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# Biography as a “Tree of Choices”: Discovering the Life Trajectories of Young Entrepreneurs in Russia

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## Biography as a “Tree of Choices”: Discovering the Life Trajectories of Young Entrepreneurs in Russia

### Abstract

The article reveals the life trajectories of Russian entrepreneurs in the context of four modern institutions of socialization which determine individual career paths—family, education, social environment and professional experience. Our empirical data were 20 semi-structured narrative interviews with entrepreneurs analyzed based on grounded theory (open and axial coding). We analyzed individual life trajectories as “trees of choices,” where the main branches are institutions of socialization, and the subsequent branches—individual life features. Finally, we showed the meanings of each institution and found out the determining role of gender and the city of socialization. The empirical output is a model of life trajectories, which we plan to test in a future survey using the strategy of mixed methods research.

### Keywords

Entrepreneur, Individual Life Trajectories, Institutions of Socialization, Mixed Methods Research

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*The article reveals the life trajectories of young Russian entrepreneurs. We discover trajectories in the context of four institutions of socialization determined career paths—family, education, social environment and professional experience. Our empirical data include interviews with 20 entrepreneurs. It was analyzed based on open and axial coding procedure. We visualized trajectories as “trees of choices”, where the main branches are institutions of socialization, and the subsequent branches—individual life circumstances. Finally, we showed the meanings of each institution and reveal the significant role of gender and the city of socialization in career paths. The empirical output is a model of life trajectories of young entrepreneurs, which we plan to test in a future survey. Keywords: Entrepreneur, Individual Life Trajectories, Institutions of Socialization, Entrepreneurs as Community*

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Entrepreneurship was formed in Russia only at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Notably the emergence of entrepreneurs is inextricably linked with the end of Soviet Union and sequential changes in the Russian economy. Thus, the planned economy was replaced by a market economy with numerous reforms. Recent level of entrepreneurship intention in 2012 was low: 4 % of respondents said that they are ready to open a business in the next 3 years and they were mostly people under 30 year-old (61%), who did not experience life in the Soviet Union (Grishaev & Nemorovsky, 2011).

Russian entrepreneurs are heterogeneous group of people. They are diverse in level of education, have origins from different social groups and come to entrepreneurship with different motivations. Russian researchers describe them as group where some of them as solid, personable people, while others as mafia members (Shkaratan, 1993). We were interested in the life trajectories of “experienced” entrepreneurs, not nascent ones: most of them leave entrepreneurial activities as a result of business failure and start working for hire (National Research University Higher School of Economics, 2007).

Generally, entrepreneurs were not positively perceived in twenty last years. Previously “Russian schools” have a cult of the exact sciences being the most challenging, intellectual and important for society. Russian “society” values engineers, computer scientists, physicists, physicians, and parents tried to develop these skills in their children. As a result, it is difficult for Russian entrepreneurs to obtain information how to make business as their education and family do not contribute the development of the business skills. Pecherskaya (2012) presents the same idea in her research: just 5% of Russian universities study entrepreneurship both practically and theoretically and only 10 of the 5% provide financial support and networking for their students. Additionally, family members often have a negative attitude towards entrepreneurship: during the end of the USSR, several businessmen became rich by buying shares of oil and gas companies. This money perceived “as easy and dishonest,” negatively influencing on people’s attitude towards entrepreneurship (Verhovskaya & Dorokhina, 2012). In Russian classical literature, the image of the entrepreneur was presented as negative (Milyokhina, 2005).

We define the “*life trajectories*” as the series of situations consistently occupied by the same person in a changing space and subjected to the endless transformations (Truc, 2011).

Generally, life trajectories are the movements in social space, constructed and modified within the confines of personal intentions. Thus, life trajectories represent *different lifelines* depending on personal biography. A life trajectory can be represented *as a tree* where its branches are individual life features with diverse role of the institutions of socializations. We are exploring the role of *institutions of socialization* in an individual's decision to become entrepreneur. Thus, this institutions as sustainable forms of human activity, provides social stability and fix the rules of social interaction. Social institutions dictate norms of social relations and legitimize inequality.

The institutions of socialization such as education, parents' family and close surrounding, affect their choices of career path. How life trajectories of young entrepreneurs were formed in the context of modern institutions of socialization? Therefore, the typologies of life trajectories determine the role of social institutions in entrepreneurial activity and show what define the paths to entrepreneurs in Post-Soviet Russia. This paper investigates how in "unfavorable" business environment the entrepreneurs were developed. Personally, we have an interest in business and entrepreneurship spheres, as we believe that innovations drive the progress. People who make these changes have to be listened and their biographies have to be investigated. Working in both sociological and management fields in the Higher School of Economics in Russia, we are interested in combining human studies with rather practical business investigations.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The study was carried out in 2013-2014 years in Moscow. In present study 20 narrative interviews was conducted with entrepreneurs. The materials were analyzed by qualitative data analysis procedures as open and axial coding. Narrative interviews have the potential to validate individual knowledge and to understand motives whose designation one of the main aims of the current study. Narrative interview is unformalized (respondent's story is an improvisation) and it gives "freedom" in the narration, but the structure and logic of the narrative is also present.

### ***Participants***

The informants were 18-30-year-old entrepreneurs. We applied the purposive sample. So, we understand an entrepreneur is an individual who registered in accordance with the law and had been owned his or her business for at least 3 years. Majority of participants are the owners of "small business" and the information about the type of business was not collected as part of the current study. The informant's characteristics include socio-demographic data such as age and gender. These assumptions were made based on literature sources (Lytkina, 2004) where male and female life trajectories are different due to different social roles they play. The man, as a head of the family and the primary wage earner should bring a steady income, providing his family with everything necessary. Business, being a risky activity, goes against this theory, which explains the parental (especially mothers') disapproval, for whom stability is a key element of successful family development. In turn, parents mostly support girls, as they believe that their daughters need to find a satisfying employment. So, the way of earning money and the financial side in general go by the wayside.

Two different age categories were chosen. Individuals who were bringing up modern institutions of socialization in Russia (under the market economy conditions) would have different life trajectories from those who were born in the Soviet Union period (before 1991). Twenty respondents participated in the research: 10 men and 10 women, aged 18 to 30 years (Table 1).

**Table 1. The Characteristics and Size of the Purposive Sample**

|              | 18-24 years   | 25-30 years |
|--------------|---------------|-------------|
| Male         | 5             | 5           |
| Female       | 5             | 5           |
| Total number | 20 interviews |             |

Interviews were usually taken in cafes during the lunch break due to a lack of free time entrepreneurs have. This informal atmosphere facilitates communication where informants were open-minded and honest. They enjoyed talking about themselves in details and shared their personal life stories. Each of the narrative an interview was divided into 3 parts:

1. *The phase of free narrative story*, which is generally described by the respondent without the interviewer's intervention.
2. *The phase of narrative questioning* where the interviewer asks questions to identify the necessary details about the respondent's life.
3. *The evaluation phase* where the respondent is asked to evaluate his/her life.

Narration went under thematic blocks: informant's family, education, social environment and professional experiences.

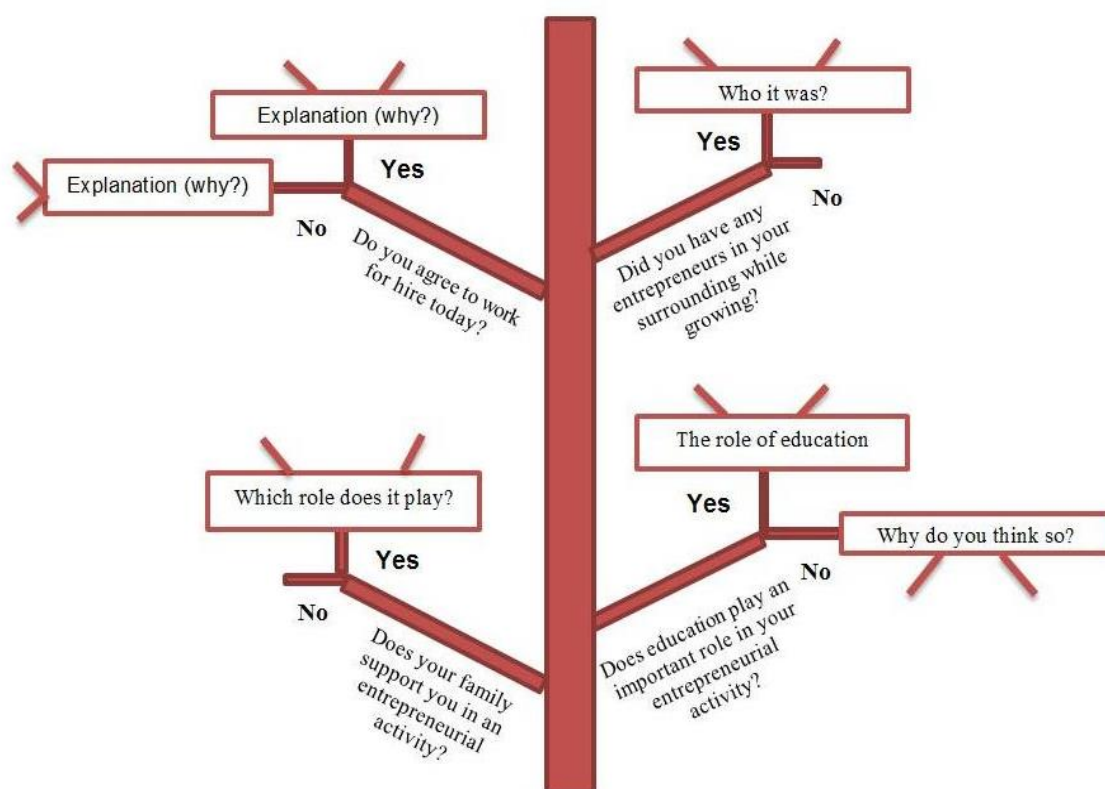
We applied the main approaches to analyze narratives is open and axial coding procedure. This technique makes a transition from an individual's experience to the general categories which we formed via four institutions of socialization: education, family, professional experience, and social environment (Table 2). Thus, we selected codes from informants' transcripts (open coding procedure) and enlarged them to the categories (axial coding procedure) within each institution of socialization.

Based on coding data we created life trees for each entrepreneur. Twenty trees were created to analyze the respondents' life stories. Each branch was one of the four institutions of socialization. In general, every tree was familiar to the Figure 1.

**Table 2. An Example of the Informant's Narrative Analysis.  
Family as an Institute of Socialization**

| Institution of Socialization | Categories (axial coding)                | Codes (open coding)  | Quotations   |
|------------------------------|--|--|--|
| Family                       | Made his business without family support | Family did not support   | I cannot say that my family supported my idea to become an entrepreneur. I do not have my father and my mother is a pensioner. She had been always against my ideas to go to Moscow, America or China. She wanted me to stay in my home city - Bryansk, and did nothing. I did what I personally found right and what other people recommended, not my family. Thus, there was no business education in my childhood at all. |
|                              |  | Grew up without father   |  |
|                              |  | Mother against Moscow and any other business trips                                 |  |
|                              |  | Did what I personally found right and what other people recommended, not my family |  |
|                              |  | There was no business education at all   |  |

The concept of life trees can be presented as a metaphor where two different but connectable parts (the role of institutions of socialization and tree's typical branching) create a new instrument for analyzing biographies (Chenail, 2012). This idea can be further implemented in presenting individual's *life choices* or *life events* within main institutions of socialization, for understanding their role in choosing life path.



**Figure 1. The Life Trajectories Visualization**

### **The Institutions of Socialization and Choice of Entrepreneur's Career**

As we assumed in our study, each of the four institutions of socialization mentioned above play different role in male and female decision to become an entrepreneur and continue this career path. During the analysis, we also noticed that the respondent's city of socialization makes some differences in their life trajectories. We consider each of them individually.

#### **Education**

An analysis shows that the "education" for men and women carries different meanings. Women understand education as a learning process while men consider it as network development and self-learning. Men mainly underline the social role of education and perceive university as a micro world where students learn from each other's experience and have a good time together. From their perspective, it is really important to visit training courses and to read business literature (these terms are included in the concept of self-education), but the importance of training is not in acquiring new knowledge but in meeting people with the same

values and beliefs. Women, by contrast, understand “education” as a diligent study, which will help to develop their future business.

**Table 3. How Different Male and Female Understand the Role of Education**

|            | Male  | Female   |
|------------|---|--|
| Categories | Social connections and self-education   | An educational process   |
| Quotations | <i>“Education mostly helped me not in terms of knowledge, but in terms of new acquaintances, and party things. Now I understand that it is necessary. I need someone to talk, to see the success.”</i> (Male, 22 years old, Moscow) | <i>“Education helped me a lot, it's definitely a basis, and since I am a financial manager on the enterprise, it is the basis for further action.”</i> (Female, 30 years old, Podolsk resident moving to Moscow) |

Generally, the meaning of education for informants from different size cities of socialization is divers. If an individual was raised in a medium or small city (Lappo, 1997), education was important for the *human capital development* (categories: cognitive and skills development, life position creation). By contrast, for those who grew up in large cities and metropolitan areas, education mainly developed *social capital* (categories: familiarity and interaction with people, the study environment).

### **Family**

During the analyses of family stories, we found that men’s families mostly do not support their entrepreneurial endeavors compared with women’s family. However, it just motivates men to continue their business path. They often did everything in spite of their parents, and in the case of business failure, they stubbornly defended their position by launching new business projects. Thus, the informants decided to become entrepreneurs, based on their personal abilities, ambitions and aspirations: they tried to prove they could succeed.

**Table 4. The Role of Parental Family in Informants’ Entrepreneurial Activities**

|            | Male  | Female  |
|------------|---|---|
| Categories | Parents orientations: fear of risk and uncertainty  | Parents orientations: it is important to find a satisfying employment   |
| Quotations | <i>“My mother considers entrepreneurship as a negative thing because she is concerned about security. It is clear that women are usually concerned about the security of their family.”</i> (Male, 24 years old, Novosibirsk resident moving to Moscow) | <i>“Parents have contributed to everything that I like, regardless of whether it is a science or business.”</i> (Female, 23 years old, Dubossari resident moving to Moscow) |

Furthermore, as in the case of education, the role of the family is different depending on the city of socialization. In the small cities parents tried to prevent their children from being engaged in entrepreneurship as they considered it risky. By contrast, respondents from the bigger cities people noted their parents’ displeasure of entrepreneurship as useless to society.

**Table 5. The Role of Parental Family for Informants from Different Cities of Socialization**

|            | From small cities   | From big cities   |
|------------|---|---|
| Categories | The desire to protect: parental guardianship  | The image of the entrepreneurship activity as useless to society  |
| Quotations | <i>"I could not say that my family supported me in the sense of being an entrepreneur. Mother has always been against my idea to go to Moscow, went to America, went to China, engaged in business. She wanted me to sit in Bryansk and did nothing." (Male, 24 years old, Bryansk resident moving to Moscow)</i> | <i>"No, my parents never supported my business activities as they find it useless. Big problems are even so far, parents are still thinking that I'm doing some kind of nonsense." (Male, 29 years old, Moscow)</i> |

### ***Social environment and professional experience***

We noticed novel trend for men: the more often one changes his job the sooner he starts his own business. Indeed, almost every one of them had dabbled in business at school or as a first-year student. In addition, the majority of men did not want to be employed, compared with women, because of high financial expectation and the desire to be independent. They emphasize the importance of their own daily schedule, own decisions and freedom of action as the core values. Comparison the men, the women are rather positive about the opportunity to work for hire, considering the change of activity as quite acceptable: if offered an interesting business proposal they are more likely to take it.

**Table 6. The meaning of professional experience in decision about career paths**

|            | Male   | Female   |
|------------|--|--|
| Categories | High financial expectations<br>Freedom as a value  | Openness to new things   |
| Quotations | <i>"No way. Unreal. Now that figure, which I presented even top managers do not receive." (Male, 24 years old, Moscow)</i><br><br><i>"It's very cool when you wake up, and do not need to run anywhere. Moreover, I cannot imagine that the results of my work go somewhere. I like to be responsible for my own actions." (Male, 24 years old, Bryansk resident moving to Moscow)</i> | <i>"I believe that everyone needs different sources of income. Basically, I could work for hire, why not, if I would have an offer." (Female, 24 years old, Podolsk resident moving to Moscow)</i> |

During the interviews, it was also found that the respondents' inner circle largely shapes their personality and character. Almost all of them said that while growing they had a model of successful entrepreneur among close people whom they wanted to be like.

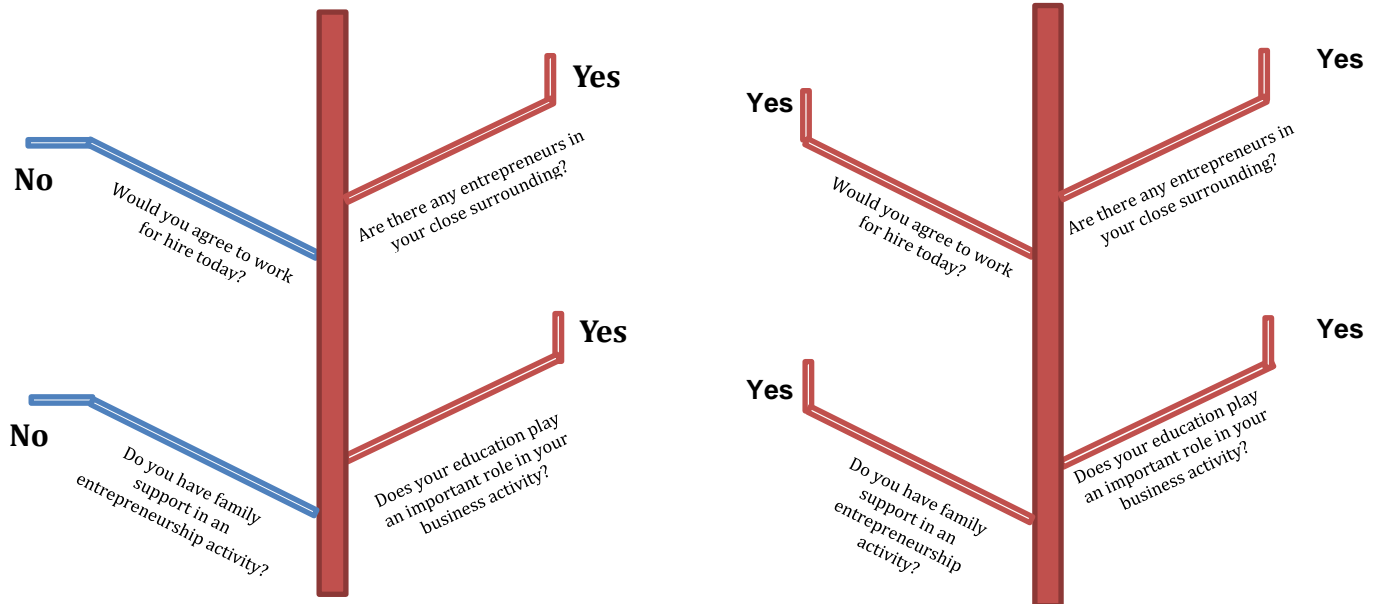
### **Gender and City of Socialization Are Significant Social Factors Determined Entrepreneurs Trajectories**

Consider our methodology and sample size we can't generalize our results to the entire population. Therefore, we consider checking our hypothesis in further quantitative survey. The analysis of the narratives showed that gender and city of socialization are factors, which have been displayed in informant's life trajectories. The differences are depicted in "life trees." They

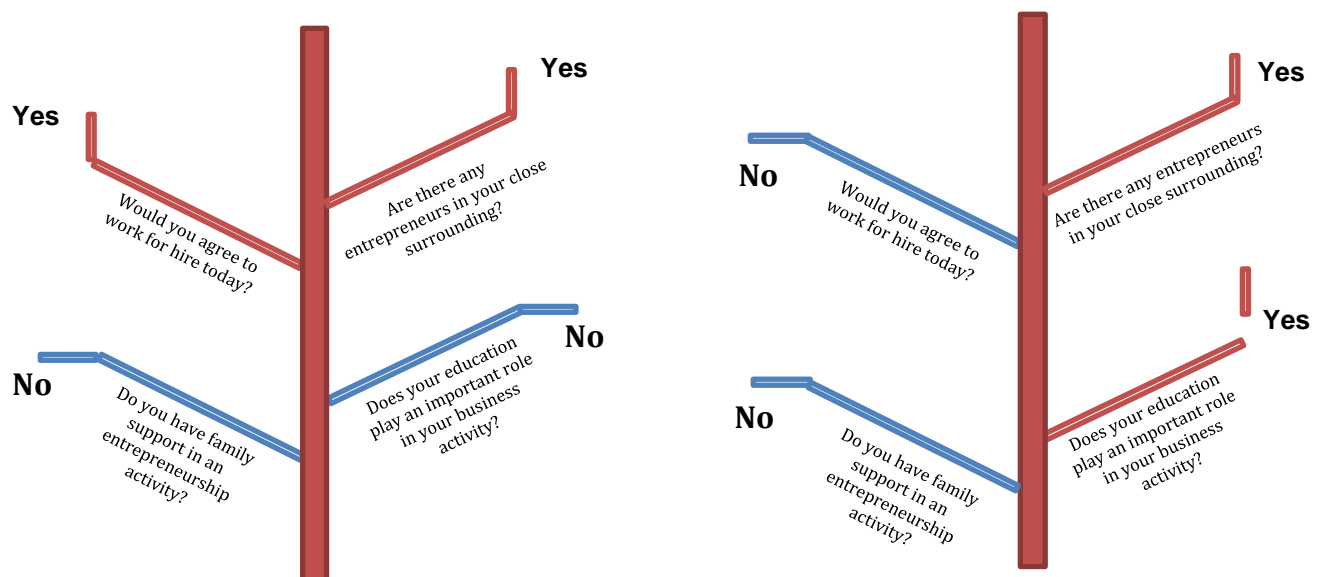


can be also expended *with the codes* which we have got from the narratives, so every tree may show not just the main trends in life trajectories but may also present informant's life features through their quotes. Matrix model of life trajectories of young entrepreneurs in Russia will look like this (Figure 4).

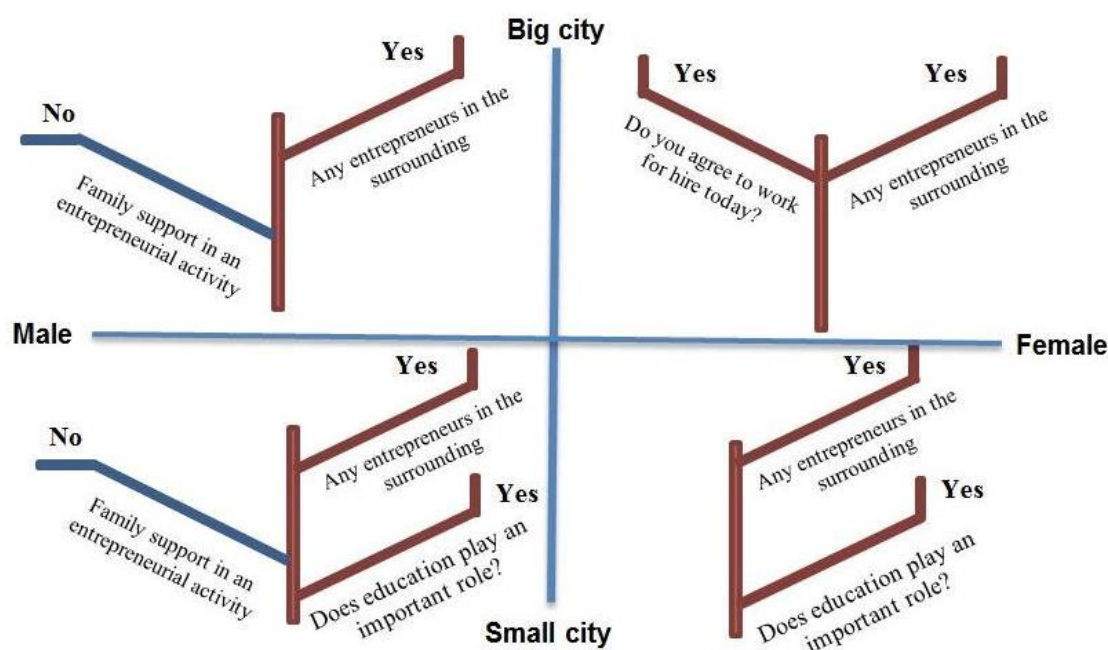
**Figure 2. Male's/Female's Life Trajectories**



**Figure 3. Typical life trajectories of respondents from big /small cities (more/less than 500 thousand people respectively).**



**Figure 4. Life Trajectories of Young Entrepreneurs**



### *Males from big cities*

Informant's family and social environment play the most important role in their decision to become an entrepreneur. Males from big cities are more likely to follow the paths of successful entrepreneurs, despite a lack of family support which may be explained *via categories*: "fear of risk and instability" and "useless to society" (the procedure of axial coding). We called this group "followers."

### *Males from small cities*

Informant's family, social environment and education play the most important role in their decision to become an entrepreneur. Males from small cities are mostly fight with the conditions in which they grew up. Their family does not support them (especially their mothers) – category: "desire to protect." They believe that social networks and self-education will allow them to become successful entrepreneurs – category: "human capital development." We called this group "fighters." The role of the professional experience of men from small cities is not depicted in the matrix model, because even despite the fact that males mostly would not agree to work for hire as well as informants from small cities, no connections between those two socio-demographic characteristics were found.

### *Females from big cities*

Social environment and professional experience play the most important role in their decision to choose this career path. Usually females from big cities are more likely to search for the most interesting career path – category: "openness to new things." They assume that it is crucial to do something that they enjoy. This group of ladies we called "adventuresses."

### *Females from small cities*

Informant's social environment and education play the most important role on their decision to choose this career path. In fact, females from small cities consider that it is necessary to work hard to succeed in business – category: “diligent study.” We called this group of ladies “sloggers.”

### **Conclusion**

The present study identifies diversity of young entrepreneur life trajectories in Russia. These trajectories depending on their socio-demographic characteristics and background (education, work experience, etc.). The analytical findings were obtained and the qualitative data were structured using the open and axial coding procedure. The way twenty biographies were presented, as trees, we find adequate for life story visualization. It presented four institutions of socialization, forming individual's trajectories. Our findings show that life paths of young entrepreneurs are depending on gender and the city of socialization. In fact, there are three tactics: creative, fighting and compromise, parents may use to grow an entrepreneur (Poylova, 2015).

The current research could be also developed, using the principle of mixed methods research called “sequential contributions” (Morgan, 2013). Mixed methods build a chain between the data: the results of qualitative research can be used as a starting point for further quantitative survey. This approach integrates the results of both methods and extends them to the macro level. To check our hypotheses statistically we plan to create an online-questionnaire, including variables as gender and city of socialization, on the one hand, and institutions of socialization on the other.

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