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‘Choosing the lesser of evils’: cultural narrative and career decision-making in post-Soviet Russia

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ABSTRACT

This paper employs the concepts of cultural narrative to examine career choice among post-Soviet Russian teenagers going into higher education. Drawing on insights from cultural sociology more broadly and the cultural autonomy thesis more specifically, we demonstrate how the cultural narrative of a university degree as a ‘must-have at all costs’ subjugates various career decision-making logics identified, while downplaying individual agency and reflexivity. We argue that, by misdirecting career choice from opportunities to constraints, the dominant narrative serves to limit, rather than diversify, young people’s career choice and social mobility potential. We go on to theorise the interplay between culture and social institutions. Drawing on the cultural interpretation of Unified State Exam – a neoliberal educational governance tool – we show how cultural narrative hijacks institutional interpretations and usages, re-grounding neoliberal sensibilities in Soviet-era ones.

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Cultural narrative; Russian youth; cultural autonomy; career choice; higher education

Disentangling career choice, social class and culture in the age of neoliberalism

This article engages with the theoretical debate on the entanglement of career choice, class and culture. Over the past three decades, academic research has reconceptualised life course in general and career choice in particular in terms of reflexive ‘do-it-yourself’ biographies (Beck 1992), individualised lifestyle, individual agency and risk, destandardisation and fragmentation (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Coffey and Farrugia 2014). How these are navigated, managed and experienced by young individuals across the globe is a source of significant current sociological, policy and public debate. The underlying leitmotif of this debate is equipping the less socially privileged to exercise more informed career and life choices.

Thus far sociological literature has focused mainly on inter-class differences in cognition styles and decision-making. Until recently, the idea of ‘making a good choice’ has been associated with more socially advantaged classes, where higher socio-economic status is equated with more agency, reflexivity and efficiency in exercising choice (Du Bois-Reymond 1998; Goldthorpe and Jackson 2007; Grytnes 2011; Reay, Crozier, and

Clayton 2009). Multiple studies, in particular those grounded in rational choice theories, have argued that middle-class youth have higher aspirations and are better prepared to make informed career choices and pursue their imagined futures (James, Mallman, and Midford 2021; Lehmann 2013; Sharone 2013). For instance, 'pursuing one's passion' is normally seen as a prerogative of the middle class, while lower classes are associated with 'doing what's expected' (James, Mallman, and Midford 2021; Sharone 2013). The need to 'raise aspirations' among lower-class youth has become a key policy prescription in addressing social inequality (Zipin et al. 2015).

Recent empirical studies from various cultural contexts, including Australia (Laughland-Booÿ, Mayall, and Skrbiš 2015), Russia (Minina, Yanbarisova, and Pavlenko 2020), Italy (Cuzzocrea 2018), the US (Silva 2012), the UK (Atkins 2010), Finland (Aaltonen and Karvonen 2016) and others have challenged the assumption that a higher social status equals more reflexive choice-making. Instead, it has been put forward that different social groups employ different cognitive, economic and symbolic meaning-making resources available to them. More socially advantaged individuals tend to concern themselves with class maintenance and, as a consequence, passively rely on class-appropriate expectation. As a result, their life choices are often predetermined to the extent that they are essentially 'non-decisions' (Ball et al. 2002; Minina, Yanbarisova, and Pavlenko 2020).

In turn, working-class youth oftentimes show more ambition relative to their starting point (Roberts 2009) and are exposed to options that are less class-predetermined (Lamont 2000, 2001a; Silva 2012). Working-class youth have been shown to be able to both create their own working-class narratives and capitalise on middle-class narratives of success (Lamont 2001b; Silva 2012). For instance, Silva (2012) demonstrates how working-class US youth appropriates therapeutic coming-of-age cultural models – 'in terms of overcoming a painful past and reconstructing an independent, transformed, and adult self' (Silva 2012, 506). Walker's (2022) longitudinal research on Russian youth argues that, in meeting the neoliberal demand for upward mobility, working-class men draw on a repertoire of both Soviet, post-Soviet and neoliberal symbolic and institutional resources to re-invent their 'failed' masculinities. Lamont (2000, 2001a) shows how blue-collar workers draw on moral integrity and moral boundaries in creating class-specific narratives of dignity and self-worth

Furthermore, it has been suggested that the proliferation of middle-class success narratives (e.g. those of upward mobility) and subjectivities (e.g. those of the agentic self) does not automatically foster an individuals' cultural and symbolic capital but may, in fact, have the opposite effect of reproducing social inequality (Atkins 2010; Dhingra 2020; Lareau 2011, 2015; Patterson and Fosse 2015; Silva and Corse 2018). Atkins (2010), for example, shows how the rhetoric of 'opportunity' that dominated education reforms in the UK offered lower-class youth a 'fantasy of impossible dreams and non-existent opportunities' (262), while marginalising the choices they themselves see as more fit for their professional aspirations. Sharone (2013) demonstrates how the internalisation of the middle-class narrative of occupation reflecting one's 'passion' by working-class youth led to an over-estimation of their professional skills and under-estimation of labour market constraints, exposing them to risks of downward mobility.

One particular middle-class narrative identified across national contexts, including Russia, is that of a university degree as a must-have for a 'good' life (James, Mallman, and Midford 2021; Silva and Corse 2018; Minina, Yanbarisova, and Pavlenko 2020). As

argued by Silva and Corse (2018, 238) in regard to the US, 'college is increasingly an expectation for all high school graduates', however, 'aspiring to go to college and actually going to college are two different things', as 'the practices that allow for their achievement are much more elusive for those not born to the middle class'. In order to complete a university degree, an individual needs to have or acquire significant procedural, informational and symbolic types of knowledge and resources, for instance, information seeking tools (for example, being able to research and compare institutional quality), understanding procedures (for example, applying on time) and connecting their career aspirations to routine behaviours (for example, taking part in extra-curriculars that would strengthen one's university application) (Lareau 2015; Silva and Corse 2018). The internalisation of the middle-class aspiration for a university degree alone can encourage unrealistic ambitions among lower-class youth who may not necessarily have the resources to realise them (Lareau 2015; Silva and Corse 2018).

Neoliberalism has provided an important context for the examination of class differences in career decision-making. By neoliberalism we understand a 'broad world cultural order' that extends beyond the free market and that comes with a master narrative of its own (Lerch, Bromley, and Meyer 2021). Among other things, the neoliberal master narrative stresses individual autonomy and choice, competitiveness, self-reliance, agency for action, pursuit of social mobility and privatisation of risk (Lamont, Welburn, and Fleming 2016; Lerch, Bromley, and Meyer 2021; Sharone 2013; Silva 2013). The discourse of choice proliferated in the academic and policy literature has been criticised for its enmeshment in neoliberal sensibilities and institutions (McDowell 2020; Walker and Roberts 2018; Walkerdine 2003). The choice-maker – often 'made in the image of the middle class' – has been construed as an autonomous individual who is well equipped to overcome failure, self-improve and, if need be, 'refashion themselves as a successful subject' (Walkerdine 2003, 239). Life success has been discursively tied into upward mobility as experienced by socially advantaged classes. For example, middle- and upper-class youth have the social privilege to delay making a choice, such as taking a gap year to travel and explore following the completion of high school, as opposed to making a quick vocational choice under economic pressure. The neoliberal bias has led to over-emphasising agency and pathologising working-class choices as not ambitious, reflexive or adaptive enough (McDowell 2020; Walker and Roberts 2018). Keeping in mind these considerations, we employ the concept of cultural narrative – discussed in detail in the next section – to examine the issues of agency and reflexivity in career choice-making at the intersection of neoliberal and post-Soviet sensibilities in contemporary Russia.

Choice-making as cultural narrative

The analysis that follows is situated within the cultural sociology strand of scholarship that examines the symbolic dimension of career choice. We adopt the 'cultural autonomy' thesis as a starting point in theorising career choice. This paper is inspired by a recent wave of cross-cultural empirical studies that have revitalised culture as a key variable in constructing 'do-it-yourself biographies' and navigating life choices. Research by Lamont (2001a), Alexander (2003), Silva (2012), Streib (2018) and others showed that class subjectivities and rationalities, including ways of defining 'success' 'risk', 'safety',

etc. are not only class-specific but also culture-specific. Culture here is 'viewed (...) as an "independent variable" that possesses a relative autonomy in shaping actions and institutions' (Alexander 2003, 12). As such, it informs ways in which individuals in a particular culture code experience life choices, including making emotional investments, handling setbacks and failures, exercising agency and capitalising or missing out on access to resources.

Some of the most interesting insights into the role of culture in reproducing social inequality on the one hand and enabling social mobility on the other have come from examining (cross)cultural narratives as a key meaning-making cultural form. Conceptualised as a 'story' that makes things intelligible in a particular culture code, cultural narrative shapes institutions, class structures and individual identities, as well as assigns relationships of responsibility, causality and agency between events, individuals and social expectations (Alexander 2003; Cuzzocrea 2018; Cuzzocrea and Mandich 2016; Lamont 2000; Sclater 2017; Smith 2010; Quinn 2004). Cultural narrative is a structured but dynamic and constantly evolving web of culturally located and historically contingent here-and-now social meanings. Those meanings can be class-specific or transcend class boundaries. They are appropriated, in varying degrees, by all members of a society but can be fully or partially adopted, internalised or rejected in the construction of an individual's identity (Silva and Corse 2018). Dominant (or master) cultural narratives both reflect and are supported by social institutions (Kuipers 2019; Lamont 2019; Sclater 2017). The 'American dream' is a classic example of cultural master narrative that provides 'a sense of normative direction ... (towards building prosperity), standards by which to determine who belongs (the materially/professionally successful), and a notion of who deserves our trust (those who try) and of which groups deserve to be stigmatised (those who are lazy and lack self-reliance prosperity). (Lamont 2019; as cited in Kuipers 2019). The narrative of the American dream energises and drives individuals to take action, set goals, not give up in the face of setbacks, take risks and initiatives, etc.

While overlapping with social beliefs, norms and expectations, cultural narrative is distinguished by strong temporal and emotional dimensions (Cuzzocrea and Mandich 2016; Sclater 2017; Smith, 2005). As a story, cultural narrative has a scenario or a plotline with a beginning, middle and end, as well as a sequencing of representations, within which events unfold with various degrees of urgency, precariousness and transience (Sclater 2017; Smith, 2005, p. 14). For example, the American dream is not achieved overnight and involves a journey full of highs and lows, risks and rewards, etc. Cultural narrative has an emotional appeal and requires a degree of emotional involvement, whether positive – one that drives motivation, aspiration, determination and enthusiasm – or negative – one that triggers fatalism, bitterness, self-blame, desperation and hopelessness. The American dream is an example of the former, while the narrative of 'domestic futurelessness' identified by Anđić (2020) among Serbian youth is one example of the latter.

The cultural narrative lens has initially been employed to 'tease out overarching grand narratives' (Alexander 2003, 7), such as the American dream (Lamont 2019), civil society (Alexander 2003) or war (Smith, 2005). Increasingly, it is being applied to reconstruct social meanings of everyday cultural forms, such as education, work, dating, aging and retirement (Anđić 2020; Cuzzocrea 2018; Cuzzocrea and Mandich 2015; James, Mallman, and Midford 2021; Streib 2018; Quinn 2004). For example, Streib (2018) identifies several cultural narratives – likely to have originated from the American dream

master narrative – that serve to propel upward mobility in the US, including ‘rags to riches’, ‘working-class hero’, ‘lifting as I climb’ and ‘giving back’. In examining university drop-out in the UK, Quinn (2004) conceptualises drop-out as a ‘self-fulfilling cultural narrative that is increasingly connoted as working class, as well as a consequence of the material exigencies of working-class circumstances’ (57). An investigation of social meanings of higher education leading to ‘a good life’ among contemporary Australian students by James, Mallman, and Midford (2020) identifies two competing dominant narratives that structure young people’s career decision-making: the authentic narrative of ‘following one’s dream’ and the neoliberal narrative of success. Cuzzocrea (2018) describes the cultural narrative of ‘rooted mobilities’ among Sardinian youth, as paradoxically linked with ‘immobility’, in that young people leave Sardinia in pursuit of neoliberal success, only in order to return to the roots later.

Building on this literature, the analysis in this paper reconstructs the cultural master narrative that informs young Russians’ decision-making logics, decoding its ‘elementary grammar’ (Smith 2010, 3) and untangling its semantic components. We extend the literature on inter- and intra- class differences in career meaning-making by showing how a dominant cultural narrative identified overwhelmingly informs decision-making logics of young people, as well as by examining how cultural narrative mediates, structures and potentially limits young people’s career and life choices. Furthermore, drawing on the case of the Unified State Exam as a neoliberal education governance tool, we theorise how cultural narratives interact with specific institutional contexts. We suggest that not only are cultural narratives supported by social institutions, as previously suggested, but that they are also able to hijack and redefine the intended meanings and functions of those institutions.

Cultural meanings of a university degree in Russia

Our analysis draws on post-Soviet Russia as a case of a post-socialist neoliberal transformation, which included a move away from a collectivist ethos and socialist institutions towards greater individualisation and choice. Having been ‘caught up in a dramatic “plunge into modernity”’ (Beck 2002, 2), today’s Russian education and labour market continue to display contradictory neoliberal, stagnation and path dependency trends (Gimpelson, Kapeliushnikov, and Rochin 2017). Traditional views of an occupation as a ‘job for life’ alongside high levels of specialisation of academic degree programmes make career decision-making one of the highest-stake life decisions for the Russian youth.

Russia’s Soviet and post-Soviet history provides an important context for this study. Soviet Russia boasted a constitution-guaranteed right to free-of-charge higher education as well as a unique mandatory distribution of graduates to work places based on the needs of a planned economy, with the education and labour markets closely aligned (Kosyakova et al. 2016). Career choice was largely predetermined, while the distribution system relied on a classification of young people’s psychological traits associated with certain types of occupations. Occupations, in turn, were aligned with school subjects, while the school subjects mirrored the Soviet industry structure.

The collapse of the USSR resulted in an unprecedented neoliberalisation and mass expansion of higher education (Bessudnov, Kurakin, and Malik 2017) and the creation of a new ‘degree generation’ (Bathmaker et al. 2016). In response to the demands of

post-Soviet labour market, the mandatory distribution of graduates was eliminated, while new private universities and new paid-for academic programmes at state universities opened up. With the expansion of higher education, the ‘signalling’ role of a higher education degree came to the forefront (Roschin 2006; Yudkevich 2017), whereby the absence thereof was ‘negatively perceived by employers, even for semi-skilled jobs such as shop assistants and delivery persons’ (Yudkevich 2017, 114). While in many Western contexts university education is associated with middle-class aspirations, as a ‘way up’ to social mobility (Bathmaker et al. 2016; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Bradley 2015; Granfield 1991; Lareau 2011; Lehmann 2013; Reay et al. 2009; Spiegler 2018), a university degree in Russia became to epitomise a basic ‘pass’ to the labour market (Konstantinovksy and Popova 2017) and ‘a form of “insurance” against an uncertain future’ (Harrison 2019).

Access to higher education in Russia was further democratised, standardised and diversified as a result of the 2009 introduction of the Unified State Exam (henceforth USE) – an external tool for the school leavers’ performance assessment. Introduced into the education system as part of the neoliberal reforms of the 2000s, USE embodied the neoliberal governmentality and purposes (Gounko and Smale 2007; Gurova, Piattoeva, and Takala 2015; Gurova and Piattoeva 2018; Hursh 2007). Modelled on the SATs in the US (Hursh 2007), USE was designed to diversify and equalise educational opportunity, enhance school-leaver’s mobility, objectify university admission and reduce corruption, as well as to encourage school choice and competition (Francesconi, Slonimczyk, and Yurko 2019; Hursh 2007; Gurova and Piattoeva 2018; Rasco 2020; Minina 2010). It also provided an independent quality indicator within the newly introduced New Public Management and Quality Assurance and Evaluation systems (Gurova, Piattoeva, and Takala 2015; Gurova 2018; Rasco 2020). In addition to the neoliberal spirit of the reform agenda, the design, testing and roll-out of USE was directly sponsored by a World Bank loan, with conditionalities attached to its implementation (Gounko and Smale 2007; Gusarova and Ovchinnikova 2014; World Bank 2005).

Today, the Russian educational system comprises 11 years of compulsory schooling. Grade 9 is a key juncture where students can choose to leave school for vocational education institution (the co-called ‘vocational path’) or continue to grade 10 for another 2 years, with the view to enrol into a university (the so-called academic path). There are two routes to higher education: applying to a university at the end of grade 11 on the basis of USE test scores or transferring into higher education having completed a vocational degree, thus bypassing USE. USE is currently compulsory in Mathematics and Russian, and students may choose to take additional exams related to their desired university study programme. Generally, the higher the USE scores, the better the applicant’s chance of enrolling in a competitive university programme. Despite vocational programmes becoming more popular than in the Soviet times (Bessudnov and Malik 2016), vocational education still remains a taboo among families of higher socio-economic class (Minina et al. 2020) and is generally associated with a lower quality life (Konstantinovksy and Popova 2017).

In today’s Russia, a university degree is considered ‘standard’ and ‘routine’, as opposed to ‘desirable’ or ‘advantageous’, and, according to recent public opinion polls, it is not necessarily associated with social mobility and higher income (Public Opinion Foundation, 2014–2021). Depending on the year, about half or more of Russian pupils make

plans to receive a higher education degree (56% in 2011, around the time of the 'Tracer Atom' first wave of interviewing) (Kondratenko, Kiryushina, and Bogdanov 2020). This results in a mismatch between educational aspirations and the labour market – a trend that has been documented across the globe. While national education policies view a university degree as a useful economic investment that maximises individual's labour market potential (Tomlinson 2008, 50), in practice, it is increasingly harder for university graduates to capitalise on participation in higher education or find suitable employment in the first place (Brown, Hesketh, and Williams 2004; Mok and Jiang 2018; Tomlinson 2008). In Russia, the issue of over-education persists, with an estimated 20–40% of Russian workers, depending on a time period and industry, being over-educated for the jobs they hold and with job market entrants being at an increasingly higher risk of downward occupational mobility (Gimpelson 2019; Gimpelson, Kapeliushnikov, and Rochin 2017).

In addition, while employment within one's area of university specialisation (*rabota po profesii*) remains a social expectation, in practice, depending on the estimate, about half of Russian graduates enter the job market outside their area of specialisation (Gimpelson 2019; Gimpelson, Kapeliushnikov, and Rochin 2017). Traditional views of an occupation as a 'job for life' alongside high levels of specialisation of academic degree programmes make career decision-making in Russia one of the highest-stake and riskiest life decisions for the Russian youth.

At the same time, post-Soviet Russia's job market is undoubtedly much more diverse and eclectic than it was in the Soviet and early post-Soviet times, and possession of a degree does not necessarily play a determinant role in career building (Gimpelson, Kapeliushnikov, and Rochin 2017; Roschin 2006). Thus, employers are able to differentiate between various universities and the quality of their academic programmes and are increasingly attaching less importance to academic credentials. Some employers will only recognise a university degree from a few top institutions in a particular field, while others, for example, in programming and high-tech fields, tend to attach value behavioural competencies, such as teamwork and leadership skills, or prioritise work experience over formal credentials. Others, yet, prefer to train their employees from scratch (Gimpelson, Kapeliushnikov, and Rochin 2017; Roschin 2006).

While university enrolment rates are likely to stay high in the near future, an increase in the demand for high-skilled jobs in Russia would require large investments into high tech and other innovations, as well as a much friendlier business culture – an unlikely scenario for the post-COVID19 labour market (Gimpelson 2022). In the long run, the structure of employment in Russia is predicted to become more uncertain and is likely to include a 'limited set of high-skilled, high-paid jobs open to a minority of well-trained job seekers', while 'all other candidates, regardless of their formal education, will have to take "bad" jobs: low-skilled and low-paid jobs' (Gimpelson and Kapeliushnikov 2019, 20).

Data

The analysis builds on the 'Trajectories in Education and Career' (henceforth TrEC) research project – Russia's first, most up-to-date and comprehensive education-related cohort longitudinal study on a national scale (Malik 2019). TrEC was constructed alongside the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)' all-Russia

representative sample and has been carried out since 2012. Specifically, we draw on TrEC's qualitative sub-sample, titled 'Tracer Atom', which is ongoing and builds on longitudinal interview data from 111 research participants. Unlike the TrEC survey data, which is publicly available and widely used by education researchers worldwide, the 'Tracer Atom' data are exclusively available to the authors of this paper and a small number of research associates.

Out of the 42 regions of Russia surveyed within TrEC, 'Tracer Atom' covers 8 that represent different types of geographical and social settings across Russia. Our sample is purposeful and includes aspiring university students, both male and female, from various socio-cultural backgrounds, with various levels of academic achievement, and living in various types of locations (village, small town, mid-sized town, Moscow and St. Petersburg). Out of the 111 'Tracer Atom' participants in this paper we draw on a sub-sample of 87 teenagers, who, following the completion of compulsory schooling, had continued to grade 10 with the view to enrol in a university programme.

As each research participant within the 'Tracer Atom' sub-sample was also a part of the larger quantitative TrEC and TIMSS surveys, for each of them we have a fair degree of contextual data, including parental level of education, parental occupation, family income, past and current school grades, desired occupation as reported in the survey and many others. The socio-economic composition of this sub-sample includes 29% of teenagers coming from a family where both parents have a higher education degree, 36% – from a family where only one parent has a higher education degree (this includes single-parent families) and 35% – from a family where none of the parents have a higher education degree (this also includes single-parent families). With the exception of a few students enrolled in 'specialised' schools – those with enhanced education in certain subjects – our participants were pupils of regular state-run secondary schools.

The analysis presented here is non-longitudinal and draws on the first wave of interviews conducted in 2013, when the participants were aged 17. Parental consent was obtained for all pupils participating in the study. The interviews were held on the school premises and lasted from 1 to 2 hours. The interviews were audio-, and in some cases, video-recorded and fully transcribed before they were analysed by the research team. All interviews were anonymised, and the names used in the examples below are pseudonyms. The interviews focused on the students' rationales for educational decisions at various junction points and their choice of a particular educational institution and programme of study. In addition, interviews discussed which symbolic resources (such as books, films and significant others) young people rely upon in making educational and career choices; what plans and aspirations they have for the future; and how the desired level of education would help them realise those.

Relinquishing choice to academic proxies

Our analysis shows that career decision-making logics of our research participants are rooted in a powerful cultural narrative of higher education as a prerequisite to entering the world of work and living a 'good' life. Amidst the uncertainties and challenges associated with future employment, a university degree emerges as a minimal security buffer and a safety vest in the face of a potential crisis. The sub-sections below examine key

semantic components, or the 'elementary grammar' (Smith 2010, 3) of the narrative of higher education, as it emerges from our data.

One's abilities or proclivities (*sklonnosti*) and their manifestation in academic performance are seen by our research participants as the basis for future careers. As a result, career decision-making control and agency is relinquished to academic proxies in the form of school grades and projected USE scores. School grades are treated as 'objective' and 'given', with teenagers having little or no control over them. At the end of compulsory schooling, USE subjects are picked depending on current achievement in school subjects.

The underlying logic in the choice of both university programme and future occupation, therefore, is the likelihood of being admitted to a university with a particular set of USE scores. In fact, when asked about their preferred career option ('Have you thought about your future occupation? Who would you like to become?') our research participants almost invariably proceed to discuss their school grades. Thus, students who are good at physics will look into a broad range of science and engineering specialisations, those who are good at biology and chemistry will consider becoming a medical doctor, while those who excel at social sciences will discuss becoming a librarian or a lawyer. Angelina's (working-class family) and Evgenia's (middle-class family) narrative accounts are illustrative of the over-reliance on school grades/USE scores in the choice of career:

Interviewer (henceforth 'I'): And what are you planning to do after 11th grade?

Participant (henceforth 'P'): To enter a university.

I: Have you already chosen which one?

P: Well, I don't know yet. Everything will depend on how I will do in the exams. I will look at my results and then I will know where to apply. For the moment there are three technical universities where you can apply with USE scores in Physics.

I: And have you already chosen a programme?

P: No, I don't know anything about it at the moment.

I: And so how are you going to choose and when?

P: When I get the results of USE, then I will give it a thought. Now my head is full of other things, the exams themselves.

I: And do you have any ideas about your future job?

P: No, not a single one.

(Angelina, none of the parents have a university degree, high academic performance)

I: How are you going to go about choosing an occupation?

P: As I told you before, I will only get round to it once the Olympiads [equivalent of USE] are over.

I: Sure, but in a practical sense, what are you planning to do? Are you going to look at occupation listings?

P: Well, it will be based on school subjects, (...) whichever I am better at. I will look online and search occupations related to those subjects..

[...]

I: Ok, but aren't there fewer school subjects than occupations?

P: There are fewer [school] subjects and that limits the scope of occupations. [The choice is further limited] by those subjects in which I get a good USE grade. It's those scores that I will use to search for occupations.

(Evgeniya, both parents have a university degree, high performing student)

Professional ambitions and personal interests are only discussed by a few students in this group, and are entirely absent from the accounts of others. Sasha, who is under-performing at most school subjects rationalises his occupational choice in terms of 'what I'm definitely not interested in' vis-à-vis 'what I'm not too bad at':

I: Do you know who you would like to become, have you given it a thought?

P: Well, I am not good at math or chemistry and I am not doing particularly well in Russian and literature, so that leaves me the humanities. A lawyer, I guess, would be the closest..

I: But why did you pick it? Why not another field?

P: I don't know for sure. I don't know any chemistry so I can't be a doctor. Physics is so-so [...] That doesn't leave many [other career options]. Chemistry, I really don't want to deal with. IT - not so much either. Biology ... would probably mean getting a medical degree, it's definitely not for me. Construction? I can't really draw. That leaves me the humanities, I guess.

Sasha (none of the parents have a university degree, low academic performance)

These accounts are often accompanied by a *laissez-faire* attitude of 'whatever happens, happens' and 'things will sort themselves out', with an underlying expectation that the system will make the right decision *for* the individual. The deciding agency is essentially transferred from an individual to an institution, as represented by USE. Individual agency is reduced to 'interpreting' signals from the system: the student receives a final term card listing school grades, signs up to take USE in the subjects with highest grades earned and proceeds to wait for the 'next signal' – USE scores – that will determine their choice of the university programme and future occupation. This decision-making logic leaves little room for engaging with post-industrial narratives of success and failure as resulting from individual motivation, skill, resources, etc., or lack thereof.

There is almost no discussion of such vital aspects of choice as the socialisation role of higher education, institutional quality, quality of academic programme and the cultural capital associated with various occupations. As a rule, teenagers will consider one or more default universities chosen on the basis of proximity to home or ease of admission – the latter usually discussed in terms of 'more realistic/less realistic'. The decision-making logic focuses almost exclusively on access, i.e. 'where I *can* be admitted' rather than 'where I *want* to be admitted'. The choice takes place primarily at the level of an academic programme that research participants are most likely to be admitted to with their projected USE scores, with the issue of university choice coming secondary.

Immediate transition from school to university is the only option discussed by our research participants, with urgency emerging as the key temporal characteristic of the higher education narrative. Any delay in enrolling into a university degree is perceived as risky or even fatal. While many career choice narratives in Western contexts feature cultures of ‘authenticity’, ‘self-discovery’ or following one’s ‘passion’ (James, Mallman, and Midford 2021), our research participants focus exclusively on the traditional school-to-university linear trajectory. High uncertainty about the future, coupled with a lack of individual agency, makes it hard, if possible at all, for young Russians to imagine stepping outside the institutional grid and envision themselves outside of clear societal roles and positions – in this case, not being in either education, employment or training. To our research participants, taking a gap year – an institutionalised opportunity popular in the Anglo-Saxon world (Snee 2014) that allows engaging in reflexive identity building or getting work experience before making a vocational choice – equals to irrevocably ‘missing out’ on life opportunities, or ‘not even existing’.

These findings shed a new light on one puzzling educational trend in Russia – the lack of popularity of the so-called bypass route to higher education – one that is based on obtaining a vocational degree before upgrading to university. The ‘bypass’ route does not require taking USE at all, providing a unique opportunity for lower performing students to ‘slip past the test’ (Yastrebov, Kosyakova, and Kurakin 2018). In reality, only about 8-10% of vocational students, depending on the year, continue to higher education after obtaining a vocational degree (Bogdanov and Malik 2020; Yastrebov, Kosyakova, and Kurakin 2018). The perception of university admission as both urgent and a ‘one-way street’ may be helpful in explaining the unpopularity of this seemingly ‘safe’ and convenient route to higher education.

Cultural re-interpretation of the Unified State Exam

Our findings highlight the complexity of career choice, where cultural scripts are in a constant dynamic culture-specific interplay with educational institutions (Kuipers 2019; Lamont 2019; Silva 2012; Streib 2018; Quinn 2004). Our analysis further suggests that dominant cultural narratives not only are in a mutually supportive relationship with social institutions but that cultural narratives have potential for hijacking and redefining the intended purposes and functions of those institutions. Specifically, our analysis shows how cultural underpinnings of USE – a neoliberal innovation designed as a tool for widening choice and propelling mobility (Francesconi, Slonimczyk, and Yurko 2019) – have symbolically transformed away from the neoliberal towards the Soviet.

The Soviet system of school subjects – often seen as a microcosm of Soviet industries – featured mono-disciplinary subjects such as ‘Physics’, ‘Biology’, ‘Math’, ‘Reading’, ‘Writing’ and ‘Manual Labour’ and was designed to accurately capture the occupational infrastructure typical of the USSR. Grades and abilities were construed as passive outcomes: something ‘given’ and ‘prescribed’ rather than ‘achieved’, while the five-point traditional grading system served to categorise pupils into clear-cut achievement groups: A-students, B-students, C-students, etc. Supported by widely used career personality testing system that determined one’s professional ‘proclivities’ (Klimov 1984), the school grading system was designed to make the career decision *for* the individual.

USE was introduced in the 2000s in the course of neoliberal modernisation of Russian education to specifically redress these Soviet-era testing and assessment legacies (Minina 2010) and to encourage young people to diversify career options and to proactively shape their career pathways. However, as school grades became conflated with projected USE scores, individual agency has been relinquished to test scores and USE scores have come to serve as the main gatekeeper of choice and arbiter of the future. As such, USE effectively internalises the proxy function of Soviet school grades. It becomes a discursive filter that automatically sorts out teenagers into those who are ‘fit’ and ‘unfit’ for higher education as well as steers those who are deemed ‘fit’ towards the ‘right’ occupations. As a neoliberal tool, USE has brought its own career choice paradigm and yet, the symbolic causality of the narrative renders it ‘less neoliberal’, as career choice continues to be experienced in the ‘old’ way and as the Soviet supersedes the neoliberal. The discursive re-interpretation of USE is reinforced by outdated institutions, including the continuing reliance on the Soviet five-point grading system and the absence of an adequate career guidance system in schools, as well as with the high-stakes nature of USE.

Living in the moment versus minimising risks

In practical terms, our analysis identifies two main choice-making strategies. One, adopted by about half of our research participants, is fully embracing uncertainty and keeping one’s options open throughout high school, until USE results are in at the very end of schooling. Teenagers in this group report being reluctant, unwilling or unable to finalise their decisions and plan ahead. Arthur, a high achiever with a middle-class background, discusses ‘living in the moment’:

P: (...) You can’t decide beforehand. You have to judge by the situation, right in the moment, you decide when you absolutely have to decide. Because I can’t predict what the future will bring, so I can’t decide now. All I know is that I will have to decide on this [career choice] some time in the future.

(Arthur, both parents have a university degree, high academic performance)

Igor, also a middle-class student whose academic performance is poor to average, shares Arthur’s logic of living ‘day by day’:

I: How do you see yourself [in the future]?

P: I don’t think about it. I’m trying to live day by day. I mean, I don’t have any specific plans regarding, for example, entering a university, finishing it, buying an apartment and living there.

I: How far ahead do you plan your life?

P: I’m trying not to plan at all and just see how it goes.

Igor (both parents have a university degree, average academic performance)

Other research participants have referred to planning ahead – whether it’s deciding on a preferred study course in advance or planning a move to a different city if admitted to an out-of-town university – as ‘counting one’s chickens before they hatch’. Instead,

teenagers learn to embrace uncertainty through ‘living day by day’, ‘going with the flow’ and ‘taking one step at a time’.

While half of our respondents keep their options open until the very last moment, the other half report downgrading their career choice earlier on as a way of minimising risks and uncertainties. These teenagers opt for a dispreferred option that is more likely to secure access to the desired level of education than their preferred or ‘ideal’ choice. A typical line of reasoning is illustrated below by a quote from Ella:

P: Right after grade 9 [...] I decided to become a philologist. I am good at it and I really like it. [...] Up until grade 11 I was planning to enrol [in a philology programme]. I still wish to do so but alas.. [I am not going to]. It's next to impossible to enrol in a philology program now. You would need to have at least 280 points for the three [USE] exams. [...] So, I decided to try my luck with music instead. It's a safer option.

Ella (both parents have a university degree, high academic achievement)

Many of these teenagers report having a ‘calling’, ‘passion’ or a strong interest in one or another profession but opting for a dispreferred – ‘safer’ – option. The USE is, again, routinely cited as the main ‘objective’ constraint to pursuing the desired occupation of choice, and the risk of failing it or underachieving is not deemed worth taking. Echoing Willis’ (1977) lads, many students explicitly refer to their decision-making strategy as ‘choosing the lesser of evils’ with the sense of fatalism underlying their professional future.

Only a handful of our research participants reported experiencing career choice as striking a balance between personal interests, dispositions, abilities, external circumstances or constraints and labour market trends. In contrast to the majority of our research participants, students sharing this logic were able to discuss in detail the pros and cons of the alternatives considered. Occupational options discussed were construed as a compromise between ‘what I want to do’, ‘what I can do’ and ‘what’s expected of me’. Once the choice is finalised, they work hard towards admission through private tutorship and self-study. All of these students reported having contingency plans in case they get lower than expected USE scores or encounter a personal hardship. They also discussed being willing to downgrade their ambition, as long as they gain university admission immediately upon finishing high school. These students displayed a greater sense of control over one’s life as well as more optimism and higher professional ambition. What enables this agentic disposition remains to be examined on a larger sample.

‘Not ending up jobless’: university degree as a means of basic survival

While higher education is often symbolically associated with a high social status and upward mobility (Bathmaker et al. 2016; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Bradley 2015; Granfield 1991; Lareau 2011; Lehmann 2013; Reay et al. 2009; Spiegler 2018), our research participants tend to view it as merely as a ‘pass’ into the labour market and a means of basic survival. A university degree is seen not as much as a tool for professional self-realisation but as a ‘proof of employability’ and a ‘guarantor’ against future unemployment. Whether it’s failing the USE, falling gravely ill or seeing admissions procedures change overnight due to a new wave of education reforms, ‘things can change in the blink of an eye’ and ‘anything can happen overnight’. In these circumstances, such scenarios as

'not ending up jobless', 'keeping afloat', 'having enough to live on', and 'having a job that is not too annoying' are considered good outcomes. The narrative associated with gaining a higher education degree shifts the focus from what one can *achieve* with it to what pitfalls and disasters it can help *avoid*. Kostya, a high achiever from a middle-class background, discusses:

I: And do you want to choose a field in which you will work in the future right away? Or do you want to get more general education and decide later?

P: I've been thinking about it a lot. There are narrow fields of study and there are wide ones. Both have their pros and cons. I think I will have to see when I pass my exams. Let's say I don't get into a narrow field so I'll have to enter a wide one. Basically, both of these options will work for me. I know that a lot of people work outside their field of studies, so I'm not concerned about it, I shouldn't end up jobless (...).

Kostya (both parents have a university degree, high academic performance)

Illustratively, a lawyer emerges as the most commonly cited 'safe' occupation – one with which a university graduate 'almost certainly would not end up jobless'.

In contrast to Western contexts, where higher education carries the symbolic function of 'status confirmation' for more privileged and aspiring classes (Tomlinson 2008, 51), the highly sought-after higher education degree in Russia is not necessarily seen in terms of class advantage or social mobility. The perceived value of a university degree among our respondents (all of whom, at the time of interview, have opted for enrolling into a university) is essentially the same as that of a vocational degree among working-class youth: being able to get a job and stay on the job in a world where 'any job is better than no job at all' (Minina, Yanbarisova, and Pavlenko 2020). Both university and vocational degrees, therefore, emerge as 'degrees of precariousness' (Themelis 2017). Both embody a sense of fatalism, pessimism about the future and a *laissez-faire* attitude to life choice.

With the issue of access to higher education being of paramount importance, teenagers' notions of chosen professions are vague, schematic and detached from context. Most students report having no or little idea of what their vocation of choice involves: 'not a single one idea' in the quote from Angelina above is all too common. Mastery of subject matter is the most common referent in justifying the choice of a university programme, for example, wanting to become an engineer is justified through 'always having good grades in technical drawing'. A profession is associated with a definitive and measurable skill, such as 'to count', 'to draw', 'to teach', 'to dig', 'to weld', so a manager 'manages', an economist 'makes calculations', an engineer 'draws graphs', etc. Unless a teenager can easily box a specific skillset taught within a particular academic programme, they cannot clearly see the value of the degree on the job market. As a result, most research participants discuss a rather limited scope of occupations associated with school subjects and tend to overlook or devalue interdisciplinary fields and professions.

Our findings suggest that the symbolic logics of choice-making inherited from the Soviet school-to-work transition contribute to limiting, rather than widening, young people's career choice. The dominant cultural narrative of a university degree as a 'must-have at all costs' marginalises alternative narratives of the future and life trajectory

and narrows the scope of occupations considered, with the focus of decision-making shifting from occupational diversity and opportunity to constraints and barriers. The reconstruction of the cultural narrative reveals a paradoxical social situation where higher education is effectively no longer a socio-economic necessity but continues to be perceived as an imperative that informs and subjugates young people's career choice. A university degree emerges not as means to improve one's life chances but as access to a very basic quality of life. Blind faith in higher education as a 'guarantee against future unemployment' prompts young people to abandon what they perceive to be their true vocational calling or preferred occupation and to routinely enrol in less suitable or less competitive programmes, choosing 'the lesser of evils' for the sake of gaining immediate access to higher education. Enrolling in an undesired or a less preferred study programme is normalised as a 'common-sense' sacrifice. The narrative serves as a powerful cognitive filter for envisioning one's future career, sidelining some crucial considerations, such as personal interests and dreams, institutional quality, labour market trends, as well as the distinction between the university and the academic programme.

Implications and suggestions for future research

The cultural sociology perspective employed in this paper offers insights that bear implications for a number of adjacent disciplines, including youth studies, studies of inequality, neoliberal globalisation of education, high-stakes testing, higher education and career guidance. Through the examination of educational decision-making outside the Global North, our findings contribute to sociological literature that explores various, sometimes contradictory, roles of cultural meanings in the reproduction of social inequality (Lareau 2011; Patterson and Fosse 2015; Silva and Corse 2018; Streib 2018). Drawing on the 'cultural autonomy' thesis, we demonstrate how the outdated narrative of a university degree as a 'must-have at all costs' hijacks and subjugates decision-making logics. Our findings feed into and extend the literature arguing that middle-class narratives do not necessarily propel social mobility but may, in fact, serve to limit career and life opportunities by marginalising individual and class considerations and preferences (Atkins 2010; Dhingra 2020; Patterson and Fosse 2015; Silva and Corse 2018). We further contribute to widening the application of the cultural narrative lens to new empirical realms – educational decision-making – as well as to theorising the concept by demonstrating how narratives inform the interpretation and use of social institutions – sometimes in ways that are the opposite of those intended by policy-makers. Our findings invite further examination of the interplay between structural and symbolic dimensions of educational institutions, in particular in complex hybrid labour markets and economy types, represented by post-Soviet Russia.

As for neoliberal expansion in education, our findings speak to policy borrowing and path dependency research that theorises education reform policies and practices in terms of 'assemblage' of domestic culture codes and borrowed neoliberal meanings. Grassroots cultural reinterpretations of neoliberal innovations in education have produced phenomena that are described in terms such as 'doublethink' (Hardy and Lewis 2017; as cited in Gurova and Piattoeva 2018) and 'schizophrenia' (Blackmore and Sachs 1997; as cited in Ball 2003), indicating the curious ways in which neoliberal educational messages become reinterpreted and adapted by its end users. We contribute to this

body of research by providing an initial insight into how social meanings of neoliberal education governance become fused with those of Soviet-era educational sensibilities. In this respect, cultural sociology also offers an important perspective for the literature on the global testing culture. In addition to performance indicators, comparative rankings, teacher accountability and teacher practices, grassroots socio-cultural meanings attached to high-stakes testing warrants further scholarly attention.

From the perspective of career guidance, our empirical findings highlight low awareness of the professional world, poor understanding of the nature of the chosen careers, and little agency and reflexivity in career-making choices among Russian high-school students going into higher education. There is an acute shortage of instruments, available to young people, for decision-making and advance planning in the context of labour market and life uncertainty that characterise 'risk societies'. Studies of career choice in other national contexts, for example, Silva and Corse (2018) in the US, Laughland-Booÿ, Mayall, and Skrbiš (2015) in Australia, Bathmaker et al. (2016) in the UK, Vulperhorst, van der Rijst, and Akkerman (2020) in the Netherlands, and Holmegaard, Ulriksen, and Madsen (2014) in Denmark, document a much wider range of decision-making factors considered, including strategic utility, university reputation, college rankings, tuition costs, institutional quality, quality of campus life, industry linkages, access to facilities, and many others. While there are cultural variations to dominant decision-making paradigms – for example, some may centre around personal interests (Pinxten et al. 2015), while others – on identity construction (Holmegaard, Ulriksen, and Madsen 2014) – these cross-cultural studies report a much more dynamic decision-making process than the one emerging from our data. Career decision-making behaviour of our research participants appears much less individualised and more rooted in collective beliefs and expectations. At the same time, increasing uncertainty in educational and career trajectories and a lack of decision-making skills is a well-documented global trend (Blossfeld et al. 2005; Heinz 2009; Silva 2012; Themelis 2017). Our analysis supports the growing concern that teenagers may be unprepared to deal with such high-stake decisions as career choice (Chiesa, Massei, and Guglielmi 2016; Hammond, Ralph, and Raiffa 2015; Kim et al. 2015; OECD 2018; Vignoli 2015) and calls for the provision of up-to-date career counselling and decision-making support in schools. Finally, further research is needed into which symbolic resources – whether they are transmitted through figures of authority, including relatives, teachers and significant peers, the mass culture or class subcultures – enable the internatisation of the 'agentic self' (Silva and Corse 2018) and a more reflexive career choice displayed by a few students in our sample.

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