

The Influence of the Post-Secondary School Transition on the Temporal Structure of Everyday Life and Alcohol Consumption

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Abstract

This paper explores how the transition from secondary school to tertiary study and employment impacts on the temporal structuring of daily life. I present findings from the analysis of 50 interviews conducted with young people in Australia (all aged 19-20). I suggest that that this group highly value time with their friends but that structural changes in the contemporary world, particularly at this point of transition, make finding this 'shared' time more difficult. While the emergence of a '24 hour, 7 day a week' and 'flexible' economic and social structure in one sense facilitates going out with friends, as the participants left secondary school and moved into new courses of study and paid work, this same structure shaped the timetables of their lives in individualised and inconsistent ways that made organising shared free time with significant others more difficult. As a substitute for a greater quantity of shared time, when the participants managed to coordinate schedules with close friends they looked for more intense affective experiences, such as that facilitated by high-level alcohol consumption.

Introduction

Two questions of time have been central to youth sociology's attempts to understand social change. Firstly, a central recent focus has been the impact of social change on the timing of broad patterns of biographical transitions, with researchers suggesting the emergence of extended, delayed, arrested, on hold, yo-yo, or non-linear transitions to adulthood (Côté, 2000; Biggart and Walthers, 2006). Secondly, others have focused

on the impact of social change on young people's subjective sense of themselves in time, whether they treat their future as open and amenable to personal shaping (du Bois Reymond 1998), or whether it is now more difficult to orient to the future in this changing world (Brannen and Nilsen 2002). This study focuses on another question of time that has so far been peripheral in the sociology of youth, the temporal structuring of day-to-day life. Taking a biographical perspective (Henderson et al. 2007), this study investigates the impact of leaving secondary school on the timetables and rhythms that shape everyday life and how this impacts on interaction with significant others and on leisure time. In particular, by focusing on the temporal structure of everyday life I point towards an alternative structural influence on young people's level of alcohol consumption to the notions of a 'culture of intoxication' (Measham and Brain 2005), where high levels of consumption are seen as expected as a cultural norm.

The study is based in Australia, a context in which there has been a relative proliferation of possible post-secondary school courses of study, and of jobs with 'flexible' and non-standard hours in a 24-hour, 7-day a week, economy (Wyn and Woodman, 2006). To explore how these changes impact on time with significant others, I draw on open-ended interviews with 50 young people aged 18-20 living in Australia. Interview participants were sampled from a larger cohort¹ taking part in an large-numbers mixed-methods study of the post-school transition for a representative spread by socio-economic status, tertiary study or not, and gender. Interview questions asked about what was difficult or challenging, what or who helped, and for a general description of the first year of the participants' post-school transition. I used a mix of pattern coding to reduce the textual data to commonalities, and the building of extended narrative case studies for each participant to explore how these commonalities emerged in particular cases. In this paper I primarily present material from nine participants to illustrate general themes in how the temporal structure of everyday life impacted on the participants' relationships².

The importance of shared time

The most commonly discussed challenge of the first year of the post-school transition was a loss of support networks. A small selection of the interview excerpts highlighting the loss of support networks is included in the box below:

Not having the support network that you're used to, just like friends at school, family, you'd have those teachers you'd get on well with, just I think people who are just always there (Angela).

Getting sick was an eye opener about my friends because none of them really got involved. They were all too busy doing their own thing (Julia).

Back home everyone sort of knew me because we'd always been there so it's easier, but here I'm just another punter. I don't [see my friends] much unfortunately. Sometimes I go back home and meet up with them if they're home. Once a month I try (Liam).

Twenty-six of the 50 participants spoke about the challenges of the first stages of the post-secondary transition in terms of building or maintaining support networks. As the interview excerpts below highlight, there is evidence that this is not a straight-forward case of people 'going their separate ways' and finding new interests and friends after leaving school.

Marissa

Marissa found it difficult to make friends at university.

You are in a lecture theatre and you go from everyone knows everyone [at school], to no one knows anyone... no one sort of integrates as such.

As she did not have people in her course she felt she could talk to, Marissa turned to her existing friends from secondary school:

Go and hangout with my friends. There's a couple of friends I don't see much cause they work full time and I'm at university full time, then I work weekends, they have weekends off, but I try and hang out with them a bit if I can, that's about it really.

Getting this shared time was difficult as her two closest friends from secondary school, a key part of her pre-existing support network, now live their day-to-day life

to a different timetable to her. It was not only those pursuing a different post-school pathway to their close friends who faced this challenge. Lydia's story below suggests it also affects groups of people following similar post-school pathways.

Lydia

Lydia, like Marissa, found making new friends at university difficult.

I think I struggled at the start...Just that friendship thing really ... I had all these expectations and I had preconceptions of what university would be about and I don't think they were met.

As she struggled to build new friendships at university, she relied on her existing support network from school.

I hang out [with friends], to get up to mischief...I think knowing that they were going through the same things as well, that you weren't the only one feeling stress...I think it makes you realize who your good friends are, because it's such an effort to catch up with friends and it's really putting in like time and everyone's busy.

While Lydia relied on shared time with old friends, finding this time was difficult. In secondary school Lydia and her school friends lived school days to a synchronised timetable, fewer were working, and most were not old enough to do bar work on Saturday nights. As they left school this changed and it became more difficult to find points where people's 'free time' overlapped.³ The days of the week and times at which Lydia had classes would change from semester to semester, and her paid work involved evening and weekend work on a changing schedule. The same held for many of her school friends, and co-ordinating these multiple and shifting timetables was a challenge.

It was not only those who were studying, or mixing work and study like Lydia, who felt their lives were out of synch with their close friends, as seen in Luke's experience of leaving secondary school.

Luke

Luke was not studying, but talked of similar challenges. He worked a bar job at a

local football club in the town where he grew up. While the pay was low, the thing he disliked most about the job was the weekend and evening work:

I didn't enjoy [work] the most, especially working at the footy club, because all the footballers come back and they're all my mates, football mates would be having a few beers and what not... and I'd be working, serving them and it wasn't the greatest...Pretty keen to move on out of it at the moment, get a normal job, like normal hours...I'm just pretty much sick of the hours I have to work, like everyone's knocked off work and I'm going to work, that sort of thing.

By the time I interviewed him, Luke had been looking for a new job for some time but without success. This was not due to his unwillingness to do the types of work available, but he is looking for a job with more standardised hours and these are hard to come by at his age without post-school qualifications.

Luke's story shows that the challenge of desynchronisation was not confined to those mixing work and study. However, the way he talks about not wanting to work when his friends were off work makes this lack of synchronisation seem like an individual phenomenon, affecting a minority whose timetable of everyday life is not synchronised with the majority. However, other participants' interview answers, such as Henry below, suggest that this is not a process of a small number of participants deviating from some standardised rhythm of day-to-day life.

Henry

Henry took a job in hospitality after secondary school, and his thoughts on this move suggest that the norm for young people might be an everyday temporal schedule that is relatively individual:

I probably found most friends sort of disappeared...separate ways, different jobs I mean retail and hospitality they're not a great combination...a lot that I knew went in their opposite directions, you can say 'oh what are you doing? Do you want to catch up?' and they'd say 'look I'm working I can't go out'. Like there's one good friend he says I can't go out during the week when I could go out during the week that's the problem he can't go out during the week, he can go out during the weekend.

Henry struggled with the 'irregular' hours he had to work. He feels that his experience, what I have called the desynchronisation of everyday life, is something 'everyone has to deal with it'. There has been a multiplication of temporal structures in Australia with a proliferation of post school study options that can involve classes at all hours and on any day, changing each semester, and the emergence of 'flexible' jobs in a 24 hour, seven day a week economy. Both these factors, independently and together, point, to a contemporary world where the structured shared timetable of secondary school significantly desynchronises as people enter the next stage of their lives.

Timetables and rhythms: a qualitative desynchronisation of time

The notion of timetables in the above section only partly captures this desynchronisation, as it suggests a way of dividing day-to-day life by clock time, blocks of a quantitatively equal time in which people's free-time does or does not overlap with significant others or support networks. As Trevor below highlights, there is a qualitative dimension to the rhythms of day-to-day life and this can be out of synch, even when time is spent co-present with a support network.

Trevor

Trevor found a job at a hotel after leaving school and, like the participants above, was working irregular hours that changed from week to week:

The hours started to kill me, the irregular hours started to kill me you know. Some mornings you'd start work at 10 o'clock and sometimes you'd start work at 2 o'clock in the afternoon. I remember once I started work at 4 in the afternoon, I was meant to knock off at 10 and I ended up working till 2 o'clock in the morning.

Unlike Marissa, Trevor did not have the same difficulty finding time to spend with his closest friends from school as he was sharing a house with three of them. However, this share house living was the most difficult part of the year:

And was there anything that didn't go so well last year?

Living with other people ... you'd come home from work after you've worked ten hours shift and you know your other friends who are at home... having fun

and you've just come home off a ten hour shift and you're [really tired] and all you want to do is sleep. That didn't go so well.

Trevor found living with people whose day-to-day lives were not lived to the same rhythm as his challenging. This meant that his friends were not going through the same things as him and could not talk about these shared experiences, and that his housemates regularly made lots of noise, had parties, or wanted him to come to the pub with them when he wanted to sleep. So both the timetables and rhythms of everyday life can be experienced as out of synch with significant others.

Desynchronisation, intense shared time and the consumption of alcohol

While it was possible for many participants to find someone or some group to spend their leisure time with, this often involved significant organisation, and regularly spending time with particular close friends was difficult for many of the participants. I asked these participants what they did when they did manage to get together with their closest friends. Many spoke about looking for an intense experience to make the most of these periods of temporal synchronisation that were felt to be too infrequent. Some of the participants talked about getting together with their friends to go 'wild' or 'crazy' on a 'big night out'. Lydia, mentioned earlier in the paper noted that when her friendship group did get together, it was important they 'get up to mischief'. Talia below echoed this sentiment.

Talia

Talia, like Lydia, found the transition to university challenging and spoke of the importance of time with friends to managing these challenges.

Were there any things you would say helped you get through last year?

...Friends, just the fact that they're doing the same kind of thing that you are and going through the same thing, and someone to go crazy with sometimes... just like go out and let your hair down a bit.

What's let your hair down a bit mean, like bars and clubs?

Yeah, yeah nothing that extreme but you know what I'm saying.

The women participants, who spoke of what they did when they got together with friends, spoke in affective terms, such as 'going crazy', or 'letting their hair down'.

The men who spoke about this were more likely to speak explicitly of drinking significant levels of alcohol. Trevor who, as shown earlier, struggled with his flat mates living to a different timetable to him, when the schedules and rhythms of his life allowed saw drinking with his friends as one of the main things that helped him manage the year:

Drinking! Drinking helped to a certain degree but then you wake up in the morning and you realise it wasn't such a good idea. But it's just a release, to have fun. I feel it loosens things up, you don't think so hard about a bill coming in tomorrow or the bills that you haven't paid or work's really hard, you don't think about any of that. That's how it helps, going to the pub with your mates.

When temporal schedules allowed, spending shared time socialising with his friends, drinking at the pub was important to Trevor as a form of escape from stresses. Evan, who I introduced in the previous chapter, also relied on friends to cope with the challenges he faced, and drinking with them was a significant part of this. Evan told me his year was 'not great', particularly when a friend died.

[W]hen we actually decided, not to get over [friend's death], but sort of move on a bit, we all just went out.... there were probably three or four of us who just sat down and said do you want to go out tonight and yeah we just went out [to a venue] in the city and got absolutely spastic [drunk], had a really good night anyhow.

However, like Luke earlier in the chapter, Evan's work timetable made regularly going to the pub difficult:

I've been working weekends now as well...When [my friends are free] and I'm not straight from work I'll go around to a mates and have a beer with them... because I can't go out on Saturdays because I work.

While levels of synchronisation may improve for many of the participants as they leave study and get more secure employment, at this point in their lives there is no longer a standard timetable or temporal rhythm for young people in Australia into which to fit. The norm is a lack of synchronisation. A new temporal structuring has emerged in the last few decades which, not equally across the board but nonetheless,

is a common tension or challenge facing young people. The participants rely on semi-regular co-presence with close trusted friends to both enjoy the opportunities of this point in their lives and cope with its challenges. The experiences recounted by the participants tended to point to a lack of control over when they undertake paid work and the number of shifts (and if they were studying, over when their lectures were held). Most of the participants in this study did not have the level of autonomy over their time to simply choose to organise more shared time with their closest friends. As it is hard to create more shared time with friends, some participants spoke of looking for qualitatively more intense experiences with friends when the opportunity arises, such as that facilitated by high level alcohol consumption.

Conclusion

A collective of close friends is important for many, if not all, people, but are not given, they take time and energy to build and actively maintain. In the transition from secondary school these collectives becomes more difficult to maintain, not simply because people drift apart from school friends as they move on to other things, but in large part because people start new courses of study or jobs working on an incompatible timetable with their pre-existing group of friends and other people of the same age who may potentially become close friends in the future (who are also likely to be facing the same process of desynchronisation). The participants in this study find themselves in a world in which they must combine a much larger array of institutional timetables than was necessary for people of their parents' generation at a similar age. As young Australians leave the relatively routinised nature of temporal interactions shaped by school, they face a rapid and sometimes radical collective desynchronisation of the temporal structure of day-to-day life. As such, at this point of their lives it becomes harder to regularly find shared time that overlaps with significant others.

¹ The data for this paper comes from the Life-Patterns Project, an ongoing longitudinal study of the post-school transition of two generations of young people in Australia. The study has received funding from a number of sources, in particular two ARC Discovery Grants. Details of the study and its funding are available at http://www.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/yrclife_patterns/.

² While I go into some detail about how the temporal structures of these participants' lives emerge biographically and impact on their relationships, this detail necessarily remains limited in this short paper. Further, while the participants are from a mix of different socio-economic and ethnic

backgrounds and of both genders, in this paper I focus on commonalities and leave the work of exploring how these differences impact on the desynchronisation of everyday life and the use of alcohol for another time.

³ While I do make a claim that finding 'shared time' with a support network becomes more difficult in general after leaving secondary school, this does not mean that everyone found this time easily in secondary school. Also, secondary school has its own challenges and can be a highly stressful time for young people, but the focus here is on the first stages of the post secondary school transition.

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