Life Out of Synch: How new patterns of further education and the rise of precarious employment are reshaping young people’s relationships

Dan Woodman
University of Melbourne

Abstract
Young people increasingly mix study with variable hours of employment in a precarious youth labour market. Drawing on interview material from 50 participants (supported by questionnaire data from 1294) from a longitudinal study of the post-secondary school transitions in Australia, this paper explores how these patterns of work and study impact on young peoples’ friendships. As the participants left school they moved into new courses of study, in which timetables shifted each semester, and employment in which the hours they worked also varied, sometimes each week. This increasingly common temporal structure shaped the participants’ lives in inconsistent and singular ways that made it more challenging for many, but not all, to find regular periods of shared time to maintain close friendships and to build new acquaintances into deeper friendships. Some participants had the resources to manage this emerging variable temporal structure without it having a major impact on their relationships.

(Key words: time, synchronisation, friendship, support networks, youth, education, employment, post-school transition)
Recent decades have witnessed a boom in sociological interest in time (Adam 1998, Bergmann 1992, Rosa 2003). Mirroring popular concern, research is focused on time pressure and ‘work-life balance’ (Gershuny, 2008; Goodin et al., 2008; Hochschild, 1997; Schor, 1993). Recent attention has shifted from the contested question of whether people are working longer to variability in the scheduling of work and leisure. Some have explored a trend towards non-standard work hours cross much of the West (Lesnard and Min, 2010; Presser, 2004; Ulker, 2006). Others have focused on how variability in temporal schedules impacts on everyday life (Southerton, 2006; 2009). Increased variability in the rhythms and schedules of daily life potentially reshapes personal relationships, as the synchronisation of timetables with significant others, for example around meals, shifts relatively from an institutional given towards a challenge demanding active efforts of coordination. Co-presence comes to requires more deliberate planning and intervention by people to coordinate their lives with each others.

This paper explores the impact of changes in patterns of education and employment on the temporal structures of young people’s lives. ‘Youth’ is popularly associated with relatively more leisure time with friends than at any other point in the life course. Yet some of the changes that have increased variability in temporal schedules have had a particularly pronounced impact on people in their late teens and twenties. Deregulation of the labour market is leading to a growth in precarious employment with fewer rights and less stability (Pocock, 2003; Standing, 2011). This growth has disproportionately impacted on young people, who are most likely to take jobs in the retail and hospitality sectors that are expanding rapidly as the manufacturing sector declines (Furlong and Kelly, 2005). These sectors are gradually moving towards 24-7 hours of operation and employment is often part time and insecure.

Young people increasingly mix casual, shift-based employment with study. Post-school study has become a majority experience in Australia, in a growing number of courses with growing number of possible timetables. In the context of these new work and study timetables, young people’s everyday schedules are likely to become increasing variable and individual. Using data from the Life-Patterns Project, an ongoing study of the post-school transition in Australia, I explore how variability in the rhythms and timetables of everyday life impacts on young people’s relationships. I
begin by mapping changes in the temporal structures of young people’s lives in Australia and then turn to evidence from the Life-Patterns study to show how increased variability in these structures is making it more difficult for many to regularly schedule periods of time together with close friends. In finishing I suggested that in this context synchronisation with significant others or its lack marks out a novel element in the role control over time plays in the reproduction of inequality.

**Changes in the temporal structuring of young people’s lives**

The temporal ordering of everyday interaction is central to how people negotiate the world and through which social structure is reproduced and potentially challenged (Bourdieu, 1977; de Certeau, 1984; Giddens, 1984; Lefebvre, 2004). This interaction is being reshaped. New tools of scheduling and sociality have been developed, including email, electronic diaries, mobile telephones, and social networking sites like Facebook. If forms of mediated communication at a distance are counted, many have never been more connected with others. Yet, even with this proliferation of devices for communication at a distance, time physically co-present with significant others appears to be highly valued.

As most people still regularly seek out shared time to be with others in person, some have suggested a type of ‘compulsion for proximity’ (Boden and Molotch, 1994). Urry (2002) suggests that sustaining relationships and building trust seems to rely on at least intermittently seeing and sensing the other person through physical co-presence, as body language and gestures, eye contact, and quality of expression are limited in other forms of communication. The creeping expansion of economic production into the evening and weekend reshapes temporal patterns that once supported co-presence with significant others. People’s labour and consumption patterns can be spread over a greater part of the day, and managing to combine home, paid work and social life requires increasingly complex scheduling. In this context, people may be more connected than ever before but the scheduling of regular periods of time co-present with significant others becomes more challenging (Southerton, 2009).

Here my focus is variability in the temporal structures of young people’s lives and how this impacts on their friendships. This group are among those most likely to bear
the brunt of increased labour market insecurity; while at the same time many are trying to balance their paid-employment with study (Wyn and Woodman, 2006). This is likely to have transformed the temporal structure of young people’s everyday lives in significant ways.

The current generation of young people is spending longer in formal education. Engagement in tertiary education in Australia has grown rapidly since the end of the Second World War. In the pre-war period, only 2 in a 1000 young people attended university. Post-war government policy supported the expansion of further education and by 1976, 32 per cent of people in their 20s held a post-school qualification. By 2001 this had increased to 45 per cent (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2005). This rapid growth has continued into the new century. By 2009, 69 per cent of the 25-34 year olds held some form of post-school qualification with approximately half at bachelor’s level or higher (ABS, 2009). This rapid growth in the further education sector has increased the variability in the timing of pathways through further education and in course structure, such as the timetabling of classes (McInnis et al., 2000).

The expanding cohort of post-school students is also increasingly likely to be mixing study with paid work, with 64 per cent of Australian students aged 20-24 concurrently employed (ABS, 2008). This employment is in a labour market that has become more precarious (Standing, 2011). Youth labour markets, even in the mid-20th Century, had relatively greater volatility than the labour market as a whole. Even during this ‘golden age’ of employment, irregular hours, shift work, and mixing work with study (for example taking night classes to open up new career opportunities) was the experience of some. These tended to be young people, a continuity sometimes underplayed by youth researchers (Goodwin and O’Connor, 2005). Yet there is much evidence suggesting that variability in the timetables of young people’s work has increased. The ‘average’ 40-hour week has become a minority experience for people in their 20s in Australia, shifting from 50 to 22 per cent between 1976 and 2001 (ABS, 2005). Half of all young people in the labour force in Australia are on ‘casual’ contracts, which tend to involve work patterns that vary from week to week (ABS, 2008). While young people may be less likely than those in their 30s or 40s to be
working full time, or to be also managing the schedules of their children, they are the most likely to mix variable hours of paid work with tertiary education.

This study looks at how these new patterns of education and employment impact on people’s relationships in the first stages of their lives after leaving secondary school. This transition potentially leads to marked changes in the temporal structuring of daily life. Secondary school timetables are highly standardised and tend to be both inflexible and consistent, institutionalising a shared temporal rhythm on the lives of students (Christensen and James, 2001). Time with friends, at least school friends, is guaranteed. When young people in Australia leave secondary school this temporal structure shared with their peers weakens significantly. Tertiary education has more variable timetabling and although some have part-time jobs while in secondary school, the number working and the hours worked increases after leaving school (McInnis et al., 2000). Further many jobs involving night-time shifts are unavailable until people turned 18, including working behind a bar or in security.

The extent of this shift in temporal structuring for young people in Australia is likely larger than that experienced by their parents as they left school. Fewer went into study, fewer mixed study with work, and many more worked ‘standard’ hours Monday to Friday (ABS 2005). In all likelihood some worked or studied long hours in the year after they left school. Yet, for workers of this previous generation an extension of the once-standard (at least for the men, and to some extent for women working before starting a family) 9am-to-5pm, Monday-to-Friday work schedule would have a relatively minimal impact on the amount of shared time with close friends that was available. They could still ‘catch up’ with friends on weeknights, even if they were late to events, and on weekends. For the current generation of young people however, this time with friends is potentially more challenging to schedule.

Young people are at the vanguard of new communicative technologies like Facebook and mobile phones (Ling, 2008; Livingstone, 2008) and increasingly they are engaged in two settings, tertiary education and work, in which they can develop social networks (Wang et al., 2010). As such this group in contemporary Australia may have more ‘friends’ than any cohort before them. While an extended number of acquaintances bring many benefits such as access to new information and new
opportunities (Thomson and Taylor, 2005) and some may prefer these kinds of relationships, young people in general continue to place a high value close friendships. Wierenga (2009) has shown that it is through trust relationships which rely on extended periods of co-presence to develop and maintain that young people develop their sense of what is possible in their future and cope with the challenges of the present. New forms of mediated togetherness are mostly viewed as an addition but not a replacement for the type of relationships that can be built through this older form of togetherness (Boyd and Ellison, 2008). This study explores whether increased variability in the temporal structuring of young people’s lives in Australia is making finding these regular periods of time co-present with close friends more complex and, at least for some, more difficult.

The research
This paper draws on the Life-Patterns Project, an ongoing longitudinal study of the post-school transition in Australia. I primarily use data from open-ended interviews with 50 of the study’s participants conducted during the first half of 2008 (the second year of their post-school transition). I also briefly report descriptive results on patterns of work and study for the entire cohort from a survey conducted late 2007. The participants were aged 18-20 at the time of the questionnaire and 19-21 at the time of the interview. The study participants were recruited using stratified random sampling of across three Australian states (New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania) and the Australian Capital Territory during 2005/2006. The sampling was stratified to achieve a representative mix of metropolitan and non-metropolitan participants and from the government and non-government school sectors in Australia. An in-school questionnaire was completed by 3998 students, of which 1294 agreed to join the longitudinal element of the study and completed the 2007 survey. The longitudinal sample remained relatively representative of the age cohort apart from some overrepresentation of women and of those who went on to tertiary study. There was also an under-representation of young people not in the labour force or education. Interview participants were sampled from this larger cohort for an approximately even split of genders, a spread of socio-economic statuses (SES), study patterns and place of residence in the final year of secondary school.
The variable used for sampling interview participants by SES combined participants’ questionnaire responses on parents’ employment and levels of education. For each parent with some level of tertiary education a ‘1’ was given, the same for each parent in professional or managerial employment. Hence the variable takes values from ‘0’ (neither parent tertiary educated or with professional/managerial employment) to ‘4’ (both parents tertiary educated and with professional/managerial employment). More interview participants were sampled from the middle and lower ends of the scale as only a small percentage of the Australian population is SES 4. The final sample of interview participants included 10 from SES 0, 11 from SES 1, 13 from SES 2, 10 from SES 3, and 6 from SES 4. The sample also contained 24 participants engaged in tertiary study in the year of the interview and 26 who were not. Almost half (24) of the sample were from larger cities (Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra, Hobart), 16 were from regional cities (less than 100,000 residents), 6 were from country towns (less than 10,000), and 7 were from rural areas outside of towns or cities (for example, farms). There were 26 men and 24 women in the interview cohort.

Interview questions asked about the participants’ paid work, study, living arrangements and relationships. Participants were asked what went well, what was difficult or challenging, and who or what was a source of support during the first year of their post-school transition. The analysis of interview material was a mix of pattern coding to reduce the textual data to commonalities, and the building of an extended case study for each participant to explore how these commonalities emerged in particular cases. Here I present some descriptive data on work and study patterns from the survey questionnaire to provide the context for the analysis of the qualitative material and counts of the number of participants whose interview answers were coded to themes, but primarily present material from ten participants to illustrate general themes in how the temporal structure of everyday life impacted on the participants’ relationships. The participants are given pseudonyms and their status on the variables used for sampling is also provided.
Everyday Life Out of Synch

Most questionnaire participants were in paid employment the year after leaving secondary school (87 per cent). Working outside of the 9-5pm, Monday-to-Friday work week was common, with 70.4 per cent working weekends and 53.9 per cent evening and night shifts. A majority had also gone on to some further study (72 per cent) and mixing work and study was common, with 67 per cent of those studying also in paid employment.

In this context, finding time for building and maintaining relationships emerged as a central concern for the interview participants (26 of 50 participants). As the interview excerpts below highlight, there is evidence that this concern does not emerge from a simple case of people ‘going their separate ways’ and finding new interests after leaving school. It is instead linked to the emerging norm of mixing study with precarious forms of paid employment. I start with Marissa, who found it difficult to make friends at university, but also found it difficult to find time with her existing friends from school.

_Marissa [Female; SES 2; Tertiary study; Country town]_

Marissa felt that developing relationships with her fellow students was the most difficult part of starting tertiary study:

> 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 develop a strong support network at university, she turned to her existing friends from secondary school. I asked her what or who had been her primary source of support during her transition from school:

> [I] go and hang out with my friends...I don’t see [them] much because they work full time and I’m at university full time, then I work weekends, they have weekends off. I try and hang out with them a bit if I can, that’s about it really.

This difficulty emerged because Marissa’s friends now lived much of their day-to-day life to a timetable inconsistent with hers. She continued to rely on these friends in part
because she felt it was difficult to develop a new support network at university. The experience of another participant, Lydia, suggests that structural changes in education might be behind this difficulty.

*Lydia [Female; SES 1; Student; City]*

Lydia also found both making new friends at university and maintaining existing networks difficult:

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 time and everyone’s busy.

She went into more detail than Marissa on why she had not developed close relationships at university, comparing her experience to that of her older sister:

I think I struggled …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… I thought that we were all going be in the same boat and it’d be really easy to find a group, like it was at school.  

*So what do you think made it different for you compared to your sister [when she went to university]??*  
I asked her and she’s like, ‘we had designated lunch times’.

Lydia’s older sisters had studied for professional qualification in dentistry. This study involved a shared course structure, with few elective classes, to a shared timetable for a small cohort. As the number of tertiary students in Australia has expanded, many universities have grown in size, creating greater complexity in scheduling classes. While student-to-staff ratios, and hence class sizes have increased, here has also been an increase in the overall variability in course structures (McInnis et al., 2000). As such, this type of highly prescriptive course where a small number of students are enrolled in mostly compulsory subjects, taken by an entire cohort at the same time, is becoming relatively rare in Australia. In contrast to her sister, Lydia did not regularly see the same people from one class to another or from semester to semester.

It was not only those mixing work and study who felt their lives were out of synch
with others. Luke’s experience of leaving secondary school, discussed below, suggests that the type of work available to young people can independently have an impact on time with friends.

Luke [Male; SES 2; Non-student; Country town]

Luke was not studying, but talked of similar challenges to the participants discussed above. He worked behind the bar at the 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 football 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 finished work and I’m going to work, that sort of thing.

By the time I interviewed him, Luke had been looking for another job for several months but without success. Find work with ‘standard’ hours is becoming more difficult, particularly for people of Luke’s age without post-school qualifications. Due to these non-standard hours, including weekends and evenings, Luke stopped playing for the football club when he began working at the club’s bar. Another participant went into more detail on how variable work patterns made it difficult to take part in organised activities, like team sports, that have a regular schedule.

David [Male; SES 0; Student; Country town]

David moved to a new city to attend university and moved away from his pre-existing support network. He found the move very difficult, telling me the ‘whole year should be scratched off’. He discontinued his course and moved home after about six months, in large part because he struggled to make new friends:

That was hard, just making friends up there…I used to be real keen on my martial arts, karate and kickboxing and I stopped doing that.

So how did you come to stop martial arts?

Moving away and just haven’t gone back.
So did you ever investigate doing it [after moving]?
I rang a guy and spoke to him, rocked up once and, because I was working as well, it was real hard. Like it was constantly changing, one week I’d work like Monday, Wednesday and a Thursday, next week Saturday, Sunday, Monday, I couldn’t keep anything going.

Before moving to start university, David spent much of his time with friends surfing or training in martial arts. While surfing was no longer an option as his university was far from the coast, he tried to reengage with martial arts. His job, however, involved working irregular hours and this made engaging in these activities difficult.

It has been argued that mixing part-time employment with study has the potential to extend young people’s support networks (Wang et al. 2010). For David however, the variability in his hours of work both made it difficult to build strong friendships at work as in the large pub where he worked he was not regularly working with the same people, and also difficult to build friendships outside of work. The temporal schedule set by his study and employment meant that organised activities he was interested in taking part in, and which could potentially connect him to a new network, were difficult to attend on a regular basis.

Another participants’ experience suggested that variable work schedules not only impacts on the amount of time with close, and potentially close, friends but also the quality of this time.

_Trevor [Male, SES 2; Non-student; Regional City]_

Trevor found a job at a hotel after leaving school and, similarly to Luke, felt that irregular work hours were the worst aspect of the job:

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

Yet Trevor did not have the same difficulty finding time to spend with his close friends as the other participants discussed above. Remaining in the family home was
the most common living arrangement in the first year of transition from school for the interview participants (24), although some attended a residential university college (7), went on a gap year (3) and one lived with her partner. Trevor was one of the minority (of 16) in a share house, living with three close friends from school. This kept him in close contact with this group, however, this share-house living was also the most difficult part of the year and his relationship with his housemates deteriorated to the point that Trevor moved out.

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

Living with other people … you’d come home after you’ve worked a ten hours shift and your other friends… they’re at home drinking and partying and 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’s story shows that rhythms of day-to-day life can be ‘out of synch’, making it difficult to maintain relationships even when time is regularly spent co-present with friends. This section has shown how both the rhythms and timetables of many participants’ lives were lived out of synch with their existing close friends and potential new friends at work, taking their course of study, or in an organised activity. The next section shows that this was not primarily because the participants were choosing to live to more individual schedules.

**Control over temporal schedules**

In previous writing there is some ambiguity about the role of increased autonomy in the de-synching of temporal schedules. It is suggested that the contemporary world makes demands on people to respond to the economic need for a more ‘flexible’ temporalisation. Yet it is also suggested that the move from the relatively homogenous temporal structure of industrial society, and the relative weakening of some material constraints due to a proliferation of convenience devices, has increased people’s control over when they do work, if not how much (Symes 1999, Shove 2009, Southerton 2009). This work has not focused on young people and, it is possible that personal autonomy over time may increase for these participants as they age. Yet, as exemplified by Henry and Lana below, in this study there was little evidence of the participants having autonomy to shape their personal timetable to their choosing.
After almost six months looking for work after leaving school, Henry found a job in hospitality. I asked him what had helped him through this period without work:

Probably just a close friend [who was also unemployed] I could talk to. Me and him had very similar things to talk about… I found having a close friend, just being able to talk, I think would be the big thing.

Although unemployment can impact on relationships in other ways, finding free time that overlaps with friends is likely to be less of an issue\(^1\). When Henry did find work, however, he found it difficult to maintain this and other relationships:

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’. 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, but felt that it was something most young people have to deal with at least at this point in their lives.

In the hospitality industry, normally you’re working [weekends]. So you can’t go out. It’s one of those things that are a bit of a shit, but hey everyone’s got to deal with it. I mean hopefully by the time I’m fifty or whatever I can be sitting back and relaxing on my weekends.

Henry, in discussing the difficulty he had in maintaining his friendships, felt his experience of working to a variable and relatively individual schedule was common to people his age. The availability of paid work on weekends and in the evenings is important to many young people. In the absence of substantial government support, it would be almost impossible for many of the participants to pursue full-time tertiary study without it. Further, it is possible that many young people do not aspire to the ‘9-5, Monday-Friday’ model. At least some of participants in this study hope to pursue careers in fields, such as the creative arts, that have never fitted this model. Increased ‘flexibility’ in timetables can be beneficial. Yet, it is important to distinguish between
‘flexibly’ and ‘precariousness’ (Furlong and Kelly, 2005; Standing, 2011). Labour market deregulation has weakened the power of employees relative to employers. More so than a demand from workers for flexibility from employers, it is increased flexibility for employers that has led to the increase in unpredictable patterns of work, particularly for those with least power in the labour market. Another participant, Lana, pointed to the consequences of this precarious temporal experience.

_Lana [Female; SES 0; Student; City]_

Lana like other participants found making new friends after leaving school a challenge. She managed to build some friendships at university, but these new friends did not play the same role in her life as her friends from secondary school had.

I really did not know that many people so I had to make a whole lot of new friends… My friends are really important. I don’t have that many close friends but the ones I have just really know a lot about me and I think that’s the way I want it to be. I mean I have a lot of people that I know, from university and sport, but a lot of them I wouldn’t just tell my deepest, darkest secrets to kind of thing. [This is hard] because my friends are my coping mechanism, and also my family.

Lana put the emphasis not on meeting people itself, but on finding time to develop close friendships:

I’m working all the time… you don’t realise just how hard you have to work [after leaving school]. I had to approach everything differently – like socially, I actually had to book people in.

She felt she was doing too much paid work:

I can’t tell work I don’t want to work…. Especially when you’re [young] and you’re there as a casual, they use you in a sense. So I didn’t want to disappoint… I didn’t want to make them unhappy and I felt very stuck.

Lana was in a casual position and the number of shifts varied each week. For a sense of job security and to not disappoint her managers, Lana almost always agreed to take on extra shifts or to changes of shifts at the last moment. Her employer’s ability to
vary her work schedule made it more difficult to schedule regular periods of time with friends.

While I have focused on the participants’ lack of control over their daily schedules, other recent changes would however seemingly make it easier for them to manage this variability. The digital revolution appears to provide the tools needed to manage competing and changing time demands while still maintaining a strong connection with friends. In this context, it is a limitation of the interviews questions that they did not directly inquire about mobile phones and social media, but only asked in general about what helped participants maintain relationships. Six participants, including Lana, did however mention these technologies. Both Lana and Marissa for example would send their friends text messages. As well as potentially fostering greater social connection more generally (Ling 2008), mobile phones may also facilitate Lana’s efforts to ‘book’ in time with friends (Southerton 2009). Yet, mobile technology also gave her less control over her work schedule, allowing her employer to contact her and vary her roster at very short notice.

Lana also used online social networking to maintain contact with her large network of acquaintances from work, school, university and sporting teams she had previously been part of, before her work schedule had made this too difficult. Yet Lana placed a high premium on physically spending time with friends. Following other research, Lana saw social networking as a support but not as a viable alternative to building friendships through time physically co-present. New communication technology could not give her the extended periods of time physically present with friends through which to build deeper relationships (Boden and Molotch 1994). The relationships that provide her with the resources to cope with the challenges she faces in her transition from school. I have argued in this section that the variability in the participants’ daily schedules does not emerge because they have significant autonomy over their time and are using this to find the mix of work and study that best met their preferences. Some participant did not however struggle to find time with their friends. The next section turns to why.

**Variable schedules and inequality**
While not the cause of the individualisation of timetables explored in this paper, some participants did have a relative degree of autonomy over their time. This group were in fact more likely to have a relatively ‘standard’ schedule to their day. All but three of the interview participants were engaged in paid work, but those from the higher SES groupings, including Ryan below, tended to have more control over their work patterns, taking occasional extend period away from paid work (for example around exam time) and having less fluctuation in their work schedules when they were working.

**Ryan [Male; SES 4; Tertiary study; City]**

Ryan was studying at a large metropolitan university and living with his parents. While he had expected to go on to tertiary study because of his educational trajectory and his parents’ expectations, he found it difficult to settle on a course. Encouraged by his family he enrolled in engineering. His mother also helped him find part-time work at an engineering firm.

    My mum and this other guy were in the same group [in a short course she was taking] and he was very high up in an engineering company. Mum asked him if he could pull some strings and get me some work experience and he goes sure thing… and yeah I like it. That confirms that I made the right choice [to do engineering].

Ryan is engaged in employment primarily for career development and is financially supported by his parents. He works 9am to 5pm, one day a week and always on Friday. In part because of these work arrangements, Ryan did not find it difficult to synchronise his life with his close friends and on the night before the interview had been able to go out with ‘all’ of his friends.

    Yeah like yesterday I finished a big [university] assignment… so I took the night off study and we [his group of friends] all go out. They are smart people. It’s good to be around smart people. You have good conversations with them. You feed off one another … just getting good advice from them as well.

Ryan’s support network is composed primarily of people he met in secondary school. His interview hinted that his friends also had more control over their work schedule than many of the participants in this study. A relative level of control over work time...
can only make a substantial difference to time with friends in these cases, when friends have a level of control also. As such, the participants who had the least trouble finding time to spend with friends were not those with the most autonomy over their time, but those like Olivia below who entered an institutional setting that provided a shared temporal structure.

**Olivia** [Female; SES 3; Tertiary study; Rural]

Olivia moved from the family farm to a residential university college in major city. She enjoyed her first year of study.

*So how did you find living in a college?*

I thought it was fantastic… I have made so many friends. I had such a good social life. I’ve made friends I know I’m going to keep for life…someone always comes to your room and says hi, and just wants to know what you’re up to. So I think it’s been so good, it’s made the transition a lot easier. .. Whenever I needed something, they always helped me. And there was obviously other people doing my course so we sort of helped each other…So I’d like to live here another year, I mean my parents are paying.

Residential colleges structure a co-presence, for example around meals and social events, with others who are going through a similar experience. This means that making new friends and having the time to develop these friendships becomes easier. In Olivia’s case, it also meant she had support with her study.

Olivia, like David earlier in this paper, moved to pursue further study. Only interview participants from outside cities relocated after leaving school, in most cases to pursue study and in two cases work. This move involved leaving behind an existing support network. David found it very difficult to re-establish a new network, Olivia easy. For financial reasons David was living in a small flat with one other person while Olivia, supported by her parents, was in a residential college. The institutionalised synchronisation and extended periods of co-presence this provided her appeared to minimise and even overcome the challenges of finding shared time with friends. Attending a residential college in Australia is expensive however. Of the seven interview participants who lived in residential colleges, six were from the two highest SES groupings used in this study (SES 3 and 4). It was participants from these
groupings who were at least relatively protected from the impacts of the variable temporal structures that are coming to shape young people’s lives in Australia.

The temporal precariat

Young people are often at the vanguard of social change and have been the group most affected by the expansion of further education and changed labour markets. In some ways, regularly changing shifts at work and timetables in tertiary institutions potentially leads to them meeting more people in both settings than they otherwise would. Young people in Australia are also regular users of technologies like online social networking. Together this would appear to allow them to maintain a larger circle of ‘friends’ than at any time in the past. Yet in the context of increasing variability in the temporal structures that shape young people’s lives, for many of the participants in this study it is difficult to regularly find periods of shared leisure time with the same group of people.

The notion of ‘drifting apart’ after leaving school, as people developed new interests or intimate relationships is a longstanding cliché. Yet the reasons these participants gave for their struggles to maintain friendships after leaving secondary school relate to processes that emerge from relatively recent structural change in education and work. The combination of timetables shaping each young person’s life has become relatively singular. Individually, this means that the timetable of everyday life is somewhat less standardised. The accumulative effect is a more considerable collective de-synchronisation which negatively impacts on at least some kinds of togetherness (Shove, 2009; Southerton, 2009). While some may prefer a greater variety of less involved or long lasting relationships, access to regular periods of time co-present with friends mattered for many participants as it allows close relationships to develop and be maintained (Boden and Molotch, 1994; Urry, 2002; Wierenga, 2009).

This new variability is not linked primarily to the participants having the ability to control and schedule their own timetables, as may be the case in Australia for some older workers in professional occupations (Symes, 1999). Young people tend to be experience ‘precarious’ rather than ‘flexible’ forms of work organisation (Furlong and Kelly, 2005). This ‘precariat’ (Standing, 2010) has emerges because legislative and social change is making the temporal structures of young people’s lives relatively
partial to particular spheres of life and more variable than in the past.

Not all participants were part of this temporal precariat. A small number of participants from higher socio-economic backgrounds were relatively protected from the consequences of this new temporal structure, in part because they had more autonomy over their time, but also because they had the resources to enter a new space like residential colleges at universities that institutionalises a shared timetable over people’s lives. Control over time and the availability of free time has long been identified as a resource that is unequally available and inculcated in the reproduction of inequality, for example in the accumulation of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). In this context of increasing variability and for many people unpredictability of temporal structures, not individual but primarily collective control over time comes to function in a new way as a resource in the interactive process by which social inequality emerges and is reproduced.

Several questions have emerged from this research that are yet to be answered. Firstly, this study has focused on time with friends but young people have other significant relationships that are potentially impacted by the precarious balancing of work and study timetables. While participants seemed less concerned about the amount of time spent with family, this may not be due to them valuing time with family less than with peers at this point in their lives. As shown in this paper, living together does not necessarily lead to quality leisure time together. None-the-less, tied to an extension of time in education, it is increasing common for people to live in the family home into the twenties and beyond (Wyn and Woodman, 2006). Time with family may be less of a concern because they are getting more. Secondly, while the limited data available in this study suggests that mobile and digital communication technology have only limited utility for managing lack of autonomy over varying temporal schedules, the role of new technology was not explored systematically. The balance between positive and negative impacts of technological change on how young people manage the multiple institutional timetables which shape their lives is yet to be clarified.

Finally, I have shown that at this point in the lives of the participants, a new norm of individualised and changing temporal schedules has emerged. It is plausible that
levels of synchronisation will improve for many of the participants as they leave study and at least potentially enter less precarious employment. For other it might not. How variable and unpredictable timetables impact on family life and other relationships over time, how this variability can be managed using technology and how it impacts on different groups of young people over time are being explored as this longitudinal study continues.

**Conclusion**

Young people in contemporary Australia are likely to meet more people, have more acquaintances, and even ‘friends’ than at any previous point in history. Yet, as the experiences of the participants discussed here show, it is regular and extended periods of shared time with close friends that many value. Finding this time has shifted from relatively taken for granted to something that must be actively organised.

Scheduling this shared time involves aligning multiple, increasingly fragmented and variable, timetables that have emerge from precarious employment and the expansion of further education. Although the rise of ‘flexible’ employment arrangements might imaginably play a central role in allowing people to combine work, study and a social life, many young people have little control over their schedules. Some with access to the right resources can use part-time working arrangements to their benefit, undertaking part-time work directly related to their preferred future career and in which they have significant control over their patterns of work. Many more find themselves in ‘dead-end’ jobs with changing and unpredictable schedules over which they have almost no control. As such relative control over time comes to function in a new way as a resource and source of inequality. Some young people have greater resources to synchronise their lives with their friends than others.

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Notes

1 Five participants were unemployed at some point during the first year of their post-school transition. Their experiences suggest that control over time is becoming an issue even when unemployed. Meeting the requirement of unemployment support is increasingly like a full time job, involving attending appointments and courses at a times designated by a government employee (see Standing, 2011: 48).

References


**Dan Woodman**

Is the TR Ashworth Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Melbourne. His research interests and publications cover the sociology of youth, the post-school transition, new forms of risk and uncertainty, and changes in the processes behind patterns of inequality. He is an associate editor of the *Journal of Youth Studies* and the founding convenor of the Sociology of Youth Thematic Group within The Australian Sociological Association.

Address: School of Social and Political Sciences, Faculty of Arts, University of Melbourne, Victoria 3010, Australia
Email: dan.woodman@unimelb.edu.au