

Changing Temporal Opportunity Structures? Two Cohorts of Young Women's Thoughts about Future Work, Family and Education

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Abstract

This article seeks to explore if and how period specific conditions affect young women's thoughts about their future lives. A contextualist analysis is done of a small sample of biographical interviews with Norwegian women in two cohorts born 1970–1975 and 1990–1995 interviewed 20 years apart when they were in their early 20s. The focus is on their thoughts about future education, work and family. Theoretically the article relates itself to concepts of time and temporalities in life course theory. Inspired by Ken Roberts' concept of opportunity structures, the notion termed 'temporal opportunity structures' emerged from the analysis. The analyses demonstrate how wider period specific circumstances and standards of timeliness form a landscape that young women navigate when they envisage future options and opportunities. Findings indicate differences between the two cohorts in biographical timing in that standards of timeliness and temporal opportunity structures appear to have narrowed.

Keywords

biographical timing, future, temporal opportunity structures, timeliness, young women

Introduction

Norms and standards for timing of life course events and transitions vary between societies, and between men and women in the same settings (Hareven, 2000; Settersten and Hagestad, 1996). Opportunity structures (Roberts, 1968, 2009) in most societies are gendered (McRobbie, 2009; Walkerdine, 2003). Such factors affect people's thoughts

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about the future,¹ thoughts that say something about individuals' present situation (Mead, 1932/2002) as embedded in layers of social and structural contexts at particular moments in history (Mills, 1959/1980). Thus, when researching thoughts about the future particular timeframes of biography in specific contexts must be included.

The overarching questions this article seeks to investigate are related to if and how period specific conditions affect young women's thoughts about the future. In an exploratory design with a life course approach the article relates itself to concepts rather than to a larger body of theory. It addresses how, and in what ways, what Roberts (1968, 2009) termed opportunity structures, formed by family background, the education system and the labour market, is a backcloth for interviewees' thoughts about the future. Concepts of time and temporalities at different levels as well as discourses of choice in notions of biographical timing are of particular relevance. Data consist of six biographical interviews with Norwegian women in their early 20s from two cohorts,² 20 years apart. The specific focus is on future work, family and education as these trajectories are intertwined in women's thoughts about the future (Brannen and Nilsen, 2002). Social class, used in a sensitising way (Blumer, 1954) referring to parents' education and occupations, is an important dimension in the analysis. The specific question is if the anticipated timing and chronological sequence of events in the life course, and the ways these are articulated, vary across the cohorts' thoughts about the future. The notion of *temporal* opportunity structures is used to address this question.

Timing, Timeliness and Temporal Opportunity Structures

Time and temporality have always been important in the social sciences (Adam, 1990, 1995; Harvey 1990; Mead, 1932/2002; Nilsen, 1999).³ Focus on time in general and the future in particular has increased from the 1990s. The writings of Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991), which suggested a de-standardisation of the life course gained prominence and are still influential. In life course studies different levels of temporality are crucial elements (e.g. Elder, 1974/1999; Hareven, 2000). Tamara Hareven's writings include the concept of 'timeliness', which is highly contextual and has parallels to normative standards of timing but is more complex in that it involves several layers of relational contexts. It is associated with a period specific structural level while notions of 'timing' are related to the biographical level (Hareven, 2000; Settersten and Hagestad, 1996). In analyses of thoughts about the future, concepts of timing and timeliness may be combined with insights from Mead's (1932/2002) writings. His processual thinking implies that the seeds of the future are sown in the past and are there as experiences and expectations in the present; his notion of time is embedded in a relational perspective and can therefore easily be combined with Hareven's notions of several levels of timing and timeliness. The analyses draw on concepts of temporality from these two.

In life course literature there is reference to life course 'scripts' that are normative scripts about the organisation of the timing of life course phases in a given society (Buchmann, 1989). The notion of *temporal opportunity structures*⁴ emerged through the analysis. It combines insights from the script concept with inspiration from Roberts' (1968, 2009) 'opportunity structures'. Whereas the former focuses on norms of timing in life, the latter includes structural aspects that impact on life course trajectories. Thus,

temporal opportunity structures include both normative and structural period specific elements that affect thoughts about the future. In addition to the notion of opportunity structures' emphasis on social class, temporal opportunity structures add a gender sensitive element in that it takes timing and timeliness of life course phases and events into consideration.

Gender, Time and the Discourse of Choice

Most of the literature on women and time in relation to education, work and family, originated in the late 1980s up until the early 2000s (e.g. Adam, 1989; Davies, 1996; Jurczyk, 1998; Leccardi and Rampazi, 1993). In later years the focus has shifted from women specifically to gender in general, especially in writings on young people (Brannen and Nilsen, 2002; Carmo et al., 2014; Cook, 2016; Gordon et al., 2005; Irwin, 2009; Leccardi, 2012; Lyon and Crow, 2012; Thomson et al., 2002). Most studies of time and biographical events after the turn of the millennium engaged with Beck's and Giddens' individualisation thesis. It implied a de-standardisation of the life course and suggested that social class and gender were of little importance: 'the individual must produce, stage and cobble together their biographies themselves' (Beck, 1994: 13), and 'Standard biography is transformed into "choice biography"' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995: 5). These ideas engendered wide debate in sociology in general (e.g. Atkinson, 2007; Brannen and Nilsen, 2005; Mayer, 2004; K Roberts, 2009; S Roberts, 2010) and with reference to gender in particular (Baker, 2008, 2010; Walkerdine, 2003). Most empirical studies have found tensions between ideas of a choice biography and young people's lived experiences, especially in the transition to work and education (Allen, 2016; Baker, 2008; Cook, 2018; Gill et al., 2016; Sanders and Munford, 2008; Thomson et al., 2002; Brannen and Nilsen, 2005).⁵

Timing in the life course involves the sequence of biographical events in relation to one another within an overarching temporal frame of timeliness (Hareven, 2000). The idea of a de-standardisation of the life course implies changes in norms of timeliness and timing that render the terms less relevant. Notions such as a 'gap year' in biographies (Cuzzocrea, 2018; Heath, 2007; Vogt, 2018b) do however suggest the opposite: that there are specific standards for the order of biographical events; a gap in the biographical trajectory is 'allowed' but only at a particular time during specific phases of life.

Timing and timeliness also provide challenges for the choice discourse. The idea of the freedom to choose is based on an individualistic approach that implicitly also indicates the freedom to decide *when* to choose. However, temporality is a relational concept (Adam, 1995) and in both Mead's and Hareven's writings the social nature of time is emphasised. The timing of events in the life course is related to timeliness with reference to social relationships at multiple levels. As, for instance, school to work transitions have had different life course timings in relation to social class (Irwin, 2009; Irwin and Nilsen, 2018; Jones, 2004; Roberts, 2009), notions of timeliness are context sensitive.

In analyses of men's thoughts about future life, work and education figure more prominently than family life (Baker, 2010; Cook, 2018; Hockey, 2009; Nilsen, 2019). The timing of childbirth has, for fertility reasons, a narrow timeframe in women's lives (Noack, 2005). Whereas the societal norms that indicate timeliness of when to have

children may vary, the timing of such life course events has boundaries. Many studies of young women have found that family and children were deemed constraining (e.g. Vaadal and Ravn, 2021). However, ideals of independence are often found to be contradictory to women's lived realities (Allen, 2016; Baker, 2008, 2010; McRobbie, 2009; Walkerdine, 2003). Thoughts about future timing of childbirth may be imagined in relation to a career and those who opt for middle-class 'careers' rather than working-class 'jobs' (Nilsen, 2012) may be aware of future workplaces as competitive settings (Halrynjo and Lyng, 2010; Hockey, 2009; Vaadal and Ravn, 2021). Navigating the restricted time-frame of fertility may seem constraining for future career prospects (Halrynjo and Lyng, 2010; Noack, 2005) and may be expected to affect young women's thoughts about future employment.

Changes in structural conditions and opportunities normally happen gradually and their impact on life courses in general, and biographical timings in particular, are therefore often studied in retrospect. Investigating two cohorts 20 years apart this article aims to study how structural conditions affect thoughts about the future 'as they happened' rather than retrospectively. The analysis may thus suggest if and how actual structural changes have affected young women's perceived temporal opportunity structures.

Designs and Methods

The approach involves a contextualist life course analysis of biographical interviews with young women from an urban Norwegian context.⁶ Cohort 1 was born 1970–1975, 40 young people (22 women and 18 men) were interviewed in 1995–1997. The focus of the study was the future on levels of biography and in wider society (Nilsen, 1999). Cohort 2 comprised the children of the mid-generation in a three-generation study where 23 Norwegian and nine UK families were interviewed in the period 2014–2017 (Nilsen, 2020).⁷ The 11 young women in Cohort 2 were born 1990–1995. In the latter study, time and thinking about the future were not main topics but were important. Questions about thoughts about the future were part of the research and were addressed in the interviews. Biographical interviews, defined as 'a story told in the present about experiences in the past and expectations for the future' (Nilsen, 2008: 83) were the primary data in both studies. There was a common theoretical and conceptual approach; Elder's (1974/1999) 'contextualist' life course approach, which is inspired by Mills' (1959/1980) history–biography dynamic. This means understanding 'the life course as consisting of age-graded patterns that are embedded in social institutions and history that [. . .] emphasises the implications of social pathways in historical time and place for human development and ageing' (Elder et al., 2006: 4).

Both studies had a biographical case-based design (Bertaux and Thompson, 1997; Brannen and Nilsen, 2011; Gomm et al., 2000), thus the number of cases is of less relevance than the logic of selection that provides thick description and contextualisation to capture processes in context (Brannen and Nilsen, 2011). Bertaux (1990: 167) expressed this more poetically: 'behind the solo of the human voice [you can hear] the music of society and culture in the background'. The sampling in both studies followed a purposive sociological logic (Silverman, 2020). Following Bryman (cited in Silverman, 2020), generalisability of cases is rather to theoretical propositions than to populations.

Moreover, generalisability also involves cases being transferable to those of similar properties beyond a particular context (Gobo, 2008). Connecting women's thoughts about the future in the same age group (approx. 20 years of age) with a 20-year timespan between them, may indicate how differences are related to changes in temporal opportunity structures.

Since the two datasets do not stem from a deliberate comparative research design, they are 'put into conversation with one another' (Irwin and Nilsen, 2018: 10) in a wider framework of dialogue for the purpose of discussing specific questions. Although this use of data is not straightforward, Glaser and Strauss (1967: 235) observed that the changing social structures of societies represent a challenge for social sciences since old structures 'take on new dimensions before highly rigorous research can be accomplished'. The task of sociology is therefore 'the exploration – and sometimes the discovery – of emerging structures' (1967: 235). The aim of this article is more modest: to analyse biographical interviews with the same age group in the same location two decades apart. The studies had the same design but different overarching aims, the topic of the future was addressed in both, hence the analysis has sociological relevance.

Three cases from each cohort are selected for case analysis.⁸ Social class as indicated by parents' occupations and their work/education situation was an important sub-sample selection criterion for the discussion in this article. The case presentations include these aspects as well as information on siblings. For space reasons the interview quotes are compressed into one per case. For cases in Cohort 1 there was more flexibility in standards for trajectories compared with 2015 when Cohort 2 was at the same age. In a contextualist analysis the structural features of societies where interviewees live their lives are an integral part of the data; this type of analysis can thus capture changes in temporal opportunity structures.

Context

Norway is considered one of the most egalitarian societies in the world, but social and economic inequalities have increased over the 20-year period between the interviews (Aaberge et al., 2020; Irwin and Nilsen, 2018). The country has also been among the top three on the UN's gender equality index for years but the labour market is both gender differentiated and gender stratified (Holter and Snickare, 2021).⁹ A reform in upper secondary education called 'Reform 94' did not affect the lives of Cohort 1 as much as Cohort 2. It exacerbated the divide between vocational and academic upper secondary subjects as the former have fallen in social status and is only rarely considered an option among young people from middle-class families (Johannesen, 2019; Olsen, 2012). For Cohort 2 not only this reform but a steady stream of changes at all levels of education from primary school to university, took place during the 2000s and affected the opportunity structures for this cohort in particular. Bakken (2017) showed that the age group 14–19 years old in 2016 were more conservative and spend more time with parents than earlier cohorts. The number of students, especially women, in higher education has increased over the period although gender differentiation exists between disciplines (SSB, 2021). The labour market has changed considerably. Among the changes are significant job cuts in state owned companies such as post and telecommunication, which

have been wholly or partly privatised. Another significant difference between the two periods is social media. This aspect will not be explored here but is nevertheless mentioned as it forms an important part of the period specific backcloth for Cohort 2. The average age at birth of first child has increased from 26.5 in 1995 to 29.9 in 2020 when the total fertility rate was a record low 1.48 compared with 1.85 in 2000 (SSB, 2021). First-time mothers' age is also related to level of education, and indirectly to social class; middle-class first-time mothers are older on average (Noack, 2005).

Cohort 1: Flexible Opportunity Structures and Trajectory Options

Sara (1975) was about to start her science master's degree in 1997, at interview, in a subject she had always wanted to study. She came from a middle-class family; her parents were in professional occupations and both her sisters had higher education. Her thoughts about her personal future were first to her work situation and she talked in somewhat ironic terms about it:

I'm going to have a very good education. I'll pay my student loan, get married, have some kids, travel a bit . . . Heard that one before? [. . .] Realistically I might end up as a science teacher in an overcrowded inner-city school . . . My profession does not have the greatest job market in the world and I get a bit anxious when I think that I don't really want to be a teacher. [. . .] But I wouldn't want to raise children in a big city. [. . .] What if that's the only job I can get? [. . .] I have these ideas about a lot of things I could fancy doing, but a lot more things that I don't want to do at all. And I try hard to avoid those . . . so when it comes right down to it it's all up to me what I'll do with my future.

Sara's privileged background and upbringing was important for her being very self-assured. Yet in spite of her confident belief that everything was up to her alone, and that she was in command of her future herself and would get the degree she had aspired to, she was aware of uncertainties and dreaded prospects of having to become a teacher. Her career ambitions came across as ambiguous. A future family was on the cards, but she did not think much about it in the present. She did however think it would limit her career opportunities and increase the likelihood of the teacher scenario.

Emma (1974) was doing a master's degree in the humanities on a subject she had decided on early in life. But she was very uncertain about the future. Her two sisters were in higher education and her parents were teachers. She kept making a distinction between what she ought to do in the future and what she could do:

Perhaps I'll get married. And then have three children. First two and then one after a while. I would like to live near my family. I'll probably become a teacher, live a protected and secure life and have close contact with my family. [. . .] I think that's the way it will be and it scares me a little because I can't really see that many other options for me really . . . It's either a husband and children and house or . . . it'll be more free . . . [. . .] If you choose a career you choose to work a lot, I think, you have to go for it and then you get all . . . I can't see that happening with three children. Maybe I could have one . . . But you can't have a house, home, husband, children and a career, all at once.

Emma's first thoughts were related to having a family of her own and she had specific ideas about that. Her studies did not set her on a clear occupational course and she was in doubt about this aspect of her future since she thought only a limited set of occupations could be combined with a family. Becoming a teacher was compatible with this wish and kept her ambivalent in relation to other occupational opportunities.

Amanda (1973) was an early school leaver with no upper secondary education. At the time of the interview, she was employed in the postal services, which were undergoing restructuring. She came from a working-class family. Her younger brother was a driver and her parents had vocational education. She had a boyfriend who lived in another town and they both commuted to see each other. On questions about the future Amanda immediately talked about her work:

There are so many changes going on. Only over the six years I've been here nothing is the same. So I don't think you can plan, I don't think I can plan my future in the postal service. I may not have a job in the future. [. . .] I've never really known what I fancied work wise so I've just stayed. [. . .] My friends who have long educations, nearly finished now so they have become somebody, and I think, 'I should've chosen something too!' But they have nothing, only lots of debt and don't know if they'll get a job! I have a flat and enough money [. . .] And then I think if we're going to have children some time and we live in separate towns, who of us will move to be together? I would need a very interesting job to move to his small town.

At the time Amanda skipped upper secondary there were opportunities in parts of the labour market such as the postal service to get on the job training. It was thought to provide a lifelong career in the organisation.¹⁰ However, at the time of the interview she felt her situation to be precarious but did not consider finding alternative employment. Since she was an early school leaver her options education wise were limited. In spite of her friends' having 'become somebody' through higher education, she was happy not to have student loan debt. But a future family with her boyfriend involved dilemmas about where to live and for her the job situation seemed very important.

Cohort 2: Choice Discourse and Restricted Norms of Life Course Timing

Solveig (1995) had a gap year after academic upper secondary and was in temporary employment. Her middle-class parents both had higher education and she had a younger brother. She felt exhausted after her exams because there was so much pressure to achieve and to get the highest grades. A gap year was her way out of a stressful situation. All her friends from upper secondary went to university or went travelling for a year. She just wanted to stay at home and get a job and reflect. She said about her future occupation:

It has to be in a way . . . a job where I can develop myself and make progress, but I don't want it to be stressful. [. . .] There are so many opportunities and yet I feel . . . the world is so big and there are so many studies to choose from but then when it comes down to making a choice there aren't that many after all. That's how I experienced it. Because so many things were just

out of the question. I didn't have the advanced maths in upper secondary so I couldn't apply to the most prestigious studies anyway. [. . .] And at my school there were so many clever people, they were going to all the prestigious studies in economics, law, civil engineering, medicine, the professions. It was like there weren't that many options after all. [. . .] I hope I'll get married some day and perhaps have children. I really do want to have a family one day.

Solveig's account is permeated with ambiguity. She had followed a path of the high achievers through education but this had led to her feeling exhausted. She thought the choice discourse that was very much present in the lives of her peer group was not a reality because in her circles only a small number of occupations counted. These were limited to careers in the prestigious professions. Thoughts of a family were important for her but belonged in the long-term future.

Sofia (1994) had a middle-class background and her parents both had higher education. An older brother was at university. During her gap year she was in temporary employment and felt she needed a break from education and all the pressure to achieve. Her immediate plan was to take a language course abroad for six months that did not demand too much of her:

In the third year when March came and we had to apply for university I was fed up with school. I said I didn't want to study in the autumn. And then, August, and I thought why haven't I applied? Of course I'll have an education in the future. I want to study, to be a student. And I want to travel. Visit all the continents . . . and then after a while I'm sure I want a family. Have a boyfriend . . . live somewhere nice . . . [. . .] For a long time I felt I had to have many children. I'm a bit anxious – oh, what am I going to do?! I don't know and I can't make up my mind. But I'm glad I have this short-term plan to do a course abroad for six months. Maybe I'll study in the autumn, maybe I won't. I'll live in [city] for sure but then maybe I'll go travelling, go to Asia with friends.

Sofia was undecided and did not know what to opt for education and occupation wise. She took for granted that she was going to have some type of higher education but she thought it was too soon, and too stressful, to decide what subject to study and the timing of it in relation to all the other things she wanted to do. She could keep such choices at bay because her family resources made this option available to her. Children and a family were important elements of her future but with no specific time reference.

Bea (1995) had an unskilled job in a care home during her gap year after upper secondary. She was the youngest of three siblings in a working-class family. Her mother was a shopkeeper and her father a service worker. Being reliable and having a good 'work ethic' had always been a priority in her life. On questions about her thoughts about the future she said:

If I start nursing studies . . . then I'll have to move to another city perhaps. Studying has always been a goal, to become somebody. [What do you mean 'become somebody'?] Well, I really like it in care work so nursing could be an alternative [Couldn't you just continue being a care worker?] I could do that but not as unskilled. You can't have permanent employment as unskilled, and at some point in life I would like to have that. When nothing is settled it doesn't matter, then it's just fine really. But when I have children and that, then . . . And then there's the salary, nurses are much better paid.

Bea considered her choice of education in relation to a future family and to her wish to ‘become somebody’, which involved higher education. She was conscious of the wage gap between care workers and fully qualified nurses as well as the better opportunities to have permanent employment for the latter.

Changing Standards of Timeliness and Temporal Opportunity Structures

A main question addressed is if and how period specific opportunity structures affect young women’s thoughts about the future. The analysis has indicated that this is indeed so.

The structural conditions for Cohort 1 were different from those of Cohort 2; for Cohort 1 there were more flexible boundaries of ‘timeliness’. Early school leavers had employment- and on the job-training opportunities that were few and far between for the younger cohort. The average age at birth of first child increased by nearly four years between the two cohorts (SSB, 2021). Period specific conditions, and the opportunity structures they hold, are important dimensions in a present (Mead, 1932/2002) from where young people try to envisage the contours of their biographical future. When societal standards of timeliness change to make biographical timing of events more rigid, it affects the way young women think about their future lives: the perceived temporal opportunity structures change.

Sara and Emma in Cohort 1 had both followed a standard middle-class trajectory; started university after upper secondary and were on track to a master’s degree. Both in different ways had ambiguous thoughts about the future, Sara with her career prospects and Emma with work–family issues. Amanda’s early school leaving meant her future was made more uncertain because many pathways in education were blocked when she lacked the necessary upper secondary exams. There were however still alternative occupations in the 1990s, which would give her credit for her work experiences (Vogt, 2018b). This indicates that ideals of timeliness in this period allowed for a wider variety of trajectories and thus more flexible temporal opportunity structures.

Achieving academically was important for both Solveig and Sofia in Cohort 2. Never had anything other than academic upper secondary been an option in their families; higher education was part of the family standard (Gill, 2007). During their time in education the reforms had struck with full force. The feeling of being exhausted by demands to achieve in upper secondary education is particular for this cohort. Sofia had similar experiences to those of Solveig. She made short-term educational plans that did not involve exams. Like many of her peers, travelling the world was part of the gap year. The very existence of gap years suggests that this is a legitimate time out period in young middle-class people’s lives (Cuzzocrea, 2018; Heath, 2007; Jones, 2004; Vogt, 2018a). Although Sara in the older cohort mentioned ‘travelling a bit’, a gap year was not common in the mid-1990s (Heath, 2007). Rather than a ‘gap in the CV’ in a negative sense, it has become an asset when part of a standard trajectory for those who can afford it (Jones, 2004). This suggests class specific ideals of timeliness of events and phases in the life course and thus of temporal opportunity structures.

Bea had followed a standard trajectory through 13 years of school and was in the middle of her gap year. In contrast to Solveig and Sofia, she had specific education and occupational plans, which could be combined with family life in the future. The theme of 'becoming somebody' was present in both Bea's and Amanda's accounts. They both came from backgrounds where higher education was not a family tradition. 'Becoming somebody' in lay terms refers to upward social mobility. An 'aspirational attitude' that is associated with 'becoming somebody' is a frequently used term in the neo-liberal vocabulary (Allen, 2016).¹¹ However, in Bea's account 'becoming somebody' was associated with reducing uncertainties in future employment and to make it secure when the time came to start a family.

The interviewees in both cohorts mentioned having children as part of their future lives. They were however aware of the possible conflicting demands from wage work and from family obligations. Such views are based on the realities they see around them and are underpinned by findings from similar studies. Women who have middle-class 'careers' rather than working-class 'jobs' (Nilsen, 2012) face a type of pressure to succeed in competitive environments where time off for childbirth and childcare comes into conflict with demands from work: 'career gaps' for family reasons may have adverse effects on promotion opportunities in competitive workplaces (Halrynjo and Lyng, 2010). In both cohorts nursing and teaching were considered secure occupational options to combine with a family without too much stress. This suggests that the two female dominated occupations remain a 'family friendly' part of the temporal opportunity structure in young women's perceptions across the 20-year period. It also indicates gendered aspects of temporal opportunity structures.

Temporal Opportunity Structures and the Discourse of Choice

The specific question this article addressed is if the anticipated timing and chronological sequence of events in the life course, and the ways these are articulated, vary across the cohorts. The analysis, and other literature, suggested that the choice rhetoric has become more prominent in the public discourse and in biographical accounts in the past decades. It has become institutionalised in the opportunity structure (Roberts, 2009) and thus in the temporal opportunity structure. Over the past decade it has become an integral part of the system of education's vocabulary (Vogt, 2018b). These may be reasons why the choice discourse was largely absent in the accounts of Cohort 1 in the mid-1990s. Although these interviewees were unsure about aspects of their future lives and somewhat ambiguous in how they imagined their future, there was no mention of pressure to achieve, and they did not talk in terms of choices.

The discourse of choice permeated the lives of Cohort 2. But by middle-class standards only a few options mattered, and although these were phrased in the choice vocabulary, there were doubts about the reality of the choice rhetoric. The lives of these young women seemed steeped in a sense of stress and pressure to achieve. They belonged to a cohort that had been exposed to social media at an early age, which may have contributed to such feelings.¹² Higher education was deemed an inevitable

destination; by succeeding individually they would keep up a family tradition. Bea from a less privileged background did not mention choices but she had a clear plan and a course mapped out for herself. She wished to do nursing education since it led to a ‘family friendly’ occupation with permanent employment guaranteed.

Timing of events in the life course is a problematic issue in relation to the choice discourse. Choosing *what* to do is one thing, deciding *when*, and in *what order*, certain events are to happen is a different matter. The notion of temporal opportunity structures captures structural constraints as well as opportunities. All the interviewees wanted to have a family at some point. But since this phase of life was thought to be in the long-term future, the knowledge that the age of fertility has boundaries was not at the forefront of their minds. Most studies about women’s thoughts about the future find family and children on the agenda, and that the timing of such events is crucial in relation to work and careers (Cook, 2018; Hockey, 2009; Oechsle and Geissler, 2003; Nilsen, 2012; Noack, 2005; Thomson et al., 2002; Vaadal and Ravn, 2021). Gendered aspects of temporal opportunity structures stand out in that both cohorts’ thoughts about future trajectories of work and education are intertwined with those of family and children; for example, in aiming for family friendly occupations such as nursing and teaching.

Concluding Discussion: Gender, Social Class and Temporal Opportunity Structures

The temporal institutionalisation of life course events and phases has become more, not less evident in Norwegian society over the 20 years between the two cohorts. Period specific changes include those that accentuate genderless ideals of timing and timeliness in more streamlined ideals of life course trajectories. Roberts (2009) concluded in his discussion about the continued relevance of his theory that the choice rhetoric has become institutionalised as opportunity structures take on different shapes and forms under varying historical circumstances, and for young people from different social classes. The notion of temporal opportunity structures, which emerged through the analysis, is also marked by period specific circumstances. Gendered aspects of the temporal opportunity structures stand out as genderless ideals and the choice rhetoric gain prominence.

Present circumstances impact on thoughts about the future (Mead, 1932/2002). Twenty years apart, the accounts of the two cohorts of women show both differences and similarities in their perceived temporal opportunity structures. There are similarities in that thoughts about future education and employment are intertwined with children and family. But since childbirths can only happen within a limited period of the life course that coincides with crucial decisions regarding education and work, stricter norms of timing and sequence of life course phases put more pressure on women’s lives than they do on men’s lives.

The stress reported by Cohort 2 is not primarily about achieving in the present. Equally important is the demand to get the sequence and timing right: events have to happen at the right time in the right order and they have to be of your own choosing. Thus, it is not just a fear of being ‘too late’ in an accelerated temporal world (Leccardi,

2012), equally unacceptable are events happening ‘too early’, or in the inappropriate order. The contemporary temporal opportunity structures that young women relate to demand biographies where the correct timing of events in relation to one another becomes the mark of a ‘successful’ life.

The gap year, which has become more common over the past decade, is for example a legitimate ‘CV-gap’ if taken between upper secondary and university (Cuzzocrea, 2018; Heath, 2007; Vogt, 2018a). This ‘time out’, originating as it does in the lives of British upper-class young men in the Victorian period (Heath, 2007) is still more of a middle-class phenomenon, but with more women than men participants (Jones, 2004). Other untimely ‘gaps’, or ‘holes’ in the CV, especially prolonged periods of sick leave or unemployment, may look questionable for employers and have a negative effect on employability (Vogt, 2018a). The emphasis on timing has become important for young people in general from an early age in an increased focus on how to ‘build’ and present the ‘correct’ CV (Nilsen, 2019).

The suggested notion of temporal opportunity structures has indicated that both gender and social class are important aspects to consider when addressing young people’s thoughts about the future. Social class is important for men and women alike (Brannen and Nilsen, 2005). The choice rhetoric that has become an institutionalised feature of social structures is easier to associate with middle-class life courses where both level and type of education give access to more arenas of opportunities than a standard working-class trajectory offers. Streamlined, genderless life course ideals are difficult for anyone to live up to but for women they become particularly constraining. The notion of temporal opportunity structures, emerging as it did from the current analysis, has provided insight into the importance of the temporal aspects of structural features of society and their effects at the biographical level in general and with reference to thoughts about the future in particular. It is transferable to studies of other social phenomena, especially those where time and life course theory are of relevance. The concept can be employed in studies about, for example, how contextual factors affect the timing of motherhood in the life course as falling fertility rates are presented politically as ‘public issues’ for societies rather than ‘personal problems’ (Mills, 1959/1980) for individuals and families.

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Notes

1. In the following the terms ‘thoughts about the future’, ‘images of the future’ and ‘thoughts about the long term’ will be used synonymously.
2. The term ‘cohort’ refers to an ‘aggregate of individuals [. . .] who experience the same event within the same time interval (Ryder, 1965: 845). The term ‘generation’ has more meanings (Mannheim, 1923) but mostly refers to kinship relationships (Nilsen, 2014). Recent studies often prefer ‘generation’ to refer to age groups (e.g. generation X, Z or Y), especially with reference to social media (Stahl and Literat, 2022) and in studies of work values (Krahn and Galambos, 2014). While this has generated interesting research, some are critical of using the generation concept in this way, especially in discussions about generational conflicts (Bristow, 2021; Roberts, 2021).
3. The most influential literature on time and temporal dimensions related to work, education and gender was published around 30+ years ago. This literature will be referred to alongside more recent publications.
4. This concept has been used earlier in studies of deviance related to the interpersonal relations rather than the structural level (Bryant and Forsyth, 2005).
5. Roberts (2009) argued that the emphasis on individual choice was prominent in British sociology in the 1960s and 1970s and has long been a part of the sociological divide between ‘the two sociologies’ of social structure and social action (Roberts, 2009: 361).
6. For the purpose of securing interviewees’ anonymity, the location in a small country is not specified.
7. The UK interviews are not included in the current article as the wordcount would not permit a meaningful comparison across both national contexts and historical periods.
8. The number of cases related to the logic of case selection does not permit lengthy quotes from each. Fewer cases would however not have facilitated analysis across social class and cohorts.
9. A recent report from the ESS survey concludes that increasing differences between men’s and women’s life course patterns are related to children and family (ESS, 2021).
10. The restructuring and opening up of the postal services for competition started in the 1990s and full marketisation was decided by law in 2016.
11. Roberts (2009) observed how an individualistic rhetoric deemed young people with no higher education as suffering from a ‘poverty of aspiration’.
12. These can bring increasing attention to personal appearance and demands for perfection and successfulness, especially for girls (Gill, 2007; Mills et al., 2018).

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