Reconceptualizing Social Capital Theory:
Life Stories of Kazakhstani Youth from Rural or Lower Socioeconomic Backgrounds

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Abstract

Social capital critically shapes the employment opportunities and social mobility of youth. Little is known, however, about how marginalized youth use social capital to pursue education and career aspirations, particularly in countries with developing higher education systems. Drawing on life history narratives of prestigious university graduates from rural or lower socioeconomic backgrounds in Kazakhstan, my research examines how the graduates use social capital in pursuing their education and career. Guided by Bourdieu's critical framework, this dissertation advances four arguments. First, I argue that participants' conceptualization and use of social capital is guided by their ethical stance that differentiated transactional use of social capital from those more focused on improving the quality of life. Second, I contend that the ethical stance of the young people in the study is formed through the process of tarbiyeh, defined as the process of forming and developing an individual's positive mindset, spirit, character, worldview, and moral sense. Third, I demonstrate that participants' tarbiyeh guided their ethical stance on how and when to leverage social capital. Finally, I illustrate that for young people in the study, people who were part of their tarbiyeh process had a significant value, which they argued was more important than the instrumental value of social capital. Ultimately, this dissertation invites scholars to re-envision social capital theory by considering how one's moral values shape when and how they leverage social capital and how one's social capital can impact morality by shaping their worldview and beliefs. By bringing the question of morality into the conceptualization of social capital, the study contributes to the sociological literature by extending and reframing Bourdieu's framework.

Keywords: social capital; social connections; networking; blat; aspirations; marginalized youth; rural youth; lower-income youth; Bourdieu; habitus; ethical dispositions; tarbiyeh; youth in Kazakhstan; narrative inquiry

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In the spring of 2019, Kazakhstani news website Tengrinews shared the story of Assel and Maxat. Assel attended a rural school in a small village of 400 people in Kazakhstan (Pastukhova, 2019) whereas Maxat attended an urban school in one of Kazakhstan's largest cities (Abilmazhitova, 2019). They both aspired to attend prestigious universities in Kazakhstan; however, they grew up in lower-income families and their families could not afford to pay for higher education. Assel's parents were particularly concerned about their daughter's ability to succeed in achieving her educational and career aspirations because they did not have influential connections; however, both Maxat and Assel succeeded in getting the merit-based state funding to attend the university of their choice and built a successful career (Abilmazhitova, 2019; Pastukhova, 2019). While Maxat attributed his educational and career success to his hard work and persistence, Assel seemed to attribute it to her supportive teachers, who motivated her to study hard. In Assel's opinion, most of her rural classmates succeeded in their career because they were high achievers in school, while some had issues with drugs, alcohol, and crime.

When I read these stories, I saw them as incomplete. This tells the stories of two exceptional students, but this is not a typical experience. I wanted to learn more in-depth from Assel and Maxat about their journey towards their academic and career success. While Kazakhstan ensures freedom of speech and freedom of the press, opposition and privately-owned news media organizations in Kazakhstan often face some form of censorship from the government (Human Rights Watch, 2015). For this reason, the exceptional nature of Assel's and Maxat's story is unsurprising. About 90% of readers' comments to Assel's story indicated skepticism by noting that her story is the exception to the rule. Without influential connections or money, the readers said, a student in Kazakhstan would be unlikely to succeed, and most lower-

income rural youth lack both (Pastukhova, 2019) Another reader hinted to the corrupt practices of the administration of the Unified National Test, the highly competitive university entrance exam that students take at the end of upper secondary school, in Maxat's hometown (Abilmazhitova, 2019). Only a few readers commented that everything depends on the person's individual efforts and that there is always a way out of poverty or disadvantages of rural life. (Abilmazhitova, 2019; Pastukhova, 2019).

As suggested by commenters, stories of Maxat and Assel are indeed the exception rather than the rule. According to the latest data of UNESCO (2015) for Kazakhstan, while upper secondary completion rate was high, there were significant disparities in higher education attendance and tertiary completion rates between the poor and wealthy students as well as rural and urban students (see Table i). It is critical to note that rural status and decreased access to educational resources and career opportunities often go hand-in-hand in Kazakhstan. Moreover, the level of poverty in rural areas of Kazakhstan continues to remain higher in comparison to urban areas. For instance, in 2022, the level of poverty in rural areas was 3.4 times higher than in urban areas (Bureau of National Statistics, 2022a).

Table i

UNESCO World Inequality Database on Education, 2015, Kazakhstan

Indicator	Per cent of population by wealth and location			
	Poorest	Richest	Rural	Urban
Upper secondary school completion rate	87%	98%	91%	95%
Higher education attendance, 18-22 years old	11%	54%	14%	40%
Tertiary completion rate, at least 4 years, 25-29 years old	15%	72%	31%	57%

Note. From *UNESCO World Inequality Database on Education, Kazakhstan* (https://www.education-inequalities.org). In the public domain.

The stories of Assel and Maxat and the experiences of the majority of low-income youth, along with my personal experience as a student from lower socioeconomic background, prompted me to investigate what circumstances enable marginalized youth's academic and career success in Kazakhstan. Marginalized youth in this study are defined as youth of 21-29 years from rural or lower socioeconomic backgrounds; this definition will be expanded in the key terms section. This research started with my own curiosity about phenomena in my country. After I read the newspaper articles, I asked myself "how do some rural or lower-income youth like Assel and Maxat find opportunities for academic and career success whereas others do not?"; and "how can those circumstances be replicated and institutionalized to support success for more students who lack the advantages of wealth and position?"

One mechanism for supporting the upward social and economic mobility of rural or lower-income students in Kazakhstan is increased access to higher education opportunities. Scholars have found that investments in higher education have multiple positive benefits both to the individual and the society, including employment and economic outcomes as well as quality-of-life outcomes (Mayhew et al., 2016; McMahon, 2009; Schultz, 1993). Higher education has been expanding dramatically worldwide over the last several decades (Altbach, 2013).

However, despite the high numbers of diverse students attending college, educational inequity in accessing and succeeding in higher education and career persists (Gale & Parker, 2015; Lucas, 2001; Mok & Jiang, 2017; Raftery & Hout, 1993). Higher education scholars reported that students from socially and economically marginalized backgrounds were not only significantly less likely to attend college but also experienced a lower sense of belonging, less

social involvement on campus, and perceived a less welcoming climate than their peers from more privileged backgrounds (Soria & Bultmann, 2014). To this end, I sought to investigate the reasons why some youth from rural or lower socioeconomic backgrounds become socially and economically mobile in Kazakhstan in this dissertation.

Social Capital

A theoretical answer to my question is social capital - defined here as resources accessed through social relationships and used by individuals for purposive actions (Bourdieu, 1986; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Social capital has repeatedly been reported as critical factor in shaping employment opportunities and social mobility of students from diverse backgrounds (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Mok & Jiang, 2017; Rivera, 2015; Stuber, 2011; Yosso, 2005). While the majority of this scholarship concluded that social capital reproduced existing social and economic structures (Allat, 1993; Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Horvat et al., 2003; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Martin & Spenner, 2009; Rivera, 2015; Stuber, 2011), an emerging group of scholars argued that social capital can be mobilized to transform inequities in society (Adjei, 2019; DeJaeghere, Pellowski Wiger, & Wangsness Willemsen, 2016; Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2003; Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Yosso, 2005). Rather than using social capital as a mere passive descriptor, or one which is available at birth (in the case of privileged families), these studies and my work aim to activate social capital as a tool for change that must be leveraged. In other words, social capital may foster the educational and career aspirations of youth, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds (Adjei, 2019; DeJaeghere, Pellowski Wiger, & Wangsness Willemsen, 2016; Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2003, 2011; Yosso, 2005).

Although research shows that social capital can constrain or facilitate educational and career aspirations of youth, it is still unclear how youth, especially from marginalized

backgrounds, perceive and use social capital to overcome the challenges related to inequities in society (DeJaeghere, Pellowski Wiger, & Wangsness Willemsen, 2016; Pellowski Wiger, 2016). DeJaeghere, Pellowski Wiger, and Wangsness Willemsen (2016) argued for the need to conceptually and practically widen the focus of learning in the post-2015 UN Education and Development Agenda to include social relations as crucial processes and outcomes for addressing educational inequalities across the globe. Yosso (2005) argued that minoritized higher education students often had “community cultural wealth” (an alternative to privilege-based social capital), and Adjei (2019) characterized economically poor students’ connections and aspirations as “hustle.” This study explores how youth from rural or lower socioeconomic backgrounds in Kazakhstan understand, acquire, and use social capital and how it facilitates their educational and career aspirations. Similar to previous work done by Adjei (2019) in Ghana, DeJaeghere, Pellowski Wiger, and Wangsness Willemsen (2016) in Tanzania, and Yosso (2005) in the U.S., this work also seeks to conceptualize the broad concept of social capital within the context of Kazakhstan. Prior to engaging in the discussion of this problem in the context for this study and identifying the research questions, it is important to be explicit about how certain key terms are being conceived in this study.

Key Terms and Concepts

Aspirations. Drawing on Appadurai (2004) and DeJaeghere (2018), I define aspirations as “cultural capacities,” which are formed in dynamic interaction with student agency, larger social context and the culture in which students are embedded. Specifically, aspirations are marginalized youth’s “process of hoping and imagining, with others,” about their future educational and career trajectories (DeJaeghere, 2018). The conceptualization of aspirations will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2.

Marginalized youth in this study are defined as youth from rural or lower socioeconomic backgrounds (or both). Drawing on socioeconomic proxies used in national reports and studies on youth in Kazakhstan, in this study, lower socioeconomic status (SES) is determined based on parental educational background and subjective (perceived) SES (see Chapter 3). Youth from lower SES backgrounds in this study come from both urban and rural backgrounds. I identified this group as marginalized based on the previous studies that reported significant disadvantages in accessing and completing higher education between youth from rural and urban backgrounds, and those from higher SES and lower SES backgrounds in Kazakhstan (OECD, 2017; UNESCO, 2015). At the same time, it is critical to consider that marginalization is more than a state, it encompasses feelings of individuals about that state (Mowat, 2015). Drawing on Mowat's (2015) conceptualization of marginalization, I view marginalization as much more nuanced and complex concept than the identification of a specific group as marginalized. Researchers should ask the question how and why these individuals and groups are marginalized and from what. Scholars claimed that to be marginalized means to be and to feel excluded from society and to lack access to the range of opportunities and services open to others, as well as to have a sense that one is not a valued member of the society in which they live (Mowat, 2015). According to Mowat (2015), marginalization manifests itself in a variety of ways including poverty, locale, and failure to conform to the dominant social norms and expectations within schools, which have an impact on aspirations, prospects, and overall well-being of students. Thus, to understand marginalization, scholars should take into consideration the underlying issues of power and domination, which are reflected in the theoretical framework of this dissertation discussed in more details in the below sections.

Drawing on Mowat (2015), I focus on the youth who have historically been reported as marginalized in the context of Kazakhstan; however, I am careful to not assume that these students experience marginalization or identify their lives as marginalized. I also acknowledge that there are other students who are marginalized in Kazakhstan because of other demographic or identity considerations, but for the sake of a focused study, I examine youth from rural or lower SES in this study.

I align this work with Mowat (2015) and recognize that in order to have a deeper understanding of marginalization, it is critical to examine the experiences of individuals from a range of perspectives while admitting that "how (and if) marginalization is experienced will be individualized" to the student and the "set of circumstances pertaining to the child, mediated through the wider societal and political context" (Mowat, 2015, p. 469). As Mowat (2015) argued, it might be case that a sense of marginalization is dependent upon the interaction between what is valued by society and what is valued by individual. For instance, if what is valued by society is not valued by an individual, they are less likely to feel marginalized. In other words, marginalization cannot be assumed to be true for all individuals who share certain characteristics. Therefore, I will examine the subjective experiences of students to understand what circumstances facilitated or constrained their pursuit of educational and career aspirations in face of inequities in society.

Morality and ethics. Although some scholars regard the terms *morality* and *ethics* as distinctly separate or even might see them as contrasting fields of inquiry, drawing from Sayer (2005) and Harper (2009), in this study, I understand these two terms as related and will use them interchangeably. In drawing a distinction, some scholars might use the term *ethics* to refer to informal embodied dispositions formed largely subconsciously through socialization

whereas *morality* might refer to "relatively formal, universal, public norms," albeit as Sayer (2005) argued sometimes terms are reversed (Sayer, 2005, p. 43). In this study, in using the terms morality and ethics, I primarily refer to the informal embodied dispositions, however, sometimes formal norms and rules can be embodied and internalized (Sayer, 2005). As Sayer argued, informal embodied dispositions and moral norms come together "in the realm of inner or public conversation about moral issues, jointly influencing moral decisions" (p. 44). Thus, the distinction between moral norms and embodied ethical dispositions is assumed to be fuzzy (Sayer, 2005).

Moreover, it is important to note that the original distinction between the terms morality and ethics was simply a linguistic one, the former is a Greek and the latter is a Latin term, "each relating to a word meaning *disposition* or *custom* [emphasis original]" (Harper, 2009, p. 1064). Therefore, in this study, I use the terms and deriving adjectives of *moral* and *ethical* interchangeably to refer to feelings, ideas, motives, norms, and preferences of "what kinds of behavior are good, and thus how we should treat others and be treated by them" (Sayer, 2005, p. 8). These feelings and norms also imply ideas of what it means to live a good life.

Social capital is defined as resources accessed through social relationships and used by individuals for purposive actions (Bourdieu, 1986; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). In other words, social capital consists of the relationships with family members, teachers, peers, and others that marginalized youth acquire and use to further their academic and career aspirations. It is critical to mention that what makes the abovementioned relationships social capital is not simply their mere existence but rather an active process of acquiring and using these relationships in the

pursuit of academic and career aspirations. The conceptualization of social capital will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2.

Context and Research Questions

Social capital has mainly been conceptualized by Western scholars based in the U.S. (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1993; 2000) and France (Bourdieu, 1986). Not only does this limit understanding of the potentially more comprehensive and globally diverse concept of social capital, but it also leaves the majority of the world unexplored in the literature conceptualizing and applying the concept. For example, comparative education scholarship demonstrated that a reliance on Western conceptual paradigms obscures the complexity of post-socialist education transformations and systematically eradicates the diversity of post-socialist education spaces by expecting that the post-socialist states will ultimately become just like the West[1] (Silova, 2010a). These narratives depicted post-socialist contexts as corrupt, backward, intolerant, underdeveloped, undemocratic, and chaotic whereas the West was portrayed as efficient, tolerant, developed, democratic, and organized (Perry, 2009). Such depictions reinforce the stereotypes and dichotomize the East and the West.

By exploring the local understandings and uses of social relationships, this study brings nuance to conceptualizations and applications of social capital while telling alternative narratives of post-socialist spaces that foster intellectual development and offer paths toward continued professional growth for youth from economically and socially marginalized backgrounds. The in-depth narratives told in this study will uncover the multiple influences on the experiences of

[1] I draw from Silova et al. (2017) in the use of the term the West and the East. Specifically, the West and the East refer to the lines that were drawn after World War II. The Western Bloc referred to the countries with the capitalist economies who were under the United States and NATO (Western Europe, North America). The Eastern Bloc, on the other hand, referred to the countries that were influenced by or connected to the Soviet Union (Eastern Europe, Central Asia).

youth in undoing the stereotypes and challenging the dichotomies pervasive in the literature. More broadly, the study will contribute to ongoing efforts to question the universality of Western knowledge and to re-examine theory and method for comparative education research in post-socialist contexts (Silova et al., 2017).

In answering the call of several scholars, this study seeks to provide an alternative to studies that homogenize the diversity of the region and fail to capture the unique histories and future imaginaries of education in various states (Silova et al., 2017). Thus, grounding this study in Kazakhstan provides specific national context that disrupts the narrative of homogeneity of all post-Soviet countries. Therefore, in this study, I focused on the youth in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. Half of the population of Kazakhstan was born after the Soviet Union collapsed: those under 29 comprise 51% of the population (Laruelle, 2019). Despite being the majority population, research on youth in Kazakhstan in particular, and in post-Soviet contexts generally, has not included marginalized youth's voices to understand the importance of these social dynamics. Based on global theorizations of social capital and *blat*[2], and my own experiences as a youth from lower-income background in Kazakhstan, I work from the assumption that familial and social influences are integral to the educational and career opportunities of youth in Kazakhstan, but I seek to understand *how* and *why* these connections work. Therefore, in my dissertation I focus on exploring how youth from rural or lower socioeconomic backgrounds in Kazakhstan develop and utilize social capital in their pursuit of educational and career aspirations. I would like to specifically focus on youth who were able to successfully navigate these structural

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[2] Blat is the concept used in the Soviet and post-Soviet space to refer to the practice of acquiring and using personal connections to circumvent formal procedures. This definition will be expanded in Chapter 3.
Note on italics: only the first use of words and phrases from another language are italicized, as per APA 7 guidelines (p. 170)

restrictions and gain access to spaces, to which they were unlikely to be part of by virtue of their lower socioeconomic status. Specifically, youth from rural or lower socioeconomic backgrounds (or both), who graduated from prestigious universities of Kazakhstan were recruited for this study. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do youth from rural or lower socioeconomic backgrounds in Kazakhstan conceptualize social capital they use to pursue educational and career aspirations?
2. What value do youth from rural or lower socioeconomic backgrounds ascribe to social capital in pursuing their educational and career aspirations?
3. How do youth from rural or lower socioeconomic backgrounds develop social capital in their pursuit of educational and career aspirations?
4. How do youth from rural or lower socioeconomic backgrounds use social capital to navigate pathways through university admissions, completion, and early career?

Summary of Conceptual Framework

I grounded my study in Bourdieu's (1986) critical framework, which was primarily concerned with how various forms of capital (economic, cultural, social, symbolic) interact with wider social structures to reproduce or transform inequities, and how the day-to-day activities of individuals contribute to this process. Inspired by the intention to overcome the structure-agency binary in sociological research, Bourdieu argued for a conceptual approach that would bring together an interdependent and co-constructed trio - habitus, field, and capital - with none of them being primary, dominant, or causal (Thomson, 2008). Simply stated, field is the bounded social arena in which habitus, an “open system of dispositions,” operates (Bourdieu & Wacquant, p. 133). Thus, habitus mediates between structures and agency, being shaped by the former and

regulating the latter (Navarro, 2006). These three concepts will be defined in greater detail in Chapter 2.

The dynamic interaction between Bourdieu's three heuristic theoretical tools (field, habitus, capital) constitutes the cornerstone of the theoretical framework guiding this study. Field, habitus, and capital are relational concepts, meaning one cannot understand any of the concepts without analyzing the other (Thomson, 2008). They are also dynamic concepts, meaning they can help social theorists to understand the processes that contribute not only to reproduction, but also to transformation of inequities in societies (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). For marginalized youth encountering fields that affirm their habitus, the result is more likely to be the social reproduction; however, when marginalized youth encounter the fields with unfamiliar rules that are likely to challenge their habitus, they experience disjuncture and must learn to navigate these newly defined terrains. For instance, a lower-income rural student attending a prestigious university in a large city may experience a disjuncture between their habitus and the new field of university since they may not be familiar with the university rules. In addition, their capital portfolio will likely be valued differently or even devalued in the new field of university as compared to their portfolio's valuation in their rural school or rural community.

The goal of my empirical research is to understand how youth from marginalized rural or lower socioeconomic backgrounds navigate these newly defined fields to further their aspirations, focusing on how they leverage capital networks, acquire new ones, or the pitfalls of having to venture forward without the set of connections experienced by more privileged students. I further expand and reframe Bourdieu's framework to better fit the context of the study. While I acknowledge the critical role of various forms of capital including economic,

cultural, and symbolic capital in furthering aspirations of youth from marginalized backgrounds, the primary focus of this study is the concept of social capital.

Based on findings present in the literature as well as gaps, there is a need for further research. In my study, I argue that it is crucial to couple Bourdieu's framework with the role of youth agency. Drawing from critical scholars who furthered Bourdieu's framework by emphasizing the youth agency (DeJaeghere, Pellowski Wiger, & Wangsness Willemsen, 2016; Morrow, 1999; Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2003, 2011; Yosso, 2005), I acknowledge that youth are not passive recipients of adult resources, but active in developing and using social relationships to further their aspirations. Thus, examining how students acquire and use social capital in furthering their educational and career aspirations will offer insight into the multiple ways marginalized youth navigate their futures to transform or reproduce inequities in society.

Location of Self in the Study and Ethical Considerations

Growing up in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, I was aware of the class differences between my lower-class family and people with higher socioeconomic status. I saw this in relation to opportunities for education and employment, in particular, because gaining access to both of them requires family wealth and/or connections with influential people. However, with the support of my family, teachers, and peers, I entered the university and got a job, much to the surprise of my relatives and neighbors. It was as if people expected me not to succeed academically and to have only low-status jobs upon graduation because of my socioeconomic background. Some people went so far as to voice this to my parents: "How were your children able to succeed in their education and career despite that you are not wealthy?" The subtext was that my parents could not have provided better conditions and opportunities for my siblings and I than these relatives and family friends had for their own children. My parents' response tended to

attribute success to their and their children's hard work whereas those questioning my parents expected my siblings and I to have the same kind of education, same kind of jobs, as my parents. In more theoretical terms, they had overt expectations about class reproduction because our lower socioeconomic background was expected to limit the availability of opportunities for success. Comparing my career path to those of my rural elementary school classmates, I understand why the majority of people were surprised to see me succeed because I was the exception, not the rule.

I have discussed my initial reflection on these experiences and the factors that contributed to my academic and career success in my published paper on rural disadvantage in accessing higher education in Kazakhstan drawing on autoethnographic approach (Amankulova, 2018):

> My social capital both in and outside of my family seem to be among the major two factors that contributed to my success [successful pursuit of educational and career aspirations]. First, my parents were invested in their children's success in school both emotionally and financially because they viewed education as the only way to get out of poverty. My parents and my extended family members helped me to be aware of not only the limiting power of the class and social structure, but also the transformative power of education and my agency to influence the future. Despite our limited financial resources, my parents paid for tutoring classes in my final year in school to prepare for the Unified National Test (UNT). Based on the results of the UNT, I was able to get the merit-based government-issued grant that covered the full costs of my undergraduate degree, without which my family and I would not be able to afford. I also benefited from government's merit-based scholarships to pursue my graduate degrees. My relationships with extended family members also contributed to my success because my grandmother in the village

took care of me from the time, I was one-year old while my parents worked and lived in the city. Although my grandmother did not attend school after the 8thgrade, she believed in the transformative power of education and shared her wisdom with me. Moreover, I transitioned from rural school to urban school in the third grade, which helped me access better quality education.

The second factor for my success was that my education provided me with social capital that was not available to my family. For instance, I benefited from empowering relationships with teachers who motivated my continued investment in schoolwork. The school culture in Kazakhstan tends to value academic excellence, and high-achieving students typically receive more attention from teachers, whereas low-achieving students are left behind. My teachers in school and university also provided valuable resources, such as information about various educational and career opportunities, recommendation letters, and networks of influential people who would otherwise be outside of my reach. Moreover, my peers in school and university provided access to additional resources, such as job postings and exchange programs. In other words, relationships with my family, peers, teachers, and colleagues had a positive and vital impact on my academic and career success." (pp. 7-8)

It is also critical to note that I was not always successful in acquiring and using social capital to further my educational and career aspirations. There were instances, particularly in my adult career, when I perceived the lack of appropriate connections had been one of the major obstacles to achieve my goals. For instance, when I completed my bachelor's degree, I aspired to work in the government institutions and applied to many entry-level positions in the ministries

and parliament offices. After a number of unsuccessful interviews and my discussions with friends and relatives, I came to believe that the interviews for those positions were usually conducted to only check the box that there was a competitive selection process, but the candidate was already known prior the vacancy was announced. In other words, I perceived it was highly unlikely to get a job in the government office without connections. Due to this belief, I was discouraged from pursuing those goals and changed my aspirations.

My lived experience made me interested in exploring the role of social capital in the educational and career aspirations of students from similar backgrounds to understand whether the factors that affected my success were common to other marginalized students. This, then, is the impetus for my doctoral research.

Therefore, I approached this study fully aware of my own positionality. While my positionality influenced my engagement with participants and the interpretations of the findings, with careful self-reflexivity, it helped me engage with my national community and understand the local context and my participants. I used multiple strategies to create spaces for students to tell their own stories and asked students to co-create the narrative through member-checking my interpretations of their experiences. Finally, this study builds upon the methodology and findings of scholars who have used life histories and narratives as a research methodology to address any biases that might emerge because of my positionality.

Significance of the Study

The study fills three main gaps in the fields of comparative and international education, higher education, and sociology of education. First, although a large body of literature suggests that social capital plays a critical role in the social mobility of youth, little is known about how marginalized youth develop and use social capital to overcome the challenges related to social

inequities. Examining how prestigious university graduates from marginalized backgrounds use social capital to access higher education and to further their aspirations offers insight into the nuanced ways inequities are reproduced or transformed.

Second, this study challenges scholarship that conceptualizes social capital as a possession one inherits or collects for personal instrumental gain and towards theoretical frameworks that include relational and moral aspect of it. Scholars studying social reproduction and social capital paid little attention to the question of morality in understanding people's experiences; thus, ignoring the normative character of life. The examination of normative (moral) implications is critical to better understand and explain both the nature and structure of the inequities and the struggles in the social field, and their normative significance for individuals. By bringing the question of morality into the conceptualization of social capital, the study contributes to the sociological literature by extending and reframing Bourdieu's framework.

Third, the study does not only challenge the dominant conceptualization of social capital developed in the West, but also helps to expose complex processes of transnational mixing; thus, moving beyond East-West dichotomy in knowledge production. Most scholarship on the concepts of social reproduction and social capital have been developed and theorized by Western scholars, which means the robustness of these theories are limited because of the exclusion of locally relevant concepts and how they contribute to the formation of social capital and social reproduction. Therefore, by examining the conceptualization and application of social capital in Kazakhstan, this study contributes to ongoing efforts to question the universality of Western knowledge and to re-examine theory and build methods for comparative education research in post-socialist contexts (Silova et al., 2017). At the same time, through the examination of locally

relevant concepts in the process of formation of ethical dispositions, the study demonstrates how this process is not unique to Kazakhstan. Specifically, every individual in any part of the world experiences the process of formation of moral dispositions as part of their habitus, which as study findings showed, are formed, and transformed in interaction with social structures and inter/national discourses that cross the boundaries of any field. This is important because it helps to move beyond "methodological nationalism" and focus on "the relationality and interconnectedness of Western and other forms of knowledge" (Takayama, 2011, p. 463).

This study also has important implications for stakeholders in the post-Soviet context and beyond, including educators, policy makers, researchers, parents, and students. It sheds light on the circumstances that may help improve higher education retention, graduation, and employment of youth from marginalized backgrounds. Moreover, this study enhances understanding regarding the potential role of higher education as a site for marginalized youth to develop social capital.

Overview of chapters

This chapter positioned my study in terms of its purpose, guiding theoretical framework, and contribution in the field of comparative and international education, higher education, and sociology of education. I briefly described the role of social connections in the post-Soviet context to contextualize this study and my interest in examining the experiences of youth from marginalized backgrounds in Kazakhstan. Then, I provided a summary of conceptual framework guiding this study expanding and reframing Bourdieu's conceptual approach. I also described what brought me to this topic and my positionality as a researcher.

In Chapter 2, I will first review the literature on conceptualizations of social capital and aspirations. Then, I will examine how social relationships were understood and used in the Soviet and post-Soviet era. Third, I will discuss the case of Kazakhstan with a particular

emphasis on higher education system and social relationships to provide contextual background for this study.

In Chapter 3, I will introduce the methodology employed in this study to explore my research questions. Specifically, I will demonstrate why the study employs narrative inquiry methodology with life history interviews as primary source of data, discuss my epistemological commitments as a social constructionist scholar, expand on my researcher positionality, and explain the process of participant selection and recruitment, administration of interviews, data analysis, and writing.

In Chapter 4, I will share the study findings in relation to the conceptualization of social capital. I start the chapter by demonstrating participants' description of the role of social capital for academic and career success in Kazakhstan followed by the description of the shift in participants' values in relation to relationships in family, village community, and gift-giving practices. Then, I explore participants' perceptions about the ethics of connections in relation to what they consider negative and positive uses of connections. I further challenge participants' dichotomous conceptualization of social capital by presenting their conceptualization on a continuum with different gradations. I conclude the chapter by complicating moral views of the participants in the study on the use of social capital. Throughout this chapter, I argue that participants' conceptualization and use of social capital is guided by their ethical stance that differentiated transactional use of social capital from those more focused on improving the quality of life.

In Chapter 5, I argue that the moral stance of young people in the study is formed through the process of *tarbiyeh*[3], defined as the process of forming and developing an individual's positive mindset, spirit, character, worldview, and moral sense. I will further demonstrate that participants' tarbiyeh guided them in leveraging social capital. Furthermore, I illustrate that for young people in the study, people who were part of their tarbiyeh process had a significant value, which they argued was more important than the instrumental value. I conclude the chapter by discussing how tarbiyeh contributes to the literature on social reproduction and social capital.

Finally, in Chapter 6, I will discuss how study findings contribute to re-envisioning social capital theory, discuss study limitations, and directions for future research. I conclude the dissertation with sharing my final concluding reflections as a researcher.

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[3] Note on italics: only the first use of words and phrases from another language are italicized, as per APA 7 guidelines (p. 170)

Chapter 2: Review of Relevant Literature

The idea of social capital as the resource embedded in social relationships first appeared in print as early as 1916 in Hanifan's article *The Rural School Community Center*. However, the concept caught the attention of the research community in 1980s when French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1986) and American sociologist James Coleman (1988), offered the initial theoretical development of the concept by independently exploring and applying the concept in greater detail (Lin, 2001; Portes, 2000). Scholars since have widely adapted, modified, and reshaped the meaning of social capital such that it has nearly lost its meaning in these various and conflicting applications. Therefore, analysis of various conceptualizations of social capital is critical for the use of social capital as a conceptual framework in this study.

I begin this section by analyzing how various scholars have conceptualized social capital as it relates to educational and career trajectories of youth. To do this, I will review perspectives in the literature from functionalists to critical to youth agency, all in relation to applications of social capital. After discussing these three distinct understandings of social capital, I will analyze the concept of aspirations, particularly in relation to economically and socially marginalized youth's social capital and agency.

After analyzing the dominant conceptualizations of social capital in the literature concentrated outside the post-Soviet context, I will historically situate the concept of social capital in the post-Soviet context by employing transversal comparison analysis (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). Specifically, I will examine how social relationships were understood and used during the Soviet and post-Soviet era and how this will influence a study on social relationships in Kazakhstan in relation to student's educational and career aspirations.

Conceptualizations of Social Capital

In this section, I analyze various conceptualizations of social capital and aspirations in relation to educational and career trajectories of youth. I will first analyze the functionalist conceptualizations of social capital grounded in Coleman's (1988) and Putnam's (1993, 2000). theorizations. Then, I will transition to critical perspectives grounded in Bourdieu's (1986) theoretical framework. I will first analyze critical scholars who focused on the processes and practices that reproduce inequities in society emphasizing dominant upper-and-middle-class forms of social capital (Allat, 1993; Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Horvat et al., 2003; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Martin & Spenner, 2009; Rivera, 2015; Stuber, 2011). I will then transition to the critical scholars who focused on the social capital of youth from a perspective emphasizing youth agency and the strengths of economically and socially marginalized communities (Adjei, 2019; DeJaeghere, Pellowski Wiger, & Wangsness Willemsen, 2016; Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2003, 2011; Yosso, 2005). Finally, I will analyze the conceptualizations of aspirations, particularly in relation to marginalized youth's agency and social capital. I argue that while social capital scholarship has provided a comprehensive understanding of how and why social capital facilitates or constrains the educational and career trajectories of economically and socially marginalized youth, fewer studies provided a thorough examination of how marginalized youth's social capital relates to their aspirations, agency, and field to transform or reproduce inequities in society.

Functionalist Conceptualizations of Social Capital

Functionalist scholars examined society as if it was a machine or an organism, in which each part (organ) communicated with another to create the dynamic energy necessary for the functioning of society (Feinberg & Soltis, 2009; Sadovnik, 2011). According to Edwards et al.

(2003) scholars who focus on the functional aspects of social capital were concerned with the norms and values that shape social relationships, social order, social cohesion, or solidarity. For functionalist scholars, the sites where social capital could be operationalized and used were "somewhat pre-determined by the ways in which the family or community groups function along prescribed lines as social institutions to (not) provide young people with needed resources" (Allard, 2005, p. 78). As such, functionalist scholars tend to construct social capital as a phenomenon that enhances benefits to individuals and communities and contributes to social cohesion through shared norms among individuals and groups.

Coleman's (1988) conceptualization of social capital, grounded in functionalist roots, is the most cited in educational literature and continues to have a large impact on the development and use of the concept (Dika & Singh, 2002). Coleman (1988) used social capital to bridge a standing debate in the sociological literature about the primacy of either social structures or human agency (Grossman, 2013). Broadly speaking, the structure versus agency debate can be understood as an issue of how an individual's actions are dictated by social structures or by the agent's free will (Lebaron, 2005).

To elaborate on Coleman's contribution to the structure-agency debate, I must first explain Coleman's contribution to social capital theory. Coleman (1988) defined social capital by its function, an aspect of social structures and a resource facilitating actions of individuals within that structure. The function of social capital was the value of social structures to individuals, who rationally decided to use them to achieve their goals. Three forms of social capital that Coleman (1988) identified as having the value for individuals were: 1) obligations, expectations, and trustworthiness of structures; 2) information channels; and 3) norms and effective sanctions. Coleman (1988) talked about the value of social networks in terms of

closure; closure of social networks means that all members of the networks are connected and thus, know each other, and can benefit from those relationships. Coleman (1988) emphasized the "closure" of social networks as an important condition for the existence of social norms and the trustworthiness of social structures since the resources of one relationship were appropriated for use in others (p. S105).

In moving from social networks broadly to the family as a social network more narrowly, Coleman (1988) further argued that both social capital in and outside the family were crucial for the establishment of human capital in the rising generation. In other words, a parent's human capital (parental education and economic skills) was irrelevant to the child's educational development if it was not complemented by social capital expressed in close bonds between parents and children (Coleman, 1988). Coleman emphasized the quantity of interactions rather than their quality such as the frequency of interactions between parents and children discussing school progress or time spent helping children with educational tasks (Bankston & Zhou, 2002). Coleman's focus on quantity over quality will be a point of critique later in this section.

Although Coleman (1988) attempted to bridge the structure-agency divide in the sociological literature through the application of social capital, in his use of the concept, the agency of the individual was unimportant. Coleman (1988) assumed a rational actor, who would act in their best interest according to their structural position (Grossman, 2013). In Coleman's (1988) view, simply being a member of a social structure *was* social capital. Social capital did not lie with the actor but existed in the structure of relations between people (Coleman, 1988). In other words, there can be no action without social structures (Grossman, 2013). As this paper will demonstrate, however, agency is a critical aspect of considerations of social capital.

Following Coleman's conceptualization, functionalist scholars found a positive relationship between social capital and educational and career outcomes of youth such as increased academic achievement in primary school (Kodzi et al., 2014) and secondary school (Crosnoe, 2004; McNeal, 1999; Muller et al., 2001); youth persistence in high school (Smith et al., 1992); and increased socioeconomic success in early adulthood (Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995). At the same time, these scholars also suggested that certain forms of social capital (parent's resources inside the family, their embeddedness in the community, and their social network) were differentially linked to specific outcomes for youth, depending, for instance, on race (Crosnoe, 2004; McNeal, 1999) and gender (Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995). Specifically, in their longitudinal study of pregnant teenagers, Furstenberg and Hughes (1995) found that emotional bonding within family were related to mental health outcomes, whereas McNeal (1999) claimed that parental involvement explained behavioral (e.g., dropping out) rather than cognitive outcomes (e.g., science achievement) for traditionally advantaged sections of populations, such as white students in the U.S. These studies demonstrate the variety of ways social capital was used to explore education.

Educational researchers following the functionalist tradition have not moved far away from the social capital indicators proposed by Coleman (1988), mainly parent-child interactions and family structure (Dika & Singh, 2002). Few studies focused on students' relationships with peers or non-family members including children's interactions with adults outside the family as positive predictors of educational attainment (Dyk & Wilson, 1999); the positive influences of peers and their academic values on desirable academic progress (Hallinan & Williams, 1990; Muller et al., 2001; Pribesh & Downey, 1999); and the positive effect of friendship closure among students (Morgan & Sørensen, 1999). These relationships were particularly important as

children age; Dyk and Wylson (1999) claimed that youth, as they mature, were less dependent on family and search for more opportunities to network with other adults outside their family. This educational research demonstrates some of the weaknesses within Coleman's approach to social capital.

In contrast to Coleman's (1988) focus on network closure, other scholars argued that the network composition and the position of individuals inside networks had a greater effect on social capital (Adam & Roncevic, 2003). Granovetter (1973) was the first to emphasize the central importance of "the strength of weak ties" to individuals' opportunities and to their integration to communities since weak ties are likely to link members of various small groups, whereas strong ties are concentrated within particular groups (p. 1378). Burt (1997) offered the most influential empirical work on network composition by adding the concept of "structural holes" that described social capital as a function of "brokerage" opportunities in a network (p. 340). In the absence of ties in a network (structural hole), being a broker offered the advantage of controlling information flow by connecting people otherwise disconnected in a network. In other words, network locations created competitive advantage with more structural holes leading to greater social capital as structural holes were the source of social capital (Burt, 1997). In this way, Burt (1997) challenged Coleman's (1988) perspective by demonstrating that smaller, dense, and hierarchical networks were more constraining. In other words, "closure" might prevent students from accessing resources outside of their network as it denied the importance of bridges, structural holes, or weaker ties (Freeman & Condron, 2011; Lin, 2001). Moreover, closure may exacerbate inequities in society as the same strong ties that connect groups together also keep others out (Portes, 1998). Thus, another limitation of Coleman's (1988) conceptualization of social capital is the lack of attention to social inequities and the issues of power and domination.

Methodologically, functionalist scholars employed primarily quantitative data available in the national data sets (Dika & Singh, 2002). Thus, their operationalization of the concept of social capital was limited to the available proxies selected from the available datasets. This approach was limited because it assumed that the proxies chosen by the study constitute social capital for all students and simply having a relationship or other indirect proxies of social capital lead to desirable outcomes. While some of these indicators were directly related to relationships between children and others, other indicators were indirectly linked. For instance, parental restriction of television on weekdays or principals' observation of teachers as indicators of social capital could be theoretically challenged (Kodzi et al., 2014; Muller, 1995). Some scholars including Muller (1995) and Muller et al. (2001) eliminated variables based on race, ethnicity, and culture to support their study, but in doing so, they homogenized their groupings and eliminated the effects of racism and classism in the transference of, and barriers to, social capital.

Social Capital and Social Cohesion. While my work focuses on social capital as a resource to individuals, I would be remiss to ignore political scientist Putnam's (1993, 2000) contributions to social capital conceptualization as it applies to society as a whole. While Coleman (1988) described the public good of social capital as achieved through engaging in relationships, it was Putnam (1993) who shifted the focus to the collective benefits of social capital, such as its influence on civic engagement, democracy, and economic growth of larger communities and nations. Putnam (1993) recognized the key role of families in social capital but defined the concept as "features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate action and co-operation for mutual benefit" (p. 2). Putnam (2000) distinguished between two types of social capital: bonding and bridging and described their use for different purposes. This was a useful conceptual addition since it demonstrated that individuals could

bridge (bridging social capital) outside their network to gain access to social capital not available within their specific community (bonding social capital).

Although telescoping the concept to the level of communities and nation-states contributed to increased interdisciplinary popularity of the concept of social capital, it resulted in attributing "each and all things that are positive in social life" to the "stock" of social capital endowed by nations and communities (Portes, 2000, p. 3). Portes (2000) identified serious limitations of this definition such as the lack of distinct separation between causes and effects of social capital as a collective feature, which led to "circular reasoning," truism, and obvious measurement issues (p. 4). In this sense, Putnam offered a somewhat naïve view of social capital ignoring structural inequities in societies as well as the fact that:

> individuals more often than not use their networks for individual gain (converting it into other forms of capital) rather than collective good. This use and conversion of social capital can often conflict with norms and undermine trust, creating conflict and symbolic struggle rather than collective action. This is particularly likely to occur in rapidly changing economic contexts where new forms of economic activity clash with pre-existing norms. (Levien, 2015, p. 80)

Specifically, drawing on his ethnographic research of how rural farmers in North India obtain benefits from a Special Economic Zone being formed in their village, Levien (2015) argued that Putnam's functionalist conceptualization of collective social capital is unable to explain how norms, trust, and networks function during socioeconomic change. Levien (2015) claimed that social capital in sense of Putnam, tended to occur most frequently in settled and somewhat equal social groups. In contrast, Bourdieu's (1986) individual social capital theory, as Levien (2015) argued, offered an alternative model by critically viewing social capital as an unequally allocated

private resource. According to Levien (2015), the aspiration to capital as Bourdieu theorized it occurred when people saw opportunity and attempted to make vertical networks for personal gain. In Levien's (2015) study, this occurred as new economic policies opened opportunities for new forms of social capital accumulation by privileged actors.

Other scholars demonstrated that social capital in Putnam's sense might have negative effects on norms, trust, and civic engagement, especially in rapidly changing economic contexts such as Kazakhstan. For instance, Dowley and Silver's (2002) study demonstrated the weak relationship between Putnam's indicators of social capital and democratization in post-soviet countries. Specifically, high participation rates in voluntary associations and interest in politics might actually signal the ethnic polarization of plural societies undergoing transition and threaten new democratic states (Dowley & Silver, 2002).

In the literature, the two ways of conceptualizing social capital either for private good or public good have often been set in opposition to each other; however, recent scholarship in the international development literature argued that private good and public good aspects of social capital at times coexist (Bonham, 2018; Johnstone, 2020). For instance, Bonham (2018), studying the role of volunteers in supporting people with disabilities in London, argued that it was possible that individual social capital could generate collective social capital and vice versa.

In Bonham's (2018) case, high levels of trust and reciprocity that community programs built in their area facilitated interactions between volunteers and the vulnerable groups including people with disabilities. Volunteers provided physical and emotional support along with bridging and linking social capital for people with learning disabilities, which in turn facilitated the development of individual social capital. For instance, the community program supported

educational and skills attainment, lowered levels of negative behaviors and improved health and well-being of participants through decreasing isolation (Bonham, 2018).

Alternatively, Johnstone (2020) argued that social capital can contribute to public good; but that additional structures and social mapping might be needed to ensure that socially and economically marginalized populations have equal opportunities to build meaningful relationships. As evidenced in Levien's (2015) work, social capital is not always a boon for personal or societal improvement and according to Johnstone (2020) must be viewed with caution for its potential to reproduce inequalities. Exploring the relationship between individual conceptualizations of social capital with its public good aspect is not the primary focus of my dissertation, but the findings of my study might have implications for furthering this discussion and offer important avenues for future research.

To conclude, although functionalist conceptualizations of social capital were useful in furthering understanding of the positive effects of social capital on educational and career trajectories of youth, functionalist perspectives of social capital are limited in analytical power due to: a) heavy focus on quantity, not the meaning and quality of relationships; b) lack of attention to social inequalities, economic, socio-cultural, and historical context, and the issues of power and domination; and c) poor specification in relation to children/youth and the role of agency (Morrow, 1999; Portes, 2000). Specifically, functionalist scholars failed to consider a range of inequities in relation to different social positions individuals occupy in society such as class, gender, ethnicity, and ability (Edwards et al., 2003). They also viewed children and youth as passive recipients of adults' resources without recognizing how youth not only actively generate and use social capital, but also provide active support for parents (Morrow, 1999). In

the paragraphs below, a critical framework of social capital is reviewed as an alternative frame for social capital.

Critical Perspectives on Social Capital

The foundational scholar best known for applying the critical perspective is Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu (1986) revived the study of social capital and his ideas have influenced other scholars in questioning how class, gender, and race influence an individual’s social capital and the various ways people use their relationships as resources (Reay, 1998). Bourdieu was primarily concerned with how various forms of capital (economic, cultural, social, symbolic) interact with wider social structures to reproduce or transform inequalities, and how the day-to-day activities of individuals contribute to this process (Edwards et al., 2003). Thus, Bourdieu (1986) offered a far more complex and nuanced conceptualization of social capital than the functionalist interpretations.

For Bourdieu (1986), social capital was the "aggregate of the actual or potential resources" linked to being a member of a group, which provided each member with collectively owned capital (p. 248). Although Bourdieu (1986) stated that the individual's ability to effectively activate their social capital influenced its volume, social capital is never independent of an individual's economic and cultural capital or the group to which they are a member. Thus, like all forms of capital, social capital is power and economic capital is at the root of all capital. Unlike functionalist scholars fixed social capital indicators, Bourdieu’s categories are heuristic, temporary constructions to be informed by research (Grenfell, 2008; Reay, 2000). Bourdieu (1986) viewed social capital as something that individuals must continuously work to generate. Individuals or groups, by strategically investing in their network of relationships, consciously or subconsciously aim to reproduce and use those relationships (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu’s

conceptualization took into consideration the following social indicators: first, the historical context and social construction of relationships as they related to wider structures in society; and second, the meanings individuals attached to their relationships (Edwards et al., 2003). The amount of social capital available to individuals depends on various factors such as the size of their networks, the quality and the scope of capital accessed through their networks, and their status within the group (Edwards et al., 2003).

Bourdieu conceptualized social capital as having two key elements: firstly, social networks and connections; secondly, sociability, in other words, how networks were sustained, which required necessary skills and disposition (Edwards et al 2003). In other words, simply having relationships with others does not constitute social capital, individuals must also understand how these networks operate and how one can maintain and use these relationships over time. From this explanation of Bourdieu, we can see that social capital involves individual agency since action is required to maintain and use relationships. However, in his own work, Bourdieu (1986) has not specifically emphasized this interrelationship between agency and social capital, especially in relation to youth.

It is crucial to view Bourdieu's concept of social capital as a part of his larger theoretical legacy, since the term capital had a relational character for Bourdieu and was never independent of the logic of the "field," and was governed by "habitus" (Thomson, 2008). Rather than becoming preoccupied by what he called the "aimless" structure-agency debate, Bourdieu argued for a conceptual framework that would bring together an interdependent and co-constructed trio - habitus, field, and capital - with none of them being primary, dominant, or causal (Thomson, 2008). Bourdieu (1980/1990) defined habitus abstractly as the "systems of durable, transposable dispositions," which function at every moment as a matrix of "schemas of perception, thought,

and action" (pp. 53-54). In other words, habitus focuses on an individual's way of being, thinking, acting, and feeling (Maton, 2008). It captures how human beings carry within themselves their history, how they bring their history into the present, and how they choose to act in certain ways (Maton, 2008). Therefore, to understand human behavior it is critical to consider habitus - habitus mediates between structures and agency, is shaped by the former and regulates the latter (Navarro, 2006).

Habitus can only be understood in relation to the dominant practices in the "field," which Bourdieu described as a bounded social space, in which individuals struggle or compete to change or to preserve its form and boundaries in line with their positions and interests (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 17). Thus, a field delimits a structure in which habitus operates (Navarro, 2006). Although field was defined as a bounded social space, its boundaries are not always easy to define. According to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992):

> …every field constitutes a potentially open space of play whose boundaries are *dynamic borders* [emphasis original] which are the stake of struggles within field itself… It is only by studying each of these universes that you can assess how concretely they are constituted, where they stop, who gets in and who does not. (p. 104)

In other words, the field is the locus of endless change since its structure was born of conflict, competition, and struggles between relations of force aimed at transforming or preserving its boundaries and form (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) noted that "the limits of the field are situated at the point where the effects of the field cease" (p. 100). To understand the contemporary form and structure of the field, it is critical to examine the development of the field over time (Thomson, 2008). In this study, I will examine multiple fields that youth from marginalized backgrounds navigate in furthering their academic and career

aspirations which includes school, community, university, and workplace. Within these fields, how students act and what they do is negotiated by their habitus. It is critical to note that while there is continuity in students' habitus, it may also change and transform through students' practices as they navigate their current reading of the field (Bourdieu, 1980/1990; DeJaeghere, McClearly, & Josić, 2016).

In various social fields, actors have different amounts of "capital" which determine their position in the field. For Bourdieu, all forms of valued resources functioned as capital when they were "a social relation of power" or the object of social struggle (Navarro, 2006, p. 16). In other words, the transactional value of capital is based on principles of scarcity. If everyone has the same capital, then it no longer has any perceived value. Social struggle within these environments connotes a fight to see how one can acquire this scarce resource. Bourdieu (1986) identified four types of capital: economic capital (money and property); cultural capital (cultural goods and services, also including educational credentials); social capital (networks and acquaintances); and symbolic capital (which refers to legitimacy) (Navarro, 2006). The hierarchy of various species of capital differed between the various fields (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Thus, capital did not function except in relation to the field since its currency depended on the field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Moreover, an individual's habitus framed the value and use of the different forms of capital to which an individual had access (Bowman, 2010). Individuals were able to convert capital between or within fields, but it required an awareness of conversion possibilities (Bowman, 2010).

Bourdieu's theoretical framework has been applied and expanded upon by numerous scholars of education. Critical scholars, who were primarily concerned with the processes and practices contributing to the reproduction of inequities, focused on the mechanisms that favor

dominant upper-and middle-class forms of capital from which marginalized groups may be excluded. Lareau and Horvat (1999) furthered understanding of the application of Bourdieu's key ideas by demonstrating the importance of closely examining: (1) the field, which determines the value of capital; (2) the moments of activation of capital in this field; and (3) the institutional response to the activation, to gain a more accurate picture of how social reproduction occurs. They argued that reproduction was uneven and continuously negotiated by actors, who chose to activate their capital or not and had varying skills to do so depending on their race and class.

Several studies further complicated the influence of race and class on social capital in education. For instance, Horvat et al. (2013) ethnographic study showed that social relationships were turned into social capital by middle class parents regardless of race but not by working class parents. Similarly, Allat (1993) showed that middle-class families utilized their resources to increase the life chances of their children, which in turn facilitated the generation of the children's own social and cultural capital.

While Allat (1993), Horvat et al. (2003), and Lareau and Horvat (1999) demonstrated how reproduction occurred in schools, other critical scholars explored how privilege was reproduced in higher education and the labor market (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Martin & Spenner, 2009; Rivera, 2015; Stuber, 2011). For instance, Martin and Spenner's (2009) quantitative study of legacy admissions in universities demonstrated how an admission preference for legacies advantaged an already privileged group and served to perpetuate inequalities in higher education. Furthermore, Stuber's (2011) compelling analysis of the impact of social class on students' engagement in social and extracurricular activities in U.S. universities demonstrated that while all students acquired social and cultural capital in college, those students who had upper-and-middle-class forms of capital at the outset accumulated more

of those resources over their time in college. These upper-and-middle class forms of capital were more valued by educational institutions while the multiple strengths and resources (capital) of non-elite communities tended to be ignored (Yosso, 2005). Stuber (2011) argued that college students' extracurricular experiences offered unequal opportunities for gaining such valuable upper-and-middle-class forms of social and cultural capital. Working class students tended to invest their time and energy on academic aspects of college life rather than social and extracurricular activities. Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) demonstrated that this kind of academically focused script clashes with the "party" and social culture of many U.S. universities. As a result, working and lower-middle-class students tended to isolate themselves from peer networks that could help them develop valuable social capital (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013).

Rivera (2015) furthered this discussion by expertly showing how working-class students' focus on academics rather than extracurricular pursuits adversely affected their career prospects after college. Through her in-depth analysis of the hiring decision-making processes at U.S. elite firms, Rivera (2015) argued that elite firms selection processes resulted in systematic exclusion of students from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds. She found that having the right social capital set the bounds of competition for the elite jobs and compensated for a lack of cultural capital. Students from less privileged backgrounds who obtained elite jobs were able to do so through the pre-existing social ties to elite individuals or organizations. Rivera's (2015) study enriched understanding of the role of social capital in the social mobility of marginalized students, but her discussion of how marginalized students developed and used social capital to get elite jobs was limited. She primarily focused on the processes that contribute to elite reproduction.

Youth Perspectives and Youth Agency. While critical scholars in the above section focused on the dominant upper-and-middle forms of social capital valued by educational institutions and organizations, a subgroup of critical scholars analyzed in this section focused on the social capital of economically and socially marginalized youth, emphasizing youth agency (DeJaeghere, Pellowski Wiger, & Wangsness Willemsen, 2016; Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Yosso, 2005). This scholarship departed from pessimistic and elitist interpretations of Bourdieu's theory by focusing on the strengths of marginalized communities (Yosso, 2005; Yosso & Garcia, 2007). Morrow (1999) suggested that social capital theory was forwarded by pairing Bourdieu's (1986) original definition of social capital with a view of children as having agency. In this way, studies that focused on the social capital of youth, from youth's perspectives, help scholars to better understand how youth are able or unable to activate their resources in light of macro and micro structural forces. In the section that follows, I first explore Bourdieu's theory as it has been applied to socially and economically marginalized youth. Then, I explore the studies that acknowledged youth as agentic beings by focusing on their perspectives on social capital.

In his later works, Bourdieu made a concerted effort to clarify his position and respond to critiques that his work was overly deterministic (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). As Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) noted, field, habitus, and capital were "dynamic" concepts, which means they are changeable and can identify the processes that contribute not only to reproduction, but also to transformation of inequities in societies. Yosso (2005) critiqued interpretations of Bourdieu's framework that focused on dominant forms of capital and ignored the multiple strengths and resources (capital) of non-elite communities. Yosso's (2005) identification of the strengths of minoritized university students in the U.S. demonstrated how non-elite individuals drew from their culture, relationships, and family to overcome structural challenges.

By identifying the ways in which traditionally marginalized students used their own forms of cultural capital (described as community cultural wealth), Yosso (2005) suggested shifting the research lens on students from a deficit view[4] to one focusing on strengths and the utilization of social networks (asset-based approach). Such asset-based scholarship critically identified the need to change what one views as capital in the "field" by calling scholars and practitioners to value the empowering potential of the capital of the marginalized communities, which is often not recognized as valuable due to the dominance of middle-and-upper class forms of capital in the "field."

Furthermore, scholars such as Morrow (1999) and Leonard (2005) argued that most scholarship focused on the role of adult agency, whereas critical scholars of youth explored how marginalized youth themselves described their ability to acquire and use social capital to overcome inequities and achieved their goals. For example, in their study of young people from diverse class, ethnic, and faith backgrounds living in a range of national and transnational contexts in the UK and the Caribbean, Holland et al. (2007) demonstrated the many and varied ways children and young people were active in the creation and use of social capital to negotiate important transitions and to construct their identities.

As agentic beings, marginalized youth obtained social capital through caring and empowering relationships to further their educational and career success (DeJaeghere, Pellowski Wiger, & Wangsness Willemsen, 2016). Based on the analysis of longitudinal data from economically vulnerable youth in Tanzania, DeJaeghere, Pellowski Wiger, and Wangsness

[4] I draw on Gorski (2016) in defining deficit approach. Deficit approach is grounded in deficit ideology, which is the ideological position of people, who interpret the problem of poverty and marginalization as the "symptom of ethical, dispositional, and even spiritual deficiencies in the individuals and communities experiencing poverty" (Gorski, 2016, p. 380). In other words, individuals guided by deficit ideology see people experiencing marginalization and poverty as the ones to blame for their own economic conditions.

Willemsen (2016) presented how youth actively drew on their social relations with teachers, peers, and other adults to navigate educational, social, and economic inequalities by transforming their knowledge and skills into well-being and employment outcomes. The authors argued that social relations in their study were more than social capital, referring to relationships that were caring and fostered affiliation. Care and affiliation helped these youth to overcome particular material and social constraints by transforming their education into other forms of capital.

Scholars also highlighted the importance of peer relationships for marginalized youth. Drawing on a four-year mixed-methods study of economically vulnerable youth in Tanzania, Pellowski Wiger (2016) found that while positive relationships with adults facilitated education and earning outcomes of youth, relationships with peers were also particularly important. Peer support supplemented a lack of adult support for their education and earning in the face of inequalities in school and on the labor market (Pellowski Wiger, 2016). Likewise, Leonard (2005), through a ten-year qualitative study of children's family, peer, and community networks in disadvantaged localities in Ireland, found that children actively developed networks with peers, family, and non-family adults to seek out employment opportunities. At the same time, the disadvantaged youth's ability to achieve their goals was hindered by their parent's lack of human and economic capital as well as structural inequalities including lower-paying and exploitative jobs for youth. Leonard (2005) showed that although structural inequities and the socioeconomic status of a family had a huge impact on the educational and career outcomes of children, students' agency in this process was also influential. Other scholars demonstrated how youth actively acquired resources and developed networks through "hustling" (Adjei, 2019) or online social networks (Greenhow & Burton, 2011).

Beyond family and friends, faculty and staff in educational institutions are another essential source of social capital for marginalized youth. In this regard, scholars showed the significance of university intervention programs such as community-directed cultivation programs (Ovink & Veazey, 2011) and multicultural learning community (Jehangir et al., 2011) in facilitating academic and social integration of underrepresented students through positive interactions with faculty and peers. Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch (1995), Stanton-Salazar (1997, 2011), and Stanton-Salazar and Spina (2003) referred to these positive relationships with both family and non-family adults and peers as "institutional agents," defined as “individuals who have the capacity and commitment to transmit directly, or negotiate the transmission of, institutional resources and opportunities” (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995, p. 117).

Stanton-Salazar’s (2011) major focus was on the model of "empowerment agents" who could go against the stratified system to support low-income students in accessing resources that these students could not access (p. 1089). Drawing on the work of Bourdieu (1986) and Lin (2001), Stanton-Salazar (2011) defined social capital within a network-analytic framework highlighting both its ability to reinforce structural inequality and empower youth. According to Stanton-Salazar (2011), institutional agents created "empowerment social capital" and empowered low-income individuals in need (p. 1090). Thus, these networks can help students to overcome structural barriers as opposed to transmitting disadvantage.

In contrast, Ream (2003) argued that not all positive relationships with teachers were convertible into beneficial outcomes for students with low socioeconomic status students. In their study of Mexican American students from a low socioeconomic background, Ream (2003) revealed that in some cases teachers fostered social relations in the classroom by going easy on students in order to maintain classroom harmony, at the expense of academic content. In this

way, students may receive a form of “counterfeit” social capital that hinders their academic success (Ream, 2003). Allard (2005), on the other hand, argued that negative relationships with family and teachers could enable youth to access resources in the form of institutional agents. In other words, the absence of social capital within family or with teachers does not automatically translate into negative outcomes for youth because youth, as agentic beings, may actively seek support in acquiring and using social capital with other adults and peers.

To sum up, critical scholars in this section offered a more complex and nuanced understanding of the importance of social capital for youth. Drawing on youth perspectives and building on their strengths, these studies demonstrated how and why social capital facilitated or constrained the educational and career goals of marginalized youth in the face of structural inequities. As agentic beings, youth drew social capital from caring and empowering relationships with their peers, family and non-family adults, teachers, and administrators to further their educational and career aspirations (DeJaeghere, Pellowski Wiger, & Wangsness Willemsen, 2016; Morrow, 1999; Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2003, 2011; Yosso, 2005). Scholars drawing on critical perspectives also demonstrated that institutions’ directed efforts can support marginalized students’ development of social capital (Ovink & Veazey, 2011; Jehangir et al., 2011). However, the question of how social capital relates to marginalized youth’s aspirations remain unanswered. To further enhance this framework, I will now turn to a review of literature on conceptualizations of aspirations since my study focuses on how social capital facilitates or constraints the pursuit of youth aspirations.

Conceptualizations of Aspirations

In the previous three sections, I have reviewed literature on various conceptualizations of social capital. In this section, I switch the focus to conceptualizations of aspirations, which is

another key concept in my dissertation. Drawing on Appadurai (2004), Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), and DeJaeghere (2018), I define aspirations as "cultural capacities," which are formed in dynamic interaction between youth agency, the larger social context, and the culture in which youth are embedded. Specifically, aspirations are marginalized youth's "process of hoping and imagining, with others, about future lives" (DeJaeghere, 2018, p. 239). While there is a large body of research on aspirations, this literature review will be limited to studies that focus on the aspirations of socially and economically marginalized youth in relation to structure, agency, or social capital. I start by analyzing the conceptualizations of aspirations based on Bourdieu and Appadurai's theorizations and then explore studies of aspirations in relation to social capital.

Aspirations, Structure, and Agency

One approach in the literature on aspirations draws on Bourdieu's scholarship viewing aspirations as (re)produced through the interactions of field, capital, and habitus (Stahl et al., 2018). Bourdieu et al. (1965/ 1990) argued that aspirations were developed within and inseparable from "objective conditions" that were defined by economic constraints and social norms (p. 16). As such, an individual's aspirations cannot be isolated from the conditions of the field in which individuals find themselves. These "objective conditions" shape a child's understanding of the possibilities in their lives and how they achieve what they consider possible (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). Put differently, youth aspirations are formed in dynamic interaction with the various fields that surround them.

In Bourdieu's framework, an individual's position in the field, determined by their amount of capital, influenced their aspirations (Gale & Parker, 2015; Tarabini & Curran, 2018). The individual had a "more or less equally probable traject[ory]," in which they more or less reproduced the circumstances of their parents, family, and community, to remain in

approximately the same position (Bourdieu, 1979/2002, p. 110). Such reproduction was likely to occur because individuals located near each other in the "social space" tended to have similar amounts of capital (Bourdieu, 1985, 1989). For instance, if a student grows up in a lower-income rural neighborhood, they are likely to form relationships with adults and peers in their neighborhood, who tend to have similar kinds and amounts of capital as they do. These relationships, along with a student's habitus embedded in the field (s) that exist in their neighborhood, may influence their aspirations. Therefore, aspirations are complex social-cultural phenomena.

Bourdieu's view of aspirations was considered as historically informed and oriented toward the past rather than the future. Scholars critiqued Bourdieu's conceptualization as deterministic, arguing that he placed structure over agency (Nash, 1990). In the case of youth, they tended to aspire for what they believed was within their reach based on their family background confirming the idea that what has been, will be again (Gale & Parker, 2015; Zipin et al., 2015). However, in a more nuanced reading of the power of the past in shaping the future, Stahl et al. (2018) argued that under Bourdieu's theory, aspirations were always in formation and continually negotiated and contested. Moreover, as DeJaeghere (2018) argued, Bourdieu's conceptualization of agency was grounded in his concept of habitus, which was not only affected by the past but also present and future oriented.

Zipin et al. (2015) further elaborated on Bourdieu's framework for understanding aspirations as complex social-cultural phenomena. Like many other critical scholars (DeJaeghere, 2018; Gale & Parker, 2015; Stahl et al., 2018), Zipin et al. (2015) critiqued a widespread policy discourse that viewed economically and socially marginalized youth as in need of "raised aspirations" in order to move along their educational trajectories. Such discourses

created a binary of high/low aspirations by blaming individuals for possessing low aspirations and thus leaving the complex processes of power and structure unexamined (Bok, 2010). In contrast, drawing on Appadurai and Bourdieu, Zipin et al. (2015) argued for a theory of aspirations that was complex, subjective, and an intersubjective process. In other words, youth aspirations are formed in interaction with multiple social-cultural resources, including policy and populist ideologies, family, and the individual agency.

Scholars also utilized Bourdieu's framework to demonstrate how habitus influenced youth's aspirations. Tarabini and Curran (2018) examined the aspirations and school experience of high school youth in Spain. They argued that habitus helps researchers analyze emotional processes related to student's educational experience in institutions which affected the students' aspirations. The authors identified three main types of feelings, reasonings, or different expressions of working-class youth habitus, that conflicted with school expectations. First, working-class youth reported an internalized sense of educational worthlessness due to their self-perceptions and the perceptions of significant others, including teachers. Second, students developed school resistance practices due to their perceptions of school as excluding them. Third, students reported feelings of uncertainty due to a lack of control over the rules of the school system. Drawing on Appadurai (2004), Tarabini and Curran (2018) argued that aspirations were capacity dependent, meaning that aspirations depended on a student's capacity to navigate the educational system. Thus, habitus, which defined a student's emotions and navigational capacity within the educational system, shaped aspirations.

Another common approach to aspirations drew on Appadurai's (2004) conceptualization of aspirations as a "cultural concept" which was future-oriented and socially embedded. Appadurai (2004) convincingly argued that "aspirations are never individual" but rather formed

in interaction and "in the thick of social life" (p. 67). Appadurai's conceptualization was similar to Bourdieu in the sense that it located aspirations in the thick of social life and acknowledged the importance of history. However, Appadurai (2004) had a stronger and more direct argument for not allowing "the sense of culture as pastness to dominate" cultural conceptions of future (Appadurai, 2004; Gale & Parker, 2015). Appadurai brought the concept of future into the discourses of "culture" by theorizing the capacity to aspire as a "navigational capacity" (Appadurai, 2004). While all people had aspirations, navigational information was not equally distributed among individuals; thus, cultural and socioeconomic factors enabled the privileged to more powerfully pursue their aspirations than the lower classes (Appadurai, 2004; Bok, 2010). Appadurai argued that privileged groups in society had more experience reading and successfully following their map of aspirations as well as more confidence in exploring unmapped possibilities than the lower classes. According to Gale and Parker (2015), individuals from lower economic classes lacked the opportunities and resources to routinely practice the use of navigational capacity and thus had reduced capacities to identify aspirational nodes and how to navigate between these nodes.

Appadurai's (2004) conceptualization has been taken up by many scholars who study aspirations of economically and socially marginalized communities and as a way to promote greater agency for vulnerable youth (Gale & Parker, 2015). Conradie (2013), for instance, drew on Appadurai's (2004) conceptualization to explore how assisting in developing and achieving aspirations may activate agency among economically marginalized women in Cape Town. Conradie (2013) found that assisting the economically marginalized women in a self-directed, deliberate process of working on their aspirations over time could activate agency and increase capabilities; however, the achievement of aspirations was constrained by the structural

opportunities available within the specific context. For instance, while most of the participants reported that the project gave them a sense of direction and encouraged them to keep trying until they succeed despite many obstacles, this did completely enable them to overcome the historical barriers such as inadequate education.

Aspirations and Social Capital

In the previous subsection, I provided an overview of the major conceptualizations of aspirations. In this section, I further expand the conceptualization of aspirations in relation to social capital. While there are a multitude of studies that focus on students' aspirations, the review in this section will be limited to the studies of marginalized communities that conceptualize aspirations drawing from Bourdieu and/or Appadurai (2004) and relate it to social relationships.

Scholars drew from Appadurai's (2004) theory to examine the different types of relationships and aspirations. Bok's (2010) study of students at an Australian public primary school in an area marked by low socioeconomic status (SES), for instance, found that transgenerational experiences, access to information networks beyond the local community and school support of academic achievement were important factors contributing to a student's capacity to navigate their aspirations towards desired futures. While Bok (2010) did not explicitly use the concept of social capital, his findings indicated the pivotal role relationships played in youth's development and pursuit of aspirations. For instance, transgenerational experience referred to the ways in which the experiences of parents guide a student's aspirations whereas school support referred to relationships with teachers. Bok (2010) reported that teachers acknowledged their strong influence on student's aspirations and in some instances guided students towards what teachers perceived were more "realistic" aspirations (p. 175). This way,

teachers took a deficit perspective on their low-income students by assuming that student's alternative imagined aspirations were unattainable (DeJaeghere, 2018). As Bok noted, youth were "vulnerable" to the decisions of parents, teachers, other adults, and government agencies – "over which they have little control" (p. 246). Therefore, it is critical to offer marginalized youth the opportunities for education to be meaningful and transformative instead of reproducing their social status and seeding hopelessness among youth (DeJaeghere, 2018).

Hart (2013) further elaborated on how one's aspirations relate to others by offering a theoretical framework of aspirations in relation to individual agency and relations to others. Building on the empirical work on youth aspirations for higher education in the UK, she defined individual aspirations as "both goal-oriented and concern[ing] the future of the self or the agency of the self in relation to goals concerning others" (p.79). Drawing on Bourdieu and Sen, Hart (2013) argued that "capability to aspire" – the possibility and the freedom of aspiring, can be fostered or constrained through social relations with others (pp. 79-80). Thus, similar to Bourdieu's framework, an individual's position in the field in relation to the existing power structures and practices had a critical impact on their capability to aspire.

Hart (2013) further differentiated between four broad levels of aspirations in relation to agency and aspirations' importance to individual and to others: 1) independent; 2) shared; 3) guided; and 4) conflicting. Students had the greatest degree of agency with independent aspirations because they reached these aspirations at their own will. On the other hand, conflicting aspirations had the lowest agency for students because these were the aspirations that significant others including parents had for students without student's consent. In other words, as the importance of aspirations to significant others (i.e., parents) increased, student agency decreased, and vice versa. While Hart (2013) offered a useful framework for locating aspirations

in relation to others, it is not clear if individual agency and the importance of aspirations to others always must be negatively related. As DeJaeghere (2018) argued, Hart (2013) did not necessarily connect the youth's choices and actions towards their aspirations to "dynamic or even generative habitus" even though Hart (2013) drew on Bourdieu in conceptualizing agency.

Finally, DeJaegere (2018), studying young girls in rural Tanzania, addressed the gaps in Hart's (2013) framework by skillfully drawing on Appadurai (2004) and Sen, to "situate aspirations as oriented to the present, the future, and one's valued well-being," in combination with Bourdieu's conceptualization of agency grounded in habitus. She conceptualized aspirations and agency as dialectically related and socially embedded. DeJaeghere (2018) found that aspirations of socially and economically vulnerable young girls developed in relation to the opportunities available in their communities and were changed and expanded with the support from teachers, peers, and other adults. Specifically, the supportive relationships and mentorship fostered "reconsideration of aspirations within horizons of agentic action" (p. 15). Thus, DeJaeghere (2018) argued for the need to examine aspirations and agency in relation to social relationships with teachers, peers, and others. DeJaeghere (2018) also argued that it was critical to examine aspirations over longer periods of time since they changed over time.

Summary. This review of literature on the conceptualizations of aspirations supports the idea that aspirations are formed through the dynamic interaction between habitus, field, and multiple forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1989/2002; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970/1990; DeJaeghere, 2018; Stahl et al., 2018; Tarabini & Curran, 2018). Scholars also emphasized critical role of social relationships in fostering or constraining aspirations (Bok, 2010; DeJaeghere, 2018; Hart, 2013). However, with notable exceptions (DeJaeghere, 2018), these studies have not specifically conceptualized social capital in relation to aspirations, habitus, and field. In other words, while it

is evident from the literature that all forms of capital, particularly social capital, influence aspirations, scholars have not thoroughly examined how socially and economically marginalized youth are able or unable to acquire and use social capital in face of structural barriers and how this process relates to the process of the formation of their aspirations.

Social Capital in the Post-Soviet Context

In this section, I contextualize the concept of social capital for my study by employing a transversal analysis on historical and socio-cultural understandings of social relationships in Soviet and post-Soviet contexts (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). Social relationships, as understood and used in the Soviet era, were rooted in the concept of blat that was based on the mutual exchange of "favors of access" to the public resources under the rhetoric of friendly support and care. People invested in building warm and genuine relationships because they were more important than money in accessing goods and services in an economy of shortage. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the transformations have influenced social relationships that have now blended with the market economy and have become increasingly commodified with the increased importance of money. Social relationships in a more market-based society have become mainly driven by self-interest and mutual profit; thus, they have increasingly become associated with corruption[5]. While social relationships played a critical role in the unequal allocation of resources and power both during the Soviet and post-Soviet era, they are deemed to have a more pronounced impact on exacerbating inequities during the post-Soviet period. Specifically, in the case of Kazakhstan, this transformation combines with entrenched historical cultural traditions of gift-giving and clan system to create a complex context for the educational

[5] In this context, I use the definition of corruption by Heyneman (2004) as he primarily focused on corruption in education. Specifically, corruption is "the abuse of authority for personal as well as material gain" (Heyneman, 2004, p. 637).

system and labor market. In the following pages, I detail this Soviet to post-Soviet transition and further exemplify why Kazakhstan is unique vantage point to explore the research questions for my dissertation.

Social Relationships in the Soviet Era: 1920s-1990s

Scholars have described Soviet society as the one where “nothing is legal but everything is possible” referring to its rigorous constraints and the network of possibilities around them (Ledeneva, 1998, p.1). People commonly referred to these possibilities as blat, the practice of acquiring and using personal connections to circumvent formal procedures (Ledeneva, 1998; Michailova & Worm, 2003; Onoshchenko & Williams, 2014). In the Soviet command economy, it was not money that caused the main problem in accessing resources, but the shortage of goods and services themselves (Ledeneva, 1998; Onoshchenko & Williams, 2014). Thus, in the economy of shortage, having blat was more important than money as personal connections could open access to goods and services in short supply. Indeed, blat was required to navigate almost every aspect of life from obtaining food and accessing medical services to securing housing, kindergarten and university places, and jobs. The importance of blat over money was well exemplified by frequently heard folk-saying during the Soviet period: “Do not have 100 rubles, do have 100 friends” (Ledeneva, 1998, p. 104).

In her ethnography of blat in Russia, Ledeneva (1998) provided a comprehensive examination of the concept of blat. According to Ledeneva (1998), blat was an exchange of “favors of access” provided at the public expense and mediated by the rhetoric of friendship or acquaintance: “helping out,” “sharing,” “friendly support,” and “mutual care” (p. 37). These “favors of access” were exercised at the expense of state property or by using the influence granted by an institutional position. By “helping out” people provided access to resources not

their own. These goods and services were going to be distributed anyway in the rationing system, but blat connections were crucial in determining who got what. As such, the acts of kindness provided some benefits to the donor as well because it earned them loyalty and gratitude and nurtured a relationship which could result in exchange of favors. As Ledeneva (2000) put it: "Blat was a complicated, culturally grounded 'social alchemy' for turning access to state property to one's own advantage but without stealing anything" (p. 190).

Sharing access with friends and acquaintances had become so common that the difference between blat and friendship blurred (Ledeneva, 1998). Blat's pervasive nature was also manifested in the fact that it could sometimes be confused with other concepts such as bribery, corruption, and informal economic practices. In discussing the similarities and differences between blat and other more negative forms of exchange and power, Ledeneva (1998) concluded that blat should be viewed as: 1) "less morally reprehensible"; 2) embedded in horizontal, compassionate, and warm human relationships; 3) specific to the Soviet system of shortage and public system of allocation (p. 52). As a rule, blat networks were based on long-term relationships, which provided regular access to each other's resources rather than just favor for favor exchanges. Blat was thus "not a relationship for the sake of exchange but an exchange for the sake of relationship" (Ledeneva, 2000, p.184). Although blat certainly involved an exchange of objects (favors), it did so only if social relationships already existed. People even tended to describe their own involvement in blat as forms of mutual help and friendship, although they referred to other's involvement in such informal deals as blat (Ledeneva, 1998). Participants in Ledeneva's (1998) study claimed that blat had some negative connotations incompatible with human relationships. As Ledeneva (1998) argued, blat seemed to function most effectively when its logic remained misrecognized.

The uses of blat evolved over time. According to Ledeneva (1998), during the latter 1920s, it was persistently used to get jobs for friends and relatives. In the 1930s, blat usage became associated more with matters of consumption such as obtaining goods in short supply. In the 1950s, blat became more institutionalized with the emergence of a Soviet industry hero *tolkach,* or a professional blat dealer. Tolkach is translated as to "to push" or "to jostle" (Ledeneva, 1998, p. 25). Tolkachi were people whose professional role was to push the interests of their enterprise and to support Soviet economy, which paradoxically could only be done by violating its distribution principles. The pervasiveness of blat in everyday life was also grasped in another term *blatmeister,* which "denoted *tolkach* [emphasis original] for individual rather than industrial needs" (Ledeneva, 1998, p. 27). Blatmeisters were people who had natural talents to be successful blat transactors. In the later periods of Soviet times, blat usage spread to everyday practices including health and other services, obtaining household and household upkeep, enjoying leisure activities, and bringing up children (getting into a nursery, passing exams, and accessing university). The least visible but most omnipresent object of blat was information including the information on what, where, or when could be obtained or who needed to be approached (Ledeneva, 1998).

Moreover, Ledeneva (1998) emphasized that it was critical to differentiate vertical and horizontal blat networks. Horizontal networks were known as *svoi ludi* - people of the circle – and consisted of people of similar background (Ledeneva, 1998). Vertical networks, on the other hand, consisted of people of different social status interested in each other's networks connected by personal contacts, kin, or most often, mediators known as *nuzhnye ludi* - useful people (Ledeneva, 1998, p. 121). Mostly these networks were closed and an introduction by a member was necessary to enter them. Transactions between horizontal blat relations were routine,

whereas interactions within vertical networks were more intermittent and instrumental. Given asymmetrical ties between these different blat networks, the distribution of resources by blat were not even or random. People of certain occupations enjoyed formal privileges by using their position as "gatekeepers" (Ledeneva, 1998, p. 125).

For instance, *cadres*, selected key Communist Party personnel, were viewed as the most skilled blat practitioners because of their power in resource-allocation and decision-making as well as access to useful information. Intellectuals, especially in "humanities were more subject to blat than sciences because humanitarian education was designed for Party cadres" (Ledeneva, 1998, p. 128). The Department of history and Komsomol, the youth wing of the Communist party, were the most efficient ways of hiring cadres. These horizontal and vertical networks have similarities with Putnam's bonding and bridging social capital, Granovetter's discussion of "the strength of weak ties", and Burt's "structural holes," analyzed in the first section of this chapter, yet these relationships developed within a strict centralized post-Soviet economy, which differs from the above-mentioned scholars' contexts.

Under the Soviet regime, blat networks played a critical role in accessing education. The Soviet Constitution guaranteed no discrimination in accessing education based on nationality, race, gender, or social status. Access, particularly to universities, however, was unequal (Sharipova 2018; Smolentseva, 2012). There was significant differentiation across Union Republics, as well as within republic's rural and urban areas. Access was mainly determined by family connections and place of residence (Sharipova, 2018). Rural residents were particularly disadvantaged not only because of the lower quality of rural secondary school, but also because the Soviet "urban intelligentsia was in many ways a self-generating elite" (Sharipova, 2018, p. 77). Although the Soviet government made special entry arrangements to regulate the social

composition of students in universities, these arrangements have largely failed (Gerber & Hout, 1995). Students admitted by special-entry arrangements, including those from rural areas, dropped out of the university at higher rates than their peers because they found it challenging to maintain the required levels of academic standing (Gerber & Hout, 1995; Smolentseva, 2012).

These conditions of higher education admissions were also explained by related differences in student's aspirations and performance (Gerber & Hout, 1995). Sociological studies in the 1960s found that structures and processes of socialization including family background, peers, place of residence, and educational experience had a significant impact on educational and career trajectories of Soviet youth (Smolentseva, 2012). Parents, particularly, played a critical role in shaping aspirations of students. Parents of students from higher social groups more frequently monitored their children's work and provided better opportunities to enhance the performance of their children such as home environment that was more conductive to study and access to tutors and preparatory courses (Gerber & Hout, 1995). Students from lower social origins, on the other hand, were more likely to be discouraged to pursue higher education due to their poor academic performance and the urgent need to work to support their family (Gerber & Hout, 1995). As a result, children of intellectuals, specialists, civil servants, and professionals were more likely to aspire to higher education than the children of workers and peasants, contributing to the reproduction of social groups in the Soviet Union (as cited in Smolentseva, 2012). A number of other scholars confirmed this finding by highlighting the influence of parent's occupational status, educational attainment, and Communist Party membership on educational aspirations of children (Gerber & Hout, 1995).

In 1970s-80s, blat became increasingly important as more school graduates competed for a limited amount of university admissions spaces (Sharipova, 2018). Given the scarcity of slots

in higher education institutions, blat networks flourished, and the access was mainly determined by who had influential parents rather than who was well prepared (Sharipova, 2018). Parents who had connections in the university could easily accommodate their children. Making phone calls was a routine practice for getting students admitted to universities, appointing them to prestigious positions, and redistributing job placements among university graduates (Sharipova, 2018).

The quality of blat networks was critical in being admitted to the most prestigious universities (Sharipova, 2018). One KGB (Committee for State Security) colonel complained that his daughter could not get into the university for two years in a row in 1980s since there was a queue in the central apparatus of KGB to enter the university through blat. Only after the colonel met the KGB Chairman his daughter was admitted (Sharipova, 2018). The Moscow Institute of International Relations was well known for admitting the children of Soviet political elite mainly from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Although job placement after graduation was expected, only students with connections could receive better placement and avoid the placement in rural areas or other republics (Sharipova, 2018).

Beyond family, Soviet youth formed relationships with peers. Numerous socio-cultural and sport activities helped youth to meet each other (Lepisto, 2010). These activities were organized and controlled by the state, which ensured that Soviet youth had certain pathways to adulthood. Aspiring youth tried to go to the good school, to marry well, to attend a good university, to join Komsomol, and seek Party membership. Youth formed friendships and connections during these controlled activities inside and outside school. Most Soviet youth formed a core support group, comprised of three to six close friends, that would last a lifetime (Lepisto, 2010).

Social Relationships and Education in the Post-Soviet Era: 1990s – to Date

With the collapse of the Soviet system and the transition to market economy, the character of blat networks had changed. This shift is exemplified by a post-Soviet folk saying that states: "Do not have 100 friends, do have 100 dollars" (Ledeneva, 1998, p. 175). Because money played a much greater role in the market economy than in Soviet society, blat networks adjusted to contemporary times (Ledeneva, 1998; Onoschenko & Williams, 2014). While some argued that blat use still persisted in some areas, others claimed that corruption and bribery replaced it (Ledeneva, 1998; Onoschenko & Williams, 2014). In this section, I first examine how blat has been conceptualized by scholars in the post-Soviet era. I will then explore its meaning in education and employment, especially in relation to corruption. Finally, I will identify the gaps in the literature related to blat.

Since goods and services have become more broadly available in a more market-based society, blat has lost its significance in accessing these goods. However, in the sphere of education and employment, blat remained significant (Ledeneva, 1998). Increasing privatization changed the traditional attitudes towards "favors of access" and enhanced the economic interests of those involved in now post-Soviet states (Ledeneva, 1998). If in the past people were able to manipulate the resources that did not belong to them and distributed without reluctance, the fall of the Soviet Union introduced new rules for gaining access to economic opportunities. Personal connections were increasingly becoming commodities and gifts/money were exchanged to access this commodity (Ledeneva, 1998). For this reason, blat was deemed to have more negative meaning than in the past and became increasingly associated with corruption under the market

economy. As a result, Michailova and Worm (2003) argued that “blat is losing its warm, human face and becoming increasingly materialized” (p. 517).

Ledeneva (1998) distinguished two phases of mutual influence between blat and market reforms. In the first phase, blat connections facilitated the development of market activities while in the second phase developed market conditions altered the frameworks in which blat was embedded. The first wave of successful entrepreneurs originated in blat such as ex-members of nomenklatura (influential posts to be filled by Communist party appointees) who took advantage of their social capital even though not all nomenklatura members were able to successfully convert other forms of capital such as economic capital when the Soviet Union collapsed (Clark, 2000). As such, Clark (2000) claimed that in post-Soviet states, “social capital is at the root of economic capital,” inverting Bourdieu’s argument with respect to capitalism that emphasized economic capital as the root of all other forms of capital. (p. 444).

However, as market conditions quickly developed, not only nomenklatura, but also academics, business representatives, and many others highlighted the decrease in value-oriented connections (mutual help, friendship) and narrowing of horizontal networks. It did not mean that connections no longer functioned, but rather that they were mostly driven by self-interest and mutual profit (Ledeneva, 1998; 2000). As one of the participants in Ledeneva’s (2000) study noted: “The deal they say has to be greened [*nado-pozelenit’* [emphasis original] – referring to the color of a US dollar bill]” (p. 192). For this reason, blat is increasingly associated with corruption under the market economy.

These changes in blat practices have important implications for educational and career opportunities of individuals. Scholars observed that although corruption was anticipated with the transition to market economy, its scale in education sector had been a shock (Heyneman, 2011).

Numerous studies decried corruption at all levels of education in the post-Soviet context (Heyneman, 2007; Milovanovich & Lapham, 2018; Polese, 2008; Rigi, 2004; Round & Rodgers, 2009; Rumyantseva, 2005). Examples of corruption in higher education sector include Ministry of Education requesting payments from university leadership for institutional accreditations, teachers or other tutoring service providers charging students for assistance in university entrance exams, faculty charging students or accepting gifts or services for grades or postponing the approval of student's thesis until the payment of a "fee" (Heyneman et al., 2008). The causes of corruption in education sector were not only related to the "mentality" of blat in the post-Soviet context, but also a number of financial and structural factors such as low salaries for academics and poor prospects after retirement, the legacy of Soviet higher education system with centralized funding, monitoring, and oral entrance examinations, and frequent oral exams throughout a student's career (Petrov & Temple, 2004).

Given the scale of corruption, the fight against corruption has become one of the primary focuses of policy and practice in the post-Soviet context. In the higher education sector, the increasing privatization, the growing demand for higher education, and a limited number of state-funded study places created increased importance of university entrance examinations. Driven by the desire to fight corruption in the admission process, most post-Soviet countries replaced oral examinations conducted by individual universities with externally administered standardized testing (Drummond, 2011; Heyneman, 2011). This shifted parents' use of blat to influence the admission decisions by individual universities to investing in private tutoring to increase the chances of their children to pass the entrance examinations and receive state-funded higher education (Silova, 2010b). Tutoring exacerbated social inequities, such as the rural-urban divide, because it was almost exclusively available to students whose parents could pay extra

money for tutoring (Silova, 2010b). These shifts in the newly defined blat in higher education sector demonstrate the critical role of both social capital and economic capital in exacerbating inequities in post-Soviet context.

Scholars examining corruption have typically called for greater scrutiny on corrupt practices (see Heyneman, 2007; Heyneman et al., 2008; Round & Rodgers, 2009); however, other scholars have called for more holistic understanding of what is deemed corruption (Milovanovitch & Lapham, 2018; Polese, 2008). For instance, Milovanovitch and Lapham (2018) argued that it was the education reforms, introduced mostly by global organizations such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank that created disruptions in education and exacerbated corrosive practices such as corruption in post-socialist contexts. The authors argued that parents typically found shadow solutions to address the lack of resources and stability in order to realize their aspirations for a better future (Milovanovitch & Lapham, 2018, p. 121). Moreover, teachers' inability to make ends meet with low salaries motivated them to offer private tutoring after school, sometimes to their own students (Milovanovitch & Lapham, 2018).

Blat connections, which relied on relations but were increasingly monetized, seemed to be at the core of the attempts to solve systemic problems in education. Data from Johnson's (2011) study in Kyrgyzstan indicates that students generally seemed to sympathize with corrupt teacher practices and blamed the system and economy not teachers. With the decreased public funding and decentralization, principals who could not sustain the school began asking parents for informal payments. Werner (2000) found that social connections were required in the practice of bribes for university admission or employment in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. Specifically, Werner (2000) argued that "bribery is an acquired skill" and individuals must know "culturally informed etiquette procedures for presenting bribes" such as "who is willing to accept a bribe,

how much and what they need to give, when and where they can safely give the bribe, and what they need to say or do when they make the presentation" (p. 18). Therefore, in most cases, older men who had substantial experience and connections handled the most important bribes for a family such as the ones for university admission and employment. This "culturally informed etiquette," experience, and connections provide the essential framework for an elaborate kind of bribery when the stakes are high, as in the case of university admissions. Often such high stakes forms of bribery are also critically dependent on the relationship between giver and receiver. As Ledeneva (2000) acutely concluded the underlying issue of the corrupt practices in the post-Soviet context lied in understanding how to deal with a society in which "loyalty to one's connections means more than loyalty to the state and where unwritten codes and social connections dominate the law" (p. 204).

Scholars reported that the social-monetary use of blat has magnified the widening gap between the rich and poor in the post-Soviet context. This particularly seemed to be the case in the job market, where blat use contributed to the increasingly widening gap between the rich and poor (Ledeneva, 1998; Onoschenko & Williams, 2014). Gerber and Mayorova (2010), in their analysis of the Russian labor market from 1985-2001, concluded that personal networks played an independent stratifying role in labor market of Russia as those who utilized their networks could get better jobs.

Similarly, Rose (2000), analyzing the extent to which Russians used social capital to produce welfare, found that the more networks in which a person was involved lead to the greater level of their welfare, such as getting food and providing income security. However, Rose argued that anti-modern networks, involving bribes for public officials and coercing others

outside the law, were most popular in the post-Soviet Russia. These studies demonstrate how the use of social connections perpetuate inequities in society through furthering or constraining career opportunities of adults in the post-Soviet context.

Blat connections seem to perpetuate inequities even when money/gift exchange is not involved. Although most studies supported the argument that blat had been commodified in the post-Soviet context, Onoshchenko and Williams's (2014) qualitative study of graduates in Ukraine provided counter arguments. The authors found that most participants in their study who practiced blat did not engage in money or gift exchange but rather used it to help friends and relatives with employment after graduation from universities. However, they confirmed the findings of the above scholars in that the use of personal connections exacerbated inequities in society since those who did not have connections faced more difficulties in transitioning to work. These findings demonstrate the critical role blat connections play in employment opportunities of youth in the post-Soviet context.

Blat and Student Research. The above discussion demonstrates the pervasiveness of blat connections in perpetuating inequities in post-Soviet context; however, most of the studies reported above except Onoshchenko and Williams (2014) examined blat use by adults or student's parents. The literature that analyzes blat conceptualization from the youth perspectives is limited. Ledeneva (2008) reported that there were generational differences in the use of the term blat among older and younger generations. While older generations, particularly those not involved in new sectors of economy, tended to highlight the enduring importance of blat admitting the fact it now met new needs, younger generations tended to view blat as an out-of-date term, unsuitable to market conditions. At the same time, Ledeneva (2008) argued that such

generational differences in the use of the term did not mean that blat as a pervasive phenomenon had disappeared.

The concepts of blat, social capital, and corruption all inform studies related to youth and education in post-Soviet contexts. Balint (2013), for example, studying youth (aged 15-29) in Romania, found that college educated young people were able to obtain only lower income and lower prestige jobs if their cultural capital (higher education degree) was not complemented by social capital. Balint found that those college graduates who lacked influential social connections could only hold jobs that were below their educational level, which led to overqualification. Balint (2013) confirmed Bourdieu's theory by concluding that cultural capital (higher education degree) was strongly interconnected with social capital. However, Balint's (2013) study tells us little about how and why these relationships are important since Balint (2013) relied on quantitative measures of social capital that assumed that simply having a relationship constituted social capital.

While the studies of scholars discussed above (Balint, 2013; Gerber & Mayorova, 2010; Rose, 2000) were largely concerned with the role of social capital in reproducing inequities in society, Lepisto (2010) focused on the role of social capital as primary means that aspiring Azerbaijani youth used to get ahead. Drawing on the ethnographic study in Azerbaijan, Lepisto (2010) explained that most Azerbaijani youth formed fewer and weaker relationships compared to older generations due to the loss of structured activities since the collapse of the Soviet Union; however, this study revealed that aspiring youth, defined as university-bound youth, developed larger and more diverse networks of friends and acquaintances due to their participation in a broad range of activities. In other words, aspiring youth found new ways to form relationships and were best positioned to forge ahead and generate social change.

Gaps in Literature. The above-mentioned studies provided valuable contributions to expanding understanding about the concept of social capital in the post-Soviet context, but the majority focused on the social capital of adults rather than youth, the focus of my proposed study (Clark, 2000; Gerber & Mayorova, 2010; Rose, 2000). While Lepisto (2010) explored the process of social capital formation by youth, he ignored the role of structural inequities in this process. Moreover, most of the scholarship targeted the dominant upper-and-middle class forms of social and cultural capital that contributed to the reproduction of inequities (Balint, 2013; Clark, 2000; Gerber & Mayorova, 2010; Roberts et al., 2009; Rose, 2000). These studies failed to explain how marginalized youth, who hold non-dominant forms of social and cultural capital, develop social capital and are able or unable to use it to overcome structural inequities in society. Exploring the youth perspectives avoid classifying youth as passive recipients of adult's resources and recognizes them as agentic beings developing and using social capital. In this study, rather than focusing on what marginalized youths lack, I emphasize their strengths and agency through examining how youth from socially and economically marginalized backgrounds are able or unable to acquire and use social capital to further their educational and career aspirations.

Furthermore, some scholars cited in this section tended to exacerbate the dichotomous understanding between the East and the West by emphasizing the superiority of the Western system in comparison to the post-Soviet system. For instance, Heyneman (2000) claimed that U.S. society had a substantial "quantity" of social capital in comparison to countries in Europe and Central Asia (p. 185). He depicted U.S. school system as having "unique virtues" such as not teaching "disrespect toward specific ethnic or religious groups" or not amplifying "political tension with countries to the north or to the south" in the curriculum whereas these were deemed

to be the educational challenges for school systems in the Europe and Central Asia (ECA) region (Heyneman, 2000, p. 185). However, in this argument Heyneman (2000) ignored critiques of Western systems for their role in reinforcing white supremacy and gender inequality (Jacobs, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Quadlin et al., 2023). The framing of post-Soviet education systems as inferior feed into what Chankseliani (2017) describes as a "double disadvantage" that post-Soviet systems face – first as systems that are navigating separation from Russian imperialism and second from scholarship that reflect Western academic colonialism.

Scholars further exacerbated the dichotomous understanding between the East and the West by framing social connections in the post-Soviet context primarily around the issues of bribes and corruption (Heyneman, 2007, 2008; Heyneman et al., 2008; Round & Rodgers, 2009). These studies, however, ignored the significance of understanding the roots and incentives for such negative forms of exchange and power as well as the trends that are similar in both Western and post-Soviet societies. For instance, while most scholars accused parents, students, and professionals in the former Soviet Bloc of participating in negative forms of exchange to support their own interests (Heyneman, 2007, 2008; Round & Rodgers, 2009; Rumyantseva, 2005), these actions may reflect common practices in the West, such as legacy admissions, donor admissions, using networks to gain admission to prestigious and competitive universities, and in the recent college admissions scandal in the U.S., paying hundreds of thousands of dollars for admission (Allat, 1993; Martin & Spenner, 2009; The New York Times, 2019). Parents, students, and professionals in the former Soviet Bloc participated in informal arrangements because they also had a genuine desire to "invest in a better future" for themselves and their children (Milovanovitch & Lapham, 2018, p. 121). In the face of challenges, parents came up with

shadow solutions to address the shortages in resources and a lack of stability (Milovanovitch & Lapham, 2018).

Furthermore, some scholars concluded that the educational trajectories of reforms in the post-Soviet context were largely predictable and would follow the neoliberal homogenous path (Heyneman, 2011). These assumptions were later challenged by an in-depth scholarship that demonstrated the complexities and divergences of post-socialist educational reform trajectories (Silova, 2018). While the findings of the studies on social capital in the post-Soviet context might hold true for some post-Soviet states due to shared history, it is essential to consider the diversity that exists among the fifteen independent states as well as the diversity among the generational experiences of people living within those states. Just as this study seeks to nuance the application of social capital in the post-Soviet context, it also seeks to nuance the application of social capital within individual states and for different generations. Each country has its own geography, socioeconomic and political system, and cultural practices that all affect how students perceive, access, and use social capital. Scholars have acknowledged the limitations of the term "post-socialism," and how social capital works in particular societies (Dowley & Silver, 2002; Silova et al., 2017). In answering the call of several scholars, this study seeks to provide an alternative to studies that homogenize the diversity of the region and fail to capture the unique histories and future imaginaries of education in various states (Silova et al., 2017). Thus, grounding this study in Kazakhstan provides specific national context that disrupts the narrative of homogeneity of all post-Soviet countries. The next section will focus on exploring the understandings and use of social capital as well as the discussion of relevant background information in Kazakhstan, the context where this study will take place.

The Case of Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan, a bilingual and the most ethnically diverse post-Soviet state, has undergone significant political changes over the past several years as younger generations begin to take on a larger role in politics. Youth represent a diverse and polarized population in Kazakhstan including those who are Western-educated, hold different advantages, and have differences in social class. These differences are important in considering the role of social capital since they are both benefiting from the social capital of their parents and creating their own in a new political order that maintains class distinctions.

To understand the current political moment in Kazakhstan, some understanding of the country's geography, culture, and history is necessary. Although Kazakhstan is the ninth-largest country in the world by land surface, its population density is low given that it has only 19.8 million inhabitants (Bureau of National Statistics, 2023). Administratively, Kazakhstan is divided into 17 regions (oblasts) and three megapolis cities of republican significance (Astana, Almaty, Shymkent). Regions include villages, towns, and cities (Alkhabyev, 2022). It is a bilingual country with Kazakh designated as the "state" language and Russian as an "official" language. About one sixth of people understand some English (Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2017). Kazakhs account for about 69% of the population and there are many other ethnic groups including Russian, Uighurs, Ukrainians, Koreans, Tatars, Uzbeks, and Germans (Chernenko, 2022).

Social, political, and economic transformations experienced by Kazakhstan under and after the Soviet rule were more dramatic than its neighbors. The shift from the economy of pastoralism to one based on large-scale mechanized agriculture, bureaucratization, and expansion to near-universal literacy and education came during the Soviet era (Schatz, 2004).

Economically, Kazakhstan experienced its GDP per capita cut in half during the first few years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but now belongs to the group of upper-middle income countries (Laruelle, 2019). Since 2002, Kazakhstan's GDP per capita has risen six-fold subsequently lifting many people out of poverty (Laruelle, 2019). According to official statistics, the rate of absolute poverty in Kazakhstan fell from 47% in 2001 to 5.2% in 2022 (Bureau of National Statistics, 2022a; Sputnik, 2022). Despite this relatively positive official figure, it is important to note that government measurements of poverty have severe limitations due to potential for manipulation of measurements (Aliev, 2015; Sanghera & Satybaldieva, 2021). In his article on poverty in Kazakhstan, Aliev (2015) convincingly argued that Kazakhstan's poverty measurement approach was primarily guided by political considerations and required radical changes. According to Aliev's (2015) calculations in 2015, the percent of population living in poverty in Kazakhstan was between 10-20% whereas the official data on the rate of poverty for the same period was 2.7% (Official information source of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2016). Moreover, there are persistent issues including endemic corruption, immense economic and social opportunity gaps between regions and rural/urban areas, quasi-nonexistent opposition to political rule, and a constrained press (Laruelle, 2019). Consideration of these issues of equity and opportunity is important for my study as I am interested in how these inequities are reproduced or transformed and how youth from socioeconomically marginalized backgrounds navigate these inequities in their pursuit of educational and career aspirations.

This study comes at the critical time period in Kazakhstan's history. The beginning of 2022 was marked by deadly civil unrest in Kazakhstan that was aggravated by the country's striking social and economic inequality. President Tokayev (2022b) referred to this moment as

the most devastating and dangerous period in 30-year history of Kazakhstan's independence. The protests became known locally as "Bloody January – Qandy Qantar" due to the violence with the highest death toll in country's independent history (Karibayeva & Lemon, 2023). The protests were triggered by a double increase in price for liquified petroleum gas in Zhanaozen in Western Kazakhstan, an oil-producing city with a long history of struggle for labor rights and union organization (People and Nature, 2022). The protests spread quickly across the major cities of the country in an unprecedented scale and speed. Although the protests were peaceful at first, they turned violent soon after, especially in cities such as Almaty, Shymkent, and Aktobe (Aitkulov, 2022; Caron, 2023). Protesters seized and then set on fire the buildings of the government, looted arms depots, and local businesses, and vandalized the international airport in Almaty (Caron, 2023). In response to this unprecedented situation, the President Tokayev took an extraordinary set of measures declaring the state of emergency throughout the country, blocking internet access for days, ordering the police "to shoot to kill without warning," and calling upon the support of the members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization to deploy their troops in Kazakhstan (Caron, 2023). According to official data, 238 people were killed and about 10,000 protesters were arrested (Aitkulov, 2023; Caron, 2023). The government of Kazakhstan estimated the total cost of the crisis at 3 billion USD (Caron, 2023). As such, in the matter of few days, Kazakhstan's image as the most politically stable and economically successful country in Central Asia was shaken up (Caron, 2023; Karibayeva & Lemon, 2023).

In addition to the abovementioned economic and human losses, these tragic events prompted massive political changes that nobody predicted just weeks before the protests (Caron, 2023). Just three years earlier in March 2019, Kazakhstan experienced big political transition when Nazarbayev, the first president of independent Kazakhstan, who ruled the country for

almost thirty years, had resigned. Although Nazarbayev left the Presidency, he did not give up his power and remained the head of the Security Council and the presidential party Nur Otan, as well as the newly created Office of the First President (Laruelle, 2019). His power was also reinforced by the strong government positions occupied by his family members (Laruelle, 2019). At the time, it was widely assumed that Nazarbayev's successor Tokayev, known as a close ally of Nazarbayev, "would simply act as a token Head of state and would not challenge the internal dynamic of the system his predecessor had patiently put in place" (Caron, 2023, p. 2). This belief was asserted by the October 2019 amendments to the power of the President that forced Tokayev to seek Nazarbayev's approval for the nomination of most cabinet ministers, secret services, regional governors, and members of the Prosecutor General office (Caron, 2023).

Nobody could have predicted that in less than three years after this big political transition, Tokayev would start what some scholars now call "de-Nazarbaeyevification" process (Caron, 2023). Specifically, in the aftermath of tragic January 2022 events, Tokayev stripped Nazarbayev of all his positions, arrested some of his closest allies, and had all direct members of Nazarbayev's family resign from their powerful positions in the government and big oil companies. Moreover, Tokayev initiated a referendum which took place on June 5, 2022, which led to the modification of about a third of the country's constitution with an overall goal of transitioning from super-presidential form of governance to presidential republic with strong parliament and accountable government office (Aitkulov, 2022). The measures approved at the referendum included stripping Nazarbayev of his title of the "leader of the nation," which led to the loss of many privileges that the title provided including the immunity against prosecution for his family (Caron, 2023). Finally, a few months later, Kazakhstan's capital was renamed "Astana" after being named "Nur-Sultan" (the first name of Nazarbayev) in March 2019

following Nazarbayev's resignation (Caron, 2023). The eventful 2022 concluded with the snap election of Tokayev on November 20. Furthermore, the first quarter of 2023 started with the election to the Lower House of the Parliament and the local representative bodies of the Parliament as well as the formation of the members of the Government office.

The uniting idea throughout the socioeconomic and political changes announced by President Tokayev after tragic January events is building "Just and Fair Kazakhstan" which aims to "decentralize decision-making, strengthen the rule of law, increase international competitiveness, and ensure equal opportunities for every citizen" (Tokayev, 2022a, n.p.). The focus on fostering "Just and Fair Kazakhstan" is the government's response to the main drivers behind the January 2022 protests. Although the scale and nature of the protests came as a surprise to many, the main drivers behind the protests had long been plain in sight: socioeconomic inequities, widespread corruption, political repression, and the failure of the state to deliver on its promises of economic growth (Kudaibergenova & Laruelle, 2023). A number of experts argued that at its core, the protests were a "working class revolt" (Akizhanov, 2022a; People and Nature, 2022; Sanghera & Satybaldieva, 2022). In the past, these acute socioeconomic inequity issues tended to be concealed with the discourse about prosperity and "open boasting about the economic might of the state," capable of giving every citizen "the type of 'good life' for which they hoped" (Kudaibergenova & Laruelle, 2022, p. 4). However, after the January 2022 protests, President Tokayev openly spoke of some of these issues calling attention to the need to focus on "social equity," which was the first time that people of independent Kazakhstan heard these issues formally acknowledged at the highest level of the government. As Tokayev (2022b) stated:

Следует признать, что произошедшие трагические события во многом вызваны серьезными социально-экономическими проблемами и неэффективной, а точнее, провальной деятельностью некоторых государственных органов… Произошел заметный отрыв отдельных исполнительных органов от трудных реалий и потребностей граждан… Обострилась и проблема неравенства. Она усугубляется из года в год, хотя средние показатели доходов населения вроде бы растут, по крайней мере на бумаге… Однако за приличными средними заработками скрывается сильное имущественное расслоение в обществе. Многие насущные проблемы граждан не решены… Сложившаяся система ориентирована главным образом на обслуживание крупных структур по принципу: «друзьям все, остальным – по закону».

We must acknowledge that the tragic events are caused mainly by serious socioeconomic issues and ineffective, to be precise - failed, activities of some government bodies… There has been a notable distance between certain executive bodies and difficult realities and needs of citizens… The issue of inequity has exacerbated. It is being exacerbated from year to year even though the average indicators of income of the population seem to be growing, at least on paper… Behind the decent average income is the huge material stratification of society. Many vital issues of citizens are not resolved… The current system is oriented towards serving large structures following the principle of: "friends get everything and everyone else gets according to the law."

In the aftermath of the protests, Tokayev (2022c) met with local business representatives and called upon them to learn lessons from the country's situation and work together with the government for the wellbeing of society:

Налицо явный дисбаланс и очевидная проблема справедливости распределения национального дохода. Международные эксперты (в частности, KPMG) утверждают, что всего 162 человека владеют половиной благосостояния Казахстана. В то время как у половины населения ежемесячный доход не превышает 50 тысяч тенге! Это чуть больше 1300 долларов в год. На такие деньги прожить практически невозможно. Как я уже сказал, такое расслоение и неравенство опасно. Ситуацию надо срочно менять… Надо определить новые «правила игры». Более честные, прозрачные и справедливые	There is a clear imbalance and issue of just allocation of national income. International experts, namely KPMG, claim that only 162 people [0.001% of the population] own half of the total wealth of Kazakhstan while income of the half of the population does not exceed 50 thousand tenge. This is a little above 1,300 USD per year. One can not survive with such amount of money. This kind of inequity is dangerous. The situation needs to be urgently changed… We need to identify new "rules of the game." They must be more honest, transparent, and just.

These figures cited by the President offer a stark picture of class stratification in Kazakhstan, characterized by a minority of wealthy at the top and majority of poor at the bottom. According to recent data, the income of the wealthiest 10% of the population was 29 times higher than the poorest 10% (Sharipova, 2015).

In their book on rentier capitalism in Central Asia, Sanghera and Satybaldieva (2021) convincingly argued that at the root of this stratification and established plutocratic regime, not only in Kazakhstan but in other countries, was rentier capitalism. Rentier capitalism is defined as "dominant and legalised economic practices and arrangements" in which "powerful propertied class (asset-rich or rentiers)" can extract different forms of rent (e.g., interest, land, housing) from those without property (the asset-poor) (Sanghera & Satybaldieva, 2022, n.p.). Rentiers' income is "unearned" because they secure income through power over others, "not because they deserve or have earned it" (Sanghera & Satybaldieva, 2022, n.p.). According to Sanghera and Satybaldieva (2021), this model was imposed by Western donors and advisors including the U.S., World Bank, and IMF, who pressured the newly independent post-Soviet states in the early 1990s "to act on behalf of foreign financial institutions and corporations more than for their own populations" (p. viii). By accepting this neoliberal "shock therapy" through adhering to the principles of free market in the "absence of mature social-democratic institutions," "the Soviet welfare states became post-Soviet debtfare states" (Akizhanov, 2022b, p. 1; Sanghera & Satybaldieva, 2021, p. 32). In Kazakhstan, almost half of the households used loans to cover for basic services and goods due to their commodification (Shedenova & Beimisheva, 2013). As Sanghera and Satybaldieva (2021) demonstrated in their study in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, commodification of land, natural resources, money, and labor, led to "mounting problems of indebtedness, usurious interest rates, land evictions, homelessness, low pay, job insecurity and environmental destruction" (p. 2).

Spatial Inequities. In discussing the inequities in Kazakhstan, it is important to highlight the significance of spatial inequities between regions (oblasts) and megapolis cities as well as rural and urban areas. There are stark inequities in income, access to educational and career

opportunities, and infrastructure. For instance, gross regional product in Astana (capital) was 12,701 USD whereas this number was 2,985 in South Kazakhstan, most densely populated region (El-Hodiri et al., 2015). Sakal's (2015) survey study demonstrated that "36.7% of respondents in South Kazakhstan, 28.1% in Mangistau and 23.9% in Atyrau were unable to afford food, clothing or essential consumer products" (as cited in Sanghera & Satybaldieva, 2021, p. 30). Moreover, Mangystau region in Western Kazakhstan was home for 70% of country's oil production, however the region and its population did not enjoy the benefits from oil revenues since the primary beneficiary was new capital Astana (Sanghera & Satybaldieva, 2021). While Astana experienced exponential growth since its establishment as country's capital in 1997 becoming one of the most modern cities in Central Asia, communities in oil producing regions experienced air and water pollution, land degradation, and poor social services (Ursulenko, 2010; Sanghera & Satybaldieva, 2021).

Spatial inequities were particularly acute in rural areas, home for 47% of the population in Kazakhstan (Sanghera & Satybaldieva, 2021). In addition to abovementioned inequities in income and access to opportunities in the regions, rural population experienced hardships with access to basic utilities including access to water sources, sewage system, and electricity. Kerimray et al. (2017) reported that 77% of rural households lacked electricity and 68% experienced energy poverty. Only 24.2% had access to water sources and only 8.9% had access to sewage system (as cited in Sanghera & Satybaldieva, 2021).

Youth in Kazakhstan. Those aged under 29 comprise half of Kazakhstan's population (Laruelle, 2019). Some scholars referred to this generation of Kazakhstan as the Nazarbayev generation since they were born after Nazarbayev took power and the only president they had known until 2019 was him (Laruelle, 2019). Studying youth aspirations is particularly important

during this time because the Kazakhstani government and public, place high hopes for them to lead the country, highly promoting the idea that this generation is qualitatively distinct from the older generation as they are free from the Soviet legacy (Junisbay & Junisbay, 2019). Recent study that focused on understanding the main causes of the January 2022 protests, reported that people believed that the next step for the country was "a complete change of power and the involvement of the younger generation in government" (Aitkulov, 2022, p. 82). The significance of youth involvement in the state jobs has also been emphasized by President Tokayev (2022b). In this regard, he particularly highlighted the importance of promoting the principles of "meritocracy" in selection and promotion in public service jobs. To promote social mobility among successful youth and to attract innovative minds to the state system, Tokayev (2022b) initiated the "Presidential youth personnel reserve" project in 2019. As such, youth have been the primary target of nation-state building (Junisbay & Junisbay, 2019). Although until the recent period, youth were rarely represented in the government leadership, this is slowly changing as Kazakhstanis are starting to see a few young Western-educated officials in the government leadership positions.

The youth initiating reforms seem to come primarily from the upper classes, with a wider access to education and experience, whereas youth in lower classes or in rural areas are having very different experiences. The contrast can be made between the *Bolashak* generation – those trained abroad under Kazakhstan government program – rural youth who were sometimes claimed to support "jihadism and going to volunteer in the Syrian war theater" (Laruelle, 2019, p. 3). Laruelle (2019) argued that youth's views were polarized in many of its values, norms, and behaviors. This polarization in values, Laruelle (2019) claimed, depended on the backgrounds of youth including place of residence (rural/urban), travel experience abroad, and related

socioeconomic opportunities. Similarly, Sanghera and Satybaldieva (2021) contended that the Western-educated youth were unwilling to go against the powerful elites by seeking opportunities within the established political order. Yermekbayev, the Minister of Civil Society, on the other hand, stated that young people, those impacted by poor socioeconomic conditions unable to find jobs, comprised the majority of members of radical Islamic organizations (80 percent) (as cited in Burkhanov, 2019). In other words, despite the youth-led movement, it seems like that it is critically advantaged youth who are becoming the leaders, reproducing and expanding the influence of class on opportunities for youth.

This unequal distribution of opportunities is especially evident in labor market. According to official data[6], 96% of working-age youth in Kazakhstan work (Laruelle, 2019). Yet, 16% were self-employed, most of whom were from rural, low-income backgrounds, often working in informal sectors[7] (Laruelle, 2019). Substantial regional disparities in industrial growth and employment exist (OECD, 2017). For instance, about one-third of working -age youth worked in the informal sector in 2017, with lower salary and no protection of a labor contract (Laruelle, 2019). Moreover, the percentage of NEET (not in employment, education, or training) youth varies significantly across regions and has been growing since 2012 (Laruelle, 2019). In addition, rural/urban gap is pronounced for the Nazarbayev Generation, with 43% of youth living in rural areas with limited socioeconomic opportunities (Laruelle, 2019). In contrast,

[6] Official statistics on unemployment in Kazakhstan are calculated based on the officially reported unemployment from youth. In other words, if youth do not officially register as unemployed, they are considered employed. Therefore, other statistical data, such as employment in the informal sector and NEET, are more helpful in understanding employment conditions of youth.
[7] Employment in the informal sector is characterized as the type of employment which is partially or fully unprotected by the laws of the country and implies a lack of social benefits.

many youth with upper- and middle-class backgrounds have had better opportunities travelling and studying abroad (Laruelle, 2019).

Considering this labor market data, it is clear that Kazakhstani youth have unequal academic and career opportunities. The inequities have made it highly unlikely that many youth from rural or low-income backgrounds would ever attend higher education institutions, especially prestigious universities. How these inequities are perceived among both privileged and marginalized youth is under-explored in research. Junisbay and Junisbay (2019), drawing on the results of the nationally representative public opinion survey in Kazakhstan, reported that the younger generation was less concerned with the issues of inequality and less supportive of the government addressing this inequality than their older counterparts (Junisbay & Junisbay, 2019). In other words, "youth are quite happy with society as it is" (Laruelle, 2019, p. 6). At the same time, about 90% of Kazakhstanis irrespective of age agreed that income gap in Kazakhstan was too large (Junisbay & Junisbay, 2019).

The generational differences in attitudes toward inequity might be the result of the prominence of market versus socialist ideology as well as locations of education (Junisbay & Junisbay, 2019). Junisbay and Junisbay (2019) argued that these differences were unsurprising given the current context in which youth were being socialized. According to the authors, this younger generation had no lived experience of the Soviet times when higher education was free, and they only knew a privatized system in which everything depended on one's ability to pay. As such, Junisbay and Junisbay (2019) claimed that "inequality is a fact of life" for those who grew up over the past two decades (p. 39). Youth did not hold the government responsible for solving the issues of inequality because "… an economically liberal lens—a limited role for the government in the economy, acceptance of inequality, and private initiative— [are experienced

more by youth] than their predecessors, who were socialized under the Soviet command economy" (Junisbay & Junisbay, 2019, p. 33). Moreover, the authors argued that youth were less inclined to pay attention to structural barriers to success "tending to believe that individual drive and hard work matter more" (Junisbay & Junisbay, 2019, p. 35). Junisbay and Junisbay (2019) further contend that these attitudes of Kazakhstani youth were in line with their young peers across the globe "as younger people tend to be more economically liberal than people belonging to older generations" (p. 33). While these arguments provide an important picture of youth attitudes and values, the authors did not address whether these attitudes differ by socioeconomic backgrounds of youth and influence youth educational and career aspirations.

The Idea of Unity in Kazakhstan. Another contextual issue that is important to this study is the idea of unity, which has been an important framework for Kazakhstan given its diverse population. According to Laruelle (2014), Kazakhstan developed the most comprehensive version of the theory of the post-Soviet "friendship of peoples" in the former Soviet States. This theory was a direct legacy of the paradoxes of the Soviet Friendship of Peoples ideology in which Russian nation constituted the cornerstone of the Soviet integration and the link connecting all other identities to each other (Laruelle, 2014).

Similarly, the Kazakh nation constitutes a "factor of horizontal integration" among all ethnicities in Kazakhstan and of "vertical integration" between the state and its citizens (Laruelle, 2014, p. 3). Kazakhstan is also promoting Eurasianist ideology, which has become local and international brand in the sense that Europe is seeking to present a more unified front (Laruelle, 2014). Eurasianist ideology is based on the idea of multiethnic nation at "the heart of Eurasia," which allows the absorption of "the best in European and Asian culture" (Laruelle, 2014, p. 9). As such, Kazakhstan has been defined as a textbook case of building a hybrid state

identity, where at least three paradigms coexist (Laruelle, 2014). Specifically, Kazakhstan simultaneously defined itself as “Kazakh, that is, the political entity of the Kazakh nation and its historical accomplishment, as Kazakhstani, that is, as a multiethnic nation at the crossroads of the Eurasian continent, and as a transnational country integrated into world trends” (Laruelle, 2014, p. 1).

In this context, these three paradigms manifest themselves in the social relationships, aspirations, and competitive spaces of youth. Scholars have provided a robust discussion on how these three paradigms influence, at times create tension, in youth perceptions of nationhood identity, and gender roles (Bigozhin, 2019; Burkhanov, 2019; Kudaibergenova, 2019; Sharipova, 2019). For higher education students, these identities are introduced and complicated by the introduction of trilingual education (Kazakh, Russian, and English), integration in the European Higher Education Area including the implementation of the Bologna process, and the transition to Latin-based Alphabet by 2025 (Ministry of Education & Science, 2018). The following section will provide an overview of higher education in Kazakhstan and its relevance to this study.

Higher Education System in Kazakhstan. To consider the importance of social capital for educational and career aspirations of students in Kazakhstan, an understanding of the Kazakhstani education system is necessary. Kazakhstan’s education can be described as highly centralized top-down system with high enrollment rates but low quality (OECD, 2017). The attainment level is comparatively high, approximating the average levels of OECD countries. According to OECD (2017), of the adult population aged 25 and above, 25% had higher education, 30% had a post-secondary degree, and about 40% had upper secondary education as their highest level of attainment. Kazakhstan’s current higher education enrollment rate is about

71% (UNESCO, 2022). Higher education funding has a high share of private investments with 66% coming from private payments in 2021 while 34% of students were funded by government educational grants (Bureau of National Statistics, 2022b). At the same time, according to the data from National Bureau of Statistics in Kazakhstan, more than half of the total income of universities is provided by the government (Mukhamediyarova, 2022). According to the latest data, there are 119 universities in Kazakhstan including 47 private, 29 public, 16 joint stock companies, 11 national, 14 military, 1 autonomous organization of education, and 1 international university (Official information source of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2022).

The Government of Kazakhstan's policy regarding higher education access has promoted overall expansion of enrollment, with little effort to ensure equity of access and participation (OECD, 2017). Public support for higher education is a voucher-type state grant system in which funds are allocated to the student not the institution (OECD, 2017). State grants provide support for only about one-quarter of higher education students based on the results of the Unified National Test (UNT), a high stakes competitive test that students take at the end of upper secondary school (OECD, 2017). There is a clear correlation between UNT scores, socioeconomic background of students, and the geographic location (OECD, 2017).

Low-income and rural students in Kazakhstan are less likely to perform well on UNT than their urban and higher income peers (OECD, 2017). According to OECD (2017), even though there were the admissions set-asides for certain groups of students including rural youth (30%), students with special needs (0.5%), and orphans (1%), the merit-based system of allocating grants combined with poor quality rural schools created significant barriers for rural and other marginalized students. An OECD (2017) review team reported the little evidence of

special initiatives aimed to support the needs of disadvantaged students at both secondary and higher education levels. As OECD (2017) team acutely stated "the systemic challenge of lower-quality, less well-resourced schooling for rural students and students from low socioeconomic groups" exacerbates equalities in the education system of Kazakhstan. Measures to address this challenge remained limited (OECD, 2017, p. 27).

The inequities in higher education access and participation are further exacerbated by the growing costs of tuition fees and access to loans. Currently, undergraduate degree tuition fees in Kazakhstan range from 250 thousand KZT ($555[8]) to 9 million tenge ($20,000) per academic year, which is quite high given the average monthly salary of 338, 715 KZT ($753) (Gurzhi, 2023; Tengrinews, 2023). Moreover, the dominant approach in Kazakhstan's higher education relies on a full-time study, creating additional barriers for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who may need to work while studying (OECD, 2017). Adding to the systemic barriers, the loan system in Kazakhstan has been ineffective, which made the merit-based state grant the primary source that may grant access to economically vulnerable students (OECD, 2017). The above discussion demonstrates that the merit-based system of state support in Kazakhstan results in financing the studies of students who are typically already somewhat privileged (OECD, 2017).

Studies also reported that university degree does not guarantee an improved employment opportunities. Jonbekova (2019), studying Kazakhstani and Tajikistani youth, argued that youth saw the purpose of university education in terms of its economic value, specifically, access to employment opportunities. Similarly, Kazakhstani youth in Kosnazarov's (2019) study almost

[8] Currency rate as of May 17, 2023, according to National Bank of Kazakhstan, https://nationalbank.kz/en

universally agreed that a university degree was a prerequisite to getting a job even though they were very critical of its quality (Kosnazarov, 2019). At the same time, due to oversupply of graduates and limited employment opportunities, employers have raised the bar for university qualifications. As a result, youth were driven to earn more educational credentials, what Jonbekova (2019) argued to be a widespread occurrence of "diploma disease," leading to a greater supply of graduates (p. 5). There is little known if earning more educational credentials results in better employment opportunities in Kazakhstan.

The sector is also marked by a lack of reliable data on the socioeconomic distribution of students and its effects at the school and tertiary levels. These shortages mirror the overall lack of data about income levels in the population (OECD, 2017). The system is not following students through their education and career trajectories, leading to a lack of reliable analysis of the higher education participation and completion rates of students from diverse backgrounds as well as the factors that contribute to these outcomes (OECD, 2017). The available data from the Ministry of Education and Science (based on a survey of universities, to which 80 institutions replied) indicated that about two-thirds of students from low-income backgrounds had no financial support for higher education (OECD, 2017). These figures were reflected in youth perceptions of the role of higher education in a recent study in Kazakhstan. Specifically, only 27.8% of youth in Kosnazarov's (2019) study perceived that their parents could afford paying for higher education. Lack of investment in creating reliable data for tracking students from diverse backgrounds, and lack of funding itself, indicates that the government places low priority to addressing the issues of equity in the education system.

Given the above discussion, it is not surprising that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to aspire to attend 3-4-year Technical and Vocational Schools,

which have a very low status in Kazakhstan, are often lower quality and less selective than prestigious universities (Shnarbekova, 2018), but may promise better access to employment than academic institutions. Students of higher socioeconomic status, on the other hand, aspire to study in international or prestigious national universities that may promise better access to high paying jobs and elite opportunities (Shnarbekova, 2018).

Social Relationships in Kazakhstan. As discussed in sections above, blat constitutes the basis of social relationships in the post-Soviet context. Although blat networks are widely used across the Soviet republics, it is important to emphasize particular features of their use in the Soviet Central Asian republics including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, which have a culture of strong kinship networks and gift-giving. Connections among relatives were much stronger for Asians like Kazakhs than they were for so-called “Europeans” like the Russian (Oka, 2013, p. 14). For instance, in 1986, it was found that 194 faculty and students in the Fergana Pedagogical Institute in Uzbekistan were somehow related to each other (Sharipova, 2018). While blat in Russia seems to be primarily based on friendship and acquaintance, in Kazakhstan, kinship ties rooted in clan system seem to be more important. Even though the role of clan is not specifically explored in research questions, it is important to understand this history in examining the context of social relationships use in Kazakhstan.

Until the 1930s, clans were the basic functional unit of society in Kazakhstan and these familial connections, and the importance of family relationships have survived into the present day (Schatz, 2004). The Soviet regime expected that the clans would be eradicated with the transformations to the traditional order introduced by the Soviet rule (Schatz, 2004). However, As Schatz (2004) claimed “traditional relationships do not disappear, nor do traditional identities and indigenous categories evaporate” (p. xxi). Clans were subethnic divisions in which

demonstrable common kinship underlies membership (Schatz, 2004). Each nomad was expected to know their genealogical background at least to the seventh generation (*Shezhire or zheti ata*). This cutoff point was crucial since Kazakhs placed a restriction on endogamous marriage (Schatz, 2004). In the pre-revolutionary Kazakh tribal society, *Shezhire* served as a marker of national and territorial belonging (Kudaibergenova, 2019). Kazakh tribes formed three hordes, which were geographically divided across Kazakhstan. As Kudaibergenova (2019) argued "*Shezhire* [emphasis original] and tribal distinctions served as the basis of a steppe code of law for the shared pastures and nomadic routes of each Horde and tribe" (p. 95). When Kazakhstan was incorporated into the Soviet Union, the nomadic lifestyle was eradicated, shifting clan-based system to the field of informal law and practice (Kudaibergenova, 2019; Schatz, 2004).

The Soviet state's powerful mechanisms to eradicate the clan-based systems by branding them as illegitimate in fact activated their concealability and provided a mechanism for Kazakh clan divisions to reproduce themselves (Schatz, 2004). Since the kinship divisions are not rooted in visible markers but rather occur privately through the exchange of genealogical information, the state-led campaigns to remove clan from legitimate public space drove these identities underground (Schatz, 2004). This in turn gave clan divisions "explosive potential" as they became less prone to state control (Schatz, 2004, p. xxii). This underground clan networks were the primary means for accessing scarce goods and services during the Soviet era in Kazakhstan.

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned particular features of social relationships in Kazakhstan, their use and development underwent similar transformations as the social relationships in the larger Soviet context. Specifically, similar to blat networks in Russia and elsewhere, social relationships were more value-oriented (kinship, mutual help) during the Soviet era whereas since 1990s, the use of cash payments became more common in Kazakhstan (Oka,

2015). According to Oka (2015), Kazakhstanis in the current capitalist society, particularly in urban areas, preferred one-time short-term practical interactions through cash payment rather than using their kinship ties or investing time to build relationships.

With regards to clans, Schatz (2004) argued that by the end of the Soviet rule clan divisions were no longer the source of social, cultural, and political identity as they were in the nineteenth century, whereas Kudaibergenova (2019) claimed that the knowledge of one's own tribal genealogy still formed an "important—and, for some, even integral—part of the Kazakh ethnic identity" to the present day (Kudaibergenova, 2019, p. 95).

Social Connections and Inequities. As scholars suggested for the larger post-Soviet context, social connections were perceived as one of the major contributors to social inequities in Kazakhstan. Junisbay and Junisbay (2019) reported that there was a broad agreement among younger and elder generations in Kazakhstan that connections, starting conditions (i.e., class and geography), and lack of opportunity were major determining factors of inequity. While there were generational differences in perceptions of Kazakhstanis with regards to the role of the government in addressing the issues of inequity as reported earlier in this section, the younger and older generations had similar explanations about the causes of these disparities (Junisbay & Junisbay, 2019). Particularly, youth shared a widely held perception that connections played the major role in determining who got rich (Junisbay & Junisbay, 2019).

Strikingly, despite the government's promotion of the official discourse about economic growth, modernization, and growing middle class, everyone knew that "the right connections" were of critical importance for success (Junisbay & Junisbay, 2019, p. 34). The authors noted, however, that this did not demonstrate youth's dissatisfaction, but rather reflected economic reality of getting things done in a "clientelistic and patronage-based society" (p. 35). Even

politically, the expressed views of Kazakhstani youth were aligned with regime practices pointing to the cases of nepotism and family rule. Junisbay and Junisbay (2019) argued that this perspective of youth was not surprising given the reality of politics in Kazakhstan that placed private interests above other consideration and widely accepted nepotism:

> The practice of favoring one's own and promoting one's personal group or clan — whether those from the same region, one's childhood friends, university mates, or family members—is so widespread that it can be considered a well-established and well-accepted, even if officially frowned-upon, norm. (p. 39)

Junisbay and Junisbay (2019) referred to this form of nepotism as a widespread occurrence in Kazakhstan's authoritarian system from the "very top of the political order to its lowest ranks" (p. 39). At the same time, Sanghera and Satybaldieva (2021) cautioned against describing Central Asian politics in patronage-based terms since it "ignores the dominance of capital and plutocracy" (p. 268). Other scholars contend that the concept of patronage is overstretched and misused in scholarship on Central Asia, which led to gaps in understanding dynamic relationship between the formal institutions and informal networks (Isaac, 2014). Isaac (2014) poignantly argued that the majority of the scholarship on Central Asian politics remained fixated on the informal practices associated with corruption and patronage networks essentializing Central Asia as "deviant norm-defying other" instead of "accepting the region on its own terms" (p. 240).

Furthermore, Roberts et al. (2009), studying youth in Central Asia, contradicted Junisbay and Junisbay (2019) by arguing that the acquisition of higher education (cultural capital), not social capital, explained the advantage of high-status children in their education to work transitions. Roberts et al. (2009) explained that social capital and economic capital might play an

important role only in creating access to crucial cultural capital. The conclusions of Roberts et al. (2009) seem problematic given that they surveyed and interviewed students both with and without university degrees and did not clarify if there were differences in their views since students with higher education might take their social capital for granted. Moreover, Roberts et al. (2009) study was conducted a decade earlier and youth perceptions might have changed since then.

On the other hand, in a more recent study, Abdiraiymova et al. (2016), drawing on the survey results of the representative sample of 1,000 youth in Kazakhstan, revealed that students with and without higher education degrees held contrasting views regarding the role of human capital and social capital in their career success. Students with higher education, residing in large cities and who had medium and high income perceived human capital rather than social capital to be an important prerequisite for employment and professional success, whereas youth from rural areas and with lower levels of education perceived social networks and relatives to be critical to achieving professional success (Abdiraiymova et al., 2016).

Theories about social ascension (whether through human or social capital) are further complicated by the presence of corruption in Kazakhstan. Heyneman (2007), studying three universities in Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, found that faculty experienced significant pressures from their relatives, friends, and society, who asked them to “protect” their children (p. 313). When faculty tried to tell their friends and relatives that protection hurt their children, they were regarded as the “enemy” (Heyneman, 2007, p. 313).

In other words, as Heyneman (2007) argued, educational “corruption” was not only defined by bribery, but also included illegal acts to demonstrate loyalty to friends and family. Faculty described this as “moral terrorism” which came in the form of special requests from

immediate family members, friends, and colleagues (Heyneman, 2007, p. 313). Faculty reported that the worst instances of “moral terrorism” occurred when university leadership or faculty colleagues pressured them by asking to change grades for certain students (Heyneman, 2007). Faculty described the difficulty refusing such requests because they did not want to upset their colleagues; at the same time, they reported suffering afterwards (Heyneman, 2007). These interactions were derived from expectations of connections as well as feelings of obligation.

Rigi (2004) also concluded that there was a cultural obligation to help kin when they asked for help; however, since it was not guaranteed that the influential kin would fulfill this obligation, bribing might be necessary. In other words, the multitude of influences on Kazakhstan, including the Soviet legacy, Asian culture, and new market economy, have created complex dynamics in social relationships. Scholars have repeatedly reported the challenges of differentiating between gifts, bribes, and corruption in Kazakhstan due to the multitude of occasions for gift-giving and the blurriness of relationships between these concepts (Oka, 2013; 2015; Rigi, 2004; Werner, 2000).

Familial Ties. Finally, social relationships played an important role in guiding educational and career trajectories of Kazakhstani youth. Scholars found that Kazakhstani youth’s aspirations were guided by educational and professional behaviors surrounding their social environment, in particular, by parents and relatives (Abdiraiymova et al., 2016; Shnarbekova, 2018). Youth in Junisbay and Junisbay’s (2019) study reported that they rarely challenged their parents and trusted family more than any other institution. More than 90% of youth saw their relationships with parents positively. Another recent sociological study surveyed 500 students and their parents, and concluded that among all socioeconomic groups, parents, depending on their level of involvement in their children’s lives and their power within their

sociocultural family structure, could have the largest influence on educational and career choice of students in Kazakhstan (Shnarbekova, 2018). For instance, low-income parents were less involved in the educational and career choice process than their high-income counterparts, which made the involvement of teachers, peers, and other adults crucial for marginalized students' educational and career success (Shnarbekova, 2018). Shnarbekova also found that there were differences in educational and career choice process of rural and urban youth. In urban areas, educational and career choice was discussed at the level of immediate family, whereas in rural areas such discussions involved extended family relatives (especially those with higher education degree) whose opinion dominated (Shnarbekova, 2018).

The discussion above provided a comprehensive understanding of how social relationships were understood and used in Soviet and post-Soviet era with particular emphasis on Kazakhstan. It is clear that social connections were among the major contributors to the reproduction of inequities in Kazakhstan. It is important to note that the vast majority of studies that explored social connections in the post-Soviet context framed them around the issues of bribes and corruption (Heyneman, 2007, 2008; Heyneman et al., 2008; Round & Rodgers, 2009) and/or focused on the role of dominant upper-and-middle class forms of social capital as the primary contributor to the reproduction of inequities in the post-Soviet context (Balint, 2013; Clark, 2000; Gerber & Mayorova, 2010; Rose, 2000).

Moreover, in exploring relationships in the post-Soviet context, most studies focused on the social capital of adults rather than youth, the focus of my proposed study (Clark, 2000; Gerber & Mayorova, 2010; Rose, 2000). Few studies that focused on youth aspirations in Kazakhstan showed the significance of the relationships with parents, teachers, peers, and other adults in educational and career choice of students in Kazakhstan (Shnarbekova, 2018). While

Shnarbekova's (2018) study is important in gaining insight into the role of social capital on educational and career choice of students there is still little known how youth, particularly from marginalized backgrounds are able or unable to acquire and use social connections to further their educational and career aspirations.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have reviewed the relevant literature around social capital and aspirations as well as the application and use of these concepts in the Soviet and post-Soviet contexts. I started from the functionalist conceptualizations of social capital as the mostly cited and dominant approach in the literature (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). Functionalist scholars largely assumed that social capital had positive effects on educational and career aspirations of children; they viewed relationships at the level of engagement and employed primarily quantitative methodology by focusing on the quantity not the meaning and quality of relationships (Coleman, 1988; Crosnoe, 2004; McNeal, 1999; Muller et al., 2001; Putnam, 1993, 2000). The most prominent gap in functionalist conceptualizations of social capital is the failure to consider the impact of structural inequities in society and the issues of power and domination on educational and career trajectories of youth as well as poor specification in relation to youth agency (Morrow, 1999; Portes, 2000).

These gaps were addressed by critical scholars, primarily guided by Bourdieu's theoretical framework, who provided a nuanced and complex understanding of the interaction between social structures and social capital by focusing on the processes and practices that reproduced inequities in society. Thus, critical scholars considered both the social construction of relationships as they connected to wider structures in society and the meaning individuals attached to their relationships. They demonstrated the dynamic interaction between structure and

agency by emphasizing the contrast between the possession and activation of capital (Allat, 1993; Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Horvat et al., 2003; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Martin & Spenner, 2009; Rivera, 2015; Stuber, 2011).

Despite providing a nuanced and complex understanding of social capital, these critical scholars including Allat (1993), Lareau and Horvat (1999), and Horvat et al. (2003) tended to focus on mechanisms that favor dominant upper-and-middle-class forms of capital from which marginalized youth might be excluded. Another subgroup of critical scholars including DeJaeghere, Pellowski Wiger, and Wangsness Willemsen (2016), Stanton-Salazar (1997, 2011), and Yosso (2005), on the other hand, focused on the strengths of socially and economically marginalized communities and acknowledged the agency of youth in developing and using their social capital through relationships. These scholars demonstrated how and why social capital facilitated or constrained the educational and career aspirations of marginalized youth in the face of structural inequities.

After examining these various conceptualizations of social capital, I examined the conceptualizations of aspirations primarily drawing from Appadurai (2004) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1990). I have expanded and reframed Bourdieu’s framework by relating his key concepts of field and habitus with the concepts of social capital and aspirations. This body of scholarship demonstrated that aspirations were formed in dynamic interaction between youth habitus, field, and multiple forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1989/2002; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970/1990; DeJaeghere, 2018; Stahl et al., 2018; Tarabini & Curran, 2018). However, with notable exceptions (DeJaeghere, 2018), these studies have not provided a thorough examination of how marginalized students’ social capital relates to their aspirations, agency, and field, particularly, in the post-Soviet context.

After analyzing the conceptualizations of social capital and aspirations primarily found in Western literature, I historicized the concept of social relationships in post-Soviet context. Drawing from Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) transversal comparative analysis, I examined the ways in which social relationships were understood and used differently over time to further or constrain educational and career aspirations of youth in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. Soviet era social relationships were rooted in the concept of blat that was based on the mutual exchange of “favors of access” to the desired goods and services provided at public expense under the rhetoric of friendship and support (Ledeneva, 1998, 2000, 2008). In the Soviet era, people invested in building genuine personal relationships because they were more important than money in an economy of shortage (Ledeneva, 1998). The positions and connections determined the privilege and the resources an individual possesses (Ledeneva, 1998). Parents with influential connections were able to allocate their children to prestigious universities and prestigious jobs using their blat connections exacerbating inequities in society (Ledeneva, 1998; Sharipova, 2018; Smolentseva, 2012).

Scholars reported that in the post-Soviet era, social relationships continued to play a critical role in the allocation of resources and power; however, the realm and motivations of social relationships changed. Social relationships became commodified with the transition to the market economy (Ledeneva, 1998, 2000, 2008; Onoshchenko & Williams, 2014). With notable exceptions, in general, particularly in business and educational settings, warm and compassionate horizontal personal relationships became rare and relationship building was mainly driven by self-interests (Ledeneva, 1998, 2000, 2008; Michailova & Worm, 2003). As a result, the use of personal connections was increasingly associated with practices such as corruption and bribe (Heyneman, 2007; Ledeneva, 1998; Rigi, 2004; Sharipova, 2018; Werner, 2000). Such use of

relationships was deemed to have a more pronounced impact on exacerbating social stratification than during the Soviet era (Gerber & Mayorova, 2010; Ledeneva, 1998; Rose, 2000). Wealthy parents reproduced their privilege by offering their children better opportunities such as private tutoring, admission to prestigious universities, and the prestigious job allocation (Balint, 2013; Silova, 2009).

Kazakhstan's case adds another layer of complexity where Soviet era blat practices and post-Soviet transformations in relationships have blended with local cultural practices such as gift-giving and strong kinship networks to create a complex context for the educational system and labor market in Kazakhstan. Based on my analysis of the post-Soviet context conducted for this study, I suggest that, historically, habitus of Kazakhstani adults and youth can be explained as the one prioritizing social connections. With rapid implementation of market reforms over the past three decades in Kazakhstan, individual dispositions towards relationships are persisting, but they transformed within the context of changing market conditions, further magnifying the role of social capital to get ahead. The context developed from this analysis frames my dissertation work, informing different fields that marginalized youth in this study need to navigate, including school, community, university, and workplace.

In Chapter 3, I describe student interviews and the narrative inquiry methodology I will use for my study. There, I expand upon questions of researcher positionality and ethical considerations. I outline the methodological decisions I have made including research sites, selection of participants, the methods, data collection procedures, and data analysis.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Returning to the Research Questions

The previous two chapters, I introduced the study and reviewed the relevant literature around the concept of social capital and the application and use of social capital and blat (social connections) in the Soviet and post-Soviet contexts with a particular focus on Kazakhstan. This chapter demonstrates how I approached my research questions and the methodologies I used to reach my findings. I return to research questions guiding this study to discuss narrative inquiry design of the study, epistemological commitments, and researcher positionality, and then describe the field and the transitions from the field to field texts, and then to research texts. Lastly, the chapter concludes with a discussion of the ethical and validity concerns.

To begin this chapter, I return to the research questions that guide this study. These research questions are informed by critical conceptualizations of social capital, grounded in Bourdieu's theoretical legacy, coupled with the concept of blat in the post-Soviet context and the concept of aspirations. This study focused on how youth from rural or lower socioeconomic backgrounds in Kazakhstan understand social capital/blat and use it to further their educational and career aspirations. I first describe why I asked these research questions, and then move on to how I answered the research questions using a narrative inquiry methodology. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do youth from rural or lower socioeconomic backgrounds in Kazakhstan conceptualize social capital they use to pursue educational and career aspirations?
2. What value do youth from rural or lower socioeconomic backgrounds ascribe to social capital in pursuing their educational and career aspirations?

3. How do youth from rural or lower socioeconomic backgrounds develop social capital in their pursuit of educational and career aspirations?
4. How do youth from rural or lower socioeconomic backgrounds use social capital to navigate pathways through university admissions, completion, and early career?

The primary focus of these research questions was to explore youth conceptualizations of social capital and what value/role they ascribe to social capital in navigating their educational and career aspirations. Question one sought to explore the conceptualization of social capital from the perspective of youth from rural or lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Questions two, three, and four focused on what value/role these youth ascribed to social capital and how they used it in navigating their access to university, their life at the university, and beyond. These questions also reflected the core assumption guiding this research, which was that students ascribe some value or role to social capital in pursuing their educational and career aspirations. In asking these questions, I was interested in learning about both the social capital that youth already have and the social capital that they develop as they shape and navigate their educational and career aspirations.

Why Narrative Inquiry?

Qualitative research design best fit the focus of the study because the study aimed to understand how youth from rural or lower SES backgrounds “make sense of their lives” and “interpret their experience” in relation to their educational and career aspirations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 33). Specifically, I employed narrative inquiry research design because it is “the best way of representing and understanding experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 18). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) argued that “stories are how we make sense of our experiences, how

we communicate with others, and through which we understand the world around us;" I applied these considerations to the stories my participants shared (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, pp. 33-34).

As such, narrative inquiry is a valuable methodology to examine student's experiences and identities, narrating and re-narrating their life trajectories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I employed life history interviews as my primary source of data because this approach helped me to gain an in-depth understanding of critical events in youth's lives that led them to where they are now. Revealing critical events and relationships in youth's lives that shaped or altered their education and career goals is important for this study because we have such limited understanding of how youth understand and use social capital, particularly in pursuing their educational and career aspirations. Life history interviews are uniquely suited for understanding the multiple ways youth are able or unable to build and use social capital in navigating their lives before, during, and beyond university. Particularly, life history interviews were useful in deconstructing youth's narratives in two ways: first, it helped to examine how students described their own lives and made sense of their experiences, and second, interviews helped to identify potentially explanatory structural forces that may or may not have been acknowledged in youth's own narratives (Abelev, 2009). Similar to Tierney (1993), through life history interviews I tried to understand how larger concepts such as social capital was defined and used by individuals.

Although life history has largely been used to study adults because they have a "history" to tell, fewer studies that employed this approach with adolescents and youth demonstrated that youth have great capacities to reflect on their life (Haglund, 2004; Tierney, 2013; Tierney et al., 2019). Haglund (2004), for instance, argued that adolescents have the necessary skills, "including recall, insight, interest, and attention span" to participate in a life history study (p. 1312). As such, life histories are particularly well-suited to study youth experiences. This was

evident from insightful and rich stories of young people in my study, who demonstrated an impressive capacity to critically reflect on their life. In-depth narratives of youth's lives enriched my understanding of how social relationships work in the context of Kazakhstan, and how the social capital of rural or lower-income youth facilitates or constrains their educational and career aspirations, as well as how they exercise agency. I have prepared a matrix for the study that links the research questions with the study design. In Table ii, I provide a summary of sampling decisions, data collection methods, and data analysis in answering my research questions.

Drawing on Clandinin and Connelly (2000), I define this study in three-dimensional space: temporal, personal and social, and place. First, the study has a temporal dimension because I was interested in hearing about participants' experiences pursuing their educational and career aspirations over time. I conducted this study because I was interested in the educational history of participants moving from what was, to what is, to what will be in the future, which Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state as critical to narrative educational thinking. As such, I entered the field in the middle of everything: the experiences of my participants as well as my own experience in the field did not begin and end with the duration of my field work. I understand that I am writing about my participants and the places they find themselves as "becoming rather than being" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 145).

Table ii

Research Questions and Data Matrix of the Study

Research questions What do I need to know?	Why do I need to know this?	Sampling decisions: Where will I find this data?	Data collection methods	Whom do I contact for access?	Data analysis
1. How do youth from rural or lower socioeconomic backgrounds in Kazakhstan conceptualize social capital they use to pursue educational and career aspirations?	Examining how marginalized youth understand social capital is important for understanding how they conceptualize social capital. By exploring the local understandings and uses of social relationships, I will be able to bring nuance to conceptualizations and applications of social capital and question the universality of western knowledge	Graduates of prestigious universities from rural or lower SES backgrounds (or both) in Kazakhstan because they can speak about their use of social capital in navigating structural restrictions and gaining access to spaces which they are unlikely to be part of by virtue of their rural or low socioeconomic status	Life history interviews Field notes	Informal groups in social media platforms	The inductive/ deductive analysis; Narrative analysis; Analysis of Narratives
2.What value do youth from rural or lower socioeconomic backgrounds ascribe to social capital in pursuing their educational and career aspirations?	This question will help me to gain an in-depth understanding of the value/role marginalized youth attach to social capital in facilitating their educational and career aspirations. The perceptions of students on this question will help to gain an in-depth understanding of the explanatory power of social capital in reproducing or transforming inequities in society. Why and how this happens.	Same as above	Same as above	Same as above	Same as above
3.How do youth from rural or lower socioeconomic backgrounds develop social capital in their pursuit of educational and career aspirations?	This question will help me to gain an in-depth understanding of how marginalized youth develop social capital in pursuing their educational and career aspirations. Specifically, I will be able to learn about what strategies (if at all) they use in developing social capital.	Same as above	Same as above	Same as above	Same as above
4.How do youth from rural or lower socioeconomic backgrounds use social capital to navigate pathways through university admissions, completion, and early career?	This question will help me to gain an in-depth understanding of how marginalized youth use of social capital in navigating their pathways through university admissions, completion, and early career. Specifically, I will be able to learn about multiple ways these students used social capital to further their aspirations	Same as above	Same as above	Same as above	Same as above

It is particularly important to highlight that the data for this study was collected during the first year of the global COVID-19 pandemic (February 2020-February 2021). It was the time of uncertainty and temporality with the rapidly changing lifestyles. Some of my participants were in lockdown in their villages with family, some lost family members, or some lost their jobs or were experiencing uncertainties in relation to the job market and their future. For many participants there was a sense of removal from linear time since they experienced dramatic changes to their lifestyles. As Gaukhar, one of the participants, noted:

Менің өміріме карантин, короновирус түбегейли әсер етті деп айтсам болады. Себебі өмірім 180 градуска айналып, мүлдем басқа фазада өтетін болып кетті… Қазір жасым 28-де. Бірақ 18 жасымда мектепті қалай тамамдап, Шұғылаға кеттім. 10 жыл бойы Шұғыладамын. Шұғылада университетте оқыдым, ары қарай жұмыс жасадым… Шұғыланың динамикасы басқа Қазақстанның қалаларымен салыстырғанда әлдеқайда жылдам…. Мені жылдам поездан кең далада, ай далада түсіріп кеткендей ощущение болды… Ол тек жұмыс жағынан емес, жалпы менің ішкі сана сезіміме де өте үлкен әсерін тигізді. Себебі осы асығыс	COVID had a drastic impact on my life. My life changed 180 degrees… I am now 28 years old. After graduating from high school at the age of 18, I left to Shugyla. I have spent the last 10 years in Shugyla. I studied at the university then worked there… The dynamics of life in Shugyla is completely different than other cities in Kazakhstan… I felt like someone dropped me off from a speed train to the steppe… It (pandemic) had a huge impact not only on my job situation but my inner feelings. I realized that I did not notice many things in the midst of this dynamic pace of life… I realized that I didn't even notice that my parents got older. 10

өмірде мен көп дүниені байқамаған екем… Мен тіпті әке-шешемнің қартайғанын да байқамаған екем. 10 жыл мен үшін 2–3 жылда өтіп кеткен сияқты болды… Мен сондықтан ойлаймын жалпы маған карантиннің бір уақыт тоқтап, жан жағыма қарап, менің өмірімде, жалпы, менің айналамда не болып жатыр деп сол нәрсені қарап, саралау үшін берілген сияқты… Тыныштықты үйрендім. Саралап өмір сүруді үйрендім десем де болады.

years seemed like 2-3 years to me… That is why I think the pandemic paused time for me and gave me the opportunity to look around and reflect on my life and my surroundings… I learnt to live in peace and to live consciously.

From this quote, it is evident that pandemic paused the "hamster wheel" in Gaukhar's life and provided the reflective space removed from linear time she was used to before. This reflective space helped Gaukhar and other young people of the study to reconceptualize what was, what is, and what will be in the future. It was fascinating to observe that despite the uncertainties about the current moment and the future, this temporal moment also provided a reflective space to intentionally understand and clarify their life journeys, which influenced their interpretation of what is and what will be.

This temporality was experienced by participants as the moment of change, the moment of clarity, the moment of uncertainty, or all of the above. Being in such reflective space in the midst of uncertainties about the current moment and the future, impacted the quality and depth of the stories shared by participants. Although I was initially worried about conducting in-depth life

history interviews with my young participants online due to anticipated challenges with building rapport in the online space, I was struck by the depth of their reflections and openness. I realized that in addition to being in the reflective space, sharing this temporal moment with participants facilitated the process of building rapport. I started all my interviews by acknowledging the shared moment of the pandemic and asking how it impacted their life. Since pandemic was a shared experience, it provided the sense of togetherness. In sum, temporal dimension is critical to my study including the quality of the data collected, interpretation, and write-up. My task in this respect is not so much to write that people, places, and things were one way or another; rather I attempted to write the narrative history of people, places, and things as they are moving forward through time and experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Second, the personal and social dimension is critical for my thinking because I focus on the interactions of students with others in their lives. I am interested in learning about student's relationships with family members, non-family adults, and peers as well as the meaning students attach to these relationships. I look at my participants as embodiments of their lived stories and view them as in a process of personal change at any point in time and interpret them in terms of the process (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Third, place or context is ever present in my study because context makes a difference and is necessary for "making sense of any person, event, or thing" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 32). Specifically, I wanted my participants to guide me through specific places or sequences of places that they lived and how they understood these places in shaping their experiences and educational and career aspirations. These places included school, family environment, university, and workplaces. Beyond a more focused description of the specific schools or universities selected for this study, in examining context I considered historical, political, economic, and

social processes that go beyond specific location's physical and temporal boundaries (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). Through such "unbounding" of context, Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) invited scholars to pay attention to various social activities and social interactions that constitute context, across scale and time. In chapter 2, I provided a detailed description of major historical, political, economic, and social processes at regional, national, and global scales pertinent for this study. These include Soviet legacy, post-Soviet transformations, and the political and economic contexts of Kazakhstan. Such nuanced understanding of the context is critical in understanding the experiences of the students participating in the study and informed the interpretation of participants' narratives. Considerations of broader context constitute a final way to understand the three-dimensional space of this project.

Epistemological Commitments

There are considerable variations in epistemological and methodological approaches to doing narrative research, but it is most frequently associated with social constructionism paradigm (Squire et al., 2014). The constructionist approach to narrative analysis aims to explore how individuals construct meaning through narratives in relation to social, cultural, and interpersonal resources (Squire et al., 2014). As such, constructionist researchers focus both on research participants' own constructions of meaning and the mutual construction of meaning between participants, researchers, and the broader context (Esin et al., 2014). Constructionists place social interactions and discourse at the center, arguing that all psychological and social phenomena arise out of interactions between people (Burr, 2015). Although constructionists have been critiqued for giving primacy to structure over agency through emphasizing the omnipresent though diffuse influence of social processes (Calhoun, 1995), social constructionists themselves argue that their perspective transcends the structure/agency divide in sociology (Burr, 2015).

Specifically, social constructionists tend to think in terms of a dialectical process and see “the person as being both agentic, always actively constructing the social world, and constrained by society to the extent that [they] must inevitably live [their] lives within the institutions and frameworks of meaning handed down to [them] by previous generations” (Burr, 2015, p. 8). In other words, individuals simultaneously shape the social structures (agency) and are shaped by its structural constraints.

Although constructionists’ emphasis on relationality fits the theoretical framework of my study, I am aware of and considering critiques of constructionists. Some scholars critiqued the social constructionists for failing to provide a comprehensive examination of the influence of power in the construction process. Calhoun (1995), for instance, argued that constructionist approach underemphasized the role of power, mistakenly implying “a multidirectional flow of influence and agency” (p. 199). In other words, ignoring power relations in the construction of narratives runs the risk of simply viewing stories as natural and unquestionable rather than examining why some narratives and meanings gain dominance while others do not.
Esin et al. (2014) addressed this concern about the role of power in his review of the constructionist approach to narrative analysis by emphasizing the importance of examining power relations in the construction of narratives.

In my study, I employed a constructionist approach to co-construct narratives with my participants, taking into account the broader social construction of that narrative within power relations. Drawing on Esin et al. (2014), I viewed narratives as having social functions because I focused not on the internal states of my participants separated from the narratives themselves but rather the “states produced socially by the narratives” (Esin et al., 2014, p. 3). At the same time, I paid particular attention to the issues of power in the construction of narratives. I considered

power in two ways: (1) larger societal structure that operates to (re) produce some narratives as dominant while others are marginalized; and (2) power relations between the researcher and the researched. Specifically, I examined power influences in historical, social, political, economic, and cultural discourses in the context of Kazakhstan and beyond as they impact my participants' narratives. For instance, some participants were critical of collectivist values of their parents while embracing the shift to individualistic values among youth including themselves; however, analysis of the dominant discourse on individualism in the capitalist economy allowed me to examine power influences that went beyond my participants' narratives. This way, I was able to see in what ways power operates to (re)produce "some narratives as dominant while marginalizing others" (Esin et al., 2014, p. 5). In other words, even though some of my participants spoke as if they were disconnected from history, social, economic, and political context in Kazakhstan and beyond, it was my job as a researcher to go beyond my participants' descriptions and explicitly situate my analysis and interpretation of narratives within historic, social, economic, and political context (Weis & Fine, 2013). Moreover, I considered my own positioning within power relations, and the power relations operating between me and my participants throughout the research process including the data collection, analysis, interpretation, and writing (Esin et al., 2014). These considerations are outlined in the paragraphs below.

Researcher Positionality

Any work has the mark of the person who produced it. Therefore, before I continue the discussion of narrative analysis, I will locate myself in the study. Discussing positionality is particularly important for scholars employing narrative inquiry design because writing narratives is an auto/biographical process at its core (Sikes, 2010). This study is not only about my

participants but about me as well, highlighting my own vulnerability and the increased necessity to consider the ethics of the work. Further, I have a professional stake in completing this work in order to earn my degree. I aim for readers to experience this work as a narrative that I have co-constructed walking alongside my participants rather than a narrative I tell for my participants. I hope this work will have theoretical and policy applications.

My positionality has a critical impact throughout the study including the choice of the topic, design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation. In Chapter 1, I have discussed that I came to this topic upon reflection on my experience as a student from a lower-income background, who accessed and succeeded in higher education. My lived experience was then the impetus for this doctoral study and has influenced my study design, selection of site, and my participants. I will further elaborate the discussion on my positionality highlighting the influential factors that had an impact in negotiating relationships with my participants and analyzing and interpreting their stories.

Because of my background, I did have a sense of affinity and potential connection points with my participants as someone who had lived similar experiences - much of what they said was not “foreign” to me. I was born and raised in Kazakhstan, speak the language(s) of my participants (Kazakh and Russian), am an alumna of the universities where some of my participants pursued their studies, and am from a lower socioeconomic background. All of these qualities helped me connect to and build trustworthy relationships with my participants. Sharing with my participants how I came to be interested in this topic was particularly helpful in building rapport. Beyond a shared background, my professional experience of working with undergraduate students at Nazarbayev University as an academic advisor and student affairs coordinator for over three years and my research experience of collecting and analyzing data on

high school to university transition experiences of students in Kazakhstan helped me in building relationships with my participants.

However, simply focusing on insider identities and affiliations runs the risk of taking for granted that commonalities with participants guarantees an open and equal relationship in which I would develop a good rapport (Savvides et al., 2016). Shared affiliations were not enough to create a good rapport considering my various outsider identities. For instance, my age, experience, or gender might have had an impact in establishing rapport because participants likely had varying levels of comfort in discussing their personal information with me (Haglund, 2004). The interviews for this research were also the first time in which youth were asked to share their life histories, as several of my participants noted. Critically reflecting on my insider/outsider identities in this research was important not only in negotiating my relationships with participants, but also in analyzing and interpreting the data.

Some of my outsider identities also came with a degree of power. My affiliations with Nazarbayev University (NU) and the Bolashak scholarship as well as my identity as a researcher/graduate student from a Western institution positioned me as an outsider with a position of some power. NU is he most elite and prestigious university in Kazakhstan. I was an administrator at NU and later pursued my master's degree there. I am also the recipient of the Bolashak scholarship, which is a prestigious scholarship that provides funding for Kazakhstani students in world's top universities. Kazakhstan has high expectations from NU and Bolashak graduates and positions them as future leaders of the country. Similar to NU and Bolashak, a Western degree is a form of symbolic capital, and is associated with elite status in the Kazakhstani context. Thus, it was critical to be aware of potential power dynamics in building relationships with my participants due to the elite status associated with these institutions.

Elite status of NU, Bolashak, and a Western institution was evident from the stories of a few participants in my study, who viewed these spaces as inaccessible to students like themselves. In these cases, I tried to demystify the application process at the end of the interview and encouraged those who shared a desire to pursue graduate degrees to consider applying. As such, these affiliations were also helpful in negotiating my way to be useful to my participants as I offered them guidance and support if they wanted to apply to these institutions. In this sense, I understand power as not only something that I should be aware of, but as something I should continuously negotiate in the research process.

My Western education also had an impact on research design, analysis, and interpretation of my findings. As it was evident during my oral exam, my theoretical framework and research questions were heavily influenced by my Western education. My committee members invited me to critically reflect on such questions as: In what ways the theories I was drawing from are/are not useful in the context of Kazakhstan? What are the limitations of the concepts that are grounded in Western ways of knowing and are considered "universal"? Feedback from my committee members served as a call to critically reflect on my discursive position(s) in the field of comparative and international education. Drawing on my committee's feedback and Takayama's (2011) self-reflective, critical review of writings of "other" (non-Western) education, I recognize my responsibility towards the process of "academic decolonization[9]" as a bi-lingual and "bi-discoursal" scholar. Takayama (2011) defined "bi-discoursal" scholars as those who are "academically and linguistically prepared to merge the theoretical constructs and

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[9] I draw from Dei (2000) in defining academic decolonization as the process of challenging "imperial ideologies and colonial relations of knowledge production which continuously characterize and shape academic practices" (p. 113) and achieving "genuine synthesis of all existing knowledges" (p. 119).

themes developed in the centres with those derived from their respective intellectual traditions" (p. 452). In considering how I can contribute to the process of academic decolonization, I found it helpful to critically reflect on such questions as: In what ways am I engaging in theoretical discussions in the wider scholarly community? How can I avoid reinforcing the Western hegemony of theoretical knowledge production? How can I contribute to the further advancement of theoretical tools rather than simply apply so called "universal" conceptual tools developed primarily by Western theorists? How could I use the national identifier (Kazakhstan) without reinforcing the existing unequal division of intellectual labour? There are no easy and fixed answers to these questions; however, critical reflection on these questions throughout my research question was essential to interrogate the unequal power relations in the knowledge production.

As Takayama (2011) put it, un-reflexivity with regards to the questions posed above can perpetuate the unequal power relations in knowledge production. For instance, critical reflection on the use of national identifiers led me to consider such questions as when I talk about Kazakhstani education systems, to what extent are they really Kazakhstani? Reflection on this question helped me to focus on transnational intermixing of theories and practices rather than reinforcing the prevailing thesis of "exceptionalism" that runs the risk of positioning the education system of "the other" (i.e., Kazakhstan) as unique. This also helped me to avoid naturalizing the "myth of homogeneity" that ignores the internal diversity that exist within any context (Takayama, 2011).

Critical reflection on the questions in relation to the Western hegemony in knowledge production was particularly generative in my study as it helped me to identify the study's theoretical contribution that challenges the Western hegemony. As I engaged in these critical

questions throughout the process of my dissertation, I realized that my graduate training in a Western institution and the dominance of Western frameworks in literature dominated my thinking on my topic. It was particularly true during the process of interviews where my Western lens was applied without me even realizing it at the moment. I was able to identify most of these moments only during the analysis of the interviews. Consciously or unconsciously, I interpreted my participants' stories through the dominant theoretical lens I was most familiar with.

While my Western education influenced my research, in a seemingly contradictory way, so did my identity as an insider. Specifically, my familiarity with the context and shared background with my participants led me to be “bogged down in a myopic gaze or becoming blind by the overly familiar” (de Jong et al., 2013, p. 169). This was particularly true during the process of interviews where I took important indigenous concepts emerging from my participants for granted. In other words, even though I strived to make the “familiar strange and the strange familiar,” it was difficult to reflect on these questions at the time of interviews where my unconscious biases about what was important to focus on went unchecked (de Jong et al., 2013).

Even more interesting than either my outsider identity as a scholar educated in the West or my insider identity as Kazakhstani was the interaction between these two identities. Specifically, my Western training dominated my thinking in terms of what I saw as worthy of theoretical importance whereas my insider identity made me view local indigenous concepts as quotidien. In other words, either because I was overly familiar with the local concept or because I did not recognize its theoretical significance at the moment or both, I rarely asked follow-up questions to clarify the meaning of the concept to individual participants. For instance, my participants clearly identified the local concept of *tarbiyeh*, as significant in their life, however I barely asked any follow up question to clarify how they understood the concept or in what ways

it was important to them. Instead, I assumed that I knew the meaning they attached to this concept based on my own familiarity with it and focused most of my follow-up questions on clarifying how tarbiyeh supported them in achieving instrumental goals in relation to aspirations.

Another dilemma that I faced as I started composing research texts was the use of language. As it will be evident in the following chapters, three languages were used throughout this study: English, Kazakh, and Russian. During my interviews, I made a concerted effort to conduct interviews in the language that my participants felt most comfortable in. I started all interviews by asking my participants the language of their choice and offered an option to mix all three languages if they felt more comfortable expressing their thoughts that way. As a result, 10 interviews were conducted in Russian, nine interviews in Kazakh, one interview in English, and one interview in Russian and English (see Table iii).

Although most of my interviews were conducted in Russian or Kazakh, my dissertation is written in a style and structure that conforms to the conventional English language academic discourse after all, which reinforces the hegemonic status of English-language scholarly discourse. While I plan to disseminate the findings of my research not only to English speaking, but also Kazakh/Russian speaking audience, the original work is written in English. This also means that interview transcripts had to be translated to make them available to an English-speaking audience. At the same time, I acknowledge that translations are not simple or objective process and involve many dilemmas that are never found in dictionaries (Simon, 1996). As Simon (1996) argued, translators must "constantly make decisions about the cultural meanings which language carries and evaluate the degree to which the two different worlds [one inhabits] are 'the same' (p. 137). My positionality as a scholar from Kazakhstan helped in the process of translation to keep the data trustworthy in alignment with my intentions. In translating my

participants' interview quotes I did not only engage in the process of transferring their meaning from Kazakh/Russian into English but also in producing an entirely new understanding of their quotes (Temple & Young, 2004). Therefore, I used my participants' quotes in the original language and offered my translation next to the quotes. Particularly, for in-text quotes, I included original quotes in brackets following my translation. For quotes that are more than 40 words, I used two columns, on the left column I presented the direct quotes of my participants in the original language (Kazakh or Russian) and on the right column I presented translation of these quotes into English. I made this decision for several reasons: (1) to preserve the voices of my participants in their original form; (2) to promote transparency by sharing my meaning-making process with bilingual/trilingual readers (Bittencourt, 2020); and to contribute to decolonial knowledge production by demonstrating the knowledge produced in a different linguistic realm (Ramos Vaesken, 2021).

Table iii

Interview Dates, Duration, and Language(s)

Pseudonym	Interview language	Duration in hours and minutes	Interview date(s)
Umit	Kazakh	#1: 40 min; #2: 1 hr 41 min	#1: March 12, 2020; #2: April 6, 2020
Yerzhan	Kazakh	1 hr 48 min	March 14, 2020
Batyr	Kazakh	2 hr 50 min	April 12, 2020
Zere	Kazakh	4 hr 32 min	June 27, 2020
Erik	Kazakh	3 hr 20 min	June 30, 2020
Jandos	Russian	3 hr 5 min	July 1, 2020
Dariya	Kazakh	2 hr 7 min	September 25, 2020
Aisulu	Kazakh	2 hr 30 min	October 8, 2020
Gaukhar	Kazakh	3 hr 51 min	October 14, 2020
Mardan	Kazakh	2 hr 50 min	October 22, 2020

Pseudonym	Interview language	Duration in hours and minutes	Interview date(s)
Indira	Russian	3 hr 17 min	October 23, 2020
Fatima	English	2 hr 11 min	October 25, 2020
Laura	Russian	2 hr 35 min	October 26, 2020
Kausar	Russian	#1: 1 hr 12 min; #2: 2 hr 27 min	#1: October 29, 2020; #2: November 1, 2020
Perizat	Kazakh	1 hr 33 min	November 4, 2020
Sanzhar	Russian	3 hr 40 min	November 6, 2020
Qanat	Kazakh	1 hr 45 min	November 9, 2020
Olzhas	Russian	#1: 1 hr 51 min; #2: 1 hr 26 min	#1: November 18, 2020; #2: November 20, 2020
Takhmina	English & Russian	2 hr 38 min	December 17, 2020
Nazym	Russian	2 hr 26 min	February 9, 2021

Note. Some participants who chose to conduct interviews in Russian or Kazakh occasionally mixed these two languages in the interview but in identifying the language of the interview in Table iii, I focused on the language that a participant primarily used during the interview.

In sum, this discussion demonstrated the multitude of identities and positions I brought to this study. Critical reflexivity on these identities and positions throughout my study is imperative to the trustworthiness of my findings. While there are aspects of my identity that certainly makes me more fit for this research than others, it is critical to be cognizant of other aspects of my identity that positioned me as an outsider and potentially impacted power relations with my participants. Being aware of potential power dynamics between my participants and myself and the ways my positionality within the educational scholarship impacts my design, analysis and interpretation was the first step towards addressing these challenges throughout the research process. As Savvides et al. (2016) argued, I was never fully an insider or an outsider, but had to continuously shift my identities and positions. For instance, with some participants, my rural

background loomed largest, whereas with other participants my other identities including gender, region (South Kazakhstan), language, or marital/parental status loomed largest. Making such shifts in identities did not mean that I lost my identity or was insincere with my participants, but rather I expanded and honored my overall identity as researcher (Savvides et al., 2016). Similar to Savvides et al. (2016), I hope that such an approach helped to gain an understanding of and represent my participant's identities as more complex rather than singular.

Being in the Field: Walking in the Midst of Stories

In this section, I will discuss my fieldwork, including strategies for participant selection, recruitment, and interviewing, as well as the negotiation of field relationships and a way to be useful for participants. I draw from Clandinin and Connelly (2000) in examining the complexities of negotiating the fieldwork. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) described how working within the three-dimensional narrative space taught them to see themselves as always in the midst – "located somewhere along the dimensions of time, place, the personal, and the social" (p. 63). They also saw themselves in the midst of "a nested set of stories" – theirs and their participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 63). Similarly, I envisioned my fieldwork as walking in the midst of stories – myself and my participants. Specifically, I came to my filed living my own story, while my participants also entered this research study in the midst of living their stories. Furthermore, the places in which my participants lived, studied, and worked, and their landscapes in the broader sense were also in the midst of stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Thus, I acknowledged the centrality of my own story throughout the research process and entered the field with an open mind to an ever-changing landscape and constant negotiation.

Recruitment

Pilot study. I conducted a pilot study as part of OLPD 8105 qualitative longitudinal research methods class in Spring 2020. The aim of the pilot study was to explore how university students from rural backgrounds in Kazakhstan utilized social capital in their pursuit of educational and career aspirations from secondary school through university. I recruited participants for the pilot study through my internal network. Specifically, in March 2020, I asked my friend who taught at a prestigious university in Kazakhstan to distribute a study invitation among fourth year students. She requested the fourth-year student cohort leaders to share the invitation with their group mates. In the invitation, I asked interested participants to contact me directly on my WhatsApp or email. This way, I was able to ensure confidentiality of participants who chose to participate in the study since those who distributed the invitation did not know who responded to the invitation. Three students who self-identified as rural based on the information on the invitation reached out to me. I conducted 15–25-minute consent meetings via WhatsApp video or audio call with each interested participant in which I went through the consent form, shared detailed information about the research study, and answered the questions of participants. A copy of the consent form was emailed to students after the consent meeting. Prior to each in-depth life history interview, participants were briefed again about what was expected of them as participants in this study and asked to confirm if they agreed with the contents of the consent form. They were reminded of the voluntary nature of the study and that they might withdraw from it at any time. Participants were asked to verbally state that they assent to the study process.

For the pilot study, I conducted three life history interviews between March 12 and April 12, 2020, and analyzed two out of three interviews for my final class assignment. The pilot study was helpful in piloting my interview questions, invitation, identifying preliminary themes, and

negotiating my way to be useful to participants. Specifically, I initially planned to offer an option of compensating participants for their time by offering either payment or help with their applications if they were applying for a graduate program or a job. However, my pilot study participants refused the payment and did not need my help at the time. I realized that participants may not be comfortable choosing payment because it might feel like they were asking for money. One participant shared that: “You don’t need to pay me because I might not offer useful information.” So, I decided to offer payment regardless and offered my help as an additional support for those who needed it. This way, I ensured that all participants of the study were compensated for their time. After the pilot study concluded, I applied to the IRB to use pilot study data in my dissertation (Data or specimen only protocol) and received approval in August 2020. Thus, pilot study data from three interviews was used in the dissertation.

Recruitment for the Study. The start of my fieldwork for this study coincided with the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. I had my prospectus meeting on March 19th, 2020, which was six days after the Minnesota governor announced the state of emergency and three days after Kazakhstan’s President announced the state of emergency. During this period, universities both in the U.S. and Kazakhstan were transitioning to distance learning. Although I initially planned to travel to Kazakhstan after my prospectus meeting to recruit participants for my study at the selected prestigious universities and conduct in-person interviews, this was no longer possible due to travel restrictions caused by COVID-19 and transition to distance learning. Given these rapid changes, my advisor sent a letter via email to the Rector and Vice Rector of one of the universities where I planned to conduct my study asking to support me with recruiting fourth-year students. He sent this letter on March 18, 2020, however neither the Rector nor Vice Rector responded. Therefore, during my prospectus meeting my committee members and I discussed

potential changes to the study design in response to the rapid changes caused by COVID-19 pandemic and alternatives for transferring recruitment and interviews to online format. My committee advised me to recruit participants using online platforms and social media such as Facebook. Based on my committee's feedback during the prospectus meeting, I made changes to my study design and submitted my IRB application on March 31, 2020. Study timeline is provided in Appendix A.

I started my recruitment after receiving IRB approval on April 23rd, 2020. I asked administrators of informal online platforms at three selected prestigious universities in Astana and Almaty to post my invitation on their online platform. Most of the informal student groups of the selected universities used Vkontakte platform. Because these online platforms were managed by students at these universities and most were closed groups accessible for active students at these universities only, I was not able to find out how many of the three universities I contacted posted my invitation. I received a reply only from Senim University (pseudonym) and saw my invitation posted on their Vkontakte platform because their platform was open to everyone, not only their students. I was able to recruit three students from Senim University using this method of recruitment. I conducted 15–20-minute consent meetings via Zoom/WhatsApp calls with these three students in May 2020 where I went over the consent form, shared the information about the research, and answered their questions. After the consent meeting, I sent them the consent form to sign and scheduled the interview.

Because I was not able to recruit the expected number of fourth year students and the academic year was coming to an end, upon consultation with my advisor I decided to expand my target population to young graduates of prestigious universities from rural or lower socioeconomic backgrounds. I restricted the age of participants to those of ages 21-29 years

because the official definition of “youth” in Kazakhstan included this age group. Specifically, according to Kazakhstan legislation on public youth policy, the category of youth in Kazakhstan included young people of ages 14-29 years. Although the legislation changed in December 2022 to raise the age of youth up to 35 years, the data for the study was collected in 2020 when the old legislation was still in force. I submitted my IRB modifications protocol on June 25, 2020, and received approval on July 8th, 2020. In addition to expanding the target population, I made three additional changes to the study design.

First, I no longer planned to conduct two rounds of interviews due to the expansion of the inclusion criteria for the target population. I initially planned to conduct two rounds of interviews with each participant: one during their fourth year at the university and the second one after six months of their graduation to gain a better understanding of how their lives evolved since the first interview and how they navigated social capital not only before and during but also after university. However, in addition to facing challenges with recruiting fourth year students, based on the pilot interviews, I realized that I might have richer data if I talked to those who were in the workforce because they could talk about how social capital worked for them in the job market. Moreover, the job market situation was uncertain given the challenges caused by COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, all of my pilot study participants planned to apply for a master’s degree immediately after graduation. Because the target population expanded to include graduates, not only fourth year students, I planned to recruit a larger number of graduates than I initially planned to be able to represent the diversity of experiences. I planned to conduct follow-up interviews with each participant (as needed) to clarify on the information shared during the interviews or to member check.

Second, I changed the compensation amount of one-time payment from $15 to $25 because I was conducting one interview, not two and wanted to offer a better compensation for participants' time. It is important to note that even though I offered compensation to all my participants, 4 out of 21 interviewees refused any form of compensation.

Third, I changed my screening instrument to include a demographic survey link in the invitation that each interested participant had to fill out. My demographic survey is shared in Appendix B. Prior to creating this instrument, I did not have a screening instrument but rather relied on participants who self-identified with the information on the invitation (rural or lower-income students) to contact me directly. Then to determine the eligibility for lower socioeconomic status, I asked interested participants to share their average family income and the number of members in the household during the consent meetings. Adding a survey as a screening instrument in the invitation allowed me to determine the eligibility of participants prior to contacting them and shifted the burden of initiating the first contact on me, not the participants. I also realized that asking for income information during the meetings or even in the survey can feel intrusive because not everyone is comfortable sharing information about income. Thus, I designed an instrument which used variables other than family income to determine lower socioeconomic status. I will describe in greater detail the rationale for this change and the eligibility criteria in the next section.

By the time I received IRB approval of the modifications to the study on July 8th, 2020, I had conducted three interviews. These three interviewees provided additional feedback on my study, which prompted me to make more changes to the study. Specifically, based on the interviewee's feedback, I shortened the project invitation to be more concise and catchier and changed the expected duration of life history interviews in the consent form from "1,5-3 hours"

to “2-3 hours” because I realized that the minimum time required to conduct life history interviews was 2 hours. I submitted the second IRB modifications protocol on July 12, 2020, and received approval on August 6, 2020.

After I received IRB approval on a modified protocol, I asked family, friends, and colleagues in my network to share the invitation with their network. Some people in my network were active or former students, administrators, or teachers at prestigious universities selected for the study. I also posted the invitation on my Facebook page. Interested participants had to fill out a demographic survey and share their contact information. I also asked three participants with whom I already conducted interviews in June-July 2020 and three pilot study participants to complete the demographic survey which was added with modified IRB protocol in August 2020.

I started reaching out to participants who met the eligibility criteria based on the information they indicated in the survey in September 2020. By the end of September, 21 participants completed the survey and by February 17th, 2021, when I closed the survey on Qualtrics, the total number reached 42 (excluding three pilot study participants and three previous interviews conducted in June-July 2020). Four out of 42 attempted but did not complete the survey and did not share their contact information. Out of 38 interested participants, I selected 15 to be interviewed for the study. I discuss in greater detail how these participants were selected in the next section. Thus, between September 25, 2020, and February 9, 2021, I conducted 15 interviews. I closed the survey in Qualtrics on February 17, 2021, and emailed 23 participants who were not selected to participate in the study. The final total number of participants interviewed for the study was 21 including three who were interviewed in June-July prior to approval of IRB modifications in August and three pilot study participants.

Data from 20 out of 21 were analyzed for this dissertation since during the interview it was revealed that one participant's secondary school experience was primarily in Kyrgyzstan, whereas all other participants attended schools in Kazakhstan. Because the study aimed at the experiences of youth from rural/urban schools in Kazakhstan, the story of one participant from Kyrgyzstan was excluded from this study.

Eligibility Criteria

In this section, I will describe how I identified eligibility of participants for the study. As mentioned in the previous section, I used a demographic survey to determine the eligibility of participants for the study (see Appendix B). The survey consisted of 11 questions including gender, undergraduate university, major, type of secondary school, five questions on family socioeconomic status (SES), and contact information. I considered the type of secondary school (rural vs urban), the type of undergraduate university, and SES as the primary criteria for eligibility in the study since I was interested in exploring the experiences of graduates of prestigious universities from rural or lower SES backgrounds. In addition to the type of school, university, and SES, I considered participants' gender representation, field of study (humanities, social sciences, and STEM), and years since graduation (0-6 years) to ensure the diverse representation of experiences; however, these criteria were not essential in making decisions on the eligibility.

Secondary School Type. For the type of secondary school, in a survey, I asked interested participants to indicate the type of school where they spent most of their secondary school education: rural or urban school. It is important to note that in Kazakhstan most people use the term *secondary school* to talk about their overall experience in school from primary to high school. I intentionally asked for the type of school where they spent *most* of their secondary

school education since some youth might transfer schools for various reasons including transfers between rural and urban schools. For instance, my family and friends shared anecdotal evidence of some parents transferring their children to a rural school during the last year or semester of their high school with a specific goal of gaining a rural quota to access higher education. At the same time, some rural students might transfer to urban schools that offer better resources and opportunities. Thus, knowing the type of school where participants spent *most* of their secondary education was essential to identify rural versus urban school students.

I identified different criteria for selecting rural versus urban students. I identified youth who spent most of their secondary school education in rural school as eligible to participate in the study regardless of their socioeconomic status since rural students are considered a socially vulnerable group in Kazakhstan's government reports. Moreover, research studies continuously identified significant disparities in higher education attendance and competition rates between rural and urban students (OECD, 2017; UNESCO, 2015). Thus, rural school students are likely to be marginalized in comparison to their urban peers even though they might be in the same socioeconomic status. On the other hand, for youth who spent most of their secondary education in an urban school, I considered additional two criteria for lower socioeconomic status to be eligible to participate in the study. Thus, urban students were eligible based on their lower socioeconomic status since previous studies identified significant gaps in higher education attendance and completion rates between higher SES and lower SES students (OECD, 2017; UNESCO, 2015). Below I describe how I identified lower SES.

Socioeconomic Status. In their recommendations to the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics concerning SES, a panel of experts in the fields of sociology, economics, education, and social sciences argued that most research on the effects of SES at the individual

level used what is called “the big 3” variables - parental education, family income, and parental occupation as SES indicators (Cowan et al. 2012). In making this recommendation, Cowan et al. (2012) relied on both the history of SES and the measures used to evaluate SES over the years. Other indicators of SES included neighborhood and school SES, cultural capital, and subjective (perceived) SES (Cowan et al., 2012). In deciding which SES indicators to use for this study, I considered the aspects of SES that relate to educational and career outcomes of youth (outcome of interest in the study), SES indicators used in the studies conducted in Kazakhstan given the significance of contextual understanding of SES, and feedback from pilot study and initial three interviews conducted for the study. Based on these considerations, I used parental education and subjective (perceived) SES to determine SES of participants.

Considering parents’ education in determining SES is important not only because it is one of the “big three” variables of SES, but also because it has a particular significance in impacting educational and career outcomes of youth in Kazakhstan as well as in understanding social capital of youth. Recent studies on parental choice of secondary schools in Kazakhstan (Whitsel & Amankulova, 2023) showed that parental education had more impact on secondary school choice than household wealth. Specifically, parents with higher education levels tended to send their children to private schools whereas parents with no higher education degree tended to send their children to less resourced public schools. Beyond Kazakhstan, numerous studies showed that parental education has a significant impact on education and career outcomes of youth. Specifically, youth whose parents have a higher education degree are more likely to attend and graduate from college, attend more selective universities, have substantially higher incomes and wealth than their peers whose parents do not have a higher education degree (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Fry, 2021; Pascarella et al., 2004; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Parental education is also

useful in understanding social capital of youth since previous studies showed that youth whose parents have a higher education degree are able to better navigate the university including the development of dominant upper- and middle-class forms of social capital valued at universities and workplaces (Allat, 1993; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Jack, 2019). Thus, in the survey two questions focused on the highest level of education completed by father and mother ranging from no school or primary school to postgraduate university degree.

In addition to parental education, I included three questions on the subjective (perceived) SES. Subjective SES was used in the study for four reasons. First, scholars have long observed that SES is not simply a matter of social position but also the perception of it (Cowan et al., 2012; Masters & Smith, 1987; Saegert et al., 2007; Walker & Smith, 2002). Second, studies of youth in Kazakhstan primarily relied on the subjective SES as proxies for SES (Oishybayev et al., 2019; Whitsel, 2020).

Third, official minimum cost of living used by the government of Kazakhstan to determine the rate of poverty was not useful in identifying lower socioeconomic status in my study. Scholars studying poverty in Kazakhstan argued that there was overall lack of understanding of the concept of poverty in Kazakhstan (Aliev, 2015). Official statistics in Kazakhstan rely on minimum cost of living to determine the rate of poverty in Kazakhstan; however, Aliev (2015) convincingly argued that the minimum cost of living calculation approach in Kazakhstan was not reliable as they were primarily driven by political considerations not objective measurements. It is important to note that the official minimum cost of living in Kazakhstan is used for many other purposes including the establishment of the level of salaries, pensions, and social benefits. Aliev (2015) argued that the minimum cost of living determined by the government in Kazakhstan is not sufficient for even physical survival and is significantly low

than the level necessary to provide sustainable socioeconomic development. Moreover, being above the official poverty line does not mean that people immediately transition to middle class; these people remain in lower socioeconomic status if their income level is no more than double amount of the minimum cost of living because any change in economic conditions (e.g., childbirth, inflation) would move them back to poverty (Aliev, 2015). Given these issues with the official data on the minimum cost of living, I decided not to rely on income level to determine socioeconomic status of study participants.

Fourth, based on the feedback from participants in the initial stages of the study, I concluded that subjective SES fits the study better than other proxies such as family income. Specifically, for this study, I was interested in family SES during their secondary school because my aim was to identify youth who were less likely to access prestigious universities due to their socioeconomic background. Moreover, all participants of the study graduated from high school and moved out from their family home at least four years ago. Thus, participants were more independent from family after transitioning to university. Based on the feedback from six participants (including three pilot study participants), I realized that most participants do not know or remember their family income growing up, which was not surprising given that they moved out more than four years ago. Moreover, to have an accurate understanding of family income required to ask additional questions about the size of family, living situation, or other assets, especially for youth from rural areas whose family may not be earning a formal income but may own a herd or land. In addition to these data quality issues, I also felt intrusive asking for family income when I was already facing challenges with building rapport given the online format of interviews. In addition, I aimed to use the survey simply to determine the eligibility of participants and planned to ask additional questions on SES as needed during the interview.

Finally, it was important that the survey did not take more than five minutes of interested participants' time. Given the data quality issues and the burden considerations, I included only three questions aimed at identifying subjective SES.

In designing the questions on subjective SES, I considered the types of questions that were used in studies of youth in Kazakhstan and around the world to measure subjective SES. Specifically, I used (1) an extensively used SES ladder technique in which participants are asked to indicate where their family would stand on a seven to ten-rung ladder; (2) "get along" measure in which participants are asked to indicate whether their family has enough money to get along, and (3) overall satisfaction level with family's financial situation. Three questions that were used as proxies for subjective SES in the study were adapted from the Oishybayev et al. (2019) and Whitsel's (2020) study on parental choice of schools in Kazakhstan. Specifically, I asked participants (1) to rank their family's socioeconomic status on a ladder from one to seven, (2) evaluate their financial situation in terms of their ability to buy food, clothes, and very expensive stuff from "we did not face material difficulties" to "we experienced difficulties even with buying food," and (3) rate their satisfaction level with the living conditions of their family on a four point scale from quite satisfied to completely dissatisfied including difficult to answer option.

To meet the SES eligibility for the study, participants from urban schools had to meet at least two of the below criteria via self-reported subjective SES: (1) family's socioeconomic rank on the self-report ladder had to be 3 or below out of 7; (2) family financial situation of either (a) had enough income to buy food, but experienced difficulties in buying clothes or (b) experienced difficulties even with buying food, and (3) family living conditions had to be rather not satisfied or completely dissatisfied; or (4) parents (mother or father) had vocational certificate or below.

Type of University. The next important criterion I used to determine participants for study was the type of undergraduate university where youth obtained their bachelor's degrees. One of the survey questions asked participants to name the university where they obtained their bachelor's degree. For the purposes of this study, I selected youth from rural or lower SES backgrounds, who graduated from prestigious universities in large metropolitan cities in Kazakhstan. As mentioned in Chapter 2, I intentionally selected prestigious universities to develop counternarratives to accepted assumptions that marginalized students mainly attend less prestigious and less selective universities. Most of Kazakhstan's higher education institutions are located in large cities. Specifically, more than half of the universities in Kazakhstan are located in megapolis cities of Astana (41), Almaty (15), or Shymkent (10), which receive 70% of total income in Kazakhstan's higher education (Mukhamediyarova, 2022). Thus, the universities represented in this study are located in Astana or Almaty.

I identified students as eligible to participate in the study if they were the graduates of the top three universities according to the national ranking of universities in Kazakhstan and/or the universities which were listed in the world university rankings. I considered such world university rankings as Times Higher Education, QS World University rankings, or the Center for World University Rankings. For national rankings, I relied on the national ranking of leading universities of Kazakhstan administered by the Independent Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (IQAA). IQAA ranks universities by the following fields: multidisciplinary (comprehensive), technical, humanitarian, pedagogical, and medical universities.

Because the participants of this study came from rural or lower SES backgrounds, they primarily attended higher education institutions with the help of public funding since costs otherwise would be prohibitive, particularly at prestigious universities. Primary state support

mechanisms for higher education come in the form of “state grants,” which are awarded to a set number of students based on the results of the competitive Unified National Test. Recipients of state grants receive full coverage of their tuition plus a stipend to cover their living expenses.

Based on this eligibility criteria, participants in this study represented three universities located in Astana or Almaty: Arman University, Senim University, and Talap University (pseudonyms). For confidentiality purposes, specific references to city names in participants’ narratives were replaced with pseudonyms. Arman and Talap universities are located in Kazyna (pseudonym) whereas Senim University is located in Shugyla (pseudonym). Given the selection criteria of the prestigious universities described above, revealing the city name could reveal the identity of the university. All three universities are among the top universities according to national rankings of universities in Kazakhstan or listed in international rankings as described above. All three universities offer full-time study training for undergraduate and graduate degrees; have large campuses located in beautiful areas of the respective cities; have dormitories on campus; and attract students from all over the country. The language of instruction in Arman University and Senim University is in Kazakh, Russian, or English languages whereas Talap is a university with English as a medium of instruction. Student enrollment ranges between 7 to 25 thousand. Tuition and fees for bachelor’s degree students ranges from $2 500-$23 000 USD per academic year.

Participants

Twenty participants of ages 21-29 years were recruited for this study using purposeful sampling, which allowed me to select information-rich cases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Specifically, I tried to ensure representation across rural-urban school background, number of

years since obtaining bachelor's degree (0-6 years), gender, and discipline (humanities, social sciences, STEM).

With regards to university, 8 out of 20 pursued their undergraduate degrees from Arman university, five from Senim university, and seven from Talap university. While I aimed to ensure representation of participants based on geographic background (rural vs urban school), the majority of participants recruited in the study (15) spent most of their secondary school education in a rural school, whereas five attended urban school (see Table iv).

With regards to socioeconomic status, out of 15 participants from rural schools, the majority (10) self-reported as from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (see Table v). As described earlier, all five participants from urban schools met at least two criteria for lower socioeconomic backgrounds (see Table v for detailed information).

With regards to the number of years since graduation, at the time of interviews six out of 20 were in their final semester of their undergraduate degree at the university whereas the remaining 14 obtained their bachelor's degrees 1-6 years prior (see Table iv). Ensuring such diversity of experience was important to understand how participants navigated not only the university experience but also the job market.

With regards to gender, 12 identified as female, eight as male (see Table iv). In Kazakhstan, while females have higher tertiary attendance (6 percentage points higher) and tertiary completion rates (about 10 percentage points higher) than males (UNESCO, 2015), there are gender disparities in the labor market (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2013). Moreover, recent studies on female leaders in academia found that informal exchange networks create barriers for career advancement for women since these networks favor males (Kuzhabekova & Almukhambetova, 2017). Thus, it was important to ensure diversity by gender.

Table iv

Participants Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Secondary school	Tracked to a higher-resourced school or class?	Gender	Undergraduate university	Bachelor’s graduation year	Bachelor’s degree major
Zere	Rural school	No	Female	Senim University	2020	Regional studies
Jandos	Rural school	Yes	Male	Senim University	2020	Logistics
Dariya	Rural school	No	Female	Arman University	2015	Telecommunications
Aisulu	Rural school	No	Female	Arman University	2016	Archeology and Ethnology
Gaukhar	Rural school	No	Female	Senim University	2014	Communications manager
Mardan	Rural school	Yes	Male	Arman University	2014	Telecommunications
Fatima	Rural school	No	Female	Talap University	2017	Biological Sciences
Laura	Rural school	Yes	Female	Talap University	2017	Civil Engineering
Kausar	Rural school	No	Female	Talap University	2015	Economics
Perizat	Rural school	Yes	Female	Arman University	2014	Telecommunications
Qanat	Rural school	Yes	Male	Senim University	2019	Social pedagogy
Olzhas	Rural school	Yes	Male	Arman University	2016	Telecommunications
Takhmina	Rural school	No	Female	Talap University	2020	Biological sciences

Pseudonym	Secondary school	Tracked to a higher-resourced school or class?	Gender	Undergraduate university	Bachelor's graduation year	Bachelor's degree major
Nazym	Rural school	No	Female	Talap University	2019	Economics
Batyr	Rural school	No	Male	Arman University	2020	Public and local management
Erik	Urban school	Yes	Male	Senim University	2020	Aerospace technology Engineering
Indira	Urban school	Yes	Female	Talap University	2019	Mechanical Engineering
Sanzhar	Urban school	Yes	Male	Talap University	2016	Electrical engineering
Umit	Urban school	Yes	Female	Arman University	2016	Toursim
Yerzhan	Urban school	Yes	Male	Arman University	2020	Toursim

Table v

Participants Socioeconomic Backgrounds

Pseudonym	SES Ladder	Family financial situation	Satisfaction with family living conditions	Highest level of education completed by father	Highest level of education completed by mother
		Participants from rural school			
Zere	5	We had enough income to buy food and clothes	Quite satisfied	Undergraduate university degree or diploma (bachelor)	Undergraduate university degree or diploma (bachelor)
Jandos	4	We had enough income to buy everything except for very expensive staff	Quite satisfied	Undergraduate university degree or diploma (bachelor)	Undergraduate university degree or diploma (bachelor)
Dariya	3	We had enough income to buy food, but we experienced difficulties in buying clothes	Rather satisfied	Some or all of secondary school	Vocational certificate or diploma
Aisulu	3	We had enough income to buy everything except for very expensive staff	Rather satisfied	Some or all of secondary school	Some or all of secondary school
Gaukhar	4	We had enough income to buy everything except for very expensive staff	Quite satisfied	Some or all of secondary school	Vocational certificate or diploma
Mardan	4	We had enough income to buy food and clothes	Quite satisfied	Some or all of secondary school	Vocational certificate or diploma
Fatima	2	We had enough income to buy food and clothes	Rather not satisfied	Vocational certificate or diploma	Undergraduate university degree or diploma (bachelor)
Laura	4	We had enough income to buy food and clothes	Rather not satisfied	Undergraduate university degree or diploma (bachelor)	Undergraduate university degree or diploma (bachelor)

Pseudonym	SES Ladder	Family financial situation	Satisfaction with family living conditions	Highest level of education completed by father	Highest level of education completed by mother
Kausar	2	We had enough income to buy food, but we experienced difficulties in buying clothes	Quite satisfied	Undergraduate university degree or diploma (bachelor)	Postgraduate university degree or diploma (Master or doctoral degree)
Perizat	4	We had enough income to buy food and clothes	Rather not satisfied	Vocational certificate or diploma	Vocational certificate or diploma
Qanat	4	We had enough income to buy food and clothes	Rather satisfied	Vocational certificate or diploma	Undergraduate university degree or diploma (bachelor)
Olzhas	4	We had enough income to buy food, but we experienced difficulties in buying clothes	Rather satisfied	Father passed away when he was born	Undergraduate university degree or diploma (bachelor)
Takhmina	4	We had enough income to buy food and clothes	Quite satisfied	Undergraduate university degree or diploma (bachelor)	Undergraduate university degree or diploma (bachelor)
Nazym	4	We had enough income to buy everything except for very expensive staff	Quite satisfied	Undergraduate university degree or diploma (bachelor)	Undergraduate university degree or diploma (bachelor)
Batyr	4	We had enough income to buy everything except for very expensive staff	Quite satisfied	Undergraduate university degree or diploma (bachelor)	Undergraduate university degree or diploma (bachelor)
Participants from urban schools					
Erik	2	We had enough income to buy food and clothes	Rather satisfied	Vocational certificate or diploma	Undergraduate university degree or diploma (bachelor)

Pseudonym	SES Ladder	Family financial situation	Satisfaction with family living conditions	Highest level of education completed by father	Highest level of education completed by mother
Indira	2	We had enough income to buy food, but we experienced difficulties in buying clothes	Completely dissatisfied	Undergraduate university degree or diploma (bachelor)	Undergraduate university degree or diploma (bachelor)
Sanzhar	2	We had enough income to buy food and clothes	Rather satisfied	Vocational certificate or diploma	Undergraduate university degree or diploma (bachelor)
Umit	4	We had enough income to buy everything except for very expensive staff	Rather satisfied	Some or all of secondary school	Some or all of secondary school
Yerzhan	3	We had enough income to buy food, but we experienced difficulties in buying clothes	Rather not satisfied	Vocational certificate or diploma	Undergraduate university degree or diploma (bachelor)

Note. Shaded columns represent the criteria that were used to determine lower socioeconomic status of participants.

With regards to bachelor's degree major, half (10) were in the social sciences and humanities field whereas the other half (10) were in the STEM field (see Table iv). There was equal representation of gender across these two fields with half of the females and half of the males in STEM fields, whereas the other half of the females and half of the males were in social sciences and humanities fields. In Kazakhstan, students' major choices are influenced by persistent gender stereotypes with females predominating traditionally female areas of study such as humanities, health, and education (ADB, 2013). These choices perpetuate labor market patterns. Specifically, females predominate in public sector jobs with the lowest salaries whereas males are overly represented in higher paying technical fields (ADB, 2013). Women are also underrepresented in upper managerial positions and less active in the formal economy, politics, and public life (ADB, 2013). These patterns reflect the overall expectation that females should primarily be responsible for childcare and housework. Therefore, balancing the number of females and males in the different fields was critical for representing the diversity of experiences of youth.

In terms of ethnic representation, most of the participants were ethnic Kazakhs (18) whereas two were ethnic Uzbeks (Takhmina and Fatima). While this study did not aim to compare youth experiences of navigating higher education access and job market based on ethnic background, analysis of the study showed no notable differences based on ethnic background in relation to the research questions for this study. However, it is important to emphasize that the study does not offer conclusive evidence in relation to ethnic differences due to limited representation of youth from minority ethnic backgrounds, which is an interesting topic to explore in future studies.

Interviews

Qualitative interviews contributed to an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of students and various factors that contributed to and/or constrained the pursuit of their educational and career aspirations. I used Seidman's (2013) three-interview series as a model for "in-depth, phenomenological interviewing" (p. 14). However, in my study, I conducted one (two with those who wanted to schedule the second half of the interview on a different day) with each participant; thus, I condensed Seidman's three-interview series. Seidman (2013) described the first interview as a focused life history. During the first interview in Seidman's process, the participant is asked to provide detailed descriptions of their lives before the interview in relation to the topic. The second interview in Seidman's series, on the other hand, focuses on the present lived experiences of participants in light of the research topic. In his study, Seidman's (2013) primary focus during the second interview series sought to reconstruct a typical day in the lives of his participants. Seidman's third interview focuses on asking participants to interpret the meaning of their experiences.

In my study, each interview lasted about 1.5-4.5 hours. The average length of interviews was 3 hours. The total number of hours for 20 interviews was 56 hours (see Table iii). Similar to Seidman's (2013) first and second interviews, the first half of my interview focused on students' past and present experiences in light of the topic. I also combined Seidman's (2013) interviewing model with Haglund's (2004) interviewing strategy for adolescents. Haglund (2004) informed her participants during the recruitment and consent process that they would be asked to tell their life history from their childhood to the present. Similarly, I informed my participants during the recruitment and consent process that they would be asked to tell their life stories from their childhood to the present with a particular focus on the pursuit of their educational and career

aspirations. This helped my participants to prepare in advance for their interview by “organizing their memories into a ‘story of my life’ format” (Haglund, 2004, p. 1312).

In each interview, I asked participants to tell as much as possible about themselves in light of the topic. Specifically, I asked them to reconstruct their early experiences in their families, in their neighborhood, in school, with friends and relatives, and in jobs (if applicable) (Seidman, 2013). I also asked about participants’ experiences at the university such as their experiences transitioning to the university and the multiple ways they navigated their university life as well as their work experiences (if applicable). I actively listened to my participants’ narrations of their life stories without interrupting them (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). My goal during the interview was to develop a general understanding of participants’ family background, educational and career path, and the ways they navigated structural challenges to gain admission to the university as well as their experiences at the university and beyond.

After participants signaled the end of their life story, I started the second half of the interviews, in which I asked follow-up questions in relation to topics participants shared during the first half of the interview. In addition, I asked participants to interpret the meaning of their experiences, following Seidman’s (2013) third interview as a model. Specifically, participants were asked to reflect on their answers during the first half of the interview and think about what these experiences mean. Thus, the second half of the interview was more reflective in nature. Seidman (2013) argued that making meaning requires the participants to look at “how the factors in their lives interacted to bring them to their present situation” (p. 22). This process of exploring participants’ past to understand the factors that led them to where they are now, and looking at the details of their present situation, created conditions for reflection on their current life experiences (Seidman, 2013). It is critical to note that although it is in the final third interview

that Seidman (2013) focuses on the meaning-making of participants' experiences, through all three interviews participants are making meaning. As Vygostski argued "the very process of putting experience into language is a meaning-making process" (as cited in Seidman, 2013, p. 22). Seidman (2013) differentiates the third interview from two previous interviews by establishing meaning-making as the primary focus of the interview and putting it within the context of two previous interviews.

I combined Seidman's (2013) and Haglund's (2004) interviewing models with Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000) narrative interviewing structure in designing my questions. Specifically, I began my interviews with an open-ended question that allowed my participants to share an uninterrupted narrative. During this initiation phase, I explained to my participants the study focus, the procedure for the interview, and asked for permission to record the interview. In the first "main narration" phase, participants narrated their life stories. During this phase, I restricted myself to active listening and did not interrupt my participants until there was a clear coda, meaning that my participants paused and signaled the end of their story. While listening, I developed questions in my mind or on paper for the next phase of the interview. In the second "questioning phase," I asked follow-up questions. I drew on Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000) criteria for follow-up questions: (1) referred to the topics mentioned in participant's narrative by using their own words and phrases; (2) did not ask questions that addressed possible contradictions in participant's narrative. During this phase, in addition to asking participants to reflect on their life journey, I clarified certain aspects of their life story and particularly focused

on following up on the role and meaning of social capital/*tanys*[10]/blat they mentioned during the first half of the interview.

Finally, I concluded the interviews with a "concluding talk" (Jovchelovitch and Bauer 2000). During this phase, I turned off the audio recording device and engaged with participants in a more informal discussion. I took notes immediately after. Providing space for such informal discussion at times invoked ideas that participants might not have felt comfortable talking about during the recorded portion of the interview. As Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000) argued, talking in a more relaxed mode may shed light on the more formal accounts shared during the narration. During this portion of the interview most participants shared how they felt about the interview process and asked any questions they had for me about the study or any other personal questions. I also used this time to share resources in relation to the need they might have mentioned during the interview.

During the interviews, I continuously checked with my participants about the duration of the interview and reminded them that we could stop the interview any time if they needed to go or felt tired. After 1.5-2 hours I checked back and asked if they wanted to continue or wanted to schedule the second interview on a different day. Most participants chose to continue the interview except three with whom I scheduled the second interview. For three participants who chose to schedule the second interview, I listened to recorded interviews the day the interview was being conducted or prior to the second scheduled interview. This helped me to improve the quality of my questions and the overall interview process. I have included a sample interview protocol in Appendix C.

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[10] Kazakh term used to refer to social connections.
Note on italics: only the first use of words and phrases from another language are italicized, as per APA 7 guidelines (p. 170)

Beyond the formal interview, I suggested to my participants to contact me if they wanted to talk about their experience, wanted to share additional details about their story, or needed my help with their graduate program or job applications. As I was analyzing the data, I followed up with some of my participants on WhatsApp to member check or ask a clarifying question about an aspect of their life story. Member checking, also referred to as respondent validation, is a way to systematically solicit feedback from the study participants about data and study conclusions (Maxwell, 2013). My participants were responsive to my follow-up questions and shared their replies as audio or text messages. I took notes whenever I engaged in informal conversation with my participants and used those notes as part of my data as well. I re-affirmed consent each time to remind them that I am likely to use these conversation notes as part of my data for the study. Since I initially planned to analyze their social media accounts, I also asked them to share their social media accounts to analyze as part of the study. Although I did not analyze social media accounts as part of this study given the constraints with time and resources, connecting on social media was helpful in staying in touch beyond the study, which I will discuss in greater detail in the next section.

Negotiating Relationships and a Way to be Useful

As I have written earlier in this chapter, narrative inquiry is a collaborative process between researcher and participants. Therefore, I paid particular attention to negotiating relationships with participants. Establishing trust and good relationships with my participants is critical to the quality of collected data, analysis, and composition of research texts. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe researcher-participants relationship as tenuous one since it is always in the midst of being negotiated.

While I recognized the temporariness and tenuousness of my relationships with participants, I aimed to connect with participants and hope to stay connected after the study comes to an end. Some of the strategies I employed to establish connection with my participants were to share my experience and/or feelings where appropriate, stay connected after the interviews, and discuss a way to be useful to participants.

In terms of sharing my experiences and feelings, I did not want my participants to feel like they were being interrogated, but rather I wanted it to be a more natural conversation, which meant there should be interaction. Participants are less likely to be willing to share their life stories if they do not know anything about me. So, I started the interview by briefly telling why and how I came to this topic. In doing this, I was careful not to share my perceptions in relation to my research questions or reveal parts of my experience that speak to my theoretical framework or research questions since it might have influenced their narratives.

I made a concerted effort to stay connected with my participants beyond the interviews. I sent my participants messages on all major holidays in Kazakhstan, asked them how they were doing, and texted them when they posted a major life event on social media such as the birth of a child, graduation, etc. I also reached out to my participants during the bloody protests in January 2022 in Kazakhstan to check in if they and their families were safe.

In negotiating my way to be useful, I negotiated with my participants how they could benefit from participating in this study. Beyond the potential impact of the study on theory and practice, it was critical that participants themselves were satisfied with their participation in the study. Most of my participants shared how much they enjoyed the interviewing process and sharing their stories with me. They shared that it provided them an opportunity to reflect on their life journey which they found fulfilling and satisfying. Most of my participants shared multiple

times during the interview that it was the first time they were sharing about their life story and some instances of their life they shared with me they never shared with anyone else. Some of them shared how they wanted to write a book about their life story, which motivated them to participate in the study. Participants were also motivated to participate in the study because they found the topic significant and interesting but under-studied in Kazakhstan. They saw their participation in the study as a way to support educational and career success of youth from similar backgrounds since they hoped the study findings would inform educators, policy makers, teachers, parents, and students. I will aim to disseminate the findings of the study not only in English, but in Kazakh/Russian languages as well. This way, participants of my study are more likely to see the practical impacts of the study within the Kazakhstani context.

Beyond the potential impact of the study on theory and practice and participants' satisfaction with the participation in the study, I negotiated with my participants how they could benefit from participating in this study and offered help with participants' applications to jobs, graduate programs, and/or scholarships where needed and asked them for other ways I or the study could be of help to them. Two participants reached out to me after their interviews requesting to review their application materials for graduate programs. I provided feedback on their motivation letters. They later updated me that they were admitted to the programs they were applying for. Some participants thanked me for offering help and shared that they will reach out to me in the future if they decide to apply. To this day, I get requests or updates in relation to their applications. For instance, recently, one of the participants shared with me that they were applying for a program in the U.S., and we discussed his options. Moreover, during the unrecorded informal part of the interview, I discussed with my participants their future goals they shared during the formal part of the interview and shared information and resources as

appropriate. For instance, I shared how to apply to graduate programs or encouraged them to consider applying to certain universities that they circumscribed as inaccessible to them given their background. I also shared mental health resources if participants expressed need for such resources during the interview. Moreover, one of my participants asked to participate in an online webinar with his students in a rural school to share my story and answer students' questions to which I readily agreed. Since I stayed connected with my participants beyond this study, some of them shared their updates with me without me asking for any updates. For instance, one participant shared that they recently started a PhD program and thanked me for motivating them to apply. Other participants shared updates about their jobs such as starting a business or a new job.

From Field to Field Texts

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argue that careful composition of field texts helps researchers to overcome many of the challenges they encounter in the field. One of the dilemmas that narrative inquirers face is between the full involvement and distance from participants. Some argue that researchers cannot have a comprehensive understanding of the lives of their participants if they do not become fully involved in the experience they are studying. Others, on the other hand, worry that too much involvement may lead to a loss of objectivity. Becoming fully involved in this sense implies that inquirers take the same things for granted and have the same intentions and viewpoints as their participants.

Drawing on Clandinin and Connelly (2000), I believe field texts help researchers "to move back and forth between the full involvement with participants and distance from them" (p. 80). Therefore, I regularly wrote field texts in a journal or dictated into a dictaphone notes on my feelings, emerging ideas, reflections on my positionality as a researcher and remembrance of past

times, if any (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Since narrative inquiry is relational, I attempted to be fully involved, "fall in love" with my participants, but at the same time, I tried to step back and see the stories of my participants along with my own stories, as well as the larger context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 82). The field texts helped in this process because the records on events, feelings, and attitudes "freeze specific moments in the narrative inquiry space" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 83). These field texts were part of my analysis.

From Field Texts to Research Texts

The transition from field text to research text was a complex and challenging process (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As researchers begin to move from field texts to research texts, negotiations of relationships with participants and ways to be useful re-emerge. At this stage, the relationships with participants shift from the living stories of participants to retelling stories through research texts. In this way, the negotiation is no longer between researcher and participant, but between participant story and the research text produced. Further, the research text becomes the way the research can be useful to the participant in revealing problems and encouraging structural change. In making this shift, researchers have to consider questions of analysis and interpretation.

Data Analysis

My analysis started during my pilot study in Spring 2020. I conducted three interviews during my pilot study and started informal analysis as I was conducting interviews. After each interview, I wrote a brief memo summarizing interview points, my thoughts, reactions, and emerging ideas on the topic. For my class assignment, I transcribed and conducted an in-depth analysis of two pilot study participants out of three. As I was transcribing these interviews, I wrote notes on the margins on my thoughts, reactions, and additional questions to follow up with

participants as needed. I initially created several codes on NVivo related to social capital and aspirations informed by the literature (e.g., the role of parents, teachers, peers before university and during university). I also developed new inductive codes. As I was coding, I also created a spreadsheet to organize my data chronologically. This spreadsheet helped me not only in writing a story of pilot study participants, but also in analyzing change through time in participant aspirations and social capital. The process through which I coded for change was reading through this spreadsheet in chronological order, reading through the transcripts and my codes while simultaneously writing memos on emerging ideas. I also created a table to compare my preliminary findings between two pilot study participants. My pilot study informed my decisions in revising interview questions and strategies for data analysis. The data from all three participants in the pilot study was used and analyzed in the dissertation.

Similar to my pilot study, during my dissertation study, I engaged in an ongoing informal analysis during interviews. Specifically, in the field texts mentioned above, I wrote analytic memos about what I was learning (Miles et al., 2014). Specifically, after each interview, I wrote a summary where I focused on such questions as: What were my general feelings about the interview and how it went? What themes emerged for me? What could have been better? What went well? What did not? These memos helped me to reflect on how what I was learning related to larger theoretical and methodological issues (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Interview recordings were then transcribed verbatim. First, I read the transcripts for the structure of the narrative in order to avoid reading it for content or as evidence of theory (Riessman, 1993). I asked such questions as: How was the story organized? Why did my participant develop his/her story in this way? (Riessman, 1993). Through this reading, I attempted to identify what was taken for granted by my participants and myself (Riessman,

1993). As I engaged in this inductive open reading of the interviews, I wrote memos on emerging ideas.

Then I developed a set of 10-13 questions to think about after reading each interview. These questions were developed based on the emerging themes in my analytic memos, pilot study preliminary findings, literature, and my research questions. Based on the discussion with my advisor, the central question I focused on answering during this stage of analysis was: “What were my participants trying to tell me about their life trajectories?” Although I did not engage in formal coding in NVivo at this stage of analysis, I engaged in the inductive analysis process within each interview similar to open coding method as I was jotting down notes, comments, observations, impressions, and questions after reading each interview (Miles et al., 2014). At this stage of analysis, I engaged in what Polkinghorne (1995) refers to as “narrative analysis” of interviews as I approached each interview as a coherent whole and focused on understanding how the past events in my participants’ lives brought them to where they were in that moment. As a result, I produced detailed and expansive field notes for each interview.

During the next cycle of analysis, I read through my field notes to identify patterns, develop codes, reduce codes to key codes, then to themes (Miles et al., 2014). Then, I conducted cross-case analysis through comparing themes across interviews with attention to re-defining, merging, eliminating, and consolidating themes. As a result of comparing and contrasting the codes across interviews, pattern codes were generated; pattern codes were explanatory codes that identified an emergent theme (Miles et al., 2014). For instance, one of the emergent themes I identified was tarbiyeh. After identifying tarbiyeh as an important emergent theme, I focused on analyzing quotes on tarbiyeh across all participants. Specifically, I created a table where I took note of tarbiyeh’s role in each participant’s life. Another emergent theme I identified through

cross-case analysis was “Positive and negative ways of using connections.” I documented the emergent themes in my data by writing assertions and evidence to support each assertion and shared this document with my advisor for feedback. For instance, one of the assertions I wrote was:

> Literature suggests that marginalized youth tend to invest their time and energy on academic aspects of college without realizing the importance of building social capital. However, youth in this study were well aware of the role of social connections in getting ahead but were trying to build their own moral stance on if/how/when to leverage connections.

To support this assertion, I provided data exemplars from such codes as “Difference between positive and negative ways of using connections” or “Perceptions on gift-giving.”

After completing this inductive analysis stage of my data, I developed a codebook. In the process of developing a codebook, I created different tables and mindmaps to make better sense of emerging codes and themes. My codebook consisted of five key themes: (1) access to university, (2) navigation of university, (3) life after university, (4) aspirations, and (5) conceptualization of social capital. For themes 1-3, I coded for different types of social capital that facilitated or constrained participants’ aspirations at these different stages in their life including parents, teachers, peers, and others. I also coded for other factors that impacted participants aspirations at these different stages in their life including school resources, internet, and challenges. Dividing the themes by life stages allowed me to see how the role and types of social capital changed for participants (if at all). Similarly, for theme 4 on aspirations, I coded participants’ aspirations at different stages in their life including before, during, and after university as well as what impacted their aspirations. For theme 5 on conceptualization of social

capital, I had codes that focused on understanding how participants conceptualized and made sense of social capital including local concepts such as blat, tanys, and tarbiyeh.

After developing a codebook through the inductive analysis and coding process as described above, I uploaded the interview transcripts into NVivo for further coding. I coded and analyzed my data in the original language of transcripts (primarily Russian or Kazakh) and translated into English the data chunks that were used in the final research text. Although I had developed deductive codes prior to coding in NVivo, I remained open to new codes and themes and added them as they were emerging during the formal coding process.

It is important to note that I engaged in iterative analysis of my data throughout the entire process of my study from interviewing through writing the research texts. As part of the iterative process of analysis, I engaged in "inspection" of my preliminary findings by identifying disconfirming evidence and constantly comparing my preliminary findings against the literature (Denzin, 1978). This helped to examine alternative explanations and identify which emerging themes were well supported and which ones were incomplete (Bittencourt, 2020). This process was also helpful in identifying expected and unexpected preliminary findings.

In addition to working with my advisor throughout the process of analysis and writing, I also worked regularly with my university's writing center consultants to brainstorm, share emerging themes, discuss the analysis process and chapter and outline drafts. As a result of the iterative analysis and discussions with my advisor, writing center consultants, along with my friends and family, some new codes emerged during my writing stage. For instance, I added the code "tarbiyeh and social capital," as I saw a connection between these two concepts as a result of the iterative analysis process.

Among myriad approaches to analysis in narrative inquiry, I found Polkinghorne's (1995) hybrid method of analyzing narratives most helpful. Specifically, following Polkinghorne's (1995) suggestions I combined "analysis of narratives" with "narrative analysis." According to Polkinghorne (1995), "analysis of narratives moves from stories to common elements, and "narrative analysis moves from elements to stories" (p. 12). In my study, I used analysis of narratives to analyze interview data from the entire sample of 20 students by presenting data according to themes while including participants' voices in illustrative quotes (Polkinghorne, 1995; Vavrus, 2015; Wangsness Willemsen, 2016). This form of analysis privileges the researcher's voice and paradigmatic and thematic knowing over narrative knowing (Wangsness Wangsness Willemsen, 2016). In doing this analysis, my intention was not to collapse my participants' lives into a singular framework as if all students from similar rural or lower-income backgrounds view the world in the same manner, but rather, to "understand whether any cross-cutting themes exist across similar students" (Tierney et al., 2019, p. 475).

The outcome of a narrative analysis, on the other hand, is to produce a coherent story with beginning, middle, and end. I used narrative analysis to analyze participants' stories as a coherent whole (Polkinghorne, 1995). My goal in doing narrative analysis was to link past events together to better understand how my participants got to where they were in their life journeys. Specifically, I aimed at understanding how the events (particularly the ones related to my research questions) in their lives helped or hindered their access to and graduation from prestigious universities and getting a job or promotion in their jobs (if applicable). I selected stories of two participants (Dariya and Olzhas) to be presented in the final text. I selected these two participants for two reasons, which are similar to the rationale that Wangsness Willemsen (2016) used in selecting focal stories to present in her dissertation. First, the stories of Dariya and

Olzhas represented important themes that had emerged from analysis of narratives of 20 participants. Their stories are particularly illustrative in explaining the concept of tarbiyeh, which emerged as significant in understanding how participants navigated the world of social capital; this concept became the focus of Chapter 5. Second, the depth and quality of these two stories lent themselves well to being shaped into what I envisioned to be compelling life histories. Although the stories of the 18 other participants are not presented as coherent narratives, their stories, perspectives, and experiences are represented in Chapter 4 on conceptualization of social capital, final sections in Chapter 5 on tarbiyeh, discussion, and in shaping the analysis of the stories of Dariya and Olzhas. In other words, the stories of 18 participants are in dialogue with the two focal narratives around my central research questions (Wangsness Willemsen, 2016).

Composing Research Texts

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe the beginning of the writing process in narrative inquiry as a tension-filled time. Narrative inquirers are likely to find themselves in the midst of uncertainty as they start writing because of the temporal nature of narrative texts. In the midst of this uncertainty, the issues of voice, signature, and audience must be carefully considered (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Voice and Signature

The issues of voice arise both for researchers and participants due to the relationship between the two. One of the dilemmas that narrative inquirers face in producing research texts is the one of trying to find balance between researcher's own voice, participant's voice, while attempting to compose a research text that will speak to the audience's voices (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It is also important to consider the multiplicity of voices for participants and researchers. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) note "We, and our participants, live and tell

many stories" (p. 147). It was a challenging task to try to capture the multiplicity of voices since it required to consider voices heard and not heard, and consider silences, both that I am aware of and those of which I am unaware (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Voice and signature are closely linked in composing research texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Signature refers to being in the field of the researcher's discipline and in the text in the special way that marks each researcher as writer; in other words, it is how a researcher exists within a particular academic context and with a particular position of authority (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). By gaining a voice and a signature for the research text, researchers put their own stamp on the work and create their identity as an author (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Although signature is usually referred to the researcher, it may also be considered to refer to participants. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) advocate for a balance between too vivid or too subtle signature of the researcher as the former runs the risk of concealing the field and its participants while the latter runs the risk of the deception that participants author the work.

Although I grappled with the questions of voice and signature throughout the process of writing my findings, it was particularly acute in composing the stories of two focal participants: Dariya and Olzhas. In composing these two stories, I went through a difficult process of narrative smoothing, in which I had to select, often not easily, the elements of the stories which were most important to focus on while excluding the elements which were not pertinent to the development of the story or the focus of the study (Polkinghorne, 1995). The breadth and depth of data produced in this study, even from two interviews only, was beyond one dissertation, after all. After I have chosen the aspects of stories to focus on, I had to decide how to present the stories in the chapter. In my initial drafts, I aspired for stories to stand for themselves in the voices of my participants. I attempted to include my voice in separate sections such as

introduction and discussion. Similar to Wangsness Willemsen (2016), I was afraid to colonize the voices of my participants by interspersing my voice and commentary within the stories of my participants. However, after numerous discussions with several readers of these initial drafts and continuously receiving feedback to clarify or discuss a concept or event shortly after it is being introduced in the story, I realized that interspersing my voice and analytical discussion alongside my participants' voice was a more effective way to present the stories and my arguments. As a result, the life stories of Dariya and Olzhas are built upon their words but introduced and followed up with my analytical discussions to bring their stories into dialogue with each other and the stories of 18 other participants and with the key literature.

In producing the stories, I draw on my disciplinary expertise and conceptual framework to interpret and make sense of participants' actions and responses. Drawing on Polkinghorne's (1995) narrative analysis approach, I included the argument and evidence to support the "plausability of the offered story" because the aim of the story is to provide a "scholarly explanation and realistic depiction of a human episode" (p. 19). It is important to emphasize that although the stories are the dialogical productions of interactions between me and my participants, they themselves are "not a neutral representation" of the research findings; the stories are molded to fit the conceptual framework of the study and the grammatical conventions of English language (Polkinghorne, 1995).

From the above discussion, it is evident that it was a difficult task to find balance between my voice and my participants' voices and to capture the multiplicity of voices. One way towards this balance was discussing with participants whether or not they see themselves in research texts. In writing the stories of Olzhas and Dariya, I gathered additional data from them as needed (via WhatsApp text/voice message/call) to "fill in the missing links in order to produce

a full and explanatory story" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 18). Moreover, I member checked with them by sharing the draft of their stories I produced. Specifically, I met with them on Zoom/WhatsApp call to discuss their stories. In doing member checking I focused not on questions about what they have said or done such as "Have I got this right? Is this what you said? Is this what you do?" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 148). Rather, I asked questions that focus on the identity of participants by asking such questions as "Is this you? Do you see yourself here? Is this the character you want to be" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 148). Both Dariya and Olzhas shared that they enjoyed reading the stories I produced and confirmed that they saw themselves in the stories. Moreover, member checking meeting provided an opportunity to further reflect on their stories and dissertation arguments together. During the meeting they provided additional explanations or examples, which I included as part of my analysis and write up. To sum up, I negotiated with my participants and acknowledged the influence of participants on the research text.

Critical reflexivity discussed in my positionality section also aided in the process of working with the above questions and concerns on voice and signature including the dilemmas with regards to capturing the multiplicity of voices. I engaged in critical reflexivity throughout the entire research process and relied on the exercise of judgement in sorting out these dilemmas. At the same time, I am open to legitimate criticism from my participants and/or audience. Despite my best intentions to represent the multiplicity of voices, the final research text is being told in my voice after all and will be read as I have written it. Therefore, I will make concerted effort to be transparent with my readers of who I am and who my participants are, and how we come together to co-construct narratives.

Audience

As in any writing, it is critical to have a sense of audience in order to write a text that is meaningful to readers. At the same time, the notion of audience can be in tension with considerations of voice and signature discussed above as inquirers might feel faithless to participants in their attempts to write research texts for the audience. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Specifically, the inquirers might feel faithless, or the research becomes less faithful to the participants as attempting to write for the audience benefits the inquirers. It is my responsibility to try to continually balance signature, voice, and audience. I acknowledge that in some parts of my writing audience may be the focus while in others signature and voice may be the focus (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I also recognize that I may need to emphasize certain aspects of my study based on the audience. For example, presenting my findings to policymakers and/or leadership of the university would emphasize the practical implications of my findings whereas presenting to the scholarly community would emphasize my theoretical implications and contributions to the larger theoretical debates in the field of comparative and international education.

I imagine the audience for my study to be scholars and practitioners in the field of comparative and international development education, higher education, and sociology of education as well as policy makers, students, parents, and teachers in Kazakhstan and beyond. Considerations of audience is also the most common way to think about generalizability in qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In other words, generalizability in qualitative research is understood in terms of the study's transferability to other settings. My readers will be the ones to decide whether or not the findings of the study apply to their particular situations. I can enhance the transferability by employing such strategies as: providing thick, rich

descriptions; purposefully selecting a typical sample, which would aim at representing the diversity of experiences of my participants.

The question of transferability leads me to the question of the impact of this work. Despite my best efforts at transparency and careful reflexivity throughout conducting this study, and detailing my positionality, I have no control over how my audience reads and interprets this work. As Riessman (1993) noted, any piece of writing can elicit different responses from the audience. The best I can do is to remain mindful of ethical considerations and challenges of conducting a narrative inquiry study.

Ethics and Validity Concerns

Narrative inquiry scholars have placed ethical considerations at the core of their work acknowledging that the narrative study is as much about the participants as it is about the narrative inquirer (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This intertwining of the stories of researchers and participants leads to complicated ethical issues and concerns that must be openly recognized (Josselson, 1996). As I embarked on my study, I was mindful of the ethical consideration in conducting a narrative inquiry. Below I discuss several of such concerns.

Ethics

There are formal ethical procedures that need to be resolved prior to conducting any study; however, unexpected issues may come up during the data collection, data analysis and interpretation stages that need to be resolved as they arise. Ethical considerations that need to be resolved ahead of time include the protection of participants from harm, the right to privacy, and the notion of informed consent (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Even though I completed a formal IRB approval for my research prior to beginning my data collection, this did not mean that the forms addressed all ethical concerns that emerged throughout the narrative inquiry process.

Therefore, it is best to think about ethics as a process rather than an initial act (Saldaña, 2003). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argue that beginning the negotiations with participants with pre-approved forms is a “forbidding starting point” (p. 170). Since narrative inquiry is a form of collaborative research with participants, the study tends to change over time. For instance, the level of engagement of participants in data collection and/or data analysis/interpretation stages may change, which is difficult to anticipate prior the relationship is being established with participants. Such ethical concerns emerge as we make moves to the field, from the field to field texts, and from field texts to research texts. Relational ethics also requires researchers to be mindful of their role and impact on relationships and treating participants as whole people rather than as just subjects of study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In the instances when I faced ethical dilemmas not addressed in my formal IRB form, I relied on my conscious judgement and sought advice from my advisor, committee members, and IRB as needed.

For instance, during my prospectus meeting, I shared with my committee members my concern in relation to negotiating my relationships with my participants. I was concerned about engaging in a conversation versus being neutral as a researcher. It was important for me to engage in a conversation by sharing about myself to build rapport and cultivate trust with participants, but I was not sure how much to share. For instance, given the similarities in our backgrounds with my participants, during pilot interviews I experienced a lot of moments where I resonated with my participants’ stories, but I was intentional not to share too much about myself to avoid dominating the discussion or influencing their answers to my questions. Based on my committee’s feedback during the prospectus meeting, I shared a little bit about how I came to the study in the beginning of the interviews and approached “each interview as a social event” where participants and I had varying degrees of comfort in engaging in the interview. At

times where I felt particularly compelled to share a resource or story with my participants, I took a note of it during the interview and returned to these moments during the unrecorded informal part of the interview. This way I did not interrupt the flow of the interview but was able to share the resource which I believed could be helpful to my participant in their future, especially in relation to pursuit of their aspirations.

Confidentiality of Participants

Although confidentiality of participants is critical, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argued that it is not clear if it is at all possible to do it in any meaningful way. Some confidentiality considerations are beyond the control of the researcher. For instance, Williams (2010) argued for the "fragility of the anonymity" by discussing multiple unexpected ways in which research participants may compromise the protection of their own identity (p. 261). For instance, I have no control over what my participants decide to share with others. I asked university personnel and people in my network who are students, alumni, teachers, or administrators at the selected universities to share information about the study with the participants, however, they were not aware of who chose to participate in the study. During the first round of recruitment, I asked participants who were interested to join the study to contact me directly whereas during the second round of recruitment I contacted them directly based on the information they shared in the survey. However, if my participants choose to share with university staff or their friends about their involvement in the study, this may have unintended consequences for them. Moreover, prior to starting the study I was worried that some of my participants might ask to use their names instead of pseudonyms with the desire to validate the research texts, which may also have unintended consequences for my participants. I discussed this concern with my committee members during the prospectus meeting. Based on the discussion with my committee, I decided

not to offer the choice of choosing their own names since the risks of hurting participants was higher than the benefits. Therefore, I used pseudonyms to protect the identity of my participants.

In addition to using the pseudonyms, I did not reveal the names or locations of the prestigious universities where my participants graduated from. Because students in my study tend to be the minority in these prestigious spaces given their socioeconomic background, by concealing the identity of their universities I aimed to protect the identity of my participants. This way it makes it challenging to identify participants based on other demographic characteristics such as major, gender, graduation year, and socioeconomic characteristics.

Protecting the confidentiality of the universities required balancing information essential for analysis with descriptions that were purposefully vague. Although I used pseudonyms for the universities, any attempt to give a meaningful description of the university might reveal the actual site. For instance, the description of such characteristics as a university's status in the national or international ranking system, the approximate year of establishment, average enrollment numbers, and location might give a hint to readers familiar with the context. At the same time, giving a detailed description of the site might be critical to understanding the experiences of participants of the study. My participants might also talk about the university in a way that might reveal its identity. Moreover, I was an alumna of some of the universities where the study takes place, so transparency about this connection to the university may easily reveal its identity. At the same time, this connection may have important implications to how I built relationships with my participants and interpret the findings. To minimize this threat, I eliminated all the information that can reveal the university. I carefully analyzed unique characteristics of the universities and only used more general descriptors that also apply to other similar universities. Beyond my own collection of facts and descriptions, my efforts to conceal

the identity of the university required significant negotiation between the students' accounts of their university life and a commitment to protecting the identity of the university. In this balance, I erred on faithfulness to students' accounts and experiences as much as possible.

Interpretation Validity

Interpretation validity refers to the difficulty of ethically interpreting the meaning my participants attach to their lives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It is critical to note that any interpretation in narrative inquiry needs to be treated as tentative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). So, my perspective to analysis and interpretation was to do my best under the circumstances and acknowledge that other interpretations were possible (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). At the same time, member checking with some of my participants helped to minimize interpretation bias and improve the trustworthiness of my findings. Maxwell (2013) argued that member checking is "the single most important way" of eliminating the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of participants' words, actions, and perspectives, as well as identifying researcher's biases and misunderstandings (p. 126).

Translation Validity

Translation adds another layer of complexity in interpreting and constructing the narratives. Difficult decisions have to be made in constructing a narrative from a translated interview (Riessman, 2008). I am fluent in Kazakh, Russian, and English languages that were used in this study and played an active role in translating my participant's stories. In doing the translations, I recognized that the decisions I made in this process were not only limited to my knowledge of English, Russian, and Kazakh languages, but also my understanding of spoken and lived contexts of all three languages (Esin et al., 2014). I recognized that while parts of the stories may be "lost in translation," new meaning may also emerge in translated text. Concerns

with regards to voice, signature, and audience discussed above re-emerge in the process of translation.

Even though translation presents positive possibilities for the dissemination and impact of the study, I acknowledge that some nuances of one language can never be adequately translated into another. In some of my translations, I needed to explain some aspects of cultural exchange/demeanor as I understand them to be different in Kazakh/Russian speaking audience vs. English-speaking audience. Thus, I reported any translation issues or challenges in the final report and did my best to explain untranslatable words within the context of the original language. Moreover, as discussed in greater detail earlier in this section, I included original text from my participants along with my translation.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I began by returning to the research questions that guide this narrative inquiry study of youth from rural or lower socioeconomic backgrounds in Kazakhstan. I briefly discussed why narrative inquiry methodology fits best the purposes of this study and identified life history interviews as my primary source of data. Then, I located myself within the social constructionist paradigm taking into account the broader social construction of the narratives within power relations. Next, I moved through concrete steps, features, and logistics of my methodology such as the description of participants, interviewing strategies, data analysis, and the composition of the research texts. Finally, I concluded with the discussion of the ethics and validity concerns. In Chapter 4, I will share the findings of the study in relation to the conceptualization of social capital by participants.

Chapter 4: Conceptualization of Social Capital by Kazakhstani Youth from Rural or Lower Socioeconomic Backgrounds

Introduction

In this chapter, I explore participants' conceptualization of social capital. To explain youth conceptualization of social capital, first, I describe their acute awareness of the role of social capital for success in Kazakhstan. Participants were not only aware of the significance of "right connections" for success but also described in detail the differences of social capital use in different fields including public and private sector. Second, I describe the shift in participants' values in relation to relationships with family, village community, and gift-giving practices. Deeper understanding of these changes in participants values is critical to explaining how youth conceptualized and used social capital to pursue aspirations. Third, I explore participants' perceptions about the ethics of connections in relation to what they consider negative and positive uses of social capital.

Participants defined negative uses of social capital as rooted in the concept of blat involving an unfair exchange of favors of access to opportunities through bribing or gift-giving. Positive use of social capital, on the other hand, was defined as guidance, support, and recommendations from social contacts with no expectation to receive something in return. I argue that in conceptualizing and using social capital, young people in the study were guided by values that differentiated the transactional aspects of social capital from those more focused on improving quality of life. While participants had a dichotomous understanding of social capital as either negative [blat] or positive [support and guidance], deeper analysis of participants' stories demonstrates that in their practice participants entered blurry areas as they navigated

through higher education and their early careers. As participants navigated this blurry area they moved back and forth between more instrumental and more guidance-oriented forms of social capital pursuit, but in many cases identified an ethical "line" that they would not cross. This ethical line that each participant set for themselves guided them in their engagement with social networks, and therefore their perspectives about social capital. I further consider participants' intention versus outcome for their networking practice to provide a more nuanced understanding of their ethical choices. Specifically, drawing on Dobos (2017) I will discuss utilitarian, emotional, and virtuous networking intentions of my participants in contrast to what they gained (outcome) from these networking practices. I conclude the chapter with further complicating ethical views of the participants on the use of social capital by recognizing the influences of participants backgrounds and the aspects of cultural relativism.

Awareness of the Rules of the Game of Connections: "In Kazakhstan, It Is So Ingrained in People's Minds From an Early Age"

Previous social science literature focused on the experiences of youth, particularly in the context of university, suggests that youth from marginalized backgrounds tend to invest in academic aspects of college because they do not realize the significance of building social capital for their success in education and career (Jack, 2019; Rivera, 2015; Stuber, 2011). However, youth in my study were well aware of the role of social connections in academic and career success in Kazakhstan. One theme that was prevalent in interviews was participants' acknowledgement of connections as pervasive in everyday life. Perizat even described the dependence on connections in Kazakhstan as being "so ingrained in people's minds from an early age that they don't think to achieve their goals on their own" [*көп нәрсені біздің қазақтардың өзінің миы санасына қалыптасып кеткен да кішкентай кезінен бастап,*

осындай бір өз білімімен, өзінің күшімен жету деп ойламайды да адам даже]. Participants shared that even mundane tasks like acquiring a driver's license might prompt Kazakhstanis to seek connections. As Gaukhar acutely stated, "We [kazakhs] have connections everywhere. If the police catch you, you call your tanys, if you need to enroll your child in a daycare, again tanys, university - tanys, etc." [*Барлық жерде бізде бәріне таныс бар. Гаи устап алды ма - таныстарға звондайды, баланы садикке устраивать ету керек па - таныс, университет - таныс, и т.д.*]. Participants' definitions of *svyazi*[11]/tanys in the context of Kazakhstan reflected this widespread use of connections for personal gain or to help one out of a difficult situation. Olzhas's definition of svyazi is illustrative of participants' definition of social capital in Kazakhstan:

Иметь каких-то людей чисто в казахском понимании, это идеально, говорят же, типа чтобы был знакомый в прокуратуре, был знакомый врач, еще какой-то там, милиция, и в акимате чтобы знакомый был, чтобы решать все проблемы. Но это, к сожалению, реальность в нашей стране в текущей жизни.	In pure Kazakh understanding, [to have svyazi means] to have some people, … as people say, have acquaintances in the prosecutor's office, doctor's office, police [department], and *Akimat* [Mayor's office], so you can resolve all your problems. Unfortunately, this is the reality of our country nowadays.

As evident from this quote, while participants demonstrated an acute awareness of the widespread use of connections in everyday life in Kazakhstan, they expressed a sense of

[11] Russian term used to refer to social connections.
Note on italics: only the first use of words and phrases from another language are italicized, as per APA 7 guidelines (p. 170)

disappointment with such a state of affairs. As Olzhas further said poignantly, "Unfortunately, nowadays the reality of Kazakhstan is like that. In some or even in most regions 70-80% of jobs are found through connections or blat" [*В реальности, Казахстан в некоторых частях такой. Во многих частях даже можно сказать такой – то, что там 80 и 70% работ, который сейчас люди устраиваются, ходят, все через знакомых, через каких-то блат, к сожалению*]. Although the figures shared by Olzhas are not official figures but rather estimates based on his experience, this pervasiveness of the use of connections that continues to thrive even today is what Junisbay and Junisbay (2019) describe as "an officially frowned upon norm" (p. 39). In other words, people interested in securing jobs and other opportunities in Kazakhstan know the critical significance of "the right connections" for success (Junisbay & Junisbay, 2019, p. 34).

Unlike Junisbay and Junisbay's (2019) study findings, which identified nepotism as a widespread occurrence in Kazakhstan, participants in my study provided a much more nuanced picture of the use of connections by identifying how its role varies between different contexts or, what Bourdieu (1986) called a "field." In other words, participants were not only aware of the significance of connections in Kazakhstan, but also were able to articulate "the rules of the game" in different fields (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 99). Participants particularly differentiated between regions versus big cities, public versus private sector.

Most of my participants argued that connections play a bigger role in regions than large megapolis cities. As Laura described, "it [the use of influential connections to get a job] is less widespread in big cities" [*это в больших городах меньше чувствуется*]. Participants further explained that these differences between regions and megapolis cities are related to competitiveness. As Laura said, "In regions, it [hiring] is only through svyazi because the level

of education in those regions is low, and no matter whom they hire their quality is probably going to be the same" [*Но когда маленькие регионы тебе только по связи. Потому что, во-первых, в тех городах, регионах, уровень образования низкое и кого бы они взяли, качество будет одинаковое, наверное*]. Competitiveness, in this example, refers to the competitiveness of candidates who qualify for the criteria for a given job. There might be fewer job opportunities in the regions than in megapolis cities but high competition among candidates. Given the lack of highly qualified candidates, employers in the regions might be relying on connections as a means for evaluation of candidates or taking the candidate who provides the best offer of future reciprocity. Analysis of participants' interviews showed that the use of connections in the regions resembles blat or what Rose (2000) called "anti-modern" social capital, which is defined by generic reliance on connections or corruption to get things done in violation of the rules (Rose, 2000). Another explanation for the reliance on connections in hiring in the regions might be the prevalence of moral obligation to kin, family, and friends, especially for those who live in rural areas.

In megapolis cities, on the other hand, there is more reliance on evaluating based on merit criteria, even though there still might be the practice of using connections, as Laura explained:

А в больших городах есть конкуренция, есть… Они не могут просто так взять по связи. По связам берут, да… Но они смотрят на experience, конечно. Они не просто так возьмут. Если ты подходишь по критериям, да. По требованиям, да. Ну	As for big cities, there is competition. … They can't just hire through svyazi. They do hire through svyazi, but they look at experience and qualifications. They will only hire you if you meet the eligibility criteria not because

тебя возьмут. Не потому, что ты там сын или агашка или еще кто на верху сидит.	you are a son or *agashka*[12] or someone from the top.

In this quote, we can see how Laura immediately realized that her first sentence was an absolute statement implying that the use of connections is non-existent in big cities. Then, in the next few sentences, she provided a more nuanced explanation on how connections are used in hiring in big cities. In regions, Laura said that hiring decisions are made primarily based on connections with no regard to qualifications, in big cities, merit criteria are prioritized. According to Laura, in big cities hiring decisions are made based on the market needs, following a specific process of selection of candidates based on merit; however, Laura observed that social connections might give a candidate an edge in the process.

Laura's argument about differences between regions and megapolis cities reflects the larger spatial inequality in Kazakhstan discussed in Chapter 3. The majority of universities in Kazakhstan are located in megapolis cities with only a small fraction in regions. As a result, most qualified and skilled youth, like the participants in this study, aspire to attend universities in big cities, and are more likely to stay there upon graduation. According to the recent Workforce Development Centre (WDC, 2021) report, the majority of the population in three megapolis cities holds degrees. These cities and their graduates include Astana (71% of the population of the region with education degree), Almaty (69%), and Shymkent (66%; WDC, 2021). In the regions such as Northern Kazakhstan or Akmola, only 25% hold a higher education degree (WDC, 2021). Such differences in quality of education and access to opportunities further perpetuate the inequities between regions and megapolis cities. These disparities between regions

[12] Agashka is a kazakh term used to refer to influential connections. Literal translation of the term is *big brother*.

and megapolis cities might also explain the differences in the use of connections between regions and big cities as discussed by participants above. Specifically, in megapolis cities merit criteria are considered because there are more opportunities and competition to hire the most qualified candidates. In regions, on the other hand, there seems to be a lack of qualified candidates, thus reliance on blat.

It is important to note that the difference between regions and big cities as discussed by participants does not mean that all regions are homogenous. There is diversity within regions as well. For instance, recent studies of mass protests in Zhanaozen observed a clear division between “oil workers” and “others” in the city (Molchnova & Zholdasova, 2015). City residents who were not in the oil industry were frustrated with unequal distribution of wealth and opportunities, as they were earning 10 times less than their counterparts in oil industry (Molchanova & Zholdasova, 2015). This was evident from persisting intercity conflicts between “oil workers” and “others” in the city. Since the jobs in oil industry are well paid and competitive, highly qualified youth from different regions and megapolis cities of Kazakhstan might be attracted to work there. Therefore, in considering the different uses of social capital in various fields, it is important to consider the difference between sectors as well not only location. In this regard, participants differentiated between public and private sector.

For the majority of my participants, connections played a bigger role to get ahead in the public sector than the private sector. As Sanzhar explained:

Вариант по плохим связям … он плохо работает в частной большой или небольшой коммерческой компании. ...	The version with negative connections … does not work well in big or small private company. … It is nearly impossible. …

Это почти невозможно. … Потому что там все завязано на прибыли, на производительности, и качестве продуктов. … И соответственно, если человека взяли по какой-то ошибке просто, наверное, за брата, который не соображает или не соображает на должном уровне, это было бы сразу видно. И такие вещи легко слишком прозрачное чтобы не заметить и развалить компанию из-за одного человека. Вот именно скажем провинции допустим … если есть какая-то компания, либо государственное, либо подрядчик … то все довольно непрозрачно что ли. Либо всем наплевать… Там нет такой реальности бизнеса жесткого. То есть, большинство из них, компания может быть у них заказчик государство. ... Они знают, что постоянно будут выигрывать тендеры, и у них будут постоянные заказчики. … У них нет конкуренции. … Такой бизнес более парализованный. ... Там не нужен	Because everything is tied to profit making, productivity, and the quality of services. … Accordingly, if someone is hired by mistake, most likely with the help of their brother, but they are not smart or not smart enough, then it will be noticeable immediately. These things are hard to miss since one such person can fail the company. If we take an example of a public or public contractor company in a provincial region … where they don't have transparency, or no one cares. They don't have the strict reality of business. May be their contractor is the state and … they know that they will always be winning tenders, and they will always have contractors. … They don't have competition. … Their business is more paralyzed. … They don't need highly qualified personnel. … Therefore, they don't need to search for high qualification. … That is why they hire relatives.

высококвалифицированный состав. … И
соответственно, не нужно искать высокую
квалификацию. … Поэтому они выбирают
родственников.

As evident from Sanzhar's quote, similar to the differences between regions and big cities, participants described the differences between public and private sector related to competitiveness. According to participants, since the private sector is governed by the rules of the market there is more competition and interest to hire qualified personnel in comparison to the public sector. In addition, this lack of competitiveness might also be due to the lack of competitive salaries in the public sector in Kazakhstan. According to recent data, the average salary in the public sector is 45% less than the national average (Nikonorov, 2020). Average salary in the private sector, on the other hand, is about 60% higher than the average in the public sector (Nikonorov, 2020). Thus, the private sector is more attractive for youth due to better salaries (Nikonorov, 2020). At the same time, the public sector provides employment for over half of the formally employed population of the country (Nikonorov, 2020). The difference in the salary levels might also explain the prevalence of blat networks and corruption in the public sector since blat arrangements may provide additional informal income to a public servant. For instance, Mardan shared how he would not want to work in public sector because he believed that money was more valuable there than one's knowledge and skills. In this quote, by "money" Mardan implied corrupt uses of connections, which he believed were more valuable than merit (knowledge and skills) to get things done such as hiring or promotion in public sector. Similarly, Gaukhar argued that one's ability to get promotion in public sector depends on "how well you can express your gratitude [through gifts, bribes], how well you can give money, how well you

can do illegal activities [e.g., get things done through informal networks]” [*менің тусінгенім, жалпы мемлекеттік қызметте, сен қаншалықты рахмет айта аласың, қаншалықты ақша бере аласың, қаншалықты левые дела жасай аласың, соған байланысты сенің қызметің өседі*].

These perspectives of participants in relation to the use of connections in the public sector is well illustrated by *Le Shapalaque Comics*, popular Kazakhstani young activists on social media, who position themselves as speaking to political and socioeconomic issues in Kazakhstan through humor. In one of their comics on Instagram, they describe the career ladder of a public servant, who initially “gives bribes” (bottom ladder) to get to a powerful position, then “takes bribes” (top ladder) once in powerful position (see Figure i). The topic of corruption and bribes in the public sector is often brought up in a similar way by other young and adult activists in Kazakhstan.

Figure i

Career Ladder of a Public Servant

Note. Title: Career ladder of a public servant; bottom ladder: Gives bribes; top ladder: Takes bribes. From Le Shapalaque Comics, by Shapalaque, 2018, February 23 (https://instagram.com/shapalaque?igshid=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==). In the public domain.

At the same time, participants offered additional explanations for differences in the institutional fields in relation to the sense of ownership, trust, and loyalty. As Gaukhar argued:

Себебі коммерческийдің иесі бір адам. … Ал адам өзіне тиесілі болғаннан кейін, ол өзі үшін. … Дәл сол сияқты, адам өзі бизнес ашқан кезде өзінің бизнесі үшін барлық жағдайды жасайды. Жақсы маман алуға тырысады … тіпті менің компанияма одан да жақсы қызмет ету үшін одан да жақсы условия жасауға дайын тұрады. Ал мемлекеттік нәрсе … Ой, ол мемлекеттікі ғой деп, оның басшысы жоқ, сұрауы жоқ деген сияқты, чуть-чуть пофигистичное отношение, потребительское отношение: "Қазір бар алып қалу, көріп қалу, попользоваться, получить." … Ал коммерческийда, к тебе действительно прозрачно относится. Потому что, там действительно ценится. Ценят твои	Private companies have an owner. … When a person owns something, they take better care of it. … They create all conditions for their business like hiring good specialists. For instance, in my company, they are ready to create all conditions, so you work well. As for the public service … People are indifferent because they think, "It is the government's, it doesn't have an owner, no demands." They have a careless, consumer attitude like, "It is there now, let's use it to our benefit." … In the private sector, on the other hand, there is a transparent attitude because … they value your qualities, skills, and everything is fair. And accordingly, you can earn a better salary there and have more opportunities.

качества, ценят навыки и все по справедливости. И там соответственно возможностей больше. Зарабатывать можешь намного больше.

Consumer attitudes in the public sector can further be explained by examining the history of social capital use in the public sector in Kazakhstan and post-Soviet context at large. In particular, the concept of blat and its historical role in Kazakhstan can give insights into this persistent "consumer attitude" to public goods. As described in detail in Chapter 3, the "favors of access" provided at the public expense were a norm (Ledeneva, 1998). This attitude towards public goods appears to have remained to some extent after the collapse of the Soviet Union. As studies in post-Soviet countries have shown, exchange of favors and moral obligation of reciprocity are at the heart of flourishing blat networks. In other words, trust and loyalty to one's networks and nurturing relationships is more beneficial and profitable in the public sector, which may have closer ties to the Soviet workplace culture than the new-era capitalist workplaces, which are driven by profit and performance over relationships. Kausar explained this process:

То есть там есть важно и там вокруг были все лояльные люди скапливаются. ... Отчасти я понимаю почему люди подтягивают. Они пытаются подтягивать тех людей, которые наиболее подходят, или еще что-то. Но часто получается, что в

In other words, it is important that you attract loyal people around you. … I partially understand why people do that. They try to attract those people who fit the best. ... But it turns out that in politics they invite people who … because you appoint someone, and

политике именно подтягивает. Потому что ты ставишь человека, человек тебе должен за то, что ты поставила. Соответственно, он принимает решение, который тебе выгодно. Это не так что только в Казахстане такое. Это было в Советском Союзе. Свое время как Сталин пришел к власти … он был человеком, который назначал на должности, то есть продвигал людей снизу вверх. … И соответственно, многие люди, которые добрались до вверх или где-то посередине были обязанными ему. Ну и соответственно, уже политическая лояльность это определенная. Этого полностью не избежать. Как бы так как система создана из людей, а не из роботов, так и будет.

they owe you. Accordingly, they make the decisions that are in your best interests. It is not only in Kazakhstan. It was like that during the Soviet Union. … Take an example of Stalin, who was responsible for appointing people to positions. He promoted people from bottom to top. … As a result, people who got to the top owed him. As a result, there is certain political loyalty. One cannot avoid it entirely. Since the system is created from people not robots it will be like that.

To conclude, participants were not only aware of the significance of connections for success in Kazakhstan, but how its value differs between various contexts such as regions, megapolis cities, public sector, and private sector. The participants perceived connections' role to be more significant to get ahead in the regions, public sector than megapolis cities or private sector. Participants explained that public sector positions were defined by historic power

relations and transactional loyalties. The private sector, on the other hand, is driven by the rules of the market, competition, and fit for available positions (often defined by merit). I will further complicate these perspectives of the study participants in the later sections of this chapter by highlighting the influence of participants' backgrounds and experience on their perspectives.

For the purposes of this section, it is important to mention that as youth from lower SES or rural backgrounds, participants in this study would have had limited access or experience with what they described to be more negative (corrupt) ways of using connections. Thus, they are more likely to be naturally critical of what they perceived to be negative uses and more supportive of arrangements that helped them to get ahead. Moreover, although young people in this study grew up in the regions including rural areas, they spent most of their adult education and career in megapolis cities since they moved out after high school to megapolis cities to pursue their undergraduate degrees and did not return to their home regions. Although some participants had experience working both in public and private sector, the perspectives of the majority of study participants in relation to the use of connections in the regions are primarily based on anecdotal evidence than personal work experience. For instance, it is possible that hiring those one knows such as relatives in the regions could be considered through a lens of loyalty or strategy since known people are more likely to be committed, and not outright corruption as it was labeled by my most of the study participants. In addition, it is important to note that my study offers neither the evidence on interactions between regional differences and sectoral differences nor the perspectives that may refute the participants' viewpoints. These are important questions to explore in future studies. For instance, in what ways connections' use is different or similar in a private company in a megapolis city versus the region? Or in what ways connections' use is different or similar in a public institution in a megapolis city versus the

region? What are the perspectives of youth studying, working, and living in the regions on the use of social capital in the regions/public sector/private sector, and how their perspectives are similar or different from the perspectives of the participants of my study?

Despite the lines that were drawn between public-private sector jobs and region-city positions, participants noted that connections were still important in urban and private sector. While the use of connections in regions and public sector was described as favoritism, nepotism, cronyism, and corruption, their use in megapolis cities and private sector was understood as modern networking[13]. In the next section, I will discuss in greater detail how participants differentiated between these two kinds of using connections for success and developed an orientation on when and how to use connections to pursue their aspirations. But before I do that, it is important to consider how participants perceived their values to have shifted in relation to what they believed was an older approach to connections (i.e., blat). The stories below demonstrate how participants perceived their approach to connections to be an ethical stance.

Shift in Youth Values in Relation to the Use of Social Capital: "Our Generation is Completely Different"

Participants stories demonstrate that they expressed a wariness of transactional use of connections rooted in blat towards newer conceptualization of the use of connections (a concept discussed in detail in the next section). As such, what participants perceived to be as an ethical use of connections was at the core of when and how they leveraged connections. These new conceptualizations challenge the dominant perspective in the literature which describes post-

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[13] Modern networking refers to the process of interacting with others to form and nurture mutually beneficial professional or social relationships with such intentions as obtaining personal economic benefits or having pleasant relationship for emotional support (Dobos, 2017; Misner & Hilliard, 2017).

Soviet society as one in which “loyalty to one’s connections means more than loyalty to the state and where unwritten codes and social connections dominate the law” (Ledeneva, 2000, p. 204). For young people in this study, use of connections that were oriented by what participants perceived to be morals or ethics were more important than loyalty to one’s connections or loyalty to the state. At the same time, it is important to note that what participants perceived to be ethical use was impacted by the capitalist idea of “merit” as I will demonstrate in later sections of this chapter. But before I do that, I will discuss how the participants’ values guided them in every aspect of the use of connections, including extended family relationships and gift-giving practices. The paragraphs below provide a deeper understanding on how participants understanding of their values is significant for explaining how they conceptualized and used connections.

Shift in Values in Relationships with Extended Family or Village Community

Significance of connections is especially evident in participants’ discussion of relationships with family or village community. In discussing familial relationships, it is important to differentiate between immediate family and extended family. Immediate family includes parents and siblings, and for some it may include grandparents if they played a significant role in youth’s upbringing, as it was the case for a few participants in the study. Extended family includes members of the family who extend beyond nuclear family including aunts, uncles, and other relatives. Similar to findings of the previous studies, youth in the study were deeply connected with their immediate family members, who played a significant role in shaping their personhood, values, and aspirations (Abdiraiymova et al., 2016; Junisbay & Junisbay, 2019; Shnarbekova, 2018).

A majority of the participants were raised in environments with tight extended family connections. Given this, one might think that loyalty to one's familial connections or village community would continue to be as significant for youth today as it was for previous generations; however, participants observed that extended family connections were eroding for them. Specifically, they explained that their values in relation to familial connections or village community are different from their parents. As Fatima shared:

> I think it's very different how we do relative bonds [from that of my parents], all of these things I don't really care about these things, you know. I don't even know my neighbors back home, I don't know their names, their children's names. … Maybe I'm also more individualistic. … But for them [parents] family bonds, all of these things are important. Weddings, all of the ceremonies, they are very, very vital. … But for me … it's very different because I personally do not communicate with all of the relatives, all of the extended family members. I don't have very much time for them… Maybe in the future I will also think all of these extended family things all these people become important, but I doubt that it will be.

In this quote, Fatima is highlighting the shift from collective to individualistic values. She explained that her parents place high importance on collective values because they grew up during the Soviet time in which "people were happy to share foods." She was critical of such loyalty to one's connections particularly because of the pressure to help and exchange gifts. As she put it, "If they bring you monetary gifts … of course, it is already pressure. It is always expected that you should come with something to our houses." While Fatima connected parents' collectivist values to the Soviet past, it is important to note that these values are not particularly "Soviet" and can be found in many parts of the world. For instance, previous studies identified

such collectivist values as important for building trust and community (Putnam, 2000; Versfeld et al., 2023).

Although the family unit was more important to some participants than others, most participants commented on community-based pressure to comply with expected norms of reciprocity and, as Fatima said, to “do as expected” according to community norms and relations. Unlike their parents, participants embraced their individualism. As Takhmina explained:

> I think it [use of connections] is totally different. The main people with whom my mom keeps in touch are colleagues, relatives, friends from childhood, and neighbors. For them [parents] it is very important. Family is important. They really care what other people think. Maybe it is USSR mind. Whenever they do something, they always think what others will think. My friends won't judge me even if I turn my hair pink. I can be who I am. Express myself. Parents are thoughtful of what others think. I don't want to spend all my time chatting with my relatives. I like them. But I wouldn't want to spend all my time with them. Their [parents’] interests are different than mine.

In this example, Takhmina is sharing that staying connected with friends, family, and neighbors is not only more important for parents but that they might uphold some of these relationships out of a sense of obligation. In this quote, she reiterated several times how her parents care too much about other people’s thoughts which might imply that they feel obligated to comply with societal expectations for reciprocity. She is contrasting it with freedom she believes she has to be who she wants to be with her friends and express herself freely. While Takhmina seems to believe that she has more freedom, it is important to note that capitalism also requires a form of loyalty. For instance, her friends may not care about pink hair, but an employer might.

From the examples of Fatima and Takhmina, it is evident that participants are critical of collectivist values of their parents, particularly when leveraging these connections involved monetary or gift expectations viewing them as outdated and related to the Soviet past. At the same time, they were uncritically buying into the new capitalist norm by becoming individualistic and successful economically. These findings are similar to the findings of recent studies on the values of youth in Kazakhstan, which found that younger generation were more individualistic and aspired to defend their independence (as cited in Zhussipbek & Nagayeva, 2019).

In comparing their use of connections to that of their parents' generation, most participants believed that the use of connections in the past was primarily rooted in the ideologies of blat as Umit stated, "in the past, everything was based on blat" [*бұрында всегда барлығы по блату болатын еді ғой*]. By blat-based ideologies, participants implied corrupt uses of connections to exchange "favors of access." Yet, one participant perceived that the use of connections remained the same and did not change from the previous generation's blat-based ideologies. At the same time, few participants provided further nuance in relation to the changes in the use of connections by arguing that in the past the use of connections was not as monetized as it was nowadays. For instance, Aisulu argued, "In the past, in using connections people might have been able to reciprocate by simply inviting for a cup of tea, but nowadays, one has to give money. … There are *stavkas* [bribery rates] to get a certain position" [*Ол кезде мүмкин олар таныстары арқылы қолданған кезде, бір шаймен құтылып кеткен шығар. Қазіргі кезде енді ақшалай ғой. … Әр қызметке орналасудың ставкасы бар*]. The perspective of Aisulu and few other participants is similar to the arguments in the literature on commodification of

relationships with the transition to the market economy extensively discussed in Chapter 3 (Ledeneva, 1998, 2000, 2008; Onoshchenko & Williams, 2014).

Notwithstanding the lack of consensus on how the use of connections changed from the previous generation to their own generation, all participants strongly criticized the use of relationships that relied on the blat ideologies. Some of them argued that they do not invest in forming those types of transactional relationships. For the majority of young people in the study, there was more of a separation between work and personal lives, and less willingness to engage in fostering social connections for the purpose of getting ahead. As Kausar shared:

У меня друг был. У него отец в военной сфере работал. Ну как бы родители вкладывали … звали шефа, еще что-то. И когда я вышла замуж, у меня была идея как бы звать, “Давай, позовем твоих клиентов, давайте пообщайтесь, чай анау-мынау. Он такой типа нет. За 4 или 5 лет совместной жизни, мы гостей звали не думаю больше 10 раз. Ну, в смысле, это считая ближайший круг, как родители. … Ну в плане, кажется, наше поколение совсем другое. Максимум ко мне могут подруги приехать, на этом все.	I had a friend. His father worked in the military field. His parents invested in relationships. … They hosted their boss, etc. When I got married, I also wanted to host. … I suggested to my husband, “Let’s invite your clients, let’s connect over tea, etc.” He was like, “No.” For four or five years of my married life, I don’t think we hosted more than 10 times. And it was only our closest circle, like parents. … I think our generation is completely different. At most, my friends might come over, and that is it.

While Kausar does not share the details of why her husband decided not to host and invest in building relationships with his clients, this example demonstrates that participants find their practices of investing in relationships "completely different" from the previous generation. It is evident from this example and other similar examples of participants discussing their practices of building relationships, which I will discuss in greater detail in the following sections. What is important to highlight in this section is that participants perceive themselves to be moving away from transactional relationships rooted in exchanging "favors of access" to the relationships that align with their current circumstances in Kazakhstan – a time when individualism and market ideologies are emerging, and youth are questioning the habits of their parents' generation.

To conclude, participants values in relation to extended family or village community shifted from the previous generation, and gradually reflected more urban and individualistic understandings. Specifically, young people in the study demonstrated the shift from collective toward more individualistic values and embraced their freedom of expression that might not have been possible in tight-knit communities with very established social norms. From what they shared, young people in the study valued their own viewpoints on socialization more important than loyalty to their extended family traditions or village community expectations. Study findings showed that participants perceive themselves to be moving away from the transactional and embedded relationships that they saw as limiting in their past to what they perceive to be self-driven establishment of relationships and individualized approaches to life and work.

Shift in Values in Relation to Gift-Giving Practices

Gift-giving culture in Kazakhstan is offered as one of the explanations for challenges with differentiating between gifts, bribe, and corruption in Kazakhstan due to multitude of

occasions for gift-giving (Oka, 2013; 2015; Rigi, 2004; Werner, 2000). In this regard, it is important to explore participants' perception in relation to gift-giving practices, especially in building and maintaining relationships. For a few participants, gift-giving culture was perceived positively. Participants mentioned how they are proud of Kazakhstan's traditions and customs with gift-giving as it is how people show respect and gratitude. As Gaukhar noted, "Kazakhs are a nation with open hands and like to give a lot of gifts" [*Жалпы, бізде қазақтарда, біз қолы ашық халықпыз ғой. Былай төгіп-шашып бергенді де жақсы көреміз, көңілі де кең, қолы да кең, алақаны да кең*]. Similarly, Indira stated, "I love culture [our culture of gift giving] because I love giving gifts" [*Я вообще по идее обожаю культуру. Потому что, я сама люблю делать подарки*]. At the same time, young people in the study set boundaries in relation to what they consider to be an ethical way to practice gift-giving. Specifically, they highlighted how it was important when giving gifts is voluntary and is based on one's intention [*niet*] and financial situation rather than done out of cultural obligation, pressure, or intentions to get something in return. As Fatima explained:

> I don't think it [giving gifts to doctors or teachers] is very professional or ethical. Of course, I understand when it's something symbolic, it is something good, memorable. … But it should not be the central thing. And people should do their jobs not because they give gifts but because it is their job. … Maybe the amount should not be very expensive. For me, it doesn't really matter, some souvenirs, I don't know, whatever a person likes. May be taking out to the restaurant, within those boundaries. And so that person's pocket does not really suffer.

This example demonstrates how Fatima is setting a line which people should not cross in practicing gift-giving. Other participants shared Fatima's sentiments and criticized when gift-

giving crossed the ethical line they established. They argued that such unethical ways of practicing gift-giving needs to change. They shared various examples from their lives of unethical ways of practicing gift-giving such as the tradition of giving gifts to teachers, colleagues, or doctors. As Fatima shared:

> When I was sick in my childhood, my parents would definitely take some meat, some very good chocolates, all of this wine, I don't remember, all of these things, so that the doctor can look after me better based on attention. Otherwise, they do nothing, you know. This is like an unwritten rule, I can say. And this is something that needs to change.

In this example, Fatima acknowledged how she benefited from gift-giving practices of her parents; however, she was critical of this "unwritten rule" by arguing for the need to change. Most of the participants did not mention that their parents may have participated in some of these practices of gift-giving they perceived to be "unethical" to get them where they are now. Although study participants may have knowingly or unknowingly benefited from their parents' gift-giving practices in the past, majority of the participants felt strongly that unethical ways of practicing gift-giving must change. Youth participants were against the "unwritten rules" Fatima described above. Accordingly, most of the participants acted on their self-perceived ethical stance of practicing gift-giving. At the same time, some participants shared examples of compliance with expectations in relation to gift-giving, even though they were uncomfortable with these acts. These examples primarily relate to giving gifts to teachers in school or university as a way to express gratitude. It was beyond the scope of this study to know if, for example, Fatima's parents were uncomfortable bringing wine to the doctor to ensure good healthcare for their daughter, or it was simply a way of thanking the doctor for care. In both the cases of Fatima's parents and present-day students, however, it occurred.

Some participants shared examples of expensive gifts they gave to their teachers in school on behalf of the cohort,[14] including golden jewelry or cell phones. Some said that it felt like a competition about which cohort gives the best gift to their teacher. At the same time, there were few students who shared that they were not allowed to give expensive gifts to their teachers as Zere shared:

И мұғалімдерге, мысалға, алтын бермейтінбіз, “Вы че, нельзя” деп қымбат нәрсе бергізбейтін. Только гүл, и то біз ештеңе бермейтінбіз. Ал біз Шұғылаға барғанда, бізге айтты, прям олар дарили телефон, еще че-то.

We did not give golden jewelry to our teachers. They would not allow us to give expensive gifts. Only flowers and even that we did not give. When I went to Shugyla, I heard that they gave gifts like cell phones.

Gift-giving itself did not seem to follow the same social rules as blat, which appeared to have generational, geographical, and sector predictors (i.e., it was more present in regional areas, among older people, and in the public sector). Even though youth in this study were at times uncomfortable or against the idea of giving extravagant gifts to authority figures, the practice still existed in schools for students.

Similarly, participants shared examples of gift-giving to teachers at the university. As Gaukhar shared:

Сенім университетінде оқыған кезімде ол жақ сондай ненің ортасы. Сен сессияның

When I studied at Senim University, the university is the kingdom of this [gift-giving

[14] In school in Kazakhstan, students typically take classes as a cohort throughout the entire school experience. Sometimes, students might stay in the same cohort of 20-30 students for their entire school years.

уақытында мұғалім жақсы баға қойып … староста үнемі ақша жинап жүреді. … Студент барады, өзінің білімімен жазып шығады, өзіне тиесілі бағасын алып шығады. Бірақ соның өзінде одан кейін мұғалімнің еңбегі ғой деп оған да жаңағы подарок алып береміз немесе ақшалай береміз. Сондай тенденция болатын. Кез-келген сабаққа біз сөйтіп ақшалай болсын немесе подаркамен болсын жинап беретінбіз. Былай қарап тұрсаң, барлығымыз студентпіз. Біразы жұмыс жасайды, біразы жұмыс жасамайды. Біреу енді әке-шешесі жіберген ақшасынан содан береді. ... Менің бір ішім ашитын нәрсе, оны ешкім түсінбейтін. Оны қалтаң көтере ма, көтермей ма. ... Группамен жиналып беріп жатырмыз, сондықтан сен беруің керек. … Сол нәрсені түсіне алмай кеттім не үшін екенін. Бірақ енді әйтеуір

practices]. During exams, the leader of our cohort[15] always used to collect money. … Let’s say a student takes an exam and gets the grade they deserve. But we would still give gifts or money to a teacher as a sign of gratitude. There was such a tendency. We used to do it as a cohort for any discipline. If you look at it, we are all students. Some have a job, some don’t. Some give money that their parents sent to them. … What I did not like was that no one would care whether your pocket can afford it. … You were expected to contribute because we were doing it as a cohort. … I never understood why they did that. But I did not want to have a conflict with our cohort’s leader or cause a conflict within the cohort, so I just did as expected.

[15] In most universities in Kazakhstan (except Western-style or international universities), students take most of their classes together as a cohort over the four years of their undergraduate study. A teacher [referred as cohort tutor] is typically assigned for each cohort to do administrative work for the cohort. Therefore, there is a strong cohort identity, and each cohort typically elects their leader who does coordination and advocacy work for the cohort.

старостамен ұрыспау үшін, группада шу-
дау болмау үшін, әйтеуір иә, иә деп ел
қатарлы қосылып беріп жүретінбіз.

Compliance with group pressure in relation to gift-giving practices to teachers in school and university were common among other participants. Participants had differing views in relation to where their ethical line was for gift-giving. While some shared an unease with these practices similar to Gaukhar others found such gift-giving practices morally justifiable. For instance, Qanat shared:

Сенім университетінде енді баға сатып алып, сыйлыққа баға сатып алу болған жоқ. Просто мұғалімге құрметіміз ретінде. Егер шынымен куратор, мұғалім сен ушін жаны ашып тұрса, оған деген ризашылығымыздың белгісі ретінде беруге болады. Қазір жұмыс жасап жатырған жерімізде директорымызға да сыйлық бердік. … Администрация сол жерде 13 адамбыз ба сондай. Жиналып, мұғалімдер күнінде директорымызды құттыктадық. Просто адам болғаннан кейін кез-келген адамнын басына іс түседі гой. Егер де сен жұмыс жасап жатырған жердің басшысы

At Senim University, we did not buy grades for gifts. We would just give gifts to teachers as a sign of our respect. If our teacher or tutor is really caring, it is ok to express our gratitude in this way. We also gave a gift to our director in my current job. … We gave it for teacher’s day on behalf of the team of 13 people. Since we are humans, life happens. If the boss is caring and understanding of your life situations, and provides good conditions for work, there is nothing wrong with showing respect as a human and give a gift.

> ертең сенің жағдайыңа кіріп, сені түсінетін
> болса, саған жұмыс жасау үшін қолайлы
> атмосфераны тудыратын болса, оны адам
> ретінде сыйлап, сыйлық беруде тұрған
> ештеңе жоқ.

From this example, it is evident that Qanat's ethical stance around gift-giving was different from Gaukhar's. While for Qanat giving a gift to a teacher or the boss on behalf of the team was a sign of respect and gratitude, for Gaukhar, it crossed the ethical line because the cohort did not consider the financial situation of members of the group. Even though Gaukhar complied with the group expectation, she was critical of practicing gift-giving in this way. Qanat, too, was suspicious of gift-giving that was utilized to "buy a grade."

Qanat's sentiments were echoed by other participants who expressed concerns that giving gifts might facilitate corruption, but at the same time felt compelled to give a gift as a sign of gratitude. In an example from her community, Kausar shared that she "felt so grateful to gynecologists" [*я очень чувствовала благодарность гинекологам*] during her 9-months prenatal care that she decided to bring them flowers. She said she understood that she was "partially facilitating corruption" by doing this [*ну, я понимаю, что это отчасти, я способствую коррупцию*].

In addition to sharing their personal ethical stance in relation to gift-giving practices, some participants discussed their evaluations of ethical positions of those who were on the receiving end of their gift-giving practices. For instance, Gaukhar shared her realization of her

boss, who was a foreigner, as someone with different *vospitanie*[16] (ethical dispositions), because of her boss's reaction to the gift Gaukhar gave her:

Мен тренинговая компанияда істеген кезде отпуск аласың, сол кезде ең алғаш рет істеп жүрген кезде шетелге, Турцияға барып келдім. Турциядан келгенде де бастығыма әкеп берген едім, ол кісі таң қалды, "Ой, рахмет, это так приятно." Сол кезде мен бірінші рет көрдім, что люди могут, оказывается, так реагировать. … А оған дейін алып келген кезде барлық жерде это было как нормально. Алып келесің, сыйлықココ бересің. Сол кезде мен түсіндім, менің сол бастығым, грубо говоря, из другого теста, совсем другого воспитания. Сол кезде сол кісінің сондай өзгешелігін байқадым.	When I worked in a training company, I went to Turkey for vacation. Then I bought a gift for my boss from Turkey upon return. She was so surprised. She said, "Oh, thank you, I am so pleased." It was the first time I ever saw that someone can actually react this way. … Before that, when I brought a gift like that [to my bosses in previous jobs], it was considered a norm. You are expected to bring a gift. Then I realized that this boss of mine was of a different breed, absolutely different vospitanie. At that moment, I realized the peculiarity of that person.

In this example, Gaukhar demonstrated how one's vospitanie (ethical dispositions) shapes their understanding of gift-giving practices in building relationships. While bringing a gift to her boss from a trip abroad was considered a norm and part of relationship-building strategies in her previous workplaces in local companies, this was not the case with her boss who was a

[16] Vospitanie is a concept defined and discussed extensively in Chapter 5. For the purposes of this chapter, I provide a simple definition of vospitanie as the process that shapes one's ethical dispositions including worldview, moral sense, and character.

foreigner with different values. Through this example, Gaukhar illustrated how one's ethical dispositions guide them in their gift-giving practices in building relationships.

To conclude, participants had varying perspectives in relation to gift-giving practices. Individuals expressed mixed feelings about the ethics and purposes of gift-giving even though they all participated in this practice in one way or another. The example of gift-giving highlights how youth in this study navigated social relationships and contacts (including the practice of giving gifts to them). This navigation was informed by their personal ethics and informed specific decisions that were made at specific points in time. The paragraphs below describe the ethical considerations and compromises made by participants as they developed social connections and capital.

Participant Ethics of Connections: "I Differentiate Between Two Types of Svyazi: Negative and Positive"

As discussed in detail in Chapter 3, previous studies of social relationships in Kazakhstan and larger post-Soviet context repeatedly reported the challenges of differentiating between friendship, blat, bribery, and corruption due to blurriness of relationships between these concepts (Oka, 2013; 2015; Rigi, 2004; Werner, 2000). This is further complicated in Kazakhstan due to the culture of gift-giving that provides multitude of occasions for gift giving, which sometimes can have corrupt motives and intentions, some related to gaining favors, others intended to show gratitude or mark a momentous occasion (Heyneman et al., 2008; Oka, 2013, 2015; Rigi, 2004; Werner, 2000). Youth in this study were navigating this complex context of social relationships in Kazakhstan and developing their own understanding of these concepts.

Notwithstanding the complexity and blurriness between various ways of using social connections to get ahead, participants had a clear definition of what they perceived to be negative or positive ways of using connections. As Sanzhar noted:

Как для меня в нашим мире, где я жил, учился, и работал, и сейчас живу, я разделяю два вида связи, которые я встречал. В первую очередь, плохая связь. … И второй вариант … такой коммерциализированный либо правильный вариант связей	In the world where I lived, studied, and worked, and continue to live now, I differentiate between two types of svyazi that I encountered. The first one is negative svyazi. … And the second one is more … commercialized or positive version of svyazi.

The use of connections was considered negative by participants if it gave an unfair advantage to access opportunities and involved bribing or gift-giving expectation. Positive uses for social contacts, on the other hand, provided guidance, support, and recommendations with no expectation to receive something in return. It is important to note that in addition to providing guidance and support, for some participants, positive use of social connections was rooted in emerging capitalist values as Sanzhar hinted using the word “commercialized” to describe what he perceived to be more positive use of connections. In the next sections, I will expand further on these two ways of using connections as defined by my participants. I will follow up with my analysis of participants' dichotomous understanding of social capital use and then highlight their broader spectrum of engagement with social capital with that can be reflected in blurry lines.

Negative Ways of Using Connections: "Tanys is Like a Golden Key That Opens All the Doors for You Everywhere"

For youth in the study, using connections was considered negative if it gave an unfair advantage to access opportunities and involved bribing or gift-giving expectation. The term blat was mostly associated with the negative way of using connections. Other terms such as svyazi (Russian term for connections) or tanys (Kazakh term for connections), on the other hand, was used to signify either positive or negative ways of using connections depending on the meaning an individual attached to it.

Blat was a concept that was especially pertinent in over half of the participant conversations. Six participants never heard of the term blat, whereas other 14 participants were familiar with the term but saw it as outdated. Kausar argued that "blat is more the term of the 1990s. Now people don't use the term blat" [*Мне кажется это термин больше 90-тых. Сейчас, как бы, по блату, как бы так не говорят*]. This is in alignment with the literature from the late 1990s which already suggested that youth tend to view blat as an out-of-date term, unsuitable to market conditions (Ledeneva, 1998).

Despite blat's dated reputation, as noted above, it was still present in over half of the conversations around social capital for this study. Participants also used different terms to talk about connections, with the most common ones being tanys and svyazi. In other words, even though participants did not use the term blat, it did not mean that blat as a phenomenon disappeared in modern Kazakhstan from youth experiences. When participants reflected on the widespread use of social connections for success in Kazakhstan, they referred to the connections and processes as blat. They considered blat in a negative way but lamented that it was the "default" understanding of how connections are typically used in Kazakhstan in everyday life. In

other words, participants perceive that most people in Kazakhstan do not know other ways of using connections beyond the negative referent point of blat. As Gaukhar acutely stated:

Потом бізде социумда понимание, сондай түсінік бар. Сенің танысың болса, в тебе есть ценность … Ал егер сенде таныс ешнәрсе болмаса, сен 5 копеек не стоишь. … И көп адамдарға таныс это - как золотой ключ, который будет открывать двери, барлық жерге.	In our society, there is this understanding that if you have tanys, you have value … if you don't have tanys, you are not worth 5 cents. … For many people, tanys is like a golden key that opens all the doors for you everywhere.

Gaukhar's quote along with analysis of other participants' stories confirms the findings of the literature that argued that "social capital is at the root of economic capital" in post-Soviet states (Clark, 2000, p. 444). As Gaukhar pointed out, one's value is determined by the value of their social connections. Here Gaukhar is referring to the role of dominant upper-and-middle class forms of social capital discussed in Chapter 3. In other words, having connections means, as Dariya noted, "knowing someone with power, whose words have a weight" [*кішкене болсын билігі бар адам, сөзі жүретін адам*]. Another participant, Jandos, further argued that such influential connections "provide access to information before it becomes available to everyone else … and facilitate easy life and easy earning without working hard" [*иметь связи в Казахстане, это быть в центре новостей до того, как это станет общедоступным вообще … по-моему, это типа просто жить, легко зарабатывать … не особо трудиться*].

Through their stories, participants also shared their amazement at examples how ingrained the use of connections are in everyday life of Kazakhstanis given how heavily people rely on their connections to get things done. For instance, Gaukhar shared how she finds it remarkable that people search for tanys "even when they are buying a carpet for their home … or golden jewelry for wedding ceremonies from the market" [*бізде даже қазақтар, алдында был такой случай ... базарға барып кілем алады ғой, үйге даже кілем алғанда, адамдар таныс іздейді. Даже той, құдалык болған кезде алтын алады ғой. Даже соған адамдар таныс іздейді, оказывается*]. Although such use of connections in mundane tasks as buying a carpet is not considered a negative way of using connections since there is no bribing or gift-giving expectation, this demonstrates how people trust and rely on their connections in everyday life.

In light of such widespread use of connections in everyday life in Kazakhstan, some young people in the study perceived themselves lucky if they did not encounter negative ways of using connections in their life. In other words, it was seen as an exception if one was able to get things done without connections. For instance, Kausar shared:

Но в своей жизни, кажется мне повезло, я еще не сталкивалась. Ну, даже такая простая вещь, как родить, никому ничего на лапу не давала…. В смысле никаких платных. Рожала все также, как все остальные. Поехала, и просто родила.	I think in my life, I was lucky that I didn't encounter it [use of connections]. Even such a simple thing as giving birth to a child, I didn't have to give anyone anything... I mean I didn't have to pay. I just went to the hospital and gave birth.

In this example, Kausar is referring to the practice of bribing your way to the hospital to give birth. Although medical services such as delivery are available for free in state hospitals in Kazakhstan, some patients might bribe doctors or administration of the hospital to get better

treatment, better conditions, or to request for a specific doctor (Shevchenko, 2008). Since it is perceived to be a widely known practice, Kausar is describing her case as exceptional since she was able to give birth without bribing anyone.

Consequences of Using Connections Negatively. Participants further discussed how a negative way of using connections has negative consequences since it perpetuates inequities in society. This is contrary to the findings of recent studies of youth perceptions on inequity in Kazakhstan that claimed youth were less concerned with the issues of inequality than older generations (Junisbay & Junisbay, 2019). For youth in the study, giving unfair advantage to access to opportunities was at the heart of what they felt made the use of connections negative. They openly expressed frustration and anger with such negative use of connections as illustrated by Dariya:

Кедергі келтіретін жағы түк білмейтін, басында ештеңе жоқтар креслода отырады да. Ондай адам ондай креслода отырғанының минусы білімі бар адамның орнын басады ол адам. Егер бір должностьқа екі адам келсе, біреуінің блаты бар, біреуі таза біліммен келіп тұрса, даже таза біліммен келіп тұрған адамның миы анадан 10 есе, 20 есе көп істесе де танысы бар адам өтеді. Оның минусы адамның жолын жабады, білетін адамның орнын тек қана танысы бар адам ғана басады да.	It has a negative impact because brainless people are sitting in positions of power. Since such a person is taking that chair, they are taking the spot of someone else. If there is a position and two people apply - one with blat and the other with their knowledge, even if this person has 10- or 20-times better qualifications, that person with tanys will get the job. As a result, they close the pathway for the other person.

Participants claimed that negative ways of using connections have other negative consequences such as brain drain, demotivation, and degradation of companies. As high-achieving upwardly mobile youth, but who are not from powerful families, participants also decried the lack of consideration that merit sometimes takes in hiring. Participants shared multiple examples of how what they believed to be unjust practices of hiring and promotion lead youth to not only be demotivated to pursue their aspirations but also led some to "no longer trust the system and the country" [*и не верит в эту систему и страну*] (Nazym, participant). Perception of unfair practices was the primary reason "why many youths are leaving and moving to places where their work is better valued" [*поэтому, кажется, молодые люди и уезжают туда, где их труд будет цениться*] (Nazym, participant).

This perception of youth in relation to brain drain is well illustrated in another comic by Le Shapalaque Comics, which speaks to the acute and widespread nature of this issue for Kazakhstan (see Figure ii). The comic is titled *Natural Migration of Animals* and shows the migration of birds to the south in search of food (picture on the top) and the migration of roe deers to the warm places to hide from cold (picture in the middle), followed by the migration of Kazakhs abroad where salaries match their skills (picture in the bottom).

Despite previous finding that blat was more prevalent in the public than private sector, participants noted that it still is present in quasi-public companies, especially in the higher-level management positions. Participants poignantly discussed the examples of how what they perceived as unjust ways of using connections has led to degradation of quasi-public companies. According to participants, such degradation has occurred largely because they are losing the most qualified candidates by placing more value on connections and not merit. For instance, Olzhas argued how top management positions are only accessible through influential

connections and those who got to the top through connections lack "the right vision and modern understanding" [*у них нету правильного видения, нету современных взглядов*], which has a negative impact on the development and growth of the quasi-public company. In this sense, "modern understanding" was related to understanding "the value of good specialists" and prioritizing merit not connections in making hiring decisions.

Figure ii

Natural Migration of Animals

Note. Title: Natural migration of animals; top picture title: Birds are flying to the South in search of food; middle picture: Roe deers are migrating away to the warmer climates to get away from cold weather; bottom picture: Kazakhs are moving abroad where the salaries match the skills. From Le Shapalaque Comics, by Shapalaque, 2018, March 15 (https://instagram.com/shapalaque?igshid=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==). In the public domain.

Who is Responsible for the Consequences of Negative Ways of Using Connections?

Contrary to findings from Laruelle (2019), who claimed youth as "quite happy with society as it is," youth in this study were not happy with society as is and they demonstrated acute awareness of the inequity of opportunities (p. 6). This is significant given that participants in this study were able to overcome the inequity barriers and succeeded in enrolling and graduating from the country's most prestigious universities and were relatively successful in pursuing their aspirations in relation to their peers from similar rural or lower socioeconomic backgrounds. One might expect that youth like my participants would be "happy with society as is" because they were able to successfully overcome inequity barriers in pursuing their aspirations. Instead, they demonstrated a desire for a better, more merit-based society, likely because their own successes within the current social system, in their perspective, were not gained through having the types of connections described above.

Beyond just a desire for a system that allows for more equal and transparent opportunities, the youth in this study demonstrated a complex understanding and strong opinions of what agents should be responsible for correcting these negative aspects of social capital and creating a more meritorious society, focusing especially on roles of the government versus individuals.

As discussed in Chapter 2, recent studies of youth in Kazakhstan argued that youth do not hold the government responsible for solving the issues of inequity because they believe that "individual drive and hard work matter more" for success (Junisbay & Junisbay, 2019). This is due to youth not only in Kazakhstan but across the globe holding an economically liberal lens with a limited role for the government (Junisbay & Junisbay, 2019). However, youth in this

study had a more nuanced understanding of both individuals and governments' responsibility for addressing the inequities.

In relation to individual responsibility, young people in the study called on other members of society to be individually responsible for operating ethically. Participants' definition of ethical operation is one that relies on merit without abusing connections. For instance, participants discussed how their hard work and commitment were significant for their success. As Gaukar stated, "When I applied to university, I did it on my own - I got the grant and passed the UNT[17] on my own. I did everything on my own" [*В принципе, университетке түскенде де өзім тапсырдым, грантты да, ЕНТ-ны да өзім тапсырдым. Все в принципе өзім делала*]. Similarly, Laura claimed that her individual effort was what helped her to get into the prestigious university, "Honestly, I impacted everything. I was the cause for everything. It was my internal aspiration. I want more, I want to live a better life. I said I want to study in the city and that was it" [*Я сама повлияла. Честно, я сама была причиной всего. Это мое внутреннее стремление. Я хочу большего, я хочу жить лучше. Это просто я сама внутри. Я сказала, я хочу учиться в городе. И все*]. Laura was the only participant who attributed her perceived success in pursuing aspirations to individual effort exclusively whereas other participants in the study attributed their success to other factors including family support along with individual effort. In other words, for all other participants except Laura "on my own" was a reference point to a combination of personal effort and an the enabling and support of others, but not success gained through personal connections.

[17] Unified National Test, standardized test that students take at the end of high school.

Individual responsibility for operating ethically without abusing connections in pursuing aspirations was also evident from the negative judgmental perspectives of participants towards those who use connections to take an unfair advantage of available opportunities. Many participants described such people as “brainless,” lacking qualifications or confidence, or searching for easy ways to the top. For instance, Gaukhar described those who believed that one cannot achieve success in Kazakhstan without connections as below:

Ең алдымен ол нәрсе адамның өзіне деген сенімділігіне байланысты. Егер адамда өзіне деген сенімділік болмаса миллион, миллиард сылтау, отговорки можно придумывать. … Но мен өмірімде ондай адамдарды кезіктірдім, кезіктіріп те жүрмін әлі де. Әлі де 40-қа келіп, 50-ге келіп, 30-дан асып, сондай дүниеге сеніп жүрген адамдар әлі де бар. … Мен енді ондай адамдарда мақсат бар деп ойламаймын. Себебі адамда мақсат болса сен ешнәрсеге қарамайсың, күні-түні сол мақсатыңа жету үшін әрекет жасайсың. Мен үшін ондай адамдарда ол просто отговорка.

First and foremost, I think it depends on a person's self-confidence. If you lack self-confidence, you will find a million, billion excuses. I met such people in my life and still meet such people. There are people who at the age of 40, 50, 30, still believe in this [cannot achieve success without connections]. … I don’t believe those people have aspirations because if one has aspirations they don’t stop, they just work hard every day and night towards their aspirations. I think it is just an excuse.

Participants saw these individuals who took advantage of their connections as responsible for perpetuating inequities in society since they did not want to work hard towards their goals and sought easy ways to access the positions to which they aspired. As Laura stated, “When I hear that [using connections to get a job], it is so wild to me. I have no comments. I don’t understand such people” [*Когда я слышу или вижу мне очень это дико. У меня просто слов нету и просто молчу. Я не понимаю таких людей*]. Perizat further argued that the individuals who seek easy ways perpetuate corruption:

Мен өзім жаңағы кішкене патриоттығым да бар да. Болашақта Қазақстанның, енді балаларымыздың болашағын, қазір осындай бола беретін болса, жылдан жылға келешегі қандай болады деп ойлайсың. Барлық қалаған нәрсесін сатып ала берсе, қалаған нәрсесіне осылай қол жететін болса, кейін алда не болып кетеді деген ой мазалайды. Сол үшін адам барлығына өз күшімен, өзінің білімімен жеткен дұрыс деп ойлаймын, негізі. Келешекте балдарымды солай тәрбиелегім келеді. … Правоны көп сатып алатын болсақ, ол жолдағы авария да көп болады ғой. … Сол үшін мен қолдамаймын,	I am a little bit of a patriot. I worry about the future of Kazakhstan and my kids’ future if things continue this way. If everyone can buy whatever they want and achieve everything they want in this way, I worry about what will happen in the future. That is why I think people should achieve goals on their own with their own knowledge. I want to give this kind of tarbiyeh[18] to my kids. … If many people buy the driver’s license there will be many accidents on the road. … That is why I am against it. There is corruption because of such people. Many people want an easy way

[18] Tarbiyeh is defined as the process of forming and developing an individual’s positive mindset, spirit, character, worldview, and moral sense. The concept of tarbiyeh will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 5.

ондайға қарсымын. Жемқорлықтың болып жатырғаны да осылардың арқасында болып тұр ғой. Көп адам жеңіл жолмен жүргісі келеді. Соған байланысты жемқорлық та көп.	and that exacerbates corruption.

Although participants believed in individual responsibility for ethical behavior without abusing connections and thus avoiding perpetuation of inequity, they also were aware of the systemic challenges that made a completely individualized approach difficult. They often tempered their meritocracy-driven discourse with acknowledgement of the barriers that excluded youth from marginalized backgrounds from opportunities from early ages. In this way, their discussions of individual responsibility were more nuanced than a simple resilience discourse such as "everything is possible, you can do it, just work hard" stance. Participants spoke critically about rural and urban gaps and the system of tracking in schools. They vigorously discussed the inequities between rural and urban schools in relation to infrastructure, teacher quality, and resources. For instance, they claimed that the system of allocation of state scholarships was unfair since it does not consider gaps between rural and urban schools as Nazym said:

Ну я помню, что когда только поступила на бакалавра, во время сдачи ЕНТ, для меня очень актуальна была тема, то, что, почему-то гранты распределяют на одном уровне.	When I was taking UNT, the topic of why grants are allocated using the same scale was very critical for me. … I thought it was unfair to us because in our schools we don’t have

… Я считаю это было не честно, по отношению к нам. Потому что в наших школах нет таких ресурсов, скажем как у специализированных школах. Но при этом нас оценивают по одной шкале. ЕНТ чтоб были пятерки, чтобы набрать максимум по той же математике, мне казалось несоизмеримо. И даже сейчас так кажется. Потому что НИШ занимаются по программе Оксфорд, они уже знали интегралы, что мы в сельских школах даже и не проходили. Это было немножко не понятно и обидно.	the resources that other specialized schools have. But we were evaluated using the same scale. For instance, getting the maximum grade on Math seemed impossible for me and seems impossible even now. Because such schools as NIS, for instance, learn using the program of Oxford and they already knew the integrals, which we in rural schools did not even learn. It did not make sense and was unfair.

Some participants also shared the role of family cultural capital in perpetuating inequities in society between those from higher SES and lower SES. As Sanzhar argued:

Еще, наверное, такая плохая вещь. Что малоимущественные семьи, те семьи, которые не зажиточное … чаще всего, родители просто не знают, как стать успешной. … Потому что, мне мама, например, постоянно дает какие-то советы. Но смысл этих советов, если она сама ни	There is also this negative thing. Those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds … their parents simply don’t know how to be successful. … For instance, my mom always gives me some advice [how to become rich]. But what is the point of this advice if she has never been able to become rich herself. It is

разу не смогла разбогатеть. Грубо говоря, это допустим слушать тренера по боксу, который ни разу не боксировал. … Поэтому хоть они пытаются нас чему-то нас учить, появиться такая планка, когда родители со своими советами будут вредить, наоборот. И надо тем быстрее это поймешь, тем легче дальше станет. И как раз на таком моменте нужно менять учителя, грубо говоря. Или, допустим, не слушать родителя, грубо говоря. Либо найти реального человека, который разбирается в этом … Грубо говоря, родители могут научить ребенка жить как они сами, но, по сути, это же не идеальный вариант. Большему они научить, к сожалению, не могут.

like listening to a boxing coach who never actually did boxing. … That is why even though they try to teach us something. There will be a ceiling when parents with their advice might actually hurt you. Sooner you realize this, better. At this point, you need to change your teacher or stop listening to your parent or find a real person who knows about it. … In sum, parents can teach their children to live like themselves, but, in reality, it is not an ideal option. Unfortunately, they can't teach you more than that.

Although in his story Sanzhar attributed his relative success in pursuing his educational aspirations to his mother's support, in this quote he is also acknowledging inequities that exist between youth from high SES and lower SES in relation to cultural capital available in family.

Furthermore, participants also reflected on their own pathways to academic and career success in relation to their peers in rural schools who were not as successful in pursuing their aspirations. Although they highlighted hard work, individual drive, and parent support as critical

factors for their success, they also acknowledged having access to certain opportunities to which their less successful peers did not have. As an example, several participants noted how they had benefited from the system of school tracking based on academic achievement and merit. Eleven out of 20 participants in the study had been tracked to a higher-resourced classroom within their school or transferred to a higher-resourced school[19] primarily with parents' encouragement (see Table iv). Since school culture in Kazakhstan tends to value academic excellence, such higher-resourced schools typically track students based on their academic achievement. All 11 participants claimed that transferring to a higher-resourced school or classroom was critical for their success and ability to enroll to the university of their choice. While I did not follow up to explore participants' opinion on the tracking system, few participants shared how they find this system of tracking students from early ages as exclusionary and unfair. Olzhas was among the participants who questioned the fairness of tracking system and its negative impact on pathways of his less successful peers:

Наше разделение, когда мы были в школе-гимназии, до сих пор думаю об этом, правильно ли делить детей вот так? То есть, мы были школа-гимназия. В школе-гимназия, одинадцатых классов, условно, были 3 или 4 класса. Из них один класс гимназия, остальные простые классы. То	I still reflect on whether it was right to divide us like that during school. I attended a school-gymnasium. In our school, there were about 3-4 classes in 11th grade. One of them was a gymnasium class and the other were regular classes. … The message was, "You are excellent students. Well done. And

[19] Higher-resourced school or class is a school or class which track academically high achieving or gifted students. These schools or classes provide better infrastructure and resources to students including rigorous curriculum, better qualified teachers than those available to students in regular schools or regular classrooms.

есть, нас там уже классово разделили, “Вы типа хорошие. Вы молодцы, умные. А эти, типа, так себе.” Нас так делили уже с шестого класса. Я сейчас думаю, психология тех детей, которые были в других классах. Ладно, мне повезло, я был в классе, где считались, мы типа лучшие, “Мы класс гимназия. Мы молодцы.” Те, которые простые классы, они реально, я просто видел живые примеры, какие-то задачи учителя говорят, “Ну зачем нам это надо? Мы же отсталый класс. Вот, класс-гимназия, пусть они решают, пусть они участвуют в олимпиадах.” … Там уже, мотивацию убили в школьное время уже. К сожалению, и это потом сказалось. Потому что, то есть, есть печальные случаи. У меня там есть ребята со школы, которые в тюрьме сидят, еще что-то, кто-то погиб в каких-то драках, типа в каких-то криминальных кругах до сих пор ходят. То есть, это по-любому высказывается то, что

students in the other classes are so so.” We have been divided like that since sixth grade. Now I think about the mentality of those students who were in other classes. Ok, I was lucky to join the class which was considered “we are better than them.” … But I saw real examples of students in those regular classes when they are asked to do something by a teacher, and they say, “Why do we need this? We are a backward class. You have that gymnasium class for these kinds of tasks. Let them do it. Let them participate in competitions.” … Their motivation was already killed in school years. Unfortunately, these then impacted their pathways because I saw sad stories. There are some who are in jail, some died in some fights or others are still in criminal gang groups. I think, anyway, dividing like that from school years had a negative impact. … Since we were a gymnasium class, about 80% of our class graduated from universities in different cities.

нас разделили. … У нас класс гимназия, 80%, наверное, там все закончили высшее ВУЗы в разных городах. Все работают, кто-то уже семья, как бы все нормально. Полноценной ячейкой общества они стали. Но в тех классах, тоже есть ребята у которых все хорошо. Но, в основном как бы такое разделение как бы повлияло неправильное школьное.	Everyone is working. ... They became full members of society. Of course, there are few from those regular classes whose life is fine. But for the most part, this kind of division in school was wrong and still impacted.

In this example, Olzhas recognized his privilege in accessing the classroom with better resources whereas others were deprived of this opportunity. He was critical of this system of tracking as having a significant impact on the career pathways of students. In other words, he was claiming that the school system is responsible for inequities in student outcomes, not students, even though he benefitted from these inequitable systems. His sentiments were echoed by a few other participants.

In concluding the discussion on individual versus government responsibility for addressing issues with negative use of connections and perpetuating inequities, it is important to highlight that these two are not mutually exclusive. In other words, participants' stories demonstrate that both individuals and the government system are responsible for addressing structures that prevent transparent and open opportunities. It is evident from participants' stories that at times seem to contradict each other. For instance, Aisulu stated:

Мен үшін ол таныcқа қатты тірелмейді, қатты өз-өзіне сенімсіз болғандықтан олар жұмысқа орналаса алмай жүр. Егер олар сенімді болса, міндетті түрде оларды собеседованиеден кейін жұмысқа қабылдайды деп ойлаймын.	I think it does not depend on tanys; I think they can't find jobs because they lack self-confidence. If they are self-confident, they will definitely get a job after the interview.

In this quote Aisulu suggests that people blame tanys when they should be able to be successful just based on merit. At the same time, in her story, Aisulu also spoke at length about rural-urban gaps and inequities in the system. She faced marginalization from faculty during her first year at university as a rural student based on how she dressed or talked. By saying that people should be able to be successful based on merit she seems to contradict the existence of inequities in society. Other participants' stories shared similar contradictory opinions in relation to individual versus government responsibility for addressing inequities. This overlap demonstrates complexity of the issue along with dynamic and nuanced understanding of participants in relation to individual versus government responsibility for addressing inequities in society.

Although participants' narratives were sometimes overly simplistic in relation to their understanding of their own efforts and the barriers presented by the present way that connections operate in Kazakhstan, an aggregate picture can begin to be drawn about the youth in this study. They all worked hard and believed in that hard work. They also all saw ways in which influential connections (which many did not have) presented a barrier to their own development. As a group, they believed fully in the concept of merit as a criterion for access to education and higher paying jobs. However, only some recognized that the merit that they held was also facilitated by

favorable structures in Kazakhstan's education system and the supports of family and community – structures and supports that were not available to others.

Enacting Ethics Around Negative Connections. The participants' social status – as achieving but not with absolute privilege, led them to develop perspectives on issues and social practices they felt were both ethical and unethical. Of particular interest to this study was ethical stance in relation to the use of social connections. These stances guided their actions of when and how to leverage connections. Specifically, study participants avoided using connections in the ways they perceived to be morally wrong. For instance, Perizat shared how her attempts to enroll in a PhD program in the university where she teaches were unsuccessful. Since she and her family realized that bribery was necessary to get admitted to the program, her in-laws offered to give money so she could enroll in the program; however, Perizat refused and stated how it is against her principles:

Мен өзім принциптары болады ғой. Мен принциппен ақшамен түскенше лучше осылай жүре берейін деп, өзім ойым солай. Негізі, мен әрекет жасасам, олай таныс таба аламын деп ойлаймын. Шыныменде, осы университетте сабақ беріп жүрген соң. Көп адамдар солай жасайды екен де, жаңағы. … Бірақ мен өзім сондай жолды қалап тұрған жоқпын да. Олай түскім келіп тұрған жоқ. Тестпен тағы да тест тапсырып өз	I have my own principles and one of them is, "I'd better not do anything than enroll with money." … If I work on it, I think I can find connections [to leverage and bribe]. It is true that I teach at this university. I realized many people do that. … But I just don't want to follow that path. I don't want to enroll in that way. I will take the exam again, and if I get admitted on my own, I will do it. If not, I will just move on.

күшіммен өтсем, өттім, өтпесем жүре

берейін деген сияқты ой болды.

In this example, Perizat is refusing to act against her moral values even though she has an opportunity to take advantage of her position and resources offered by her family members to pursue her aspirations. She is aware that as a teacher at the university where she wants to pursue her PhD, she can acquire connections that can help with achieving her goals. However, since the only option available to her at present involves taking an unfair advantage of her connections in corrupt ways, she opted not to enroll. She was willing to give up on her aspiration to pursue a PhD if she could not pursue it solely by merit and through the present system, she believed was most fair – entrance exams. Someone else in her place might have taken advantage of the resources and opportunities to leverage connections and justify it morally as having no other choice to achieve their goals in the given context of Kazakhstan.

Other participants confirmed this interpretation by sharing multiple examples of strong ethics against using connections in negative ways. For instance, Jandos shared how he realized connections' significance to achieve his aspirations but tried not to leverage them to achieve his goals even though he had influential connections.

To conclude, young people in the study explained that connections are significant to get things done in Kazakhstan; however, they argued that "default" understanding of the use of connections in Kazakhstan is rooted in the concept of blat and involves bribing or gift-giving expectations. They defined such use of connections as negative since it gives unfair advantage to access to those who have such connections or are willing to comply. Examples above showed how participants enacted an ethical stance in relation to such use of connections by refusing to

leverage connections in a negative way, for purposes of admission or employment. Despite their stances against blat and its requirements, and their strong belief in meritocratic measures such as exams, participants did not completely reject the importance of social connections in their lives.

Positive Ways of Using Connections: "In My Understanding, Tanys is a Different Kind of Person"

Literature on social relationships in a post-Soviet context described that social relationships have been commodified in the new market economy and that people prefer payments to investing time to relationships. As such, previous studies on social relationships in Kazakhstan paint the picture of relationships primarily rooted in the concept of blat, driven by self-interest and mutual profit, which my participants defined as a negative way of using connections. However, the analysis of stories of youth in my study demonstrated that such a negative way of using connections represents only a partial story of connections' use in Kazakhstan. Instead, study participants provided a more nuanced understanding of how connections are cultivated in Kazakhstan, particularly among youth.

Participants supplemented their description of negative use of connections with what they defined as a positive way of using connections. For young people in my study, using connections was considered positive if it was used to provide guidance, support, or recommendations with no expectation to receive something in return. Some examples of using connections positively include friendship, mentorship, and networking.

The most common examples of positive ways of using connections were participants' relationships with their peers. Participants shared many examples of how their peers supported them with their educational and career aspirations by providing academic support, emotional support, informational support (resources about job and internship opportunities) or providing

recommendations. Particularly, the relationships participants formed during their university years were significant as most of them shared they found their best friends at the university. As Laura said, "I have my best friend. We are like family. … She is the most precious gift the university gave me" [*У меня есть моя лучшая подруга, прям лучшая подруга, мы с ней как родные. … Это самый ценный подарок который мне университет дал*].

Although many participants described the differences, they noticed between themselves and their peers from the cities or higher socioeconomic backgrounds, they stated that such differences did not interfere with building relationships with peers from diverse backgrounds. For instance, a few participants shared how the way rural and urban students dress, talk, or joke were visibly different in the first semester at the university; however, such differences became less visible later in their university years as rural students adjusted to city life. For instance, Kausar shared about differences between herself and peers she met at the university, "They were a different generation. Even TV shows we watched were different … because they had cable TV" [*Они немножко другое было поколение. Потому что, даже телевидение, на которое мы смотрели было разное. … Потому что, у них было кабельное телевидение*]. But Kausar said, "Even though some aspects of childhood were different, it was not a big problem" [*Ну, какие то аспекты детства у нас не совпадает, ну, в принципе, это не являлась большой проблемой*] in building relationships since everyone was interested in forming friendships. Some participants shared that they felt uncomfortable to share they were from the rural school among their peers at the university who were primarily from most prestigious urban schools. As Nazym shared:

Мне это немножко, не знаю, стеснялась говорить, что вот я из сельской школы, почему-то. … Когда в первое время, спрашивали, “С какой ты школы?” я могла молчать или “а ты не знаешь” и то, это. … И раньше всегда завидовала тем, кто учиться в школе, у которых есть номер порядковый. Просто в моей школе такого не было и мне всегда было интересно. ... Адаптация в начале вот было сложно, а потом, нормально. … Мне кажется, что это были просто мои внутренние комплексы, потому что, никогда никто не ущемлял, не подчеркивал, что вот из села. Наоборот, когда говорила, многие, “Вау, ты молодец, круто!” или кто-то мог просто отреагировать типа, “Прикольно!” Я просто в начале это очень сильно воспринимала, а потом я поняла, что в этом особо ничего такого нет, я могу этим гордиться и особо такой	For some reason, I was ashamed to share that I am from a rural school. … When people asked, “What school are you from?” I would keep silent or just say, “You don’t know it.” … I would also be jealous of the kids who had a sequential number for their school since I did not have such number.[20] ... Adaptation was difficult initially, but then it was normal. … I think these were just my internal complexes because no one ever discriminated or emphasized that I am from a rural school. On the contrary, when I shared, they would react, “Wow, well done!” or “Cool!” … Initially, I would take it very personally, then I realized that there is nothing wrong with it, and that I can be proud of it. I did not see any differences except for the knowledge gap. … I had to study extra hard to learn new topics whereas those from better schools already knew

[20] sequential number is assigned to schools if there are multiple schools in one city whereas in some rural areas there is typically only one school, and such number may not be assigned.

разницы я не чувствовала. Единственная разница, которую я ощущала сильно это – знание, потому что из более сильных школ у них многие ребята все уже проходили, ну темы, а мне приходилось дополнительно учиться, чтобы понять новую тему.

these topics.

Despite these challenges with initial adaptation to the university, when I asked Nazym what helped her to adapt to university life she shared that it was primarily her peers:

Именно, то, что, мне кажется, помогло то, что я жила в такой хорошей комнате с хорошими девочками. Всегда помогали, поддерживали. … Помогло, то осознание, что не только я одна боюсь, нас много. Даже вот студенты, которые были у нас в комнате, даже они вот закончили НИШ, а одна закончила лицей. То есть, я не чувствовала себя другим ребенком. Они так же, как и я волновались. И я поняла, что мы все в похожей ситуации, и тут нет ничего удивительного, страшного. Постепенно привыкала.

I think what helped me was that I lived in a good dorm room with good girls. We always supported and helped each otherю … It helped me to realize that I am not the only one who is scared but there are many of us. Even the students who were in my room were from Nazarbayev Intellectual School [one of the most prestigious schools in the country] or lyceum. In other words, I did not feel like an outsider. They were also worried just like me. Then I realized we are all in the same situation, and there is nothing surprising or scary. Eventually, I got used to it.

This example demonstrates that emotional support of her peers was significant for overcoming challenges during the transition to university life. Similarly, other participants shared how emotional support of their friends was critical for overcoming challenges not only during the transition period but during and beyond university life.

In addition to emotional support, participants also shared how their peers helped them to navigate an unfamiliar field of the university. In other words, peers helped participants to learn the unwritten "rules of the game" at the university (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Participants shared examples of learning about how to approach faculty, how to get the dorm placement, or how to find internships. As Gaukhar shared:

Сұрап, кеңес сұрап, сөйтіп сұрадым балалардан, "Өйстіп барып, жұмыс жасағым келеді сендер сияқты көргім келеді, не істеуге болады деп?" Сосын ол балалар айтты, "Өйстіп өйстіп резюме жасап бар, сосын сөйлес, барып айт, 'Стажер болғым келеді деп.' Кез-келген телеканалға барып, кіріп айтсаң, 'Журналист болып оқып жатырмын, тәжірибе жинағым келеді,' десең, ешқандай телеканал қуып шықпайды," деп. Мен басында қорқынышты болды, әрине, X каналына барған кезде ... Сол

I asked peers for advice. I said, "I also want to work like you, I want to do things like you. What should I do?" My peers said, "Prepare your resume this way, then go and talk to them, and say, 'You want to be an intern.' You can go to any TV channel, and say, 'I'm studying journalism, and I want to have an experience.' No TV channel will kick you out." Initially, I was scared, of course. … When I went to channel X … my legs and arms were shaking. I went to the reception and said, "I want to do an internship." … They said to leave my resume. … Then after

жаққа барғанымда, қол-аяғым дірілдеп зорға барғам. Барып, ресепшнға кіріп, сөйтіп айтқан едім, “Стажировка өткім келеді, журналистикада оқып жатырмын,” деген едім. “Резюменді қалдырып кет. Өзіміз хабарласамыз,” деді. Сөйтіп, екі аптадан кейін маған хабарласып, жұмысқа шақырды. Содан, бір рет сол жолды өткендіктен, ары қарай уже на автомате ғой. Уже, ары қарай қорықпайсың.

2 weeks they invited me. … Since I already went through that once, after that it became automatic. I was no longer scared.

From the above examples it is evident that young people in the study successfully developed relationships with their peers from diverse backgrounds at the university. Their peers supported them in navigating the unfamiliar field of the university and overcoming the challenges during and beyond university. As such, participants’ friendship relationships facilitated the pursuit of their educational and career aspirations through emotional, academic, and informational support and guidance.

In discussing the positive way of using connections for youth, it is critical to consider the value of social capital for youth. While instrumental benefits of leveraging social capital mentioned above including access to job and internship opportunities were significant for youth participants, the most important value of relationships lies in shaping their worldview and moral values through emotional support and guidance. This conceptualization of social capital was in contrast to widely known society’s conceptualization. As Gaukhar declared:

Мен үшін, вообще, в моем понимании, мен үшін таныс адам совсем другой человек. …. Но вот это шаблонное понимание, что таныс вот который решит все твои вопросы, которому можно довериться, от которого будут риски, мен ондай нәрсеге, шынымды айтайын, сенбеймін. … Ал мен үшін несколько таныс ... такие люди … ну, өзі адамдар болады ... мен айттым ғой, мен тренингта істеген кезде маған адамдар қатты әсер етті, менің мировозрениемді, сол нәрсені өзгертуге. Вот, сондай адамдар, действительно, помагают саған көмектеседі, өсуге де көмектеседі. Карьера бойынша болсын, басқаша болсын өсуге көмектеседі. Но блат арқылы, ақша арқылы вопрос шешіп беретін адамдар емес.	In my understanding, tanys is a different kind of person. … This default understanding of tanys as someone who resolves all your problems, whom you can trust, from whom there are risks, I don't believe in this, to be honest. … For me, tanys are the kinds of people … as I said when I worked in the training field, I met people who had a huge impact on me and my worldview, and who transformed me. These are the types of people who actually help you and help you grow, be it in career or other ways. But not the types of people who solve issues through blat, through money.

As evident from Gaukhar's definition of tanys, she is placing society's default understanding of tanys rooted in blat in contrast to her own definition of tanys rooted in mentorship, guidance, and support. This is significant in the context of Kazakhstan and broader post-Soviet context because studies of social capital in post-Soviet countries primarily draw on

the concept of blat and reported social relationships as increasingly associated with corruption. My participants' conceptualization of social capital is challenging this dominant narrative in the literature, popular media, and everyday life of Kazakhstanis.

Beyond Kazakhstan and the post-Soviet context, participants in this study challenged the Western-centric scholarship that conceptualizes social capital as a possession one inherits or collects for material and economic gain towards theoretical frameworks that include relational aspects of the concept. The significance of mentorship, guidance, and support is extensively discussed in social capital literature, especially in relation to academic and career success of socioeconomically vulnerable youth (DeJaeghere, Pellowski Wiger, & Wangsness Willemsen, 2016; Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Yosso, 2005). However, in most social capital scholarship the value of social capital lies in using social relationships for personal gain such as getting a job, which some scholars argued to be morally wrong since it advocates the idea that "human beings are 'capital', i.e. something to be used as a tool" in order for the user to reach personal gain, and that "people can be discarded when their usefulness has expired" (Taormina et al., 2012, p. 146). However, for youth in this study, the most important value of social capital lies in their connections' ability to transform their worldview, shape their personhood and moral values, and only secondarily related to instrumental knowledge and opportunities. They argued that such relationships are valuable for youth from rural or lower-income backgrounds like themselves in pursuing aspirations. As Gaukhar explained:

Жалпы жағдайы төмен отбасыдан шыққан болсын, ауылдық жерден, көп балалы отбасыдан шыққан бала үшін, менің	For youth from rural areas or from low-income backgrounds or from a family with

ойымша, қоғам түсінетін таныстан гөрі менің түсінігімдегі таныстың рөлі әлдеқайда көбірек. … Мен үшін ондай таныскқа қарағанда наставник деген таныстың болғаны әлдеқайда жақсы. Оның біріншіден, мүмкіндіктері көбірек. Яғни, әркезде де, сенде қандай қиыншылық болса да, ол сенен қаражат сұрап келмейді, тек ақылын ғана айтады. Және ол кез-келген уақытта бөлісе алады, және сенен ешнәрсе сұрамайды.

many children[21], I think the kind of tanys as I understand it is much more important than tanys as society understands it. ... For me, it is much better to have the guide type of tanys than that kind of tanys. First of all, they have more influence. I mean in any difficult situation, they don't come to ask you for money but only share their wisdom. And they can share their wisdom any time and don't ask for anything in return.

What is significant about Gaukhar's argument here is that she is highlighting that "guide type of tanys" is more important for youth like herself from "rural and low-income backgrounds." One might argue that this might be simply because other dominant upper-and-middle class types of social capital is not feasible for youth like Gaukhar since they lack resources to access these types of networks. As a result, they might say Gaukhar places more emphasis on the guide type of connections that might be more feasible for youth from rural or low-income backgrounds. While this is a reasonable argument and Gaukhar, in fact, acknowledges that as part of her reasoning, analysis of her story along with the stories of other participants demonstrated that "guide type of tanys" was indeed more significant in youth's

[21] In Kazakhstan, "family with many children" is considered a socially vulnerable group and is eligible for social benefits from the government. "Family with many children" is a family with four or more minor children or full-time students up to 23 years of age.

pursuit of educational and career aspirations. These people included their parents, siblings, peers, teachers, colleagues, and other people, whom they met along their life journey. The significant value of these people in youth's life was how they shaped participants' worldview, personhood, and moral values, which in turn guided participants' actions in pursuing their aspirations. For instance, Olzhas provided a specific example of how positive use of connections did not only help to find his first job but also transformed his position in relation to job applications in the future:

Я же говорил, когда я сам учился в академии, у меня был инструктор. … После того, как мы закончили, мы общались с ним, до сих пор продолжаем общаться. Он был тоже такой же как ментор. Ну, примерно, как я сейчас помогаю студентам, он так же советовал. И когда я закончил, я искал работу, вот первую работу куда я устроился, я видел вакансию хедхантер. И там вижу условия там, прям, написано, ну как любят. Я потом понял то, что любят там все написать. Я вижу смотрю, "Блин, очень сложно. Меня же не возьмут." Я даже не попробовал, но я уже отказался сам типа, "Нет, слишком сложно." И я ему

As I shared, I studied in an academy [tutoring classes] and I had an instructor. … I stayed connected with him after I graduated, and we are still connected. He was also like a mentor. Similar to how I now support students he also mentored students. And when I graduated and was searching for my first job, I saw a job ad in headhunter. I see what they wrote about all these things. ... I understood later that they like to write them [job ads] in such a way. I read and thought, "No, they won't hire me." I didn't even apply and already gave up, "too difficult." And I showed him this job ad and asked, "Do you think they will hire me?" And he said,

показываю, “Смотри, там вакансия. Как думаешь, возьмут?” А он, “Давай, без проблем. Там ты подходишь 100%. … Вот эти вещи ты научишься. … По любому скидывай резюме. Ты, по-любому, ничем не проиграешь. Тебя либо возьмут, либо нет. Но как бы ты от этого не проиграешь.” И он как бы так немного помог, мотивировал. Как бы я именно там откликнулся и отправил резюме. После этого я уже с такой позиции всегда ходил. Чтобы неважно там если мне интересно, я всегда скидываю. Если позовут, позовут. Если нет, но я как бы сейчас в нормальном уровне, я ничего не теряю. И такая практика у меня даже вошла вот такую привычность.

“Apply, no problem, you qualify 100%. … These things you can learn. … Submit your resume, anyway. You are not losing anything. They will either hire you or not, but you lose nothing from that.” He motivated me, and then I submitted my resume. Since then, I have changed my position. I always submit my resume if I am interested no matter what. They will either invite or not, I don’t lose anything. It became like a habit for me.

In this quote, Olzhas is sharing an example of positive benefits he received from his mentor. It is important to highlight that what he valued most in his relationships with his mentor was how the mentor changed his perspective and helped him to become more self-confident. While the job application was a one-time transaction, transformation of his perspective in relation to job application had a long-time impact on his pursuit of career aspirations.

This argument is further supported by the fact that “guide type of tanys” or mentorship was not the only type of tanys participants had access to. In other words, in describing positive uses of connections participants gave many examples of the uses of tanys that provided them with instrumental benefits. As participants entered the privileged spaces such as prestigious universities or workplaces, they gained access to the dominant upper-and-middle class types of connections to which they aspired.

Participants considered instrumental uses of social capital positive since it aligned with their definition of what it means to leverage social capital in an ethical and positive way. The thin line between networking and more traditional definitions of “connections” could be partially explained through participants’ commitment to playing by the rules of meritocracy. Participants saw casual connections and information sharing about opportunities to apply for as more benign than using connections to take up a position. Participants did not perceive the uses of social capital as transactional but rather as aligning with their ethical understandings of how to connect. In these cases, there was no intention or expectation in an instrumental outcome or “exchange of favors.” These understandings, however, were sometimes blurry about where lines were drawn. I will complicate this argument further in the next section where I challenge participants conceptualization of social capital as ethically dichotomous by arguing that certain uses of connections enter blurry areas.

The Continuum of Connections and Complicating the Issue

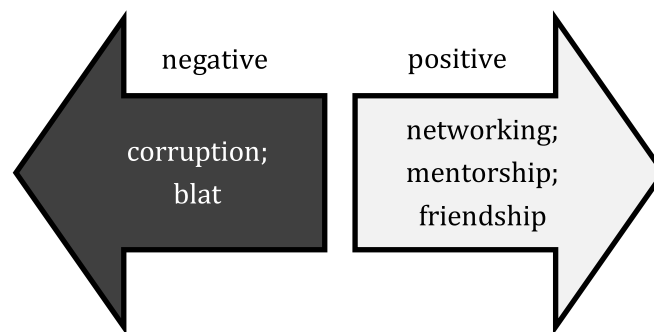
Conceptualization of Social Capital as Dichotomous

Participants’ conceptualization of social capital can be captured as shown on Figure iii. On the left side of the figure is what participants described a negative way of using connections. As discussed in detail in the above sections, the negative way of using connections was rooted in

the concept of blat and involved corrupt practices or intentions. Thus, the concepts of corruption and blat are placed on the left side of the figure. The arrow indicates its direction to the past as the majority of young people in the study perceived these ways of using connections rooted in the "old ways" of using connections. On the right side of the figure is what participants described as a positive way of using connections. Networking, mentorship, and friendship are placed on the right side of the figure since participants described these relationships as positive. The arrow indicates its direction to the future as participants perceive these ways of using connections as "new ways" supporting them with their aspirations.

Figure iii

Dichotomous Conceptualization of Social Capital by Youth



Note. Color indicates negative [darker gray] or positive [lighter gray] use of connections whereas the arrow indicates the direction to the past or the present.

Analysis of participants stories led me to conclude that in explaining their conceptualization of social capital, participants viewed these two ways of using connections as dichotomous. They categorized social capital use as negative or positive depending on when and how they were leveraged. By describing the use of connections as dichotomous, participants perceived these two ways of using social capital as independent of one another and ethically

absolutist. For instance, to my question about the role of tanys in facilitating or constraining rural youth's aspirations, Mardan explained:

Мхм, енді мен айтқандай негативный емес жағынан болса. Просто рекомендация, не болатын болса, онда ол дұрыс әсер етеді деп ойлаймын. Мысалы, сен жас бала да 4-курста оқиды, курс оқып жатыр, бірақ әлі неуверонность бар өзінде, мысалы, жұмыс іздеуге. Резюме апаруға батылы жетпеуі мүмкін. Осындай бала бар, соған рекомендация беріп, көмектесем да, кішкене артынан демейміз. Бұл жерде, мысалы, таныс бұл жерде, именно, жақсы отношениеде, жақсы түсінік бойынша болуы мүмкін. Ал, егер де көп жағдайда ауылды жақ, жұмысқа қатысты, или гос. органдарда ... жақсы жұмыс істейтін жұмыскерді көтермеуі мүмкін. Өзінің туысқан бірдемесін көтеруі мүмкін. Лауазым бойынша өсуге барлық жағынан сәйкес болуы мүмкін, бірақ өсірмейді, өйткені там ақылы, обязательно ақша беру	I mean if it [connections] is not used in a negative way, as I mentioned, but used to provide recommendations and such, it has a positive impact. For instance, let's say a student is in fourth year in college, and is attending extracurricular courses, but may lack confidence to search for a job. They may lack confidence to submit their resume. If we have such a student, we share advice, provide recommendations, motivate, and support them. Here, tanys is used in a positive way, positive meaning. But if, especially in rural areas, in the public sector, when someone is not promoted even though they do a good job, but instead a relative or someone's someone is promoted. This person may meet all criteria for promotion, but they are not promoted because the other just gives money to the boss. This happens a lot in the regions.

керек начальникке. Ол нәрсе региондарда

өте көп мысалы.

In this example, Mardan is contrasting two ways of using tanys. In the first example, tanys is used to provide recommendations and support [positive] whereas in the second example it involves nepotism and bribery [negative]. These two ways of using connections are viewed by Mardan as distinct, which demonstrate his dichotomous ethical judgment. Other participants shared similar examples to contrast two ways of using connections.

The Use of Terms. Analysis of the use of certain terms in my participants' stories further revealed interesting patterns in relation to the impact of larger socioeconomic context and global discourses on participants' dichotomous ethical judgment. These terms include *svyazi, blat, tanys, networking*, and *Kazakh*. Participants who attended Arman University or Senim University where Russian and Kazakh were the main languages of instruction primarily used the local terms *tanys* or *svyazi* to talk about both positive and negative ways of using connections; similar to Mardan's example above, they explained differences based on when and how one uses their svyazi or tanys. On the other hand, seven participants who attended Talap, the Western-style university where English was the primary language of instruction[22] primarily used the term *networking* to talk about positive ways of using connections. It is important to note that Talap graduates also differentiated between two meanings of local terms *svyazi* and *tanys* and at times used these terms to talk about social connections' use in a positive way, but, for them, *networking* was the term that fit better a positive use of connections. These participants

[22] The English instruction university functions similar to the universities in the US, UK, or other developed countries and employs primarily international faculty or local faculty trained in the West.

perceived networking as positive and some provided explanations for how it is different from blat*,* svyazi*,* or tanys. As Nazym explained:

Networking подразумевает именно профессиональную основу. То, что человек делает, например, то, что подай резюме тебя отберут если ты подойдешь. А связи, уже предусматривает, что не будет никакого скрининга. Все-таки, networking подразумевает маркет, когда есть хорошая позиция, но не могут найти специалиста на эту позицию, а у тебя есть знакомые, у которых в принципе все подходит, по всем критериям, и можно просто порекомендовать, и отправить ссылку.	Networking implies a professional basis. For instance, if you send the resume, you will be selected if you qualify. Svyazi, on the other hand, implies that there will be no screening. As such, networking implies a market when there is a good position, but they can't find the specialist, and you have an acquaintance who meets all the criteria, and you can just recommend, and send the link.

From this quote, it is evident that networking is not only viewed as more positive but also as the term that fits the current market economy. By stating that "networking implies a market," Nazym is showing its relevance to current economic context and practices in the job market. Nazym's and other English instruction university graduates' perception of networking in contrast to such terms as *tanys, svyazi*, or *blat*, which they perceived to have more negative connotation was also evident from the discomfort that some of them expressed to use these local terms to talk about the use of connections in their life. When I asked questions related to the use of connections, some of the participants would clarify, "You mean networking, right?" In these

circumstances I had to either provide the definition of what I meant by connections or use the term *networking*. In other words, for some of these participants, there was a sense of discomfort and reluctance to use the terms *tanys, svyazi,* or *blat* due to their primarily negative connotations. They were much more comfortable and verbal talking about networking.

This implies that networking as a concept might have been introduced to students in Western style university as a positive concept that they should aspire to practice. Other participants, who studied in non-Western style universities with Kazakh or Russian as primary languages of instruction used the local terms for connections but clarified how it means something else for them. As Gaukhar said, "Tanys as I understand it not as society understands it" [*Қоғам түсінетін таныстан гөрі менің тусінігімдегі таныс*].

Such differentiation in the use of terms demonstrates how the larger discourse which is primarily focused on the corrupt uses of connections in Kazakhstan impacts the youth's perception of these concepts. Discourses both in academic literature and popular media play a critical role in this process. Mardan was particularly articulate about how the meaning of the local concepts has been ruined:

Просто бізде Қазақстанда просто связь деп оның уже бүлдіріп тастаған да көзқарасын. Ой, связь десе, уже ол жаңағыдай откат-моткат сомен ассоциация болып кеткен да. Бірақ негізінде ол бір жағынан нормально нәрсе. Қазір модно, жаңағы, бәрі комюнити деп айтады.	In Kazakhstan, it is just that the meaning is ruined by saying *svyazi*. If you say *svyazi*, people already associate it with *otkat-motkat*[23]. … On the other hand, it is a normal thing. Nowadays there is this modern word *community*.

[23] a slang used to refer to bribing an authority figure who is responsible for making budget decisions.

In the above quote, Mardan is highlighting how the meaning of local terms for connections have been ruined, and using "community," which similar to "networking" is an English word, has a positive connotation.

Some participants even referred to the term *Kazakh* in a negative connotation. Specifically, it was used to refer to corrupt practices of using connections. For instance, when I asked Qanat how students were selected for his elite selective school, he mentioned:

<table>
<tr><td>Тест алды. Сосын сабақ үлгеріміне байланысты. Бірақ оның өзі әділ болған жоқ. Сабақ үлгерімі нашар, кейбір мұғалімнің балдары мектепте калғандар болды. Казакбайшылық бәрібір болды.</td><td>They took the test, then they selected based on academic achievement; however, it was not fair. Some students whose academics were low, but they were children of teachers, were selected. Kazakhbaishylyk [kazakh ways of doing things] still happened.</td></tr>
</table>

In this quote, by *kazakhbaishylyk* [kazakh ways of doing things], Qanat is referring to negative practices of selecting children of teachers even though they might not have qualified the eligibility criteria. Other participants also used the term Kazakh in a negative connotation. As Gaukhar stated the following about her university:

<table>
<tr><td>Енді Сенім университеті бірден белгілі ғой казахский вариант, әке, көке, жәкенің нақ ордасы.</td><td>Of course, it is evident that Senim university is a Kazakh version, it is the kingdom of aga, koke, zhake[24]</td></tr>
</table>

[24] Terms aga, koke, zhake are loosely translated as "big brother." These terms are used to refer to use of influential connections.

In this quote, similar to Qanat, Gaukhar, by saying “Kazakh version,” she is referring to the widespread practices of using connections in a negative way. On the other hand, in explaining why certain ways of using connections is considered positive, most participants referred to how it is practiced in the West. As Olzhas noted:

Вообще, как я знаю, по примеру, как я читал, спрашиваю ребята, у которых есть заграничный опыт работы. Вообще, рекомендации — это нормально. То есть, даже на западе, даже там в Европе, когда устраиваешься, какого-то специалиста делать рекомендацию кому-то это - хорошая принятая мера. Наоборот, работодатель хорошо смотрит.	I know by example, and I also asked some guys who had experience working abroad. Giving recommendations is normal. It is even practiced in the West, Europe when applying for jobs. Employers there, on the contrary, have a positive attitude to this.

Similarly, others referred to examples of such practices being used in big companies in the West such as Google, thus a positive practice. As Takhmina stated:

> On the other hand, there are many opportunities, especially in international companies. You can find a job on your own. It is used but not all the time. … But there is also networking, it is in the U.S. with recommendation. Even in Google. I think it is good. Not fair when someone gets a job undeserving.

From these excerpts, it is evident that for participants the fact that networking is practiced in the West is what gives the practice its moral legitimacy. In their perception, it is good because it is practiced in the West. Although young people in the study considered Western ways of doing things as morally legitimate, it is evident that they have done so uncritically. For instance,

in a place like Google, there may be hundreds of equally qualified candidates; however, as Rivera's (2015) study of hiring practices of elite firms in the U.S. demonstrated, the right social capital set the bounds of competition for these elite jobs and compensated for a lack of cultural capital. However, study participants uncritically accepted Western ways of doing things as good or legitimate whereas they were critical of local ways of doing things, which they perceived to be primarily associated with corrupt or negative practices. This is not surprising given the dominance of Western ways of knowing and doing things. In relation to networking and social capital, dominant global discourse is about instrumental value of social capital and the realities of the job market in the current knowledge economy, not about how networking also perpetuates inequities. Local practices, on the other hand, are perceived by the majority as negative and corrupt because of the dominant discourse in the literature that portrays the post-Soviet context as corrupt without much nuance about the rationale for these practices. Moreover, as mentioned in Chapter 2, most scholars tend to accuse parents, students, and other stakeholders in the former Soviet Union for participating in negative forms of exchange to support their own interests whereas these actions may reflect common practices in the West such as legacy admissions, donor admissions, and using networking to gain admission to prestigious universities, or instrumentally using contacts to provide an advantage in hiring processes.

To conclude, the above examples demonstrate that the moral position of participants in relation to the use of connections were shaped not only by people around them but also by larger socioeconomic context and global discourses. Although participants viewed their take on networking as a morally simple stance, as I noted above, there was ethical complexity within these explanations. This complexity is described below.

Conceptualization of Social Capital on a Continuum

Although participants described social capital use dichotomously as positive or negative, deeper analysis of their stories show that their conceptualization and use of social capital is better explained by a broader continuum as shown on Figure iv. In other words, while Figure iii captures what participants actually said about their perception of connections as dichotomous, Figure iv captures the nuances of their practice that they explained in interviews. The colors on the continuum indicate their closeness to positive (acceptable for participants) or negative uses (unacceptable for participants) of connections. Moving from left [darker gray] to right [lighter gray], the colors become lighter indicating the move from negative towards positive uses. When the use of social connections was perceived to involve corrupt motives and was similar to practices of bribery, nepotism, or cronyism, participants unquestionably categorized it as negative; therefore, I placed it on the far-left side [darker gray] of the continuum as "corruption."

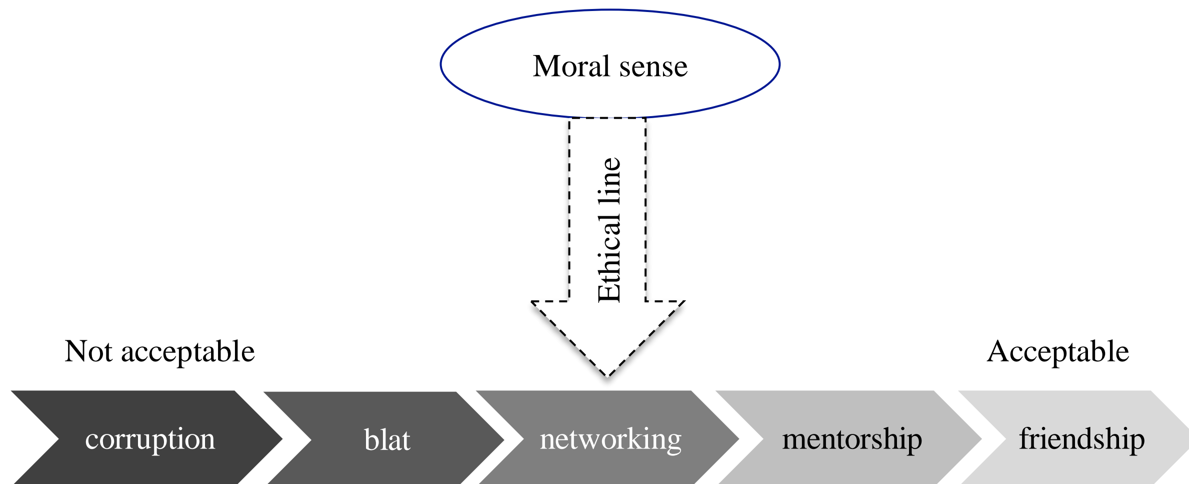
I placed blat after corruption because in the literature blat is defined as conceptually different from corruption, bribing, and nepotism. Specifically, blat is viewed as embedded in horizontal warm human relationships and less "morally reprehensible" (Ledeneva, 1998, p.52). Even though my participants defined blat as negative or the same as corruption, some of their practices walked close to the line of blat as it is defined in the literature. Furthermore, in discussing their practices of networking, mentorship, and friendship as they moved towards the right side of the continuum, participants at times entered blurry areas by recognizing that sometimes blat is needed, or by "networking" (i.e., getting close to) with powerful individuals intentionally for personal gain. I define lighter gray areas on the continuum as the use of connections which might be perceived as positive by some, especially the ones who are

benefiting from such uses, but may be perceived as unfair by others as these uses might unintentionally perpetuate inequities in society.

To better understand the blurry areas on the continuum, it is important to recall that at the core of what differentiates the positive use from negative is fairness. In other words, if the use of connections was seen as fair it was considered positive or at least neutral. In most cases, participants described fairness as involving a fair meritocratic process of selection in admission or hiring. On the other hand, if the use of connections provided an unfair advantage to access opportunities without considering merit criteria, it was negative such as hiring based on recommendation with no consideration for qualifications.

Figure iv

Participant Conceptualization of Social Capital on a Continuum



Note. Moving from left [darker gray] to right [lighter gray], the colors become lighter indicating the move from negative [not acceptable by participants] towards positive uses [acceptable by participants] of social capital. Each participant navigated the ethical line individually based on

their sense of morality: In the figure these individual differences of where participants put the red line is shown using dashed borders of the ethical line.

As mentioned in the previous section, the relationships that shaped participants' worldview, personhood, and moral sense through emotional support and guidance were more important than the ones that were used in an instrumental sense such as gaining access to job opportunities. At the same time, most participants shared examples of how their connections helped them to find jobs or internships opportunities or how they supported their friends or students in finding job opportunities. While they viewed such use of connections as positive since there was a "meritocratic" process of selection and no bribing, some of their examples walked close to the line of blat. For instance, Mardan shared:

Біреу бірдеңе сұрайтын болса, специалист керек мысалы, бір жігіт IT-ға қатысты. ... Енді оны іздеп отырмайды ғой. Айдаладағы біреуге сену қиын. "Танитын кім бар?" дегенде, "Вот осылай бірге оқыған танитын танысым бар, осыған беру керек, оның возможность бар." Осы жағынан ол нормально нәрсе. Кез-келген адам сенімді болу үшін танысына, либо біреу арқылы танысына сомен жұмыс істегісі келеді. ... Мысалы бізде жиі болады, менде студенттер көп болған соң,	Let's say someone says they need to hire an IT specialist. They would not search for it. It is hard to trust someone you don't know. They might ask, "Do you know someone?" and the other person might respond, "I have tanys with whom I studied together. They might be a good fit." Any person wants to work with tanys or someone they found through tanys. It is a normal thing. … Oftentimes I am approached by my tanys since I have many students. They ask that they are looking for a certain kind of specialist.

жиі маған таныстар хабарласады, “Осындай адам керек.” И мен балалардың резюмесін жіберемін. Менің көмегіммен либо Бауыржанның көмегімен жұмысқа тұрады. И ол да получается комюнити да… Мысалы маған айтады, “Осындай бала керек неопытный, бірақ білімі бар” деген сияқты. Мен білем да, мысалы, осы бала жақсы оқыды, вот соны рекомендация беремін. И осы нәрсе норм нәрсе. … Сол орынға шамасы келетін адам болса, әрине, онда тұрған ештеңе жоқ деп ойлаймын.

Then I send the resumes of my students. Then students find a job through me or Janat [another instructor]. This is also kind of a community. … For instance, I am approached by someone who says, “They need this type of person with no experience but good knowledge.” I know that this student studied well and provide recommendations. And it is a normal thing. ... If a person can do the job, I think there is nothing wrong with that.

In this example, Mardan viewed recommending his students for vacant positions in his network as an example of a positive way of using connections since it does not involve bribing or gift-giving, and his students still have to go through the “meritocratic” process of selection and interview. As Mardan noted it is a “normal” thing and is widely practiced all around the world. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that a recommendation is not far away from a “good word,” which might give Mardan’s students an advantage over other equally qualified candidates in the pool who may not have been recommended by their teachers, or even known of the position. This way, such use of social capital might perpetuate inequities in society as it is extensively discussed in the literature (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Jack, 2019; Rivera, 2015; Stuber, 2011).

As Bourdieu (1986) argued, capitalist networking is an example of a privileged group reproducing itself through its internal network, which challenges the argument in relation to fairness of the use of connections in these ways. It is important to clarify that Mardan is originally not a member of the privileged group based on his rural, first-generation low-income background, thus he might not view himself as privileged in this situation. At the same time, he developed influential upper-and middle-class forms of social capital during his university years. By leveraging his social capital through this internal network his actions are like those of privileged groups extensively discussed in the literature. In other words, Mardan, in this example, is both an outsider and is acting in somewhat the same way as those in privileged groups are criticized for. Specifically, in this example, it is not a "pure merit" situation in which Mardan tells his students to apply for a vacant position. Even though Mardan is not expecting “exchange of favors” either from his students or his professional network, he is leveraging his connections, and might be gaining a reputation as a good supplier of labor, which could help his standing in his workplace and the broader field. He actually acknowledged that by sharing:

Бұрын жұмыс істеген жерде өзімнің оқыған студенттерімді алып келдім. Олар өздерін жақсы жағынан көрсетті. И одан кейін беледі, “Вот, Мардан, нормально балаларды алып келеді,” деген сияқты. Содан кейін басқа жерге ауысқан кезде начальниктер сұрайды, “Осындай балалар керек,” деп. … Біреулер просто таниды, біледі, ондай	I recommended some of my students to my previous workplace. They proved themselves well. Then, they know, “Ok, Mardan brings good students.” Then when I changed workplaces, the team leaders asked me when they needed certain types of specialists. … People just know even though there is no close connection. They just know me. They

тығыз отношение жоқ, просто таниды. Там, можете порекомендовать деген сияқты. ... Такой рабочий чисто.	might ask to recommend. … It is purely professional.

Although Mardan is viewing these practices as positive and "purely professional" and is in fact not intentionally searching for instrumental benefits from it, his reputation both among his students and his professional network might be one of the reasons why he is typically contacted with offers of employment even when he is not searching. In other words, he is benefiting from the system even though it is not through more clearly unethical uses. In fact, he shared that while in the beginning of his career he found jobs on his own, more recently he does not even need to search for jobs, "The jobs that I am now offered I almost never have to search because I built a portfolio and companies contact me themselves" [*Мысалы қазірде шақыратындардың ешқайсысына почти өзім іздеп тапқан жоқпын. Портфолио жинағаннан кейін, компаниялар өздері хабарласады*]. Mardan attributed his success with job offers to his cultural capital as he saw benefits of obtaining one of the most prestigious certificates in his field. Even though Mardan's cultural capital plays an important role in his success with employment offers, it is evident that his social capital (colleagues, students) is equally, if not more important in this process. When I asked how these employers who offer jobs hear about him, he explained, "It might be my colleagues, or sometimes my students. … It is always through community, recommendation" [*Иә, либо это коллегалар болуы мүмкін сенімен бірге істеген, или жаңағы кейбір кезде менен оқыған студенттер, или менімен бір жерде істегендер солар жаңығы айтады. ... Ну, всегда, жаңағы, комьюнити ғой, рекомендация айтады да біреулер*]. This way, he is acknowledging that he primarily finds jobs through recommendations

even though he does not always ask for it. As Mardan reflected on this change in his job search experience by recalling how initially employers did not take him seriously as if saying, “Who are you?” [*сен кімсің? деген сияқты*] but “now it has changed” [*қазір уже кішкене басқаша*]. He explained how one needs time to develop tanys*:*

Қазір уже кішкене басқаша өйткені оған да уақыт керек та. Сені адамдар тану үшін, сенің таныстарың болу үшін, связің болу үшін, коммюнити. Қазақша бізде связь ғой. Таныстарың болу үшін да уақыт керек та. Кішкене күту керек екен да. Сол сабақ бергеннің де плюсі сол деп ойлаймын. Жұмыс тапқан кезде сол жағынан қатты көмектеседі.	Now it has changed because time has to pass for people to get to know you, for you to have tanys*,* svyazi*,* community. In Kazakh, it is svyazi[25] (laughing). For you to have tanys, you need time. You have to wait. I think it was one of the benefits of teaching. It helped me a lot in finding jobs.

When I further clarified how he developed this community, Mardan shared, “I did not develop this community on my own” [*Community-ді өзім құрған жоқпын*], highlighting that he did not intentionally develop these connections with economically driven instrumental goals in mind. Instead, he explained that with time just more people know about him and his expertise including his students and colleagues. As a result, it makes it easy for others to recommend him when someone asks for help. This way, his example along with other similar examples of participants demonstrate how access to internal networks gives an edge in career success while

[25] Interestingly, Mardan used the Russian term “svyazi” but said it is a Kazakh word. This shows that the terms svyazi and tanys are used interchangeably by youth and became embedded in everyday life. Even though Mardan used Kazakh language for his interview, at times he used some Russian terms like svyazi in his speech.

excluding others outside the network from these opportunities. Even though Mardan viewed such use of connections as positive, those outside the network may not necessarily view this situation as positive. This way, the line between negative and positive, as well as acceptable and unacceptable ways of using connections becomes blurred and certain practices enter the blurry area.

Ethics of the Line

Analysis of participants' stories demonstrate that youth are using connections to their advantage in new ways that they find to be different from "old ways." In their networking practices, participants entered blurry areas by engaging in networks that were beneficial to them in an instrumental sense but might have had negative consequences for others outside their network. As they navigated this blurry area, they relied on their ethical boundaries in setting the line between what they perceived to be negative or positive ways to practice networking. What is important to explore in my study is not whether these boundaries were "right" or "wrong" but rather how youth chose to navigate these situations. In other words, the most interesting finding is that participants set an ethical line on the social capital continuum which guided them in their practice of networking. While this ethical line was in different spots along the continuum for every participant in the study, they all relied on their own ethical and moral stances to set boundaries in their networking practices. For instance, similar to other participants Laura shared that "networking plays a very significant role" [*нетворкинг сейчас очень большую роль играет*] in career success, and "one should develop it since the village times" [*вообще, нетворкинг надо развивать со сельских времен*]. She further shared how one can network by visiting various events and communicating with people since "they can learn about opportunities" [*просто ты можешь благодаря этому networking, или просто услышать*

просто вот такая есть opportunity]. She perceived such networking practices as "normal" and said, "If you are attending different events and learning about opportunities from your acquaintances, why not?" [*Если ты ходишь на разные мероприятия, узнаешь у своих знакомых о каких-то возможностях, почему бы нет*?] At the same time, when I asked her how she networks, she shared that she does not cross the line of instrumental networking in her practice:

Жулдыз: Вы сказали важно делать нетворкинг. Что вы делаете для того, чтобы установить вот этот connections или networks?
Лаура: На самом деле, никаких стратегий я не использую. Я просто стараюсь просто хорошо себя показать и общаться со своими коллегами. Потому что, именно reference to people происходит автоматический. Если ты хороший сотрудник, компетентный человек, тебя рекомендует. … Честно сказать, я не совсем люблю, когда ты целенаправленно ищешь networking и пытаешься устроиться куда-то. Я так не могу. Это не мой ход, не мой подход к чему-то. ... В моем случае, в основном, референс. Когда говорят, "Вот,

Zhuldyz: You mentioned it is important to network. How do you network?
Laura: In fact, I don't use any strategies. I just try to show myself well and communicate with my colleagues. I think reference to people happens automatically. If you are a good employee, competent, then you are recommended. To be honest, I don't like to intentionally network trying to find a job. I can't do that. This is not my approach. … In my case, it is referencing. When someone says, "This is Laura." I think this is networking because I knew this person and I had a good relationship, connection with them. They know me. I just stay connected

Лаура.” Это networking считаю. Потому что, я знала этого человека, и у меня были с ними хорошие отношения, общение. Он меня знает. Я просто поддерживаю связи, те, связи, которые у меня появились и возникли. Но я при этом не ищу других связей для того, чтобы найти что-то для себя.	with my existing svyazi. But I don’t search for new svyazi to find something for myself.

In this example, by explaining how she navigated the ethical line in her approach to networking Laura showed that she was not willing to cross the line of instrumental networking whereas some other participants including Nazym or Takhmina found it as an accepted practice. It is evident that Laura goes up to the line of instrumental networking but does not cross it. For her, networking is staying connected with your existing relationships, who might recommend you based on what they know about you. She perceives intentionally networking as unacceptable since it crosses an ethical boundary, she established for herself. This shows the complexity and nuance of how young people in the study understood their ethical boundaries and relied on these boundaries in navigating the blurry area in the social capital continuum on Figure iv. Thus, the most significant finding of the study is in how participants set ethical boundaries to navigate the social capital continuum in pursuing their aspirations. Particularly, participants’ moral sense guided them in how they chose to use social capital to pursue educational and career aspirations. These understandings and interpretations were mediated in the complex environment of Kazakhstan, in which blat, long-standing community connections/expectations, and global capitalism were all part of the participants’ social and economic environment.

Networking: Intention Versus Outcome

Study findings demonstrate that while youth are trying to walk away from "old ways" of using connections rooted in the concept of blat, they are certainly using their connections to their advantage in new neoliberal ways. As discussed above, some uses of connections by participants were not necessarily "good" or "bad" but were rather in the blurry area. As participants navigated this blurry area, they relied on ethical boundaries they set for themselves. In Figure iv, these ethical boundaries are shown using the ethical line. Although participants provided broad principles in categorizing relationships on either side of the continuum as described in the above sections, each participant navigated the ethical line individually based on their sense of morality. In the figure these individual differences of where participants put the ethical line is shown using dashed borders of the line. Participants' moral sense was shaped by their experiences, background, people they met in their life journey, and local and global discourses. Thus, their moral sense was dynamic and fluid, not static (a concept that is explored more in Chapter 5). Given the complexity and nuance of how participants navigated this blurry area, consideration of intention and outcome for their networking practices is important.

In discussing the intention for networking, Melé's (2009) three types of networking are helpful to consider. Melé (2009) differentiated between three types of networking: utilitarian, emotional, and virtuous. Utilitarian networking is defined as networking with the intention to obtain economic advantages, power, or protection. Some examples of utilitarian networking involve networking with the goal of finding a job, clients, getting promotion, or accessing useful information and resources. Emotional networking is motivated by desire to build pleasant relationships and is typically characterized in finding enjoyment in each other or in the same things. Friendship is an example of emotional networking. Virtuous networking is practiced with

an intention to contribute to a noble cause and includes “a positive moral intentionality in the end pursued and means employed” and a non-instrumental concern for others’ wellbeing. Some examples include researchers sharing their knowledge or teaching resources to benefit others.

These three types of networking are helpful to discuss how study participants approached networking. While some participants openly discussed their utilitarian intention for networking, others had emotional or virtuous networking intentions. At the same time, purely emotional or virtuous networking intentions did not necessarily mean that it did not involve utilitarian outcomes, which I will discuss in greater detail below.

As mentioned above, some participants openly discussed their utilitarian intention for networking. For instance, some shared their desire to develop networking skills since they realized the importance of utilitarian networking to find a job. To my question about the role of networking in her life Nazym shared:

Это круто, это полезно, но нужно развивать в себе этот skill, стать менее интровертом, потому что это нужно чтобы найти работу. Вообще нужно, конечно, сейчас особенно. И социальные сети играют большую роль, я так думаю. Но я это еще нарабатываю никак не могу дойти. … Да, нужно быть такой, уметь себя продавать, так скажем. … Я вот сейчас чувствую, что я на стадии становления к этому. … Я думаю, я в	It [networking] is cool, it is useful. But I need to develop this skill and become less introverted because I know that it is needed to find a job. Of course, it is needed, especially now. Social media also plays an important role. But I am still working on this and can’t get there yet. … I should be able to pitch myself so to speak. … I think I am in the process of developing this [networking skill] because I am graduating soon and have

процессе, потому что уже скоро graduation бұйырса, и нужно будет искать работу, поэтому нужно активироваться. … Нужно вот развивать это, стратегии networking	to search for a job and thus need to be active. … I need to develop networking strategies.

In this example, Nazym highlighted the significance of utilitarian networking to find a job and is committed to developing her networking skills. In justifying utilitarian networking as a positive way to use connections, participants contrasted it with negative uses of connections such as nepotism. As Takhmina stated:

> I am really for networking. Even this doctor with whom I work I can rely on him when I need a doctor. I know he can find the best specialists. If I am not taking someone's spot. That is why I approve of it. I don't approve of uneducated people graduating from unit and work. This is fail of the system. Stupid people sit and control.

In this example, Takhmina is drawing an ethical boundary between nepotism and her networking practice. Even though her networking practice has instrumental intentions she finds it positive because she is “not taking someone’s spot” unfairly.

Another example of utilitarian networking was “weak ties,” a descriptor used by one participant for a type of informal networking that provided youth with instrumental benefits such as job and internship opportunities. For instance, Fatima described how she benefited from social capital she developed during her university years:

> Ok, so the connections, of course, very important. So, I was saying too I was attending different events. Even within the boundaries of the university. And it was very helpful because I found so many opportunities. Without attending them, I think, I would be like if

> I sit all the time in my room and do nothing. Only talk to 2-3 close people, I get no real information. Information about opportunities, about some things that I can really learn and develop. … I believe like in if, for example, if even I'm flying, I try to I like to talk to get to know the person who's next to me because you never know who can be like, you know, we can meet tomorrow. Maybe we can actually get to know. One time I was just flying back from Amsterdam. And then there was an event, and I was coming back and there was actually one, like a foreigner and he was also flying from there. And it turned out that we live almost like very close here in Kazyna. And we participated in so many events together. And, actually, he gave me the contact of Medical School professor who does some research on my interested area. Like through this networking I was able to join new research. So, I believe we should always try to get to know. Even like shy or hesitant people.

In this example, Fatima is demonstrating how she developed her social capital during university and the instrumental benefits she received from leveraging her social capital. The "weak ties" approach is similar to contemporary networking approaches used in market economies and is reflected in global platforms like LinkedIn. This example shows that participants did not only have access to dominant upper-and-middle class types of capital, but they actively leveraged it to pursue their aspirations. It also shows a temporal shift in how participants seek and understand social capital away from blat.

A few other participants shared Nazym, Takhmina, and Fatima's sentiments in relation to the significance of networking in finding career opportunities but noted that they are not good at it and were reluctant to develop networking skills. Despite their reluctance to engage in

utilitarian networking, for these participants, utilitarian networking was viewed positively and an accepted practice to navigate the job market nowadays.

Despite the fact that a number of participants had this intention to avoid utilitarian networking, what was interesting was the outcome in terms of how participants benefited from emotional and virtuous networking. For instance, Mardan was among the participants who believed he lacked networking skills and was not interested in developing this skill since he believed it was just not his personality. In the above example, Mardan would categorize his intention in helping his students by recommending them to employers as virtuous networking since he did not have an instrumental goal to get something out of the interaction. Instead, he had a non-instrumental concern in his students' career success. At the same time, he indirectly benefited from these interactions in an instrumental way such as getting job offers. In a similar example, Fatima shared how she benefited from emotional networking even when utilitarian intention was not at the forefront of her networking practices:

> And also, I learned it was also thanks to make very, very far away connection. So, I was cooking in the kitchen and one girl just was curious about who I am and what's my name and we just started talking to her. And it seems that like she figured out that I know Uzbek language, that they speak English, and it was on campus. And she was, "Wow, I actually was searching for this kind of person." And she actually introduced me to a very good paying job position. And I worked like in Embassy of Finland for two years. … So, it'll just part-time job for myself. And again, in this case, it was just random conversations that started in because I could say, "I don't want to talk" or something like this, be shy. But we are still like that friend of mine, very good friends. So, after that

project, we worked on like another embassy and we've got fund from that embassy and did internships both of us in France. And that was just, you know, is from simple talk.

In framing this interaction with her friend above, Fatima shared how her internal drive and openness to connections had such unexpected consequences for her career advancement. In other words, she attributed such positive career outcomes to her personality rather than utilitarian networking. At the same time, she had multiple instrumental outcomes from this random "simple talk" with a stranger in the kitchen. Simply focusing on Fatima's intention for networking in this example would disregard these instrumental outcomes. Therefore, analysis of such interactions with regards to intention versus outcome is useful in showing the complexity and nuance of youth networking practices.

To conclude, participants had economic-instrumentally driven (utilitarian networking) and social-affective driven (emotional or virtuous networking) intentions to networking. Although intention is important in understanding how participants use their social capital, it is not complete without considering the outcomes from their practices of leveraging connections. Specifically, some social-affective driven practices of networking resulted in economic-instrumental outcomes for these youth, which did not seem to raise any ethical dilemmas for the youth.

A further consideration for the question of intention and outcome relates to the conditions of the job market in which these youths are operating. It is important to consider how this reality shapes both their ethical intentions and the realities despite intentions. Specifically, as participants navigate the job market and make decisions about the use of social capital to pursue their career aspirations, they consider "the rules of the game" in the current context (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). As they make decisions about the ethics of their intention for networking, they

might find some practices more ethically justifiable due to its acceptance as a fair game in the market not only in Kazakhstan but beyond.

In this regard, it is particularly interesting to compare blat practices in the past with networking practices in the present. Blat practices in the past were viewed as positive by those who practiced it since they were justified given the Soviet system of shortage and public system of allocation. As Ledeneva (1998) argued people tended to describe their own involvement in blat as mutual help and friendship whereas they referred to other's involvement in such informal deals as blat. As a result, blat seemed to function most effectively when its logic remained misrecognized. Similarly, young people in the study viewed networking as positive since it is considered "a norm" in the current market economy. Blat practices of the past are no longer justifiable as ethical in the current market economy whereas networking practices are considered ethical. Furthermore, similar to blat practices in the past, participants may not recognize the logic of their networking practices. In other words, they may focus on their intention in making ethical judgments about their networking practices without consideration of its outcomes for others. Even if they recognized the outcomes of networking practices, they might consider it as a "fair game" given the rules of the market.

One study that is particularly significant for exploration of this topic is Dobos (2017), in which they explore the ethics of networking as a means of competition. Drawing on Dobos' (2017) study, I provide further explanation of factors that may shed light on ethical decisions of participants that they may or may not have directly acknowledged, but seemingly experienced based on their comments. In discussing the ethics of networking for job or university placement, Dobos (2017) argued that in today's world, networking is ethically justified given the deficiencies in the candidate selection process (Dobos, 2017). In this article, Dobos (2017)

argued that those who engage in utilitarian networking in the job market might have two goals: (1) to influence decisions that impact their career; (2) to show that they are in fact meritorious. The former is seen as more unethical than the latter since the networker is aiming to position themselves to benefit from injustice. The latter, on the other hand, is seen as more ethical given the deficiencies in the current selection process. While some might find such practice of networking with the goal of demonstrating their merit as interfering with the just selection, similar to earwigging[26], it would only hold true if job selection was indeed the just process, which it is not (Dobos, 2017). Dobos (2017) argued that networking is not as bad as earwigging because networkers are not breaking any "rules of the job market—indeed it is seen to be a standard feature of 'the game''' (p. 475). Studies demonstrated that current hiring practices do not guarantee just results since employers tend to make intuitive decisions without realizing their unconscious biases. This is especially evident in the social capital literature, which showed that one's social capital plays a determining role in social mobility (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Jack, 2019; Rivera, 2015; Stuber, 2011).

Participants' understanding and acceptance of these "rules of the game" in the job market might have impacted their ethical views on networking. Those participants who accepted networking as the "a standard feature of the game" might have viewed it more positively than those who found it as interfering with just and meritocratic processes of selection. In this way, their views on an ethical line might be shaped by some pragmatics in addition to moral judgments. Furthermore, youth's different experiences with fairness might impact their ethical

[26] Merriam-Webster dictionary defines earwigging as "to annoy or attempt to influence by private talk" (Haltom, 2009, p. 117). It is also used in law to refer to "improper ex parte communication" (Haltom, 2009, p. 117). It is intended to "prevent an attorney from discussing facts of a case outside of a formal proceeding" (Haltom, 2009, p. 115).

stance. This is especially important considering that the young people in the study come from traditionally disadvantaged backgrounds, which might impact their perception and therefore their judgment. For instance, some participants argued that for them networking was particularly important since they did not have influential connections they could count on and had to rely on themselves to develop their own network of connections. As Takhmina stated:

> In my life I never had a negative type [of connections]. When I first applied to Talap University and was enrolled, people thought we sold everything so that we could study there because my sister also studies there. We told that we don't have this much money. In the future, networking is very important. … I don't know, I don't have *dydya*[27] in the ministry to use. I have to count on myself.

By highlighting that she needs to count on herself to develop social capital due to the lack of influential connections in her family or network, Takhmina is connecting her ethical judgment in relation to networking practices to her background. Since she did not have upper- and middle-class forms of capital at birth and has to work hard to develop them given the current job market, she sees networking practices as fair.

Furthermore, the above analysis of intention versus outcome for networking practices of the participants along with the features of the market demonstrated that the outcomes that cross into a blurry area on the social capital continuum may be unavoidable regardless of intentions of individuals. In other words, it might be less about some lack of alignment between ethics and practice and more about the conditions of the current market. Study findings do not offer

[27] Dyadya is translated as uncle from Russian. This term is used to refer to influential connections.

conclusive evidence in relation to this argument, which could be explored in greater detail in future studies.

Complicating Ethical Views on the Use of Social Capital

In considering the judgments of the participants about social connections, especially the practices they found corrupt, it is important to recognize the influence of both their own backgrounds and the aspects of cultural relativism. Specifically, notwithstanding participants' strong ethical stance in relation to negative ways of using connections, it is critical to consider that the idea of using tanys/blat networks in negative ways may not be viable for youth from rural backgrounds since they may lack influential connections or money/expensive gifts to bribe such connections. As Gaukhar argued, "If you are from a low-income background … even if you meet that kind of tanys [influential connection], will you have money to give to them to resolve your issue?" [*Жағдайы нашар отасыдан болсаң... саған ондай таныс кезіккенімен, оның шешіп берген жұмысына қаражатың бола ма?*]. This way, participants are acknowledging their positionality in relation to the use of connections. Their strong moral stance might be impacted by their limited engagement with what they described to be negative ways of using connections. Specifically, most young people in the study did not have access to influential upper- and middle-class forms of social capital growing up nor the resources to bribe these types of connections to get things done; thus, their lack of experience navigating the situations which involved bribing or corrupt practices may have shaped their ethical judgment in relation to these practices. As discussed in the previous sections, this may have further shaped their practices of leveraging connections. Their strong ethical stance in relation to what they understood as corrupt practices of leveraging connections may impact their decisions not to leverage connections in these ways, even when they have the means and resources for it as adults or later in their careers.

Another complication in considering participants' moral perspectives on the use of connections comes from the different cultural practices of using connections. For instance, studies of morality, corruption, and cultural practices of exchanging favors such as blat in post-Soviet context, *guanxi* in China or *wasta* in the Arab world, which resemble negative ways of using connections described by my participants, demonstrated that those leveraging networks in negative ways had a moral justification for doing so (Avenarius & Zhao, 2012; Al-Hiari, 2022; Ledeneva, 2013; Ruan, 2021; Ulusemre & Fang, 2022). In other words, those practicing blat, guanxi, or wasta did not necessarily feel they were unethical but rather viewed them as a glue to cement ongoing relationships that may be presently or in the future beneficial to either party. Some moral justifications for these practices of relationships included (1) moral obligation to help kin, family, and friends; (2) cultural obligation to exchange favors; or (3) being bound by the system to leverage networks in corrupt ways to get things done due to ill-functioning formal institutions and the rule of law (Avenarius & Zhao, 2012; Al-Hiari, 2022; Ledeneva, 2013; Ruan, 2021; Ulusemre & Fang, 2022). As Ledeneva (2013) argued, in Russia the concept of justice is separate from that of formal law, which is evident from diverging connotations of the words *zakonnyi* (legal) and *spravedlivyi* (just). On the other hand, in countries with strong democratic institutions and effective rule of law, morality is typically defined as obedience to the rule of law (Letki, 2006). In other words, as Pardo (2004) and other scholars argued "what is legal is not always broadly regarded in society as moral and legitimate and what is illegal as immoral and illegitimate" (p. 5).

Scholars defined corruption as a changing phenomenon and argued that cultural values, personal interest, and socioeconomic status impact its conceptualization, which means that its aspects in relation to ethics and morality are culturally specific (Pardo, 2004). Scholars

particularly differentiated between the context and meaning of corruption in "Western cultures" versus "other cultures" (Fallah & Bebmamoun, 2021; Hooker, 2009). As Hooker (2009) argued:

> different cultures use radically different systems to get things done. Whereas Western cultures are primarily rule-based, most of the world's cultures are relationship-based. Westerners tend to trust the system, while people elsewhere trust their friends and family. Westerners organize their business around discrete deals that are drawn up as contracts or agreements and enforced by a legal system. Other cultures may organize their business around human relationships that are cemented by personal honor, filial duty, friendship, or long-term mutual obligation. Loyalty to cronies is suspect behavior in the West but represents high moral character in much of the world. (p. 252)

I disagree with dichotomous view of culture as "Western" and the "other culture" as anthropologically informed scholarship demonstrated culture as not static and homogenous concept but rather "ever-changing, active, productive process of sense-making" (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 10). However, Hooker's (2009) and Pardo's (2004) arguments above are helpful in demonstrating the contested and dynamic definitions of morality and corruption in different cultural contexts, and thus provide a broader and nuanced context for my participants' understanding of morality in relation to the use of social connections. What my participants perceive to be negative or morally wrong ways of using connections might be accepted as culturally legitimate and moral by their counterparts from different socioeconomic backgrounds, experience, and upbringing. Further, what they understand to be morally acceptable networking might be construed as an act of pure self-interest by people who rely on relationships for their professional livelihood.

Chapter Conclusion

Participants in this study had a nuanced and complex understanding of connections' use in Kazakhstan including differences between various fields such as public and private sector. In these fields, participants identified two ways of using connections: negative and positive. At the core of what differentiated these two ways of using connections was the participants' conceptualization of fairness. Negative use of connections was seen as unfair because they did not consider merit and were rooted in the concept of blat and involved bribing or gift-giving expectation. Positive use of connections, on the other hand, was considered fair since merit criteria were considered. While participants had ascribed "bad" and "good" morality to the use of connections, in their practice they entered areas with blurred lines. As participants navigated this blurry area, they set an ethical "line" for themselves, which guided them in leveraging social capital networks. In the next chapter, I will argue that this ethical line was informed through the process of tarbiyeh. As such, tarbiyeh helped participants navigate the world of social connections, and make decisions on what they did and did not want.

Chapter 5: Understanding Participants' Navigation of Social Capital Based in Tarbiyeh

Адамға ең бірінші білім емес, тәрбие керек. Тәрбиесіз берілген білім – адамзаттың қас жауы, ол келешекте оның өміріне қауіп әкеледі	What a human need first and foremost is not knowledge but tarbiyeh. Knowledge given without tarbiyeh is the enemy of humanity. It will bring destruction to their future.
(Әл-Фараби)	(al-Farabi[28])

Introduction

In Chapter 4, I demonstrated that participants' conceptualization and use of social capital was shaped by their moral judgment. Specifically, their moral judgment not only shaped their perception of social capital but also guided them in their actions of when and how to leverage connections. In this section, I will: (1) demonstrate that moral judgment of participants in the study related to connections were formed through the process of tarbiyeh; (2) describe how participants' tarbiyeh guided them in navigating the world of social capital and the ethical line on when and how to leverage social capital; (3) relay that the most important value of social capital for these youth was not about finding the "right" connections in an instrumental sense, but about the people who were part of their tarbiyeh process.

To demonstrate the significance of tarbiyeh in participants' lives and how it guides them in navigating the world of social capital, in this chapter I use narrative analysis of the stories of two participants: Olzhas and Dariya. I will present the stories of Olzhas and Dariya as coherent

[28] Al-Farabi (c. 870-c. 950) is an early Islamic philosopher and music theorist, who is known as the "Second teacher" in the Arabic tradition – second to Aristotle (Haq, 2009). He is known in the West as Alpharabius.

wholes to show the comprehensive impact of tarbiyeh throughout the life journeys of my participants including their life before university, life at university, and beyond.

Tarbiyeh as an Unexpected Finding

When I asked my participants some version of this question: "As you described, most of your peers from similar rural or lower-income backgrounds in your school were not as successful in pursuing their aspirations as you, what made the difference for you?" most of them attributed it to their tarbiyeh. I was fascinated and impressed by the depth of their reflection on their life journey as they answered this question. Thus, tarbiyeh emerged as a critical concept in the study based on the majority of the participants naming it as the most important factor in successfully pursuing their aspirations, and upon deeply reflecting on their life journey.

While I took tarbiyeh for granted at the time of interviews, as I analyzed my participants' narratives, I realized the significance of tarbiyeh for my participants' pursuit of aspirations. What was even more interesting is that while they agreed on the significance of tarbiyeh in their life, they had varying, at times conflicting perspectives, on what aspects of tarbiyeh they found helpful. In other words, what was most influential about tarbiyeh was not only who, what or how tarbiyeh was given but also how participants interacted with the tarbiyeh they received and made sense of it in their lives. As such, tarbiyeh is not a one-sided but rather interactive process. Moreover, participants deeply reflected on the tarbiyeh they received and identified both its positive and negative influences. What was particularly significant about participants' reflection was that no matter how critical they were about potential limitations of the kind of tarbiyeh they received, it did not diminish its foundational role in their life.

Definition of Tarbiyeh

Tarbiyeh is an ancient concept omnipresent in academic and popular literature as well as everyday life of people in Kazakhstan. A keyword search "Тәрбие" (tarbiyeh) in the kazneb.kz website, which includes online catalog of libraries, research institutions, and other government and non-government organizations in Kazakhstan, revealed 710 results (as of March 13, 2023). The majority of these items were books, newspaper articles, and journals with fewer including CD/DVDs and dissertations. These sources were categorized as relevant to the fields of education, pedagogy, literature, philosophy, art, sociology, history, and others. Furthermore, there are thousands of sources on tarbiyeh in Google and Google Scholar websites in Kazakh language. While some of these sources are written for academic and scholarly audiences as they focus on theory and methods of tarbiyeh, others are written for parents, teachers, or students as they focus on the process and organization of tarbiyeh in family, school, and community. Two prominent examples in these sites are advice for parents on how to give tarbiyeh to children and discussions of relevant folk sayings. There are also some examples of tarbiyeh curriculum designed for teachers to conduct regular "tarbiyeh hours," typically conducted by the appointed cohort teacher[29] in schools. Beyond these academic and non-academic sources in print and online, tarbiyeh is the word often used in everyday interactions of Kazakhstanis as I witnessed growing up. For instance, one could hear it often in discussing children's upbringing and in making important decisions in relation to marriage or friendship relationships. Specifically,

[29] In Kazakhstan, in most schools, each cohort is appointed a teacher, who is responsible for organizing tarbiyeh related activities with the cohort which include conducting tarbiyeh hours, out of class team building events, parent-teacher conferences, and public engagement activities. The goal of these activities is to impact the formation of humanistic qualities, worldview, work ethic, and provide conditions for students' development. In Kazakhstan's K-12 system and some HEI, students typically take most of their classes as a cohort of 20-30 students during their entire secondary school unless they choose to change their cohort. This provides an opportunity for students to build long term friendships and create a sense of group identity.

elderly relatives are eager to learn what kind of tarbiyeh their to-be daughter-in-law or son-in-law received, in some cases disapproving of their children's choice of their future partner if they believe their tarbiyeh was not perceived by them as "good."

Tarbiyeh is derived from an Arabic word *tarbiyah,* which means to "increase, nurture, and facilitate" (Rahman, 2020, p. 445). According to Sahin (2013), tarbiyah is the term that comprehensively captures the concept of *education* in the Arabic language. Rahman (2020) argues that this Islamic approach to education is based on the ideas of personal, spiritual, social, and academic growth. Rahman further states that the ultimate aim of education in Islam is to ensure that "every learner has a sense of moral purpose and is thus academically objective in his or her learning adventure" (2020, p. 449). Among the many sub-aims of Islamic approach to education are "putting knowledge to practice and adopting befitting character," nurturing the community to grow, and "finding God through His signs" (Rahman, 2021, p. 445). According to Islam's educational paradigm, education is seen as a "part of holistic way of life" since it is considered to "provide for the holistic needs of the growing child and aims to develop a strong confident Islamic yet individual human personality" (Ahmed, 2012, p. 729). Tarbiyah plays a central role in this process as Ahmed (2012) argued "it is through *tarbiyah* (personal development/education) that human beings realise their purpose and attain their true worth as the 'best of creation'" (p. 730).

Kazakh dictionary defines tarbiyeh as:

(1) Отбасы, мектеп, қоршаған ортада қалыптасқан адамның қоғамдық және жеке өмірдегі байқалатын тәртіп пен	(1) a habit of positive action, discipline and character aimed at forming an individual's humanistic image and adaptation to life;

мінез құлық дағдысы; (2) Жеке адамды идеялық, саяси, адамгершілік, эстетикалық т.б. жағынан қалыптастырудағы жүйелі процесс.	(2) a systematic process of developing an individual from political, humanistic, aesthetic, and other aspects. (Language Committee et al., 2013, p. 1230)

In this dissertation, drawing on Abenbayev (2004), Kozhayeva (2013), and other Kazakh scholars' definition as well my participants' stories, I define tarbiyeh as a dynamic, multidimensional, and interactive process between *tarbiyeshi* (the one giving tarbiyeh) and *tarbiyelenushi* (the one receiving tarbiyeh) aimed at systematically forming and developing an individual's positive mindset, spirit, character, worldview, and moral sense. This definition emerged from my participants and is similar to the definitions found in other relevant literature. Specifically, tarbiyeh is a dynamic process because it (a) changes over time and across individuals, institutions, and cultures participating in this process; and (b) it is continuous and does not end with individuals reaching a certain age or milestone. It is multidimensional because an entire social structure is part of the process including people, school, social institutions, and society. It is interactive because it requires an engagement between the one receiving tarbiyeh and the one giving tarbiyeh. The recipient of tarbiyeh is not passive but active in making sense of the process and acting on it including enactment, rejection, modification, and adaptation from its intended purpose. It is systematic because tarbiyeh has a purpose that is identified by the individuals engaged in the process. These individuals then employ various methods to achieve the goal of tarbiyeh systematically over a long period of time. Tarbiyeh's purpose is associated with forming a positive, correct mindset, worldview, etc. So, the term *systematic* in this sense

means that the methods used in the tarbiyeh process by those involved in it are not random but rather intentional which are designed to have a desired impact over time.

Some Russian speaking participants in the study used the term *vospitanie* to describe the process similar to tarbiyeh. Thus, in this study I understand vospitanie as the Russian equivalent of the term tarbiyeh. This is also evident from the definition of vospitanie in the literature. Literal translation of vospitanie is *"V os' pitanie"* - nurturing [pitanie] of the human axis [os']. Zbenovich and Lerner (2013) cite the following definitions of vospitanie:

> Ushakov (1935) defines vospitanie as (1) "systematic effects on child development" and (2) "possession of skills that meet the requirements of the environment" (p. 371). Ozhegov and Shvedova (1999) dictionary gives the following definition of vospitanie: "The behavior skills imparted by family, school, environment, and manifested themselves in public life" (p. 98).

From this definition, it is evident that similar to tarbiyeh, vospitanie refers to the dynamic, multidimensional, and interactive process of child upbringing. At the same time, it is important to highlight that two terms have different historical roots and were used for different purposes. The concept of tarbiyeh is rooted in Islamic approach to education as described above. Vospitanie, on the other hand, is rooted in the Soviet ideology as "a key concept of the Russian-Soviet educational discourse embracing its main messages" (Zbenovich & Lerner, 2013, p. 140). Despite the differences in their purpose and historical roots, in this study, I use them as equivalent terms given the similarities in the meaning attached to these terms by study participants. Specifically, my focus is on the meaning and role of tarbiyeh/vospitanie for my participants in pursuing their educational and career aspirations; however, this does not mean that the purpose of tarbiyeh/vospitanie is not significant.

Some Kazakhstani scholars argued that the purposefulness of tarbiyeh is one of its most important principles (Abenbayev, 2004). They further differentiated between the purpose of tarbiyeh for the society and for an individual. The purpose of tarbiyeh for society is to develop mindful, active, and good-willed citizens in accordance with the needs of the society, whereas the purpose for an individual is to learn how to live life and interact with the surrounding environment (Abenbayev, 2004). Abenbayev argued that tarbiyeh will only be successful if it identifies its goals in relation to life circumstances, society, and its policies. It is important to note that these two goals of tarbiyeh may not always be in alignment with one another. For instance, the needs of the society may not reflect the needs or values of an individual and/or their family who actively participate in the process of tarbiyeh. This might particularly be true for the students who are marginalized by society. Therefore, in this study I will focus on the purpose, meaning, and role of tarbiyeh/vospitanie for individual study participants, particularly in relation to their pursuit of educational and career aspirations. In the following section, I will share how participants of this study understood tarbiyeh/vospitanie and how it influenced and contributed to their educational and career aspirations as well as guided them in leveraging social capital.

Olzhas's Story: "Without My Vospitanie I Would not Have Come to This Moment in Life"

When I met Olzhas in November 2020 during our first interview, he was 26 years old and had earned a bachelor's degree in Telecommunications from Arman University in Kazyna in 2017. By this time, he changed several jobs, the most recent one being the team leader of the department in his company for over a year. He got married two months ago, bought his own house in Kazyna and a car. As he put it, he was happy with his job, salary, and life in general since he was able to achieve both his personal and career aspirations that he set for himself for

this age. His personal and career success is exceptional given his rural background and challenges he experienced growing up.

School Years: Grandparents' Vospitanie

Olzhas was born in a remote small village in Kazakhstan in 1994. He lost his father when he was 30-40 days old. Because his mother was still young and had another child, Olzhas's elder brother, his maternal grandparents decided that they would take care of him, or as Olzhas put it "give vospitanie" [*дать воспитание*] and took him to live with them. As Olzhas said, "from that moment on until I was 15 years old, I was *"vospitan* (given vospitanie) by my grandparents" [*и с этого момента до пятнадцати лет я, по факту, воспитывался бабушкой и дедушкой*]. At the age of 15, his mother insisted that he move into her house, which was in the same village as his grandparents. Although Olzhas moved in with his mom and stepfather, he said, "I felt like I was taken away from my own home. … Initially I used to go to my grandparents after school … and went there [mother's home] to sleep overnight only" [*Меня прямь как будто из дома забрали из своего. Такое по началу отношение было. ... Я помню, в первое время, когда меня мама с отчимом забрали, я после урока всегда ходил домой к бабушке и дедушке. ... Вечером просто возвращался домой. ... Ночевать приходил*]. Olzhas shared that he saw his mother like an elder sister not a mother.

Olzhas started school in the same school where his mother worked as an elementary school teacher. He changed schools twice, the most recent one in 6th grade when he transferred to a higher-resourced school in the village based on his academic performance. Transferring to a more rigorous school was stressful for him since everyone seemed to be a good student whereas in his previous school, he was one of only two to three students prepared for class. At the same time, this transfer played a critical role in his ability to enroll at the prestigious university of his

choice, because the school offered better resources and infrastructure. Despite his positive experience and good performance in school, Olzhas used to hang out with young gangster groups outside of school as he did not want to be excluded from his peers. His neighborhood was a criminally-impacted region not far from the prison, and Olzhas had been taken by police several times due to his engagement with young gangster groups. He highlighted that he did not have role models growing up in that neighborhood because his peers were not interested in school, but rather interested in things like fighting or disco, and as a teenager he wanted to be part of that community too. Despite the influence of his surrounding peers, which were reflected in his self-described “hooligan” behaviors in childhood and unthoughtful decisions as a teenager, his grandparents' vospitanie had a significant impact on his ability to understand his circumstances. In fact, Olzhas mentioned vospitanie 37 times during our 3 hr 17 min interview starting from his infanthood to adulthood. He also shared his critical reflections in relation to the vospitanie he received, and vospitanie he wants to give to his children in the future. Olzhas highlighted that he has been deeply reflecting on the question about his relative success in comparison to his peers since his early rural school years as he explained:

Воспитание в первую очередь, наверное. У меня всегда была дилемма со школьного возраста воспитание или гены? ... Сейчас я до сих пор думаю об этом вопросе, потому что, мне мама всегда говорила, “Я боялась, что его гены передаются вам,” когда я в передряге	First and foremost, it is vospitanie I think. I always had this dilemma since school years: vospitanie or genes? [nurture vs nature]. ... I still think about this question because my mom used to always say, “I was scared that his [your father’s] genes might transfer to you” … when I would get in a scrape [fight]

всякой в проблемы попадал. … Мой родной отец был такой в жизни, когда он был жив. … Я с детства был немного хулиган. Но потом с возрастом успокоился, и плюс воспитание было вообще другое. То есть, воспитание было спокойное, уравновешенное. Бабушка с дедушкой спокойные люди, не конфликтные, всегда все решают умом. И вот это воспитание у меня в переходном возрасте оно сильно сказалось.	or problems. My father was like that in life when he was alive. … I have been a little bit of a hooligan since childhood. But as I grew older, I calmed down, and also my vospitanie was completely different. In other words, my vospitanie was calm and balanced. My grandmother and grandfather were calm and non-conflicting people. They make decisions on everything wisely. So, this vospitanie during my teenage years had a significant impact.

In this excerpt, it is evident that Olzhas has been thinking about what got him to this moment in his life for a while and after deep reflection he concluded that his vospitanie was the most significant factor for his exceptional success in pursuing aspirations. He also showed how his vospitanie helped him in most critical moments in his life such as teenage years. As he continued this discussion of the significance of vospitanie, he further emphasized that he found vospitanie of his grandparents as more important than blood ties, genes, or other factors.

Даже вот в психологии относят себя к великому. У меня просто в генах родители, именно со стороны отца, я там чингизит, торе. И у нас там считается свои	Even in psychology, thinking of yourself as the one of the greatest. It is just in my genes, particularly from my father's side, I am

родственники любят это говорит везде, “Вот, мы ченгизиты, мы торе. У нас там в родословные восьмой дед это Абылай хан.” Еще дальше идти там Шыңғыс хана можно найти, короче. Вот это все наши любят говорит. А я вообще не люблю. Я там воспитан был другими людьми, и в наших краях об этом вообще не спрашивают про родословную про ничего там. … Какие бы у меня сильные гены там, гены там каких-то ханов не было бы, без этого воспитания я к этому моменту не пришел бы в жизни. Поэтому и в жизни, и в доме, везде, то есть воспитание, в первую очередь. То есть … то, что, нас воспитали более свободно и учили быть ответственными. Всегда отвечать за свои слова, отвечать за свои действия, как бы отвечать за свою жизнь, самостоятельно.

Chingizit, Tore[30] and my relatives like to talk about it everywhere, “We are Chingizit, Tore. Our eighth ancestor is Abylai Khan [King].” If you go further, you can find Genghis Khan [King]. So, my relatives like to talk about it. But I don’t like it at all. I received vospitanie from other people, and in our regions, people don’t ask about blood ties, etc. … No matter whatever strong genes I had, genes of some kings or what not, without my vospitanie I would not have come to this moment in my life. That is why in life and at home, vospitanie is the most important. In other words, the fact that we received such vospitanie based on freedom and teaching responsibility and to always be responsible for your own words and actions, i.e., to be independently responsible for your own life had an impact.

[30] Tore is considered a social group in Kazakhstan outside of Kazakh’s genealogical clan system. They are the descendants of Genghis Khan’s elder son Juchi. As Olzhas noted Tore tends to consider themselves aristocrats since in ancient Kazakh society kings (khans) were elected from Tore descendants.

In the above excerpts, in addition to emphasizing that vospitanie is more important than genes, Olzhas shared multiple examples of how the vospitanie of his grandparents formed his habitus, including teaching by example [grandparents are wise, calm/non-conflicting people], hard work, and independently taking responsibility for your life. This habitus was significant in facilitating Olzhas's aspirations not only in school but in university and beyond as it guided his actions. This way, Olzhas shows that the most important value of social capital (grandparents) for him was vospitanie. Specifically, the most important way his grandparents facilitated his aspirations was shaping him through vospitanie not through instrumental means such as enrolling him in university. While his grandparents' vospitanie did eventually help him to enroll at the university, what Olzhas found most valuable in his relationships was not that they helped him with this one instrumental goal in transactional sense but in that they formed his habitus through vospitanie. This vospitanie had a long-term impact on facilitating his educational and career aspirations.

Transition to University and Life After University

Although this vospitanie was foundational in shaping his character and moral values and guided his actions throughout life, the role and direct influence of grandparents and parents changed after he transitioned to university. This transition manifested in relation to taking personal responsibility for the challenges and problems he encountered in the unfamiliar field of university because he realized that "this is a big city and the rules here are different, and I have to behave differently" [*здесь это большой город и другие правила. Здесь такой нужно вести себя по-другому*]. He immediately realized that he no longer could expect his parents or relatives to come and help resolve his problems similar to what they did when he would be caught by police in his village. Furthermore, he no longer consulted parents or grandparents

about his personal, educational, or career aspirations such as internships, jobs, getting a car or apartment. In other words, he took responsibility for his aspirations as well.

While it is true that not only Olzhas, but most of the other participants of the study learnt to take responsibility for their actions and live independently after moving away from family, they continuously referenced their tarbiyeh or in Olzhas' case, vospitanie, as grounding their actions. For instance, Olzhas continuously referenced how responsibility and hard work remained critical aspects of his personality, grounding his actions. On the other hand, some participants whose parents used different approaches to their vospitanie from Olzhas's grandparents such as strict discipline, control, and shaming, explained how they were shy and had a hard time being self-confident in expressing their thoughts in and outside class at the university, and how this is the quality they were still working to change. This is not surprising given Bourdieu and Wacquant's (1992) argument in relation to habitus being "durable, but not eternal" (p. 133)

Analysis of Olzhas' story demonstrates that his grandparents' vospitanie laid a foundation for his actions not only during school years but throughout his life. He frequently referenced his vospitanie in relation to what he did or did not do in certain situations such as dealing with injustices. As he said:

Не знаю, я привык всегда вот комплексы или правильно, но нас так воспитывали, что я всегда ищу проблему в себе. Если что-то со мной не так случилось, то я сам в этом виноват. Может даже если	I am used to always, maybe it is a flaw, or it is the right thing to do, I don't know, but due to my vospitanie I always search for problems in me. If something wrong happened to me, it means I am the one to blame. Even if it is some

какая-то несправедливость не случилось, значить я сам виноват в этом. Значит я там, где-то не доглядел, где-то что-то неправильно свою позицию выставил. Поэтому со мною так обошлись. … И после этого я начинаю искать там в других местах. И там, смотреть, как бы, по сторонам.	kind of injustice, it means I am the one to blame. It means I was treated this way because I was not able to articulate my position well or missed something. … Only after I look for problems in me, do I start searching for them outside and look around.

In this quote, Olzhas's action to initially blame himself in any situation even if it seems unjust, is an example of him taking responsibility for his actions as his grandparents taught him in the process of vospitanie. Responsibility, independence, and hard work were constantly referenced throughout his story as examples of his vospitanie that grounded his actions.

Despite retaining the base of this vospitanie, Olzhas built relationships with other people who also participated in his vospitanie through transforming his habitus from childhood. While the self-blame Olzhas described above was his response based on his old habitus formed through grandparents' vospitanie, as Olzhas encountered new fields and met new people, he learnt to advocate for himself. Specifically, he was exposed to mentors, who taught him the importance of valuing oneself and advocating for oneself, and his vospitanie shifted to accommodate this new worldview. One illustrative example is how Olzhas was able to get a promotion based on his advocacy after his colleague and good friend told him that he was being treated unfairly:

У меня были коллеги, которые были старше меня на 5–6 лет, но я их обучал. … У них должности тоже были повыше меня, оказывается, и зарплата была по выше. Я вообще, как там понял, что через год полтора я понял, что я вообще про деньги не думал. … У меня была цель вот работать нормально. И потом, я осознал, что, оказывается, я обучаю людей, которые получают в два раза больше меня денег. Почему так происходит? Хотя я сам к этому не пришел. Мне один из них сам сказал. Один мой хороший друг, коллега, говорит, "Что ты нас обучаешь? Ты ходишь тут. А какая у тебя зарплата? А что у тебя должность простая?" А я, "Правда, а почему так?"

I had colleagues who were older than me for 5-6 years, and I was training them. … Their positions were higher than mine, and later I learnt that their salary is also higher than mine. Only after 1-1.5 years, did I realize that I completely did not think about money. … My goal was to work well. Then I realized that I am training people whose salary is twice higher than mine. Why is this the case? But I did not come to this on my own. One good friend and colleague told me, "Why are you training us? Doing all this work. What is your salary? Why is your position so basic?" Then I thought, "Really, why is that so?"

This is the moment when Olzhas learnt he was being treated unfairly in comparison to his senior colleagues. Encouraged by his friend and colleague, he went to his leadership and advocated for himself. Initially, his advocacy efforts were unsuccessful because he "naively trusted" [*поверил искренне*] that the leadership would actually do what they promised him to do. After a long process of negotiations with his current job and new job offers, he was able to get a

promotion with a much higher salary than he expected. Advice of one of his team leaders and mentors was critical in helping him to make the final decision with job offers. This is an illustrative example of changing habitus because Olzhas's attitude to work changed from focusing only on "working hard" [grandparents' vospitanie] and expected to get paid fairly to proactively advocating for himself and his worth. This does not mean that Olzhas no longer was hardworking or values hard work as an important part of his habitus. It rather shows how his habitus adapted in encountering a new field and learning the rules of the game in his workplace. Olzhas described this moment in his life as transformative because it changed his perspective of himself:

Я у меня все несколько раз перевернулась. Я реально самооценка себя, в общем, много раз перевернулась. Потому что, не знаю, из детства или откуда это все идет. То, что там, я всегда считал себя вот простой парень из деревни и я не достоин такого.	Inside me transformed several times. To be honest, my self-worth transformed many times. Because, I don't know, maybe from childhood or what not, I always thought of myself as a simple guy from the village, and I am not worth such things.

This example illustrates the transformative impact of this experience on Olzhas's perception of himself (habitus). Analyzing this example from traditional Bourdieu's lens, in which the value of social capital lies in instrumental benefits (promotion), it would disregard the transformative impact it had on Olzhas's habitus. Particularly, while this experience including his mentor's guidance (social capital) helped him to achieve his promotion goal, what Olzhas found most valuable was not limited to getting promoted; in fact, transformation of his view of himself (habitus) was more valuable for Olzhas because it had a long-term impact on his pursuit of

aspirations. This example also shows that tarbiyeh is not a static process but dynamic since Olzhas' habitus was changing through new experiences and new people in new fields, who all participated in giving tarbiyeh to him in new ways.

Adding to the complexity of how tarbiyeh grows or transforms while maintaining connection to the early tarbiyeh is how it influences the navigation of the world of social capital. That is, tarbiyeh is continually influenced by social connections, but tarbiyeh also influences choices of social connections. Specifically, analysis of Olzhas' friendship relationships showed that he tended to form close friendship relationships with those who reinforced his own tarbiyeh. For instance, he surrounded himself with people that he believed to be responsible, hardworking, and independent, who shared his worldview and values.

У меня есть свои круга друзей около 10 человек. … Вот эти друзья ребята они кто в параллельном группе учились, кто-то с военной кафедры, еще то где-то. Но мы с ними скучковались, и как бы одну компанию нашли, и начали друг другу хорошие связи друг другом появились. … И там у нас общие интересы, общие взгляды на жизнь. То есть, там никто не пьет, никто там ниче не потребляет, правильные взгляды. Там религиозные некоторые правильные взгляды. То есть, которые нас объединяют. И за счет	I have my own circle of about 10 friends. … These friends I met either because they studied in parallel groups [at university] or military department [at the university] or elsewhere. We cliqued and found each other and started building svyazi with each other. … We all have common interests, shared worldview to life. I mean no one drinks alcohol or has any addictions. All with correct worldviews including some correct religious views. In other words, these things bring us together and because of that we

этого, у нас хорошая компания сложилось. … Мы друг другу заменяем вот эту роль, то есть друзей-родственников, которые всегда помогут что-то не так наоборот поддержат каких-то сложных ситуациях всегда оказываются рядом.	formed a good company. … We play the role of family for each other. In other words, we are like friend-relatives, who would always help in any situation and support in difficult situations by being together.

The quote above shows that in forming close friendships, Olzhas prioritized not the influential or right connections in an instrumental sense but the connections that reinforced his own tarbiyeh as Olzhas highlighted that they came together because of “shared worldview to life.” On the other hand, he was not as close with his extended relatives because they did not share his value for independence. He mentioned that he tries to set boundaries in interacting with his extended family relatives because he does not want to get involved in their family issues or allow them to intervene in his life. By extended family Olzhas meant those family members who were not part of his immediate family (his mother, grandparents, and elder brother). As he said, “It is better to set boundaries. Every family is its own institution, and it has to be like that” [*Лучше ограничить. Каждая семья — это же отдельный институт, отдельное государство, и оно должно быть так и быть*]. In other words, tarbiyeh guided him in selecting social groups, even above those extended family members who were not a significant part of and did not align with his tarbiyeh. This reinforces the idea of youth participants building relationships not based on familial ties but rooted in their ethical values (inspired by tarbiyeh) as shown in Chapter 4.

Olzhas' story demonstrates how his habitus formed through the process of vospitanie of his grandparents, which guided him throughout his life including such critical moments as teenage years and transition to university and independent life in the city. Particularly, such personal qualities as responsibility and hard work instilled by his grandparents' vospitanie guided his actions in these critical moments of life including his choices of close friends. At the same time, as Olzhas transitioned to university and workplaces, he developed new social capital, which played an important role in his vospitanie process either by reinforcing his old habitus or transforming it.

Dariya's story: "The Only Single Thing That Helped is the Mindset, and the Mindset is Impacted by Tarbiyeh"

Ұяда не көрсең, ұшқанда соны ілерсің	What you see in your nest is what you catch when you fly.

Kazakh folk saying about family tarbiyeh

Next, I will share Dariya's story to further enhance my arguments about the significance of tarbiyeh for participants' pursuit of aspirations and demonstrate (1) how one's family tarbiyeh guided them in navigating the world of social capital, and (2) how their newly developed social capital was part of the tarbiyeh process by reinforcing old habitus or transforming it. I chose to focus on Dariya's story because tarbiyeh emerged as an important concept during my analysis of her story. Dariya provides illustrative examples of how parents' tarbiyeh remains significant even when it has limitations such as the lack of dominant upper-and-middle class forms of cultural and social capital. Dariya further shows explicit examples of how peers at times challenge parents' tarbiyeh, thus participating in the process of transformation of habitus.

At the time of our interview in September 2020, Dariya was 27 years old and was home on maternity leave with her seven-months old daughter. She had successfully graduated from her bachelor's and master's degrees in Telecommunications from Arman University, had experience working in her field of interest for over two years, got married and lived a year in the United Kingdom with her husband while he was pursuing his master's degree. Yet, Dariya started her story by sharing, "I am the girl, who was born at home not in hospital. I was born in the cold winter in a small village with about 20 households. There were no schools in that village. I was born into a family of shepherds" [*Мен жалпы үйде туылған қызбын, больницада туылмағанмын. Қыстың аязында, кішкентай 20 шақты үйде, қазір қыр деп айтады ғой, сондай жерде туылған қызбын, прям үйде босандырып алған. Ол жерде ешқандай мектеп ешнәрсе болмаған. Малмен айналысатын, шаруа отбасында дүниеге келгем*].

When she was six, her family moved to a neighboring village of about 2,000 residents which had a school. She spent her next 11 years in that school. Dariya's school had about 350 students in total and was considered among the better resourced schools in the district of about 15 villages due to its status of a lyceum[31]. For this reason, Dariya believed that she received a good education in school. Despite being a well-resourced school in the district, about 60-65% of Dariya's classmates left school after the 9th grade because "they were not doing well academically and/or were not interested in continuing their education" [*сабақ оқымайтындар, оқығысы келмейтіндер ғой кететіндер. Жалғыз себеп сол деп ойлаймын, нет смылса дальше продолжить учиться в школе*]. Among the ones who completed the 11th grade, about

[31] Schools that have a lyceum status are the ones that offer advanced curricula in several subjects including social sciences, humanities, or STEM. These schools typically have better infrastructure and resources than regular schools.

40% enrolled at the university. Furthermore, in describing socioeconomic status of her family, Dariya noted:

Кешегі опроста ойландым, "Мен қай деңгейге жатамын? деп. Қазір ойласам, мүмкін ең төменгі деңгейге де жататын шығармын деп ойладым кеше. Себебі мамам тек қана вахтер болып істеді, папам тоже мектепте плотник болып жұмыс істеді. … Бізге опрос ішіндегідей тамақ жетпеді дейтіндей де болған жоқ, киім жетпейді дейтіндей де болған жоқ. … Біздің отбасымызда прям күшті ақша табатындай ондай адам болған жоқ. Минимально өмір сүрдік деп айтсақ болады.	When I was completing your survey, I concluded that my family is at the lowest socioeconomic status because my mother was just a janitor, and my father worked as a carpenter in school. ... We were not hungry or lacked clothing. … [But] no one in our family earned good salary. I can say we did not have much growing up.

Dariya also highlighted her family's limited experience with higher education as the first-generation student; the highest education level completed by her father was secondary school whereas her mother had a vocational certificate. Despite these challenges, Dariya was the only student in her cohort who received the Golden medal[32] and was admitted to the prestigious university in Kazyna.

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[32] In Kazakhstan, school graduates who present distinguished results in studies are awarded "Altyn Belgi" (Gold Medal). The successful recipient of the gold medal is a student whose annual total grades for each subject between grades 5-11 were "5 (excellent)" and he/she was able to get "5 (excellent)" grade at the state school completion exam. Recipients of Altyn Belgi will have a priority in the higher education admission process over the students who have the same UNT score.

School Years: Mother's Tarbiyeh

In reflecting on her journey, and what impacted her pursuit of academic and career aspirations, Dariya concluded that her mother's tarbiyeh had the biggest impact. As she noted:

Ол жердегі енді жалғыз көмектесетін баланың бойындағы сана. Ол санаға әсер ететін тәрбие деп ойлаймын. Мен, значит, менің ата-анам сондай тәрбие бергендіктен, менің санама тек қана оқу ғана келіп тұр, и сила воли сөйтіп қалыптасты. Сила волидың арқасында мен ұйқыға да, сол кездегі қызығушылықтар, сотка да, қызығушылық қой енді, беріліп шығып кетпей, өзімнің направлениямнан, жолымнан тайқып кетпей, бітіруіме тек қана тәрбиенің арқасында қалыптасқан ой-сана мен сила воли деп ойлаймын. Басқа фактор жоқ сияқты. Ол кезде тек қана баланың бойына тек сол нәрсе керек сияқты.	The only single thing that helps is the mindset, and the mindset is impacted by tarbiyeh. Because my parents gave me such tarbiyeh, the only thing that my mind is thinking is to study, and my willpower formed that way. With the help of my willpower, I did not turn away from my pathway despite sleep deprivation, various interests, and temptations at the time such as cell phones. I think that is the only thing that a child needs at that time [during school years].

Dariya's attribution of her relative success in pursuing aspirations in comparison to her rural classmates to tarbiyeh mirrors the attributions of Olzhas and many other participants. Like Olzhas, Dariya identifies that it was family tarbiyeh (in her case willpower), not any situational

advantages or inherent personal strengths that led to successful pursuit of her aspirations. This interview excerpt also shows that the value of tarbiyeh for Dariya was in forming her mindset and willpower (habitus) not in whether or not it helped her in an instrumental sense such as enrollment at the university. While her mother's tarbiyeh rooted in what scholars called "academic script" was critical in her ability to enroll at a prestigious university, its impact was more comprehensive than just "academic script" narrative in the literature.

This argument is further strengthened by Dariya's perception that most of her peers in rural school were not as successful as her in pursuing their aspirations and enrolling at the university because they did not have the "right tarbiyeh:"

Тәрбие дұрыс болмады, біріншіден, оларды тәйт дейтін адам болмады, құрықтап отыратын адам болмады. Сол себептен де оларда дұрыс сана қалыптаспады. "Е, мен сөйтіп жүре берсем болады екен, значит бәрібір екен," деген ой қалыптасты. Сол үшін олар мән бермеді. Ойы басқа жақта болды.	First of all, they did not have the right tarbiyeh; there was no one to discipline them. That is why they did not have the right mindset. They thought, "It is ok for me to be like this, no one cares." That is why they did not pay attention, and their mind was elsewhere.

This excerpt is significant because it emphasized the argument about the significance of tarbiyeh for one's pursuit of aspirations as Dariya argues that the reason most of her rural peers were not as successful as herself is the lack of "the right tarbiyeh." In other words, Dariya believes that she was more successful than her peers in pursuing her aspirations because she had better tarbiyeh than them.

In addition to demonstrating the importance of family tarbiyeh, further analysis of Dariya's story gives important illustration of tarbiyeh as an interactive process. While in Olzhas' story, his grandparents' tarbiyeh was based on freedom of choice and teaching responsibility, for Dariya, it was about the strict discipline and control of her mother. It is evident that Olzhas' grandparents and Dariya's mother used different approaches to tarbiyeh; however, it was up to Olzhas and Dariya to determine how to respond to these tarbiyeh approaches. In other words, as agentic beings, youth are active not passive participants of tarbiyeh process. This shows the interactive nature of tarbiyeh since it was not only about how tarbiyeh was given but how each individual youth interacted with it. This argument is further enhanced by Dariya's further explanation about her mother's tarbiyeh, and its differing impact on her versus her elder brother, who did not enroll in the university but instead attended a vocational education institution in a small nearby city. Dariya argues that her mother's tarbiyeh was the same for both kids, but it did not have the same impact on Dariya's brother since he did not form a similar value of education and academic excellence. As Dariya explained, "My mom was very strict. … I probably was like that because my mom was strict. … She was strict with my elder brother too, but my brother did not study like me" [*Бірақ мамам қатал болды. Сол мамамның қаталдығынан шығар менің сөйтіп неткенім. Бірақ ағама қатал болған мамам, бірақ ағам мен сияқты оқымады*]. Dariya believed that these differences were due to the gendered nature of tarbiyeh as she stated, "Boys should be disciplined by their father. But my father was not strict at all. … Probably because my dad did not say anything, my brother was instead impacted by his peers in class" [*Ер баланы, негізі, әкесі құрықтау керек қой, негізі. Бірақ бізде папам мүлдем қатал емес тұғын. ... Может сол үшін шығар, папам айтпағандықтан ба, ағам жоғары класста достарына еліктеп кетті ма*].

While my study does not offer conclusive evidence about gendered nature of tarbiyeh, a topic to be explored in future research, it is evident that Dariya's brother did not interact with his mother's tarbiyeh in the same way as Dariya did. According to Dariya, his peers in class might have had more impact on his tarbiyeh.

"There Was No One to Tell Me"

Tarbiyeh had value for Dariya even though it had limitations such as the lack of access to dominant upper-and-middle class forms of social and cultural capital. Although Dariya was relatively successful in relation to her peers from similar backgrounds, she had regrets about her educational and career pathways. Upon reflection, she realized that having people to guide her and share useful information in her life could have helped her to make better choices about her education and career. For instance, Dariya named just one experience as responsible for her choice of major because of the lack of any other guidance. Specifically, she heard of her chosen major (Telecommunications) for the first time during a visit of a private university to her school; however, she "had no idea" who she would become if she studied that major. As she recalled:

Ешқандай маған лично айтатын адам болмады. Мүмкін ол менің алдымда, жаңағыдай, үлкен қалаларда оқитын туыстарым болмағандығы ма, әлде ауылдық жерде болғандықтан, жаңағыдай, көп адам ондай жерлерге бармайтын болғандықтан ба, білмеймін. Информация

There was no one to tell me. Maybe it is because I had no relatives who studied in big cities or may be because I was from the village, and not many people went to such places. There was a lack of information. I did not know that there were other majors

аз болды сол кезде. Білмедім басқа

мамандықтар бар екенін.

She continued to share the impact of the lack of guiding people and information after she started her studies in the university. For instance, she shared that she missed opportunities for learning English or traveling abroad through the Work and Travel USA program, "If I knew I would have participated. But no one told me. No one participated before me" [*Мен, мысалы, ол кезде Work and Travel-дың не екенін білген жоқпын, тоже барушы едім. Бірақ маған ешкім айтпады, менің алдымда ешкім бармады*].

Dariya's reflection on the lack of guidance and information aligns with Appadurai's (2004) theory of capacity to aspire since she lacked scripts to pursue her aspirations. This is not surprising given that Dariya is the first in her family to attend university and lacked dominant upper-and-middle class forms of social capital and cultural capital. Such lack of information and guidance was a consistent theme in other participants' stories. Although most participants shared the critical role of support from their parents, they shared how the lack of information constrained the type of support their parents could provide, especially in relation to major and university choice, career opportunities, and navigation of life at university.

What is significant and distinct about Dariya's discussion of the lack of guiding people is how she circled back to tarbiyeh. One might assume that Dariya had regrets about not having people to guide her or share useful information as primarily connected to achievement of instrumental goals such as enrollment at university or participation in study abroad opportunities. However, for Dariya, what was important about having such guiding people was connected to their role in expanding her mindset, which Dariya previously noted as connected to tarbiyeh. As she shared:

Или ой-санамнын бұдан ертерек кеңеюіне информацияның, айтатын адамның аздығынан, наверное, кештеу түсіндім деп ойлаймын. … Мен мүмкіндікті пайдаланып, сондай таныстар іздеуші едім. ... Больше өзіме интересный адамдарды окружать етіп, соларды более позновать етіп, өзіме керек нәрсені қабылдап, ой-санамды кеңейтуге тырысушы едім. Уже ой-санам кеңейсе, өзіңді табасың да ондай кезде. Өзіңе интересно бағытты тауып, сол бағытта кетесін. ... [Бірақ] ондай адамдар қоршамады ол кезде. Сол үшін менің ой-санам аз болды ол кезде.	I probably realized too late the importance of guiding people and information in expanding my mindset. I would look for someone who could guide me and share information. I would probably search for tanys. I would try to surround myself with interesting people, get to know them, and learn from them and grow my mindset. If you expand your mindset, you find yourself. You find what interests you and move in that direction… [But] I was not surrounded by those kinds of people. That is why my mindset was limited at that time.

Dariya was self-critical of her “limited mindset” because she was not able to expand it through finding people to guide her, traveling abroad, and learning about other people’s values. This can be interpreted as Dariya identifying a wish to have had more people involved in her tarbiyeh process. At the same time, through her examples she emphasized the value of tarbiyeh in her life. She aspired to “search for tanys” (social capital) not only because these people might help her achieve her goals in an instrumental sense (choosing major, enrolling at university, study abroad) but because of their impact on shaping her mindset. In other words, the primary value of social capital for Dariya lies in their ability to expand her mindset, which is broader than

the personal transactional value often discussed in social capital literature (see, for example, Bourdieu, 1986; Burt, 1997; Coleman, 1988; Dika & Singh, 2002).

Despite Dariya's critical reflection on the lack of guidance and informational support from parents, it did not diminish her perceived significance of mother's tarbiyeh in her life. When asked about what helped Dariya most to access university, she immediately highlighted her mother's tarbiyeh as most significant.

Although family's role was formative in shaping one's worldview and mindset as highlighted by Dariya, it is important to emphasize that tarbiyeh is a multidimensional and dynamic process. This multidimensional and dynamic nature of tarbiyeh was particularly evident in Dariya's discussion of her peers at the university. On the one hand, participants' family tarbiyeh guided her in choosing friends, on the other hand, her peers, particularly at the university, reinforced or transformed her worldview and values through participation in tarbiyeh process.

"My Friend Azhar was a Big Tarbiyeh School for Me"

As Dariya transitioned to university, similar to other participants in the study, she experienced challenges adjusting to a new environment both academically and socially. She was placed in the dorm with 12 people, most of whom were from Shymkent. She was "shocked" not only because of the number of people but also because she was told by her family to "stay away from them [people from Shymkent]" [*Оларға, Шымкенттіктерге, жолама деген понятия болатын*].

Dariya initially followed this guidance from her family by taking a different pathway than her roommate from Shymkent in walking to university even though she was also her groupmate. This stress caused by transition challenges and stereotyping of others made her

consider transferring to a less prestigious university not far from her village. Interestingly, this situation illustrated how tarbiyeh can also have negative effects, in this case teaching stereotypes about people from certain regions. However, in Dariya's case, her family tarbiyeh, though it partially caused the problem, was also how she overcame the transition challenges. Specifically, her willpower and her commitment to excellence played an important role in enabling her to move on with her studies, "I think my willpower helped. ... It was my aspiration to strive towards my goals. Only if I study well will I achieve big heights. ... That is why I studied well" *[Ол жерде де сила воли болатын шығар. ... Өзіңнің мақсатыңа жетуге деген талпыныс ғана шығар. Егер оқымасам мен қайда каламын дегендей да. ... Сол үшін ғана жақсы оқыдым*].

Here, Dariya again was highlighting her willpower, which she previously pointed out as being formed through mother's tarbiyeh, as critical for overcoming transition challenges. Therefore, it shows that family tarbiyeh continued to be a driving force to pursue her aspirations at the university. Despite the challenges of transition in her first semester she continued to strive for excellence and study.

Beyond family, Dariya highlighted the critical role of her peers at the university in overcoming the transition challenges. Her peers did not only provide emotional support but also participated in Dariya's tarbiyeh process:

Бір-бірімізді сөйтіп тауып алдық деп ойлаймын. … Сөйтіп кейін қыздарым өте жақсы қыздар болды. ... Жетеуміз подружка болдық. Бірақ екеуміз бір-бірімізді қатты тартатынбыз. Бір жағынан

We found each other. … [So] then my girls turned out to be good people. … All seven girls were friends, but we were best friends with her [friend from Shymkent]. We also were classmates, not only roommates. We

группалас деген тағы бір статусымыз бар екеміздің. Екеуміз почти бүкіл уақытты бірге өткіземіз, әрі бір комнатада тұрамыз. Басқаларға қарағанда сол екеуміз бір бірімізді қатты тартатынбыз. Мінезіміздің көп ұқсастығынан шығар деп ойлаймын. … Барлығы тәрбиелі, барлығы қарапайым. Орталарында баршылықта өмір сүріп келген қыздар болды, бірақ тоже өте қарапайым болды. Менсінбеушілік болмады. … Сол жеті қыз әлі күнге дейін араласамыз. Сол жеті қыздың, қалған қыздардың арқасында шығар кейін сол үйреніп кетіп. … Сәттілік болған шығар деп ойлаймын, өзімнің мінезіме сәйкес келетін адамдарды жолықтырып, сол мінездерді … бекіттім деп ойлаймын. … Егер ортамызда, араласатын ортамызда, бір адамның мінезі бізге жақпайтындай болатын болса, сәл отталкиваем дейді ғой, алыстан араласқандай, сөйтетінбіз. Но сами понимаем оныкі дұрыс емес. …

spent all of our time together. We connected better with each other than anyone else probably because we had similar personalities. … They [seven roommates] all were tarbiyeli [had good tarbiyeh], humble. There were some who came from wealthier backgrounds, but they also were humble. There was no negligence. We are still friends with those seven girls. I think I got used to it [adapted to university life] with the help of those seven girls and other friends. … I think I was lucky I met good people in my life whose personalities matched mine, and they helped me to cement my good qualities. I did not have people in my surrounding whose bad qualities impacted me. … I think if we meet people whose personalities we don't like we try to avoid them or keep a distance from them because we understand they [what they are doing] are not right. …

I say to this day, I think, for instance, my friend Azhar [the one from Shymkent] was a

Мен әлі де айтамын, өзім де ойлаймын, мысалға, өзімнің подругам Ажар үлкен тәрбие мектебі болды деп, прям айтамын да. Шынымен, қарапайым нәрсенің өзінен, мысалы, просто кетіп бара жатып жевачка лақтырып кетудің өзін ол дұрыс емес екендігін, олай істеуге болмайтындығын, біреуге жамандық жасауға болмайтындығын, сондай кішкентай мелочь нәрселерден бастап, нәрселерді сол Ажар арқылы өзімнің бойыма сіңіріп, қалыптастырдым деп ойлаймын. Сол үшін мен тәрбие мектебі болды деп мен Ажарымды солай айтамын. Жолымызда кездескен адамдардың жақсы қасиеттері болса алуға тырыстық. Бірақ досың қандай болса, сен де сондай боласың дейді ғой. Адам қандай болса, соның качестволары жұғады деп ойлаймын. Сол подругамның оң әсері болды деп ойлаймын. Жақсы қасиеттері жұқты деп ойлаймын. … Бірақ группаммен маған повезло, прям ұлдары

big tarbiyeh school for me. It is true. Even things like that it is wrong to throw away bubble gum on the street, and that you should not do bad things to other people, from small things like that to other things, I formed with the help of my Azhar. That is why I say, my Azhar was my tarbiyeh school. We tried to take the good qualities of people we met in our life journey. They say, “You become like your friends.” I think the qualities of people around you impact you. I think she had a good impact on me. Her good qualities impacted me. …

I was [also] lucky with my groupmates, boys were tarbiyeli [had good tarbiyeh] and girls were very good people too.

да өте тәрбиелі, қыздары да өте жақсы

қыздар болды

This interview excerpt is significant for three reasons. First, it shows the critical role of peers in supporting Dariya during the difficult transition period. Similar to Olzhas and other participants, this peer support had a more direct impact than parents' because parents were far away and could not guide her in navigating life in the university due to the lack of dominant forms of cultural capital. Dariya shared multiple examples of how her friends in the dorm and classmates supported each other including group study, advocacy, and emotional support. Although the significance of peer support for navigating university life and/or inequity barriers is discussed in the literature (Jack, 2019; Pellowski Wiger, 2016; Leonard, 2005), peers' role in the process of tarbiyeh is not explored. Second, Dariya's new friends participated in the tarbiyeh process by reinforcing Dariya's good qualities (honesty) while changing her perception about certain things by challenging the stereotypes instilled by Dariya' family tarbiyeh, i.e., changing habitus. As such, peers actively participated in the tarbiyeh process (e.g., "My Azhar was my tarbiyeh school"). This demonstrates the multidimensional, dynamic, and interactive nature of tarbiyeh. Third, while initially Dariya's family tarbiyeh led her to avoid people from certain regions (Shymkent people) because of stereotypes, after Dariya learnt that her peers' tarbiyeh in fact aligned with hers, she became good friends with them. As such, her choice of friends was based on how *tarbiyehli* (having tarbiyeh) she perceived them to be. Here, tarbiyeh impacted not only Dariya's mindset, but it also impacted her perception of others' tarbiyeh. In the end, Dariya concluded that in choosing friends it is important to pay attention to their tarbiyeh not regional/clan affiliations or socioeconomic status because "it is not about the person; it depends on their tarbiyeh" [*а так адамға емес, тәрбиеге байланысты барлығы деп*]. This is

significant because it shows that Dariya's tarbiyeh guided her in choosing friends at the university.

Beyond university and school, Dariya argued that in life people's choices of friends are guided by their tarbiyeh:

Егер көзқарастары егер бір-біріне ұқсас болса, тек бір нәрсе туралы емес, көп нәрсеге, егер біраз нәрсеге, өмірдегі маңызды деген нәрселерге көзқарастары бірдей болатын болса, адамдар уже біріне-бірі тартылатын сияқты. Мысалы, адамдар болады, кейбіреулер өте активный, анандай, сәл кішкене өтірік айта салса ниче деген сияқты, кейбір жерде қосып жіберіп, ары қарай спокойно өмір сүре береді дальше дегендей сияқты адамдар болады да. Ондай адамдар өзі де сондай адамдармен дос болып жүреді былай қарасаң. Ал кейбір адамдар болады, наоборот, жаңағы тек қана түп-түзу жүргенді, тіке жүргенді жақсы көретін адамдар болады. ... Өзі адамдардың құндылығы қандай, қандай нәрсені, өзі қандай, жалпы сондай адамдар жолығатын

I think people become friends because their worldviews match. I mean worldview not only about one thing but many things, particularly important things in life. Such people attract each other. For instance, some people might think it is ok to lie a little bit. So, they might lie and continue to live their lives peacefully. I see those people becoming friends with others who are like that too. On the other hand, some people might be committed to being on the right pathway in life [fairness, honesty]. ... So, depending on the values of an individual they meet similar people on their pathway because they attract each other like a magnet. It is true that people's tarbiyeh guides them in choosing friends.

шығар, наверное, адамдарға. И сол адам
өзіне тартылады. Сондай адамдар бір-біріне
как магнит тартылып тұрып бір-бірімен дос
болып кететін шығар. Шынымен дос
таңдағанда тәрбиесіне қарап таңдайсың.

In interpreting how Dariya's viewpoint supports tarbiyeh as continuing to influence the social capital one forms through friends, there are a few important things to keep in mind. Specifically, tarbiyeh had a comprehensive impact on the formation of an individual's value system towards life in general, beyond only academics and career. In other words, similar tarbiyeh does not necessarily mean that people become friends simply because they both are committed to doing well academically or in career, but because their values system to what it means to live a good life match.

To conclude, Dariya's story demonstrates that her mother's tarbiyeh shaped her mindset and willpower and played a significant role in facilitating her educational and career aspirations, even though this tarbiyeh had its limitations. Desired social capital and social networks are those that reinforce her own tarbiyeh. In other words, in building social capital at the university, Dariya chose networks because they "fit" with her worldviews inspired by tarbiyeh not because of her personal economic goals. More broadly, this connects to the idea of how tarbiyeh becomes an ethical guide in leveraging social capital discussed in Chapter 4.

Chapter Discussion and Conclusion

In this chapter, by focusing on individual stories of Olzhas and Dariya, I demonstrated the significant value of tarbiyeh for youth in the study in several ways. First, tarbiyeh played a

critical role in successful pursuit of participants' aspirations, primarily because tarbiyeh shaped their moral judgment, worldview, and study habits (habitus), which guided participants actions and vision of a good life. Second, the most important value of social capital for participants in the study was connections with people who were part of their tarbiyeh process including its formation, reinforcement, or transformation not only about the "right" or influential connections in an instrumental sense. For participants in this study, people who provided tarbiyeh included their family and mentors, who were generally a "guide type of tanys" mentioned in Chapter 4, and peers, who often provided timely advice to reflect upon. Third, participants' tarbiyeh guided them in navigating the world of social capital including the choice of close friends.

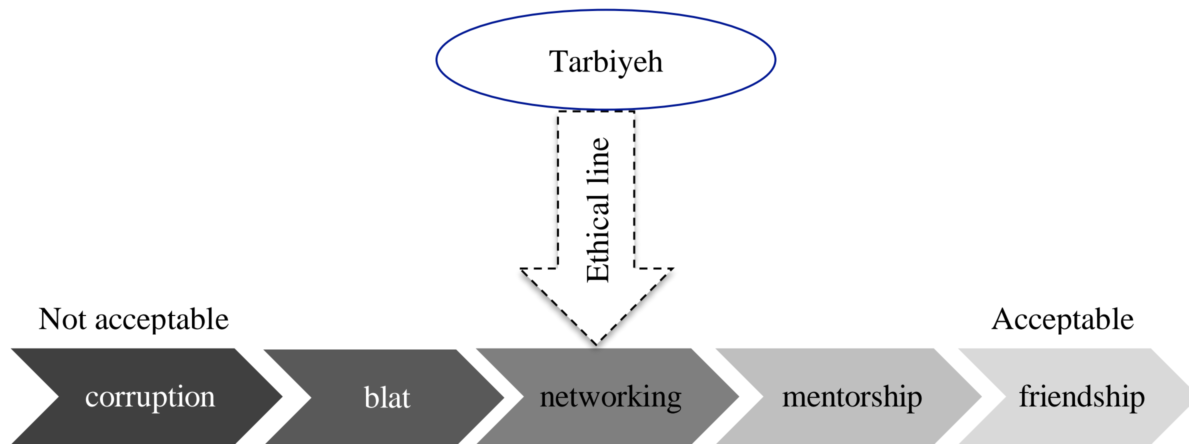
Based on these arguments, I argue that as the process shaping habitus (including ethical dispositions) of individuals, tarbiyeh guided the ethical line on the social capital continuum discussed in Chapter 4. Therefore, in Figure v, I illustrate the modified visual of the conceptualization of social capital on a continuum. In other words, tarbiyeh guides the ethical line that participants set for themselves in choosing if/when and how to leverage social capital.

Through the stories of Olzhas and Dariya, I demonstrated that tarbiyeh had an important value for youth participants. Tarbiyeh shaped participants' worldview and moral judgment, guided them in navigating the world of social capital, and overall guided them in living the perceived "good life." Understanding the value of tarbiyeh for participants in the study was important in understanding their life trajectories and how and why social capital matters to them. Although the tarbiyeh as described in this chapter was specific to the context of Kazakhstan and life trajectories of participants in the study, tarbiyeh sheds light on the questions that have theoretical and practical significance beyond the context of Kazakhstan. Therefore, in what follows I aim to demonstrate how tarbiyeh breaks new ground in the literature on social

reproduction. Based on the findings discussed in this chapter, I argue that tarbiyeh is a particularly helpful concept in examining how one's habitus formed and evolved through time and space, who was part of this process, and what dispositions formed as part of one's habitus. I will further argue that the examination of ethical dispositions as part of one's habitus is critical to understand youth's actions including the pursuit of aspirations and social capital. An enhanced understanding of the process of formation and transformation of habitus *and* the ethical dispositions will help to gain a nuanced understanding of how youth, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, navigate inequities in society.

Figure v

Tarbiyeh and Conceptualization of Social Capital on a Continuum



Although this study demonstrated the unique context of tarbiyeh in Kazakhstan, the process of tarbiyeh which participants in the study described happens in every society. Specifically, tarbiyeh examines the process through which habitus formed and transformed, which is applicable to any context. Human beings in any part of the world develop worldview,

character, moral sense, and their own understanding of "good life" through the process of upbringing and experiences in family, school, community, and society in which they live. Scholars use different concepts to describe this process including parenting, socialization, upbringing, nurturing, vospitanie (Russia) as well as the Arabic equivalents of tarbiyeh in other contexts including *tabia* (Tanzania), *tabiyat* (Pakistan), and tarbiyah (Arab world) (Ahmed, 2012; Rahman, 2020; Setel, 1999; Vavrus, 2021). While the previous literature extensively discussed how these processes contribute to the formation of habitus in one way or another, my study sheds further light on how youth exercise agency in this process and how habitus evolves over time.

Tarbiyeh and Agency

I find habitus a particularly helpful heuristic tool in understanding the embodied nature of dispositions, which produce certain actions in the process of dynamic interactions between agency and structures in the social field. Tarbiyeh was helpful in examining these dynamic interactions between agency and structures in the social field. Study findings showed that youth are active, not passive in the process of tarbiyeh. Youth in the study demonstrated their agency in the process of tarbiyeh in two ways. First, study findings illustrated that parents employ different tarbiyeh approaches (freedom of choice, strict control, shaming), which had a varying impact on participants in the study depending on how each individual youth responded to these approaches. In other words, there is no "one size fits all" approach in tarbiyeh. What works with one child may not be as effective with another. Second, as participants grew older, they critically reflected on the tarbiyeh they received in the family by identifying both its positive and negative aspects. As a result of this critical reflection, participants made conclusions about what they wanted to change in their tarbiyeh. While some were working on changing certain values or ways of being,

others made conclusions about tarbiyeh they want to give to their children. This shows that through analyzing the process of tarbiyeh, scholars gain insight into how youth as agentic beings interact with social structures (e.g., family, school, community) that are part of the tarbiyeh process.

Tarbiyeh and Formation/Transformation of Habitus

Tarbiyeh was helpful in examining how influential figures in participants' lives shaped their habitus (worldview, character, and moral values). Although previous studies of youth from disadvantaged backgrounds demonstrated the significance of nonmaterial resources of family in shaping youth's values and aspirations, the focus remained limited to the role of family in this process. For instance, Gofen's (2009) study of successful first-generation students in Israel demonstrated the significance of nonmaterial resources of family in breaking the intergenerational cycle such as families' belief systems, priorities, habits, and values. Gofen (2009) employed the concept of family capital to explain these nonmaterial familial influences and categorized these day-to-day actions of upbringing that facilitated academic success of children into three: attitude towards education, interpersonal relationships, and family values. While my participants' family tarbiyeh has a lot of similarities with Gofen's (2009) findings, tarbiyeh as a concept is more comprehensive than family capital. As a multidimensional process, tarbiyeh helps to examine the role of the entire social structure including people, school, social institutions, and society in the process of formation of values, character, and worldview, not only family.

Although family played a primary role during early childhood and adolescence years in the process of tarbiyeh, other people in participants' lives were also part of their tarbiyeh process including teachers, friends, and mentors. For instance, one participant mentioned the role of

school teachers in tarbiyeh process. While most teachers' role was mentioned in relation to support with education, some teachers were named as the types of teachers who "were not only good at their subject discipline but were role models in relation to tarbiyeh" [*Ол тек өз пәнінен емес, жалпы тәрбие жағынан да жақсы үлгі өнеге көрсетіп жүрген апайлардың бірі еді*] (Batyr, participant). Given that tarbiyeh was not the original focus of the study, future studies can further explore the role of schools and teachers in the process of tarbiyeh.

Furthermore, as participants transitioned to university, family's role changed, and other influential figures guided students. Although core family values such as honesty, responsibility, and commitment to academic excellence continued to guide participants actions at university and beyond, their immediate surroundings, including friends and mentors, became particularly important in the process of participants' tarbiyeh. For instance, participants highlighted the role of their peers and mentors in the tarbiyeh process. These people and new environments either reinforced participants' family tarbiyeh or transformed it. Thus, by examining the process of tarbiyeh, scholars will be able to gain insight into not only how youth habitus is formed but also how it evolves over time and space.

Tarbiyeh and Ethical Dispositions

In addition to explaining the process of formation and evolution of habitus through the concept of tarbiyeh, the study findings demonstrate the significance of examining ethical dispositions as part of one's habitus, which was largely ignored in the literature. Study findings showed that moral values shaped through tarbiyeh were significant in understanding how participants navigated an ethical line on the social capital continuum (see Figure v). Particularly, participants' habitus shaped through tarbiyeh explained when and how they leveraged social capital. While I understand moral values as part of one's habitus, previous scholarship paid little

attention to questions of morality as part of discussion of one's habitus. Even though Bourdieu acknowledged "deeply evaluative character" of actor's behavior, he primarily focused on the "valuation of these things in strategic, functional and aesthetic terms" (as cited in Sayer, 2005, p. 42). This way, Bourdieu paid limited attention to how actors also value "others and their conduct in terms of their goodness or propriety" (as cited in Sayer, 2005, p. 42). Therefore, drawing on Sayer's work (2005), I argue that habitus includes moral dispositions, which, as study findings showed, "when activated, produce moral emotions" (p. 42). As it was evident from study findings, ethical dispositions are similar to other dispositions as they became embodied through tarbiyeh. What is significant to highlight about ethical dispositions is that they are not solely driven by self-interest but can also include the wellbeing of others. This was evident from how some participants in the study considered the consequences of their actions for the wellbeing of others (see Chapter 4).

Dismissal of ethical dispositions as part of the habitus in previous scholarship is problematic because "people are evaluative beings," especially in matters related to their wellbeing (Sayer, 2005, p. 99). Such dismissal led scholars to search for answers and solutions to social problems elsewhere even though at times they were available through deeper analysis of ethical dispositions. For instance, even though the previous scholarship identified that one's habitus framed the value and use of social capital to which an individual had access (Bowman, 2010; Bourdieu, 1980/1990; Maton, 2008; Navarro, 2006), these scholars did not examine ethical dispositions as part of this habitus. As a result, youth who did not leverage capital readily accessible to them to achieve their aspirations were viewed as unaware of capital conversion possibilities (Bowman, 2010; Jack, 2019). Such lack of awareness of capital conversion possibilities was often interpreted as a result of the mismatch between one's habitus and the rules

of the game in an unfamiliar field. Consequently, raising their awareness of the hidden "rules of the game" was offered as one of the solutions to support marginalized youth academic and career success (Jack, 2019).

While participants in my study also experienced the mismatch between their habitus and various fields they were navigating, their actions in relation to whether to leverage social capital was not limited to their lack of awareness of capital conversion possibilities. On the contrary, participants in this study had a nuanced understanding of the value (currency) of social capital in the various "fields" they were navigating; however, they chose not to leverage social capital in ways that crossed the ethical line they established for themselves. This shows that youth actions go deeper than simple "lack of awareness" narrative in the literature. In-depth understanding of ethical dispositions in relation to leveraging social capital does not only center the youth agency in developing and using social capital but also provides a nuanced understanding of how habitus operates between structures and agency. This also provides us a nuanced understanding of what *matters* to actors in the social field and how they navigate inequities as Sayer (2005) stated:

> people are evaluative beings; that what befalls them matters deeply to them; they cannot develop a comfortable or contented feel for just any game, or accept just any rationale, or submit to just any 'interpellation.' No struggle is reducible to striving for power or advantage, because power or advantage can only exist in relation to goods, that is, valued things, practices and ways of life. (p. 99)

Findings from my study are helpful in making sense of what Sayer (2005) called "the obvious point" that "our relationship to the world is not simply one of accommodation or becoming skilled in its games, but, at least in some ways, one of wanting to be different and

wanting the world and its games to be different" (p. 35). Thus, by questioning the morality of "the rules of the game" of connections, participants in my study are challenging the root of these "rules," which reduce human relationships to mere transactions of exchange.

Tarbiyeh and Social Capital

Findings demonstrate that social capital for the youth in the study included caring relationships that shaped their character, worldview, and ethical dispositions through the process tarbiyeh. In the literature, the significance of such caring relationships and mentors is well explored (DeJaeghere, Pellowski Wiger, & Wangsness Willemsen, 2016; Yosso, 2005). What is not well explored in the literature is how such caring relationships shape worldview, character, and moral values, which in turn guides youth in leveraging social capital. In other words, such caring relationships were instrumental in the process of tarbiyeh for these youth, and their tarbiyeh guided them in building relationships. Specifically, study findings showed that for youth in the study, social capital was not always about finding the "right" or "influential" connections in an instrumental sense, but about finding others who reinforced their own tarbiyeh. In other words, tarbiyeh helped youth in the study navigate the world of social connections and make decisions on what they did and did not want. For most of them, it was building relationships with those who shared their vision of good life as well as their internal drive and commitment to excellence.

In sum, for youth in the study, the value of social capital went beyond the transactional value extensively discussed in social capital literature. In other words, relationships had important value for participants because they shaped their mindset, worldview, and moral sense, not simply because they helped them to achieve their personal goals in an instrumental sense. Thus, study findings challenge the scholarship that identifies the value of social capital in an

overwhelmingly instrumental sense and suggests a shift towards the scholarship that examines the moral aspect of it. The study showed that careful examination of the moral values of youth reveals what actually *matters* to youth in their relationships (value of social capital). In the next final chapter, I will discuss how these findings contribute to re-envisioning social capital theory.

Chapter 6: Discussion

Re-Envisioning Social Capital Theory

Much has been written about the critical role of social capital in shaping the employment opportunities and social mobility of youth from diverse backgrounds worldwide. Social capital is also offered as an explanation for why social inequities persist, despite the increasing numbers of diverse students in massified higher education institutions. Inspired by the explanatory power of social capital theory for interpreting my own lived experience, I was drawn to explore the role of social capital in facilitating educational and career aspirations of youth from similar rural or lower socioeconomic backgrounds in Kazakhstan. However, through immersing myself in personal narratives of my participants, I found that social capital theory in its current theorization only partially explains their exceptional education and career pathways. Through my deep engagement with my participants' stories and critical reflexivity, I came to reconsider the explanatory power of Western-centric social capital theory in my own life leading to epistemological liberation.

I realized that I fit my story into the existing theoretical framework. Specifically, in my first autoethnographic publication I focused on the instrumental value of social capital in my life - dismissing that the value of these relationships went beyond simply helping me to achieve aspirations. Although speaking of my most meaningful relationships including the ones with my grandmother, parents, friends, and mentors as "capital" was empowering at the time, it also made me write about them in a mechanistic transactional way, which is counter-intuitive to what they mean in my life. These relationships are meaningful because they have intrinsic value to me not simply because of their current or future instrumental value. In other words, I am committed to these relationships because they are "ends in themselves, not merely means to other ends"

(Sayer, 2005, p 41). Furthermore, similar to my participants, these relationships shaped (and are shaping) the person I am today, including my moral sense, mindset, and worldview as well as the life I aspire to lead. My excitement and deep engagement with social capital literature primarily theorized by scholars in the West, turned my gaze towards its instrumental and transactional value and away from its relational and moral value. My data collection was a transformative experience as it helped to critically reflect on my own story.

This epistemological liberation led me to re-envision social capital theory. Therefore, I call to re-envision social capital theory both to better understand the experiences of youth from marginalized backgrounds, as well as calling attention to the social inequities that act to marginalize youth, and the role of scholars to resist these inequities. Although the aim of this study was not to generalize but rather to contextualize the conceptualization and use of social capital in Kazakhstan, the findings of the study may be relevant to other contexts. Particularly, the study findings challenge the social capital theories that conceptualizes social capital as a possession one inherits or collects for personal gain and towards theoretical frameworks that include relational and moral aspects of it.

Challenging Dominant Social Capital Theory

In order to better understand how this study challenges the existing theorizations of social capital theory, it is important to remind readers the major aspects of dominant social capital theory. In this regard, the question about the value of social capital is central to consider. In other words, what makes one view social relationships as capital? What makes social capital "capital?" For Bourdieu, all forms of valued resources functioned as "capital" when they were "a social relation of power" or the object of social struggle (Navarro, 2006, p. 16). In other words, the transactional value of capital is based on principles of scarcity. If everyone has the same capital,

then it no longer has any perceived value. Bourdieu further argued that capital did not function except in relation to the "field" because its currency depended on the "field" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

In my critique of Bourdieu's theory, I find Sayer's (2005) excellent analysis of the moral significance of class particularly helpful. Sayer (2005) argued:

> In their mostly subconscious and fallible, but mostly practically-adequate ways, they [people] value the world. That so much social theory could miss such an obvious point is a sad testament to its estrangement from practice and the normative character of life. (p. 34)

While Sayer (2005) focused on the moral significance of class, which they argued was missing from social theory for the past 200 years, many of their ideas are also applicable to my conceptualization of social capital theory and their insights help to illuminate issues with the dominant narrative in social capital literature. According to Sayer (2005), Bourdieu understood struggle in overwhelmingly "interest-based terms, as pure power-play" (p. 98). In other words, struggles are portrayed as "a neutral competition for capital, with winners and losers" (p. 99). I do not deny that agents in the field do compete for their capital; however, merely interest and power-based struggle depoliticises it as it ignores that agents also "struggle for things which they value for their own sake, regardless whether they bring them advantage vis-a-vis others" (p. 95). As Sayer (2005) rightly points out, by ignoring moral-political content of struggles, we will fatally misunderstand their nature and normative significance in the field. Thus, to understand social inequities and resistance, it is important to explore what is the struggle about and how they are related to actor's normative concerns or as Sayer (2005) stated "why they should *matter* [emphasis original] to actors" (p. 99).

As the findings of the study showed, the “struggles” of participants in the study were not simply about power and interests but about how to live what they considered to be a good life. For the participants, there was little point in competing or “struggling” for social capital that did not align with their vision of good life and the role and value of social capital in it. So, their “struggle” involved not only the pursuit of capital simply because it has instrumental value in the field, but the search for what they hoped to be a good life. As Sayer (2005) highlighted, the struggles are “not only over access to existing goods but over the definition of what is good” (p. 132). Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that not everything is a struggle. As Sayer (2005) argued:

> Quite simply, not all is struggle, for there is also a great deal of peaceful coexistence, compliance, cooperation, solidarity, sympathy, respect and generosity, and mutual indifference. To understand how far social life involves micro-political struggles we have to acknowledge how far it does not involve them. This is important because we need to recognise the moral dimension of social life, not only in itself and as a basis of social order, but as a source of resistance to the existing order. (p. 97)

From this quote, it is evident that examining the moral dimension of social life is critical in enhancing our understanding of inequities and how and why actors decide to consent or resist these inequities. However, previous studies on social capital paid little attention to the question of ethics and morality in their conceptualizations, including how actors define the value of social capital and why it matters in their life. Previous studies on social capital demonstrated that what is viewed as a scarce resource in any “field” is centered around its economic transactional value. Specifically, at the core of social capital theory is exchange aimed at mutual benefits, primarily material or symbolic (Bourdieu, 1986). For instance, Bourdieu (1986) posits that “the profits

which accrue from membership in a group are the basis of the solidarity which makes them possible" (p. 249). Bourdieu (1986) further argued that "the network of relationships is the product of investment strategies, individual or collective, consciously or unconsciously aimed at establishing or reproducing social relationships that are directly usable in the short or long term" (p. 249). These arguments imply that people stick together to each other and build community only because they believe this relationship is going to bring them profit (monetary or other) in some way. Bourdieu further adds that investing in social relationships is a "solid investment" even though it "entails the risk of ingratitude" (pp. 253-254). Framing relationships as "a solid investment" with risks to the return on the investment makes them no different from any other economic investment. Even though this framing instrumentalizes human relationships, it is the most pervasive in the social capital literature. In fact, despite the clear distinction between functionalist (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1993, 2000) and critical (Bourdieu, 1986; Yosso, 2005) conceptualizations of social capital, all share a limited view of social capital value as instrumental.

Viewing social relationships in this mechanistic way is also prevalent in popular literature on networking, which is viewed as one of the most widespread practices to develop social capital. In their book *Networking Like a Pro: Turning Contacts into Connections*, Misner and Hilliard (2017) provide multiple examples of return on investments on social relationships to justify the significance of networking. In other words, what makes social capital "capital" is limited to material or symbolic benefit. Such dominance of economic transactional value of capital is not surprising given that we live in a global capitalist economy, the logics of which cross boundaries of any "field." However, this paradigm does not consider the value individuals may ascribe to their relationships that may go beyond economically transactional value.

Use-Value and Exchange-Value of Social Capital

In considering the value of social capital, I find Sayer's (2005) distinction between "goods as valued in themselves" (use-value) and "goods as valued for advantages which they bring their holders vis-a-vis others" (exchange-value) helpful. While the exchange-value refers to the instrumental value (currency) of capital in the field, use-value refers to the internal qualitative value of capital to individuals regardless of its exchange-value in the field (e.g., job market). For instance, some relationships such as the ones with parents or guide type of tanys mentioned by study participants may have an important use-value for individuals including emotional satisfaction and shaping of moral sense and vision of good life; however, these relationships may not be convertible to the forms of capital acknowledged by the wider society as having exchange-value such as access to resources facilitating job placement or promotion.

As evident from the above discussion, Bourdieu's (1986) conceptualization of social capital prioritizes exchange-value while overlooking its difference from use-value. Similarly, other popular theorizations of social capital including the ones from Coleman (1988) and Putnam (1993, 2000) do not differentiate social capital's exchange-value from its use-value. However, As Sayer (2005) argued, differentiating between exchange-value and use-value of capitals is significant "both for explaining the nature and structure of the inequalities and struggles of the social field, and in relation to their normative significance for both actors and observers" (p. 108). For instance, even though our friendship networks may provide instrumental social capital benefits, it would be a "disastrous mistake" to treat the former the same as the latter even though the latter may unintentionally result from the former (Sayer, 2005). These two are regarded as separate, as was also evident from the study findings in which participants differentiated between various perceptions and uses of social capital.

Even though scholars did not clearly differentiate between the use-value of social capital for individuals versus its exchange-value and currency in the "field," these two uses of capital have been extensively discussed by scholars, particularly those who employed a critical framework of social capital inspired by Bourdieu's theory of field and capital (DeJaeghere, Pellowski Wiger, & Wangsness Willemsen, 2016; Yosso, 2005). These scholars employed an asset-based approach to the study of marginalized communities by calling scholars to value the empowering potential of the capital of marginalized communities, which is often not recognized as valuable (having an exchange-value) due to the dominance of middle-and-upper class forms of capital in the "field."

What my study findings add to this asset-based scholarship is a more nuanced understanding of the use-value of social capital for individuals, which might not align with its ascribed exchange-value in the "field." While Yosso (2005) and other critical scholars identified the wealth of capital in marginalized communities, what made capital "capital" remains limited to "instrumental and emotional support" to navigate through the institutions (fields) in society (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). My work calls to examine the moral dimension of "capital" to better understand what one values as morally acceptable and justified. This is significant because it brings the question of moral thinking and guidance into the conceptualization of social capital, which has been largely ignored in the literature. In other words, my work invites scholars to consider how one's moral values shape when and how they leverage social capital and how one's social capital can impact morality by shaping their worldview and beliefs. Dismissal of moral dimension of social capital is unfortunate because it is essential to how we navigate our relationships as Sayer (2005) argued:

> The moral dimension is unavoidable. Hardly any social relationship 'is intelligible without a recognition of the ethical responsibilities and obligations which it carries with it, and . . . much of our moral life is made up of these kind of loyalties and commitments.' (p. 10)

As findings of this study demonstrated, the exchange-value of social capital was only partially helpful in explaining youth participants' experiences of pursuing their aspirations. It explained how social capital helped them to obtain instrumental benefits such as enrolling at the university, finding a job, internship or getting a promotion. Although such instrumental use of relationships was part of participants experiences and was essential in their pursuit of aspirations, it was not at the forefront of their perception and use of social capital. Relationships that had internal value (use-value) for the majority of participants in the study were the ones that helped ground them in the types of values they thought would bring about a good life. These were the relationships with people who shaped their character, worldview, and moral sense through the process of tarbiyeh. Examining this use-value of relationships for participants was critical to understand when and how they chose to navigate social networks.

Shift From Transactional to Morally-Driven Social Capital

Consideration of morality in conceptualization of social capital was particularly helpful in re-envisioning various uses of social capital on a continuum rather than dichotomous or distinct concepts. As findings of this study and previous studies showed, different ways of using social capital are typically viewed as dichotomous or are used as separate concepts disconnected from each other. For instance, corruption is distinctly separate from networking even though some networking practices may have used social contacts in similar ways. Furthermore, similar to participants of the study, other scholars had dichotomous views of social capital such as

good/bad, negative/positive or a dark side of social capital (Pena Lopez & Sanchez Santos, 2014; Uribe, 2014). The findings of this study challenged this dichotomous view of social capital by providing a more nuanced picture of the conceptualization and use of social capital on a continuum. Such re-envisioning of the conceptualization of social capital as on a continuum is helpful in understanding different gradations of social capital perception and use. An in-depth analysis of how one navigates an ethical line on the social capital continuum provides insight into the complexity and nuance of one's social capital perception and use. In order to understand how one navigates this ethical line, it is critical to examine ethical dispositions as part of one's habitus. However, as I discussed in Chapter 5, previous scholarship paid little attention to ethical dispositions. As a result, previous scholarship remains limited to examining the transactional value of social capital while ignoring its moral dimensions.

Although such a transactional view of social capital is the dominant framing in the literature, it is counter-intuitive to how meaningful human relationships work in life (Smith, 2020). A community that is built on the basis of pure mutual exchange is not likely to be sustainable as it faces the threat of ceasing to exist once the utility of their members expires. At the same time, the most meaningful and durable human relationships (e.g., friendships, family relationships) are based on the sense of care, commitment, and love, as well as mutual benefit. These relationships certainly have value for individuals beyond their transactional value. Thus, it is critical to examine the use-value of relationships for individuals not only exchange-value. For instance, participants in this study discussed their social capital in a variety of ways including more meaning-oriented and transactional uses. Study participants highlighted that their definition of tanys was rooted in mentorship, guidance, and support with no expectation to receive something in return, which they contrasted to default understanding of tanys rooted in

transactional blat relationships. Although study participants were critical of these transactional uses of relationships, some of their networking practices entered blurry areas by walking close to the line of blat, or reflected newer approaches that also were instrumental, but focused on individualized achievement in a global capitalist economy. Participants offered nuanced and complex explanations for how they navigated this ethical line in their social capital perception and use. Such analysis was possible through examination of participants' ethical dispositions including what they valued in their relationships (use-value). However, previous scholarship did not focus on this significant moral meaning-making process in relationships even when it was present in their participants' narratives (Jack, 2019). Therefore, the shift away from instrumental transactional value of social capital towards the morally-driven humanistic values is significant as it aligns with how most people experience and make meaning of their relationships.

Such re-envisioning of social capital theory is significant not only in better understanding the experiences of youth from marginalized backgrounds but also from privileged backgrounds. Human beings regardless of their background are guided by some kind of moral compass. As Sayer (2005) argued, "moral thought involves a generalising moment which can cross the boundaries between social groups; indeed, it is to this that we owe our ability to criticise inequalities such as those of class" (p. 50). Deeper analysis of how one's moral sense develops and changes over time in dynamic interaction with their environment and how their moral sense guides their actions including but not limited to the navigation of the world of social capital may shed light on how reproduction or transformation of societies occur. Further, a deeper understanding of how and when people make choices related to when to engage in more transactional and more instructive forms of social capital may also shed light on how people use social capital, especially in transitioning economies.

Re-envisioning social capital has the potential to impact change in practice because it challenges the current impact of dominant conceptualization. As study findings demonstrated, what participants found morally justifiable went beyond the boundaries of the specific "field" they were situated in. Moreover, an individual's moral judgments were not independent of the inter/national discourse. For instance, study findings demonstrated that social capital is changing in this particular moment in time in Kazakhstan. Youth are contributing to this change in the ways that social capital is defined, shared, and reproduced. While youth in the study moved away from "old ways" of using social capital rooted in the concept of blat, they are using social capital in new neoliberal ways. This shows how local articulations and uses of social capital were situated within broader inter/national discourses on neoliberalism that emphasizes individual responsibility and individualized pursuit for personal gain (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). Particularly, broader systems that go beyond the boundaries of any field were part of youth tarbiyeh based moral values. In this regard, it is important to highlight the dominance of Western worldview. Although not all youth in the study acknowledged this, what some participants found to be ethically right or in alignment with their tarbiyeh was impacted by the dominance of a Western worldview. Thus, how they chose to navigate the fields and leverage social capital was impacted by broader discourse. For instance, participants justified certain uses of social capital as morally acceptable simply because they are practiced in the West whereas the local terms such as blat, tanys, or even *kazakh ways* were primarily used to refer to negative connotations of the use of social capital. This is problematic given that negative uses of social capital, which participants labeled as part of the mentality of people in Kazakhstan, can be found anywhere in the world including the West. Moreover, the uses of social capital that they found to be positive because they are practiced in the West dismisses the fact that these uses can also perpetuate inequities in

society, at times walking close to the line of what they defined as negative social capital. Thus, consideration of the moral dimension of social capital invites individuals to critically examine their moral beliefs, especially in relation to dominant taken-for-granted narratives. Such a critical and nuanced look at one's moral beliefs has the potential to impact change in practices in the "field" by questioning the roots of their moral values. Moreover, these findings contribute to ongoing efforts to question the universality of Western knowledge and to re-examine theory and build methods for comparative education research in post-socialist contexts (Silova et al., 2017).

Examining the moral dimension of social capital does not only challenge the dominant conceptualizations of social capital but also helps to expose complex processes of transnational mixing in which "the boundaries between cultural forms and identities are fluid rather than fixed" (Takayama, 2011). This is important because it helps to move beyond "methodological nationalism" and focus on "the relationality and interconnectedness of Western and other forms of knowledge" (Takayama, 2011). In considering the question of morality, it is important to recognize that "ethical arguments are ever sufficient to bring about political change but politics without ethical guidance is directionless and prone to repression rather than emancipation" (Sayer, 2005, p. 231). Furthermore, by bringing the question of morality into the conceptualization of social capital, this study invites practitioners to consider the moral dimension in developing student support systems for youth, particularly in relation to activities aimed at developing social capital.

These questions are both theoretical as well as relevant to practice in higher education. Specifically, instead of inviting youth to "play the game," how can the student support professionals challenge the roots of the game at the systemic level? How can the social capital building events be structured and organized to better fit the moral values of youth, especially

those from marginalized backgrounds? Most importantly, how can higher education professionals and mentors of youth expand the model of most meaningful human relationships at the systemic level instead of expanding the model of transactional relationships?

To sum up, I do not suggest abandoning the current critical conceptualization of social capital in the literature due to its explanatory power but rather to moderate and supplement it. Particularly, no other sociological concepts can explain the embodied nature of dispositions and how they dynamically interact with the structures in the social field as the heuristic tools developed by Bourdieu, including habitus, field, and capital. Thus, I invite scholars to supplement the conceptualization of social capital by Bourdieu with the recognition of the close relationship between dispositions, moral orientations, and the value of capital. Such re-envisioning of social capital will provide a nuanced understanding of how one conceptualizes, develops, and uses social capital to pursue their aspirations. Re-envisioning of social capital in this way involves close examination of ethical dispositions as part of one' habitus as well as the process of formation and transformation of habitus. I further suggest a move away from reductionist understanding of the struggles in the social field in terms of pure power play based on neutral competition for "capitals" towards a more holistic framework that considers why these *matter* to people in the first place. As a result, scholars and practitioners may be able to better understand how inequities are transformed or reproduced.

Limitations of the Study

In the previous section, I argued that the findings of this study may be applicable to other contexts because the question of morality can cross the boundaries both between social groups and social fields. While the study findings offered important insights for re-envisioning social capital theory for future research, the aim of this research was not to generalize social capital

conceptualization and use but rather to contextualize. I sought to provide an in-depth understanding of how students navigate social inequities in Kazakhstan through exercising agency as well as how they conceptualize and use social capital to achieve their educational and career aspirations. Therefore, the scope of the study is limited to youth from similar rural or lower-income backgrounds and life trajectories. I purposefully selected participants who provide "information-rich cases for in-depth study" (Patton, 2015, p. 264) and offered "the most productive relationships" (Patton, 2015, p. 92).

The experiences of study participants, who are graduates of selective large prestigious universities are not representative of the experiences of students in other less selective institutions. Although selection mechanisms in all Kazakhstani universities are based on the results of the Unified National Test, the admission cut score is higher for prestigious universities than less selective ones. Moreover, tuition in prestigious universities is much higher than in less selective universities. Thus, low-income students attending prestigious universities must be high achieving; they must earn competitive scores in comparison to their high-income peers in order to receive state grants because costs are otherwise prohibitive.

Moreover, focusing on successful graduates of prestigious universities did not allow me to capture the experiences of marginalized students who did not make it to the graduation for various reasons. While including the voices of the above-mentioned students could have enhanced the conclusions of the study and provided a more nuanced and complex account of the phenomenon under study, I intentionally chose students who gained access to the spaces to which they are unlikely to be part of by virtue of their socioeconomic status. Through this process, I intentionally aimed to counter the deficit approach to the study of marginalized communities and to tell alternative narratives to scholarship that presently depict post-socialist

spaces as corrupt and backward. Although some of my participants depicted Kazakhstan in this very way, through deeper analysis of their stories I demonstrated the impact of broader socioeconomic context and dominant inter/national narratives on their perceptions. Moreover, through the analysis of youth's stories I showed a more nuanced picture of the use of connections in Kazakhstan, which is not limited to corrupt or negative way of using connections dominant in the literature based in deficit approach. Life history interviews allowed me to examine how youth described and made sense of their experiences, and helped to identify potentially explanatory structural forces that they may or may not have acknowledged. Focusing on how these young people succeeded in navigating structural inequities in society and were able or unable to transform themselves may also contribute to designing meaningful interventions for marginalized students that take into account their specific needs and concerns.

Furthermore, the concept of tarbiyeh emerged as an important finding during my data analysis process; however, I was not able to conduct an in-depth review of the literature on this concept since the online access to the works of Kazakhstani scholars in Kazakh language was limited. Such literature review on the concept of tarbiyeh could have enhanced our understanding of how tarbiyeh as a concept evolved across time and space in Kazakhstan, and how it relates to tarbiyeh's current meaning and use.

In my view, these limitations were predicated on the availability of resources and disruptions caused by COVID-19 pandemic. Although I initially planned to travel to Kazakhstan for my data collection, I was not able to travel due to travel restrictions caused by COVID-19 pandemic. The start of my planned data collection in Spring 2020 coincided with the start of COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, I had to conduct interviews online and make changes to my initial study design as discussed in Chapter 3. Moreover, as a graduate student-parent pressured

by time and financial constraints, I had to limit my data collection timeline, which included the cancellation of my planned trip to Kazakhstan to visit libraries.

My personal and professional experiences with this topic might lead some readers to question my objectivity. However, objectivity was not the goal of the study; instead, my subjectivity provided additional analytical strength. As stated in my positionality earlier, with careful self-reflexivity, my lived experience provided an opportunity to have an in-depth understanding of the context under study as well as my participants, which strengthened the conclusions from this research.

Implications and Future Directions

Directions for Future Research

The findings of the study generated important insights about how youth from rural backgrounds conceptualize and leverage social capital to pursue aspirations, but most importantly it raised questions for future research. Of particular importance in this regard is the emergence of the concept of tarbiyeh as significant in understanding how youth conceptualized and used social capital to navigate their educational and career aspirations. Although the study provided important insights into how moral sense and values shaped through tarbiyeh guides youth in navigating the world of social capital, tarbiyeh as a concept is more expansive and comprehensive. Thus, future research is needed to better understand how youth conceptualize tarbiyeh in their lives and how it guides their actions, particularly in relation to the pursuit of aspirations. Examples of questions for future research include: "What is the role of tarbiyeh in facilitating or constraining educational and career aspirations of youth? How do youth conceptualize and use tarbiyeh in their life? How does tarbiyeh shape youth's moral sense (ethical dispositions)? How does moral sense (shaped through tarbiyeh) impact youth's

subjective experiences of inequities in society? How do neoliberal networking norms align with youth understandings of tarbiyeh (if at all)?" Such in-depth analysis will provide further insight into the formation and transformation of habitus of individuals, especially ethical dispositions. As Sayer (2005) argued, rather than treating ethical dispositions as mere facts about people, it is important to analyze them in greater depth to better understand people. To do this, a Comparative Case Study (CCS) approach could be used as it will allow analysis across three axes including horizontal, vertical, and transversal (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). The use of the CCS approach will provide a comprehensive understanding of the current results of the study in several ways.

First, horizontal comparison of the process of tarbiyeh of youth from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, including those attending rural/urban/elite schools, could be helpful to understand whether and how tarbiyeh is similar or different across socioeconomic spectrum and how it is related to educational and career outcomes of youth. For instance, although youth in the study identified tarbiyeh as critical for their pursuit of aspirations, we don't know whether their peers from urban/elite schools and wealthier backgrounds find tarbiyeh equally important. We also don't know how tarbiyeh of their counterparts from urban/elite schools is similar or different from tarbiyeh of the youth in the study. In addition, some participants in the study perceived that most of their peers from rural school were not as successful as them since they did not have the right tarbiyeh; however, we do not know if their peers agree with this argument.

Second, given that the current study was limited to the retrospective accounts of youth of their experiences, it is important to include ethnographic observations both in and outside school along with interviews with influential figures in youth's lives (family, peers, teachers, mentors) to further enhance understanding of youth's tarbiyeh. For instance, although participants in the

study extensively discussed family tarbiyeh, observations and interviews with family members will provide an in-depth understanding of this process by identifying practices and intentions behind them that participants may not have acknowledged or mentioned. By further examining how youth interact with tarbiyeh provided in these spaces, and by various people, scholars may better understand how youth's habitus is formed and has evolved, and how it shapes their actions including but not limited to pursuit of aspirations.

Third, study findings showed that tarbiyeh is not a one-way but an interactive process. Youth are not passive recipients of tarbiyeh from adults but actively make sense of it, at times challenging it or even changing the mindset of adults. This interactive nature of tarbiyeh further raises the question of intergenerational impact of tarbiyeh. Specifically, how youth participate in the tarbiyeh process of both adults and younger generations. For instance, Olzhas shared how his experience of being able to find his first job without connections or support of relatives shocked his older influential relative in his family, who did not believe that one can find a job without connections. As a result, this older relative changed his perspective. This is particularly interesting because participants spoke of the older generation as having different tarbiyeh such as "Soviet tarbiyeh," which implied the reliance on old ways of using connections. In addition to participating in the tarbiyeh process of adults in their lives, participants were also engaged in supporting and sharing wisdom with the younger generation. Specifically, participants' experiences with leveraging social capital impacted their engagement with providing similar support to the younger generation. Several participants shared that they are supporting the younger generation in the same way they were supported by their mentors, older peers, and teachers. Some shared examples of visiting their rural schools to share their experiences of

navigating prestigious universities and pursuing their aspirations since they benefited from similar experiences in the past.

Fourth, horizontal comparison of the process of tarbiyeh of youth from diverse backgrounds will also help to better understand if tarbiyeh values are related to other factors such as class or rurality. Although some participants mentioned that their close friendship network included individuals with similar tarbiyeh values but from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, it is not clear how common such diversity is in one's network (friendships, mentor/mentee relationships), and how diverse it is. For instance, what is the composition of a network based on language backgrounds, socioeconomic status, rural/urban status, regional background (South, North, etc.), and disciplinary background. Few participants mentioned they felt more connected with peers who were from Kazakh speaking families not Russian speaking. It is not clear whether this preference is based on tarbiyeh values (Kazakh speaking youth share similar values) or other factors. Thus, more data on the composition of close networks of study participants could provide insights into whether and how their tarbiyeh-based networks cross the boundaries of class and position.

Fifth, given the study findings that showed that tarbiyeh is not independent from broader political, socioeconomic, and cultural environments, vertical examination across scales (local, national, regional, international) is important. Specifically, vertical comparison will provide insight into how these broader structural forces impact one's tarbiyeh. Specifically, vertical comparison will help to identify how youth values in relation to different forms of capital in the "fields" they are navigating are impacted by broader socioeconomic and political context, and global discourses. For instance, study findings showed that the increasing prominence of English and Western degrees is changing the logic of the "field" in Kazakhstan that was continuously

reported as prioritizing social capital over any other forms of capital to get ahead. All participants of the study shared an aspiration to learn English or study abroad. While some shared how English language proficiency opened doors to opportunities typically unavailable for youth from their background, others shared how they wish they realized the importance of learning English early on. Almost all of them shared learning English as their advice to younger selves or to their younger peers in high school. Youth participants believed that if one is proficient in English language and/or has a Western degree, they can get ahead in Kazakhstan without connections. This shows that larger political and economic situations that go beyond the boundaries of any field are changing the logic of the "field" in Kazakhstan (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). Specifically, the prominence that government reforms are giving to the English language is making competence in English and/or a Western degree valuable forms of cultural capital and individuals who possess this form of capital get ahead without social connections. Since most employers that require fluent knowledge of English tend to be international companies, it might also be the case that these companies use different sets of rules for recruitment. Vertical comparison across scales can shed light on this topic.

Finally, as an ancient concept tarbiyeh will benefit from transversal comparison to situate it historically and provide in-depth understanding of how tarbiyeh as a concept evolved across time and space in Kazakhstan, and how it relates to its current meaning and use.

In sum, analysis of tarbiyeh process using CCS approach will provide a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of (1) the process of the shaping of the individuals' ethical dispositions, and how far it varies or cross cuts across social divisions (horizontal); how youth's habitus formed and evolved over time "in different locations and at different scales," especially as it relates to how youth navigate and make sense of their capital portfolios (social capital,

cultural capital) in different “fields” (vertical); how evolution of the tarbiyeh concept across time and space in Kazakhstan relates to its current meaning and use (transversal). Most importantly, close analysis of the formation and transformation of ethical dispositions will help to understand what youth care about, and how it relates to their wellbeing. Previous study findings showed that youth from marginalized backgrounds stand to lose the most for their moral beliefs and values in the “fields” that award behaviors that these youth find morally corrupt, which contributes to reproduction of inequities (Jack, 2019). How can the systems in society be structured to not punish youth for their moral beliefs? Instead of inviting youth to “play the game” or “game the system,” how can “the rules of the game” be challenged to transform inequities in society?

Although the tarbiyeh described by scholars was specific in this context, future studies on the moral dimension of social capital could expand beyond Kazakhstan. Specifically, the in-depth analysis of the concept of tarbiyeh as described above seeks to understand the unique context of tarbiyeh in Kazakhstan; however, as a term which derived from Arabic language, there are equivalent terms to tarbiyeh used in other contexts including *tabia* in Tanzania, *tabiyat* in Pakistan, and *tarbiyah* in the Arab world (Ahmed, 2012; Rahman, 2020; Setel, 1999; Vavrus, 2021). Beyond the specific term, analysis of the process of *tarbiyeh* invites scholars to examine the process of formation and transformation of habitus (including ethical dispositions), which are applicable to any context.

In analyzing habitus, it is critical to examine the larger structures given the impact of inter/national discourses and socioeconomic context on the formation of habitus (including ethical dispositions) as discussed in the previous sections. Such close analysis of formation and evolution of habitus is important as it helps to better understand how youth mediated between structures and agency since habitus is shaped by the former and regulates the latter (Navarro,

2006). For instance, although study participants discussed the significance of family tarbiyeh in shaping one's habitus, it is important to avoid essentialized and/or dichotomized notion of what constitutes "good" tarbiyeh as it may lead to invisibilizing larger structures at work. These larger social and economic pressures are not only part of the youth tarbiyeh process, but also may guide tarbiyeh methods employed by parents since parents are trying to raise their children to be successful in various "fields" youth encounter in their lives. Therefore, examining normative (moral) implications further offers insight into the nuanced ways inequities are reproduced or transformed since we will be able to better understand the significance of these inequities and the struggles in the social field to individuals. In other words, what such analysis allows us to do is to address subjective experience of inequities. By treating people as evaluative beings and exploring the relation between the structure of inequity and different value systems, scholars will be able to gain insights into how inequities *matter* to people (Sayer, 2005).

Another important area for future research is related to supporting the development of social capital, particularly for youth from marginalized backgrounds. One of the most widespread ways to develop social capital is networking and community building events. Much has been written on the significance of such events in building social capital. However, little is known how individuals navigate ethical line in their networking practices? How networking and community building events can be organized to reflect the moral dimension of social capital? As evident from study findings, participants had diverse perspectives in where they put the ethical line in their networking practices. While for some it was considered a standard feature of the game given the current job market, others found networking in order to find a job morally corrupt. Thus, by exploring individuals' moral interpretation of networking practices, future

studies can shed light into the nuanced ways in which they reproduce or transform the inequities in society.

Rethinking the Meaning of Education

The understanding of tarbiyeh and its role in social capital could also be applied for future studies that examine the meaning of education. Study participants discussed tarbiyeh as separate from formal education they were receiving in schools or universities because of its focus on shaping worldview, moral sense, and character. At the same time, tarbiyeh has similarities with formal education. In fact, in the initial stages of my analysis I struggled to understand how tarbiyeh is different from cultural capital, human capital, family capital, or social capital. Both education and tarbiyeh share the aim of nurturing individuals to become well-rounded and responsible members of society and emphasize the importance of supporting a learning environment that fosters growth and development. However, they differ in their focus, scope, and underlying principles. Dominant education paradigm is focused on the acquisition of knowledge and skills, whereas tarbiyeh goes beyond this by also focusing on character development and moral values (Ahmed, 2012; Rahman, 2020). Thus, the findings of the study in relation to tarbiyeh has implications for understanding and questioning the meaning of education such as “What does it mean to be educated in today’s world?”

Other scholars who studied *tarbiyah* called for a paradigm shift at the higher level of education philosophy (Ahmed, 2012; Rahman, 2020). Pring (2019) argued that such a paradigm shift means that the answer to the question on the meaning of education should include a “sense of moral purpose and civic engagement,” as these that “make us distinctly human” (p. 50). There is a growing recognition of the importance of values-based education and character education aimed at developing students’ social and emotional skills, moral values, as well as academic

knowledge and skills; however, mainstream education remains limited to providing qualifications and skills. The paradigm shift to include "a sense of moral purpose and civic engagement" challenges the dominant paradigm that views the primary aims of education as preparation of learners for the workforce in order to maintain a strong economy (Rahman, 2020). For instance, Ahmed (2012) argued that Holistic Islamic Educators perceived contemporary British education as "dehumanizing, providing qualifications, not education," neglecting moral and spiritual growth (p. 729). According to Ahmed (2012), Holistic Islamic Education has parallels with "critical pedagogies" and indigenous education movements in post-colonial societies as it developed as a defense against "the dominant secular culture" to provide for the holistic needs of a growing child through tarbiyah (p. 725). Such tarbiyah-based holistic Islamic education is based on a culturally-coherent pedagogy developed as an alternative to mainstream pedagogy in Britain (Ahmed, 2012). Based on these arguments and emerging findings of this study, I suggest further exploring ways to expand education to become part of a holistic way of life that opens opportunities for alternative epistemologies and ontologies. For example, scholars may ask "What is the role of educational institutions in tarbiyah-based education?"

Methodological Implications

The study has methodological implications for future research on social capital. Re-envisioning social capital theory from an instrumental perspective towards the one that considers its moral dimension requires nuanced methodologies for understanding social capital conceptualization and use. First, in addition to considering the structure, composition, function, and instrumental benefits of social capital, it is important to analyze how individuals' moral values relate to their conceptualization and use of social capital. Such analysis will also help to better understand what individuals value in their relationships, i.e., why it *matters* to them. As

study findings showed, centering meaning-making and morals of participants was essential to understanding when and how they leveraged social capital and drew an ethical line on the social capital continuum. Such centering of meaning and morals is possible through deep analysis of ethical dispositions as part of analysis of one's habitus. Specifically, instead of taking habitus as mere facts about people, deeper analysis of how habitus including ethical dispositions formed and evolved is essential to understand how habitus interacts between structures and agency. As Sayer (2005) argued, "actors' own judgements and justifications, be they good or bad, have to be taken into account insofar as they influence what they do" (p. 46). Thus, such methodological considerations in studying social capital will shed light into the subjective experiences of individuals with inequities in society, and how and why they choose to conform or resist such inequities.

Concluding Reflections

As I complete this study, I am struck by how much my understanding of the theories of social capital and social reproduction have changed in the process of walking alongside my participants' stories. I came to this study upon deep reflection on my own lived experience highlighting my own vulnerability. This study was not only about my participants but about me as well. As my participants opened their hearts and shared the gift of their life stories, they transformed my thinking about my own story. Through sharing their vision of good life and social capital based in tarbiyeh*,* my participants made me realize the dominance of the existing theoretical frameworks in my interpretation of my story in initial stages of the study. This realization led to epistemological liberation inspiring me to challenge the current theorization of social capital, which largely ignores the normative character of social life. As a result, I suggested to re-envision social capital theory by closely examining morally-driven humanistic value of social capital to individuals not only its transactional instrumental value. This is possible through supplementing Bourdieu's theory of social capital with the recognition of ethical dispositions and the use-value of capital. Such re-envisioning will provide a more holistic framework to understand how individuals make sense of their relationships and use social capital as this framework considers why these relationships *matter* to people in the first place. It is my hope that this dissertation sparks curiosity in the fields of comparative and international education, higher education, and sociology of education to closely examine the normative character of social life in studying social capital and social reproduction. The examination of moral dimension of social life will contribute to furthering understanding of the structure and nature of the social inequities and their normative significance for individuals.

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Appendix A

Study Timeline

Dissertation work	Dates
Passed Oral preliminary examination	December 17, 2019
Prospectus meeting with the Dissertation Committee	March 19, 2020
Conducted a pilot study related to the dissertation as part of OLPD 8105 Qualitative Longitudinal Research Methods class	February – May, 2020
Worked on the modifications of the research design due to the challenges caused by COVID-19	March, 2020
Submitted IRB application	March 31, 2020
Received IRB approval	April 23, 2020
First round of recruitment	April 23 - June, 2020
Consent meeting with interested participants	May 2020
Submitted Data or Specimen only protocol to IRB to use pilot study data in the dissertation	June 23, 2020
Data or Specimen only protocol approved by IRB	August 10, 2020
Submitted IRB Modifications #1	June 25, 2020
Conducted interviews with three participants	June 27, 2020- July 1, 2020
IRB Modifications #1 approved	July 8, 2020
Submitted IRB modifications #2	July 12, 2020
IRB modifications #2 approved	Aug 6, 2020
Second round of recruitment	August 7, 2020 - February 17, 2021

Scheduled and conducted interviews with 15 participants	September 25, 2020-February 9, 2021
Transcribed interviews	August 2020 - June 2021
Data analysis	April 2020 - April 2023
Write up the findings and discussion	April 2020 - April 2023
Chapter revisions	February 2023 - June 2023
Oral defense of the dissertation	June 2023

Appendix B

Demographic questionnaire

Please answer the following questions if you are interested to participate in this study.

1. Your gender
    a. Female
    b. Male
    c. Prefer not to answer.

2. Please indicate the name of the university from which you obtained your bachelor's degree: ___________________________

3. Please indicate the year when you graduated from the university (bachelor's degree): ______________________

4. What was your bachelor's degree major: __________

5. Please choose the type of school where you spent *most* of your secondary school education:
    a. Rural school
    b. Urban school

6. Think of a ladder in which people in Kazakhstan are ranked with the highest socioeconomic status people on the top rung and the lowest socioeconomic status on the bottom rung. On a ladder with seven steps, on which step would you place your family **when you were in secondary school?**

- 7
- 6
- 5
- 4
- 3
- 2
- 1

7. How would you evaluate the financial situation of your family **when you were in secondary school?** Please choose one:

    a) We did not face material difficulties
    b) We had enough income to buy everything except for very expensive staff
    c) We had enough income to buy food and clothes

d) We had enough income to buy food, but we experienced difficulties in buying clothes
e) We experienced difficulties even with buying food.

8. How satisfied were you with the living conditions of your family **when you were in secondary school?**

a) Quite satisfied
b) Rather satisfied
c) Rather not satisfied
d) Completely dissatisfied
e) Difficult to answer

9. What is the highest level of education completed by your father? Leave blank if the items do not apply.

a) No school or primary school
b) Some or all of secondary school
c) Vocational certificate or diploma
d) Undergraduate university degree or diploma (bachelor)
e) Postgraduate university degree or diploma (Master or doctoral degree)
f) Not sure

10. What is the highest level of education completed by your mother? Leave blank if the items do not apply.
    a. No school or primary school
    b. Some or all of secondary school
    c. Vocational certificate or diploma
    d. Undergraduate university degree or diploma (bachelor)
    e. Postgraduate university degree or diploma (Master or doctoral degree)
    f. Not sure

11. If you are interested to participate in 2–3-hour interview to share your life history, please leave your email and/or WhatsApp phone number.

Appendix C

Sample Interview Protocol

Participant pseudonym:
Interview date:
Start Time:
End Time:

Before the interview:
[Check the recorder is fully charged and is recording properly]

Welcome the participant.
[Ask a few warmup questions about their day, mood, etc].

During the interview
Jot down notes on things that seem important for using them in asking probing questions when appropriate.

Concluding the interview
Turn off the audio recording and ask participants if they have anything else to say. Take notes immediately after.

Check the audio recording to make sure that the entire interview is properly recorded. If not, take notes on what I remember from the participant's response.

Part 1: Main narration phase of the interview

Before I start asking you any questions related to my research, I'd like to know how are doing today? How has the coronavirus outbreak affected your life and your plans?

As I informed you in our earlier communication over the text/email/phone, I am going to ask you about your life story from your childhood to the present moment. I am curious to hear about your experiences in your family, in your neighborhood, in school, and the university. I am particularly curious about your experiences in relation to the pursuit of your educational and career aspirations. You could share all the experiences and events that are important for you.

When the participant marks the coda at the end of the story, probe for anything else: "Is this all you want to tell me?' or 'Is there anything else you want to say?" (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000, n.p.)

Part 2: Questioning phase of the interview

Below are possible probes in the event the response to the above question is very brief. I will only use these in the event the conversation slows. I do not intend to read the below probes as a

script or structured interview. In asking the follow-up questions, I drew on Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000) by referring to the topics mentioned in participant's narrative by using their own words and phrases and not asking questions that addressed possible contradictions in participant's narrative.

Life before the university

1. Tell me about your family? Where did you grow up?

2. Tell me about your school? Where did you go to school?

3. What were your aspirations/goals in elementary school?
4. What were your aspirations/goals in middle school?
5. What were your aspirations/goals in high school?
6. If aspirations changed, what/who impacted these changes in aspirations? *(Adapted from Vavrus)*

7. What/who supported/constrained your educational and career aspirations if any?

8. How did you decide to attend the university?

9. How did you come to choose this university?

10. How did you come to choose this major?

11. In your opinion, what/who contributed to your successful admission to university? How? *(Adapted from Vavrus)*

Life at the university

1. Tell me about your transition to the university life. Who/what supported you during this period?

2. How did you choose your advisor? Your thesis topic? Tell me about your relationship with your advisor.

3. How did you find internships?

4. Did you experience any challenges during your transition to the university? If yes, how did you overcome these challenges?

5. What support have you had or wish you had in navigating the university life?

6. How your relationships changed, if at all, from school to university?

7. Can you share if there were any people who were your important supporters? If so, in what ways?

8. Do you think your experiences are different from others? For instance, students from different background than yours such as those who are more privileged than you (i.e., wealthy students) or those from similar backgrounds as you? If yes, in what ways?

9. How do you think you have changed as a person since coming to the university? How do your friends or family think you have changed as a person? How do you feel about this change? (Adapted from Seithers, 2018).

Life after university

1. How did you search for a job, if you did, or if you have a job, how did you get it?

2. What are your short-term/long-term aspirations for the future? How might you achieve them?

3. What have you been doing/are doing/plan to do to achieve your future goals? Is anyone supporting you in this process? In what ways these strategies (whatever a student is doing/will do) support the achievement of your goals?

4. What kind of career would you like to have? What kind of job you would want to be doing within the next five years?
   a) What makes this job attractive to you?
   b) What might help/prevent you from getting this job?

5. What advice would you give to students from similar background who are graduating from school, entering the university, or graduating from the university? Or if you were to give your secondary school self some advice about navigating life during/after university, what advice would you give to yourself?

Questions related to social capital

1. How do you maintain your relationships? What strategies do you use?

2. How do you understand the word “tanys/svyazi/blat” (connections)? What does it mean to have “tanys/svyazi/blat”?

3. How do you think most people in Kazakhstan use their social connections?

4. What do you think about the role of tanys/social connections/blat in furthering/constraining educational and career aspirations of students from similar background as you? Do you think your tanys/social connections/blat will be important in furthering getting where you want to be in six months, 5 years, or 10 years from now?

5. How would you compare the role of connections in your network vs your parents' network? How would you compare your surroundings to the surroundings of your parents?

6. Do you think people in your surrounding can help you to achieve your aspirations? If so, in what ways?