

Levels of intersecting temporalities in young men's orientation to the future. A cross-national case comparison

Abstract

Inspired by G.H. Mead's philosophy of time and his focus on the present as the site of interpretation of past experiences and thoughts about the future, this paper makes cross-national comparisons between four cases of young Norwegian and British men. The method is case based biographical analysis. Levels of biographical time, family time and historical time intersect in young men's orientation to the future in a present set in the current contexts of Norway and Britain. The overarching question addresses if and how timing at the biographical level, related to family time and resources, harmonize with features of opportunity structures in the national contexts. Two typologies are identified: those whose future orientations correspond with standards for 'successful' trajectories are named *confident continuity* while *cautious contingency* characterises the orientation of those whose biographical timing of transitions are not in synchrony with family time nor with standards in the current opportunity structure.

Introduction

The following takes inspiration from the writings of G.H. Mead in an exploration of young people's thoughts about the future. Temporal aspects of social life formed an important basis of Mead's theoretical ideas. Based in the pragmatist tradition he saw the present as the site of social interaction and of interpretations of the past and perceptions of the future (Mead 1932, 1936). Thoughts about the future are elements of biographical time that are important because they are associated with a sense of direction and opportunity related to past experiences interpreted in a present situation; 'what we are going to do is determined by what we are doing' (Mead 1936, p. 301). And 'what we are doing' is situated in a present where layers of context beyond the immediate personal circumstances are of importance. Time horizon and time perspectives change over the life course as past experiences are carried over into ever changing presents.

The last decades have been characterised by social, political and economic changes that have exacerbated inequalities in European societies (Stiglitz 2012) and studies have shown how this affects young people's approach to both their personal futures and their long term perspectives of society (Irwin and Nilsen 2018, Adam and Groves 2007, Heinz 2014, Cook 2016). In this paper the focus is on the general orientation to the future (Hadjar and Niedermoser 2019) in education and work and the topic is examined by doing cross-national comparisons between two pairs of cases of young Norwegian and British men¹ set in the multi-layered contexts of historical period, cohort, and their three-generation families.

The theoretical framing of the article is Mead's concepts of time. Three levels of temporality are involved: the biographical time at the individual level, family time at the intermediate level, and historical time at the level of society (Hareven 2000). Thus the overarching questions address how intergenerational relations act as an intermediate level between individual young people's future thinking and the specific circumstances in the Norwegian and English² societies in this particular historical period. Conditions in the family such as available resources of various kinds and parents' experiences from their trajectories are

important for the timing of life course events, and the way young men think about them in relation to their biographical time. The main question addressed is thus whether perceptions of the future are affected by how well timing at the biographical level, related to family time and resources, harmonize with historical time defined as features of opportunity structures in the particular national contexts.

Following Mills (1959/1980) concepts that are helpful for analysis are neither too large for the content of data, nor too narrow to capture its meaning (p. 138) thus this paper will use concepts in a sensitising way (Blumer 1954) to examine diversity and similarities across the two contexts in order to capture temporal processes in descriptive typologies.

Time and temporalities

Time and temporality have always been important in the social sciences (Mead 1932, 1936, Adam 1990, 1995). In life course studies time and timing at different levels have been centre stage (e.g. Elder 1974/79, Hareven 2000). In general sociology the writings of Ulrich Beck (1992) and Anthony Giddens (1991) have been very influential over the past decades; they conceptualised social change as contingent upon processes of increasing individualisation in 'late modernity'.³ Beck's notion of the 'risk society' (1992) in which the future, in the form of uncertainty is brought into the present as risks that can be calculated and managed, has been very influential.⁴

In other writings on time, the pace and structuring of time itself has been discussed (Adam 1990). Harvey (1990) addressed what he termed the 'time-space compression' that affects perceptions of distance in both time and space, which was related to an overall acceleration of the pace of life in contemporary societies. Nowotny (1994) maintained that a constant busyness binds people to an 'extended present' that alters the sense of both past and future. From the mid-1980s onwards, the confluence of a whole range of issues in society and in the social sciences were important for the contemporary interest in time in general and the future in particular.

While Norbert Elias' *Time: An Essay* has been taken as a point of departure in much contemporary writings in sociology (e.g. Tabboni 2001), others have started from Mead's work (e.g. Flaherty and Fine 2001). Mead (1932, 1936), writing in the early period when time was the object of interest both in the sciences and in public debate, was a contemporary of Einstein, Bergson and Whitehead.⁵ Although there are parallels in Mead's and Bergson's thoughts about time (Mead 1936), Mead's variety of pragmatist thought is important in biographical research because of his notion of the temporal and processual self in an interactional context. Writing about the past-present-future he said:

"The past as it appears with the present and future, is the relation of the emergent event to the situation out of which it arose, and it is the event that defines that situation. The continuance or disappearance of that which arises is the present passing into the future. Past, present and future belong to a passage which attains temporal structure through the event" (Mead 1932/ 2002, p. 53)

Mead's views of time do not imply time as a linear movement of discrete events; the seeds of the future are sown in the past and are thus there as experiences and expectations in the present. With inspiration from Mead and in combination with notions from life course research the following addresses levels of biographical time; family time, which refers to 'the synchronisation of the individual life transitions with collective familial ones' (Hareven 2000 p. 129), and historical time in perceptions of the future. Thus, the social and structural aspects of temporality are taken into consideration.

Research on young people and time

The topic of young people and time has been studied from a variety of specific research questions and perspectives and only a tiny fraction of these can be included in a brief overview that aims to give a glimpse of the diversity of studies relevant for the questions addressed here. Survey research has examined young people's plans for education, housing and employment (Anderson et al 2005). Carmo et al (2014) examined young Portuguese's thoughts about future employment in the lower end of the labour market. Qualitative studies have focussed on how young people's thoughts are related to wider social change. Some have made a distinction between plans, hopes and dreams in conceptualising how young people envisaged the personal future and that of the wider society (Nilsen 1999). Lyon and Crow (2012) studied young people's imagined futures in a re-study of the island community of Sheppey⁶, and Cook (2016) examined young Australians' imaginaries of the long-term future of society, their thoughts about the personal future, and how these are related.

A number of studies have concluded that family relationships are formative for young people's expectations and aspirations for their personal futures. In Irwin's (2009) study of young people's orientation to the future based on both qualitative and quantitative data, she found that emotional support in the family was important for motivation in orientation to school work for young people from all social classes, but parents' education and social status trumped motivation in expectations about higher education. Also drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data Aaltonen and Karvonen (2016) compared Finnish teenagers' orientations to the future to trace changes or continuities in relation to their parents' educations and occupations. Parents' support was important for faith in the future regardless of class background. Woodman (2011) interviewed a sample of young Australians (18-20 years old) about how they felt about the future with reference to relationships, work and education. He found that they mixed multiple temporalities and that thoughts about both the present and the future were embedded in relationships with significant others.

Relationships and events in society beyond the family are of importance too. Reiter's (2003) biographical study of disadvantaged young Austrians whose transition took place during a period of higher than normal youth unemployment emphasised the uncertainty they felt in life, and how their time horizon was affected by their discontinuous transition to vocational training and employment in an historical period of uncertainty. And Thomson et al's (2002) study based on longitudinal data showed how 'critical moments' in young people's biographies shaped their outlook on both the past and the future.

Research on young people's thoughts about the future in cross-national comparisons helped to identify how some contexts were 'taken-for-granted' (Brannen and Nilsen 2005). In the Nordic countries a rhetoric of autonomy and independence from parents was related to the support from the welfare state in the form of free education, student loans and other benefits that were not explicitly referred to by the interviewees (ibid). Based on a recent three country comparison, Heinz (2014) concluded that particular social and political contexts are important for how the 'Great Recession' impacts on young people's transitions, and although aspirations may still be high, many young people drop out of higher education due to financial pressures in these circumstances.

Although most studies on time do not compare across gender, differences between men and women in experiences of time and perceptions of the future are well established and have been demonstrated in literature that focuses on either women or men, or compares across gender. Women's experiences of time was the focus in Davies (1989) study of the interweaving of different temporalities in women's lives. Leccardi and Rampazi (1993) focussed on young women's experiences of past and future based in a study that compared men and women from a similar framework to Davies'. In recent research, Gill et al (2016) in a study of young Australian girls, showed how their thoughts about the future were affected by perceptions of expectations to succeed and fear of failing. Samuel and Kanji (2019) demonstrated how the image of the 'ideal worker' at an ideological level corresponded with men manager's experiences and approaches to time. The current paper's focus on one gender only is thus grounded in research traditions that take the gendered features of society into consideration in all phases of research.

Young people's relation to time in an intergenerational comparative perspective has only recently become an important topic of study. Snee and Divine (2014) interviewed young people and their parents in a study that focussed on how social class impacts on young people in 'the middle' in their decisions about future education in their final year of compulsory schooling. They found that social mobility in the parent generation was important for the aspirations of their children. Leccardi (2012) discussed contrasts of the different cultural period specific conditions of youth for 'the baby boomers' and 'the millennials'. She concluded that the accelerated speed of social rhythm in societies likely give the younger generations a different sense of temporality than that of the parent generation. (Nilsen and Brannen 2014) compared two generations of British men in the same families in their school to work transitions and demonstrated how historical periods are important for the relevance of intergenerational relationships.

The current paper is based on a three-generation study but the focus here is on the youngest generation of men. Intergenerational relationships are considered important for their perceived trajectories into the future, but with the added dimension of period specific circumstances that vary for each generation over the life course. In a discussion about intersecting temporalities a theoretical starting point in Mead's focus on the present is highly relevant.

Study design, methodology and theoretical framework

The 'contextualist' life course approach (Elder et al 2003) is central to the research project '*Intergenerational transmission in the transition to adulthood*' where 23 Norwegian and 10 British three-generation families were interviewed about their transitions to adulthood. The study has a comparative case-based design (Bertaux and Thompson 1997, Hammersley and Gomm 2000, Brannen and Nilsen 2011) thus the number of cases is of less relevance than the thick description and contextualisation of these for typology construction that can capture processes in context (Nilsen and Brannen 2014, Hantrais 1999). As Gomm et al (2000) observed the difference between variable and case approaches is that the former has a large number of cases and few variables, whereas the latter involves few cases and many 'variables' to enrich contextualisation. This paper follows in the tradition of Bertaux and Thompson's (1997) cross-national comparisons between France and Britain based on a limited number of biographical interviews. In the cross-national comparisons, nations are seen as a levels of contexts where social institutions affect individuals' lives (Kohn 1987: 714). Bertaux (1990) has also emphasised the usefulness of biographical research in comparative studies in a more poetic way: 'behind the solo of the human voice, the music of society and culture [can be heard] in the background (1990, pp. 168).

The systematic sampling followed a sociological rather than a statistical logic (Gomm et al 2000, Gobo 2008). The generalisability of the sample is thus enhanced in the sense of findings being transferable to cases of similar properties beyond a particular context (Brannen and Nilsen 2011). Interviewees were selected on the basis of birth year of the mid-generation (1960-1965), with one child (18+) and one parent prepared to take part. Interviewees were recruited by leaving information folders in workplaces, email, telephone, face-to-face encounters and snowballing. We selected cases from the majority population in both countries and aimed for diversity of social background⁷ in the mid-generation and gender balance in the sample. Biographical interviews lasting 1,5 to 3 hours were carried out with family members individually. The interview focussed on the scheduling of the life course, the transmission of aspirations, material resources and care and support during the transition from youth to adulthood, reflections on notions of adulthood, as well as thoughts about the future. Information about education and occupations for members in the extended families within and across generations (siblings, uncles, aunts, and grandparents) is included. In the most affluent families more members across the generations and within the extended family tended to have higher education.

The association between education and social background is well established in sociology (Crompton 2006, Devine 2004). In this instance the focus on parents' level of education is not related to social class in itself but mainly to temporality in aspects of family time. Men's timing of school-to-work transitions have been closely associated with social class over the past century (Roberts 2013, Brannen et al 2018⁸). When historical circumstances change the synchrony of timing of transitions is altered for some social classes more than for others. The 'lads' in Willis' (1977) study approached their future with confidence, in spite of not having any higher education since the labour market of that time offered a range of opportunities for a variety of skills sets. Structural changes and expansion in the education system over the past decades in both countries have made it more common for people in the younger generations to have education beyond compulsory schooling and higher education has become more important for getting gainful employment (Hobsbawm 1994).

For men with low skills the labour market offers fewer options compared to the situation for their fathers' and grandfathers' generations (MacDonald 2008, Roberts 2013, Brannen et al 2018), as indeed Willis' (1977) study demonstrated. When young people have difficulties in finding education and employment the timing of transitions is out of synchrony with family time and can thus become a strain on family resources. As the 'present' in Mead's terms is a site of interaction, family time is an important level of temporality to consider in the current discussion.

Relationships in young people's lives beyond the family are significant for how they think ahead, as are the circumstances in the contemporary historical period (Nilsen 1999). The interviews were done from 2014 to 2017. In England this was, and still is, a time of austerity and cuts in public spending as well as increases in fees to universities and colleges. The youth unemployment rate is very high and the prevalence of zero hour contracts is increasing. Norway, with its oil rich economy was not hit as hard as the rest of Europe by the economic shock of 2008 and the austerity in its aftermath but a labour market with growing demands for academic degrees among the young, in addition to increasing housing prices and high living costs are a problem for many.

In a paper that addresses a particular set of questions, a selection of cases is made from the original sample. These have to be illustrative of traits in the whole sample and point beyond the personal circumstances in the individual biographies; they have to be cases *of* something (Gomm et al 2000). This is done by specifying contextual features at different levels and relate the cases to these to demonstrate their validity beyond the particularities of the individuals and show the sociological relevance of the analysis of them as cases in a specific society (Bertaux and Thompson 1997). Whilst cases in the overall study cover the whole range of educational backgrounds for the current comparisons two pairs of the youngest generation of men from opposite ends of the social class divide⁹ have been selected to explore how the complexities of intersecting temporalities affect orientations to the future. Comparing extremes across the class spectrum can give a more defined picture of how the interplay of temporal dimensions may inspire particular trajectories over others, than were the intermediate positions included. The analyses identified two descriptive typologies that capture orientation to the future in view of these dimensions. They are based on analyses of the men's accounts set in the temporal contexts of family and historical period and refer to attitudes in thoughts about the future at a biographical level and how the perceived future trajectory fits in with family and historical time. Thus the category 'confident continuity' refers to a confident attitude to the future where the perceived biographical trajectory is in synchrony with family time and represents a generational continuity that coincides with ideals in current historical circumstances. 'Cautious contingency' on the other hand refers to a cautious attitude in a context where transitions are out of synchrony with family time and generational continuity is challenged by the current historical conditions in work and education, hence contingency; the need for keeping options open.

Young men from families of very privileged backgrounds: confident continuity

In these cases all three generations interviewed have higher education, as do members of the extended family including grandparents, uncles and aunts. Some were in professions such as medicine and law. Both have older siblings at university.

Norway: Alfred (1995)

Alfred was about to finish academic upper secondary at interview. He was unsure of what to do education and occupation wise and planned a gap year. In his family higher education was part of the 'taken for granted' in the context. For Alfred it was thus not a question of 'if' but of 'what' type of higher education after upper secondary.

I think that I'm really fed up with school. I have only been looking forward to getting this over with... and take things as they happen after that. I haven't planned any studies ... or what direction to take after upper secondary. So the plan is to have a gap year... and work for a year. And then see if I find something that I want to... a direction in which I want to go... But now the focus is to get final exams the best I can and just get it over with.

Later on he talked about how he would take a gap year to be free for a while and think about what he would really like to study, what he found exciting. But asked why he thought it was necessary to study at all, he said,

It's about well, economic interests... in the sense that you wish to have a good economic situation. So that it's not... a problem and something one has to think about a lot.. And it is often through education, a certain amount of education that you get the better paid jobs. So maybe there's an economic motivation behind it.. and I also think then you could find the interesting occupations that would be exciting to work in [...] you'll go crazy if you have to do something your whole life that you hate., right... so money isn't everything...

When asked about his future housing situation and when he thought he would move out of his parents' house he related the move to his future studies,

I think that's a long way into future yet.. If I study in this city I imagine I can continue to live here, but if I were to go somewhere else to study, I would have to rent student accommodation. It's difficult to find money to buy a place to live...

Alfred's present situation clearly affected his orientation to the future. He knew he was going to university, only he had not yet decided what to study. He also had the option of living with his parents for as long as he liked. 'It is unnecessary to spend all the money one earns on rent really.... I see no reason to live anywhere else, so yes, the plan is to live at home'. There are no education fees in Norway, but asked how he thought he would support himself when he studied he was vague about study loans and had not found out about the details of that yet. Alfred's plans for his immediate future included education. Support from his parents and kin during this phase was a taken-for-granted aspect of his life.

UK: Andrew (1993)

Andrew studied at a university away from his home town and lived in student accommodation, staying with his parents during holidays. He liked university life, although it was less intellectually stimulating than he had expected,

It's good fun, I'm enjoying it I suppose. [...] university is ... I mean from my slightly cynical perspective I think it's a bit of a glorified waste of time, insofar as you spend most of your time just socialising, partying or talking, and there aren't ... I mean I went to a very academic school and so I had slightly probably high expectations of what the intellectual calibre would be like at (name of posh) university. I don't know ... I guess it was sort of rather built up to be some sort of great you know intellectual pilgrimage, and it's not

He thought his future career would be in something to do with languages or the foreign office and had reached the point where he wanted something safe and secure employment wise. He had a loan for the tuition fees and his parents paid for his living costs. Still he dreaded the debt

[...] I'd quite like a lucrative job if only because I've been rather scared by the fact that I'm going to have so much debt. I mean it's silly because I'm sure a lot of people end up with that debt and then end up paying it off actually quite easily [...] But from my own perspective I mean that's a ... you know I've never handled sums that large, you know such large sums before, and so it's sort of overwhelming.

His wish for the future was stability in life although he was not sure about his long-term career,

So I just want to find something that I can do once I graduate you know ... maybe even if I don't enjoy it that much I'd just like to have a bit of security there. Looking forward to the future, I don't really know ... I mean yeah I'd want to see myself in a stable job to be honest. I hope that in 10 years' time I kind of know what I want to be doing and am doing it I suppose.

Realising the costs of buying a place to live he pushed such concerns into the future

I recognise that yeah the housing market's quite a difficult thing, but I don't think I'm going to be in a position to buy a house for quite some time anyway to be honest. So it's not something I really give much thought to.

Andrew planned for the immediate future whilst keeping the longer term, with housing costs and paying back study loan, at bay.

Alfred and Andrew had certainty in the relationships to their families and the support they provided were important for their confident way of looking ahead in spite of all the uncertainties around them. Following the male standard for educational and occupational trajectories in their families made their biographical timing synchronous with family time

and set them on a course that offered continuity and were deemed successful in the current historical period, hence the typology confident continuity to describe their orientation to the future.

Young men from families of low skilled backgrounds: cautious contingency

At the other end of the spectrum are Didrik from Norway and Charlie from England who both came from working class backgrounds. The only ones in their extended families who had education beyond vocational training were their mothers who both had education at college level without degrees, and Didrik's brother who was a college student.

Norway: Didrik (1993)

Didrik was unemployed and lived with his parents. When he talked about the future it was his lack of final exams at the upper secondary level that was the biggest obstacle to finding employment or getting into university or college.

You have to find something you like and study. That's what was expected of me. Felt the normal, typical: You *shall* go to school! You have to get an education and then find a job. But I feel that's a bit wrong... because there are many people like me who are more practical than theoretical... I feel there's too much emphasis on studies nowadays. You *must* have a Bachelor or a Master degree!

All the jobs he applied for in the technical retail business had hundreds of applicants and he was never invited to an interview.

I have practically applied for anything. Everything except grocery stores, cos I did that for a couple of years, got pretty tired of it.

ICT was high on his list of interests but he did not really know how or what to do education wise. He found it difficult to get any type of work.

It's much easier to get a job if you know someone who works in a shop [...] It's not like you hand in a CV and they ring you up any more. It's more like: do you know him and do you know her and...

In the longer term he would like to have a job that he found interesting and fun,

I don't want a job where I feel I only do something for money, right? If you don't [have fun] I think you have the wrong job.

As it was his chances of getting such a job were very limited. But he longed for a more independent life even if he knew it would mean less money to spend,

You learn a lot by living on your own I think. You have to... you don't get dinner on the table. You have bills to pay, right? And all that depends on you.

His brother had moved away to study and lived on his own, and 'probably a damned good feeling... coming into a flat and think, this is mine! Cos when you rent it is almost yours, yeah?'

Didrik seemed bothered about his present situation. His parents wanted him to get a trade but he did not know what subject to choose, '[my parents] haven't forced me into any particular direction [...] they support my choices'. He wanted to live independently because of the freedom of having his own space and because that way he would learn to manage life on his own. The lack of full upper secondary exams affected his orientation to the future as it not only blocked his way into higher education, it also limited his employment opportunities. The timing of his transition was out of synchrony with family time but his older brother was an important source of inspiration.

UK: Charlie (1995)

Charlie was an only child and lived with his parents who wanted him to stay on in the education he had started as a mechanic, or to follow a trade,

they wanted me to stay in education as long as I could [...] I think the main thing they've always gone on about is probably career-wise is to do a trade. Like plumbing, electrician or something. [...] you would always need people in the trade, like for whatever reason ... they'll probably never die out, and it's probably a good thing to like know.

In spite of knowing all this Charlie did not stay on because he would have had to take up a loan to do the third year. 'If I didn't have to pay I would've probably gone back for the third year, cos then that's all the levels done then.' His current job did not pay well and there was no job security. He described the process involved in an earlier application for a job stacking shelves, where there were many applicants and all had to queue up to hand in their CVs and go through interviews and tests.

Charlie would have liked to move out but saw this as something unlikely to happen until way into the future because he would not earn enough for rent or toward a mortgage. His economic situation made it impossible for him to save, although he did stress that he was very good with money.

I know I'm going to need it [money]. Like if I want a new car, insurance, and then obviously at some point when I want to move out, get my own place. And then obviously with that you're going to have water bills, electrical, everything like that [...]. I know in the future I'm going to need as much money as I can ... unless I win the Lottery. So the main goal at the moment is just to get as much money as you can.

He worried about being late in getting the independence living away from his parents could give him.

I think if you leave it too late, like if I'm still like 23 and they're still paying for me, you're never really going to learn, and it's going to be late. [...] I suppose you've got to start learning now like how to spend your money! I know that I'm not going to be able to save enough money any time soon to be able to move out or anything,

because places are a bit expensive. [...] So I know that unless I get a really good job or a massive pay rise I'm not going to be able to afford to move out or do much in the future. It's going to take a while.

Charlie's thoughts about the longer term were about hoping to live an 'ordinary' life and have a wife, children, a house and a car. He thought it would take ten years or more for him to be able to save enough money.

Like Didrik, Charlie had a cautious attitude to the future because of the poor prospects of getting a well-paid job. Their biographical timing was not in synchrony with family time. The family norm in education and occupation were no standard to follow in an historical period when many male working-class jobs were gone. Both would have liked to move out but felt stuck in a situation where they were dependent upon their families but kept their options open, hence the typology cautious contingency.

Comparing across contexts

There are many differences between the English and Norwegian societies but this section refers only to dimensions relevant for the current comparisons. The system of education which is publicly funded with no tuition fees in Norway, has very high fees in both private and public institutions in England (Brannen et al 2018)¹⁰ where students also start university a year earlier. Welfare state provisions for young people including student loans and grants, are more generous in Norway. There are however many similarities in topics related to young people, not least with reference to the deregulated housing markets that contributes to social inequalities and delayed timing for moving out of the parental household (Irwin and Nilsen 2018). Occupational structures across Europe (and beyond) are affected by an increased global division of labour where industry is outsourced to so called 'low cost countries' and male dominated low skilled jobs are becoming fewer and the wages for those left are meagre, especially in Britain with the increase in zero-hour contracts. At the other end of the labour market the demand for credentials and academic degrees is increasing (Roberts 2013). As Didrik put it, '*there's too much emphasis on studies nowadays. You MUST have a Bachelor or a Master degree*'. This seemed to be a common perception among young people in both countries.

Charlie and Didrik¹¹ came from families where vocational skills had been more common for men than academic education over the generations, much like the families of the 'lads' in Willis' 1977 study. Where Charlie worked for a very low pay in a zero-hour contract, Didrik had his scant income from benefits that he was slightly embarrassed to talk about. Charlie had the necessary grades to continue his education but the increased college fees made this impossible. Didrik could not make use of the free education in Norway because he lacked a full upper secondary diploma. Neither of them wished to take up loans. They both emphasised the importance of personal contacts and networks¹² for finding work because of the overwhelming numbers of applications to menial jobs in both countries. As Didrik said, if you knew someone who knew someone it was easier to be considered for employment.¹³ The difficulties both faced in getting a job and a wage that made them able to set up an independent household meant there was a contingent quality about their future lives, hence 'cautious contingency' as the typology that described their orientation to

the future. In their present situation family support was of crucial importance. Both longed to become independent of their families and thought this very important for their future lives. Although it would be an exaggeration to say they were 'prisoners of the present'¹⁴ (Sennett 1998 p. 91), events at different levels of temporality and normative expectations in historical time were not in synchrony.

Alfred and Andrew came from similar families where higher education was the standard across generations. It was therefore not a matter of 'if' they were going to university, but a question of 'what' subjects to study. The variations in the systems of education across countries made the life course phase gap wider than the two year age difference would imply since Andrew was well into his education whilst Alfred had not started his. Their orientation to the future is called 'confident continuity'. While they were confident they would get the education of their choice, the wider situation in society were beyond their control but their trajectories represented continuity with reference to their families. Andrew was a little worried about the unemployment rate in the UK, but in more abstract than concrete terms since he was confident about finding employment. Alfred was unsure about what education he would eventually settle for, but he was also confident that he would get a job. They were both worried that the steep housing prices would be an obstacle for establishing an independent life. Thus a certain vagueness about the long term future was evident in their accounts but still an unspoken confidence that they would get by and that their families had the means to support them should they need it.

Concluding discussion: intersecting temporalities and orientations to the future

The study this paper is based upon is set within a contextualised life perspective with a focus on multi-layered contexts. The present circumstances vary considerably at all levels of temporality: biographical, family and historical period. The future is unknown but orientation to future from any present situation is never context free. Following Mead's thought the future is already in the present in that the foundation of any trajectory is laid in the past; it is in the past and the present not only seen from the level of biographical time, but also from that of family time and historical time.

The analyses has suggested two ways in which family time and resources are aspects of both present and past circumstances and thus an important basis for orientation to the future. Transitions for Alfred and Andrew were in synchrony with family time and the family context was important in providing a 'script' (Buchmann, 1989) to relate to regarding education level, if not type. Their future was on tracks in the sense that they were expected to opt for an academic degree and the financial and other material support they needed to do so would be provided without conditions. Alfred was about to take a gap year, and Andrew had had one before he started his studies. The very notion of a gap year suggests a break in a linear temporal pattern in biographical time, but when taken up by many it becomes standard practice rather than an exception, especially among middle class young (Cuzzocrea 2018, Heath 2007, Vogt 2018). They both wished to find employment in well-paid occupations that were interesting and worries about the long term were put on hold as their educations made ambitions for future occupations achievable. In their lives there was a continuous trajectory between past, present and future at the levels of biographical and family time. Thus the future they envisaged in the present was not only contingent upon

their personal decisions in the past and in the here and now; their attitude of confidence was related to future trajectories that have come to be regarded as a standard for a successful transition to adulthood in wider contemporary society.

In spite of parental support, Didrik and Charlie both lived in present circumstances they would have liked to change. Their biographical timing was not in synchrony with family time. The broader period specific conditions in both countries demanded skills sets and credentials that were beyond their reach because neither had followed the prescribed 'successful' trajectory for their cohorts in their respective national contexts. Because of this their immediate plans were more to do with keeping the future at bay – the gap that had to be bridged in order to make their occupational ambitions achievable was too wide to consider in the present. The future they would like to have seemed in the present more like a dreamscape than a realistic destination. Family time and biographical timing were not in synchrony and in the long run support towards their upkeep could become a strain on family resources. Family support had a different meaning for them than for Alfred and Andrew since they were in a situation where they felt dependent; intergenerational relations were thus important not for the 'script' they could provide as an inspirational trajectory but as support that helped in getting by on an everyday basis in the present.

Combining insights from Mead's notion of the present and Hareven's multi-level time perspectives have helped to identify two types of orientation to the future that are based in structural conditions that cut across national boundaries. The emerging findings suggest that the prescribed standard for normative biographical trajectories in this historical period in Norway and Britain has more affinity with middle class lives and does not provide a model that working class young men can easily fit into; for Didrik and Charlie there was an a-synchronicity between the levels of biographical, family and historical time. Their situation is thus not related to 'private troubles'. It has everything to do with 'public issues' (Mills 1959/1980) as the opportunity structure in terms of diversity of well-paid occupations has deteriorated in both countries (MacDonald 2008, Roberts 2013). This affects all young people but the effects on biographical timing in working class men's lives seem more profound.

¹ This paper focusses on young men only. Overall analyses of the material reveal gender differences across and within generations that are demonstrated in earlier and contemporary publications, including from the current study (Brannen et al 2018).

² The interviewees lived in London and since the structural features of education and other social institutions vary across the UK what is referred to here is the English context in particular.

³ Anderson (1998) is critical of epochal terms such as 'late modernity' since they gloss over the importance of events in specific historical periods.

⁴ In Sennett's (1998) understanding of risk however, it refers to a probability logic where events are seen as isolated and random; outcomes of present events cannot be predicted on the basis of previous events. Thus, the past is no guide to the present. In such circumstances, some people may become 'prisoners of the present' (p.91).

⁵ In *The Philosophy of the present* (1932) he engaged with their writing at length and many of the chapters are related to topics in natural science rather than the social sciences.

⁶ In later writings from the same study Carabelli and Lyon (2016) define the term 'orientation to the future' to mean 'the very process of imagining the future.' (p. 1111), thus not focussing on the content of such orientations. This in contrast to writers cited in the literature section where the term 'orientation' is used synonymously with 'perceptions' and 'thoughts about' the future to focus on content.

⁷ In a related Norwegian study three generations of immigrant families have been interviewed. Since Norway has a short history of immigration there are few families with three generations living in the country. There was no parallel study to this in Britain.

⁸ Other publications from this project have made intergenerational comparisons that have drawn on full biographies of all family members interviewed (Brannen et al 2018).

⁹ For reasons of anonymity details in case descriptions have been omitted.

¹⁰ The vocational training schemes are very different in the two countries, and there are more apprenticeships available in Norway (see Olsen et al 2018 for detailed comparison). Didrik did not make use of such options.

¹¹ Didrik's brother was doing a college degree which demonstrates important diversity within and across generations and shows that social origin is not destiny.

¹² Networks and contacts are also important for young people with degrees. With the help of family or friends some get work as unpaid interns in companies to get practice that boosts their CVs. The fact that such work is unpaid often means that only those from affluent backgrounds can afford such placements. This has also been discussed in terms of 'social capital' (Snee and Divine 2014).

¹³ This resembles the old 'speaking for' system (Vogt 2017) that was common in male dominated working class occupations in both countries in earlier times.

¹⁴ The term 'extended present' (Nowotny 1994) could on first sight seem to capture their situation. However, this notion is a broader concept to describe an acceleration of the pace of time in wider society (Brannen and Nilsen 2002).

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