of the articles that make up the dissertation. The main conclusions of the dissertation are presented in Section 5, followed by Section 6, which discusses the academic and practical significance of the research. Finally, Section 7 addresses the limitations of the dissertation and the prospects for future research.

The results of the dissertation are reflected in four publications, referred to as Articles 1-4:

Article 1. Minina E., Yanbarisova D., Pavlenko E. Educational choice of Russian high school students in grade nine // International Studies in Sociology of Education. 2020. Vol. 29. No. 4. P. 326-343.

Article 2. Павленко Е. С. Культурные паттерны образовательных решений российской молодежи на примере поступления в колледж // Вопросы образования. 2023. № 4. С. 179-206.

Article 3. Minina E., Pavlenko E. 'Choosing the lesser of evils': cultural narrative and career decision-making in post-Soviet Russia // Journal of Youth Studies. 2023. Vol. 26. No. 9. P. 1109-1129

Article 4. Павленко Е. С., Якубовская А. А. Интерпретации взросления и формирование образовательных траекторий // Мониторинг общественного мнения: Экономические и социальные перемены. 2020. № 3. С. 376-390.

2. Research problem

2.1 The Problem of the Reproduction of Inequality in the Sociology of Education

Despite all hopes for the development and strengthening of meritocracy, education remains one of the key instruments for the reproduction of inequality rather than its overcoming. Children from unprivileged families are likely to remain unprivileged after navigating the education system,

while privileged families will reproduce or even enhance their social status due to the cumulative effect of inequality and additional resources that help overcome negative educational scenarios (Yastrebov et al., 2018). In the sociology of education, which increasingly intersects with the sociology of inequality today, the persistence of inequality in education is explained by several key theories: the theory of maximally maintained inequality and the theory of effectively maintained inequality (Chirkina, 2018).

These theories focus on factors related to family resources and the so-called socio-economic status (SES), in other words, the distribution of socio-economic resources or capitals. At the same time, general sociological studies of inequality increasingly indicate that while "the distribution of resources—both material and immaterial—remains a solid foundation of inequality, its 'backbone,' only by supplementing the picture with a cultural dimension of inequality can we understand how economic forces relate to people's perceptions and motivations" (Kurakin, 2020: 192). Although there is room in the sociology of education for theories that pay a bit more attention to the mere presence or absence of resources, the cultural dimension of inequality does not receive full attention or development.

Among the theories that focus on how certain resources are interpreted, the theory of primary and secondary effects of inequality and the theory of relative risk avoidance are worth mentioning. The theory of secondary effects of inequality was first proposed by Raymond Boudon (Boudon, 1974) and subsequently revitalized by Michelle Jackson (Jackson et al., 2007). According to Boudon's theory, primary effects of inequality refer to the fact that children from families with different SES receive different grades, which then determine their future trajectories. However, he also emphasizes that even with equal grades, children from families with different SES still make educational decisions differently. Meanwhile, the theory of relative risk avoidance by Goldthorpe and Breen (Breen, Goldthorpe, 1997) shows that educational ambitions are class-specific and, in addition to the desire to maintain a certain status, include strategies to avoid a decline in that status.

Russian researchers confirm that the same mechanisms are characteristic of the educational trajectories of Russian youth (Bessudnov & Malik, 2016; Bessudnov, Kurakin, & Malik, 2017; Kosyakova et al., 2016; Ibragimova & Franz, 2021a; Ibragimova & Franz, 2021b; Konstantinovsky, 2008; Konstantinovsky & Popova, 2018; Konstantinovsky & Popova, 2020; Khavensun & Chirkina, 2018; Khavensun & Chirkina, 2019).

2.2 The Problem of the Reproduction of Inequality in Youth Sociology

The issue of the reproduction of social inequality in education is discussed not only in the sociology of education but also in youth sociology. Youth sociology is structured around concerns for the social well-being of young people, not only in the context of education but also in other domains. As in the sociology of education, the direction for addressing this issue is related to the development of a culturally sensitive theory of individual action (and decision-making) that also takes into account the individual's immersion in social structures. The current discourse on social inequality in youth studies focuses on addressing the problem of "structure" (external socio-economic constraints) and "agency" (individual freedom and opportunities to overcome structural limitations).

Although there is no unified definition of the concept of "agency" and its role in this field, "agency" initially emerged in youth studies alongside the Marxist tradition of cultural studies, in which action was considered at the class level and identity was viewed as part of a subculture constructed in resistance to the dominant culture (Hall & Jefferson, 1975). The consideration of external structural factors in youth studies as a systematic approach to studying educational transitions and pathways came later than the consideration of cultural factors. Upon entering the research field, proponents of the structural approach criticized advocates of individual agency for overstating the role of freedom and creativity in youth action, arguing that the decisions made by young people are heavily structured by systemic inequality. It was claimed that researchers focusing on "agency" commit an "epistemological error" by underestimating structural factors and overstating individual responsibility for the outcomes of actions (Furlong & Cartmel, 1977). In response, proponents of the "agency" approach criticized the structuralists for portraying youth as passive victims of circumstance.

From 2009 to 2015, a large-scale debate unfolded in journals such as the *Journal of Youth Studies*, *Current Sociology*, *Journal of Sociology*, and *Sociological Research Online* regarding the opposition of structure and action. The search for solutions was, in one way or another, connected to reliance on the conceptual framework of Pierre Bourdieu, particularly his concepts of habitus and dispositions. It was proposed to expand Bourdieu's concept of "habitus" to describe proactivity as the reflexivity of action in response to changes in familiar conditions (Roberts, 2012; Roberts, 2010; Threadgold and Nilan, 2009; Laughland-Booy, Mayall, Skribs, 2015; France and Threadgold, 2016). It was also suggested to link structure and action through the perception and subjective evaluation of structural conditions. This search for a "middle ground" was characterized as a struggle against the false binary of structure versus action and led to the development of intermediate options described as "middle ground" (Farrugia, 2012; Threadgold, 2010).

2.3 Inequality in Educational Choices in Russia

In the Russian context, researchers have systematically studied a range of factors related to social inequality that young people face when constructing their educational and professional trajectories. Significant attention has been given to studies on access to education.

In particular, it has been established that the gap between the labor market and the education system is widening: the education system is becoming more isolated and operates according to its own rules, without real connections to labor market demands (Klyucharev, 2015). The changes in the employment structure among youth are considerable, and more attention should be paid to their study (Konstantinovsky, 2014; Konstantinovsky & Popova, 2015). Researchers note that in recent years, the share of university graduates working in their field has steadily decreased (Zubok & Chuprova, 2015). About one-third of graduates from 2010-2015 are employed outside their specialty, and more than one-third find themselves in positions that do not formally require a higher education degree (Cherednichchenko, 2018). Graduates of secondary vocational education institutions face even greater challenges entering the labor market—about two-fifths of graduates find work outside their specialty, more than one-third of graduates from programs training middle-level specialists, and between one-third and one-fourth of graduates from programs training qualified workers and employees end up in jobs that do not require the training formally provided by their diplomas (Cherednichchenko, 2019).

Research findings indicate that higher education in Russia is viewed by many as a necessary condition for achieving success in life (Konstantinovsky & Popova, 2015; Popova, 2015), and despite the increase in the number of students enrolling in secondary vocational education programs (Bessudnov & Malik, 2016), secondary vocational education is not associated with success (Konstantinovsky & Popova, 2015; Klyachko, 2016). According to recent data, about half of secondary vocational graduates believe that obtaining a promising job requires a higher education degree (Avraamova et al., 2017). Thus, research results on the Russian landscape demonstrate the large scale of strategic errors made by applicants, students, and graduates when planning their educational and professional trajectories. However, there is critically little work in the Russian field that shows the specific determinants of constructing particular trajectories or studies the multidimensional structure of factors influencing career and educational decision-making. In this regard, examining the role of cultural mechanisms in the social mobility of Russian youth could represent a valuable shift in studying these issues.

Charlie Walker devoted significant attention to the system of secondary vocational education, conducting research in Russia in the 2000s that was analogous to Paul Willis's classic work "Learning

to Labour: How Working-Class Kids Get Working-Class Jobs." Walker demonstrated that when making decisions about further education, adolescents relied on a series of perceptions about the secondary vocational education system that did not hold true once they entered it. Their expectations of the system significantly diverged from the reality, leading Walker to label it as a "zombie system" (Walker, 2007; Walker, 2015; Walker, 2018).

The study of educational choice is closely linked to the choice of specialization and profession. In this regard, post-Soviet Russia represents an important case. Soviet Russia boasted a unique compulsory distribution system for graduates to jobs, based on the needs of the planned economy, wherein the education and labor markets were closely interconnected (Kosyakova et al., 2016). State career guidance primarily relied on a psychological classification of professions proposed by Soviet psychologist Klimov in the 1970s. This classification focused on the psychological traits and inclinations of students, which were believed to correspond to specific types of professions and, in turn, to particular school subjects. The choice of educational program, based on academic success in certain school subjects, determined future career trajectories, and the chosen "profession" typically equated to a "career."

Following the collapse of the USSR, Russia experienced liberalization of higher education and a mass expansion of higher education opportunities (Bessudnov et al., 2017). In response to labor market demands, the compulsory distribution of graduates was abolished, new private universities were established, and new academic programs emerged in state universities, including paid programs. Consequently, the signaling role of higher education diplomas took center stage (Roshchin, 2006), as "the absence of a higher education diploma is negatively perceived by employers even for semi-skilled jobs, such as salespeople and couriers" (Yudkevich, 2017). Possessing a diploma is more likely to convert into a higher income than, for instance, work experience or professional skills (Roshchin, 2006). This led to the institutionalization of the discourse on higher education as a "social imperative," guaranteeing basic access to the labor market, while in practice, depending on assessments, about half of Russian graduates subsequently enter the labor market outside their specialty (Gimpelson et al., 2009; Vybornoye Nabludeniye, 2016; Varshavskaya, 2017; Avraamova et al., 2017).

However, research using Russian data often overlooks the perspective of the individual, the processes unfolding at the level of action, and the specific-historical contexts of these processes. In 2008, David Lvovich Konstantinovsky pointed out that "individuals engage in a kind of 'summation' of the data available to them, both their own and others' assessments of the situation, and ultimately arrive at a result that determines the content of conclusions and the vector of actions when

transitioning from each previous stage of orientation formation to each subsequent one" (Konstantinovsky, 2008). Researchers also note that over time, "there is a shift from a predominance of necessity in motivation to rationality in choice" (Konstantinovsky & Popova, 2020). Here, rational choice is equated with meaningful, goal-directed, and non-random decisions (Konstantinovsky & Popova, 2018).

However, foreign studies have already shown that "reflexivity as such is not a guarantee of effective choice" (Kurakin, 2020: 201). Research indicates that the concepts of "reflexivity," "rationality," or "agency" may serve as cultural narratives that can be adopted and embodied to varying degrees (Silva & Corse, 2018). While some studies assert that "self-analysis, so essential for constructing a reflexive project of self-identity (Giddens, 1991), is precisely the cultural resource that the working class lacks" (Illouz, 2008; Lamont, 2000), other studies convincingly show that under certain circumstances, narratives typical of the working class can become a powerful resource for overcoming inequality, while habits and cultural patterns characteristic of the middle class can, conversely, lead to downward mobility (Streib, 2017; Silva, 2013).

2.4 Culturally-Oriented Studies of Educational Choice

Arguments in favor of the limitations of existing approaches to studying the reproduction of inequality through education arise from both sociological theories and empirical social reality. Social and economic effects of social inequality continue to operate even in the context of the expansion and massification of higher education, where youth from families without higher education are gaining direct access to higher education. Students from families with different socio-economic statuses (SES) do not experience the learning process in the same way, even in the same educational institutions. The mere decision to pursue higher education, and even successful admission to a higher education institution, does not guarantee the successful acquisition of all the resources that the educational system can offer (Lukina, 2023). Consequently, the difficulties faced by first-generation students (FGS) in constructing their educational trajectories also prompt researchers to focus on cultural mechanisms.

Trends in sociology as a whole and in the sociology of education specifically indicate that what current research on inequality in education most lacks is "an understanding of how intersubjectively shared meaning structures (e.g., scripts, narratives, repertoires, and symbolic boundaries) contribute to or hinder certain behaviors of individuals" (Lamont, Beljean, Clair, 2014: 580, cited in Kurakin, 2020: 192).

This research is a contribution to the development of a culturally-oriented approach in studies on the reproduction of inequality in education and sheds light on the cultural mechanisms embedded in the educational decision-making of contemporary Russian youth.

2.5 Aim and objectives of the study

Key Research Question: How do the landscapes of meanings surrounding educational decisions condition and shape the specific educational choices made by individuals situated in different socio-economic and cultural contexts?

Research Objective: To identify and describe the elements of the landscapes of meanings that inform a given educational choice.

To achieve the stated objective, the following tasks are set:

1. Empirical validation of the study of educational choice as embedded in landscapes of meanings.
2. Identification and description of cultural narratives that shape educational choice at the 9th-grade crossroads, in relation to the family's socio-economic status (SES).
3. Identification and description of cultural narratives that high school students rely on when choosing a profession, in relation to the institutional logic of the Unified State Exam (USE) and the family's SES.
4. Exploration and description of less structured cultural forms that may be associated with the concept of education and thus influence specific choices.

3. Research Design

The main challenge that must be addressed in proposing a conceptualization of a culturally oriented framework for educational choice is to reconcile, on one hand, the fact of an individual's social disposition, their position within a specific social structure, and the horizon that opens up from this disposition; and, on the other hand, to disentangle cultural constructs from class-specific trajectories. The conceptual framework should take into account that the same educational choice may be influenced by different symbolic constructions, as well as the fact that, depending on the key symbolic constructs that create the internal meaning-making environment for an individual's actions, the consequences of the same choice will vary.

Some attempts to develop such a conceptual apparatus have already been made by education sociologists. In particular, Phil Hodkinson proposed the concept of the "horizon of action." By introducing this term, Hodkinson aimed to demonstrate that, firstly, decisions made in the present are based on a certain perspective of the future, and secondly, that this perspective is shaped by the position the individual occupies within the field (Bourdieu, 1993) as well as within the social structure—positions that, while potentially close, are distinct. Each position opens up its own "horizon"; in other words, decisions are made within a specific "horizon of action."

Hodkinson's research focuses on how and why certain patterns of decision-making remain stable. The horizons of action available to individuals both provide opportunities and impose limitations on their worldview. At times, young people may reject advice because the options proposed fall outside the horizons they perceive as viable. Such options may not align with their existing self-conceptions or the career opportunities they view as suitable. The horizons of action are segmented—no one comprehensively envisions the full spectrum of possibilities available to them in education and the labor market. Thus, what can be "seen" and "chosen" is contingent on the horizon of action, which in turn is influenced by the individual's position within the field and relative to educational and labor opportunity structures. To explain these various ways of operating within horizons of action, Hodkinson invokes culture, defining it as "socially constructed and historically rooted common grounds of knowledge, values, and norms of action in which individuals are raised and which they accept as a natural way of life" (Hodkinson, 1997, p. 33). However, his proposal has not received sufficient attention, and research has moved toward the study of "learning cultures."

A closely related concept was introduced much later in sociological theory as part of the development of the strong program in cultural sociology, namely, the concept of "landscapes of meaning" (Reed, 2011). Therefore, as a foundational concept that allows for the conceptualization of the symbolic constructions surrounding various educational choices, we will employ this notion. In other words, we will adapt and refine the concept of landscapes of meaning for application in educational research, specifically within the context of studies addressing educational choice and the reproduction of inequality.

3.1 Landscapes of Meanings

This concept was introduced by Isaac Reed in 2011 with the aim of "capturing the diversity of ways in which meaning and communication processes provide the foundation and shape the subjectivity and strategies of actors" (Reed, 2011, p. 110). In other words, it seeks to enable

sociologists to examine social processes at the micro-level. This initial definition did not explicitly mention the inclusion of the structure of the social field and the dispositions of the individual in the analysis. Over the following years, the concept was refined by several researchers. In response to various critiques, Reed clarified that in developing this concept, he aimed "to provide researchers with the opportunity to utilize the positioning of the subject in social space more precisely and clearly" (Reed, 2015, p. 533). He sought to develop the idea of relational dynamics between the process of world construction by the individual and the structuring of the individual by social order, as described by Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1993), thus allowing for consideration of "the aesthetic, complex, and sometimes elusive variations of interpreted worlds in which actors find themselves" (Reed, 2015, p. 533). Understood in this way, the concept of landscapes of meaning is suitable for studying educational choice as a product of both structural constraints and subjective interpretations, allowing for an exploration of an individual's social positioning through these subjective interpretations.

Going forward, we will proceed from the following assumptions:

Firstly, landscapes of meaning imply the existence of dimensions not only of proximity/distance but also of overall topography, suggesting deeper structures that underlie what is accessible to actors on the "surface." However, this position will not be developed further in this work.

Secondly, an individual's position within the landscape of meaning is influenced by socio-economic factors, and different "horizons" or various aspects of the same social reality may emerge from different perspectives.

Thirdly, the same landscape of meaning can be navigated through various routes. As a specific sociological concept reflecting this fact, we adopt the concept of cultural narrative. We further posit that cultural narratives can have varying degrees of rootedness within the landscape; for instance, there exist more dominant (master) narratives as well as more localized narratives.

Bartmański and Binder, commenting on Reed's work, describe landscapes as symbolic constructions that "shape the motivations and action mechanisms of actors, which, in turn, act as driving forces" (Bartmański & Binder, 2015, p. 501). A key critical commentary is that landscapes of meaning are defined as exclusively textual constructions, which does not take into account the materiality and temporality of the surrounding world. This limitation of the concept persists to this day.

3.2 Empirical Data

The study involved working with longitudinal qualitative data, specifically from two waves of research conducted in 2013 and 2015. Longitudinal in-depth interviews were conducted with

participants from the panel study "Trajectories in Education and Careers," which is managed by D. Kurakin and I. Froumin at the Institute of Education at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (NRU HSE). Approximately 5,000 respondents are surveyed within this panel, and more than ten waves of research have been conducted since 2012 (Malik, 2019). The data also includes results from international comparative studies such as TIMSS and PISA.

Among these 5,000 respondents, qualitative interviews were conducted with 111 informants during the first wave. Our analysis relies on this qualitative sub-panel known as the "Tracer Atom." The uniqueness of this database lies in the fact that statistical data from survey questionnaires are also available for the informants in the qualitative study, in addition to the qualitative longitudinal data.

The author of the dissertation is a co-author of the overall research design for the "Tracer Atom" project and serves as the responsible executor for each wave of research, as well as the custodian and administrator of the database. Additionally, the author developed all the guides (interview templates) for the interviews and conducted interviews with approximately one-third of the informants.

The sample of the "Tracer Atom" was constructed based on several criteria. Firstly, from the 42 regions of Russia studied within the TREC longitudinal study, 8 regions were selected for the "Tracer Atom," representing various types of geographical and social conditions across the country: Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kaluga Region, Krasnodar Krai, Sverdlovsk Oblast, Krasnoyarsk Krai, Amur Oblast, and the Republic of Tatarstan. In each region, apart from the federal cities, schools were selected both in the regional capital and in remote areas (in some regions, this included rural settlements, while in others, it involved small towns). Researchers then visited the schools participating in TIMSS, met with survey participants who were in the 11th grade or attending higher education institutions, and explained the objectives of the qualitative project. Those who volunteered subsequently participated in interviews conducted at the school. School administrators assisted in contacting and organizing interviews with their former students who left school after the 9th grade to enroll in vocational-technical educational institutions. The interviews from the first wave of the "Marked Atom," which we utilize, were conducted in 2013 when the participants were approximately 17 years old. Our sample includes those who left school after the 9th grade and those who remained until the 11th grade, comprising both boys and girls from various socio-cultural backgrounds and with different levels of academic performance.

The interviews focused on adolescents' educational decision-making at different stages of their trajectories, their vision of future professions and careers, the selection of specific educational

institutions, and programs of study. Furthermore, the interviews explored the symbolic resources (such as books, films, and close individuals) that young people rely on when choosing education and careers, as well as their overall plans and aspirations for the future and how their desired level of education might assist in realizing these aspirations (if at all). Since each respondent in the "Tracer Atom" subsample was also part of a larger quantitative TREC study, we had sufficient contextual data for each, including parental education level, current parental occupations, family income, past and current school grades, desired professions indicated in the study, and much more. With the exception of a few students from "specialized" schools—schools with in-depth study of certain subjects—our participants were students from regular public secondary schools. Among them, students with average grades predominate, while there are no cases of highly selective educational trajectories. Thus, our sample represents an averaged picture of educational decision-making and does not include extreme cases from either end of the socio-economic continuum.

The table below presents the socio-economic composition of the respondents' families based on parental education levels and the field of study chosen by the respondents:

Table 1. Number and share of "Tracer Atom" informants with regard to their parents' level of education (2013, wave 1)

	Academic track	Vocational track
Both parents have Higher Education	24	4
One of the parents has Higher Education	30	10
None of the parents have Higher Education	33	10
Total	87	24
	Total	111

Table 2. Number and share of "Tracer Atom" informants with regard to their parents' level of education (2015, wave 2)

	University	VET and army
Both parents have Higher Education	9	4
One of the parents has Higher Education	8	4
None of the parents have Higher Education	10	2
Total	27	10
	Total	37

In Articles 1 and 4, the full set of interviews was utilized. Article 2 employed a subsample of cases involving adolescents who decided to attend college after the 9th grade (24 interviews). Article

3 focused on a subsample of cases involving adolescents who chose to remain in school after the 9th grade and decided to apply to higher education institutions.

The interviews were conducted in November and December 2013 by members of the "Marked Atom" research group. During the first wave, two team members visited each of the eight regions, spending an average of seven days in the field. At the time of the interviews, the majority of respondents (87) were continuing their studies in the 10th grade, while a smaller number (24) were enrolled in vocational educational institutions (which is not representative of national statistics). The interviews were conducted one-on-one, without the presence of teachers or parents. Most of the interviews from the first wave were held on school premises with the administration's consent; subsequent interviews took place in cafes, at the informants' homes, or in other convenient locations. Typically, the same interviewer interacted with each informant across several waves to establish reliable rapport and minimize the risk of personal information leakage.

During the first wave of interviews, students' participation in the study was ensured through consent provided by their parents for participation in the TROP study. In subsequent waves, as participants reached the age of 18, forms for personal consent to participate were collected. Contact with interview participants in later waves was direct, meaning that researchers contacted informants directly. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and anonymized before analysis by the research group. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to ensure that no personal information or details were disclosed. Unlike TROP survey data, which is publicly available and widely used by education researchers worldwide, the "Marked Atom" data is accessible exclusively to the authors of this article and a small number of research staff.

Data storage, sorting, and processing were facilitated using software such as Atlas.ti, Microsoft Word, Microsoft Excel, and Taguette.

3.3 Methodology of analysis

To reconstruct the landscapes of meanings and their accompanying elements, in-depth interviews are the most productive method. These interviews "are tools designed to reveal 'representations, systems of classification, boundary work, identity, imagined realities, and cultural ideals' of individuals" (Lamont & Swidler, 2014, p. 157). This cultural sociological approach to using interviews also allows for overcoming one of the limitations of working with interview data, which relates to whether the narratives obtained in interviews are or are not transmitted into the everyday lives of informants. This becomes possible because narratives and symbolic representations are

significant for how individuals co-construct the world for themselves. "By revealing such a cultural landscape, interviews tell us how people make sense of a world that extends far beyond the interview situation" (Tavory, 2020, p. 10).

As a strategy for analyzing interview data overall, the dissertation employs an abductive approach, proposed by Stephan Timmermans and Ido Tavory as an advancement of grounded theory (Tavory, 2020; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012; Timmermans & Tavory, 2022). Abductive analysis is defined as "a scientific logic of inference aimed at building a theory that includes a recursive process of moving between data and theories" (Timmermans & Tavory, 2022, p. 256). The specificity of this approach lies in the integration of Charles Peirce's pragmatism in the construction of theory in close relation to empirical data, particularly through abduction. According to contemporary interpretations of pragmatism, the key to the abductive approach is "the ability to distinguish some conclusions as unexpected in light of existing theories" (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p. 169).

As immediate techniques for data analysis at various stages of the research and for different research narratives, different methods were employed: open, axial, and thematic coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Saldana, 2009), and discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995; Lemke, 1995; MacLure, 2003).

4. Research Results

A culturally-oriented methodology for analyzing educational choice has been developed and successfully tested, enabling the identification of less apparent mechanisms of reproducing inequality.

4.1 Cultural Narratives Shaping Choices at the 9th Grade Crossroads

This task is addressed in the following articles:

Article 1: Minina, E., Yanbarisova, D., Pavlenko, E. "Educational choice of Russian high school students in grade nine." *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 2020, Vol. 29, No. 4, pp. 326-343.

Contribution of the author: development of a culturally-oriented methodology, coding and analysis of 30 interviews, interpretation of results.

Article 2. Павленко Е. С. Культурные паттерны образовательных решений российской молодежи на примере поступления в колледж // Вопросы образования. 2023. № 4. С. 179-206.

4.1.1 Article 1 Summary

This article contributes to the discussion on educational inequality not only in Russia but also globally. Depending on the year, between 51% and 67% of Russian ninth-grade students choose the academic track, 26% to 39% opt for vocational education, and the remaining either leave the system or move to evening schools (Bessudnov, Kurakin, & Malik, 2017; Bessudnov & Malik, 2016; Yastrebov et al., 2018). Research on educational inequality in Russia identifies significant differences in this crucial educational choice based on socio-economic status (SES). Much of this research deals with the primary effects of inequality (Boudon, 1974), linking educational choices to academic performance, which is, in turn, associated with family SES. Generally, those who leave school after ninth grade come from lower SES families compared to those who choose to stay in school (Bessudnov & Malik, 2016; Kosyakova et al., 2016). Another body of research highlights the secondary effects of education—when students with high grades but low SES choose to leave school, while underperforming students from higher SES families continue and eventually enter university (Bessudnov & Malik, 2016; Khavenson & Chirkina, 2019; Kosyakova et al., 2016).

The core assumption of the article is that obtaining higher education is perceived by students and their families as being tied to securing prestigious jobs and achieving higher social status in the future. At the same time, according to the theory of relative risk aversion (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997), students from low-SES families are more likely to opt for vocational college as a less risky and selective option. This theory of relative risk aversion was further refined through a more detailed exploration of the decision-making process at the micro-level by introducing the concept of cultural narrative (Mumby, 1993; Quinn, 2004; Steinmetz, 1992).

Cultural narratives "enable the creation of a shared, meaningful world, a world of common sense" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 468). They shape expectations and norms related to social institutions and practices such as education, work, relationships, family, and aging. Cultural narratives are rooted in socio-economic status (SES) and are passed down from generation to generation (Bourdieu, 1986), serving a function of "social control" (Mumby, 1993, p. 1). While these narratives are absorbed to varying degrees by all members of society, they can be fully or partially adopted, and in individuals' personal narratives and identity formation processes, they may be internalized or rejected. By combining these two concepts, the article posits that while high school students make rational decisions, what is considered "rational" (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997), desirable, necessary, or risky is embedded in class-related cultural narratives.

The article addresses two main questions: How do students continuing into tenth grade and those leaving school after ninth grade experience their educational choice? What narratives do students use to justify their educational decisions in ninth grade?

The article presents the following findings:

1.   Dominant narrative of higher education as obligatory: There exists a dominant narrative that higher education is necessary and mandatory. However, within this narrative, higher education is not associated with achieving exceptional success, prestige, or higher social status. Instead, it is seen as a ticket to the labor market, with work and career being tools to "stay afloat" and secure a regular income.

2.   Staying in school after grade 9 as a non-decision: For high school students, the "choice" to remain in school after ninth grade is not perceived as a decision in itself—this juncture is passed without considering alternatives.

3.   Lack of articulated understanding of education quality and differentiation: Students do not have a clearly articulated understanding of the quality of education, the differentiation between educational institutions, professions, or specializations. Only a few informants make their educational choices with a clear perspective of a specific career trajectory, researching universities to select the best one.

4.   Decision-making based on short-term planning and unpredictability: High school students from both low and high SES backgrounds make decisions based on a perceived high degree of unpredictability regarding the future, relying on short-term planning.

5.   Parental influence and SES differentiation in decision-making: Differences between students from families where both parents have higher education and those from lower-educated families emerge in that for the latter, higher education is something their parents want for them. At the same time, students from lower SES families consistently aim to choose less risky educational options, which in some cases means leaving school after ninth grade, and in others—pursuing a university with lower entry requirements.

6.   Cross-class narrative conflict in college decisions: Since the narrative of the necessity of higher education for a "normal life" is shared by families of different SES levels, in the case of students opting for vocational college, this cross-class narrative conflicts with a class-based narrative where educational decisions are made with the logic of approaching the labor market and gaining financial independence. In such cases, the decision-making process becomes complex and requires significant effort from both the adolescents and their families. Even among students choosing college,

this choice can sometimes be unreflective and self-evident. Grades play a key role—when a student's grades exceed the expected norm for peers of similar SES, they genuinely face a choice.

7. Rationalization of leaving school for the labor market: Most adolescents who choose to leave school after ninth grade share the dominant narrative of higher education as mandatory but view it as a less optimal option for themselves, instead relying on a narrative of the necessity of entering the labor market sooner. They may describe this choice as suboptimal and insufficient to ensure a "good enough" life.

4.1. Article 2 Summary

Building on the premise that decisions, which from an external perspective might seem forced, are nonetheless meaningful and rooted in cultural patterns shaping both specific choices and subsequent trajectories, this article aims to demonstrate that the cultural logics behind adolescents' decisions to leave school after ninth grade are, in fact, diverse and can be highly reflective. We seek to show that educational trajectory choices are influenced not only by what is chosen (leaving school after ninth grade) or by who makes the choice (students with low grades insufficient for university admission) but also by cultural structures.

Conceptually, the article draws on the concept of "horizons of action," developed by Phil Hodkinson based on Pierre Bourdieu's theory. It refines this concept by incorporating Eviatar Zerubavel's interpretation of "horizon" from cognitive sociology, which asserts that "horizons limit not only our perceptual field but also our conceptual field" (Zerubavel, 1993, p. 397). Consequently, we speak of a "symbolic horizon of action." We do not refer to cultural narratives here, as we focus on a more localized level of reasoning about specific decisions, identifying key categories that shape the symbolic horizon rather than cohesive narratives.

In developing the connection between reflexivity and social class, many scholars (Roberts, 2012; Roberts, 2010; Threadgold and Nilan, 2009; Laughland-Booy, Mayall, Skribs, 2015; France and Threadgold, 2016) have put forth and empirically validated the hypothesis that a high level of reflexivity (the ability to rethink one's own trajectory and consider the future by aligning actions with potential consequences) is characteristic of middle-class students who have more privileges and advantages. Other researchers, however, challenge this notion, showing that the relationship between reflexivity and class is not always clear-cut, and that young people from various social backgrounds demonstrate different levels of reflexivity (Aaltonen & Karvonen, 2016; Lehman, 2004). Some studies even suggest that middle-class youth tend to make decisions unreflectively, following paths laid out

by their parents. Meanwhile, working-class youth are often forced to deal with high levels of uncertainty and external constraints, leading them to become more reflective. Regardless of class, young people must navigate and overcome uncertainty. Thus, any educational choice can be more or less reflective, rational, or constrained by circumstance.

Key Findings:

1. Four Symbolic Horizons Informing the Decision to Leave School After Ninth Grade:

   a. Profession and Goal-Setting: This horizon is characterized by long-term career planning, where students choose an educational track that they believe will provide the best qualifications and education for success in a chosen profession. In other words, this is a rational horizon.

   b. School and Novelty: It was found that the decision to leave school may not be linked to educational planning but rather to an individual's sense of identity within certain social institutions, particularly school, and the processes of objectification within this interaction. Identity may conflict with or outgrow the school institution earlier than expected, with teachers signaling this to the students. This horizon was more common among girls in the sample.

   c. Work and Speed: Often associated in literature with working-class decision-making logic, this horizon also emphasizes the element of speed—how time is understood differently within this horizon. Educational decisions here are driven by urgency. This horizon was characteristic of young men in the sample. In this case, leaving school is not a forced decision but one motivated by the immediacy of entering the workforce, framed within the category of its quick approach.

   d. Tests, Knowledge, and Fears: In this horizon, students view higher education as a possibility, but the testing system is seen as unpredictable and intimidating. This generates frustration, leading to a decision to avoid engagement with the system altogether.

2. Decision-making is neither random nor entirely rational: Adolescents' decisions about educational trajectories are not made arbitrarily, but they are also not fully rational.

4.2 Cultural Narratives Shaping Career Choices of High School Students

This section is explored in Article 3:

Minina E., Pavlenko E. (2023). 'Choosing the lesser of evils': cultural narrative and career decision-making in post-Soviet Russia, Journal of Youth Studies, Vol. 26, No. 9, pp. 1109-1129.

Contribution of the applicant: data collection and analysis, interpretation of results (specifically regarding the cultural re-interpretation of the Unified State Exam (USE) mechanism).

The article contributes to the theoretical discussion on the relationship between career choice, social class, and culture. Over the past three decades, academic research has redefined the understanding of life trajectories and career choices through the lens of reflexive "DIY" biographies (Beck 1992), individualized lifestyles, personal agency and risk, and the processes of de-standardization and fragmentation (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Coffey & Farrugia 2014). How young people navigate and manage these trajectories globally, and how they experience them, are central topics in contemporary sociological, political, and public debates. The goal of these debates is to enable less privileged youth to make more conscious and optimal career and life choices.

In the article's introduction, the existing research on the relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and educational decision-making is reiterated. It is noted that the middle class consistently shares a common narrative: higher education is necessary for a good life. Today, this narrative is embedded in a larger cultural construct — neoliberalism. This broader construct dictates how various aspects of education and actions within the educational system are interpreted. Neoliberalism is understood here as a "global cultural order" that goes beyond the free market and has its own core narrative (Lerch, Bromley & Meyer 2021). Among other things, the neoliberal narrative emphasizes individual autonomy, choice, competitiveness, self-reliance, agency, the pursuit of social mobility, and the privatization of risks (Lamont, Welburn & Fleming 2016; Lerch, Bromley & Meyer 2021; Sharone 2013; Silva 2013).

The article then focuses on the concept of cultural narrative, as its aim is to reconstruct the key cultural narrative that defines the decision-making logic of young Russians, decipher its "elementary grammar" (Smith 2010, 3), and relate this narrative to the process of choosing a career specialization.

The main attention of the article is devoted to the dominant narrative of the necessity of obtaining higher education, especially in the context of the cultural and historical conditions of post-Soviet Russia. Russia serves as an example of a post-socialist neoliberal transition, which includes a shift from a collectivist ideology and socialist institutions towards greater individualization and choice. Having been "caught in a dramatic 'plunge into modernity'" (Beck 2002, 2), the modern Russian educational system and labor market continue to exhibit contradictory trends of neoliberalism, stagnation, and dependency on former conditions (Gimpelson, Kapeliushnikov & Rochin 2017). Therefore, the Russian case is an important empirical object for studying the interaction

between cultural narratives at different levels and the examination of cultural mechanisms that perpetuate inequality.

One key element of the neoliberalization of the education system was the introduction of the Unified State Exam (USE). The USE helped democratize, standardize, and diversify access to higher education. Introduced as part of neoliberal reforms in the 2000s, the USE embodies neoliberal governmentality and objectives (Gounko & Smale 2007; Gurova, Piattoeva & Takala 2015; Gurova & Piattoeva 2018; Hursh 2007). Modeled after the U.S. SAT (Hursh 2007), the USE was designed to diversify and equalize educational opportunities, increase student mobility, enhance the transparency of university admissions, reduce corruption, and foster competition among school students (Francesconi, Slonimczyk & Yurko 2019; Hursh 2007; Gurova & Piattoeva 2018; Rasco 2020; Minina 2010).

Key Findings of the Article 3

1.   Career choice of high school students is deeply rooted in the dominant narrative that higher education is necessary to gain basic access to the labor market and to serve as a safeguard against crises and unpredictable developments. The surrounding world is generally characterized by high uncertainty.

2.   Career decision-making is mediated by various proxies. Due to the inability to engage in long-term planning and the lack of information about the higher education system and labor market, students rely on external, system-created indicators. For example, conclusions about individual aptitudes and, consequently, possible career options, are based on the subjects in which students consistently receive high grades. Grades are perceived as objective indicators of abilities, interests, and opportunities.

3.   The effect of relying on institutional proxies is the students' rejection of their own agency and control over their educational choices and career paths. Career ambitions or professional interests are rarely mentioned in the interviews.

4.   The rejection of individual agency in favor of institutional logic is also reflected in the perception that the transition between educational levels must be seamless and continuous. Being outside of institutions is inconceivable or is associated with irrationally perceived risks.

5.   Thus, the neoliberal logic of the Unified State Exam (USE) does not translate into the actions of students. Instead, the cultural narrative emphasizing the need for higher education to secure a minimally prosperous life (essentially, to avoid critical negative scenarios), tied to late and post-

Soviet ideas of the unpredictability of the future and the rejection of individual agency in favor of public institutions, defines how students construct their educational trajectories.

4.3 Other Cultural Forms Shaping Educational Choice

This section is explored in Article 4:

Павленко Е. С., Якубовская А. А. Интерпретации взросления и формирование образовательных траекторий // Мониторинг общественного мнения: Экономические и социальные перемены. 2020. № 3. С. 376-390.

In previous articles, the authors focused on the relationship between the landscapes of educational decision-making and the socio-economic status (SES) of adolescents' families. It was demonstrated that cultural narratives can be both class-specific and cross-class. While searching for relevant elements in these meaning landscapes, it became apparent that educational decisions are also connected to the concept of adulthood. Of course, in terms of academic sociology, educational choice is inevitably embedded within the structure of growing up. However, it remains unclear how individuals, specifically adolescents, within their meaning landscapes, either make or do not make a connection between their concept of adulthood and their educational choices.

Building on discussions of the destandardization of life courses, the emergence of new life stages (such as young adulthood), and the significance of studying subjective interpretations of what defines oneself as an adult, this article compares how adolescents speak about themselves in relation to the construct of adulthood and the educational choices they make. The study analyzes how interpretations of growing up are either related or unrelated to the social positions of young people and the educational decisions they make.

The article identifies several key interpretations of adulthood that are characteristic of both educational trajectories after the 9th grade (either leaving school or transitioning to upper secondary school).

Adulthood is generally associated with positioning oneself in relation to social institutions, self-control, responsibility, and financial independence. However, young people—both boys and girls—describe themselves differently within these categories depending on their chosen educational paths.

Among adolescents who chose the academic trajectory:

1. Adulthood is linked to remaining within the education system as a whole; a person becomes an adult when they graduate from university. Consequently, the longer one stays in the education system, the longer adulthood is postponed.

2. Self-control implies the ability to focus on studies, limiting recreational activities in favor of academic pursuits.

3. Responsibility is understood as the ability to independently navigate the consequences of one's actions.

4. Financial independence is not perceived as a challenge; it is considered something that will eventually be achieved.

Among adolescents who chose to leave school after the 9th grade:

1. Adulthood is connected to being in school; by leaving school, one becomes an adult. Therefore, attending college is also seen as a step toward adulthood.

2. Self-control entails the ability to manage emotional impulses and focus on tasks (of any kind), especially in stressful situations.

3. Responsibility is viewed as the ability to make the right choices and decisions, with a significant moral dimension.

4. Financial independence is an immediate concern, often related to reducing the burden on parents and acquiring money that does not require careful accounting or division.

Unique Features of Adulthood Interpretation in the Academic Trajectory:

1. Among adolescents who chose the vocational education path, no one describes adulthood as something they have control over. Rather, growing up is seen as an inevitable process, and the emotional characteristics of adult life are also perceived as predetermined.

2. Among adolescents who chose the academic trajectory, various forms of reflexive interaction with the concept of adulthood are evident. Growing up is seen as something that can be postponed, redefined (with the adolescent determining their own emotional characteristics as an adult), and, ultimately, as something that can be entirely rejected. One can refuse both the process of growing up and the conceptualization of oneself according to the criteria of adulthood.

Culturally conditioned notions of adulthood differ between educational trajectories and social groups not only in their content but also in how these categories are interpreted and the degree of control individuals feel they have over them.

4.4 Thesis Statement

1. The concept of "landscapes of meanings" allows for the consideration of how an individual's actions are conditioned by their position within the social structure, as well as by symbolic constructions that represent interpretations constructed by the individual themselves. This concept reveals the subtle mechanisms of interaction between social status and education that lead to the persistent reproduction of social inequality within the educational system.

2. The landscapes of meanings underlying seemingly similar decisions are, in fact, diverse, which can lead to differences in the formation of subsequent trajectories. A specific choice is not inherently more or less successful. Moreover, youth belonging to various social groups, whether from high or low socioeconomic status (SES) families, are not necessarily more reflective or rational in their educational decision-making. For Russian youth from families of varying SES, there is a tendency to adopt the dominant narrative regarding the necessity of obtaining higher education; however, obtaining a higher education is associated not with success, but rather with navigating high uncertainty, securing a basic entry ticket to the labor market, and achieving a minimally acceptable quality of life. Nevertheless, in certain trajectories chosen by adolescents attending college, this narrative contradicts the class-specific narrative emphasizing the need for a swift transition to the labor market, which encourages a greater reflexivity in their choices. Additionally, as shown by the analysis of decision-making among youth opting for college, this choice may not be related at all to the construction of their educational trajectory.

3. The narrative regarding the necessity of higher education has a formative impact on how decisions about future professions are made. Although the Unified State Exam (USE) was introduced as an institutional mechanism aligned with neoliberal logic to facilitate the individualization of trajectories, existing cultural narratives reinterpret it in such a way as to minimize uncertainty and information deficits. Individuals tend to relinquish agency in favor of signals generated by institutions, which are perceived as proxies that reflect the objective characteristics of the individual.

4. The making of educational decisions is also linked to the symbolic construction (concepts of) adulthood. Adolescents following different educational trajectories not only differ in the content of their views on what it means to be an adult and their current status regarding maturation, but also in the degree to which the interpretation of adulthood can be rigid or multifaceted, as well as in how the interaction between the individual and adulthood as a collectively shared symbolic construction is established.

5. Research limitations

The analysis is based on interview data collected in 2013-2014, making the findings relevant to the corresponding historical and institutional context. However, although these data do not allow for conclusions about the choices of contemporary students, our research has highlighted cultural narratives and symbolic horizons as universal dimensions of choice. Our empirical results will facilitate future comparisons and assessments of changes occurring in the landscapes of meanings related to educational decisions.

Due to the nature of the informant selection process at the initial stage of the research (which occurs through schools), there is a significantly higher number of cases regarding the choice of the academic trajectory. Since the conclusions about the decision to pursue vocational education after the 9th grade are based on only 24 cases, these should be considered preliminary.

Given that the interviews were conducted after the decision had been made regarding whether to remain in school after the 9th grade, our interpretation relies on the narratives retrospectively constructed by the informants. At the same time, since the interviews took place in the autumn, it can be assumed that not much time had elapsed since the immediate choice was made, thereby reducing the likelihood that perceptions of this choice were distorted by subsequent experiences or further decisions.

As our study relies on interpretative analysis, we refrain from drawing conclusions about causality when describing our results, limiting ourselves to stating the existence of a connection.

6. Scientific and Practical Significance of the Work

Scientific Significance

The scientific significance of this work lies, firstly, in the theoretical results manifested in the conceptualization of the term "landscapes of meaning." Secondly, it contributes new empirical knowledge regarding the cultural mechanisms underlying educational decisions, which support the reproduction of inequality in various ways. The development of this approach enables the examination of the same choice made from different logics, some of which may be linked to class-specific narratives, while others relate to cross-class narratives or more localized symbolic horizons. In the long term, this creates opportunities for meaningful advancement in research on the issues of reproducing inequality in education.

Practical Significance

The practical significance of this work is that its results can be utilized to develop solutions and measures that take into account the more nuanced and intricate nature of educational choice. We have demonstrated that cultural narratives and the degree of rationality or reflexivity in decision-making vary among students from different socio-economic statuses (SES). Furthermore, support for educational choices is needed both for those who decide to leave school after the ninth grade and for those who choose to remain in high school and enroll in universities. However, the nature of this support must differ in each case.

Key recommendations include the following:

1. Overcoming the dominance of the narrative that higher education is mandatory for a normal life.
2. Expanding students' understanding of the education system and the opportunities it provides.
3. Transforming perceptions of the education system by demonstrating that rational, reflexive choices are possible across all trajectories.
4. Working with students' perceptions of their capabilities and resources, regardless of their academic performance and family SES.

A deeper understanding of the internal symbolic environment surrounding educational choice can indicate how adolescents should approach the construction of their educational trajectories to maximize available opportunities and realize their potential.

7. Results credibility

The credibility of the results is ensured through the application of general scientific research methods, triangulation of interpretations among co-authors of the publications, and cross-validation of the data with one another. This is aligned with methodological approaches in the field of education research and is further supported by the results of testing and publication in peer-reviewed journals with double-blind review processes.

8. Further development

Recent studies have already corroborated the findings we reached based on interview data and statistical information. For instance, it has been shown that "from the perspective of subjective perception, higher education, first, does not secure status privileges within the youth cohort, and second, does not always serve as a social elevator" (Lukina et al., 2024).

A promising direction for the development of this research will be a more detailed examination of the sources of such interpretations of education. These sources may include deeper symbolic structures that pertain to the distinction between the sacred and the profane, the revered and the tabooed, not only as perceived by adolescents but also by broader communities and groups. We anticipate that these communities will not align with conventional stratification categories (e.g., by class), and that they will exhibit greater diversity (e.g., there will be no singular basis for their delineation apart from shared complexes of meanings). An additional avenue for investigation will involve examining the sources of various interpretations of adulthood, as well as the overall differences in how adolescents engage with meanings, symbols, and their own cultural horizons. Conducting more targeted studies of youth in specific socio-economic and symbolic conditions will be critically important, as this research merely provides a broad overview.

Finally, the most ambitious and promising task will be a longitudinal analysis of the identified narratives and horizons—investigating how interpretations of education evolve as individuals progress through the education system and enter the labor market; studying which elements of symbolic horizons or emerging narratives exert the most significant influence on changes in perceptions of education. For example, how do changes in the understanding of adulthood affect the interpretation of education? Furthermore, how do educational practices encountered by young people within the education system and at its intersection with the labor market, along with their accumulated experiences of education and life in general, lead to shifts in the cultural systems of distinction upon which youth rely when interpreting the surrounding world?

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