

The Transition to Work and Adulthood: Becoming Adults via Communities of Practice

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INTRODUCTION

The role of work in the transition to adulthood is not a new concern with many authors suggesting a clear link between work and the processes of becoming an adult (Banks *et al* 1992; Pilcher 1995). For example, Pilcher (1995) describes the transition to work as marking a period in young people's lives where they are defined "in terms of what they no longer are (children) and what they nearly are (adults)" (Pilcher 1995:58). These debates have recently been extended by authors exploring the role of formal and informal workplace learning in the formation of worker identities (Lawy 2006). Central to some of these approaches is the theoretical framework of Lave and Wenger (1991) with authors utilising the concepts of 'legitimate peripheral participation' and 'community of practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). These concepts have been applied to a range of learning contexts including work-based learning and apprenticeships, education and training frameworks and organisational learning (see Fuller 1996; Cornford and Gunn 1998; Driver 2002). There have also been numerous discussions considering the theoretical coherence of Lave and Wenger's approach (Hodkinson and Hodkinson 2003; Owen-Pugh 2004; Fuller *et al* 2004). They highlight that, whilst Lave and Wenger's approach marks an important step forward in

understanding learning at work, their theorising needs extending to accommodate certain limitations. Such limitations include Lave and Wenger's undeveloped considerations of power (Owen-Pugh 2003; Fuller *et al* 2004), fantasy elements (Owen-Pugh 2003), the importance of formal learning, the value of previous experience, and learning beyond the achievement of full community membership (Fuller *et al* 2004; Fuller and Unwin 2003, 2004).

An additional aspect of Lave and Wenger's work that remains largely unexplored, and which could be further developed, is the contribution that 'legitimate peripheral participation' and 'community of practice' can make to an understanding of the transition to adulthood via the transition to work. Indeed, Lave and Wenger's model of the transformation of novice into old-timer could be used to signify a broader transition from childhood to becoming a full adult member of the community at work and elsewhere. Lave and Wenger (1991) allude to this process suggesting "we might equally have turned to studies of socialization; children, after all, are quintessentially legitimate peripheral participants in adult social worlds" (Lave and Wenger 1991: 32). Wenger (1998:277) also recognises the significance that working with adults has on the formation of young worker identities:

...it is desirable to increase opportunities for relationships with adults just being adults, while downplaying the institutional aspects of their role as educators. What students need in developing their own identities is contact with a variety of adults who are willing to invite them into their adulthood. (Wenger 1998: 277)

However, if we are to extend Lave and Wenger's analysis in this direction we also need to understand the process of learning the norms and behaviours of an 'adult community' as well as the process of occupational socialisation that Lave and Wenger (1991) describe. If the transition to adulthood is to be effective young workers need to acquire adult behavioural standards *and* occupational skills to move beyond their status as legitimate peripheral participants in the workplace. Without acquiring the norms and behaviours of the adult workers around them young workers cannot fully participate in adult working life. One possible approach to this is to utilise Norbert Elias's (largely unknown) writings on the transitions to work and adulthood. (See Elias 1961)

LINKING LAVE AND WENGER WITH ELIAS

Others have recognised the benefits of using Elias to extend Lave and Wenger's theorising (see Gherardi 1999; Owen-Pugh 2003; Goodwin and O'Connor 2005) and the two approaches have important parallels when considering the transition to adulthood. First, Lave and Wenger's (1991) starting point is very similar to Elias as both question the *homo clausus* or closed personality view of human beings, emphasising instead, the relational nature of identity and the social. For both Elias and Lave and Wenger, 'who we are' is not the product of an internal cognitive process but instead emerges out of "participation in an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities" (Lave and Wenger 1991: 98).

Second, Lave and Wenger (1991) and Elias (1962) highlight the peripheral status of young workers at the beginning of their careers. For Elias, when young people go to work they have to make broader adjustments to situations and to roles which are new and the implications of which were “often imperfectly understood by them and by the adults concerned, and for which they are in many cases not too well prepared” (Young Worker Project 1962: 2). For Elias, this transition is a difficult process as the norms, the behaviour and attitudes of adults at work differed considerably to those adults the young people were familiar with. Elias argues that too is due to the limited amount of contact between young people and adults outside of family, friends and teachers. It is here that Elias could make a useful addition to the theorising of Lave and Wenger in that Elias articulates a very clear separation between young people and the adults that surround them and this takes further Lave and Wenger’s notion of legitimate peripheral participation. From the minutes of the meetings relating to the ‘*Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles*’ Elias argues that

...a complex society such as ours requires customarily a prolonged period of indirect preparation and training for adult life. By indirect I mean from the age of 5 to 14,15 or 16, the...children of our society are trained for their adult tasks in special institutions which we call schools, where they learn... knowledge about the adult world past, present and future not by direct contact with it, but largely from books. Their actual knowledge of the adult world...[is] relatively limited. (Young Worker Project, 1962a: 2)

Because of this separation of adults and young people, before entering work adolescents have a highly selective and unrealistic perception of the adult world and of their life in it. The encounter with reality enforces a reorganisation of their perception. This is a painful process for a least two different reasons. First, because every strongly enforced reorganisation of perceptions is painful. Second, to all intents and purposes the “social reality” to which the youngsters have to get used, is unsatisfactory and “the gap between the adult reality as it turns out to be is very great indeed” (Elias 1962: 1). This has similarities with Lave and Wenger’s approach where legitimate peripheral participants do not perceive their peripherality before they enter the workplace and only begin to understand their separateness from the older, established workers around them once at work and trying to adjust. However, this approach takes the theorising further and reflects upon the emotional impact of being a peripheral participant and Elias argues that absence of relationships between children and other adults, the differences between the fantasies of future adult roles and the actual reality of adult life, and the encounter with reality, could lead to this experience being one of shock. An example of this could be that the young person before entering work has a perception or fantasy that work will be a positive experience and will have no negative effect on them. In such a fantasy the young person does not perceive the reality of adult working life as being one without long school holidays, short working days and extended ‘break times’. The reality of work is different from the perceptions of the young person and, for Elias, the realisation that nothing will ever be the same in terms of school holidays or the general loss of the ‘freedoms’ that accompany childhood lead the young person to experience a ‘reality-shock’.

Third, Elias (2001) and Lave and Wenger (1991) emphasise the historical context of the present in which the “shaping of an individual depends on the historical evolution of the social standard” (Elias 2001: 23) or where learning is the “historical production, transformation and change of persons” (Lave and Wenger 1991: 50). Understanding the link between processes of change in social relations and processes of change in habitus¹ is the central concern of much of Elias’s work. Elias conceptualised this change process as the inter-relationship between *sociogenesis* (the processes of development and transformation in social relations) and *psychogenesis* (the processes of development and transformation in the psychology, personality or habitus that accompany such social changes) (Krieken 1998; Goodwin and O’Connor 2002). For Elias, habitus is not innate but ‘habituated’ - a constituent part of the individual by learning through social experience, developing as part of a continuous process beginning at birth and continuing through childhood and youth (Krieken, 1998: Goodwin and O’Connor 2002). The interrelationship between sociogenesis *and* psychogenesis means that the transition to adulthood cannot take place in isolation as the learning of adult behaviours is only possibly due to interactions with adults. As such, the transition from school to work is a central process through which young people are habituated or learn the norms, attitudes and the new adult codes of behaviour. Again Lave and Wenger’s notion of legitimate peripheral participation also overlaps, to some extent, with Elias’s conceptualisation of the interrelationship between sociogenesis *and* psychogenesis and clearly describes how changes in the social context link with changes in an individual’s habitus. However, the change in habitus is not simply the acquisition of workplace skills but is, instead a broader

transformatory process central to the transition to adult life. As Elias suggests, young workers need to make

...adjustment to relationships with older workers, supervisors etc in factory and workshop (e.g. learning new codes of behaviour, problems of competition and co-operation, conforming and non-conforming in factory and workshop, coping with tensions in social relations etc). (Elias 1961: 1)

This transformatory process, according to Goodwin and O'Connor (2002), requires young people, on entering work, to have to begin communicating with adults who are not family members and, as such, work becomes a site through which young workers can begin to fully engage with the sociocultural practices of adulthood. Such practices include learning to behave responsibly as opposed to exhibiting childish behaviours such as 'time wasting' or 'messing about'. It could also mean learning to conform to very specific workplace behaviours such as conforming to adult hours of work including, clocking in, reduced break times, limited holidays. Adult behavioural standards would also require the young workers to learn to cope with workplace tensions and conflicts themselves rather than rely on family members or adult friends to resolve their problems. More broadly in Eliasian terms, the transition from school to work would require the young workers to develop the foresight and self-restraint of the adults around them. This means moving from childhood where the individual can express their feelings with a great deal of freedom without consequence to adulthood and where the individual (largely unconsciously) regulates and controls their own behaviours in line with the behavioural standards of the time.

Supplementing Lave and Wenger (1991) with the works of Norbert Elias perhaps provides a more complete conceptual framework for explaining how young people become both workers and adults via a process such as legitimate peripheral participation. Only by developing such workplace skills and learning adult norms and behaviours can the young people become full participants in the sociocultural practise of the community as adults and workers. In the next section, empirical data from Elias's *Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles* project is used to examine the transition to adulthood of 854 young adults in the 1960s in the city of Leicester. This data was collected between 1962 and 1964 from those who left school during the summer and at Christmas of 1960 and 1962. The majority of the respondents were aged between 16 and 18 (see Goodwin and O'Connor 2002).

BECOMING ADULTS VIA COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

It is impossible in a chapter such as this to cover all of the aspects of adult behaviour that are learned during the transition to adulthood. As such, the discussion will focus first on the young workers experiences of learning for other adults how to do the job. The discussion will then move on to consider how the young workers in the sample perceived adulthood and the learning of (and conforming to) appropriate adult behaviour. This data provides a useful insight into the actual experiences of the young workers and highlights the separation or peripherality of the young people from the older workers around them. The data also highlights that the young workers, when

entering work, begin to get a better idea of what it means to be an adult vis-à-vis appropriate standards of adult behaviour. Such themes reflect the central concerns of both Lave and Wenger (1991) and Elias (1961).

Learning To Do the Job From Older Workers

One of the main features of both Lave and Wenger's (1991) and Elias's work is the centrality of older adults in the transformation experience of the young. In Lave and Wenger's approach it is clear that older or more experienced workers were central to the novices ability to be transformed from legitimate peripheral participants to older timers. For Elias (1961), working with older people had the same transformatory effect with older workers being central to the skill development process. For many young workers their transition from legitimate peripheral participants began as soon as they arrived at work, with some encountering formal inductions to the job or more usually through a process of informal learning. In Elias's (1961) study the young people were asked '*when you started did anybody show you how to do the job and in what way?*' This was to ascertain how they had initially acquired the skills they required to do the job. There were a range of responses to these questions, the majority of which suggested that someone had shown them how to do their jobs, even if it was a simple demonstration of the basics. The extent to which the young workers were trained for the job or inducted into the role varied from formal training courses to informal chats with friends. The following quotes illustrate these themes:

When I started at the drawing office one of the chaps there showed me how to make the catalogues up. When I were downstairs the foreman showed me how the job worked y'know what to do and then 2 to 3 weeks later the men told me - just a general outline of what happens. (Hosiery Worker)

Yes, when you first go into the factory you go into a training school where there are instructors, in the offices there was a clerk doing the job I am doing now, he showed me what to do and stayed with me for a fortnight and then if I had any queries I just went to him and asked him. (Apprentice Engineer)

Yes - show you what to do and you just carry on and they show you more and more each day until you're doing it on your own. Trainee Mechanic)

I went to training school for a day and at the first shop I went to the manager and first hand showed me. (Grocery Assistant, Aged 15)

Yes, there is a fair amount of instruction (pause) there was another boy, he'd been there 2-3 years, I stayed with him for 2-3 weeks then I went to another mechanic (Sewing Machine Mechanic, Aged 15)

Yes in a sense, but 50% had to find out for myself, a lad there a bit tougher than me shown me the fill of the job...however on this job you don't exactly get told, only have to press button or pull a chain to fill the cake bags. (Bakery Assistant, Aged 15)

However, there were those who felt they were just left to get on with it. For example the young workers suggested that:

no not really, 1st of all says just wonder round- asked people questions...(Hosiery Worker, Aged 15)

Well, no because when I first started there was this rather old fashioned manager who was as you often get with older managers set in their ideas and they won't let anybody else change them. If I had any ideas I had to keep them to myself. I didn't get on with him very well but after that especially having that experience of working on my own in the shop it built me up. (Salesman, Aged 15)

no, you grope your way, to start with its a bit dodgy. but it works quite well. (Lathe Operator, Aged 17)

However, in the main, regardless of whether the young workers were trained formally in a training school or informally on the job a common feature is the centrality of older, more experienced workers in the young workers learning process. The following quotes from the interview schedules illustrate these themes:

Taught you things no one else would. (Trainee Mechanic)

I like the people older than me better than those around my own age group, that applies only to work mates. I think they appreciate you more, give you more help and more chances to do the job. (Apprentice Painter and Decorator)

Get on all right pick up some useful hints, but on some things you just can't agree with them... they'll say that old paints are better than the new ones that come out. I disagree on that sort of thing. They think older things are better I think new are better.

(Apprentice Painter and Decorator)

Working with other people. You watch them and think I must do that. (Shop Assistant)

However, although the majority said that they got on well with the older workers and suggested that the older workers taught them the job, some raised issues of generational differences in terms of communication and understanding and others cited the older workers playing tricks on them and bullying them. Some young workers suggested that:

When I was doing my training they used to be quite soft on you and then when you finish your training they get a bit harder, but they're alright otherwise. (Mine Worker)

You sometimes feel inferior to them but they make you feel like that more or less. [p] Well you know they don't like talk to you, except the lad that is over you and the instructor. (Apprentice Engineer)

The quotations outlined above highlight clearly the themes central to the works of Lave and Wenger and Elias. We have young people having to engage with older workers during the transition process. The older workers are central to developing the occupational skills of the young workers and, in the main, the young people begin to acknowledge the importance of older workers as 'old timers'. The young workers discussed above are clearly at the start of their careers and are clearly peripheral

participants. However, the quotations also reveal some of the anxiety that Elias alluded to, with the young workers not feeling entirely comfortable with their relationships with older colleagues. These themes are developed further in the next section.

Learning and Conforming to Appropriate Standards of Adult Behaviour

The young workers in Elias' study were asked questions about their relationships with the older workers in the organisation and on their transition to adulthood, including '*what sort of things make a boy/girl become an adult?*' and '*do you think of yourself as an adult?*'. An analysis of these questions reveals the extent to which the young workers themselves thought they were becoming immersed in the socio-cultural practices of the adult group at work.

Based on their early working experiences, the young workers were very clear what characteristics were essential to acquire to become adults at work. Many in the sample thought that becoming an adult meant behaving more responsibly, 'learning to behave' and not 'messing around' as they had done at school. Based on their interactions with the adults around them other more subtle features of adulthood also came to the fore such as 'responsibility', 'politeness' 'having pride, 'not being sloppy', 'not wasting time' and having 'respect' for the skilled workers around them. As the young workers suggest

Not shouting and gallivanting about. When he settles down and just behaves like an adult. (Hosiery Worker)

There is a realisation you have got to work for a living, you can't mess about like you did at school. (Clerk)

At school you are sloppy - don't care about what you do - at work you've got to take responsibility for what you do - you've got to do it and that's it. (Apprentice Engineer)

A sense of responsibility. Having to do things you don't really want to do. Being with adults all the time. (Typist)

You have to be polite - talk like an adult and act like one. (Spinner)

As well as being able to identify appropriate adult behaviours, 574 of the 854 young workers interviewed felt that they had begun to acquire the behaviours of adulthood identified above. However, the young workers themselves clearly identify their transformation into adulthood as part of a learning process based on their interactions with older workers. For example some of the young workers reflected that

When you start going out on your own like, you're own job, no-one showing you how to do it, and you've got to take pride in yourself and your work. I suppose you feel more of an adult then. (Hosiery Worker)

Working with older people makes you think like them. (Wage Clerk)

I think if you are working with a man and he is showing you what to do... that's how you learn to be an adult. (Spinners Lad)

Mixing with adults all the day, you see the way they behave and you copy them. (Cost Clerk)

Working with adults- you start acting like an adult- an adult doesn't run around- just takes his time doing his work. (Hosiery Worker)

The young workers were asked to identify how they had changed. Many of the young workers simply stated that mixing with older workers had changed their behaviours and attitudes making them more polite and respectful. More importantly the young workers felt that working with older workers had made them grow up. Others indicated that they had become more adult, behaving more like adults than they had done previously. Again, the young workers were clear that these changes were as a direct result of interacting with older workers in their workplaces.

I suppose I'm beginning to grow up - have responsibility of my work. And I think mixing with people of an older age group makes you change your ways. (Trainee Typist)

I have grown up a lot more definitely, with working with older people. (Clerk)

...when you work with 100-200 blokes you see you are all the same and its no good trying to be a bit upperty with the others cos you soon get pulled down if you do. (Engineering Draughtsman)

I've grown up. You get a wider scope. Life is nothing until you go out to work. You are working with men. You learn a lot of things about how older people live - you are working with men instead of lads. (Tool Maker)

You seem to grow up a lot quicker when you leave school and start work, and working with older people helps a lot as well. I suppose getting to know different people and getting to know what everyone is like. Widening your outlook. (Audio Typist)

However, although the young workers had begun to identify adult behaviours, had realised that they were learning those behaviours from the adults around them and they were beginning to grow up, many in the sample still felt that they were still quite early on in this process of transformation and were still largely peripheral. Instead, the young workers perceived themselves as still being in a transition stage where they were not yet adults but neither were they still children (see O'Connor and Goodwin 2005). As the young workers suggest when answering the question 'are you an adult?'
...half and half I suppose, I can't do so much work as the men, but I do more than the young ones. (Hosiery Worker)

Sometimes yes, sometimes no. Being at work you are an adult. But then you are not old enough to be an adult. People treat you as a lad or an apprentice which means you are not an adult. (Hosiery Worker)

Further still, for some of the young workers 'work' was still seen as part of an adult world of which they had little experience and which they did not fully understand and that was both frightening and unfriendly.

It is one thing to identify the appropriate behavioural standards as the young workers had in this study but it is another thing to internalise them and develop the foresight required to behave like or as an adult. There are also very clear and specific workplace

behaviours that the young workers had to learn very quickly. For example, in their childhood and whilst still at school, the young workers had other adults to tell them when to do things, when to take breaks and when to work. However, the transition to work marks another step of the transition to adulthood as it is at work when young people begin to regulate and control their own behaviours.

For many of the young workers, having to regulate their own behaviour, have relatively short breaks and keep time also came as a bit of a shock to them. For example, in discussing break times and arriving at work the young workers commented that:

They're a bit sharp in the morning, If you're 2 minutes overtime you can lose 1/2 hours pay. (Craft Apprentice)

I keep strictly to time- some might be a couple of minutes late coming back after dinner, not more than that. (Apprentice Fitter)

Nobody stops for tea if we've got work to do, you're not allowed to. (Cost Clerk)

All keep strictly to 75 minutes dinner time, 10 minutes morning and all about the same afternoon. (Boot and Shoe Worker)

However, although the young workers do not like the earlier starts and the short breaks they soon begin to internalise what is required and regulate their own behaviour in order to conform to the standards of their workplace. They suggest:

At first I weren't too pleased at getting up at 6:30. I didn't like that much but I've got used to it. (Hosiery Engineer)

Once you're used to it - you're used to it and you keep like clockwork. (Apprentice Carpenter)

Although these behaviours are learnt, the young workers also learn from the older workers around them when they can 'bend the rules' or take extra time and often the young workers observed what was going on around them before they behaved differently to what was required

Boys only take longer breaks if men do. [The] boys stand up when the men stand up! (Apprentice Panel Beater)

From the quotes above we can clearly see that the transition to work involves much more than simply acquiring the skills to do the job. The young workers have to learn to behave completely differently, regulate their own behaviours, adopt the behaviours around them, develop the foresight required to 'keep time' and, I would argue, all of this is central to the legitimate peripheral participation process and the transition to 'older timer' status.

CONCLUSION

The transition from school to work is a useful site to explore Lave and Wenger's conceptualisations of communities of practice and legitimate peripheral participation. One can clearly see, from the data above, young people making the transition from

novices to old timers via their interactions with the older workers around them. However, those interactions take two forms and ultimately lead to the learning of two 'types' of behaviour - the occupational behaviours and skills required to do the job and the behaviours appropriate to being an adult. It is perhaps the case that later has been absent from Lave and Wenger theorising with their over concentration on occupational practice. However, the acquisition of adult behavioural standards are equally important in the transition from novice to old timer and it is perhaps here where using Elias to supplement the work of Lave and Wenger offers the most.

One has to be mindful, however, the data presented here is from an historical data set reflecting the views and experiences of young workers some forty years ago. However, one of the strengths of historical data such as this is that it allows us to analyse this material in the light of contemporary debates and may also provide a more accurate picture of respondent's thoughts and feelings at the time the research was carried out. With this in mind it could be argued that the findings presented here do have a great deal of contemporary relevance given the existing 'moral panic' surrounding young people in contemporary Britain. For example, it has been suggested in the media that young people now do not know how to interact with adults who are not family members and that young adults do not appear to be able to demonstrate self-restraint or have the foresight to understand the consequences of their actions. These experiences may relate directly to the increasingly fragmented and complex nature of the transition from school to work whereby it is often the case that young workers do not become members of communities of practice until their mid 20s

and, as a consequence, do not learn the behavioural standards of adulthood as previous generations have done. As such it is clear that the works of Lave and Wenger and Elias have important contemporary relevance and, when combined, can help us understand fully the complete process of legitimate peripheral participation.

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Notes

[1] Readers may be more familiar with the concept of habitus in the work of Bourdieu. However, it is now well established that Bourdieu's approach was based on Elias's original theorisation but that Bourdieu has retained a structuralist bias and that

ultimately Bourdieu's approach to habitus may have become more of a pseudo-philosophical concept with less explanatory utility as compared to Elias's original approach (see DeJong 2001).

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