Life as a Planning Project or Nomads of the Present: Exploring the
Ways Young Australians Orient to the Future

by

Dan Woodman

Australian Youth Research Centre
Melbourne Graduate School of Education
University of Melbourne
dtw@unimelb.edu.au

Paper for Reimagining Sociology – Annual Conference of The Australian Sociological Association, Melbourne University, December 2008
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(2938 words)

For many sociological theorists the contemporary milieu is marked by a weakening of the certainties of modernity that has instituted salient shifts at all levels of social experience, including people’s relationship to time. As young people have lived their entire lives in this epoch of relative uncertainty, many of these theories have been taken up in the sociology of youth. However, in different theories this relative uncertainty has significantly different impacts on people’s temporal experience. This paper draws on forty qualitative interviews from a longitudinal mixed method project following Australians making their post high-school transitions to explore the contrasting ways the participants orient, or do not, to the future in everyday life.

The Present and the Future

For some theorists, there has been a shift towards privileging lifestyles structured by consumption, which now appears as the only available resource, as the meta-narratives and biographical structuring of modernity have been undermined (Miles, 2000: 141-42). For others, including Barbara Adam (2004) and Zaiki Laidi (2001), the future is losing its importance at the expense of the present as individuals and organisations act at a frantic pace in the face of an apparently numerous and growing number of unpredictable crises demanding immediate action. Drawing these ideas, Melucci (1992) argues young people value doing something, anything, right now, in a cultural milieu that offers them excessive choices and mandates change, and ironically this leads them to feel increasingly agenetic and blind to the uncertainties of the future.
However for others, the future comes to be more important. Theorists of ‘late modernity’, such as Ulrich Beck, argue that the future is the orienting centre of the contemporary milieu. While pre-modern societies were structured by tradition, high modernity shifted to the present, as a belief in progress and human rationality allowed the discounting of long term uncertainties as all consequences were seen as in principal resolvable at a later time. Late modernity emerges from the proliferation of unexpected side effects from a push for more technology, economic growth, and specialization (Beck, Bonss & Lau, 2003: 542-44). Recognising this proliferation shifts the focus of modernity, at least in part, from the present to the future, in the guise of uncertainty, the exemplar the current concern with climate change (Beck, 1992: 34). The processes Beck describe function at multiple scales, including the personal biography, weakening the relatively taken for granted boundaries provided by first modernity’s institutional forms, such as marriage and parenthood, which now appear as decisions needing to be made and potentially at risk. As Giddens puts it, ‘[i]ndividuals seek to colonise the future for themselves as an intrinsic part of their life planning (1991: 125).

Some empirical research, drawing on the theoretical positions above, has been conducted into the ways young Europeans orient to the future. Brannen and Nilsen (2002), for example, use focus groups with English and Norwegian young people to critique the late modern thesis that the future, in particular as deliberative decision making, has come to shape biographies, and find instead a way of thinking about the future that is subordinated to the present and its contingencies and cannot be conceptualised as planning. Anderson and colleagues (2005) have strongly critiqued Brannen and Neilsen, using their own mixed methods research with Scottish young people, suggesting that the large majority of their participants plan for the future and there is no evidence of present centeredness. Both theoretically and empirically there is disagreement within youth studies between theorists claiming an extended present and late modern theorists suggesting that the future reasserts itself. Working through and with these
disagreements is significant as understanding contemporary lived experience, which is always
temporal, is a primary aims of much current youth research.

**Method**

This research draws on the Life Patterns Project\(^1\) a longitudinal study of the post school transition combining large numbers questionnaire surveys and in-depth interviews. This paper draws on interviews with forty young people to undertake a relatively descriptive exploration of the way young people orient to time. As many youth researchers were born in a different era to their participants, unless they are sufficiently reflexive, the young people they research are judged based on relative distance from particular post- World War II conditions that no longer exist. Beginning with large-numbers closed-ended questionnaire research risks limiting researchers to interpreting outcomes based on the understandings the researchers bring with them. Hence this exploratory research draws on qualitative data. The benefit of a longitudinal mixed methods study is that this work can then inform and be built upon in future waves of data collection.

The interviews drawn on in this paper were conducted by the author in early 2008, a little more than a year after the participants finished secondary school. The participants were purposively sampled from the 1285 people in the quantitative sample for the Life Patterns Project for a mix of young people from different geographical locations, a balance between genders, a mix of socioeconomic backgrounds and post school destinations. Interview questions were designed to explore four areas: how the participants negotiated work, education, and relationships; their coping strategies; where they wanted to be over the next 5 and 10 years; and influences on how they felt about their futures.
Based on analysis of the interviews, it is evident that diverse but particular forms of narrative are being used by young people to talk about the future. The following section presents and analyses four short narratives\(^2\), selected as particularly contrasting, as a means of exploring the range of narratives that are emerging from the interviews as a whole.

**Findings and analysis**

Most of the participants have reasonably ‘traditional’ hopes for the future: owing a home, marrying and family, and hopefully secure rewarding employment and a sense of financial and emotional security. Yet many also want to travel, try several lines of employment and to experience share house living before this. Participants appear to desire both gaining new experiences and a sense of security in their lives. For some these forces could be experienced as contradictory, and stressful, for others, such as Henry below, it appears that they can more easily hold these two forces together.

*Henry\(^3\)*

I want perfection I guess…taking [university] all seriously. I didn’t stress at [my retail job last year] it was not my future. I think about the future quite a lot, everything: house, family, health…the list goes on and, yeah, I’ve got anxiety [laughter].

Last year I travelled [for six months, including]… a month in London with my God Father, he got the ticket for me as an 18\(^\text{th}\) present. I guess it helped a lot in seeing what you really want to do; my God Father travelled a lot [and] he took me out for drinks with his business partners and they were speaking about the work.

[This year I’m doing] environmental engineering, I just chose last minute and that’s really what I wanted to do… because I knew you could travel a lot. I did a Tony Robbins course,
personal development, last year [my mum got me into it] you’re kind of allocated a group at
the start of this course and my mum and this other guy were in the same group and he was
very high up in the engineering company. I asked him if he could pull some strings and get
me some work experience and he goes sure thing… and yeah I liked it [I’m still working
there]. That confirms that I made the right choice.

Many of the participants, like Henry, said they regularly thought about the future. Many others,
such as Stacey below, suggested they rarely did.

**Stacey**

For the first half of the year, I just worked flat out in retail, then I did summer camp in
America and then I travelled. Before [signing up for] camp I didn’t know if I was travelling,
it was kind of hard mentally, because I didn’t know what I was doing with my life…[and]
when I got back I was auditioning for unis and I got rejected a couple of times.

I’m doing a diploma in Performing arts [this year] I just always wanted to do it [theatre]. I’m
working at the moment, [and] I’m volunteering for a big arts festival, our teachers are always
telling us to get involved in stuff with the industry. I’m being an exchange student next year
in America but I’m not sure where.

I don’t really think that far ahead. [In five years] probably be working as an actor; there’s like
a ninety eight percent unemployment rate for actors but, (laughing) I think I can be in the two
percent because I’m pretty good, my passion and drive, determination [will help]. In ten
years hopefully still working in the theatre. I want to get married and have kids but later [not
in the next ten years].
Even though Stacey suggested she rarely considered the future, she did know that studying theatre/performance would not guarantee her a job and that unemployment levels are high. She also felt that not knowing what she was doing with her life caused stress. Also, teaching theatre to children at summer camp, volunteering at festivals, and going on exchange, could plausibly be read as taking steps to increase her chances of success with theatre, and to open up other options in teaching or administration. Ironically, while Henry says he thinks about the future all the time, he chose his university course at the last minute while Stacey, who says she does not, has had a sense she would do theatre all her life.

While a number of the participants’, like Stacey, said they did not think about the future, when prompted all could tell at least a fuzzy general story about what they wanted for the future, such as security, marriage, house and family, and almost all made comments suggesting that in the background to their day to day life, and implicitly most of the time, they feel that a secure future is somewhat at risk. Participants look for security in different ways. Some participants feel that security is linked to flexibility. Others, like Dave in the Box below, felt security came from pursuing work in fields with concrete and less flexible pathways, and in which they know a demand for workers exists, such as nursing and teaching.

Dave

My first choice was a paramedic course near where I live, but my marks were not high enough [so] I was doing nursing five hours from home. [It was] hard to make friends, stopped the gym, martial arts, surfing because of moving away and wasn’t eating well. I only lasted five months and then I came back [to a small coastal town] and started working. Last year I had no plan, just went with the flow.
I was going to take off to WA with a couple of mates and do the mines [but] I was thinking [that] you can’t just waste your life, and mum was getting a bit angry… This year I’m doing teaching [at the local TAFE]. I think more about it [the future] now. I think about money. I know there’s not huge money in teaching, but you know you can change your routine a bit [and] a lot of holidays. I don’t think that far [five years] in the future but hopefully [I’m] not here. Ten years from now, I’d like to think I’d be pretty set, pretty well off, and… might start thinking about a family. I’d like to live where my parents live [but that’s] unreachable initially… Maybe have two houses or three houses, renting them out and working pretty hard to get them paid off, or if I haven’t done that I want to make sure I’ve gone round the world, done all that sort of thing. It’s an either or sort of thing. [Either way] I’d have to be lucky.

My participants seem unsure of what actions are required to secure their future. However, this does not appear to play itself out primarily in the cognitive domain of planning. For many participants, including Dave above, it is breakdown situations, things not working out, that lead to actively thinking about the future more regularly. It was not only thinking about the future, but also planning that seemed to emerge in moments of breakdown. This can be seen with Steve in the box below.

Steve

I was getting really frustrated because… I thought that I needed to find a job that I would be in for the rest of my life. I went into the army for a while [but was] discharged because I had a back problem…I realized that I don’t need to be making such a big decision at the moment, because it restricts everything that I could do [like] go to uni or TAFE or travel overseas.
Somewhere between 5 to 10 years from now, I’d like to be doing something in business and own a house… I went through times where I could not pay my debt for a few months [last year] …. If you own a house you’re fairly stable. I’m dreaming I guess not really a goal.

I don’t really have a coping strategy… do things to get my mind off it… sex helps a lot and routine. Towards the end of the year and beginning of this year’s brought a bit more hope for the future. [It was] goals. Since the beginning of this year I sort of decided I would try to set goals, like getting rid of the large debt I got into last year and travelling, or putting on twenty kilos by the end of the year... setting goals and, sort of a little reward, doing things on the way to achieving them.

Although the participants occasionally said things that could be seen as treating day to day life as a planning project; interestingly it seems those that fit most closely with this model are those having more difficulty with the post school transition. And, as with Steve, treating daily life as a planning project, and having long term goals do not necessarily go together.

**Conclusion**

The forty participants, as explored through the exemplars above, have different ways of engaging with the future in the present. Many participants claimed to think about the future often, but most didn’t have concrete goals, or explicit plans for reaching their goals. Others claimed to not think about the future, but when prompted could at least fuzzily describe a desired future and when talking about their day to day lives, mentioned many things which can be seen as taking steps in the direction of these desired futures. Based on the theoretical positions explored at the beginning of this paper, I began this research conceptualising future oriented behaviour as planning, and present centred behaviour as it’s opposite. However, while conducting and analysing the interviews, I came to feel that future oriented behaviour could not
be characterized as conscious and as planning, or even day dreaming for that matter. The interviews suggests that the debate between the extended present thesis and claims of the increasing importance of the future are hampered by a tendency towards either/or thought – an orientation to the future can be affective and not involve explicit planning towards explicit goals. Explicit goals and planning, at least in this small group, seem to emerge in crisis situations, but this does not mean that the participants are oriented to the present and not the future. Being relatively speculative, the narratives above do point to a degree of uncertainty about the future, but not to the degree of a general lose of the future to urgency in the present, or to constant recreation through consumption, nor for most of the participants at least did uncertainty lead to treating life as a planning project. The impact of the uncertainty seems to play out more on an affective level, a mild but general background anxiety, a feeling of security at risk, that is dealt with in different ways. The participants who, like Henry, at this early stage, seem to be managing the transition with more ease are not those with explicit concrete goals who can identify steps to achieve these goals. Instead it is those whose social positioning exposes them to opportunities, and gives them the resources necessary to take them up, often working with just a fuzzy sense of where exactly it will take them, and the affective resources to actively manage uncertainty. Overall, what this paper suggests is that future research and theorising around young people and temporal experience needs to consider moving beyond an either/or framework, and to explore rather the diverse ways in which young people are negotiating both their present and the future. The benefit of a longitudinal mixed-methods project is the opportunity to further investigate these speculations.

References


1 I am one of six current members of the Life-Patterns team and I am completing a PhD using qualitative data from the project. The project was originally instigated by Associate Professor Dwyer (now retired) and Professor Johanna Wyn is the current chief investigator. It is currently funded by a five year ARC grant. All team members are based at the Australia Youth Research Centre at the University of Melbourne. The Project is following two cohorts of young Australians, recruited as they completed secondary school in 1991 and 2006 respectively. The overall study is designed to be comparative across cohorts to explore generational differences, but this paper focuses on the second cohort in its own right.

2 Each of the narratives was built by taking sections from one participant’s transcript. While more constructed than direct unedited excerpts and admittedly obscuring the way my questioning shaped the discussion, I use them to present contrasting material in something resembling that participant’s own style. Cuts are marked with ellipses and my insertions are in brackets. The participants were chosen to build the most contrasting narratives possible from the ways the forty participants spoke about the future.

3 All are pseudonyms. Participants are exemplars of ways of talking about temporality and are not meant to represent male or female participants, nor any other demographic variable.