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Nightclubbing and the search for identity: making the transition from childhood to adulthood in an urban milieu

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Abstract
It is generally held that the kinds of rites of passage that mark the transition from childhood to adulthood found in less complex societies are not characteristic of advanced industrial societies. Rather, young people are seen to be caught within a liminal phase of ‘youth’ that involves a period of freedom and hedonistic leisure before they assume the roles and responsibilities of adulthood. This paper argues, however, that many young adults in advanced industrial societies seek to enact informal rites of passage through their leisure-time pursuits. As a popular form of leisure activity for young people worldwide, nightclubbing is examined in terms of an urban rite of passage using Mitchell’s typology of urban relationships and Turner’s dramaturgical perspective. The result of this analysis is a framework that may prove useful for approaching the transitional significance of other leisure practices engaged in by young people.

Introduction
One of the most common transformation rituals found in societies worldwide are initiation ceremonies related to achieving adult status, often referred to as puberty or coming-of-age rites. These rites vary from culture to culture, but most of them involve some kind of symbolic performance that marks a change in status for participants from childhood to adulthood. Such formal initiation ceremonies are not seen to be prevalent in advanced industrial societies (Knepler, 1974: 215; Commerci, 1989). Rather, a variety of status-marking events occurring during this transitional period serve to herald a young person’s ‘coming of age’, such as age of sexual consent, marriageability, a driver’s licence, political voting and legal alcohol consumption. None of these events, however, are definitive in marking a person’s assumption of adult status, and this piece-meal transition leaves young people uncertain of their precise status (Wyn & White, 1997, p.5). Lacking a clear transitional path, the thesis put forward in this paper is that emerging young adults in advanced industrial societies have taken it upon themselves to undertake quasi rites of passage in leisure-based activities such as nightclubbing.

Employing the kind of fine-tuned dramaturgical perspective characteristic of the work of Ervin Goffman (1959), and drawing on the theoretical work of J. Clyde Mitchell (1966) and Victor Turner (1969, 1974), I will argue that nightclubs are a popular venue for rites of passage for many young adults, not only because of the status that nightclubs possess as adult icons, but also because they provide a stage for various performative dramas involving negotiation of various social configurations. To clarify this social dimension of the transitional performance I will draw on Mitchell’s (1966) three-fold classification of urban relationships: personal relationships; structural relationships; and categorical relationships. I will show how Mitchell’s typology can be applied to understand both the symbolic and interactional aspects of clubbing
activity, and I will argue that it may serve as a useful framework for studying other leisure-based activities of young people as well.

The examination is based on an ethnographic study of the Perth nightclub scene carried out in the mid 1990s, which involved six months participant-observation in the Perth nightclub scene and extended interviews with seven young club-goers from mostly white, middle class backgrounds. The reflections of the interviewed club-goers, whose ages range from 18 to 24 years, will be referred to in the course of the discussion. Additionally, the research draws on my personal involvement in the Perth nightclub scene beginning in the early 1990s and continuing to 2000. My own participation involved an early period of frequent participation in my late teens and declined to sporadic involvement in my mid 20s as my personal relationships, career and responsibilities took on increasing importance. This led me to perceive a connection between activities such as clubbing and wider life transitions, which is the rationale underlying the analysis provided.

The Transitional Context of Young Adults’ Clubbing Practices

The notion of young people being in the midst of a transitional stage of their life has been widely recognised in the youth literature generally as an intrinsic aspect of ‘youth’. Youth is seen to be a phase that post-dates childhood and precedes the period of 'settling down' (McRobbie 1984, p.146) – a phase that several analysts hold has been extended in recent decades due to economic restructuring and social change (Chisholm, 1993; Irwin, 1995; Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; Wyn & White, 1997, p.115; Chatterton & Hollands, 2002). Developmental psychologists have long emphasised the importance of wider transitional experiences in understanding young people's leisure activities (Eisenstadt, 1956; Kenniston, 1969), although the individualistic and biological connotations implied in the psychological concept of ‘adolescence’ has come under criticism (Wyn & White 1997, p.52ff.). While normalised, linear characterisations of youth transitions are often questioned (e.g., Du Bois-Reymond, 1998; Gillies, 2000; Hariss et al., 2000; Wyn & White, 1997), the interest in how young people construct their own pathways is very much en vogue (e.g., Harris et al., 2000; Lahelma & Gordon, 2003; Mitterauer, 1993, p.87; Plug et al., 2003). Identity construction is seen to be a central feature of this phase, and the ‘free time’ of leisure is seen to be a pivotal moment when young people can express their identity through consumption activities (Duff, 2003, p.442).

There has been a general failure in youth research, however, to explore the relationship between the liminal/identity-defining activities of young people and the transitional nature of their lives in general. This failure can be related to the divide that has existed between youth cultural activity and transitional pathways (Hollands, 2002). This ‘gap’ is very much evident in studies that have been carried out on young adults’ nightclubbing practices. For example, while Sarah Thornton notes in her study of the British club scene that identity experimentation in nightclubs serves as part of a 'rite of passage' for young adults (1995: 16), she does not take this insight any further. Rather, clubbing is seen by Thornton to mainly have value in terms of the 'subcultural capital' that club-goers’ accumulate through status defining activities (see also MacRae, 2004). In his study of the British club scene, Ben Malbon (1999) ignores the transitional context of such activities altogether, noting only the playful, expressive approach to identity-formation among young British club-goers. For Malbon, night-club interactions are
micro-structurings of a neo-tribe, which have little to do with the world outside the nightclub or the roles and identities of adulthood. But if clubbing is such an infectious lifestyle in a world set apart (and one in which participants have supposedly accrued subcultural capital), why is it that by their mid-20’s so many participants are all too ready to dispense with their neo-tribes and accumulated status to assume the responsibilities of ‘mundane’ adulthood?

I hold that the studies by Thornton and Malbon are reflective of an isolationist tendency in current approaches to youth scenes such as nightclubs. Indeed, Pini notes the problem of "viewing the 'other worlds' created within the club context as having no political or cultural significance or effectivity beyond their function as markers of an 'underground’” (2001, p.45). The drive behind this ‘isolationist’ perspective on nightclubbing is partly due to a general backlash against the structural approach of the Contemporary Centre for Cultural Studies (CCCS) studies in the 1970s, and also partly due to the carefree, hedonistic discourse that club-goers embrace and happily regurgitate to field researchers. With the shift of analytical focus to the perspectives of club-goers themselves (also partly a reaction to the liberal semiotic and symbolic 'readings' of youth subcultures evident in many CCCS studies), these ‘insider’ perspectives, which tend to celebrate frivolity and disengagement, have reinforced the view that young people are 'doing their own thing' quite separate from the wider, structured world. What analysts fail to consider, however, is that these insider views are just one of the many elements that comprise young people’s outlook, and that such sentiments serve an important role in defining a lifestyle set apart from the everyday world – a setting apart that is in fact integral to dealing with the pressures and demands of the everyday world.

Hodkinson (2005) warns of the danger of taking insider views at face value and of not situating these viewpoints within wider analytical frameworks. Is it possible that the discourse of youth, with its emphasis on freedom and segregational (i.e. ‘underground’) activity, is an ideological (or discursive) means of emphasising liminality in which young people negotiate the opposing identities of childhood and adulthood? If so, does this help to explain why practices such as nightclubbing begin to lose their appeal to young adults as they gradually assume their ‘adult’ roles and responsibilities (as they define them)?

There is certainly evidence that young people have forged their own rites of passage (Sande, 2002), and that activities such as nightclubbing and alcohol consumption are central to such transitions. Delaney (1995), for example, suggests that Anglo-American adolescents try to enact their own rite of passage through indulging in adult behaviour such as drug-taking, alcohol consumption and sexual intercourse. In their study of alcohol consumption among young adults, Harnett et al (2000) remark: “Initiation to alcohol, gaining access to the places where it is served and the development of specific drinking cultures are important rites de passage of youth” (p.62).

While the transitional significance of nightclubbing and its component activities has been recognised, it has not been taken beyond the level of general observations about the role of clubbing and its component practices as status-changing activities – that is, to a fine-tuned analysis of clubbing practices in terms of a rite of passage. For example, Hollands’ (2002) promise to bridge the divide between youth cultural activity and transitional pathways in his examination of clubbing turns out highlighting the transitions of the British nightlife economy rather than those of the consumers. Consequently, we are left with no understanding of clubbing as a cultural practice and the role that clubbing plays in the transitional pathways of young adults. What is required is an approach that relates the meaningful practices evident in young adults’ clubbing practices to the wider changes in their lives.
Towards a framework for understanding clubbing practices

In order to construct a framework for understanding how clubbing practices are related to wider transition processes, I will first examine Victor Turner’s work (1969, 1974) on liminality. The centrality of liminality in raves and dance clubs is emphasised by Hobbs et al (2000) and Gerard (2004), but the role such liminality plays in terms of social relationships and biographical transitions of young adults has not been adequately addressed. Fatone (2001, online) notes in passing that the rave experience, in which liminality is seen as such an essential aspect, might be “viewed as a playing with the transition from adolescence to adulthood”, but takes it no further than this. The possibility of linking the concept of liminality to wider transitions is one that I want to explore in some detail, as it offers one way to bridge the cultural/transition divide.

Turner’s notion of ‘liminality’ draws from van Gennep’s (1960) formulations on rites of passage, in which the notion of social relationships and social transitions was central. Van Gennep characterised three distinct stages in rites of passage: separation, segregation and integration, which were aimed at symbolically marking the changing status of participants. As an individual or group undergoes status change, they are separated from the community and kept in seclusion whilst they undergo transformative work to mark their new identity. This mid stage is characterised by van Gennep as a ‘betwixt and between’ phase, as encumbents are viewed as neither child nor adult, but something in between. Once the symbolic work is completed, they re-enter the community as transformed individuals. Turner (1969) laid particular emphasis on the segregation phase of rites of passage, which he saw as important to reconciling distinctive identities through transcending everyday social structures – a phase he referred to as liminality.

According to Turner, a central aspect of liminality is the way in which social relationships are redefined – if only briefly. According to Turner, social interaction during the liminal phase takes place in a free and intimate manner, what he refers to as ‘communitas’ - "a bond uniting ... people over and above any formal social bonds" (Turner 1974: 45), and he described a 1960’s nightclub setting to illustrate this concept (1969: 138). While nightclubs certainly promote something approaching the notion of a ‘communitas’ spirit, they are also characterised by other social formations that play an important role in transforming identity, and it is to Mitchell's (1966) three-fold model of urban relationships that I now turn to in order to elaborate on Turner’s dramaturgical approach.

Working in the same social-structural tradition of British anthropology as Turner, Mitchell developed a framework for understanding the types of social relationships characteristic of African urban societies. Categorical relationships are the most distinctly urban aspect of Mitchell's typology – a concept he adopts from Wirth (1938), who refers to the typifications made by people regarding class and ethnicity and used as markers of social identity among strangers in urban settings. Mitchell defines these categorical relationships as standardised ways of relating to others in terms of some visible characteristic. These relationships, he claims, are "a way of simplifying or codifying behaviour in otherwise 'unstructured' situations" (1966:53). Here, Mitchell emphasises the importance of dress, argot and other stylistic features that serve as identity markers between strangers. Such forms of identification are particularly important for those who identify with various styles (or ‘subcultures’) that are associated with contemporary youth scenes (Moore, 1994), including the nightclubbing scene.

The second type of relationship identified by Mitchell - ‘structural relationships’ - is defined as:
...relationships, within an urban social system, which have enduring patterns of interaction and which are structured, i.e. the norms are defined in terms of the role expectations of others (1966:51).

Structural relationships are associated with roles derived from such areas as work, education, and family, and these relationships yield for participants a 'structural identity' - an identity firmly rooted in institutionalised roles defined by the wider society. As I will show, such structures form the backdrop for much of the symbolic activity characteristic of clubbing practices. For example, many young adults see themselves as being in a liminal phase between their past and future families. According to the normalized route of transition (which is still accepted by many young adults, particularly those from white, middle class backgrounds who were involved in this study), they are leaving behind the consanguineal (or equivalent) family unit that they belonged to as youths, and postponing the matrimonial family that potentially awaits them as adults.

The other type of relationship that Mitchell defines is 'personal relationships', which are the "series of relationships which an individual builds up around himself on a personal basis" (Mitchell 1966:55). For young adult club-goers, such relationships primarily revolve around their peers. Their network of friends serves as the pool from which, on any given night, clubgoers draw to form a group for a nightclub outing. Nightclubbing among young adults is rarely done alone.

Applying Mitchell's framework to nightclubbing practices in conjunction with Turner's dramaturgical perspective provides a useful means for understanding the way that young adults construct their identity through clubbing activities. In particular, it is possible to understand the transitional nature of the identity construction process by taking into account the way young adults orientate themselves to each of Mitchell's relationship modes in the form of a rite of passage. Specifically, through their clubbing practices, young adults are seen to affirm the structural identity associated with adulthood through experimenting with an independent identity forged through categorical relationships and with personal relationships that characterise adult-type partnerships. The emphasis that young adults place on personal relationships in their peer group is viewed as a provisional safety net for avoiding any loneliness and awkwardness associated these wider interactions. Over the long term, these liminal flirtations with an adult identity will, for most participants, give way to a more durable identity rooted in the structural 'adult' roles of partners, careers and parents, at which point the appeal of clubbing will lose its importance.

Clubbing as a transition between structural positions

Nightclubs are viewed by young adults as establishments where the roles of adulthood can be enacted in a socially sanctioned manner, and in this respect, clubbing can be understand as a means of assisting them to bridge the divide between the structural roles of childhood and adulthood. Nightclubs not only represent a site where adult activities are rehearsed, but entry to them constitutes a status marker in itself. Kristy told me that her initial involvement was motivated by "the thrill of getting in", while Ethan said, "It was a real voyage of discovery sort of thing: "Ooh! A nightclub! Woo!" You know?"

It is the excitement and novelty of nightclubbing in the context of their transition from youths to adults that seems to be the qualities that attract young people to nightclubbing. Emma, for
example, says she was, "just sort of bored with typical 17-year old parties, just wanting to get out and have a look at what was around at that stage". She remarks:

Cause it was really hard to sort of get out, especially, like, living with your parents and everything. It’s always sort of hard to sort of say, “I’m going to Northbridge”. So, that wasn’t very frequent – it was just sort of like experimental, now and again when you could.

The opportunity to ‘get out’ into the larger urban environment is important to young adults, who are endeavouring to leave behind the perceived restrictions of their youth and embrace an independent, adult identity.

The importance of the location of most nightclubs in or near metropolitan centers is important in this respect. Featherstone points out that cities are repositories of signs and images that enable limitless means of expression (1991: 101). While a formulation such as this suffers from a certain unstructured romanticisation characteristic of some nightclubbing studies (I have in mind here Malbon’s study in particular), and certainly fails to consider that these city spaces are heavily regulated and policed by State and commercial interests (Chatterton & Hollands, 2002), they do accord somewhat with the mythic representation of the urban environment that is an essential ingredient for young people’s experimentation in the nightclub setting. To this extent, the mythologised flux and excitement of the city serves to legitimise the liminal space required for the nightclub performance. In fact, the way in which the nightclub itself amplifies the elements of urbanity may serve as a more powerful and immediate sign of the mythic metropolis than even the real city environment that lies beyond its walls. Like the activity on the streets outside, the emphasis in the nightclub is also on movement, sound and visual excitement - but on a much more intense scale. The club is bustling - strobe lights intermittently illuminate the throng of people dancing to the loud, pulsating music on the dance floor, while other club-goers watch on from the dimly lit sidelines. This is contrast to, say, pubs, which generally seek to mythically represent a certain homeliness - a Victorian model of homeliness to be sure (Thornton, 1995) - within the impersonal surroundings of the city.

But while the nightclub setting may be a mythical representation of the metropolis, club-goers themselves see nightclubs as inextricably part of the urban scape. Nightclubs are, along with pubs, cafes, restaurants and theatres, a prominent component of city night-life, and club-goers themselves do not tend to treat nightclubs as significations of an urban setting as much as intrinsic elements of that setting. Hence, nightclubs have become something of what Baudrillard (1983) refers to as a ‘simulacrum’ – originally the signifier, but now the signified. Inside the nightclub, the carefree hedonistic excitement of youth and popular culture merges indistinguishably with the freedom and excitement of life in the big city.

However, while club-goers may feel they have distanced themselves from the normal, everyday world when ‘out on the town’, it is arguably but a superficial distancing. In fact, beneath the hedonistic discourse seems to lie a concern amongst many club-goers – in some cases an intense anxiety – about life challenges beyond the leisure domain. These concerns relate to issues characteristic of the normal, structured world such as family, career, gender and ethnicity. In the back of their minds, young adults know that when the clubs are closed and the sun shines, they will once again have to confront the wider social world and resume their efforts to become competent young adults within it. This is so even if – in their immediate words and deeds – they are partying like there is no tomorrow.
Accordingly, club-goers often admit to experiencing anxiety at certain moments during their night out (sometimes for the duration of the entire evening) - a fact that belies the general notion that they are having a great time. These anxieties often relate to specific status-defining objectives that they feel compelled to achieve, such as successful presentation of self, identification with the wider clubbing crowd, and successful interaction with the opposite sex. These goals are intrinsic to the manner in which clubbing is constructed by many young people as a quasi rite of passage into their adult lives, and centre on the negotiation of certain identity formations in order to reaffirm their independence and experiment with courtship strategies. Let us examine how Mitchell's other relationship constructs can help illuminate these transitional processes.

**Categorical Relationships**

Categorical relationships, that is, relationships based on outward characteristics such as style of clothes, argot, and so on, are central to the clubbing experience and help young adults establish an independent identity that is part of the transition process. While Mitchell saw categorical identity as principally constructed around ethnicity and class, these markers of identity are less pronounced in the nightclub setting, even while they may continue to define identity in the ‘everyday’ world. The standardisation of fashionable or cult dress (however stylistically defined at different nightclub venues) ensures that distinctions based on class and ethnicity tend to be less significant, although some clubs, it is true, come to be associated with working class youth or a high class clientele by virtue of certain dress standards and niche marketing.

The importance of clothing as a vehicle for young people’s experimentation with identity has often been emphasised (Littrell et al, 1990; Sweeney & Zionts, 1989), and nowhere is this more important than in nightclubs. One young club-goer, Ethan, told me, "It's incredible that it comes down to clothes and everything, and that's why people put on such an act when they go out." The ‘act’ he is referring to can be related to what Goffman (1959) calls ‘impression management.’ The concept of impression management is important for an understanding of nightclubbing practices, because apart from the friends one goes clubbing with, the nightclub is essentially a room full of strangers who evaluate one another based on first impressions.

For many club-goers, especially females, presentation is primarily a matter of 'looking good'. Julianne told me: "...for the girls it tends to be a huge big thing - what they look like when they go out, and who they can attract. Even if they aren't after any guys! I mean, if you look good, you feel good." For females, make-up, hairstyle and clothing are the most important aspects of presentation. The transformation of self often begins several hours before entering the nightclub, typically in the bathroom or bedroom at home or at a friend's place. In fact, even this earlier preparatory phase is the outcome of more sustained backstage work involving shopping expeditions for fashionable clothes and shoes, visits to the hairdressers, and the purchase of make-up and perfume. The male club-goer also will undergo a preparatory phase, but it will (in most cases at least) not be as involved as it is for females. For the male club-goer, impression management primarily involves what Ethan calls ‘looking cool’, that is, looking as if "you know what you're about".

Mitchell saw categorical relationships as characteristic of the urban lifestyle, in which strangers needed a ready-made reference system for determining the status of others and entering into appropriate forms of interaction in the absence of pre-defined roles. Clubbers employ these
different categories of relationships for much the same reason - to indicate their status as competent individuals to strangers in the absence of prior designations. For some, this simply means dressing to impress. Others may make particular statements with their dress, grooming and body language. Body language can be particularly important in terms of looking confident, relaxed and purposeful in a room full of strangers. Ethan told me:

It's like, "oh my god", you know, "What am I going to do?" ‘Cause it's so easy to stand around and look stupid, you know, unless you're dancing or, you know, you're propping up the bar or whatever, or actually talking to someone, which is pretty hard.

Demonstrating that one can successfully avoid looking lost in a crowd of strangers is one of the challenges involved in the clubbing performance, as it is in urban life generally, but even more so among young adults attempting to establish their independent status.

The dance-floor is one of the prime arenas within the nightclub setting where independence can be affirmed. As the centre of activity in every nightclub, the dance floor is a very public space. Julianne says: "I really, really want to dance, but I care about how I look too much ...it's very public. People stand around the edges of the dance floor and they watch the people who are dancing." For this reason the club-goer usually moves on to the dancefloor accompanied by friends. As Greg observes about female club-goers, "they usually dance in groups". Drinking sufficient alcohol can help the club-goer overcome the difficulty of venturing on to the public dance floor, particularly for the male club-goers who may feel reluctant to intrude into this very public, female-dominated arena (particularly in conventional clubs, although less so in rave-type ‘dance’ clubs where many males are avid dancers). Ethan's remarks highlight the importance of aids such as alcohol:

If I've had enough drinks and there's, you know, a whole group of us, or even someone out there [on the dance floor that] I really like. I mean, I'm not really into going out there by myself, you know - "Hey everyone, look at me" - you know?

Self-consciousness on the dance floor is not, however, a problem for all club-goers. Some see in dancing the opportunity to stand out from the crowd and reaffirm their individuality. They either have no problem venturing onto the floor alone, or tend to quickly disengage from their friends once on the dance floor. This is particularly true of females. McRobbie (1993), in describing female dancing habits, emphasises the way that females, through their dancing style, redefine their feminine identity. She points to the self-control and independence expressed through dance as a "redefinition of the feminine self" from the "romantic myth" that was a central theme of dance in the 1980s, when female dancing was more a display of availability under the ‘male gaze’ (McRobbie 1993; McRobbie 1984). Either way, the importance of expressing to onlookers and fellow dancers that one is a free and sensual (even sexual) being can be an essential component of affirming an independent, adult status.

Deriving identity through the presentation of self, however, is a very fragile process - the club-goer can never be completely sure what the 'stranger' thinks. Consequently, beneath the external appearance of looking relaxed, happy and involved, club-goers may be feeling considerable self-consciousness and uncertainty. This can contribute to an atmosphere that is self-conscious, aloof, competitive, even intimidating. Insecurity is an unavoidable part of categorical
relationships, which Wirth described as "impersonal, superficial, [and] transitory" (1938:12). In this context, one can understand the importance of such aids as alcohol, drugs and cigarettes - they all help to alleviate self-consciousness and insecurity. Even the presence of one's friends plays an important role in this respect - friends are part of the 'known' in an otherwise largely 'unknown' environment. It is to the importance of friends and other 'personal relationships' that I turn to next.

**Personal Relationships**

The ‘group’ of friends, commonly referred to in the youth literature as the ‘peer group’, often becomes the pre-eminent source of personal identity for young adults during their teen years (Morris & Fuller, 1999:532). Part of the function of the nightclubbing experience is to reaffirm the peer group in the face of competing forces of romantic partnership formation and career responsibilities from the 'structured world' that constantly threaten to break it apart. Ethan, for instance, explained to me that he goes to nightclubs regularly as a way of keeping in contact with his friends:

> Yeah, yeah, every Friday sort of pretty well, you know, ‘cause everyone is doing their own thing, it's the only time you can get everyone together. It's like a big Friday night sort of thing. ...You know, everyone's left Uni or doing their own thing and all that, so we really have to make a big night of it.

Cindy expressed a similar point of view:

> ...you see friends that you may or may not have seen for a long time, especially now, that we've been out of school for four or five years, you know, people who you don't see all the time. You might see people once every three months or something, so it's good to catch up with them when you can.

But the peer group, like the consanguineal family unit that it tends to supplant in importance, is destined for decline as the pre-eminent source of personal identity, and club-goers begin to realise this as their friends start to find partners and careers. However, the superficial nature of categorical relationships, with their accompanying insecurity and loneliness, means that their set of friends retains importance as a provisional grouping until partnerships are formed that will offer a more durable buffer against the alienation of urban life. These dilemmas are part of what are dealt with by young adults in their clubbing practices. For young adults, the significance of the nightclubbing experience is that it enables them to face the larger society of strangers, but the habit of clubbing within a group of friends ensures that the safety net of personal relationships is always there should the encounter with the crowd of strangers become too daunting or too lonely. As Simmel points out, interacting in a wider circle of relationships within a smaller circle is the means by which a person can, “preserve his [or her] sense of individuality and still avoid excessive isolation, bitterness, and idiosyncrasy” (1971: 262).

Interaction with friends is, however, limited by the setting. For example, conversation in a nightclub is made difficult due to the loud music. A female club-goer told me: "You can't talk to people and you can't, you know... you hang out but you don't do a lot of talking, you don't get
into a lot of deep conversations." Unlike pubs, conversation at nightclubs is generally kept to a superficial level, and often involves a fair degree of shouting in each others’ ears. Conversation mainly takes the form of commentary, joking and gossip. While such talk serves, on one level, to reaffirm ties between friends, on another level it reveals clubbers' preoccupation with the wider communal grouping. Even as they chat to their friends, club-goers are peering around continuously, observing the general club activity. For many, this includes checking out members of the opposite sex. As Christie says, “you do a fair bit of perving”. Ethan told me:

...the guys are, you know, "I've got to make something happen tonight", you know? You always think that it's a boring night when there's been nothing sort of interesting going on with women and that. And that's the thing, everyone's smiling and laughing and everything and that, but everyone's got a little hidden agenda in their head, like, "Oh she's nice," or, "That's nice", or you know, "What's going on here" sort of thing, you know, which makes the whole thing pretty interesting I suppose.

At any one moment, there may be several interactions taking place within the club concerned with 'making something happen' in a sexual or romantic way. This might involve anything from the exchange of a glance or smile, the exchange of a few words, an offer of a drink or a dance, to the exchange of phone numbers or even going home together. It must be stressed, however, that sexual liaisons are a less prominent feature of the clubbing experience today than they seem to have been in the past (Malbon, 1999, p.9). Some female club-goers are especially wary of undesired advances from male club-goers, and this defensiveness can contribute to the aloofness that sometimes characterises female behaviour in the club environment. Hence, female club-goers are trying to appeal to male desires through their stylistic dress, but many (although not all) are on guard against male sexual advances (Snow et al, 1990).

In many respects, club-goers realise that their future lies in the society 'out there', including the potential partners that they may one day settle down with and create families of their own. Most also realise that social responsibilities may one day lead them away from the carefree lifestyle of late-night escapades in nightclubs. Even now, Cindy is aware that she will not be going to nightclubs forever. "If you're paying off a house, you can't go to a nightclub and spend sixty dollars on drinks. And your friends start having kids, so you start going to their houses." Emma describes clubbing as a single person’s activity:

I think a lot of it’s got to do with your personal status. Like, if you’re single, you’re more likely to go out, do you know what I mean? …Whereas if you’re attached, …there’s no point going out…

Julianne told me that the frequency of her club outings had declined since she became involved with her boyfriend, whom she admits does not like clubbing.

UK surveys have found that club-going falls away dramatically once participants reach the age of 25 (e.g., Release poll cited in Malbon, 1999, p.8). For many club-goers, leaving the scene will mark the end of their transition through the liminal phase between youth and adulthood. Their phase of 'flirting' with an urban, categorical identity will be replaced by one defined by their structural roles as partners, parents and workers. The lifestyle of the unattached, urban nightclubber will lose its appeal or no longer be possible, as the responsibilities associated with
'settling down' will lead most participants to spend their weekends relaxing in more tranquil ways.

Not all, however, will leave the nightclub scene entirely. Some will continue to visit nightclubs - a few even on a regular basis. But for them, the symbolic appeal of clubbing practices will change somewhat - no longer the playful experimentation with a liminal identity amongst their friends, but an established part of their urban identity or a brief 'time-out' from their structural responsibilities to sustain or relive the thrills of their youth.

Conclusion
I have argued that going to nightclubs serves as a means of adjustment for young adults undergoing a transitional phase from youth to an independent adult identity in an urban milieu. Clubbing activities are very much a process of balancing competing modes of identity, both during the clubbing outing and over the longer term. Nightclubbing allows young adults to reaffirm their personal relationships while at the same time providing a stage to explore their categorical and structural identities in a quintessential urban environment. In this respect, we can talk of clubbing as a form of ritual behaviour characteristic of a quasi 'rite of passage'. Whether the term 'ritual' is in fact appropriate to describing this process is of course contestable, but at the very least, we can say that clubbing is a form of 'play' with modes of social relationships that has an important role to play in young adults’ biographical transitions. The fact that clubbing does not permanently signify a change of status in the individual from the wider society’s point of view – a problem noted with other quasi rites of passage identified in Western societies (Cushing, 1998; Bell, 2003) – does not belittle the importance of the psycho-social effect of clubbing in redefining their sense of self. In this respect, clubbing has features that accord with Turner's notion of ritual transitions:

In the actual situation of ritual, with its social excitement and directly physiological stimuli, such as singing, dancing, alcohol, incense, and bizarre modes of dress, the ritual symbol, we may perhaps say, effects an interchange between its poles of meaning. Norms and values, on the one hand, become saturated with emotion, while the gross and basic emotions become ennobled through contact with social values (1969, p.30).

In the club setting, the norms and values associated with being adult are saturated with the 'raw' youthful emotions associated with music, dance, sexuality, alcohol and visual stimulation, while these emotions, in turn, are 'ennobled' by the outward signs that young participants associate with mature adults (i.e. clothes, money and a sophisticated demeanour). In the process, each of van Gennep's stages in rites of passage are achieved: separation (the ritual exclusion of a person from ordinary life); liminality (the period of marginality or seclusion); and incorporation (the re-aggregation of a person into society with their new status). Club-goers start the evening in their peer groups, later seeking to engage with the wider clubbing community as the night wears on (i.e. separation leading to liminality), and hopefully (if things go well) end up engaging in meaningful interaction with a would-be partner (i.e. re-aggregation with a new status). These stages mirror the transition that tends to take place over the long-term: the importance of the teenage peer group gives way to an independent categorical identity, which eventually moves
towards a structural identity rooted in partnered relationships. At this point, the emergent adult often leaves the club scene – their transition complete.

Admittedly, this is a rather ideal representation of the clubbing event and young adults’ biographical transitions. In practice, the ‘ritual process’ involved in clubbing is not nearly as linear or predictable, with club-goers often drifting back and forth between their peer groups and the wider crowd throughout the duration of the evening, and some foregoing the opportunity to interact with potential partners altogether. This vacillation between social formations is also characteristic of many young adults’ lives, where living at home with parents, forming peer affiliations and romantic partnerships are not necessarily progressive stages, but overlap and are sometimes revisited at different times. Furthermore, the notion of a distinct end-point involving a definitive notion of adulthood – whether in the context of the clubbing experience or in terms of young adults’ lives - is neither uniformly conceived by participants nor always desired. Malbon (1999) emphasises the variable meanings associated with the clubbing experience, which can be "as much about temporarily forgetting who you are as about consolidating an identity" (p.19). However, the process I have described depicts the general structuring logic or ‘mythic charter’ for many young adults’ mode of interaction at nightclub venues, even if the particular enactment of these elements may vary between participants.

Perhaps the next stage to understanding these self-made quasi rites of passage is to broaden understanding of 'conventional' nightclub-based practices with those managed (or rejected) by young adults in alternative venues such as pubs, parties and other urban and non-urban spaces in which they congregate. Non-leisure scenes also need to be studied, such as universities (see Jones & Kern, 1999) and work places (Lindsay, 2004). The role of popular culture and various alternative ‘subcultural’ forms (e.g., rave, grunge, punk, goth, metal, rap) will have particular relevance to such an analysis. For example, do the new dance clubs and rave events frequented by many contemporary young adults, with their emphasis on dancing, ecstatic drugs, crowd identification, casual wear and a relatively non-sexual form of interaction, indicate an alternative rite of passage in which partnered relationships and conventional symbols of adulthood are no longer the desired objective? If so, is this connected to fundamental structural changes in advanced industrial societies concerning the demise of the nuclear family unit? These are interesting questions, and ones that the framework outlined here might help illuminate.

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References:


