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'We don't have any limits': Russian young adult life narratives through a social generations lens

Darcie Vandegrift*

Department for the Study of Culture & Society, Drake University, Des Moines, IA, USA

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A social generation framework attends to how emergent historical patterns of social organization shape young adult contemporaries, noting shared strategies to constructing subjectivity within a common political, social, and economic milieu. However, the perspective has given scant attention to how young people engage in reflexive life management outside of well-documented Western contexts. Additionally, the framework needs further consideration of how youth lives are shaped by the social relations of globalization. To address these omissions, this article examines how educated, urban Russian young adults engage in reflexive life management. In drawing on a social generations rather than transitions approach, youth meaning-making is analyzed through grounded analysis rather than reliance on previously conceived categories. The study of youth reflexive life management can be reframed as a question: 'what does making a life mean to educated urban post-adolescents in Russia?' We explore how respondents interpret difference and inequality through transnational comparisons, center globality in the biographical project, and encounter citizenship constraints. We focus on three meaning-making projects: idealized globality, assuming nonlinear paths, and vigilant evaluative work.

Keywords: social generations; globalization and identity; reflexive life management; Russia; young adulthood; youth

Recent youth sociology scholarship bridges cultural and structural approaches to emphasize how young people 'renegotiate core values in ways that promote reflexive life management and the framing of life as an ongoing project largely devoid of explicit markers' (Furlong, Woodman, and Wynn 2011, 362; Woodman and Bennett 2015). Social generations theory focuses on subjectivity in context to avoid ahistorical interpretations that assume outdated social conditions (Furlong, Woodman, and Wyn 2011, 367; see also Wyn and Woodman 2006). Youth share common interpretative strategies as they are 'endowed with a common location in the historical dimension of the social process' (Mannheim 1952, 290; Pilcher 1994). Drawing attention to 'the salient issues, and means of taking action, within a particular social generation' (Wyn and Woodman 2006, 373), the approach gives attention to emergent historical patterns of social organization, noting shared strategies young people use toward reflexive life management within their political, social, and economic milieu.

Social generations perspectives, while paying close attention to temporal aspects, require deeper theorization of space and place. Social generations theory lacks ample consideration of youth outside of the West (Vandegrift 2015; Nilan 2011). Increased empirical attention to non-Western cases corrects the tendency of youth studies to 'other' non-Western youth (Roberts 2009) and provides a more in-depth understanding of the

*Email: darcie.vandegrift@drake.edu

dynamics of reflexive life management. Second, generations are often theorized as nationally bounded, with scant attention to shared experiences of youth across contexts (Nilan 2011) or how globality, the social conditions fostered by global flows and interconnections (Steger 2005), informs the reflexive life management that characterizes contemporary youth lives. To address these current shortcomings, this article explores the life narratives of urban educated Russian post-adolescents through a social generations framework. In addition to building on an emergent paradigm, the article highlights insights to be gained from a divergence from the transitions approach that is so prevalent in Russian youth sociology.

Russian youth lives: beyond the transitions paradigm(s)

Russian youth studies grapple with two theoretical paradigms involving transitions, one which frames the sociopolitical context as a transition from Soviet to post-Soviet and another concerned with explaining how young people navigate their way to 'adult' roles of work, education, family, and subjectivity. Post-Soviet social science has challenged the continued usefulness of talking about Russia in terms of 'transitions' (Carothers 2002; Aage 2005; Gans-Morse 2004) because the term 'transitional' fails to capture the actual, ongoing political, social, and economic context of the time (Carothers 2002). Mijnssen and Perović (2014), writing on Russian youth politics, suggests that the term *dislocation,* or the 'unfixity' of identities that occurs with the collapse of a hegemonic discourse (Laclau and Mouffe 2001), more accurately describes the post-Soviet period in Russia. In this article, we consider how a departure from the frequently used transitions framework in youth studies might also helpfully explore issues of unfixity and dislocation experienced by youth in recent decades.

Diverging from the transitions framework most often used in scholarship about post-Soviet Russian youth (Roberts 2009; Roberts and Pollock 2009; Roberts et al. 2003; Walker 2012, 2007; Walker and Stephenson 2010), we highlight how young people approach the biographic project of making a life rather than assessing whether or not their reflexive life management practices will reach predetermined end points. Transitions perspectives underscore how social structure limits opportunities in an anticipated journey from child to adult (Pollock 2008), including school to work (Walker 2007, 2009) and birth family to independent living (Pollock 2008; Roberts 2009). Continuity with the past is a central feature of this work, how previous forms of social inequality are reproduced as well as the continued importance of familial (Tomanovic and Ignjatovic 2006) and state mechanisms (Roberts 2009) on young people's transitional pathways. 'Old dependencies and traditional modalities' (Walker and Stephenson 2010, 530) are emphasized in the transitions perspective.

As valuable as these findings are, they often give less attention to what happens when young people themselves articulate subjectivities that diverge from the transitions framework. Their perspectives may become minimalized in efforts to highlight 'the contrast between individual narratives of mobility and wider patterns of stratification' (Walker 2014, 15). What youth themselves think or do – a key component in understanding the relationship between individuals and society – is undervalued in the emphasis on the reproduction of inequality. Expanding understanding of post-Soviet youth would benefit from the new questions posed by the social generations framework.

Youth subcultural practice comprises another central area of inquiry in the sociology of Russian youth. Pilkington et al. (2002) contribute to the subcultural tradition of youth

sociology to problematize Western assumptions about globalization and youth culture. Russian young people enact complex relationships to the West through Russian youth culture, negotiating the legacy of Soviet ideology, the organizing practices of cultural globalization, and the proliferation of indigenous youth cultural practice at a local level. We turn this attention on cultural practice to analyze how young adults draw from global cultural repertoires and values to navigate issues of difference and inequality (see Patico 2005, 489). The attention to lived practices that form the methodological foundation of subculture studies turns here to the meaning-making that young people do as they manage their life projects, which include school, work, housing, relationships, and consumption. In the focus on this narrative act, a social generations lens integrates considerations of cultural practice with structural constraints and opportunities to examine how, in a Russian context, young adults assemble and imagine their future in a globalized context. It offers the possibility of identifying 'new markers' of adulthood (Wyn and Woodman 2007, 375) as well as new subject positions youth construct and inhabit. Rather than drawing from previously conceived categories, reflexive life management can be reframed as a question: 'what does making a life mean to university educated Russian young adults? ' We explore how respondents deploy globalized cultural logics to interpret difference and inequality, center globality in the biographical project, and encounter citizenship constraints. We focus on how youth organized life narratives through three meaning-making projects: idealized globality, assuming nonlinear paths, and vigilant evaluative work.

Social generations in Western contexts

Youth sociology has identified a set of shared circumstances across Western contexts. Post-secondary education has become a mass experience; young people in the industrialized West spend more time in tertiary education than in past (Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley 2009). The pathway through university to stable work is no longer a given, with new divisions emerging between elite and low-status institutions (Furlong and Cartmel 2009). Globally, and in contrast to earlier generations, women pursue post-secondary education at higher rates than men, constituting the majority on many campuses (see review in Becker, Hubbard, and Murphy 2010). Educated young adults, rather than occupying a position of unmediated privilege, experience the anxiety of uncertain economic location (Brown 1995). Work and learning comprise a double field rather than a serial endeavor (Du Bois-Reymond 1998). In the labor market, a bifurcated set of circumstances shape youth experiences with work. The knowledge economy offers new possibilities, while the expansion of the service economy creates more jobs with erratic hours and low wages. Combined with shifted temporal structures that must be newly managed (Woodman 2010), new forms of civic participation (Vinken 2007), activism, and online sociality have impacted how youth participate in politics (Harris 2008) and interact with friends and family (Lehdonvirta and Rasanen 2011). These conditions are rarely identified as specific to the West; however, they assume a set of conditions that are spatially located, not universal. In addition to changes across time, differences in national contexts present varying 'risk and chance conditions' (Du Bois-Reymond 1998, 77). Attention to Russian and Global South youth experiences of economic, social, and political change challenges troubling assumptions that all societies (and all youth) 'evolve' toward a single endpoint or historical progression (Gans-Morse 2004, 321).

Russian neoliberalism through a social generation framework

Post-Soviet youth in this study experienced similar conditions, but at a more accelerated pace (Yurchak 2003). Russian neoliberalism fundamentally shifted the relationship of young citizens to the economy and the state during the 1990s (Markowitz 2000). Economically, Russian youth born between 1975 and 1990 lived the whiplash macro-level transitions from centralized planning to market economy. During the 1990s, when young people interviewed for this study were 10–24 years old, social and economic stressors created difficult living circumstances. Food shortages, poverty, increased inequality, and economic contraction emerged amidst elimination of government services and a 'large-scale and ruthlessly hazardous economic adventure policy' of privatization (Aage 2005, 4). The state 'shed its responsibility for the socialization of youth' (Mijnssen and Perović 2014, 34), and these shifted to the liberalization and privatization of care for young citizens (Blum 2007). Families and youth assumed increased management of myriad risks and microsocial responsibilities including procurement of housing (Mijnssen and Perović 2014, 32–34), fill of leisure time (Pilkington 1994), and creation of elaborate informal economic networks to replace monetary exchange (Ledeneva 2006).

These shifts had particular impacts for young people as a generation. They experienced heightened risk and found private ways of managing this risk (Pichler and Wallace 2007). Chaotic, non-normative experiences of finding a job replaced previously standardized paths (Walker 2009); unemployment and informal economic work both increased. Old social identities around class fell into disuse; new class identities had not clearly emerged (Salmenniemi 2012). Navigating individualization processes (Walker 2009) and engaging globalized culture (Pilkington et al. 2002) changed young people's experiences of finding work, making friends, pursuing education, and engaging in civic participation (Omel'chenko and Pilkington 2006). Young people navigated these parts of their lives in the context of globalized culture, market-based distribution, and class inequality (Pilkington et al. 2002; Roberts 2009, Walker and Stephenson 2010). The ideal neoliberal economic subject – triumphing in the market through individual effort and unfettered by obligations to the common good – emerged gradually in the West; Russians lived this initial transition over a few short years (Yurchak 2003). Rather than a 'transitional' period, the impacts of neoliberalizing processes continued in flux and contingent (Carothers 2002).

Methods

Twenty life narratives were completed with English-speaking undergraduate and graduate university students. Each had passed competitive entrance examinations to attend highly ranked universities. All but one had attended or graduated from these schools. The respondents did not have children (n = 20), had not yet found postgraduate employment (n = 16) or worked multiple jobs but lacked stable full employment (n = 3), and did not have nor had ever had a long-term partner or spouse (n = 18). Sixteen lived at home exclusively or combined with part-time student housing.

The interview data-set is a cohort of 20 young adults, aged 18–35 in 2004 and 2005. The oldest, born in the late 1970s, experienced their adolescent years amidst the turmoil of the 1990s transition after being educated in the Soviet system. The youngest, born in 1986, had personal experience with only the post-Soviet transitional period. Despite these significant differences, respondents' age range resembles the post-adolescent age

delineation used by the Russian National Youth Strategy (Ohana 2008) and the All-Russian Center for the Research into Public Opinion's youth surveys (Diuk 2012, 187).

Interview participants were recruited through snowball sampling through a summer linguistic institute in St. Petersburg. All spoke exceptional English, having passed a proficiency exam to be eligible to participate in the Institute. At the time, a systematic survey noted that 44.7% of Russian youth reported speaking English (Diuk 2012, 149), but the study's respondents held very high levels of professional fluency. Research on English language use during this period suggests that the level of command exhibited by respondents would confer status and prestige (Ustinova 2005), even though the respondents reported difficulty finding employment and often relied on informal sector part-time jobs to support themselves. Respondents participated in open-ended interviews oriented toward a life-history approach (Cole and Knowles 2001; Goodson 1995; Wengraf 2001) which lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours.

Their narratives detailed examples of processes of reflexive life management: how they made decisions, their perspectives on their families, comparisons with older generations, and cultural touchstones to illustrate what they considered typical of Russian society. I asked interview participants to relate stories (Kvale 1996) about educational and economic histories and the most important events that had happened to them and their family. My social location as a non-Russian university professor in her early 30s undoubtedly shaped the tenor of these conversations. I lacked the deeper experiential and cultural understanding of the Soviet era, Perestroika, and the tumultuous transition to market capitalism that would be well-understood by a Russian sociologist. At the same time, my outsider social location meant that informants spent considerable effort explaining their lives so a stranger might understand, speaking in detail and with a feeling of expert status that they might not have felt with an older Russian academic or foreigner with extensive ties.

This study was informed by Du Bois-Reymond's call (1998, 76) to identify the 'compound of values, expectations and attitudes' used by 'post-adolescents' to narrate their futures. I noted themes common across multiple interviews in the data-set, and considered them in comparison to key themes in Western youth studies and scholarship on Russian youth. Grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1990) allowed posing young people's meaning-making practices *as a question* rather than drawing from pre-assumed set of markers.

Three meaning-making projects

Idealized globality: an important imaginative marker for reflexive life management

Social generations perspectives frequently consider young people as a bounded cohort within a national territory. We examine how they imagined themselves as part of a global community. Global identities served as 'imaginative markers.' Within narratives of globalized selves, national identity was discursively constructed through difference, processual and constantly changing in order to make sense of experience (Hall 1997). Descriptions and comparisons to other locations served to interpret difference and inequality in life projects.

Respondents developed a grammar of inclusion and desire through consumption of Western cultural commodities such as cinema and fashion (Pilkington et al. 2002; Pyšňáková and Miles 2010). They described aspirations to travel to the West. Some had been offered funding for study-abroad in Europe and the USA. Others, having limited

economic opportunity in Russia (Man'shin, Timoshenko, and Pis'mennaia 2009), responded to street advertisements and online solicitations for recruitment to temporary youth-oriented (low-paid service) employment. They interacted with global others frequently through online interaction, mostly initiated in Internet cafes. As one informant remarked;

> I do believe that most of Russian citizens have never … thought about being anywhere else. But, my personal experience tells me absolutely different things because I mostly read and communicate with people of different attitudes towards things. From everywhere.

For young people who faced financial and citizenship constraints to travel, the Internet offered an online global imaginative framework to understand daily life.

Interviewees believed in the transformative potential of globalized human interaction. Young adults who could not afford to travel expressed similar ideas to those who had been to the West. Yuliya was a 29-year-old doctoral student in English who taught in university and strongly desired to travel. She explained, 'I can't leave the country. I'm very limited, you know. I have no money.' She avidly participated in online discussions about English-language novels and sought all possible interactions with international visitors to St. Petersburg. She believed that a global orientation created important connections of which she was a part:

> I think we have to think of globalization as uniting many people. We all belong to one and the same place. We are not separate nations but we live on one planet and we should understand it and should understand each other, and a person of any nationality, of any country, we should work somehow together to improve our life. But you can't do it separately, everyone separately, but we should work together within the world.

Yuliya advocated for the political, communicative, and economic potential of global integration, even as she herself had not been able to go abroad. The interactive possibilities of online exchange offered connections and expressions of sameness in contrast to the hyperindividualization experienced in everyday life. Even if immediate surroundings did not offer social mobility or like-minded peers, these possibilities existed online.

Affluent respondents imagined themselves traveling frequently in the future. This marked for them a key generational difference, a tool for identity construction not possible for their parents. Ivan, 19 years old, expected to go abroad for enlightenment as well as educational opportunity:

> For example, as I am a student now, I have an opportunity to go to other countries to get some education there. So, maybe in future, I'll go to Germany or Italy, I don't know where. It's a great opportunity to think. Many before have done it … So, as for me as an individual, I think the biggest change [from my parents] for me is that I can learn many things from abroad. I can maybe have some examples for me and follow these examples.

Ivan and Yuliya pursued exposure to non-Russian literature and travel as 'examples' or inspiration for 'life improvement.'

A repertoire of global tropes emerged within the narratives. Through them, young adults analyzed their lives and contemporary Russia. In some cases, Russia was imagined as a parody or a student of the West. In other instances, their country was theorized as a

competitor with other nations (Roberts and Pollock 2009, 595). Comparative imaginative meanings explored anxiety about Russia's economic stability. Marina, 32, a graduate student waiting on her visa to attend a US Ph.D. program, desired to live permanently in Russia. But she worried about its geopolitical and economic location:

> In Asia, people are working for four dollars a month in wages. And the factory is closing there, because it's cheaper to have a factory someplace else … I'm wondering if Russia might be one of the certain countries, where are we moving? Are we going to be one of the eight great countries or where we are? Will I be able to work like a professor in Europe, or will I be translating and teaching English to children forever?

Marina had experienced a range of anxieties distinct from counterparts in much of the Global North. Russian citizenship limited her access to the world beyond its borders, despite offers of scholarships and opportunities. Her visa to continue study in the USA was delayed, making her own mobility aspirations contingent on the bi-lateral relations of her state with a sometimes antagonistic nation. Russia's place in global national hierarchies felt extremely uncertain. Russian young adults analyzed circumstances in a context 'characterised by the globalisation of cultural and economic flows and the dominance of market-based forms of social organization which reach[ed] beyond the edges of Western Europe' (Walker and Stephenson 2010, 522). Even as she sought global opportunities and saw them as desirable, Marina encountered unique constraints as a Russian national.

Some respondents rejected national identity, distancing themselves from mainstream Russian opinion. The self in relationship to a backwards Russian other demarcated values and life plans, combining politics (anti-nationalism) with an outward orientation (Pilkington et al. 2002). Valeriya, a 21-year-old social sciences student, ridiculed pride in national identity:

> I'm a great mix. I'm a global girl … Because any form of nationalism in issues of identity is just a means used by stupid people, so to say mentally constrained, and they are not able to make their opinions on the base of their education, social experience or anything. That's why they need a Russian identity.

Anastasiya, 29, concurred, asserting that patriotism was irrational, like taking pride in any characteristic that happened merely by chance:

> In terms of culture clearly [people from different nations] will be much closer. Which in reality is a good thing. Because now it's for some to say, *I'm Russian and I'm proud.* That's like saying, 'I'm proud of being Russian' or being American, or being whatever, is like saying 'I'm proud to been born on a Wednesday, or a Thursday, or a Tuesday.'

The three respondents offered different comparative framings of what it meant to be Russian – one fearful for the national economy, the others casting-off ties to national identity. Despite these variations, global relations of difference informed all of their understandings. Each considered self and nation in comparison to places beyond national borders. Anastasiya and Valeriya believed their perspectives marked them as distinct – and superior – from the Russian youth majority. They distanced themselves from Russians they felt were trapped in the vestiges of national identity, imagining such allegiances as a choice that rationally should be rejected.

Perceptions of Western Europe assisted respondents to interpret their own locatedness in Russian society. Olga, a 23-year-old linguistics major, first described Russian young women as 'too fashionable,' lampooning their tendency to exaggerate Western styles. In Western fashion 'they wear simple clothes.' Then, Olga broadened her narrative to the country as a whole:

> I think that Russia's kind of a parody of the rest of the world. We have the same notion, and we are somehow exaggerated. They [think they] can somehow integrate it with our Russian mentality, and they've gone wrong. Because what you have in the West, it's all kind of right, but here these ideas have all sort of collapsed. They don't fit too much in this system.

Valeriya expressed more connection with a global community than with Russians. She positions herself as a particular kind of subject through her participation in global consumer circuits (Pyšňáková and Miles 2010). Such acts of 'self-peripheralization' (Liechty 1995) evoked and critiqued an imaginary Western standard desired for Russia, contrasting with previous research in which globally aware Russians rejected the framing of Russia as peripheral (Pilkington et al. 2002). Respondents imagined their futures through narratives that drew from temporal contrasts but also spatially based imaginative markers of social difference.

Staking identity claims with globality over nationalism, youth positioned themselves with affluent, mobile global elite instead of an economically and ideologically stymied national other. Notably, this occurred even when such positioning ran counter to actual economic possibility. They experienced constraint from the realities of global national hierarchies. Russian youth, encountering economic and citizenship limits, could not access consumption and mobility in the same ways as Western counterparts. Respondents actively contrasted themselves to older, rural, and poorer Russians who were perceived as stuck in old patterns of allegiance and exchange. They understood themselves as part of a transnational cohort, oriented to economic and cultural fields unfettered by national borders. This coincides with what Pilkington et al. (2002) found as the position of 'progressives' youth, who embraced a global horizon and 'looked outward' as a strategy of cultural practice. They drew from global repertoires to construct – and distance themselves – from how they viewed Russian society as well as the perspectives of an older generation. Global comparisons and transnational contexts served as imaginative markers. The social generations paradigm often constructs youth lives as nationally bounded (both in terms of mobility and reflexive life management) or else as a dichotomy of mobile/migrant vs. situated/place-embedded. The present article's data indicate a collapse of these divisions, invoking consideration of how globality shapes young people's lives in myriad ways.

Assuming nonlinear paths to embrace or manage risk

Young adults created biographic projects in this data-set that embraced or accommodated nonlinear paths of residency, work, school, and relationships (Dwyer and Wyn 2001; Wyn and White 2000). Their perspectives did not track to stable adult roles, but rather optimism and/or acceptance of searching for one's place, creating a life project (Du Bois-Reymond 1998), and managing risk (Beck 1992). Unemployment, a denied visa application, and harassment by corrupt state officials were realities that they or their acquaintances personally experienced. Narratives indicated reflexive life management

practices that in many ways looked similar to Western counterparts, but in situations of deeper constraints.

Amidst seemingly invisible market and state processes, educated young adults relied on personal resources not only because they were required to do so (Kelly 2006) but also because such narratives allowed them to ride the paradox of constraint coupled with possibility (Woodman 2009). Participants had expansive lists of potential dangers that they needed to manage alone, including economic risk, friendships, and food safety, without expectation of institutional support to regulate or provide guidance. Their life narratives blamed individuals for 'wrong choices' (Walker 2009). In addition, however, these relatively privileged young adults expected and had experienced benefits from assuming risk: future success would be self-authored. David, a 19-year-old business major, described his hopes for the future, focusing on the importance of his own economic prosperity.

> In my life, I judge everything up to me. You know, now my level of life is rather good. I have enough money for my, you know, my extra money. My father has a car. He has a wonderful work. So, I'm satisfied with my nowaday position.

David used his and his family's personal financial situation to evaluate his happiness and life satisfaction, and this success depended on individual effort. His optimism surely stemmed in part from safety provided by his family's affluence, but even more economically vulnerable young adults in the study held such optimism. Yuliya, the entry-level English professor, described the economic risks she faced alone, but calculated she had an 'eighty percent chance of success':

> It's up to me. Because if I continue to earn money like this, if nothing happens to my health and to my mom, then I will have the money to buy a flat. Within a year, everything will be settled. I can live in the flat and then I'll have more opportunity to participate in some more important things.

Reflexive life management in these circumstances required young adults to autonomously evaluate circumstances. Using the correct cost–benefit calculations, she or he hoped to overcome obstacles and create an economically secure life.

Diana, a 23-year-old sociology student, explained the transitions of the past two decades as an emergent list of available freedoms, including mobility, open-speaking, and a feeling of limitlessness:

> So, if to set aside all those political things and just to look directly at what's going on in our life, then there are some simple things. We can buy what we want. We can go wherever we want. We can actually speak about different things. My generation, I don't feel any limits set … Now we are existing in a polarized spheres. People are on their own, and government and those other people somehow connected to the government are on their own.

Natalya, 29, furthered the idea of being on one's own, explaining that her generation understood the shift away from the Soviet social contract:

> Now we don't have those illusions that people used to have soon after the crash because it was really hard to shift from their state that we used to have to a new state. [B]ut my generation, we are already used to this new system *that the state is not going to provide us anything. We have to just to do it on our own*. So, we don't have those illusions that our

> parents or the generation before them use to have. We are a completely new generation. [Italics in quotes added]

In seeing themselves as a 'completely new generation,' the defining feature was a belief in self-authorship – that the individual himself or herself held responsibility for success as well as risk-avoidance. Larisa, a 27-year-old psychology graduate student, believed that she alone controlled the success or failure of her work trajectory, 'I think I have control over my career. If I don't achieve something, I know that it is *entirely my fault* in terms that *I didn't manage it*.'

The circumstances of living in Russia contoured the opportunities and constraints encountered in the self-management project. These conditions were different than in Western contexts. Risk levels in Russia were high for even these aspiring youth, evidenced in the lack of sociolegal protections, poor health outcomes, and limited employment options (Zubok 2005). Meaning-making projects included an awareness of constraints (Walker 2014) along with, paradoxically, the belief in potential of self-actualization. They recognized their strategy as generational; the post-Soviet context offered pleasures and possibilities unavailable to their parents' generation. This required working and studying at the same time, riding the paradox of, for example, pursuing global travel while living with parents.

Among this sample of well-educated youth, myriad traumas occurred almost unheard of among similar Western young adults. Alonya's father was arbitrarily imprisoned, the family finding out only when prison staff called from the father's cell phone, demanding payment. The denial of travel documents delayed Marina's lifelong ambitions. As they tried to create a life project, their social location as Russians added dimensions to their experiences of risk, self-authorship, and individualization.

Vigilant evaluative approach: extending cost–benefit analysis beyond consumption

Interview participants managed their lives and life projects using a cost–benefit approach that they justified as appropriate given the flexible, contingent, and risk-saturated context. Their narratives elaborated carefully weighed possibilities and uncertainties, taking no decision as 'given' or 'natural.' Spanning beyond the realm of economic decisions, they negotiated possibility and constraint in everything from friendships to food choices to courses of study.

Youth subjected educational and employment decisions to cost–benefit analysis. Their calculations responded to the nonlinear experiences that combined school and work. Many worked multiple, informal economy jobs, such as English tutor or tour guide (Morris and Polese 2013). Would the time and money spent in pursuit of a particular degree be worth the effort? Diana, 23, argued that the benefit for much advanced education was not worth the cost:

> Just speaking about salaries, [some jobs] we [won't] do it because it won't pay off. For example, the service sector when you have to be a waiter, or a shop assistant, you could earn more than if you were some specialist with a diploma. Because doctors earn less than waitresses. So, my friends, people with the diplomas in fields like psychology … find that it is not worth the trouble. Some really good friends with diplomas, I mean, they can't afford to go into the sphere they would like to. They have to go and earn money where they don't want to, as a waitress or selling something in the underground [shops in the subway tunnels].

Such logic drew from knowledge of the Soviet context, while also acknowledging that informal employment and underemployment were becoming ongoing features of post-Soviet neoliberal livelihoods (Morris and Polese 2013, 4). Aspiring young adults valued 'pragmatism' as an important element for successful navigation of economic terrain. Highly educated young adults, even as they said that their future depended solely on individual effort, calculated which educational credentials would move them toward sustainable employment options.

Alyona, a 22-year-old psychology student, explained that friendships should not be loyalties that inhibit opportunity, which she interpreted as a departure from previous generations:

> If you can get some job, and your friend wants the job … If I were the girl of my father's generation, I would have wanted to save that job for my friend. But me personally, I won't. Because what for and why should I? Because I have the same qualifications. I have the same qualities or even better ones. I can do this job. Why should I give it away? So, things like that. Of course, we are [not], should I say, romantic or anything. We are much more pragmatic. So, this was the difference between my father's life and then my own life.

In contrast, Larisa, 27, criticized Russian society for a lack of concern for the other, with a preoccupation for making money eclipsing personal relationships. Unlike Alyona, Elena held personal experiences recalled from Soviet Russia:

> Maybe it's just an illusion … it seems to me that people used to be more friendly. They were more open to each other, and you could go with your problems to your friends. And they'd help you. And now the key word is 'it's your problem'. I'm not interested. I'm engrossed in my own stuff, and I don't want to. I don't want to feel it, I don't want a connection. And people are more concentrated on their business and their career and a lot of old ties are broken. A lot of people say that they're broken because they were artificial and imposed, they were not natural. I don't feel that way. I think that people are changing because the social and political situation is influencing them. Young people, at the same time, are creating the situation. I don't really know which comes first.

Unlike Alyona's unconflicted prioritization of work over personal relationships, Larisa's wistful comparison of past and present expressed longing for the past. Both recognized how youth placed career interests over personal ties in the mid-2000s, but the older Larisa was more skeptical. These findings diverge significantly from the retraditionalization argument in post-Soviet youth studies. While previous findings document importance of the security of personal networks in Soviet (*blat, see* Ledeneva 1998; Michailova and Worm 2003) and post-Soviet times (Markowitz 1999; Pichler and Wallace 2007), respondents in this study did not frame these relationships as important social capital. Highly pragmatic and individualistic approaches to navigating relationships emerged in interviews. This encourages research about how young adults talk about relationships and social ties, rather than assuming meanings from previously existing eras.

While the compulsion to choose is often framed primarily in terms of 'significant personal suffering' (Walker and Stephenson 2010), the young adults in this study analyzed choice in terms of generational difference. For example, Dasha, age 23, answered my question about the disadvantages of growing up in a post-Soviet Russia compared with previous generations. She emphasized opportunity and possibility:

> No, I don't think are disadvantages [to my life compared to my parents.]. Maybe there are some, like because when they are like growing up, ready to know their place, their life was more chosen already, planned. My life is more erratic than their life. But I like it. I think my life is better, I think. I don't really think about it much, I think I have developed a new character of myself, so now I'm really calm to everything that happens to me or other people. I think if you, the main thing for you decide what you want in life, you just go with your dreams and you'll get everything that you want. Especially if you know what you want.

A transitions framework that focuses on the extent and ease of moving from school to work might analyze Dasha's narrative as naive, privileged, overly simplified. However, the interpretative possibilities of a social generations framework highlights the meaning-making projects at work as young people navigate a new context. Dasha valued developing her character, being calm in the face of trauma, and the importance of dreams. While Dasha might or might not have what transitions-lens analysis might want for her – in terms of material success, a stable job, or independent living – we can also raise the question of *by what set of values and practices did young adults in the mid-2000s (and today) determine what it was they wanted?* In posing these questions in the Russian context, the West is decentered as a presumed neutral set of values, practices, and circumstances.

Conclusion: social generations, local contexts, and young adult reflexive life management in Russia

With a social generations lens, youth life projects can be contextualized and compared without imposing preexisting 'ideal transitions' or assuming ahistorical conditions. In listening to meanings and life projects (Du Bois-Reymond 1998), new questions arise that would benefit from further exploration: namely, the marketization of social relationships, emerging beliefs about social ties, and how the global imaginary shapes life choices. The article's data suggest the importance of broadening consideration of non-Western contexts and of place and globality in social generations theory.

The growth of the middle class in the Global South, the development of new state-citizen relations, and the non-Western demographics of large youth populations justify increased comparative work and consideration of globality in youth studies. Nation and space shape youth lives, requiring that we decenter the West as a neutral or normalized space from which to understand young people's meaning-making. All young people's lives are shaped by neoliberal globalization. Reflexive life management is informed by the imaginative markers presented by globality.

This attention to the specificities of space and globality parallels social generations' cogent critique of ahistoricity (Furlong, Woodman, and Wyn 2011). Young people's talk about their social relations embedded in globality demonstrates how historical economic and social milieau cross national boundaries. Educated urban young adults sought to share traits with the 'winners' (Lash 1994, 124) of globalization: globally oriented, self-authored, market-calculating. Cosmopolitan global comparisons of cultures and institutions become central points of reference to understand daily experience (Trubina 2012).

It is hoped that this exploration of Russian young adults outside of a transitions framework will spur continued inquiry through a fresh lens. This article invites comparisons with life narratives of earlier or later Russian youth cohorts to examine

how young adult reflexive life management has shifted with changing contexts. These include state discourses toward the young through the voluntary organization *Nashi* (Hemment 2009) and its demise (Lassila 2014), the relative optimism and prosperity of the mid-aughts compared with the present (Dafflon 2009), and the compound effects of economic and personal insecurity in the present decade (Jensen 2013; Ohana 2008). While gendered dynamics are not a central theme in the article's analysis, future research can productively attend to the intersection of gendered social difference and power inequalities with space and time (Markowitz 2000; Pilkington 1996) as well as how youth themselves perform gender within reflexive life management processes. Furthermore, careful consideration of family dynamics and contexts which explore intergenerational subjectivity would strengthen and refine social generational analysis in Russia contexts (see Omel'chanko and Sabirova 2015)

As the middle class expands in the Global South and becomes increasingly anxious in the Global North, youth studies continue to document the uneven terrains of aspiration and risk, assessing how this changes what young people think as well as what they do (Wyn and Woodman 2006, 507). With attention to globality, a generational analysis illuminates the shifting strategies youth use to navigate neoliberalism, how neoliberalism has changed the social circumstances of being young, and the how national context shapes reflexive life management. The persistence of inequality and related constraints coexists with new subjectivities and social reorganizations. This paradox, which is evidenced in youth meaning-making practice, requires new directions of inquiry to better understand young people's lives.

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