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Narratives we live by: sequentiality and timeliness in temporal structuring of action

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Abstract

Cultural structures can organize experience either independently of time—'transversely' to its flow—or temporally—'longitudinally' along it. Most existing concepts—binaries, codes, norms—represent the former. Temporal structuring is much less theorized. While sociologists frequently invoke 'narratives,' they often use the term loosely, as a more evocative synonym for beliefs or values (e.g., 'ecological narrative'). Recent work in pragmatism and interactionism has reintroduced temporality into theories of action. I argue, however, that further progress is hindered by the 'aporia of time'—the enduring difficulty of simultaneously accounting for subjective and objective time. To address this problem, I adopt Ricoeur's solution and extend it by introducing *timeliness* as a dimension of narrative. While narratives are typically understood as sequences of segments, timeliness captures how the duration of those segments also shapes meaning-making. It ties narrative to both the inner flow of time and social time—producing harmony or dissonance (e.g., 'untimely,' 'premature,' etc.). This helps us understand how the narratives we live by—such as the 'American Dream'—structure our actions and our sense of temporal movement. I explore this theoretical innovation through an empirical case of educational decision-making. Using longitudinal data from Russia, I examine a puzzling pattern: vocational-track students often revise their plans mid-course. I show that this shift results from a temporal conflict between the unfolding meta-narrative of 'coming-of-age' they often employ and the pressures of real-life time.

Keywords Narrative · Temporality · Cultural structure · Timeliness · Decision-making

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Introduction

'Cultural structures' is a widely used sociological concept that reflects how we expect culture to shape social life. Culture is supposed to 'structure'—that is, to organize thinking, decision-making, actions, and evaluations through patterned forms. Its frequent use in the plural signals a loosely organized set of partly overlapping concepts: binaries, codes, patterns, schemes, frames, narratives, norms, values, myths, scripts, metaphors, and more. Amid this variety, however, a key distinction can be made—one grounded in their relationship to time.

Some cultural structures are atemporal: their elements coexist synchronically. Binaries and codes, for example, are fully available to actors at any given moment. Individuals can locate their actions within established oppositions such as good/evil, beautiful/ugly, or true/false. This form of structuring operates independently of temporality—only the projects actors build on this basis unfold over time. Other cultural structures, by contrast, are intrinsically temporal. Our lives are organized not only by calendars, weekly routines, and long-term plans (Douglas, 1975; Hitlin & Johnson, 2015; Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013) but also by cultural narratives—stories, plots, and broader meta-narratives composed of recurring and recognizable storylines. In timetables and narratives, elements succeed one another in time, structuring experience through temporal progression. Monday and Tuesday do not coexist; when Tuesday comes, Monday is gone. Similarly, the narrative logic of life stages—childhood, youth, young adulthood, middle age, and old age (depending on the culturally defined age periodization)—infuses experience with sequential expectations.

These are the narratives we live by. They shape our identities, condition how we interpret the world, and cultivate our sense of moving through time. For example, the meta-narrative of the American Dream does not merely articulate values—it structures aspirations, evaluations, and decisions (Scott et al., 2022). In this article, I define narrative as a temporally structured cultural form: a sequence of elements—ordered both in occurrence and duration—whose meanings emerge from their relationship to the evolving narrative whole. I focus on this temporal dimension and develop a model to capture an often-overlooked capacity of cultural narratives: their ability to breathe both sequencing and tempo into the flow of lived experience.

Atemporal structures, such as binaries, and temporal ones, such as narratives, reflect two basic orientations in time—'transverse' and 'longitudinal.' Yet, while the atemporal side has been well theorized, the temporal structuring of experience remains underdeveloped. The prevalence of the term 'narrative' in sociology can be misleading; in many empirical studies, it serves as a placeholder for beliefs, values, or meanings, with its temporal dimension often set aside. This reflects longstanding challenges in theorizing the temporal aspects of action and the limitations of existing approaches. Although recent efforts from pragmatist and interactionist perspectives (Abbott, 2016; Hitlin & Johnson, 2015; Mandich, 2020; Mische, 2009, 2014; Tavory, 2018; Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013) have begun to redress this gap, the

cultural-sociological contribution remains limited—even though narrative is arguably among the most intrinsically 'cultural' tools for making sense of time and continuity (Gell, 1992; Genette, 1988; MacIntyre, 1984; Ricoeur, 1984).

This article seeks to fill this gap by identifying the source of the neglect and offering a theoretical resolution. I argue that the difficulty lies in capturing both the subjective time of lived experience and the objective time of calendars, clocks, and institutional rhythms—a version of the ancient 'aporia of time.' This tension has shaped recent sociological approaches to temporality, and difficulties in resolving it have often forced theorists to choose between these dimensions rather than integrate them.

To address this dilemma, I turn to Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative (Ricoeur, 1984, 1988), which offers a conceptual resolution to the aporia of time. For Ricoeur, narrative is the mediating structure that allows human experience to hold together subjective and objective temporalities. Building on this foundation, I propose a cultural-sociological adaptation: a refinement of the concept of narrative that includes not only its well-recognized sequentiality but also what I call *timeliness*. While sequencing refers to the ordered succession of elements (A-B-C), timeliness captures their internal temporal dynamics—the duration, pacing, and rhythm by which the story unfolds. For example, the length or tempo of B can retroactively shape the meaning of A and influence the anticipation of C. Rhythm is one form of timeliness, but narratives may also be a-rhythmic or unevenly paced.

To explore the productivity of this innovation, I apply it to the case of educational decision-making—an inherently temporal process involving planning, acting, evaluation, and revision over time. Drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data from a longitudinal panel study of educational and career trajectories in Russia (Malik, 2019), I identify a puzzling pattern: students who opt for vocational education often revise or abandon their plans mid-way, even in the absence of new external constraints or unanticipated events. I argue that this pattern can only be explained by attending to the timeliness of the coming-of-age narrative these students implicitly inhabit. Put simply, they 'outgrow' education not because of external pressures or incentives,[1] but because of a growing dissonance between the narrative and the rhythms of institutional time.

In the first section, I examine the growing interest in the temporal coordination of action in recent sociology through the lens of revisited aporia of time. I then outline Ricoeur's solution to the aporia and identify the space for a cultural-sociological intervention. In the second section, I introduce the concept of timeliness and situate it within existing sociological approaches to narrative, temporality, and action. In the third section, I apply this model to the Russian case to demonstrate how cultural narratives structure educational trajectories not only by sequencing life events but by organizing their rhythm, pacing, and evaluative timing.

[1] For example, on-campus corporate recruitment has shown to unexpectedly affect plans of elite US college students (Binder et al., 2016).

Temporal structuring of action

The problem of time and action

Temporality has long been acknowledged as a fundamental dimension of human action. Yet, a persistent tension in theorizing the temporal aspects of action continues to challenge social theory, prompting renewed efforts to integrate temporality into theories of action in innovative and productive ways. In recent years, this engagement has given rise to a dynamically evolving discourse on the temporal structuring of human action (Abbott, 2016; Baert et al., 2022; Beckert & Suckert, 2021; Cossu, 2023; Hall, 2016; Hitlin & Johnson, 2015; Mandich, 2020; Mische, 2009, 2014; Nilsen, 2020; Suckert, 2022; Tavory, 2018; Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013; Wagner-Pacifici, 2017).[2] Pragmatism and interactionism have become the driving forces behind this progress. Pragmatism, which has always taken time seriously, is now gaining momentum in sociology. Interactionism offers the most intuitively appealing conceptual *mise-en-scène*: an individual placed in a *situation,* looking ahead to an uncertain future. The future is thus becoming an essential category for understanding the problem of the temporal organization of action. Consequently, the future effectively serves as a proxy for temporality in these works.

One way to articulate the tension that compels social theorists to revisit the temporal dimensions of action is through the ancient *aporia of time*. This aporia underscores the enduring difficulty of reconciling subjective, phenomenological time with objective, cosmic time. The attempt to bridge lived experience and objective temporality has long been a central, yet persistently challenging, task for theorists. Classical philosophical positions exemplify this divide: Aristotle's account of time in *Physics* can be read as a foundational articulation of cosmic temporality, while Augustine's tripartite schema of present-past (memory), present-present (perception), and present-future (expectation) offers an early theorization of subjective time that would later resonate through phenomenology and existentialism (Aristotle, 2008; Augustine, 1961; Martineau, 2020; Ricoeur, 1984). Throughout the twentieth century, theoretical approaches to time continued to gravitate toward the same two poles identified by Alfred Gell as 'physicalism' and 'phenomenology' (Gell, 1992: 151; see also Munn, 1992). Physicalism is most often associated with the spatialization of time, whereby time is represented as a linear sequence akin to segments in space (Bergson, 2001; Munn,

[2] These theoretical efforts remain largely disconnected from the extensive empirical literature on life course analysis, particularly the tradition associated with Glen Elder's foundational works (Elder, 1998). This omission is not coincidental. Life course studies have primarily focused on large-scale trends, socially structured age roles, and patterned trajectories across the life span, often aligning with the concerns of social demography (Mayer, 2009). While Elder's original insight emphasized the importance of situating lives within historical, geographical, social, and institutional contexts, subsequent research has largely pursued this direction to better understand the role of institutional settings, generational dynamics, historical transformations in life stages and age roles, and key domains of social concern such as health and aging—instead of addressing the theoretical problem of temporality in social action (Hitlin & Johnson, 2015).

1992). This orientation is evident in many narrative approaches within sociology, which tend to adopt Aristotle's model of time as a structured sequence with a beginning, middle, and end. Abbott, who significantly advanced narrative analysis in sociology (Abbott, 1990, 1992; Abbott & Hrycak, 1990), ultimately concluded that narrative – *understood as sequence* – cannot capture the lived experience of time. He then adopted an Augustine-like momentary perspective, advocating for the so-called 'lyrical sociology' (Abbott, 2007, 2016), which abolishes narrative and focuses on experiencing time: 'tensed time is what we live; ordered time is what we narrate' (Abbott, 2007: 90). Both the opposition between lyrical and narrative sociologies, and the tendency to define narrative in minimal terms—as a mere sequence of elements—reflect the aporetic logic of polarization.

Current attempts to reengage with the problem of time and action can be seen as striving to solve the aporia by combining subjective and objective temporalities. Thus, in their groundbreaking work, Iddo Tavory and Nina Eliasoph introduce three modalities of future orientations of action: protentions – phenomenological sensing of the immediate future, first theorized by Husserl; trajectories – temporal entities in which actors situate their actions; and temporal landscapes – 'naturalized time patterns,' such as days of the week (Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013). They show how these modalities interact, shaping social action. We can see a clear attempt to combine a phenomenological perspective (represented by 'protention') with cultural temporal structures.

In a similar vein, Ann Mische introduced several dimensions of projectivity that characterize actor's orientation toward the imagined future (Mische, 2009, 2014). John Hall's 'structural phenomenology' distinguishes between various registers of temporal coordination of action (Hall, 2016). Drawing on Thévenot's pragmatist theory, Giuliana Mandich identifies distinct regimes of engagement with the future (Mandich, 2020). These theories converge with the growing field of the sociology of 'imagined futures' (Beckert & Suckert, 2021; Suckert, 2022), which encompasses a wide range of studies analyzing the social construction, anticipation, and institutionalization of future imaginaries, as well as their implications for social and political life. This literature emphasizes how projects of the future—whether individual, collective, cultural, or institutional—shape present-day decision-making and action. In doing so, it resonates with Augustine's insight that the future effectively exists in the present in a form of expectations and anticipations, or what he called the 'present of the future.'

These contributions significantly advance a temporally attuned understanding of action and enhance our explanatory capacities. However, further progress remains constrained by the unresolved aporia of time—namely, the persistent privileging of one of its poles over the other. Firstly, many of these approaches reduce enduring temporal structures, such as narrative, to momentary and therefore effectively non-temporal 'projections.' Secondly, even theories that employ inherently temporal notions—such as rhythm—often fragment them into sequences of discrete, momentary elements, thereby undermining their durational quality. These limitations inform the strategic direction I take in this article: to advance a revised concept of narrative that captures temporality and the lived texture of time.

The first of the two aforementioned problems is evident in the way the concept of narrative is increasingly detached from its defining feature: temporal continuity. When viewed primarily from the perspective of the future-orientation, narrative tends to be reduced to a fixed point on the horizon—akin to a geometric projection—serving as an aim or a reference point. Although the three modalities of future orientation introduced by Tavory and Eliasoph encompass varying temporal horizons, from the immediate to the long-term, they remain anchored in a momentary perspective, as implied by their reliance on the concept of the situation. This projection is articulated through concepts as 'anticipation' (Tavory, 2018). Anticipation is fundamentally a momentary experience that can condense both immediate and distant events into a single affective stance. One can, for example, anticipate an ice cream while waiting in line, or the Second Coming of Christ—suggesting that it is not the temporal structure of the corresponding narrative that determines the nature of anticipation, but rather individual preferences and affective investments that shape its value and emotional tone. Consequently, while Tavory and Eliasoph do acknowledge the sequential character of narrative (Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013: 914–915), the continuity intrinsic to narrative is effectively eclipsed by the situational frame they adopt, rendering narrative an atemporal cultural form. Notably, in a later article that further develops this framework, Tavory omits narrative altogether. His account of trajectory as a modality of future orientation, which included narrative in the previous work, is instead exemplified through individual plans and institutional structures, such as school grading systems (Tavory, 2018).

The second problem I mentioned above concerns the de-temporalization of inherently temporal patterns, such as rhythm. Tavory analyzed the structuring power of rhythm, showing how many domains of social life are, in fact, following rhythms (Tavory, 2018). Rhythm unfolds over time and structures experience, thereby intrinsically embodying temporality. However, in Tavory's model, rhythm is perceived by the individual primarily through moments of disruption—reducing it to a succession of presences and absences apprehended only at points of alternation (Tavory, 2018; Tavory & Fine, 2020). This results in a momentary decomposition of what is, by nature, a continuous temporal phenomenon.

To address these challenges, I propose expanding the sociological concept of narrative beyond its minimal definition as mere sequence, in order to encompass the temporal dimensions of both lived experience and broader social and symbolic processes. Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative provides a strategic framework for this endeavor. In what follows, I draw on his work to develop a cultural-sociological contribution to the temporally oriented theory of action.

Ricoeur: narrative as a solution to the aporia of time

In his monumental work *Time and Narrative*, Paul Ricoeur reengages the ancient aporia of time (Ricoeur, 1984). Drawing on two foundational sources—Augustine's *Confessions* and Aristotle's *Poetics*—Ricoeur argues that a more nuanced understanding of narrative offers a means of bridging the gap between lived (subjective) and cosmic (objective) time. He elaborates the groundbreaking thesis

that narrative functions as a central cultural mechanism through which objective, chronological time is transformed into human, experiential time. Time, stresses Ricoeur, 'becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience' (Ricoeur, 1984: 3). This perspective resonates with a broader tradition in cultural sociology—advanced by scholars such as Robert Bellah and Clifford Geertz—which holds that culture is not merely a supplement to human thought but a constitutive part of it (e.g., Geertz, 1973: 83). From this standpoint, fundamental cognitive faculties, including temporal perception and the organization of action in time, are grounded in narrative. Related arguments suggest that narrative experience is a precondition for the human ability to apprehend continuity (e.g., MacIntyre, 1984). Narrative and its central engine—plot—must thus be understood as 'the privileged means by which we re-configure our confused, unformed, and at the limit mute temporal experience' (Ricoeur, 1984:xi).

To account for the dynamic nature of narrative, Ricoeur identifies two fundamental operations at its core, drawing on Aristotelian concepts: *muthos* and *mimesis*. *Muthos* corresponds to emplotment or *sjuzhet* and refers to the active reconfiguration of a raw chronological sequence into a coherent and meaningful narrative whole. This reconfiguration involves not only reordering events (e.g., detective fiction begins with 'what happened,' and later fills in the causes) but also establishing intelligible connections, such as causal relations. As Ricoeur emphasizes, emplotment is not a system but a creative, effortful process of organizing events into a system (Ricoeur, 1984: 33).

Mimesis, on the other hand, serves as the dynamic correlate of human action, conceived as a form of 'creative imitation.' Ricoeur develops a tripartite theory of *mimesis* to articulate the layered nature of temporal experience, ranging from cosmic to subjective time, with narrative mediating between the two. *Mimesis-I* links narrative to praxis by modeling narrative as a structured imitation of life—not a direct copy of reality, but a creatively shaped representation. At the other end, *Mimesis-III* connects narrative to perception, locating the narrative within the reader's or interpreter's subjective temporality. Situated between the two, narrative emerges through *Mimesis-II*, where the meaning-making synthesis enacted by *muthos* occurs. In Ricoeur's framework, *muthos* and *mimesis* operate as the complementary forces—akin to a yin and yang—that drive narrative meaning-making. Together, they enable stories to dynamically resolve meaningful incongruities, perform creative repairs, and to render the elusive flow of life intelligible and narratable.

The conceptual development I propose builds on this framework by highlighting an additional dimension: I suggest that the dynamic interplay of *muthos* and *mimesis* involves the setting of *tempo*—imparting rhythm to sequences of events and shaping the experience of time as fast or slow, urgent or leisurely. This tempo-setting is integral to meaning-making, as the evaluation of events often depends on their perceived *timeliness*—whether they are seen as premature, delayed, well-timed, and so forth.

Cultural sociology and temporality

Durkheimian cultural theory occupies a foundational position in advancing the understanding of temporality within the social sciences. In his review of the anthropology of time, Alfred Gell argued that the entire field stemmed from Durkheim's sociological theory of knowledge (Gell, 1992). In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim contends that our experience of time originates from social time, understood as a collective representation (Durkheim, 1995). Nancy Munn has shown that this insight was further elaborated by Durkheim's immediate intellectual heirs, from Hubert and Mauss to Halbwachs, and remains evident in the work of later figures influenced by him, such as Clifford Geertz (Munn, 1992: 95–100). These claims can be further supported by the fact that Durkheimian thought enabled several fundamental breakthroughs in understanding the temporal aspects of sociality. For example, Mauss' theory of gift provides a fundamental insight into the temporal nature of social bonds: the obligation to postpone gifting back lies in the very core of sociality (Mauss, 1954). This idea later resonated in economic sociology (e.g., Hayes, 2024; Zelizer, 1994). Another example is Victor Turner's analysis of social drama and, in particular, his elaboration on Arnold van Gennep's model of rite of passage, which was widely applied in the social sciences for understanding social change (Van Gennep, 2004; Kurakin, 2024; Turner, 1969, 1975).

One of the strengths of Durkheim's theory is its potential to bridge subjective and objective conceptions of time. Munn shows that, in Durkheim's theory of time, individual (subjective) time closely aligns with Bergson's notion of *durée* or James's stream of consciousness, whereas social time is conceived as a coherent 'morphology of cognizable units that imposes itself on "all minds"' (Munn, 1992: 95). This perspective is consistent with Ricoeur's solution discussed above. According to Durkheim, social time provides a 'canvas on which all duration is spread out before the mind's eye' (Durkheim, 1995: 10). Without this 'canvas,' we are unable to perceive either time or continuity—just as, in Ricoeur's model, time cannot be meaningfully grasped without narrative, which mediates between the 'confused, unformed, and at the limit mute' experience of immediate time and the adopted experience of 'human time' (Ricoeur, 1984: xi, 3).

Given its distinctive engagement with the concept of narrative, cultural sociology possesses a crucial—yet still insufficiently developed—resource for advancing our understanding of the temporal structuring of action. The field is deeply intertwined with literary theory, structuralism, narratology, ethnography, and cultural anthropology, drawing on a rich intellectual lineage that includes figures such as the Russian formalists, Vladimir Propp, Roland Barthes, Gérard Genette, Paul Ricoeur, Northrop Frye, and Hayden White, among others. These theoretical traditions have endowed cultural sociology with a critical vocabulary of linguistic and narrative concepts—such as metaphor, metonymy, trope, genre, and narrative itself—which have become integral to its analytic repertoire.

Narrative theory largely crystallized in the 1970 s through the work of Gérard Genette, Roland Barthes, Paul Ricoeur, Algirdas Julien Greimas, and others

(Barthes, 1975a, 1975b; Genette, 1988; Ricoeur, 1973). While their focus was primarily on literary texts, they shared a broader recognition of narrative as a fundamental mode of human thought. By the 1980 s, however, the initial momentum of narrative theory within literary studies had waned (Stock, 2013), and the concept began to migrate into the behavioral and social sciences. This shift entailed a conceptual broadening: narrative came to refer not only to specific texts—spoken or written—but also to diffuse, collective story forms that shape social imaginaries, such as the 'American Dream.' Today, scholars frequently reserve the term story for individual accounts while referring to broader formations as narratives or employing terms such as 'meta-narratives,' 'master narratives,' 'paradigmatic narratives,' and 'background stories' (Polletta, 2006: 20). In this article, I follow this convention, using these notions interchangeably.

This development opened new avenues for narrative analysis in sociology, as narrative has come to be widely recognized as a central medium through which meaning is constructed, communicated, and contested in social life. Anne Kane, for example, defines narratives as 'stories that embody symbolic meaning and codes of understanding; through "story-telling" meaning is publicly shared, contested, and reconstructed' (Kane, 2000: 314). This view has supported the construction of thick descriptions, positioning narrative as a means of animating abstract codes, binaries, and schemas with what might be called 'cultural flesh.' In this capacity, narrative has proven indispensable for examining a range of social phenomena, from the formation of identity and selfhood to the dynamics of social movements and political mobilization (Ochs & Capps, 2002; Polletta, 2006). Yet as the concept has broadened, there is a growing risk of detaching narrative from its defining temporal structure. In many cases, 'narrative' is used interchangeably with 'belief,' 'opinion,' or simply 'meaning.' In contrast to such usages, this article foregrounds narrative's distinctive role in organizing temporality and shaping the temporal structure of social action.

To date, the potential of narrative as a structuring force in action has been only partially realized within cultural sociology. The most significant contribution in this regard stems from the theory of cultural pragmatics (Alexander, 2004; Alexander et al., 2006). At the core of cultural performance lies a script—essentially a narrative—that temporally organizes action. This framework has been effectively applied across a wide range of empirical cases. In cultural and historical sociology, the work of Margaret Somers and Anne Kane has been especially influential in demonstrating how narrative forms structure agency (e.g., Kane, 2000; Somers & Gibson, 1994). Building on these developments and drawing from Northrop Frye's theory of genres, Philip Smith offers perhaps the most precise articulation of narrative's relevance for social action (Smith, 2006: 18):

> [N]arratives allocate causal responsibility for action, define actors and give them motivation, indicate the trajectory of past episodes and predict consequences of future choices, suggest courses of action, confer and withdraw legitimacy, and provide social approval by aligning events with normative cultural codes. Social action can be seen as deeply embedded in a narrative framework. People make sense of the world with stories and act accordingly.

These insights offer a robust foundation for the continued development of narrative analysis within cultural sociology. Nonetheless, existing approaches often overlook the intrinsic dynamism of narrative that Ricoeur emphasizes. In what follows, I aim to address this limitation by introducing the concept of timeliness as a dimension of narrative that captures not only the sequential order of events but also their tempo, pace, and affective urgency.

Improving narrative analysis: sequentiality and timeliness of narrative

Beyond sequence: introducing timeliness as a narrative dimension

In the social sciences, narrative is typically understood as a sequence of events that constitute a plot. This perspective originates in the Aristotelian model of beginning, middle, and end, where ordered sequence is viewed as the defining—and sometimes sole—attribute of narrative. The nature of the elements in this sequence can vary. Andrew Abbott, for instance, observes that qualitative sociologists tend to conceive of the sequence as a succession of events, while quantitative researchers often interpret it as a sequence of variables (Abbott, 2007: 76). Yet in both approaches, the duration of individual episodes and the temporally structured impulse for their transition often go unacknowledged. This omission might be partly inherited from literary analysis, the original domain of narrative theory, where prose lacks explicit temporal measures. As a result, narrative conceived in this way fails to capture the experience of passing time. Abbott contends that if the passage of time is central to our inquiry, we must abandon the narrative approach in favor of what he calls 'lyrical sociology.'

To address this limitation without abandoning narrative analysis, I propose an additional dimension: *timeliness*. This concept refers to the internal logic of pacing within a narrative—the prescribed duration of episodes and the rhythm by which they unfold. Many narratives do not simply follow a sequence but organize it through temporal cues such as urgency or rhythm. For instance, in their 'existence theory,' Partic Baert, Marcus Morgan, and Rin Ushiyama examine how life narratives structured around 'existential milestones' become infused with a sense of urgency. Delays in achieving these milestones (e.g., earning a degree or marrying) can alter the evaluative meaning of life events—what was once desirable may become undesirable when it is perceived as 'too late' (Baert et al., 2022).

Previously, the concept of rhythm has received considerable attention in both the social sciences and narratology. Henri Lefebvre developed an entire methodological framework—'Rhythmanalysis'—to explore the temporal structures of everyday life (Lefebvre, 2004). In literary theory, Gérard Genette and others have shown how rhythm shapes narrative tension, emotional engagement, and the experience of tempo (Genette, 1988). Rhythm thus serves as a paradigmatic example of narrative timeliness. However, not all forms of narrative temporality are rhythmic; some temporal patterns lack the repetition that rhythm implies.

Timeliness and sequentiality are not mutually exclusive. All narratives entail sequentiality (Danto, 1985: 143–181), but timeliness may be more or less salient. For example, the meaning of a chess move depends on prior and potential future moves—timing is largely irrelevant. Similarly, a computational task will yield the same result whether it takes seconds or days to run; timing has no bearing on outcome, as illustrated by the Turing machine model. This computational abstraction—slow but universally capable—may help explain why contemporary behavioral sciences, influenced by computational methods, often overlook timeliness as a narrative feature.

However, in many real-world narratively organized practices, the tempo of action is integral. Consider running technique manuals, coaching guides, or instructional videos. These often break down technique into discrete micro-movements, presenting a sequential narrative. Yet even when each movement is learned, success hinges on performing them at the right moment. This highlights the practical importance of timeliness. Notably, sports technologies now incorporate temporal metrics—such as cadence and ground contact time—into training routines, enabling even amateur athletes to refine the timing of their performance. This example illustrates the conceptual distinction between sequentiality and timeliness, and it leads to a deeper question: where does timeliness originate within a narrative structure? The answer lies in relationality.

Timeliness as relational

The timing settings in the running technique example above arise from the interplay between the temporal structure of the running cycle and the time-sensitive characteristics of the body, the ground, and other material elements involved. The rhythm is not imposed externally but emerges from the correspondence among factors such as muscle and joint elasticity under gravitational force, the forced oscillation frequencies of legs and hands, and the respiratory rate. Together, these components form a temporal ensemble that dictates the optimal timing of the micro-movements that constitute running. In this sense, the enacted features of narrative timeliness are always relational—they depend on alignment with other overlapping sequences.

To consider a more conventional example often used by sociologists in theorizing temporality, music vividly illustrates the centrality of timeliness, relationality, and the role of enactment in narrative experience. Music inherently embodies timeliness: its notation specifies the exact duration of each note. Yet its experiential impact is fundamentally enactive—it must be performed to be perceived. This distinguishes music from temporal forms like plans, which can often be assessed without enactment, or from chess notations, which convey the structure of a game without requiring it to be played out. Musical performance unfolds as a sequence and rhythm that engages with the listener's anticipatory expectations: as we listen, we involuntarily try to predict where the melody will lead, and the music, in turn, plays with these anticipations.

Musical rhythm also interacts with other temporal structures, most notably the psychophysiological rhythms of the listener. These include organic patterns such as

heartbeat, respiration, and brainwaves (Lévi-Strauss, 1990: 16–17). This embodied interaction explains our almost automatic impulse to tap a foot or sway to the beat. Music, then, becomes a potent medium for synchronizing subjective temporal flows and thereby facilitating social connection. As Alfred Schutz noted, the 'sharing of the other's flux of experience in inner time' that occurs during listening to or making music together generates 'the experience of the "We"' (Schutz, 1976: 173).

This dynamic illustrates a broader capacity of narrative to structure temporal experience and impose its own evaluative logic. Narrative does not merely unfold in time—it can reshape our perception and alter what we know and remember. Cognitive studies of perception demonstrate that the enactment of a narrative can influence memory so powerfully that it temporarily displaces established knowledge. In a laboratory experiment by Richard Gerrig, participants read a biographical passage about George Washington contemplating retirement after the Revolutionary War—raising the possibility that John Adams might become the first president. Immediately afterward, many respondents expressed uncertainty about who actually was the first U.S. president (Gerrig, 1989). This phenomenon is familiar to anyone who has reread a novel or rewatched a film with a tragic ending, only to catch themselves paradoxically hoping—despite knowing the outcome—that things might somehow turn out differently this time.

This example demonstrates how narrative can reshape perception and how its enactment, in turn, influences broader temporal structures. As discussed in the previous section, the relationship between momentary experience and extended temporal forms—such as temporal landscapes, scenarios, and trajectories—has long posed a challenge for theories of action. Notably, Tavory and Eliasoph (2013: 920–921) critique earlier influential accounts by Bourdieu and Schutz for positing a 'seamless tandem' between momentary protentions and long-term structures. Bourdieu's habitus, for instance, epitomizes such continuity by serving both as a product and a representation of durable social patterns (Bourdieu, 1963, 2000). In contrast, Tavory and Eliasoph argue that short-term anticipations and long-term orientations can be disjointed or even conflicting. The concept of timeliness allows us to move further by emphasizing how narrative—through its inherently relational nature—can shape the experience of the present moment in ways that feed back into and transform broader temporal structures. For example, in the cognitive experiment discussed above, the enactment of a biographical narrative (Washington's life) through reading temporarily reshaped respondents' memory of a well-established historical sequence.

This perspective overcomes the 'metaphysics of presence,' which reduces narratives to immediate subjective projections. Timeliness, as a dimension of narrative, suggests that the urge to move from point A to point B in time t is not simply imagined or spontaneously constructed by the individual. Rather, it is embedded in the structure of the narrative and its interaction with other temporal forms, which are enacted in time.[3] Like musical rhythm that compels bodily movement, the unfolding

[3] In a similar vein, Robin Wagner-Pacifici shows that the occurrence of an event, which she understands as a process rather than a moment, can change the meaning of other events and narratives (Wagner-Pacifici, 2017).

of narrative can generate a palpable temporal pull—an impulse shaped by its internal logic and its alignment with external temporalities.

Finally, the concept of timeliness can enrich and refine other theoretical constructs. It lends substance to Andrew Abbott's notion of 'enchainment,' one of three core features he attributes to narrative (Abbott, 1992: 435–436), by specifying how links between events can carry temporal pressures and constraints. It also adds depth to Ann Mische's (2009: 701) notion of 'connectivity' within projective agency—'the imagined logic of connection between temporal elements'—by highlighting how the timing of those links matters as much as their sequence.

The relationality of timeliness has important practical implications for sociological research. Prior studies have demonstrated that analytical focus on temporal conflicts—whether between different modalities of future orientation (Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013) or between organic and technological rhythms in urban life (Lefebvre, 2004)—offers particularly rich insights into the temporal dimensions of social action. The concept of timeliness advances this line of inquiry by introducing a new layer of analysis: conflicts based not only on sequence, projection, or the meanings of clashing narratives, but also on the duration of their segments—on being 'too late,' 'premature,' 'overdue,' etc. In the empirical section that follows, I show how this theoretical innovation can illuminate the temporal logics underlying educational decision-making.

Narrative structure of educational choice: how vocational track choosers unexpectedly outgrow education

Setting the stage: education, change, and time

Education offers a strategic site for theorizing the temporal structuring of human action. In contemporary societies, it serves as a foundational life phase, with educational choices consistently shown to exert long-term consequences across the life course. Yet an often-overlooked perspective is that education constitutes a form of *institutionally regulated, intentional change that unfolds over time*. This characterization resonates with Talcott Parsons' identification of education as one of the four basic functional categories of institutions (Parsons, 1990: 330–31) and aligns with Omar Lizardo's conceptualization of education as a process of supervised internalization (Lizardo, 2021: 16–17, 21).

Of particular importance is the latter feature—its temporal duration—which, although rarely taken seriously in sociological accounts, is essential. Many transformations in identity, role, or status occur rapidly: assignments, prescriptions, rites of passage, moments of insight, or experiences of initiation. In contrast, education is not simply prolonged—it takes a long time. It unfolds across a duration commensurate with the life course itself. If this temporal dimension is indeed central, as I and other scholars have argued (Lingard & Thompson, 2017; Wright & Høyen, 2020; Xu, 2021), then any conception of education that reduces it to the attainment of a state—whether defined in terms of skills, competencies, or knowledge scores—misses a fundamental aspect of its processual nature.

This is where the dimension of *timeliness* comes into play. If education is indeed processual, then the tempo and timing of transitions between stages—and the enactment of its key turning points—may be crucial, much like rhythm in a melody.

Popular culture reflects this insight. The trope of transformative education frequently appears in movies, where a protagonist must undergo a lengthy and often arduous educational process to emerge changed—consider, for instance, Luke Skywalker's training with Yoda. In cinematic form, such processes are typically compressed into brief montage sequences, signaling the passage of substantial time without depicting it in full. They are universally set against a musical backdrop, underscoring the centrality of timeliness in the process. These representations capture a cultural intuition: education is a legitimate, even paradigmatic, means by which one becomes a different person—and this transformation takes time and is densely structured in temporal terms.

Zooming in on the choice of vocational track

To observe the effects of temporal structuring on human behavior, I selected a case that saliently exhibits time-related features: meaning-making that unfolds over time, temporally structured evaluative frameworks, and enactive effects that only become visible in practice—particularly when plans go awry. This required focusing on a process where something deviated from expectations or failed to go as planned.

I therefore examined a key educational decision point for Russian students with far-reaching consequences for their future trajectories: the choice to pursue a vocational track after 9th grade, rather than continuing to high school (10 th and 11 th grades). Educational researchers typically distinguish between two main pathways: the academic track, which leads to higher education and white-collar employment, and the vocational track, which provides technical or manual skills and tends to lead to blue-collar jobs. As in many other countries, in Russia the economic returns on education are significantly higher for those who pursue the academic track; in contrast, vocational education offers little to no earnings premium (Kapeliushnikov, 2021). The academic track is also more competitive and deeply entangled with social inequality. For example, data from the 'Trajectories in Education and Careers' (TrEC) study show that in Russia, 84% of students whose parents hold higher education degrees graduate from high school (11 grades) and proceed to university. Among students whose parents do not have higher education, only 32% follow the same path (Bessudnov et al., 2017: 101).

Russia's tracking system is structured so that the primary decision point occurs after the 9th grade. At this stage, students must choose either to remain in school and advance to the 10 th grade (usually in the same school) or to leave and enroll in a vocational school. Vocational programs range in length from 18 months to five years, though three to four years is typical. Students on the academic track complete 11 th grade and take the Unified State Exam (USE) to qualify for university admission. Those who fail may retake the exam the following year or enroll in vocational training. Vocational school graduates may take the USE and apply to a university,

though in some cases, institutional partnerships allow them to bypass the exam through simplified admission procedures.

Existing research confirms that the post-9 th-grade decision is the most pivotal in shaping students' long-term educational and occupational trajectories (Bessudnov et al., 2017). Even those who 'correct course' by entering university after vocational school usually end up in less prestigious distance-learning programs. Unsurprisingly, only 5% of students who enroll in vocational education after 9th grade have two college-educated parents (Bessudnov et al., 2017: 101). In this study, I focus on cases where students made, in economic terms, suboptimal choices—opting for vocational education despite its long-term disadvantages.

Data and methods

The primary data source for this study is the qualitative subsample of the national longitudinal cohort study *Trajectories in Education and Careers* (TrEC). I also drew on the main quantitative sample for descriptive statistics and contextual background. TrEC is a nationally representative panel study based on a cohort of 4,893 respondents, followed from 2011 to 2023 across 42 regions of the Russian Federation. The study includes twelve survey waves, supplemented by two additional waves based on international assessments – PISA and TIMSS; the latter formed the foundation for the initial wave of TrEC. In 2013, a qualitative component of the study—named *Tracer Atom*—was launched. It included 111 respondents drawn from the original sample, who, in addition to completing the standard questionnaires, were interviewed qualitatively in four waves: 2013, 2015/2016, 2017/2018, and 2019/2020.

For the current study, I analyze interviews from 22 of the original 111 *Tracer Atom* respondents who had chosen the vocational track after 9th grade in 2012. At the time of the first interview wave, they were in the second year of their vocational programs. Geographically, this subsample spans a wide range of locations across Russia, including Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and Kaluga (Central Russia); Kazan and Naberezhnye Chelny (Volga Region); Krasnodar (Southern Russia); Krasnoyarsk (Siberia); Ekaterinburg and Nizhniy Tagil (Urals); and Blagoveshchensk (Russian Far East). Of the 22 respondents, 13 were male and 9 female. Three had both parents with higher education degrees, five had one parent with higher education, and the remaining 13 had parents with no more than vocational education (data was missing for one respondent's parents).

In analyzing the data, I approached temporality in two complementary ways. First, I examined *narrative time*, focusing on the temporal structuring within respondents' stories. Second, I addressed *real-life time* by comparing accounts across the four interview waves, which were separated by years. Particular attention was paid to the evolution of time-based evaluations of events—such as assessments of promptness, timeliness, urgency, delay, or being 'too late.'

I also gave special consideration to emotional intensity, which often signaled critical turning points or moments of perceived rupture. This included emphatic reflections on personal mistakes or accusations directed at parents for offering misguided advice. Further, I closely examined puzzles, paradoxes, and

inconsistencies—especially when judgments or interpretations of the same event shifted between interview waves. These discontinuities could relate to factual changes or to evolving interpretations of past decisions and experiences.

Ultimately, this analysis uncovered the most influential background narratives respondents used to make sense of their trajectories. The most prominent of these was a meta-narrative I term the *coming-of-age* narrative. Serving as a central evaluative structure, this narrative provided coherence to sequences of events that were otherwise fragmented, ambivalent, or unclear—both to external observers and to the respondents themselves.

Laying out the intrigue: the patterned defeat of hopes

A striking disparity emerges in the effectiveness of educational planning between students who chose the academic track and those who opted for vocational education—one that becomes apparent at the statistical level. As shown in Table 1, the majority of academic track students intended to pursue higher education from the outset and, aside from a relatively small number of dropouts, largely succeeded in doing so. In contrast, although nearly 60% of second-year vocational school students—and a similar proportion of 11 th-grade graduates who entered vocational education rather than university—initially expressed plans to obtain a higher education degree, only about half of that number eventually followed through. This means that less than one-third of those who chose the vocational track ultimately transitioned to higher education.

Moreover, even those who did manage to enroll in higher education institutions often took a markedly different path from their academic track peers. Among vocational track students who later pursued higher education, the overwhelming majority enrolled in distance-learning programs: 76% for those entering vocational school after 9 th grade, and 79% for those entering after 11 th grade. In stark contrast, only 5% of academic track students took this form of education. This suggests that while academic track students' plans were largely realized, a substantial share of vocational track students experienced what can be described as a patterned and mostly unforeseen *defeat of hopes*—a moment in which they found themselves compelled to revise or abandon their original aspirations.

This statistical pattern reveals a deeper puzzle that this study aims to investigate. The recurring disruption of initial plans among vocational students points to the operation of a hidden force—one that only becomes visible over time. My findings suggest that this force is cultural in nature, manifesting through a dominant cultural narrative: a shared *coming-of-age* storyline that individuals draw upon when interpreting their experiences and making judgments. I argue that this meta-narrative comes into conflict with the institutional 'temporal landscapes' (Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013) inhabited by the respondents. This conflict unfolds through *timeliness*—that is, through the revaluation of events and decisions in light of mismatches between narrative time, institutional rhythms, and lived temporal experience. Such temporal dissonance underlies the unpredictability of these trajectories—because clashes in

Table 1 Plans and actual trajectories (based on nationally representative sample of TrEC panel longitudinal study)

Trajectory	Total	Planned HE at age ~ 15 Declared they planned to get a higher education eventually (when asked in 9 th grade: Autumn/Winter 2011-2012)	Planned HE at age ~ 17 Declared they planned to get a higher education eventually (when asked in 11 th grade or in vocational school: Autumn/Winter 2013-2014)	Actually got HE Graduated from or currently studying in university (as of Autumn of 2019)	… among them at distant HE programs Graduated from or currently studying in university, *at a distant program* (as of Autumn of 2019)
Basic vocational track: vocational school after 9 th grade	**36%**	29%	58%	28%	76%
Subsidiary vocational track: vocational school after 11 th grade	**7%**	57%	60%	33%	79%
Basic academic track: university after 11 th grade	**48%**	83%	94%	92%	5%
Total		**56%**	**75%**	**57%**	**25%**

Note: A weighting procedure was applied to correct for panel attrition. Cases were adjusted using weighting coefficients calculated for the final wave included in each analysis (e.g., when analyzing variables from the 2nd and 4th waves, weights from the 4th wave were applied). The author is grateful to Anastasia Lukina, who manages the TrEC data, for performing the weighting used in this table

pacing and sequencing often reveal themselves only after the fact, they are difficult to anticipate in advance.

Embracing the 'from good to bad' emplotment

When comparing the narratives of vocational track choosers one year after their decision and in subsequent interview waves, two particularly striking and puzzling patterns emerged. First, there was a marked shift in emotional tone between the first and second waves. A year after graduating from middle school and entering vocational education—typically around the age of 16 or 17—respondents were often enthusiastic about their new environment and optimistic about their future. Two years later, however, these narratives changed dramatically, and this more negative tone persisted in the following interviews.

For example, in the first wave, Svetlana spoke with excitement[4]:

> **R**: I'm now thrilled I've entered this school. <…> Everything unfolded in such a way that I liked it a lot. For one, I had this soldering hands-on training this year. I was so excited! I like it all here. And my parents are happy that I'm happy, that's the main thing. (Svetlana, Krasnodar, 1st wave).

Two years later, her evaluation had changed entirely:

> **I**: If you would be making the decision right now, well, from scratch, if you could return and decide anew, what would you do?
> **R**: I would never go to a vocational school.
> **I**: No?
> **R**: No. And when I have my own kids, they will not go to a vocational school. I will… I don't know… I will do anything so that they only go to university. (Svetlana, Krasnodar, 2nd wave).

Second, most respondents reported unforeseen but decisive changes in their educational plans. Many adjusted their ambitions downward, both in general outlook and concrete goals. Some abandoned or postponed their plans to pursue higher education; others, even if they remained committed to the goal, ended up enrolling in less prestigious, less rewarding distance-learning programs. These puzzling developments—supported by the statistical data—are difficult to explain using existing literature on educational choice and trajectory. Both patterns are clearly temporal in nature: they describe developments unfolding over time and follow a classic 'from good to bad' narrative plot (Franzosi, 1998).

The narrative nature of meaning-making emerged not only in the evaluative framing of choices but also in how respondents understood the objects of choice themselves. Close reading of the interviews revealed that many respondents had vague

[4] All names in the dataset were anonymized. The translation is mine.

or confused understandings of what distinguished higher education from vocational education, or what enrolling in a vocational school would actually entail. Counter-intuitively, this suggests that the meaning of such life-defining categories as 'university' or 'vocational school' is not fixed or definable in any straightforward way. Instead, these meanings are *narratively constituted*—formed and re-formed through personal storytelling over time.

Many respondents also expressed the belief that they had 'outgrown' school, identifying a desire to move beyond the perceived infantilism of high school life. This notion of 'growing up' was central to their decisions and evaluations, directly invoking the category of *timeliness*. Indeed, vocational school students are treated more like adults than their high school peers: teachers expect more responsibility, stipends give them a degree of financial independence, some live away from home, and the peer environment is perceived as more mature. Some respondents explicitly stated that they were bored or weary of school and felt it was time to move on.

This mode of decision-making—anchored in a sense of maturity or developmental readiness—stands in contrast to the idea of *emerging adulthood* (Arnett, 2000), which emphasizes a prolonged period of identity exploration and age-deferral. These two frameworks of development represent opposite patterns of timeliness, and this contrast leads to striking differences in how respondents construct meaning around their educational choices.

Contrary to what 'existence theory' suggests (Baert et al., 2022), the life milestones invoked by respondents—such as vocational school and university—do not have fixed meanings. Rather, they are in flux, continually reconstituted through narrative. The coming-of-age meta-narrative, driven strongly by timeliness, renders these meanings unstable and subject to change. When evaluating opportunities and choices, respondents often relied on developmental terms—growing up, maturity, independence—rather than the language of educational or career advancement. Ultimately, many trajectories fell apart not due to external shocks or misfortune, but because of *temporal inconsistencies* between the dominant narratives respondents followed and the institutional frameworks they inhabited. This is a conflict rooted in *timeliness* as a key dimension of narrative experience.

Projective 'reach' and 'clarity': horizons of planning and appropriation of time

Ann Mische (2009: 699) introduced the notions of reach and clarity as key dimensions of projectivity—referring, respectively, to the temporal extension and the specificity of imagined futures. In line with her framework, our data show that vocational school students typically display a short projective reach and low clarity in their temporal orientation. In other words, their visions of the future are often vague; they either refrain from planning altogether or do so within a narrow time horizon. Moreover, they tend to lack concrete ideas about the means, possible scenarios, and resources necessary to achieve their goals.

This short-term planning pattern underscores the distributed nature of decision-making, wherein background narratives—and their interplay with broader temporal structures—exert greater influence than personal, goal-oriented planning. As

will become evident, this influence operates primarily through the dimension of timeliness.

Svetlana from Krasnodar, 17 years old at the time of the first interview, illustrates this pattern:

> **I**: How far in advance do you plan?
> **R**: Well, in theory, I am inclined to plan, but too often, I've had these moments when my plans wouldn't work out, so I plan literally for two to three days, maximum. Apart from that, I plan a lot for myself, and these plans never get realized. (Svetlana, Krasnodar, 1st wave).

Ella, another 17-year-old respondent from the same city, gives a similar answer at her first interview:

> **I**: Do you usually plan? For how long ahead?
> **R**: I never plan. Well, in fact, I guess it goes back to my childhood. All my attempts to plan would usually fail; that's it.
> **I**: Like what, for example?
> **R**: Well, let's say, my day plans. I would plan an evening before: I would go here at this time, and I would go there at that time, and so on. And that totally doesn't working out. So, for me, it is more convenient to work… and to live without any planning. (Ella, Krasnodar, 1st wave).

Long-term goals, when articulated, tend to be repetitive and generic. With minor variations, they usually include a 'standard set': starting a family, building a career that provides stable income, and acquiring personal property—typically an apartment and a car. Earning a higher education degree is also a recurring element, though rarely elaborated in detail (Minina & Pavlenko, 2023; Minina et al., 2020).

While many initially aspired to attend full-time, on-campus higher education programs, by the second wave of interviews (two years later), most respondents had revised these expectations. They now assumed that, if they did pursue university studies, it would likely be through distance education combined with full-time work. As our longitudinal data confirm, this shift in planning was not just rhetorical: for the majority, this was precisely the path they ultimately followed—contrary to their earlier intentions.

Time-related evaluation of events: 'cutting corners' and avoiding 'wasting time'

Because education is inherently structured by time, both making educational choices and making sense of those choices—along with education itself—follow a salient temporal logic. In this regard, the most salient feature is timeliness. Among vocational school students, a common pattern is the preference for the fastest possible progression through life stages. Spending more time than necessary at any given stage is typically seen as undesirable and even irresponsible—a waste of time.

Nikolay from Moscow, aged 19 at the time of his second-wave interview, articulates this accelerated sequencing of life. His reasoning also reflects gendered assumptions about responsibility and adulthood:

> **R**: Well, there's always an option of studying until the 11th grade and then entering a university. But I, frankly, didn't really want to because I realized that I should help my parents financially; the sooner, the better, that's it. And, studying in university, especially considering the master's program as well … well, I'm a guy after all, not a girl … to be constantly a freeloader for so long. And then, in the age of, let's say, twenty-three, twenty-four, I would only be beginning to build my own life, and only then starting to climb the career ladder. Roughly speaking, at the age of twenty-seven – twenty-eight, I would only begin to get a reasonable income, if I'm lucky enough. I mean, for a guy, I think that is quite risky. (Nikolay, Moscow, 2nd wave).

A typical strategy voiced by many respondents is what can be termed 'cutting corners'—seeking educational shortcuts to reduce perceived delays in entering adult life. For instance, choosing a vocational school after the 9 th grade rather than continuing to the 10 th is commonly understood as a way to save time and avoid the perceived inefficiency of high school. Importantly, these evaluations are often framed not by knowledge acquisition but by formal credentials—educational certificates seen as markers of progress.

In Russia, vocational schools are legally required to provide general secondary education alongside professional training. As a result, students graduate with both a secondary general education certificate and a vocational qualification. In contrast, students on the academic track receive only the general education certificate. This dual-certification system is frequently used by vocational students to justify their choice, as illustrated by Artyom from Blagoveshchensk, aged 17 during his first interview:

> **I**: Why didn't you [go to a high school and] graduate from 11th grade and then enter a university?
> **R**: Well, it is easier in a vocational school, I suppose, because here I'm completing the 10th and 11th grades within a year, and in addition, I'm getting a profession. (Artyom, Blagoveshchensk, 1st wave).

Yet, when we consider actual university admission outcomes, the academic track remains the more reliable path. The quality of general education is typically higher in high schools, enhancing students' chances of university success. Given that many vocational school students still express aspirations for higher education, their initial track choice may appear paradoxical—if not outright irrational.

This apparent puzzle, however, can be resolved by uncovering the temporal structures that underlie their meaning-making. The logic of their choices is not grounded in an instrumental calculus of future outcomes but in an immediate, time-sensitive evaluation of progress—what feels timely, efficient, and

responsible at a given life stage. Timeliness emerges as a key factor in understanding how educational decisions are made.

Coming-of-age as a meta-narrative

The quotes above reveal a striking reliance on temporal judgments and underscore the centrality of *timeliness* in evaluating educational and professional choices. In nearly all cases, the temporal framework is explicitly or implicitly structured around age and the normative expectations attached to particular life stages. This pattern of evaluation recurs throughout the interviews and can be understood as constituting a broader *coming-of-age* meta-narrative.

What kind of plot does this meta-narrative entail? At its core, it portrays the coming-of-age period as the most formative and generative phase of life—one in which an individual transitions from childhood to adulthood, both physiologically and socially. Social development is imagined as closely tracking physiological maturation, unfolding through a linear and successive sequence of stages in which each subsequent phase is expected to surpass the preceding one. Within this framework, any delay, repetition, or reversal of stages is interpreted as a sign of developmental failure—either a 'developmental delay' or a 'regression.' Timeliness, then, is judged against normative age-related benchmarks: individuals are expected to have 'outgrown' certain choices or experiences, which are retrospectively assigned to an earlier developmental stage.

This meta-narrative creates a rigid alignment with external temporal landscapes, fostering what Baert et al. (2022) call 'existential urgency.' In their theory, such rigidity serves as a mechanism of inequality. They argue that advantaged individuals often enjoy the privilege of *reversible time*, allowing them to revisit or delay life-course decisions without penalty. The centrality of the coming-of-age narrative among disadvantaged youth substantiates the authors' claim: here, time is experienced as irreversible and tightly constrained, heightening the stakes of 'on-time' progression through educational and social milestones.

Show must go on: rejection of gaps and delays

As the quotes above illustrate, postponing the start of a career until one's mid- or late twenties is often perceived as both risky and irresponsible. This attitude is particularly evident in respondents' rejection of the very idea of a 'gap year.' Among those who had initially planned to continue into the 10 th grade but were forced to leave school due to unforeseen circumstances, most reported choosing their vocational school quickly and somewhat spontaneously. In their view, even a random or unplanned choice was preferable to taking a year off. Once again, *timeliness* serves as the guiding principle of meaning-making: a spontaneous but timely decision is judged as more legitimate than a well-considered but delayed one.

Svetlana from Krasnodar, introduced earlier, recalled how she ended up choosing her vocational school almost by chance:

> I met one girl at a summer camp four years ago. So, we're still in contact. The other day, we were chatting on the Internet, and she was like, 'Where are you going after 9th grade?' I go, 'I don't have any plans.' She's like, 'Enter the KEP [abbreviation of the name of vocational school].' Well, in the beginning, I didn't even take it seriously… [before eventually enrolling in it].

Later, during a trip to Krasnodar with her mother, they met the same friend, who offered to show them the school she had mentioned:

> … I liked it, and I'm like, 'Mom, why not? Why shouldn't I enter [this school]? This is more than I ever planned for myself.' And she's like, 'Well, let's try.' (Svetlana, Krasnodar, 1st wave).

Even when respondents knew in advance that they would leave school after the 9th grade, the choice of a vocational program or future profession was rarely based on a long-term plan. Instead, decisions were often guided by gut feeling, convenience, or a sense of urgency—under the assumption that one must *keep moving* and avoid interrupting the educational trajectory. Georgy, a 17-year-old student from St. Petersburg, described how he made his choice:

> **I**: OK. So why [did you choose] this profession? How did it happen?
> **R**: How did I choose? Well, that was quite a story. Because, like, I'm lazy. In the 9th grade, my parents told me: 'Choose a vocational school.' Well, I'm like… They gave me a book with kind of descriptions of all these vocational schools. So, I randomly opened a page and put a finger on the page, randomly. There turned out to be that railway service technical school, so I told them I chose this. (Georgy, 1st wave, St. Petersburg).

These accounts exemplify how the imperative to maintain momentum—deeply embedded in the coming-of-age meta-narrative—leads young people to avoid gaps or delays, even at the cost of reflective decision-making. In this logic, any forward movement is preferable to stasis, and the continuity of one's trajectory is treated as a value in itself.

The irreversibility of coming-of-age

As a paradigm of natural development, the *coming-of-age* meta-narrative prescribes a steady, upward trajectory—one that allows no room for gaps or delays. Yet this logic of progressive advancement extends well beyond education and professional development, encompassing other spheres of life such as intimate relationships and the establishment of independent households. One of the most consequential effects of this type of irreversible change is the reconfiguration of what is perceived as possible or desirable over time.

At the first wave of interviews, conducted shortly after respondents had graduated from the 9th grade, they were still largely children—financially dependent on

their parents and only recently having lived in their family homes. From this vantage point, many confidently stated that they intended to pursue higher education and expected it to be of a comparable level and quality to what their peers on the academic track would obtain. Many emphasized that choosing a vocational route did not mean forfeiting the opportunity to attend university.

However, by the time of the second wave of interviews—approximately two years later—many respondents had transitioned into what they themselves described as more 'adult' roles. Most had become financially independent, some had moved to larger cities, and many had started living in their own apartments, sometimes with partners. In this new life context, returning to a position of full dependency on their parents in order to pursue full-time university studies no longer seemed feasible—socially, economically, and emotionally. The imagined future of being a full-time university student had effectively evaporated, rendered inaccessible not just by external constraints but by the internalized sense that it was now *too late*.

This illustrates the *irreversibility* of coming-of-age. Opportunities once seen as realistic and desirable had, within two years, become obsolete—framed by the respondents themselves as 'missed' or 'no longer timely.' Quantitative data from the TrEC study broadly support this trend: while two out of three vocational track students initially intended to pursue higher education, only about half of that number had actually obtained a degree or enrolled in a university six years later (see Table 1). Moreover, those who did enroll in university typically opted for lower-quality, distance-learning programs—chosen precisely because they allowed for continuing an 'adult' lifestyle centered around work and independence. This widespread turn to distance education is part of a broader structural pattern in Russia, where a vast sector of higher education consists of part-time or remote programs. During the period studied, nearly half of all higher education degrees were issued through such programs. These degrees disproportionately served so-called 'adult students'—many of whom already held vocational qualifications and combined study with full-time employment.

For some, this shift resulted in what Jennifer Silva (2013:87) terms an educational 'betrayal'—a sense that the social promise of education had been broken. This feeling was a recurring theme in the later waves of interviews, as youthful optimism gave way to adult realism, and often, to a deep sense of disillusionment. One of the most vivid examples comes from Svetlana, the respondent from Krasnodar, who at age 20 reflected bitterly on the realities of her higher education options:

> It's just after a vocational school, and what are the actual prospects for one? You're getting a secondary education, and as a sensible person, you want to get a higher education, right? And do you know what the allurement is? 'You'll go to the vocational school, and after the third year, you'll enter a university.' Yeah, sure! It's such a ruse. <…> I mean, when you're sixteen, they lure you like with candy, and then they're like… 'there's no candy'! What they offer [instead] is <…> just some [lower-tier] universities, where you don't physically have to go, you can study there virtually. <…> They're like: 'You are so cool, you're gonna study, like, awesome. Just pay the money!' It's kind of meaningless. So meaningless! I could just give thirty thousand roubles to that

woman [points to someone nearby] for the same effect. Because what's the point? It's pointless. It's better not to study at all than go for that. That's it. (Svetlana, Krasnodar, 2nd wave).

By this point, full-time, on-campus education appeared to Svetlana as a missed opportunity—irrecoverable because of her life stage, a conflict rooted in the logic of timeliness. In a follow-up exchange, she made the connection explicit:

I: … Well, do you have an opportunity to enroll in a government-sponsored program or fund your higher education program yourself?
R: Well, there are opportunities to get state funding, but it demands passing the exams. I mean, I… well, I kind of don't want to get a state-funded spot for the following reasons… I mean, it's gonna take too much time to study. At this point, I already want more self-sufficiency. I need to work, and that's why I would rather enter, well, a distance education program, and there are no state-funded spots there. <…> My parents kind of told me: 'You, kind of, can enroll on a commercial basis; we'll help pay for it.' They'd actually like me to go full-time, but I don't want to. For me, the main reason is, well, the time. That's the only thing. If I had gone [to university] right after high school, I would have indeed enrolled full-time. But there are those two [extra] years, and even though it's just two years… I can't manage full-time studies now.
I: And it takes four years on-campus, right? Which option is better? What about distance education?
R: Well, on-campus, yeah, it's like that. Well, the bottom line is… I'd graduate at twenty-five. For me, that's a bit too long. I'd have been studying for nine years straight. <…> Even if it is eight, I've already studied almost four years now. To go for another four – that would be suicide. (Svetlana, Krasnodar, 2nd wave).

By the third and fourth waves of interviews, Svetlana confirmed her regret about not experiencing student life or gaining a more prestigious qualification. Yet from her current position—working in a bank and enrolled in a distance-learning program—she saw higher education as a mere formality: a credential required to avoid 'those shocked stares' from HR professionals at job interviews. Svetlana's account is exceptionally articulate, but the themes she raises recur across the dataset.

A similar logic of irreversibility appears in Alexander's narrative. At age 18, in the first wave, he described his decision to enter vocational school not because of his preference for early specialization, but because of a perceived sequencing constraint involving mandatory military service:

R: I wanted to complete my education first and then go to the army. After the army service, I doubted I could study.
I: You mean, if you would complete all 11 grades, then…
R: Then I would get [drafted]…
I: And you might not have managed to enter a school afterwards?
R: Yes. Yes. I might not have managed to enroll. That's the reason why. I wanted to complete my education first and then go to the army. That's why I left second-

ary school after 9th grade [and went to a vocational school]. (Alexander, Krasnoyarsk, 1st wave).

Taken together, these narratives show how young people's choices are structured by a shared temporal logic and propelled by the imperatives of timeliness. The coming-of-age meta-narrative frames life as a linear, irreversible sequence, where delays are not merely inconvenient but existentially disorienting. Within this framework, the future becomes less predictable—not due to individual indecision, but because it hinges on how this narrative intersects with the timing of educational transitions and emerging adult responsibilities, generating timeliness-based evaluations such as 'too late' or 'overdue.' The perceived urgency to 'move on' drives young people to make premature or suboptimal choices—ones that later foreclose opportunities once imagined as open. This temporal pressure, intensified by social inequality, ultimately transforms aspirations into regrets, as the logic of timeliness overrules more flexible and deliberative approaches to the life course.

Conclusion

In this paper, I offer a refined concept of narrative that complements the standard understanding of narrative as a sequence of segments by introducing the dimension of *timeliness*. Timeliness refers to the internal tempo of a narrative—the prescribed duration of episodes and the rhythm by which they unfold. Many narratives do not merely follow a sequence but organize it through temporal cues such as urgency, pacing, or rhythm. Salient in some narrative forms (e.g., poetry or music) and barely perceptible in others (e.g., chess notation or computer code), timeliness drives narrative flow through such cues, shaping how sequences are experienced and interpreted. This applies both to narrative as a concrete story and to meta-narratives or background stories composed of multiple similar stories, such as the 'American Dream.' By foregrounding timeliness, this conceptual refinement captures both the lived, subjective time of actors and the objective, measured time shared across social contexts. In doing so, it addresses a central theoretical challenge that has persistently animated sociological debates on temporality: how to reconcile subjective, experiential time with objective, socially shared time in a unified account of action.

Timeliness shapes meaning-making in powerful ways because the evaluation of events within a narrative depends not only on their order but also on their duration. It foregrounds categories of evaluation such as 'premature,' 'belated,' 'overdue,' or 'ill-timed.' Deviations from expected narrative rhythms alter meanings, producing judgments such as 'untimely,' 'long-awaited,' or 'overmature.' Timeliness thus emerges as a valuable tool for analyzing action and decision-making.

To demonstrate the productivity of this theoretical innovation, I examined evolving decision-making patterns among vocational-track students in Russia. Drawing on qualitative and quantitative longitudinal data, I investigated why these students often experienced sudden breakdowns in their educational plans despite the absence of any identifiable external disruptions. I find that these shifts were shaped by a shared *coming-of-age* narrative that organizes education and career within a

naturalized life-course logic, aligning developmental expectations with perceived stages of psychological or physiological maturation.

The timeliness of the coming-of-age narrative played a central role in life-course dynamics. Respondents often described themselves—sometimes with surprise—as having 'outgrown' education. Their decisions were not driven by stable long-term goals but by temporal evaluations such as 'too late,' 'too long,' or 'no longer age-appropriate.' This supports the theoretical premise that timeliness conditions how narratives are lived and acted upon. Yet, the findings go further, revealing an additional feature of timeliness: the degree to which narrative time is perceived as *reversible* or *irreversible*. Irreversibility, in this case, functions as a constraint—contrasting with the 'reversible time,' previously shown to be a privilege (Baert et al., 2022). The urgency to 'move on' limited actors' temporal flexibility, undermined deliberative planning, and reduced their capacity for future-oriented agency.

While I had anticipated variation in the salience of timeliness, the empirical data extended this by showing that heightened salience can suppress actors' projectivity—their ability to imagine and pursue future possibilities (Mische, 2009). In such cases, action is less shaped by foresight than by an unfolding temporal logic, akin to the way a musical motif carries a listener forward, shaping affective and cognitive states.

These findings also point to a limitation in relying solely on concepts such as imagined futures, anticipations, or projections (Beckert & Suckert, 2021; Hall, 2016; Mandich, 2020; Mische, 2009; Tavory, 2018; Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013). While the vocational-track students began their studies with clear aspirations and future-oriented plans—similar to those of their academic-track peers—their actual trajectories unfolded differently. Over time, many of them abandoned their initial aims and priorities, not because of new external constraints, but due to a growing misalignment with a deeper, background narrative: the narrative of coming-of-age. Unlike discrete goals or scenarios, such narratives provide evolving templates for how life should unfold. They structure experience not through fixed endpoints, but through a temporal logic that actors live through, often without conscious articulation. When personal trajectories no longer 'fit' these templates—an outcome not foreseeable at the outset—aspirations are gradually reshaped, re-evaluated, or let go. Thus, beyond goals and projections, it is the narrative we live by that ultimately orients action, and as it unfolds, it can either sustain or undermine the imagined futures we once confidently held.

This dynamic also offers a new perspective on the achievement–aspiration paradox, wherein disadvantaged actors express high aspirations but often end up in less favorable positions (Lizardo, 2017: 101). By revealing how background narratives guide and reshape trajectories, the theory helps decipher the black box of short-termism previously shown to undermine life chances. The refined concept of narrative developed here thus contributes to understanding how culture shapes inequality—not through values or beliefs, but through temporally embedded narrative forms.

More broadly, the theory presented here identifies a temporal form of cultural structuring—an often-overlooked but crucial way in which culture shapes social life over time. Relatedly, by emphasizing timeliness as an essential narrative dimension, I recover the temporal and processual specificity of narrative—a feature often lost

when 'narrative' is used interchangeably with atemporal concepts such as beliefs, values, or meanings.

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Data availability The data used in this study are available upon request from the national longitudinal cohort study *Trajectories in Education and Careers* (TrEC – http://TrEC.hse.ru/), conducted with support from the Basic Research Program of the National Research University Higher School of Economics.

Declarations

Ethical approval This research did not involve data collection or direct interaction with human subjects. It is based on the analysis of an existing dataset, in which all sources were fully anonymized and are not individually identifiable. As such, the study did not require formal ethical approval.

Conflict of interest Dmitry Kurakin declares that he has no conflict of interest.

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