

Young people's friendships in the context of non-standard work patterns

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Abstract

Non-standard patterns of paid work are increasing in Australia, and young people are among the most affected. To investigate the impact of non-standard work schedules on young people's relationships, this article draws on data from 50 interviews conducted in 2008 and 4 surveys conducted between 2007 and 2012 with 636 young people (aged 18–24 years), all participating in the Life Patterns Project longitudinal study of youth in Australia. Over the 6 years, a majority of participants were engaged in non-standard work, working weekends, evenings or public holidays. A significant minority also faced weekly variability in their work schedules. The interview data suggest that these patterns of employment can be considered unsocial, making it more difficult to find regular periods of time together with a group of friends. Interview discussion also suggests that as a substitute for a greater quantity of shared time, some young people seek out shared experiences felt to be intense or out of the ordinary, such as that facilitated by alcohol consumption, to make the most of limited opportunities to bond with a group of close friends.

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Keywords

Alcohol, decent work, flexibility, friendship, health, non-standard employment, synchronisation, unsocial hours, work, youth

Introduction

Intervention in economic policy, for example, to increase labour market flexibility, can reshape cultural practices and impact social connection and individual well-being (Du

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Gay and Pryke, 2002; Marmot and Wilkinson, 1999). The expansion of education, the mixing of work and study and the rise of casual and otherwise insecure work in Australia are likely to not only reshape work and education but to also impact other spheres of life, including relationships with significant others (Woodman, 2012).¹

One significant recent economic change has been a shift away from 'standard working hours' of 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday to Friday. With growing recognition of this shift, the traditional notion of 'unsociable' or 'unsocial' hours of work has acquired a new urgency in debates about the impact of labour market change (Bittman, 2005: 59–60; Skinner and Pocock, 2010). The concept of 'unsocial' hours highlights that not all hours of leisure are equal, and that it is more difficult for a person to organise social contact if their hours of work do not align with significant others (Bittman, 2005; Southerton, 2009).

Research and policy interest in unsocial hours has focused on older employees and families, not young workers. Yet, the latter are among those most affected by labour market restructuring. Industries likely to employ young people, such as hospitality and retail, have been at the vanguard of less secure conditions and increasingly non-standard hours of work (Furlong and Kelly, 2005; Price et al., 2011: 3). Drawing on a longitudinal study conducted with young people working and studying in contemporary Australia, this article argues that increasing divergence from once standard daytime and Monday-to-Friday working patterns has added a new challenge to coordinating lives with friends and that young people may be responding by valuing more highly shared practices that are experienced as intense or out of the ordinary.

Arguably reproducing larger divisions in social science, a sophisticated understanding of the interaction of economic structures and the experience of being young is hampered by a historical and continuing division between research focused on the structural patterns of education and labour market transitions on one hand and youth cultural practices on the other (Furlong et al., 2011). This article begins by proposing to bridge this division using a biographical perspective, which has a methodological focus on the interaction of investments across different spheres of life (Henderson et al., 2007; Roberts, 2002). Diminishing temporal standardisation in contemporary employment is likely not to be limited in its impact only to this sphere but also to cause new contradictions and challenges across other spheres of life.

The second section describes the research design and introduces the Life Patterns Project, an ongoing Australian longitudinal life-course study utilising mixed methods. Using this project, the third section presents survey data collected in 2007–2012 and interview data from 50 study participants collected in 2008 to show that non-'standard' patterns of work are the norm for the participants. Interviews with the participants suggest that the emergence of relatively individual and less standard temporal schedules among young people appears to make it harder consistently to organise leisure time co-present with close friends.

The next and largest section of the article then turns to exploring the way interview participants most affected by these temporal changes are responding to the challenge of coordinating their schedules with friends. As compensation for the lack of regular and routine periods spent together, some participants appear to put greater importance on experiences felt to be more intense or out of the ordinary with their friends, in some cases

facilitated by high levels of alcohol consumption. These participants privilege the importance of these shared experiences and the benefits close friendships can bring, seemingly even at the risk of damage to some other dimensions of their health and well-being. The article concludes by arguing that understanding the challenges some young people face in holding together their lives with others in the face of individualising contemporary temporal structures can give us new insights into the impact of labour market changes on the shared cultural practices in which young people can engage.

Studying the temporal structure of young people's everyday life

The sociology of everyday life has made time an ongoing concern, emphasising that temporal structuring of lived experience is the foundation for social practice and social reproduction (Shove, 2009). Contemporary work continues to emphasise time and how the collective rhythms of life are constituted and reconstituted through shared practices (Southerton, 2009; Thrift and May, 2001).

New research is also highlighting an emerging challenge raised by recent social change, namely, the difficulties faced by individuals in working with others to coordinate their increasingly diverse temporal schedules. Some coordination among individuals continues to emerge owing to a socio-temporal order that is shared to some extent. Yet, this order is now more complex, and the shape of each person's daily schedule is relatively individual and more variable. As a result, co-presence requires more intervention and greater effort in order to synchronise schedules with significant others (Shove, 2009: 28). Research by Southerton (2009) comparing time-diaries documenting 'everyday activity' in England in 1937 and in 2001 provides an example: personal coordination of time with others emerged as a central challenge for contemporary participants, which was absent for the earlier group.

In 1937, paid and unpaid work, the later mostly undertaken by women and structured differently from contemporary unpaid work because of its quantity and daily recurrence, provided a relatively fixed structure to the day. Diarists of the time wrote of eating lunch at the same time every day with children returning from school, and with husbands returning from work to eat. They also documented the routine allocation of periods of time spent with close friends as part of a recurring schedule, such as lunch with the neighbours every Sunday. For the interviewees in 2001, this type of routine was largely absent (Southerton, 2009: 57–60).

The contemporary respondents documented efforts to create 'cold spots' of calmer 'quality' time aligned with friends and family by actively compressing other activities, such as paid work, into 'hotspots' of harried time (Southerton, 2009: 61). In contrast, in 1937, synchronisation was provided by fixed institutional timetables and the material conditions of life. For this reason, personal scheduling was less an option or necessity.

This research, exemplifying the new interest in synchronisation between significant others, has focused on the employment and unpaid labour of older people established in the workforce or in caring roles. Often the focus is on professional workers (Symes, 1999). There are reasons, however, for why the experience of younger workers should also receive attention.

The challenge of synchronisation for young people

The late teens and 20s are seen by researchers as a time when leisure with a friendship group is both important and relatively available (Arnett, 2004). While the importance of friends is unlikely to have diminished and may have even grown as transitions associated with youth become more complex, finding this time together with friends may present new challenges not faced by previous generations. The temporal structures of people in their late teens and 20s are, to a much greater extent than that of their parents as young people, simultaneously shaped by two institutions, employment and education. Educational credentials are becoming more important, despite the link between credentials and secure professional employment becoming more convoluted, and post-school study has moved from an elite to a mass experience (Andres and Wyn, 2010). In Australia, the rate of post-school qualification has approximately doubled since 1976 (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2005).

The move towards increasing credentials has coincided with escalating change in the labour market and new patterns of mixing work and study. The overwhelming majority of post-secondary school students in contemporary Australia are also workers, with almost three quarters of university students working during the semester, often in casual work (Devlin et al., 2008).

At almost a quarter of the workforce, casualisation rates in Australia are among the highest in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, and such work has few leave entitlements and low levels of regulatory protection over patterns of working hours or period of notice required to vary hours of work (Campbell, 2004). Even without a change in hours, work requirements can change, increasing the intensity, variability or sense of precariousness of employment, leaving workers potentially exhausted, or willing to accept shifts that place significant limits on their social life (McNamara et al., 2011; Pocock et al., 2012: 135–138, 163–174; Standing, 2011).

While it is likely that they do not aspire to emulate in all aspects the career trajectories of their parents, there is little reason to believe that younger workers no longer value a sense of security and some feeling of control over their work patterns. Yet, young people make up the core of the new insecure labour market (Furlong and Kelly, 2005). Many of the sectors that employ young people, such as retail and hospitality, have moved towards extended hours of operation. This means more work takes place outside the once 'standard' hours of 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday to Friday. For Australian employees in their 20s, this type of work pattern is now decidedly non-standard (ABS, 2005). This article builds on evidence of changing patterns of engagement in the youth labour market to argue that young workers also face the challenge of synchronisation and that they may be responding by changing the way they use the time they share with friends.

Shared time in the context of variable and individualised work patterns

As already noted, Southerton (2009: 61) suggests that one method of managing the challenge of coordinating temporal schedules is developing 'hotspots' or 'harried' periods at work to create 'cold spots' of relaxed time with significant others. This response might

accurately characterise the type of temporal variability in the lives of some contemporary workers such as professionals, specifically those with high workloads and shifting deadlines but relative autonomy over when they complete tasks (Symes, 1999). There are reasons, however, to believe that there are limits to the extent to which many young workers can respond in this manner.

Increasingly precarious patterns of employment across many industries and labour markets cannot be linked primarily to employee preference (Standing, 2011). In Australia, since the rise of enterprise-level bargaining, employers have prioritised increasing their 'flexibility' over labour utilisation. Rather than a shift towards increased rights for workers, it is arguably this push from employers, supported by governments concerned to maintain competitiveness in attracting capital, which has led to changing patterns of working hours (Campbell, 2004). From the perspective of employees with least power in the labour market, such as many young workers, to describe current conditions as flexible is a misnomer for what is an increasingly insecure experience of work.

While working 'unsocial' hours may be a growing phenomenon for younger employees as employers demand more flexibility with staffing in an increasingly 24×7 economy, this is not to suggest that friendship networks among 20-something workers are disintegrating. New types of friendships are being created, and as the meaning of friendship can shift across time and place, scepticism should be directed at any unequivocal claims about a general decline in connectedness or 'friendliness' (Allan, 2008; Spencer and Pahl, 2006).

One limitation with the concept of unsociable work hours is that working time is not necessarily unsocial; intimate friendships can develop between work colleagues (Pettinger, 2005). The growth in young people mixing education and employment also means that more young people can now build friendships in the two spheres simultaneously. Shorter tenure and variable shift patterns also mean that many young people will work with more people than their parents did.

Communicative technologies can provide new ways of maintaining friendships, including a way to manage the intrusions of modern work into other spheres of life (Gregg, 2011). Young people are among the early adopters of new online 'social networking' tools (Livingstone, 2008). Yet, online networks also represent a different form of sociality. Online association with a large number of acquaintances, or a large number of 'Facebook' friends, does not appear to provide a satisfactory alternative for regularly spending time physically co-present with a smaller group, but at best a supplement to these types of relationships (Urry, 2002). The experience of physical co-presence is hard to replicate online (Boyd and Ellison, 2008). While friendship networks are not disappearing, their contours and the way they are built and maintained is likely to shift in response to new temporal structures.

Young people who value this time physically co-present with close friends may be faced with the option of making sacrifices in other areas, such as university success, to find such periods. Alternatively, they may be looking to reshape the nature of time spent co-present with friends. For example, there is concern among public health professionals about young people's patterns of alcohol use. While overall levels of consumption have not changed significantly, alcohol is increasingly consumed in a 'binge' pattern (Szmigin et al., 2008). While harmful to health in many ways, alcohol also acts in many cultures

as a symbol of belonging and of celebrating being together (Szmigin et al., 2008). This hints at a different structural influence on patterns of drinking than, or at least in addition to, a strengthening 'culture of intoxication' (Measham and Brain, 2005).

One plausible response to emerging individualised temporal structures is to create different types of shared experiences in an attempt to compensate for this structural barrier on regular time together. While this article begins with an investigation of the extent to which young people identify scheduling their leisure time with others as a challenge, I then shift to suggest how they may be reshaping time together with friends in this context.

Research design

This article investigates two related questions. First, what is the extent of non-standard working hours in the employment patterns of the participants in the Life Patterns Project?² Second, what can qualitative data suggest about the ways in which young people are shaping their shared practices in response to contemporary temporal structures? The data come from questionnaire-based surveys and semi-structured interviews. The participants were recruited using stratified random sampling of schools by state and sector (across Victoria, New South Wales (NSW), Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and Tasmania) during 2005/2006. An original sample of 1285 agreed to join the longitudinal element of the study beginning in 2007. Owing to attrition, 633 of this original sample continued to participate in 2012. The participants remained relatively close to the population age cohort in Australia in terms of school sector attended, parental socio-economic status and ethnicity, place of residence and living arrangements. There is, however, an over-representation of women and university students.

The data presented first in the analysis below are taken from responses to a question asked in each of these waves about patterns of work outside the 9:00 a.m.-to-5:00 p.m., Monday-to-Friday standard. The question was asked in waves 3, 6, 7 and 8 of the survey element of the project (2007–2012) conducted when the participants were between their first and sixth year after leaving secondary school. The percentages given are calculated only on the 633 remaining in the study in 2012. At each wave, between 455 and 562 of this group answered the question as some were not engaged in paid work during that year (participants not working were excluded) or otherwise did not complete the items.

The 50 interview participants were sampled from the larger cohort for a spread of study patterns (half undertaking tertiary study, half not), for an equal division between those living inside and outside major cities, for gender balance and for a spread of socio-economic backgrounds. The variable used for sampling by socio-economic status combined participants' questionnaire responses on parents' employment and levels of education, with scores varying from 0 (neither parent tertiary educated or in professional/managerial employment) to 4 (both parents tertiary educated and in professional/managerial employment). In this article, a pseudonym is given to each interview participant who is quoted. Gender is clear from the name chosen, and discussion of the excerpts makes clear their location. Socio-economic factors are not a significant focus in this analysis, but of the participants who provided material quoted in this article, most were from the lower SES groupings of 0–2 and none were from SES 4.

Interview questions explored a number of issues concerning the post-school transition, but focused primarily on challenges and successes in the first years after leaving school and the supports that facilitated these transitions or provided coping resources. Participants were explicitly prompted to discuss how they managed paid employment in the context of their other time investments and, separately, the nature of their friendships. The focus on non-standard work and its impact on relationships was not, however, an issue that was foreseen during interview planning to hold the significance that it did for the participants. Thus, explicit questions were not prepared on this topic. In this sense, it was a theme that emerged from the data.

The analysis of interview material relied on 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 biographies (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Below are presented some descriptive data to show levels of 'non-standard' hours of employment over time. In addition, quotations are used to illustrate common themes that emerged across the interviews. The analytical burden is carried primarily by a small number of case studies presenting material to illustrate the ways in which specific participants appeared to be responding to the growth of non-standard work patterns. As is often the aim in pursuing a biographical approach, the interview material is examined in an attempt to understand the different investments of time and resources made by each participant in the light of their different cultural settings and structural locations. Roberts (2002) argues that in this approach, qualitative research can have a central role in illuminating the consequences of major societal changes.

Temporal patterns in the lives of the participants

Within 2 years of leaving secondary school close to 90% of the survey participants were engaged in some type of post-secondary education. By 2012, 30% were still studying, with over half having completed some post-school qualification. Approximately 9 out of 10 participants were employed in each of the years they have been surveyed since leaving school, including those who were studying concurrently. While consistent employment has been common, job changes and even mixing of multiple jobs has also been widespread. Many have also been working non-standard hours. In Table 1, patterns of working evenings, weekends or public holidays are shown for the years in which the participants have been questioned about this.

While there is a steady decrease in non-standard hours over time as some participants find more secure work, this is relatively small, and many were working evening or night shifts (46.9% in 2012) and on public holidays (46.5%) 6 years after leaving secondary school. An even higher number continued to work weekends, declining a little over the 6 years but still at 59.3% in 2012. Some type of 'non-standard' hours was in fact standard for the participants. In 2012, 70% of the participants responded 'yes' to at least one of the types of irregular shifts and 33% reported that their patterns of work would vary from week to week.

These patterns cannot be considered a short transitory stage linked to the combination of employment with higher education. Even among the majority of participants who were not studying in 2012, either because they never started post-school study or had

Table 1. Percentage of participants working weekend, evening and public holiday shifts from 2007 to 2012.

	2007 (n = 465) %	2010 (n = 449) %	2011 (n = 499) %	2012 (n = 562) %
Night or evening shifts	59.4	53.3	53.6	46.9
Weekend work	79.8	67.9	68.2	59.3
Public holiday work	61.1	51.0	41.2	46.5

Source: Life Patterns Questionnaires 2007 (wave 3), 2010 (wave 6), 2011 (wave 7) and 2012 (wave 8). A recurring yes or no question asked across these waves: Does your work ever involve the following?

completed it, 65% were working some type of irregular or non-standard pattern, comparatively close to the 77% of students.

The experience of temporal irregularity in employment patterns crossed socio-economic backgrounds, with no clear pattern across the five groupings used for this study. Elsewhere, however, I have argued that some young people, mostly from the highest SES group, have greater financial and social resources to manage this irregularity without it impacting their relationships. In simple terms, some participants have the ability to say no to demands from their employers, either to change shifts or take extra shifts at work, and the ability to take periods of time off work, such as when they wish to focus on their studies (Woodman, 2012). For other participants and with the caveats raised above, these patterns of irregular work can be called ‘unsocial’ (Bittman, 2005).

The importance of shared time

The fact that non-standard hours of employment represent a new standard for this group of young people provides a context for interpreting the discussions with the participants who took part in interviews during 2008. Among the interviewees, one of the most commonly discussed challenges of the first years of the post-school transition was a loss of support networks (mentioned as a challenge without prompting by 26 interviewees). Trying to maintain and strengthen existing social networks and attempting to build new ones in the context of work and study commitments was a dominant theme. A selection of excerpts illustrates the importance of support networks:

Not having the support network that you’re used to [was a challenge], like friends at school, family. I think people who are just always there. (Angela)

Back home everyone sort of knew me because we’d always been there so it’s easier, but [now] I’m just another punter. I don’t [see my friends] much unfortunately. (Liam)

You go from everyone knows everyone [at school], to no one knows anyone ... No one sort of integrates as such. (Marissa)

I think it makes you realise 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. (Lydia)

Leaving secondary school, which institutionalises regular and extended periods of time with school friends from the same age cohort (Woodman, 2012: 1077), and the challenges of geographical mobility for study or employment were among some of the reasons for the loss of support networks raised in the interviews. For most, however, it was not straightforwardly a case of a group of friends going their separate ways at a point of significant life transition, either metaphorically drifting apart or literally moving to a new place. Nor was it primarily a case of work and/or study commitments making the participants feel they were too busy to spend time with their friends, although this was again mentioned by some (see, for example, Lydia above). Instead, it was the impact of weekend and evening work, as well as variations in the patterning of work or study between evenings, weekends and weekdays, or even across the year, that emerged as central:

I didn't enjoy [work] the most, especially working at [a pub] ... Mates would be having a few beers and what not ... and I'd be working ... 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. (Luke)

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. (Marissa)

I probably found most friends sort of disappeared ... separate ways, different jobs. I mean retail and hospitality they're not a great combination ... 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'. (Henry)

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 ... You'd come home from work ... and your [housemates] 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. (Trevor)

It always becomes a fairly big strain on [my relationship] ... because I commit so much time when assignments are due or exams are coming up. I feel she doesn't quite get the concept of how things were working at the time ... So at those points or times of year it definitely made it harder on us. (Nathan)

The challenge described by these participants is one of coordinating lives with others in the face of individualised temporal schedules. This is only partly captured by conceptualising a lack of synchronisation as the result of work and study schedules clashing with significant others so that it is difficult to organise any time together. The final two excerpts, from interviews with Trevor and Nathan, point to the way that rhythms can be out of synch with other, even when time is found to spend with them. Trevor shared a house in a regional city with three other young men, and would often come home after working non-standard shifts and want to sleep, while his housemates wanted to invite people to the house and consume alcohol, activities often accompanied by levels of noise unfavourable to sleep.

Nathan worked for a real-estate agent in a smaller regional city and was undertaking related study in property valuation. He was also intermittently doing a few hours unpaid work a week for his father, who ran a small retail business that struggled financially. Unsurprisingly Nathan identified 'time management' as a major challenge for the year.

Yet, it was not simply the number of hours he spent working or studying but again the rhythms of the busy periods of his life being out of balance with his girlfriend that was the greatest challenge. His girlfriend was doing an apprenticeship and, although she also works long hours, she does not have the same peaks and troughs in her workload that Nathan experiences with his university semesters combined with employment.

While spending time with others is valued by most, it can also require an investment of energy. Variable hours of work or study can also mean that the peaks and troughs in people's energy are put out of synch with those of significant others, from the course of a day to a calendar year. Even if people have overlapping 'free' time, those who have not worked that day might have more energy for social activity than others who have just left work or class, or worked or studied the night before. For these participants, desynchronisation of the schedules and rhythms of their lives with those of significant others appears to be one impact of current labour market structures. In the remainder of this article, I turn to the way that participants respond to these contemporary temporal structures.

A different sense of time: Intense shared experience

Beyond, in some senses, selecting their jobs or their courses, the participants seemed to have little autonomy over their schedules relative to their employers or university administrators. This section draws on narratives from a smaller number of participants to explore how those without significant autonomy to adjust their timetables seem to respond to these emerging temporal structures and the biographical impacts they have. Not all of the participants who mentioned the challenge of maintaining support networks went into significant detail on how they responded. Of those who did, only one described a form of managing his workload that resonated with Southerton's (2009) concept of creating 'hotspots' of harried work time to free up quality time with significant others.

Costa

Costa studied for a diploma in business management and marketing at a local vocational education provider in the capital city in which he lived. He did a few hours of part-time paid work most weeks in a small IT-related business run by his older brothers. Costa spoke of making a 'deal with himself' that when he had completed a certain amount of work, he would organise to go out for a night with a few close friends from secondary school:

I didn't go out much with the boys, like my mates, but when I did that was probably one of the things that sort of kept me going in school. Because I wanted to see them more often, I'd go to school and work really, really, hard so I could see them more often. That would be a drive because I'd start missing them ... so I'd start working even harder.

Costa seemed to create 'hotspots' of study to create 'cold spots' with friends. Yet, his experience was not common among the participants. While Costa did spend long hours in work or study some weeks, his patterns of work were mostly at his discretion. Working

for his brothers, who allowed him to engage in work on his own terms, gave Costa a relative autonomy over when and whether he undertook paid work.

Others were approaching organising time with significant others in a different way. These participants aim for shared time that is experienced as qualitatively different, more intense, than other times. Nathan, who earlier on talked about the challenges of finding time with his girlfriend, was the most explicit about seeking out a qualitatively different sense of time.

Nathan

In his interview, Nathan spoke of physical activity as a coping strategy he used to deal with the stress he felt in the face of study, employment and relationship tensions:

Something like a physical activity of some sort is what I find relaxes me ... get my mind off [work and relationship difficulties] the most. It's very easy because you're just out there in the moment ... When I'm outside and in the water or out in the boat, or out hunting, or out playing a game of [football] there purely just isn't the time to think about [other things]. You're thinking about what you're doing in the moment and just the physical exhaustion side of things ... You're not thinking about what you've got, to study, back at work, or back at the house.

Like several other participants, Nathan thought physical activity was a central part of his coping strategy. This should not be understood of as an individual pursuit; he goes scuba diving and hunting, and obviously plays football, with others. It is noteworthy that Nathan did not engage in organised team sports but only informal activities. While it may simply have been a preference for him, other participants spoke about the challenge of taking part in organised sport when their work schedules shifted across evenings of the week.

While his activities do have a shared dimension, what Nathan highlights is the experience of a qualitatively different sense of time, and the sense of escape this enables. This different sense of time may provide a coping resource for young people managing the complex work and study demands placed on them today (Woodman, 2004).

Other participants talked about how getting together with their friends to go 'wild' or 'crazy' on a night out was important to dealing with challenges and difficulties. Lydia spoke about the challenge of finding time with members of her friendship group and noted that when they managed to get together for an evening out they would 'get up to mischief'. Talia below echoed this sentiment.

Talia

Talia spoke of the importance of time with friends for managing the stresses that she experienced with the transition to university study in one of Australia's largest cities:

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

Well definitely 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 does 'let your hair down a bit' mean, like bars and clubs?

Yeah, yeah ... you know what I'm saying.

Women interviewees, who spoke of what they did when they got together with friends, spoke in terms of 'going crazy', or 'letting their hair down'. The men who spoke about this were more likely to speak explicitly of drinking significant amounts of alcohol.

Trevor

Trevor, as shown earlier, struggled with his flat mates living to a different timetable to him, 'drinking and partying' when he wanted to sleep. Yet, he also talked about drinking with friends, when schedules allowed, as a central coping strategy. I asked Trevor about what helped him through the previous year:

(Interviewer) Would you have anything that you do that would make you feel better when things were not going well?

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 work is 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 drinking with his friends at the pub was important to Trevor as a form of escape from stresses. Another participant Evan, also relied on friends to cope with the challenges that he faced, and drinking with them was a significant part of this.

Evan

Evan was working two jobs, in construction and in hospitality, in a major Australian city. He told me his year (2007) was 'not great', in part because of the pressures of his work commitments, and partly because a close friend died. Alcohol played a part in the way his friendship group coped with their bereavement:

[W]hen we actually decided, not to get over [friend's death], but sort of move on a bit, we all just went out ... It's not going to be the same but we have to go out again and we have to start having a good time again. And 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].

Evan's work timetable made regularly going to the pub difficult, however:

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 mate's [house] and have a beer with them ... because I can't go out on Saturdays because I work at the pub now.

In the Australian vernacular, 'a beer' tends to mean a number of drinks, and Evan's stories of time with his friends, even Saturday mornings, often involves significant alcohol consumption.

Discussion: Making shared time a 'hotspot'

While some relationships have a dark side, strong friendships bring satisfaction, enjoyment and may have an increasingly important role in managing the challenges of contemporary life (Allan, 2008; Spencer and Pahl, 2006). While it is difficult to support the argument that overall, or in general, social bonds are weakening or strengthening, the creeping extension of non-standard and often variable patterns of work adds a new challenge to scheduling regular periods of time with others. A number of participants felt that organising leisure activities so that others could attend, as well as attending such events organised by others, was made more difficult by their weekend, evening, night-time and variable patterns of employment. A pattern that is increasingly common for young people.

This does not mean that weekend and evening work do not hold any benefits for at least some young workers, helping them coordinate earning money with engagement with education. Yet, few students have no period during the Monday–Friday 'standard' work week available for employment, and many of the participants who are working non-standard hours are not students (including, during 2008 when these interviews took place, Evan and Trevor discussed above).

Although they were slightly less likely to be doing so than the participants studying, among the questionnaire cohort in 2012, the majority of those not undertaking study still faced employment with either weekend, evening, public holiday or variable hours of employment. Increased autonomy over scheduling, if not workload, has been suggested as a factor in the emergence of increased variability in patterns of work among professional workers (Shove, 2009; Symes, 1999). The interview material presented here suggests, however, that the rise of these patterns of employment among younger workers may not be primarily a response to employees demanding flexibility (Campbell, 2004). The experiences recounted here suggest that if other considerations such as pay rates are not a factor and if study timetables could be controlled and weekday hours were available, these participants would have preferred to have their evenings and weekends free to spend with others.

Thus, the new standard of 'non-standard' hours continues to have an effect on people's time with significant others, and hence can be said in this regard to be unsociable. The growing pattern of spreading the work week across 7 days and into the evening, particularly for workers in retail and hospitality, does not mean that Sunday or the evenings are now just like any other time (Bittman, 2005). There is nothing to suggest that people are now just as likely to schedule a 21st birthday or a regular meal with friends or family at midday on Tuesday.

The stretching of potential working hours and associated variability in individuals' working hours that is associated with this mean that it is more difficult to organise collective time together among friends, so that all, or even most, can attend. This suggests that there are limits to the extent to which the impact of evening or weekend work on

relationships and collective activity can be compensated by rescheduling social time at other periods, such as the aforementioned Tuesday daytime.

In this article, use has been made of interview data to help guide a conceptualising of the ways in which the participants responded to the rise of individualising work patterns. In a sense, it inverts one-half of Southerton's (2009) framework in which he suggests that his participants create 'hotspots' of harried and intensive paid work to free up 'cool' or relaxed points of sociality. While the participants in this study sometimes felt harried at work, and their work certainly did not constitute 'cool' points in their lives, they were not in general working in the types of jobs where they could free up time for relationships by working harder or by adjusting their hours. Instead, it was shared time that becomes 'hotter'. Through more intense experiences, some aimed to make the most of limited time together, for example, by drawing on the intoxicating effects of alcohol. It may be that such a way of using their shared leisure time provided an experience of relative autonomy.

Many interacting factors have been shown to impact alcohol use, including culture and regulation of the night-time economy (Measham and Brain, 2005). This article has not addressed the long and complex history of the relationship between alcohol use and work, let alone accounted in detail for changing cultures of alcohol use in Australia. Acknowledging these limits, it is suggested that some participants were using intoxication or other embodied experiences as a coping strategy. These experiences were not primarily important as a type of personal escapism or as a facilitator of a 'cold spot' of shared relaxation, but because they were physically active (Nathan), a time to 'get up to mischief' (Lydia), to go 'crazy' and 'let your hair down' in bars or clubs (Talia) or less euphemistically to get 'drunk' (Trevor) or 'absolutely spastic' (Nathan) with others, who were or could become close friends.

This research cannot directly show how common this pattern is, or how much it represents a change from previous generations. Yet, the heightened search for this type of intense experience with significant others could represent an understandable response from young people to the challenge of maintaining a fulfilling social life in the face of increasingly unsocial temporal structures.

Conclusion

Close friends are important for many, if not all, people, but this type of relationship is not simply given. Building and maintaining relationships takes time and energy. Contemporary employment patterns may make this type of relationship more difficult to create and maintain. The participants in this research are living in conditions in which a larger array of institutional timetables shapes their lives than was the case for previous generations. While precarious employment conditions matter to all workers, it is likely that they interact with the life course, having a different effect on different age groups. The experience of younger employees has so far been relatively marginalised in sociological research investigating changing temporal structures of work, despite the decline in regular work patterns potentially impacting younger workers more than any others.

The conceptual approach taken in this article and the experiences recounted by the participants point towards a new direction for researching the experience of youth in

contemporary conditions. One of the challenges facing social scientists is to understand the way intervention (or lack of intervention) in economic policy shapes cultural forms. By focusing on temporal structures and biographies – the way temporal investments in one sphere such as employment interact with investments in other spheres such as friendship – I have suggested that new temporal structures are influencing the type of social goods that can emerge from relations with others.

Work patterns that are still called non-standard have become a new standard, at least for younger employees. As this new standard contains increased variability in when people will be expected to work, it adds a new challenge to maintaining personal relationships. It is not, however, a straightforward or unilateral relationship between new labour market (and education) structures and cultural outcomes for these young people. They are creatively shaping their use of time in response to the temporal structures they face. As it is hard to create more shared time with friends, no matter how much this is valued, some young people appear to be looking for qualitatively more intense experiences with friends when the opportunity arises.

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Notes

1. The article ‘Life out of synch’ (Woodman, 2012) can be considered a companion piece to this one. The focus in the 2012 piece is on the experience of losing networks after leaving secondary school, and it provides an extended discussion of the emergence of desynchronisation in the lives of project participants using interview data. This article instead turns to the consequences of this lack of synchronicity and how the participants are responding using both survey and interview data. A small amount of the interview data presented here, approximately 10%, also appears in the other article, albeit with a different form of presentation.
2. This project includes two cohorts, an older group who finished school in 1991 and a younger group who finished school in 2006. I draw only on data from the younger cohort in this article. Further details on the Life Patterns Project can be found at the project website: http://web.education.unimelb.edu.au/ycr/life_patterns/

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