



Legal consciousness of the individual as a psychosemantic construct

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Abstract. The aim of the study was to theoretically substantiate the internal architecture and hierarchy of meanings that determine the logic of the perception of normative prescriptions and the choice of algorithms of human activity in the socio-regulatory space. The methodology was based on methods of conceptual-analytical elaboration, structural-logical modelling, case-study and applied analytical synthesis. It was established that within a psychosemantic perspective, legal consciousness is considered as a sphere of meaning-making in which legal phenomena acquire individual interpretations. The object of analysis shifts from formal awareness to the structure of subjective experience, in which “law” functions as a meaning category. Methodologically, it is essential to distinguish “meaning” as stable semantic content and “sense” as personalised evaluative-semantic modality. It was found that the psychosemantic framework unites the categorical organisation of meanings (semantic core), the evaluative-semantic modality and scenario forms of interaction into an integrated model. Legal consciousness appears as a structured semantic space in which the axes of interpretation provide the grounds for reconstructing individual meaning profiles. Contextual differences should be interpreted not as a “different level” of legal consciousness, but as variability of meaning configurations that determine the choice of strategies. Modality acts not as a “background” but as a structural mechanism of meaning-making, where key categories function as axial elements of the semantic core. Illustrative empirical plots (China, the United States of America, the Netherlands) confirm that the choice of scenarios of interaction with law depends on subjective trust and the meaningful evaluation of the situation. In Ukraine, the war brings the categories of justice and responsibility to the centre of the semantic core, stimulating scenarios of compensation and documentation of harm. It is appropriate to develop individual agency

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and algorithms of rights protection through the reconstruction of meaning oppositions and work with the evaluative-semantic modality of legal experience. The practical significance lies in the possibility of using the results by psychologists in psychological diagnostics and educational-preventive work to develop individual agency and to form effective strategies for the protection of rights

Keywords: sense; meaning; scenarios; interaction; modality; trust

Introduction

Legal consciousness functions not as a level of awareness, but as an interpretative mechanism that determines whether an event will be recognised as a legal problem and which forms of action the subject will consider permissible and expedient. In everyday legal situations, what is decisive is not the mere existence of a norm but the meaning that the individual attributes to law (a resource of protection, an instrument of control, a threat, a formality), which brings about different scenarios of interaction with institutions. At the same time, in scholarly discourse legal consciousness is mainly described through knowledge, trust, legitimacy, or readiness to comply with norms, whereas its internal psychosemantic structure – the configuration of meanings, evaluative-semantic tonality and scenario schemes of interaction with law – remains insufficiently disclosed.

Existing scholarly research considers legal consciousness not as a static sum of knowledge, but as a dynamic field of meanings in which personal experience intertwines with external normative requirements. In the study by K. Young & K. Billings (2020) it is substantiated that legal consciousness is an integral part of the individual's cultural capital which determines the strategy of behaviour in the legal field. The authors showed that a subject's deep-seated attitudes towards law are formed depending on the social status, which makes the perception of legal norms not an objective process but a subjective projection of class experience. In the work of X. Shuhui *et al.* (2025), it is shown that the cognitive component of legal consciousness may perform a protective function in relation to

problematic behavioural trajectories in the youth environment. The authors demonstrated that, in the presence of mechanisms of moral disengagement, the experience of victimisation may facilitate a shift towards aggressive behaviour, yet a higher level of legal cognition (as a component of legal consciousness) weakens this transition and reduces the likelihood of transforming the role "victim→bully". This supports the view that legal consciousness (through its cognitive regulators) may structure behavioural consequences and enhance the stability of the implementation of psychosemantic constructs in social interactions.

The psychosemantic vector of research is reflected in the work of I. Ergashev (2025), where legal consciousness is presented as a system of semantic signs that structure the legal culture of civil society. It is precisely through the transformation of internal symbolic meanings that a conscious citizen emerges who is capable of interpreting law as an instrument of protection rather than merely a restriction. Analysing everyday reality, G. Skąpska *et al.* (2023) revealed the contradictory and fragmented nature of contemporary twenty-first-century legal consciousness, where abstract ideals of justice come into conflict with pragmatic strategies of survival. Individual senses of legal phenomena are predominantly situational and depend on the extent to which institutional requirements correlate with the individual's immediate lifeworld. Such an approach implies identifying the mechanisms of the constant restructuring of legal consciousness under the influence of acute social contradictions.

The study by L. Chua (2022) showed that constitutional "meanings" are born far beyond

courtrooms, in the everyday practices and interpretations of ordinary citizens. The “grounding” of legal categories in consciousness takes place through the process of personal comprehension of constitutional principles, which makes law a living construct that is constantly reproduced in the subject’s mind. This proves the priority of the individual’s everyday meaning-making as a foundation for the existence of law beyond formal institutions. In the context of the synthesis of the cognitive sciences, the work of C. Sinha (2024) substantiated the process of “understanding law” as a complex integration of neurobiological structures and social learning. The individual’s legal self-awareness is the result of critical reflection, in which socialisation acts as a filter through which the person attributes meaning to legal requirements. This substantiates the psychological mechanism of transforming external legal prescriptions into internal psychic structures through a combination of cognitive and social factors.

In the context of Ukraine, special attention has been paid to the analysis of the transformation and specifics of the development of legal consciousness. The study by A. Honcharov & M. Honcharov (2025) established that the development of professional reflection and empathy ensures a qualitative transformation of declarative legal knowledge into deep and operational professional meanings. The results obtained made it possible to identify the internal psychological determinants that condition the transition from the formal assimilation of legal norms to the construction of stable professional-semantic constructs of the individual. The multidimensionality of legal consciousness as a spiritual phenomenon is substantiated in the research of R. Hryniuk & O. Hutsuliak (2023). The authors showed that this phenomenon is based on the subject’s existential elaboration of legal reality and is not reducible to formal normative awareness, which makes it possible to interpret legal consciousness as a holistic meaning construct those structures individual experience. The work of A. Kolly-Shamne *et al.* (2023) revealed that the profile of professional

training directly dictates the cognitive and emotional architecture of legal consciousness, whereby future lawyers are inclined towards formalised meanings, while historians gravitate towards broad axiological senses. This confirms the role of the educational environment as a decisive factor that sets the coordinates of semantic space and the hierarchy of meanings in the structure of the individual’s legal consciousness.

Despite the existence of research on the contextual variability of legal consciousness and its connections with trust and behavioural choices, the psychosemantic model of its internal structure – how the meanings of “law” are organised, the evaluative-semantic tonality and scenario schemes of interaction – remains insufficiently elaborated, which makes it difficult to interpret contextual differences at the level of individual experience in a non-contradictory way. Therefore, the aim of the study was to identify the regularities of the organisation of mental representations and evaluative reference points that mediate the subject’s attitude to legal phenomena within the structure of the subjective comprehension. To achieve this aim, the following objectives were set: to substantiate the psychosemantic framework for the analysis of legal consciousness as a system of individual meanings and senses, with a clear distinction between the levels of “meaning” and “sense” in the organisation of legal experience; to describe the internal structure of legal consciousness in the form of a component model (semantic core, evaluative-semantic modality, interaction scenarios) in order to determine the semantic axes and indicators through which these components may be reconstructed; and to demonstrate the contextual variability of the psychosemantic structure and the interpretative capacity of the model using illustrative plots of sociocultural contexts (China, the United States of America (USA), the Netherlands, Ukraine) so as to formulate recommendations for applying the model in psychological diagnostics and educational-preventive work, particularly in Ukraine.

Materials and Methods

The study combined methods of conceptual-analytical elaboration, structural-logical modelling, case-study and applied analytical synthesis aimed at reconstructing and operationalising legal consciousness as a dynamic psychosemantic construct. By means of the method of conceptual-analytical elaboration, scholarly approaches by F. Horák *et al.* (2021), A. Cowen & D. Keltner (2021) to psychosemantics, semantic spaces and the scenario organisation of individual behaviour were systematised. This ensured the identification of key explanatory variables that describe the real transition from legal representations to social action, rather than merely capturing the level of knowledge about normative prescriptions. The selection of content blocks (meaning, sense, component structure of the psychosemantic construct, parameters of semantic space, functional mechanisms) was determined by the capacity to explain the mechanism of the interiorisation of external norms into internal psychic structures through a combination of cognitive and social factors. Such an approach made it possible to operationalise legal consciousness as a multi-stage interpretative process and provided a methodological basis for further comparison of meaning configurations in different sociocultural contexts.

The method of structural-logical modelling was applied on the basis of data from R. Hood *et al.* (2022), M. Hefner *et al.* (2022), M. Hertogh (2024) for formalising the internal architecture of the construct and representing the functional links between its elements so as to present a component scheme that brings together the levels of organisation of legal experience: semantic core, evaluative-semantic modality, scenarios of interaction with law. These components were chosen because the components are functionally necessary for describing the full mechanism of the transition from legal representation to legal behaviour: the core provides categorical qualification of events as legal, modality – the experienced “quality” of law (trust/legitimacy/symmetry

of application), and scenarios – the “transformation” of meaning and modality into typical chains of interpretation and action. The criteria for selecting the components were explanatory sufficiency, internal consistency and distinctness, and operationalisability. This was done in order to translate the theoretical understanding of legal consciousness into a formalised model and to describe the mechanism of the transition from the interpretation of legal phenomena to the choice of behavioural strategy.

To assess the interpretative capacity of the model and confirm its universality, the method of case-study of illustrative plots was applied, covering different sociocultural and legal contexts (China, USA, the Netherlands, Ukraine) according to the criteria of semantic qualification of the situation, evaluative axes of modality and indicators of instrumentality and barriers to the subject’s interaction with law. The selection of these cases was determined by the ability to demonstrate the functioning of legal consciousness as a sequential chain: the Chinese context was used to operationalise evaluative-semantic modality and the semantic core; the plots from the USA and the Netherlands made it possible to trace the mechanism of the formation of interaction scenarios; the comparative analysis of 104 countries (based on the graphical report of the World Justice Project, (2023)) provided the development of a typology of scenario trajectories of seeking assistance; the Ukrainian case served for the illustrative testing of the applicability of the model under extreme conditions. An analytical report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2025) and primary public opinion survey data in Ukraine (2012-2024) from the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) (2025) were employed. The choice of these sources was determined by the complementarity and the capacity to provide a multi-level illustration of the interpretative capacity of the psychosemantic model in different sociocultural contexts. This ensured the transition from the theoretical

description of legal consciousness to the creation of an effective diagnostic toolkit capable of reconstructing individual strategies of interaction with law and predicting the subject's readiness for the active exercise of the rights in different sociocultural environments.

By means of the method of applied analytical synthesis, the component model of legal consciousness (semantic core→evaluative-semantic modality→scenarios) was interpreted in terms of potential directions of intervention in order to assess the applied validity of the model and to identify structural "points of influence" for substantiating applied impacts (educational, psychological, communicative) not as the "transfer of knowledge" but as the reconstruction of internal meaning oppositions. This was done in order to show how actual legal behaviour depends not on knowledge of the text of the law, but on the "input filters" of consciousness and the expected instrumentality of law. Such an approach made it possible to develop diagnostic-intervention tools based on procedures for measuring connotative meanings (semantic differential) and clustering of profiles, and to form a methodological foundation for applied programmes aimed at reducing psychological barriers of distrust and activating the individual's agency in the legal field.

Results

The internal architecture of the individual's legal consciousness as a psychosemantic construct

Within a psychosemantic perspective, legal consciousness is considered as a sphere of meaning-making in which legal phenomena acquire individual interpretations and become a basis for orientation in legal situations (Horák *et al.*, 2021). Accordingly, the object of analysis shifts from normative categories and formal awareness to the structure of subjective experience, in which "law" functions as a meaning category: it sets the way of recognising a situation, the boundaries of permissible interpretations and the repertoire of possible actions. Such an approach is consistent with the methodological position that the psychic

reality of the subject is organised not as a sum of declarative knowledge about objects but as a system of meanings and senses through which a person evaluates events, attributes subjective weight to these events and chooses behavioural strategies (Cowen & Keltner, 2021). In this approach, legal consciousness is a descriptive-reconstructive construct that can be analysed as a system of subjective representations of law, evaluative-semantic characteristics of institutions and procedures, and the interaction scenarios associated with these elements.

Methodologically, it is essential to distinguish "meaning" and "sense" as two levels of organisation of experience (Cowen & Keltner, 2021). "Meaning" denotes a relatively stable semantic content fixed in language and culture, which ensures the recognition and categorisation of phenomena (what it is and what it belongs to). In the plane of legal consciousness this means that meaning sets the cognitive-semantic framework within which an event can be qualified as one that has a legal dimension (violation, procedure, grounds for seeking assistance, protection). "Sense" reflects the personalised evaluative-semantic modality of meaning, that is, what this "meaning" signifies for a particular person in view of its subjective value, experiences, expected consequences and sense of personal agency. Accordingly, the same culturally shared meanings (court, police, law) may acquire different senses: an instrument of protection, a source of danger, a neutral procedure, coercion, or a symbol of justice (Horák *et al.*, 2021). This is why psychosemantic analysis is methodologically justified, as it makes it possible to reconstruct not only the categorical qualification of legal phenomena but also the evaluative-semantic modality of the representations and the scenario schemes of behavioural orientation associated with these phenomena.

In this connection, the category of semantic space becomes central, as it allows legal consciousness to be described as a structured system of relations between meanings. Semantic

space conceptualises how categories and evaluations are mutually ordered in the “coordinate system” of experience, forming not a random set of representations but recognisable structures: clusters, oppositions, relations of proximity/distance. Methodologically, this implies the possibility of reconstructing the dominant axes of interpretation through which the subject organises legal experience. It should be noted that such axes have not only a descriptive status: the axes perform the function of meaning parameters that set the direction of evaluating situations and pre-structure the repertoire of action. In theoretical terms, such axes may include, for example, trust-distrust, protection-threat, justice-injustice, agency-powerlessness, procedural-arbitrariness. These dimensions set the psychosemantic coordinates through which the subject interprets law as a sociopsychological reality (Cowen & Keltner, 2021). Thus, in a psychosemantic reading legal consciousness is not reduced to a “level of knowledge” but appears as a relatively stable configuration of meanings and evaluations which determines what is considered a legal problem, what is perceived as an acceptable solution and what consequences are expected from appealing to institutions.

The psychosemantic lens is productive for three reasons. First, it is oriented towards the structure of categories: which meaning units form the semantic core of representations of law and how these units are organised (centre/periphery, oppositions, clusters) (Horák *et al.*, 2021). It provides tools for reconstructing the evaluative (connotative) component of meaning. In this case, what is appropriate is not a “dictionary” definition of a concept but its experienced evaluative modality – that is, the poles (safe/unsafe, fair/unfair, accessible/inaccessible, etc.) with which the concept is associated in the subject’s experience. Methodologically, such reconstruction is consistent with the logic of the semantic differential as a way of measuring connotative meanings through bipolar scales (Hood *et al.*, 2022). The

psychosemantic approach makes it possible to analyse scenario structures of interaction with law as internally organised meaning schemes that set typical ways of interpreting legal situations and corresponding action strategies. In this logic, a scenario is considered not as a mechanical choice between given alternatives but as a derived result of the semantic qualification of the situation and the evaluative-semantic modality of legal institutions and procedures. Accordingly, what is decisive for the formation of a scenario are: the criteria for attributing an event to the legal dimension, the expected instrumentality of appealing to legal mechanisms, and the anticipated consequences and constraints of interaction with institutions (Horák *et al.*, 2021). On this basis, the psychosemantic framework provides a conceptual combination of the categorical organisation of meanings (semantic core), the evaluative-semantic modality and the scenario forms of interaction into an integrated model for describing legal consciousness.

Within this approach, the legal consciousness of the individual is defined as an individual system of meanings and senses that organises the interpretation of situations as legal or as having legal consequences, structures the evaluation of the legitimacy, justice, and reliability of legal institutions and procedures, and regulates the choice of scenarios of interaction with law (appeal/avoidance, fulfilment of conditions/challenge, formal/informal strategies). Unlike the normative approach, this definition is descriptive-reconstructive: it records how “law” is represented in the psyche and how the corresponding meaning configurations mediate behavioural decisions (Horák *et al.*, 2021). In view of the above, it is appropriate to present a structured generalisation of the model in the form of a component scheme. Table 1 reflects the three components of legal consciousness as a psychosemantic construct and links these components to the corresponding semantic axes and possible approaches to operationalisation.

Table 1. Component structure of the individual's legal consciousness as a psychosemantic construct

Component	Functional role in the structure of the construct	Characteristic	Semantic axes of interpretation	Operationalisation and indicators
Semantic core (categorical structure)	Qualifies situations as "legal" and sets categorical frameworks for interpretation	Basic concepts and oppositions ("law", "justice", "responsibility", "sanction", "protection") and the organisation (centre/periphery, clusters)	"Law as a resource/procedure/threat/symbol", centrality of legitimacy	Map of categories, clusters, dominant oppositions, profiles of legitimacy
Evaluative-semantic modality	Gives meanings an evaluative-semantic tonality and determines the experienced suitability of law as a resource for action	Trust/distrust, legitimacy as acceptability of the order, experienced symmetry in the application of law	Fair/unfair, safe/risky, accessible/inaccessible, predictable/arbitrary	Semantic differential, scales of trust/legitimacy, profiles of modality
Scenarios of interaction with law (scripts)	Transforms meaning + modality into typical chains of interpretation and action	Qualification of the situation→assessment of the instrumentality of law→choice of strategy	appeal/avoidance, compliance/challenge, formal/informal strategies	Analysis of typical condition-consequence schemes, qualitative reconstructions of scenarios, typologies of barriers to appeal

Source: compiled by the authors based on F. Horák *et al.* (2021), A. Cowen & D. Keltner (2021), R. Hood *et al.* (2022), M. Hefner *et al.* (2022), M. Hertogh (2024)

Table 1 records the internal architecture of legal consciousness as a psychosemantic construct within which categorical, evaluative-semantic and scenario elements form a functionally interconnected system. The semantic core determines which events and states are recognised by the subject as having a legal dimension and sets the categorical frameworks of interpretation; the evaluative-semantic modality endows these meanings with an experienced "quality" (trust/distrust, acceptability/problematisation of legitimacy, a sense of symmetry/asymmetry in the application of law), thereby determining the subjective suitability of law as a resource for action. The scenarios of interaction with law reflect the transition from interpretation to the choice of strategy: the scenarios specify how meaning configurations are transformed into decisions on appeal or avoidance, compliance or challenge, formal or informal practices. The model makes it possible to describe legal consciousness not as a

level of knowledge or a set of declarations, but as a structured semantic space in which the axes of interpretation and the indicators associated with these axes provide a basis for reconstructing individual meaning profiles.

Contextual variability and applied potential of the psychosemantic model of legal consciousness

The psychosemantic structure of legal consciousness is actualised in specific conditions of life experience and is therefore contextually variable. Its variability is best explained from the standpoint of an approach according to which cognitive contents are formed and reproduced in the interaction of cognitive processes with perceptual experience, embodiment, and characteristics of the environment, rather than as an autonomous "internal" system. Thus, the sense of categories is constituted and actualised in recurrent situations of activity through goal orientations, emotional states, typical actions and expected

consequences. This gives grounds to argue that “law” as a psychosemantic category appears in different configurations in different life environments: the semantic core (the structure of central meanings), the evaluative-semantic modality (the dominant way of experiencing legal phenomena) and the scenarios of interaction (stable schemes of action in legal situations) change. Accordingly, contextual differences are correctly interpreted not as a “different level” of legal consciousness

but as variability of meaning configurations that determine the interpretation of legal situations and the choice of behavioural strategies (Barsalou, 2020; Horák *et al.*, 2021). In view of this, the component scheme presented in Table 1 requires a demonstration of its interpretative capacity using material from different empirical plots. This is why Table 2 shows the possibility of conceptual alignment of such plots within a single psychosemantic logic of description.

Table 2. Psychosemantic interpretation of empirical manifestations of legal consciousness (China, USA, the Netherlands, Ukraine)

Case/Country	Empirical focus	Analytical correspondence to the components of the model	Psychosemantic interpretation
Trust and equality as organisers of modality (China)	Information exposure→trust→perceived equality→legal consciousness	Evaluative-semantic modality	Trust/equality set the experienced “quality” of the meaning of law as a resource or as a problematic order
Legitimacy as an axis of organisation of meanings and profiles (China)	Types (profiles) of attitudes to legitimacy	Semantic core, evaluative-semantic modality	Legitimacy acts as an axial dimension, “meanings” are organised as configurations rather than as a single indicator
Semantic qualification of violation and barriers to mobilisation (USA)	Recognition of violation of a protective order, decision to report/not to report	Semantic core→evaluative-semantic modality→interaction scenarios	The action scenario is derived from the semantic qualification of the event and the experienced instrumentality/risk of the system
Everyday interaction with institutions and practices of compliance with legal requirements/challenge (the Netherlands)	Experience of social security clients: law, compliance with requirements, reactions	Evaluative-semantic modality, interaction scenarios	Experienced justice and predictability of institutions structure the choice of interaction strategies
Trajectories of seeking legal assistance and access barriers (comparatively, 104 countries)	Typical trajectories of seeking assistance, barriers, unmet legal needs, trust/accessibility/quality	Interaction scenarios (typology), context of modality	Barriers at “nodal points” reflect typical scenarios; indicators of quality/trust set the background of the modality of law
War as a context of changing centrality of categories and polarisation of evaluations (Ukraine)	Priorities of justice and responsibility, experience of victimisation, dynamics of trust in institutions	Semantic core, evaluative-semantic modality, interaction scenarios	War strengthens the centrality of key categories and polarises modality, changing the spectrum of available scenarios

Source: compiled by the authors based on M. Hefner *et al.* (2022), World Justice Project (2023), P. Vinck *et al.* (2024), M. Hertogh (2024), P. Liu *et al.* (2025), H. Wang & M. Dai (2025), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2025), Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (2025)

The proposed model of legal consciousness as a psychosemantic construct (semantic core→evaluative-semantic modality→interaction scenarios) has clear empirical “points of application”, despite differences in topics, countries and methodological strategies. Legal consciousness manifests primarily as a system of experienced qualities of meaning, rather than as a sum of knowledge about norms. This is most clearly seen in the Chinese case on trust and perceived equality: the mere fact of information exposure does not guarantee an increase in legal consciousness; instead, its dynamics are mediated by “modules” of evaluative-semantic modality – political trust and the experience of social equality. The meaning of “law/legislation/institutions” acquires a subjective quality through evaluative axes such as “reliable-unreliable”, “for all-for the chosen”, “fair-unfair”, and it is precisely this modality that determines whether law will be interpreted as a resource for action or as a problematic order. Modality functions not as a “background” but as a structural mechanism of meaning-making. Key categories (in particular legitimacy) function as axial elements of the semantic core around which configurations of meanings are constructed. This is clearly demonstrated by the Chinese case, in which legitimacy is presented not as a one-dimensional continuum but as profiles that differ in combinations of evaluations of the legal order. The semantic core is not reducible to a “degree of support” or a “degree of distrust”; it sets structured configurations of meaning that may be qualitatively different. It is more appropriate to describe legal consciousness through the organisation of relations between meanings (centrality, oppositions, clusters) than through isolated indicators (Horák *et al.*, 2021; Wang & Dai, 2025).

Illustrative plots from different contexts demonstrate the “operation” of the model as a sequential chain: semantic qualification of the event→evaluative-semantic modality of the system→choice of interaction scenario. The American case shows that the decision to report or not

to report a violation of a protective order is determined not only by the objective situation but by how the event is semantically recognised (is this a violation or not?) and how the legal system is experienced (will this help or create additional risks?). Accordingly, the interaction scenario appears as derived from the internal organisation of meanings and evaluations rather than as a direct consequence of knowledge of rules. A similar logic is supported by the Dutch case – everyday interaction with institutions forms experienced justice, predictability, and accessibility of procedures, which in turn structures the repertoire of practices from compliance with requirements to avoidance or challenge. Both plots, although thematically different, converge in one point: scenarios are psychologically “motivated” from within the semantic field rather than externally by normative prescriptions.

The World Justice Project (2023) report summarises how people usually act when faced with a problem that has legal consequences: whether individuals seek help, at what stage the process stops, which obstacles arise and why formal procedures are often not brought to a conclusion. In a psychosemantic interpretation this makes it possible to describe “scenarios of interaction with law” not as random single decisions but as typical behavioural trajectories that are repeated under different conditions and are correlated with the experience of law as an accessible/inaccessible and effective/ineffective resource. Data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2025) complement this framework with indicators of trust, accessibility, sensitivity, and quality of justice services, which can be interpreted as external conditions that support or weaken the corresponding evaluative-semantic modalities. Accordingly, this makes it possible to theoretically reconcile typical barriers and trajectories of seeking legal assistance, the experienced “quality” of law as an instrument of action and probable scenarios of mobilisation or avoidance of legal mechanisms without moving to a normative comparison of legal systems.

The Ukrainian case performs a different function – under conditions of war it is not the “correctness” of legal consciousness that changes but the configuration of its semantic structure. Survey data on justice and responsibility, in combination with the long-term dynamics of trust in institutions, make it possible to interpret the war as a context that strengthens the centrality of the categories of justice, responsibility, punishment, and compensation (that is, shifts these categories into the core of semantic organisation), polarises the evaluative-semantic modality (trust/distrust, expected effectiveness/barriers) and changes the spectrum of psychologically available interaction scenarios from seeking recognition of harm, documentation, and compensation due to expected obstacles (Vinck *et al.*, 2024; Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2025). It is indicative that this description remains within the boundaries of psychosemantics: it concerns changes in semantic weights, axes of evaluation and scenario repertoires rather than normative assessments of the legal order. As a result, the methodological productivity of the psychosemantic approach for the theoretical analysis of legal consciousness is confirmed. Different research contexts, from the information environment and profiles of legitimacy to everyday institutional interactions, access barriers and war experience, converge in the view that legal consciousness manifests as a “structured space of meanings” in which the semantic core sets the framework for the qualification of events, the evaluative-semantic modality endows law with the experienced quality of resource/risk, justice/arbitrariness, accessibility/inaccessibility, and interaction scenarios specify how these meanings are transformed into strategies of seeking redress, compliance, contestation, or avoidance. Such a change in semantic configuration in wartime indicates that further legal educational and psychological work with the individual should focus not on transmitting normative prescriptions but on supporting agency and developing scenarios of active rights protection as a means of overcoming the

consequences of war-related victimisation (Vinck *et al.*, 2024; Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2025).

If legal consciousness is understood as a psychosemantic construct, that is, as a system of individual meanings and senses, then educational influence cannot be reduced to “transferring knowledge about norms” or to formal information about rights and duties. Within the proposed model it is more promising to focus on three psychosemantic goals: work with semantic oppositions that organise the core of legal experience, support of meaning modules of trust and agency, and the development of scenarios of interaction with law as internal “scripts” of action. The educational component can be directed towards awareness and reconstruction of the semantic oppositions through which a person interprets law (law as protection-law as threat, justice-arbitrariness, accessibility-inaccessibility, effectiveness-futility). Such oppositions are not purely cognitive: the oppositions set the basic modality of meanings and can act as “input filters” for the evaluation of legal situations. Accordingly, educational practices that include reflection on typical life situations and the interpretations are more relevant to the psychosemantic nature of legal consciousness than the accumulation of normative information (Horák *et al.*, 2021).

Given the role of trust and related meaning variables (in particular perceived equality), educational influence should be considered as work with agency and the expected instrumentality of law. Information exposure is not linked to legal consciousness in a straightforward way: the effects are mediated by trust and the perception of social equality, which in fact means that legal consciousness depends on how the socio-institutional context is interpreted (Liu *et al.*, 2025). In this sense, education may be addressed not to the “correctness” of representations but to the formation of psychological conditions under which law is regarded as a potentially effective and accessible resource rather than as a neutral or threatening abstraction. The educational aspect may be

connected with the development of “scenarios of seeking help”, that is, with the formation of meaning “scripts” in situations of violation, conflict, or threat. What is crucial is not only the formal channels but also how people qualify the problem, assess risks and predict the outcome of interaction with institutions (World Justice Project, 2023). The decision to act/not to act depends on the interpretation of the situation and the expected support of the system (Hefner *et al.*, 2022). Thus, psycho-educational interventions can focus on developing “scenario competence”: recognition of situations, assessment of safe options, alternative routes of help, and also on reducing psychological barriers associated with distrust or expectations of ineffectiveness. Generalised comparative assessments of trust, accessibility, and quality of justice services should be regarded as the external context within which the key dimensions of the evaluative-semantic modality of law are manifested (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2025). At the same time, the educational aspect in this study performs an auxiliary function: it serves to indicate possible directions of intervention rather than to expand the subject framework beyond the psychosemantic analysis of legal consciousness.

Therefore, proceeding from the fact that in a psychosemantic perspective legal consciousness is not a “level of awareness” but a structure of individual meanings and senses, it is appropriate to direct applied influences (educational/psychological/communicative) towards the reconstruction of the semantic core of legal experience, that is, towards identifying which concepts are central and which oppositions structure representations of law (centre/periphery; closeness/remoteness of categories), since it is the core that sets the framework for subsequent evaluations and choice of action. It is also necessary to work separately with the evaluative-semantic tonality of legal institutions and procedures, operationalising it through connotative dimensions of meanings (for example, fair/unfair; safe/unsafe; predictable/arbitrary; accessible/inaccessible), since it is

precisely this tonality that determines the experience of law as a resource or as a problematised order. It is worth moving from “average indicators” to a description of qualitatively different configurations of meanings (profiles), since legitimacy and related evaluations are organised not as one linear scale but as different types of semantic organisation that combine trust, justice, expected effectiveness and acceptability of coercion in different ways. It is also necessary to consider scenarios of interaction with law as a separate object of formation – as internally organised schemes of interpretation and action that arise on the basis of prior semantic qualification of the event and the evaluative tonality of institutions. In the applied dimension this means focusing not on “awareness of norms” but on how the subject defines an event as a legal problem, what consequences are expected, what risks are anticipated and what sequence of actions is regarded as permissible.

For the Ukrainian context it is appropriate to focus on the war-induced restructuring of the semantic structure, namely on the shift of the categories of justice/responsibility/punishment/compensation into the core of semantic organisation, on the polarisation of evaluative axes (trust/distrust, expected effectiveness/barriers) and on the change in the spectrum of psychologically available scenarios (seeking recognition of harm, documentation, compensation/avoidance due to expected obstacles). Such an approach is methodologically correct within psychosemantics since it records transformations in the semantic organisation of legal experience (redistribution of the centrality of categories, shifts in evaluative-semantic dimensions, reorganisation of semantic oppositions) and thereby avoids substituting research analysis with normative judgements about the legal order and institutions. It is essential to methodologically coordinate recommendations with psychosemantic procedures, in particular with tools for measuring connotative meanings and reconstructing semantic spaces (semantic differential, subsequent factorisation/clustering of profiles), since

this ensures a direct transition from the theoretical model to transparent operationalisation.

Thus, in the psychosemantic dimension the legal consciousness of the individual appears not as a sum of declarative knowledge about norms but as a structured system of individual meanings, where the semantic core, evaluative modality and interaction scenarios determine the subjective suitability of law as a resource for action. The analysis of global experience, in particular the specifics of Ukraine in wartime conditions, confirms that extreme contexts radically reformat the internal hierarchy of meanings, bringing the categories of justice and responsibility to the centre of semantic organisation and polarising the evaluative axes of trust. Ultimately, this justifies a shift of emphasis in applied work from formal information towards the reconstruction of meaning oppositions and the development of individual agency through the formation of effective scenario “scripts” of rights protection.

Discussion

The results of the study confirmed that an individual’s legal consciousness functions as a complex psychosemantic construct within which legal phenomena follow a sequential path from cognitive recognition to individual sense-making. The proposed model, which is based on the distinction between “meaning” as a relatively stable semantic content and personalised “sense” as an evaluative-modal way of experiencing law, correlates with the conclusions of M. Jakubiec (2022). The author substantiated an understanding of legal concepts primarily as mental representations, that is, internally organised cognitive structures that allow a person to classify events as “legal” and endow these events with functional significance. Within a psychosemantic logic, this means that legal categories exist in consciousness not as external texts of norms, but as internal sense formations that set the direction of interpretation and prepare the groundwork for subsequent choice of action. This approach to legal consciousness as a sphere of sense-making in the

present study also correlates with the conception in the work of B. Forti (2025), where consciousness is viewed as an information system that provides the “relational significance” of a subject’s experience through internal interpretative structures. Applied to legal issues, this framework makes it possible to specify the mechanism by which the “legal” becomes psychologically operative: a legal event is not simply registered as a fact or a norm but is embedded in the subject’s internal system of relations (values, expectations, experience of interaction with institutions), as a result of which it acquires a concrete sense – for example, as a resource of protection, as an instrument of control or as a source of risk. For this reason, within the model proposed in the present study, what is decisive is not the nominal presence of legal meanings, but the interpretative “activation” in consciousness, which determines the subsequent modality of perceiving law and the realism of scenarios of interaction with it.

The psychosemantic logic proposed in this study refines the conclusions of E. Perry *et al.* (2025) on “captured” legal consciousness: in situations of prolonged violence, law may be experienced not as protection but as a continuation of control and victimisation. Within the present study, this is interpreted as a radical deformation of the evaluative-semantic modality, when the axis “protection-threat” shifts towards perceiving law as a source of danger. As a consequence, in the semantic core of the category of “justice” the categories of “control” and “coercion” displace it, which blocks active rights protection and stimulates scenarios of avoiding institutions or of forced compliance. Both works confirm that the choice of scenarios of interaction with law is mediated by an individual sense field that defines the limits and ways of using legal means in a concrete situation.

The study by M. Lewis *et al.* (2023) showed that the semantic spaces of human languages combine local similarity with global variability: despite shared principles of the organisation of meanings, specific configurations of semantic

relations differ substantially between linguistic communities and contexts. At the methodological level this means that the same nominal category may belong to different “geometries” of sense – changing its centrality, oppositions and semantic neighbourhoods. In this sense, the architecture of the semantic space of legal consciousness substantiated in the present study is consistent with the authors’ approach and explains the phenomenon identified here, in which legal meanings with identical labels (for example, “court”, “law”) acquire radically different senses depending on the sociocultural background and experience of interaction with institutions. The results of the work by E. Martínez *et al.* (2024) showed that even non-specialists are capable of reproducing legally marked linguistic forms; however, this does not remove the problem of cognitive accessibility – the complexity of legal language may lead to incomplete or distorted assimilation of legal categories in everyday communication. In applied terms, this indicates that legal language may simultaneously perform the function of a cultural “carrier” of legal meanings and remain a barrier to the stable interiorisation. This corresponds with the findings of the present study that linguistic complexity and stylistic remoteness of legal formulations may complicate the formation of clear mental representations, potentially undermining the stability of the semantic core of legal consciousness and weakening the coherence of subsequent scenarios of interaction with law.

The results of the study established that script-like forms of interaction with law (“scripts”) should be considered as a separate structural component of the construct of legal consciousness, which ensures the transition from sense-based interpretation to the practical choice of action. In particular, within the proposed model, scenarios appear as ordered chains of the type “qualification of the situation→evaluative-semantic modality→strategy”, which makes it possible to explain the variability of legal behaviour not through the “presence/absence of knowledge” but

through the availability or unavailability of internal algorithms of action. This is consistent with the conclusions of G. Eickers (2023), who showed that social cognition is organised through “scripts” as knowledge structures that set the typical logic of events, roles, and actions in recurring situations. Interaction with institutions (submitting an application, lodging an appeal, seeking help, avoiding contact) relies on scenario schemes that may be well-formed and effective, or fragmented or blocked by a negative modality of perceiving law. The identification of scenarios as a component of legal consciousness has theoretical grounding in contemporary ideas about the script organisation of social behaviour, and confirms the usefulness of script analysis as an instrument for reconstructing legal behaviour.

The results of the study recorded a link between evaluative-semantic modality (in particular trust/distrust) and the choice of strategy of action: modality acts not as a descriptive characteristic but as a mechanism that increases or decreases the probability of activating particular scenarios of interaction with law. This conclusion corresponds to the study by S. Balaskas & I. Yfantidou (2026), who established a link between modality (in particular trust) and the choice of strategy of action, and this finds empirical support in the research. Analysing women’s responses to digital violence in the United Kingdom and Greece, the authors found that institutional trust acts as a critical “filter” that activates or blocks help-seeking scenarios. If a subject perceives the system as unreliable (negative modality), such a subject refuse to protect the rights even when aware of the violation. The empirical data of S. Balaskas & I. Yfantidou support the chain “qualification→modality→scenario” proposed in the present study, demonstrating that it is the evaluation of the reliability and accessibility of institutions that determines whether a help-seeking scenario becomes psychologically realistic and behaviourally attainable. Legal consciousness is not a static knowledge base, but a dynamic process in which cognitive “scripts” and evaluative filters of trust

determine the individual's readiness for active realisation of the rights in the social space.

In the study by J. Zhang & T. Zhang (2025), it was established that individual features of moral justification directly determine decision-making strategies and the nature of a person's stress reactions in situations of acute social-moral conflict. The authors demonstrated that internal value filters act as basic regulators of behavioural choice under pressure. These conclusions are correlated with the results of the present study, which revealed that legal consciousness functions as an interpretative mechanism that defines the admissibility and expediency of particular forms of action. The choice of a specific scenario of interaction with law is a derivative result of the semantic qualification of the situation and the evaluative-semantic modality of institutions. Moral and legal scripts act as internal sense schemes regulating the subject's social activity. The work of M. Pahore *et al.* (2024) confirmed that targeted influence through narrative structures (in particular films) can cause stable changes in the emotional states and legal attitudes of young people, altering the attitudes towards social phenomena. This reinforces the conclusion of the present study about the psychosemantic flexibility of legal consciousness and the appropriateness of developing subjective agency through the reconstruction of sense oppositions of legal experience. Applied interventions should be aimed not at broadcasting norms but at working with the evaluative-semantic tonality of legal phenomena (fair/unfair, safe/dangerous), since it is precisely this that determines the experience of law as a resource for action.

In the work of S. Halliday *et al.* (2024), it was found that extreme conditions and state interventions (in particular during lockdowns) radically transform citizens' "consciousness of rights" and the perception of the boundaries of the legitimacy of power. The authors recorded that external crisis forces subjects to revise the habitual interpretations of the rights and duties. This position is reflected in the results of the present

study on the transformation of legal consciousness in Ukraine in wartime conditions. War as an extreme context radically reconfigures the internal hierarchy of meanings, bringing the categories of justice and responsibility to the centre of the semantic core and polarising evaluative axes of trust. Macrosocial upheavals change the sense configuration of legal experience, determining new vectors of behavioural activity of the individual. In the study by J. Skorinko *et al.* (2025), it is substantiated that the legal system functions primarily as a sphere of socio-cognitive interaction in which legal behaviour is determined by subjective mental models and processes of social cognition. The authors emphasise that the future development of the field depends on the ability to design applied tools based on understanding individuals' cognitive filters and interpretative mechanisms. This position is reflected in the results of the present study on the functioning of legal consciousness as a system of individual meanings and senses; the model developed (semantic core→modality→scenarios) confirms the conclusion about the priority of internal representations over formal norms. The choice of scenarios of interaction with law is a derivative result of the semantic qualification of the situation and the experienced instrumentality of institutions. This is especially evident in wartime conditions in Ukraine, where the extreme context radically reconfigures the semantic core, bringing the categories of justice and responsibility to the centre of sense organisation. Thus, legal consciousness appears as an autonomous interpretative mechanism in which evaluative-semantic modality (trust, safety, equality) determines the subjective suitability of law as a resource for action. This makes it possible to assert that applied interventions should focus on reconstructing internal sense oppositions and developing "script competence", which fully corresponds to the strategic vector of development of cognitive psychology of law aimed at creating effective predictive models of an individual's behaviour in the legal field.

Conclusions

The results of the study revealed that the mental reality of the subject in the legal field is organised not as a sum of declarative knowledge, but as a system of meanings and senses through which a person assigns subjective weight to events and chooses behavioural strategies. Stable “meaning” sets the cognitive frame for qualifying an event as legal, whereas personalised “sense” reflects its subjective value, experience and sense of one’s own agency. The category of semantic space makes it possible to describe legal consciousness as a “coordinate system” of experience in which categories and evaluations are ordered into clusters and oppositions. Dominant axes of interpretation, such as “agency-powerlessness” or “procedurality-arbitrariness”, perform the role of sense parameters that preliminarily structure the individual’s repertoire of actions. The psychosemantic lens makes it possible to reconstruct the experienced evaluative modality of concepts (for example, safe/unsafe, accessible/inaccessible) through the logic of the semantic differential. Scenario structures of interaction are considered as internally organised sense schemes that set typical ways of interpreting legal situations and corresponding strategies. The semantic core determines the range of events and states that are recognised by the subject as having a legal dimension and categorically frame further interpretation. Evaluative-semantic modality endows meanings with the experienced quality of trust or acceptability of legitimacy, defining the subjective suitability of law as a resource for action. Interaction scripts reflect the transition from interpretation to choice of strategy: seeking help or avoidance, complying with legal requirements or challenging these requirements, formal or informal practices.

The sense of categories is constituted and actualised in repeated situations of activity through goal orientations, emotional states and anticipated consequences. The dynamics of legal consciousness are mediated by “modules” of evaluative-semantic modality – political trust and the experience of social equality of the subject.

The semantic core is not reducible to the degree of support for norms, but sets structured sense configurations that may differ qualitatively in the type of organisation. The action script (the cases of the USA and the Netherlands) appears as a derivative result of the internal organisation of meanings and evaluations of the individual, rather than as a direct consequence of knowledge of formal rules. Typical behavioural trajectories and barriers to seeking help are correlated with the experience of law as an accessible or inaccessible resource at “nodal points” of experience. Macro-social upheavals, such as the war in Ukraine, radically change the sense configuration of legal experience, determining new vectors of behavioural activity of the individual. Applied psychological work should focus on the development of “script competence”: recognising situations, assessing safe options and reducing barriers of distrust. A limitation of the study is its theoretical-reconstructive character; the conclusions are conceptual and require further empirical and psychometric verification. The case analysis has an illustrative function, and contextual sensitivity (particularly in wartime conditions) limits generalisation and calls for longitudinal confirmation. Future studies should be linked to empirical testing of the chain “qualification→modality→scenario” and psychometric validation of modality tools (semantic differential, scales of trust/legitimacy) with the identification of typical profiles. A separate line of research is the extension of modality (agency, procedural dignity, risk of secondary victimisation, experienced symmetry of the application of law) and its testing in longitudinal and comparative designs for different groups and contexts, particularly in wartime conditions.

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Правова свідомість особистості як психосемантичний конструкт

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Анотація. Метою дослідження було теоретично обґрунтувати внутрішню архітектуру та ієрархію значень, що визначають логіку сприйняття нормативних приписів та вибір алгоритмів активності людини у соціально-регулятивному просторі. Методологія базувалась на методах концептуально-аналітичного опрацювання, структурно-логічного моделювання, case-study та прикладного аналітичного синтезу. Встановлено, що у межах психосемантичної перспективи правова свідомість розглядається як сфера смислотворення, де правові явища набувають індивідуальних інтерпретацій. Предмет аналізу зміщується від формальної поінформованості до структури суб'єктивного досвіду, в якій «право» функціонує як смислова категорія. Методологічно принциповим є розрізнення «значення» як стабільного семантичного змісту та «смислу» як персоналізованої оцінно-смислової модальності. Виявлено, що психосемантична рамка об'єднує категоріальну організацію значень (семантичне ядро), їхню оцінно-смислову модальність та сценарні форми взаємодії в цілісну модель. Правова свідомість постає як структурований семантичний простір, у якому осі інтерпретації задають підстави для реконструкції індивідуальних смислових профілів. Контекстні розбіжності слід трактувати не як «різний рівень» правосвідомості, а як варіативність смислових конфігурацій, що визначають вибір стратегій. Модальність виступає не «фоном», а структурним механізмом смислотворення, де ключові категорії функціонують як осьові елементи семантичного ядра. Ілюстративні емпіричні сюжети (Китай, Сполучені Штати Америки, Нідерланди) підтверджують, що вибір сценаріїв взаємодії з правом залежить від суб'єктивної довіри та смислової оцінки ситуації. В Україні війна висуває категорії справедливості та відповідальності в центр семантичного ядра, стимулюючи сценарії відшкодування та документування шкоди. Доцільно розвивати суб'єктну агентність та алгоритми захисту прав через реконструкцію смислових опозицій і роботу з оцінно-смисловою модальністю правового досвіду. Практична значимість полягає у можливості використанні результатів психологами в психологічній діагностиці та освітньо-профілактичній роботі для розвитку суб'єктної агентності й формування дієвих стратегій захисту прав

Ключові слова: смисл; значення; сценарії; взаємодія; модальність; довіра