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To cite this article: Lea Trier Krøll (2019): Students' non-medical use of pharmaceuticals to manage time in everyday life crises, *Drugs: Education, Prevention and Policy*, DOI: [10.1080/09687637.2019.1585760](https://doi.org/10.1080/09687637.2019.1585760)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687637.2019.1585760>



Published online: 22 Mar 2019.



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Students' non-medical use of pharmaceuticals to manage time in everyday life crises

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ABSTRACT

This article examines students' narratives of lived experiences with non-medical uses of prescription pharmaceuticals (NMUP) and analyzes how their experiences of time in everyday life influence the meanings they ascribe to their NMUP. The analysis draws on sociological notions of time and 28 in-depth qualitative interviews with young adults (age 20-30), who have used pharmaceuticals non-medically while enrolled at a university or college in Denmark. The article focuses on how a majority of students associate their NMUP with situations in which they experience urgency and a crisis of temporal agency due to their inability to pursue perceived necessary rhythms of studying or resting. It examines how these students consider NMUP a normative exception yet employ pharmaceuticals to manage their embodied and everyday life rhythms in order to relief senses of urgency and re-gain temporal agency. The article suggests the notion 'everyday life crises' to account for how students reflect that the time pressure associated with the experience of urgency relate to their everyday lives' temporal practices, structures and norms. In conclusion, the article suggests that the analysis of NMUP as a practice embedded in everyday living highlights the relevance of conceptualising NMUP as 'time work' and suggests that future prevention campaigns should focus on students' experiences of temporal conflicts in everyday life.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 8 October 2018
Revised 4 February 2019
Accepted 17 February 2019

KEYWORDS

Non-medical use of pharmaceuticals; temporality; students

Introduction

In the context of expanded medical uses of pharmaceuticals in society, sociologists have paid attention to how prescription pharmaceuticals are also being increasingly used 'non-medically', that is, without a prescription, or for other purposes, or in ways other than prescribed by a doctor (Abraham, 2010; Bancroft, 2009; Fox & Ward, 2009; Williams, Martin, & Gabe, 2011). Specifically, young adults use analgesic, sedative, and stimulant pharmaceuticals for recreational purposes on weekends as well as with intentions such as to control and customise various practices and experiences in everyday life (e.g. Mui, Sales, & Murphy, 2014). Students' non-medical uses of prescription pharmaceuticals (NMUP) in everyday life has received much attention from qualitative researchers, who suggest that students' substance use reflect wider societal processes. Among other things, these authors suggest that experiences of institutional and normative pressure related to competitive education and job market pressures as well as daily stress and 'busy' lifestyles influence students' choice to use NMUP. Educational researchers and sociologists concerned about temporal experiences in late-modern everyday life argue that time has become a scarce resource and the pace and rhythms of everyday living increasingly contested by educational regulation as in many spheres of late-modern life. This article examines 28 in-depth qualitative interviews with young adults and uses a sociological

phenomenological concept of 'lived time' to investigate students' experiences of pressure in everyday life, specifically time pressure, in relation to their NMUP¹ and everyday life rhythms. In line with previous research, the article finds that many students are ambivalent about their use of pharmaceuticals to tackle experiences of pressure. This article finds that experiences of urgency and time pressure makes students consider NMUP a legitimate or necessary exception, and suggests the notion 'everyday life crises' to account for how students reflect that time pressure is not exceptional but relate to their everyday lives' temporal practices, structures and norms.

Background

Time and students' non-medical uses of pharmaceuticals

While students' non-medical uses of particular prescription stimulants such as Ritalin and Modafinil are often conceptualised as performance enhancement and associated with perceived effects on cognitive processes, qualitative research emphasise students' appreciation of what may be termed 'temporal effects' of such drug use (Coveney, Gabe, & Williams, 2011; Schelle, Faulmüller, Caviola, & Hewstone, 2014; Vrecko, 2013). Qualitative research identifies how students use stimulants in attempts to control and customise biological rhythms of sleep and wakefulness (Williams,

Coveney, & Gabe, 2013), to focus and concentrate on work for many hours, especially during exam time (Hupli, Didziokaitė, & Ydema, 2016; Robitaille & Collin, 2016), and more generally to lead busy lives and imagine that stimulants can be used to promote wakefulness, replace sleep, and balance between studying and time off (Coveney, 2010; Hildt, Lieb, & Franke, 2014). Qualitative research on students' non-medical use of sedatives and analgesics finds that students use such drugs in attempts to managing body rhythms and time in everyday life such as in the sense of sleeping, winding down, 'maximizing down time', and to 'chill out' as a conjunction to everyday lives characterised by hard work and productivity (Dertadian, 2019; Dertadian, Dixon, Iversen, & Maher, 2017; LeClair, Kelly, Pawson, Wells, & Parsons, 2015; Quintero, 2009).

Many students associate the pursuit of such temporal effects, not simply with a choice to achieve enhancement and pursue busy lifestyles but also with feelings of being insecure or 'overloaded' by work-related strain, stress, or a pressure to perform in many areas of life and in a fast paced manner (Bjønness, 2018; Coveney, 2010; Dertadian, 2019; Hildt et al., 2014; LeClair et al., 2015; Robitaille & Collin, 2016). Yet, the affective and emotional effects of NMUP which students emphasise also entail pleasurable experiences of feeling able to combat such external or internal pressure (Vrecko, 2013) and feeling able to adhere to cultural norms of productivity (Petersen, Nørgaard, & Traulsen, 2015), time management, of doing more in less time, and a work hard ethos found in many competitive university environments (Robitaille & Collin, 2016).

Accelerated everyday lives and crises of time

During the last decades, the planning of higher education in Europe and other parts of the world have increasingly been validated by a logic of necessity of adhering to demands of a changing labour market (Andersen & Jacobsen, 2017; Brøgger, 2018; Nielsen & Sarauw, 2017; Vostal, 2015). Along with political aims at enhancing students' employability (Andersen & Jacobsen, 2017), various regulatory temporal techniques have aimed at speeding up students' pace of studying (Sarauw, 2014). In Denmark, the implementation of regulations following the European Bologna Process since around 2000, and a so-called Study Progress Reform from 2014 that limited students' possibilities for taking 'breaks', studying less than 'full time', and 'delaying' study completion are examples of such political regulation (Sarauw, 2014). Thus, at the same time as there is an increased emphasis on students' individual responsibility for their study trajectories (Sarauw, 2014) and on the management of their own time more generally (Alhadeff-Jones, 2017, p. 108), the governance of education imply a certain temporality and leaves students with fewer opportunities to 'make a mistake' and choose anew (Sarauw, 2014, p. 15).

Research on the effects of recent educational regulation on Danish students' experiences and practices of time shows that students reflect on or worry about structural acceleration and political narratives of necessity, and this encourages more students to emphasise choosing 'safe' study subjects

that focus on job market relevant skills and speed up their educational completion (Sarauw, 2014; Sarauw & Madsen, 2016). However, many students are frustrated by the perceived need to navigate their education according to a 'risk of delay' (Sarauw & Madsen, 2017) and experience stress and a lack of time for independent studying due to the changed educational time-frame (Nielsen & Sarauw, 2017).

These analyses of how educational regulation and political narratives of the necessity of fast paced studying and managing time efficiently and the resulting pressures on students' lived time echoes more general sociological questioning and exploration of experiences of time in late-modern everyday life. Critical speed theorists (ref. Wajcman & Dodd, 2016) suggest that the temporal structures and culture of late-modern capitalist life increasingly cause various social and psychological crises (Alhadeff-Jones, 2017, p. 148; Hassan, 2009; Rosa, 2013). These theorists highlight how de-synchronisations between the pace of accelerating (fast) social and technological processes and (slow) individual rhythms gives most peoples' everyday lives the character of a constant critical condition characterised by stress, uncertainty, and time pressure. Other sociologists concerned about experiences of time in everyday life are critical about the universality of such claims and emphasise that the effects of acceleration on experiences of time in everyday life differs between different social groups and are diverse even within social groups (Sharma, 2014; Vostal, 2016; Wajcman, 2015). Commonly, however, sociologists emphasise that acceleration and even critiques of acceleration have become popular cultural narratives (Sharma, 2014) and that, as such, they contribute to experiences of feeling hurried and a lack of personal time are often considered to be common and even expected aspects of current living (Keller, 2015, p. 206; Wajcman, 2015).

In the context of these developments on increasing pressures on individuals' time in education and current living, this article investigates the temporal aspects of students' experiences of pressure and of using NMUP while feeling under pressure as well how these experiences may reflect possible or impossible synchronisations between students' lived time and social rhythms.

Methodology

Following a sociological phenomenological approach, the article investigates the lived time that is shaped by students' everyday life practices and social rhythms (Lefebvre, 2013). Whereas clock time is the most common explicitly used notion of time used to structure everyday life at modern institutions like universities (Adam, 1994, p. 110; Liao et al., 2013), lived time is subtly embedded in everyday practices. Yet, it tends to escape common language and conscious reflection (Nowotny, 2005, p. 8). The perception of a melody is often used to exemplify a phenomenological notion of lived time. When we listen to music, we do not experience a discrete row of sounds that we subsequently consider a melody. Instead, we continuously weave together tones that we hear in a synthesis of past, present, and expected tones, and we instantly sense a melody (Flaherty, 1999, p. 8). Perception

of all kinds of activities entails such sensuous 'melodic' synthesis. Staying with the music metaphor, this article's sociological interest examines the way students' everyday life practices, in which their temporal experiences arise, are shaped in 'ensembles' of social institutional and or culturally valued rhythms (Lefebvre, 2013) as well as how they reflect agential 'time work' when students arrange their circumstances so as to obtain desired temporal experiences (Flaherty, 2011, p. 9).

Temporal experiences and practices can be empirically explored in narratives with a particular attentiveness to expressions of sensuous, emotional, and affective aspects of experiences (Chen, 2016, p. 2–3; 47). These may reflect how students' are 'moved' or 'charged' by practices and rhythms (Blackman, 2008; Michels, 2015). This entails analytical attentiveness not only on how students try to make coherent 'stories' to account for their experiences, but also on how they 'lyrically' account for emotional and sensuous melodic synthesis in the here-and-now (Abbott, 2007; Brinkmann, 2014; Kupferberg, 2016). Qualitative interviews can make such aspects of narrations tangible in the form of voice and transcribed texts and thus available for analytical reflection (Lefebvre, 2013, p. 79).

The analysis presented in this article draws on 28 in-depth qualitative interviews with young adults (age 20–30), who have used pharmaceuticals non-medically while enrolled at university or college in Denmark. Participants were recruited for the study via paper posters posted in notice boards in the common areas at universities and university colleges in Copenhagen. As a supplement to this initial recruitment strategy, the same poster was converted into a digital poster, which was then distributed on formal and informal Facebook groups for students at the same universities and colleges. The headline of the poster was a question: "Medicine during your studies?" which both implies that medical pharmaceuticals are used in the contexts of studying or in the time period in which one is a student. The poster vignette then asked students: "Have you used medicine in other ways than prescribed, maybe to gain better concentration, relaxation, sleep, or improving performance?"

Participants contacted the author via e-mail or SMS and were then invited for an interview. All interviews took place in an office at the university. The interviews were conducted by the author and lasted between 80 and 120 minutes. An interview schedule was employed which asked open-ended questions, first about participants' educational backgrounds and future work ambitions, then about descriptions of students' first experience with NMUP; the everyday life situation of this first use; as well as students' initial intentions and expectations. The participants were asked about (potential) NMUP trajectories as well as potentially changing experiences, expectations, and thoughts about NMUP. The interviewer then asked for participants to reflect upon which norms and meanings they associated with NMUP, and finally the role of social relations in their experiences with NMUP. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and anonymized.

The analysis of interview data started with a vertical reading of each transcribed interview and a written condensation of their content. During this initial analysis, I noted how 19

out of the 28 interviewed students describe feeling senses of pressure in NMUP situations in everyday life and that they consider NMUP a normative exception. To explore further these 'small narratives' within each interview (Thomsen, Bo, & Christensen, 2016), I used the software Nvivo to code transcribed text containing students' accounts of pressure and exceptions. While drawing on the sociological phenomenological framework presented above I coded text containing accounts of everyday life contexts, practices and sensuous, emotional, and affective experience with an attentiveness to how students' lyrical uses of language such as metaphors, intonation, and sentence structure can manifest experience (Kleres, 2011, pp. 194–195). During a subsequent reading of these small narratives, I identified common themes in students' accounts of their experiences. In the following sections, I shall present these empirical themes.

Episodic crises of temporal agency

Tea is a recent university graduate. While she was working on a Master's thesis, she doubled her daily dose of a prescribed ADHD medication, a stimulant drug, without consulting her doctor. In our interview, she emphasises that she finds it crucial to make an analytical distinction between a segment of students who will use stimulants to "enhance their performance" and another segment that she finds herself to be part of who uses stimulants simply "to survive". She emphasises that it is her *experience* of the situation that makes her use the word "survival" to tell her story about using stimulants non-medically. She does not like that she felt that she had to use stimulants non-medically and consequently has not told anyone about it. But she felt that using the stimulants was "necessary" and that in the situation it appeared "self-evident" in order for her to complete and finish her education. She uses a vivid metaphor to explain this: "Imagine that you have to enter into a blizzard; then you think 'How can I best make it through and get to the other side?'".

Similar metaphors and imagery are present in many interviews: students describe the situations in which they have used pharmaceuticals as extraordinary and threatening with phrases such as "emergency strategy", "pulling an emergency break", using drugs as a "life jacket", and as a "chance to make it". A common characteristic of the situations in which students feel a pressure are the experience of necessity as is reflected in Tea's and other students' use of metaphors referring to potentially life threatening situations.

Students variously describe three types of 'emergency' situations related to necessary or desired everyday life rhythms: the inability to concentrate and endure studying for many hours to work efficiently; tackle emotions in order to work efficiently; or get sufficient amounts of sleep. Besides a sense of necessity, a common characteristic of all three types of 'emergencies' is students' frustrations about an inability to 'function', as Hanna says, who have used a stimulant in the context of studying: "the use did stem from a necessity [...] I thought kind of that something had to be done to function, to – yes, to function properly". In most students' narratives

the experienced necessity and inability to ‘function properly’ regards either the ability to pursue certain everyday rhythms or to reach a goal (usually an exam) within a limited time frame. Anita emphasises how she uses stimulants in situations where she feels “a crazy time pressure is put on you”. Similarly, Lars describes using stimulants when he feels that he has “no time to lose” and here describes such a situation:

sometimes I have kind of taken a pill in the morning because I don’t have *time* to like spend those hours walking in circles, calming down, getting started. I like ‘I need to get started *now*’. When it really is a matter of *hours*.

Students associate their inability to ‘function properly’ in the sense of pursuing desired everyday rhythms or reach a goal within a limited time frame with ‘problematic’ ‘limited’ bodily and mental capacities. Thomas describes a situation in which he used stimulants to become able to focus on his work at a time when he felt that he could not sit still and felt easily distracted:

I was kind of like: ‘Well, what the fuck can I do, I have this bachelor thesis I need to write’ [...] I couldn’t sit still more than ten minutes, not even five minutes sometimes, before I looked at my phone, or looked anywhere else, and didn’t really want to work. [...] I did not want to give up. I am too stubborn for that. So, it was kind of a solution. Eh, a kind of desperate attempt, to kind of see if it would work. ‘Now I might as well try it’. When everything else looked hopeless - then you want to try to do something, right.

Thomas describes how, in this situation, a part of him wanted to work and felt that he needed to, but that in fact he felt both bodily and mentally exhausted.

Students experience crises when losing trust in their body’s capabilities to function in a way they conceive of as necessary or normal (Shilling, 2008) and a limitation of agency and possibilities (Vigh, 2008, p. 13). They account for crises of temporal agency when they find themselves in situations where they experience not having the necessary means to pursue desired everyday rhythms within a given time frame. These crises entail experiences of time pressure and urgency caused by a dissonance between experienced or perceived limited bodily rhythms and desired or perceived necessary everyday life rhythms.

Re-gaining temporal agency with pharmaceuticals

Like other drugs, pharmaceuticals have the ability to moderate the rhythms of the nervous system and alter subjective temporal experience (Fitzgerald, 2015; Oksanen, 2013). The experiences that pills can provide are shaped by heterogeneous elements such as both their chemical interactions with the biological body and the hopes and fantasies that are invested in their use (Leder, 2016; Whyte, van der Geest, & Hardon, 2002). In a western medical context, the use of pills are commonly associated with hopes of reliability and efficiency, that relief is ‘just a swallow away’ (Leder, 2016, p. 58).

Ideas of pharmaceuticals as reliable and efficient tools to alter biological rhythms and temporal experience gains particular salience in situations of crisis. Students describe various pharmaceuticals with metaphors such as: “life-jacket” and

“emergency valve”. Students express hopes that drugs can provide them with a certain and efficient temporal agency that can relieve the crisis. Karen explains how she uses stimulants to alleviate a time-consuming self-doubt and “control” her otherwise unrested mind and body to subsequently adhere to a desired work rhythm:

the reason may exactly have been that I suddenly sit and get stressed about not being able to keep up with what I want to accomplish, do what I want to do, and then I may get the impression that I lag time. And then it is quite ironic to me that I then have to take time from my calendar to sit down and deal with these emotions. Then it becomes kind of self-perpetuating – you can say that I have gone far enough down the spiral – then it may take a long time before I get my breathing under control again until I can start thinking new constructive thoughts. And that is quite difficult if you don’t feel that right now you ought to take that half an hour out of the calendar. Well, and it is like I avoid that completely with Modafinil, while at the same time I really get to do my work so I don’t as often get the feeling that I am not keeping up, that I have a lot to catch up on

In the context of experiences of urgency and of crises of temporal agency, students narrate pharmaceuticals as efficient, certain, and time saving tools that can help them regain temporal agency. Students associate pharmaceuticals with a hope of an increased sense of certainty about the ability to plan and structure the otherwise ‘unruly’ bodily and mental rhythms according to desired daily rhythms. Tea describes how her use of stimulants gave her a sense of satisfaction with her ability to plan her day:

it was about feeling satisfied with myself, that I could know that ‘Now, I will concentrate from 8 to 4 every day and then I can go home and be off duty and have – be with my friend and feel good. And then it would be okay for me to have a one hour break during the day because I would concentrate in the efficient hours, right’. It was about imposing a structure on this process

Students imagine that pharmaceuticals help them gain a certainty about their temporal agency and as such associate pharmaceuticals with an ability to provide that certain ‘crisis relief’ they feel that they miss when they are experiencing urgency.

Besides providing a hope of an increased certainty about the ability to moderate bodily and daily rhythms, pharmaceuticals are also associated with doing providing this ability quickly. Experiences of urgency seem to entail an urge for this. Students describe pharmaceuticals as a quick relief or a “magic stroke”, as Hanna says, echoing common ideas of pharmaceuticals as a ‘quick fix’ (Vuckovic, 1999; Williams, Seale, Boden, Lowe, & Steinberg, 2008) and ‘magic bullets’ (Williams, Gabe, & Davis, 2009, p. 4).

Although obviously present and salient in other contexts too, the meaning of non-medical pharmaceutical use as ‘time work’ (Flaherty, 2011) is emphasised in the context of experiences of urgency and crises of temporal agency.

Critical exceptions

Many students consider the ‘urgent’ situation or time period in which they use a pharmaceutical an exception to their usual everyday life and consider their NMUP as normative exceptions. Students commonly argue that it is the situation

with the feeling of urgency that allows for them to make exceptions to their usually held beliefs.

Gitte, who uses motion sickness medicine to combat severe sleep difficulties, describes how the sense of urgency makes her act “completely against” her own ideals: “it’s not at all how I feel I ought to solve the problem, but, it is an emergency thing”.

While mentioning her concerns and hesitations regarding her non-medical use of insulin to combat stress, Lisa notes that: “you don’t really think about it in the situation”. In times of crisis, usual narratives are questioned and the use of situational logics and adjustments to critical conditions using provisional and everyday tactile techniques (Vigh, 2008, p. 11). Students describe how they attune their ideas of action to situational circumstances with short time and meaning horizons. In an ‘urgent’ situation with perceived short time horizons, Anita describes how she reflects about her use of a stimulant with a situational logic that is more emotional and pragmatic than moral:

I do think that: ‘Well maybe it would be nicer if you would go for a run’. But, I just don’t think – in those situations I have just been thinking: ‘But now I am under so much pressure, that this is not what is takes’. Or like, it’s, ‘Its’ not the way to handle this stress right now. This, I must handle by just, work-work-work,’ or like eh. So I do think about it. You do think about other ways [of dealing with the pressure than stimulant use]. But I did not consider whether ‘is this wrong or is it right - what would be more right?’ It’s more been like, ‘what fits the situation best, which has to be handled right now’.

Focusing on working hard as a means to cope with immediate work-related stress is common among professionals (Keller, 2015). Anita describes how it is the experience of urgency itself that made her chose an immediately available and perceived time efficient strategy rather than considering choosing one that she would deem right. In the interview, she reflects upon how the perception that she had to handle the situation ‘right now’ was that which made her consider her non-medical use of stimulants less of a choice than a necessity. Students commonly describe that the experience of urgency itself makes exceptions of their usual held beliefs and narratives about the right ways of dealing with experiences of pressure and NMUP appear seemingly necessary or legitimate in order to deal with a currently urgent situation. When, in these situations of crisis, time horizons shrink so does the meaning horizons of students’ narratives.

Busy everyday lives

While students commonly talk of perceiving pharmaceutical use as an exceptional means to gain temporal agency while experiencing pressure, in the interview situation they reflect upon the causes of their senses of pressure and define these as less exceptional. Students’ describe how their experiences of time pressure and urgency relate to their normal everyday life practices and to educational time structures and norms. Time pressure and generalised senses of being hurried often relate to disorganisation, high structural and institutional demands, or multitasking caused by cultural values of everyday living (Wajcman, 2015).

The senses of urgency, which students describe, are often related to a sense of time pressure in exam situations. Many describe the fear of failing an exam as a motivation for pharmaceutical use. Anita describes using a stimulant when reading for her second attempt at an exam in the holidays: “I became so stressed in the end. I began to feel so bad, because you were lagging behind all of the time.” Sarah describes that she took a stimulant in a situation where she feared she would not pass an exam because she: “had so much to read. Like, really, really a lot on the reading list”.

While some students argue that the time pressure associated with such situations are a result of their own ‘poor planning’ and procrastination during the semester, others argue that disorganisation within educational structures’ makes it difficult for them to not get stressed. They describe how recent educational reforms both as changes of educational time structures and as narratives of a necessity of fast paced studying contribute to enhancing their sense of urgency. Mazuur associates a generalised sense of time pressure with initial difficulties adjusting his daily rhythms to the demands of university structures and emphasises how educational structures and reforms makes studying at university so “tight packed” that he is not allowed enough time to find himself in any of his subjects:

I wanted to pass my exams, but I also want to understand what I am reading, because I am really interested in it. I just do not feel there is time enough for that, when it is so tight packed. You really have to do things fast. You cannot take leave, there are so many things you can’t do.

Students also describe a generalised sense of time pressure stemming from educational time norms related to ‘the right’ age, pace, and rhythm of studying. Some students describe feeling bad about “lagging behind” and “wanting to keep up” with a certain pace of studying. Pia says that she already felt a bit old for the norm of “a good student” as she had “started late” and “wasted years” not doing anything “productive”, she concludes: “I believe that it played a large role that I felt I had lost time and that that was wrong and that I then had to prove that I could do something”. Such senses of feeling behind relate to subtle norms of the pace and timing of education in biographical perspective. Thomas describes how implicit educational time norms contribute to his idea that taking pills would be better than taking a break to rest at a time when he was too exhausted to work:

those expectations which you anyway *feel* [...] all those regulatory restrictions which are being rolled out now, I don’t know what is gonna happen next year, or the year after. Well, there may be some kind of punishment if you don’t – if you take a break – there may be problems related to that. And it is kind of, this thing about, I don’t want to waste five years and then enter the job market and not get a relevant job

Thomas uses the term “competition state” to explain how he associates recent regulatory changes with a larger global urge for competition, which he does not like but considers it to be a fact. His everyday sense of time is structured according to a rhythm of fear that: *if*, he will not get a side job, *if* he does not get good grades; and *if* he does not continue to get that; *then* he may become unemployed when he graduates. This may express a more general sense of embodied

and narrative uncertainty. More students associate a busy living with a pressure and fear of “failing” in life if they do not ‘keep up’. In Thomas’ words, it can relate to a feeling of trying to “prove to yourself that you are good enough, and to society”.

Most students describe having high expectations not only as regards their academic performance but also the amount of things they want to accomplish in their leisure time. Pia lists how, at the time where she sometimes used sedatives non-medically, she wanted to be a good student, be very social, go to therapy, have a student job, and a hobby. Many students describe having to deal with time pressure related to endurance and coordination of a high density of practices (Wajcman, 2015, p. 78). Lotte explains that she has to remind herself that she cannot do all the things that she wants to do which she describes as a yearning to: “be the one doing the most burpees in fitness, and the one with most friends, and the prettiest boyfriend, and the most astonishing grade point average”. Abdul describes both cutting sleep and using stimulant pharmaceuticals for studying to create a balance in his busy everyday life in which he:

work very much and spend a lot of time on that. I also like being with people, so I spend a lot of time with friends too. That takes a lot of your time too, right. But then I don’t sleep so much because then I can balance those things: work, school, friends.

Being busy entails pleasures as well as pressure. Lisa reflects that her many social involvements alongside her “tough study” make her life: “a hard life, but also a very fun life”. Lars reflects that his everyday life is generally characterised by a sense of pressure both because his education “objectively is quite tough” but also because he is ambitious and wants to do “a lot”: both study, work, and do research at the same time. He reflects that: “I lead a hard life. Well ... I don’t use drugs or have other bad habits like smoking, but, well, I really try to squeeze the lemon ... yes [laughs]”. When ‘under control’, the experience of being busy and able to speed up can be enjoyed as a corporeal pleasure, one that can be fuelled by its associations with a competitive advantage (Vostal, 2016, pp. 125–126) and social status (Wajcman, 2015, p. 72). Many students associate being busy both with having meaningful ambitions and a satisfying identity. Lotte explains that doing well in many spheres at once is “who I want to be. And who I want other to think that I am”.

Managing everyday life crises with pharmaceuticals

This article has examined a group of university and college students’ narratives of lived experiences with NMUP and emphasised how their experiences of time in everyday life influence the meanings that they ascribe to NMUP. It described how a majority of students associate their NMUP with experiences of urgency, time pressure and a crisis of temporal agency due to an inability to pursue perceived necessary rhythms of studying or resting. These students consider NMUP a normative exception yet they employ pharmaceuticals to manage their embodied and everyday life rhythms in order to relieve a sense of urgency and re-gain

temporal agency. Students describe that the experience of urgency itself makes exceptions of their usual held beliefs and narratives about the right ways of dealing with time and NMUP appear necessary and legitimate in order to deal with their current situation.

The experiences of urgency, however, may not be that exceptional as students relate their senses of time pressure and lack of temporal agency to usual and recurring everyday rhythms. Students relate their experiences of pressure to exam situations, lifestyles densely packed with activities, being busy, educational structures, and narratives of a necessity of fast pace. As it seems that the risk of critical ruptures are an integral aspect of their general everyday living, I suggest that students’ senses of urgency and time pressure may be termed an ‘everyday life crises’ of temporal agency. Rather than perceiving these crises as singular ruptures, they may be seen as potentially recurring aspects of students everyday living.

While students’ experiences of crises of temporal agency relate to their everyday living that is shaped in particular ways by their engagement in higher education, causes of stress on temporal agency may also be found elsewhere in the wider context of late-modern capitalist everyday living. Critical sociological speed theorists suggest that experiences of stress, mental overload, and a sense of lack of time are fuelled in all spheres of everyday life and that ‘urgency’ even has become a generalised experience and social norm (Alhadeff-Jones, 2017, pp. 148–150). The anthropologist Vigh (2008, p. 19) suggests that when crisis recurs or become endemic, people will start to reflect upon how they navigate their lives and interpret their social environment in order to gain a sense of control. Sociological speed theorists, however, are more sceptical about the potential for developing such reflexivity in the wake of the crises of time in late-modern capitalist society. At the same time as acceleration of everyday living leads to experiences of social and psychological crises, it leaves individuals with little time for reflection and pause (Hassan, 2012, p. 136) to reflect on narratives whose meaning transgress singular situations (Rosa, 2013, p. 18). While the students in this study, in the interview situations, are generally highly reflexive about their NMUP and critical of its subjective and social consequences, they also describe how their experiences of urgency allows or urges them to create situational narratives and act in ways they perceive as exceptional (Rosa, 2013, p. 146). In the everyday life crises students adjust to the critical conditions using situational logics and provisional tactile techniques (Vigh, 2008, p. 11). The students work on the most readily available aspects of their immediate circumstances by managing the rhythms of their bodies. Thus rather than developing a critical reflexivity in the context of crisis of time, students seem to adhere to social ideals of self-controlling citizens (Hogle, 2005, p. 702) and time controlling students (Sarauw & Madsen, 2017).

The phenomenological guided conceptualisation of NMUP as sensuous and emotional time work in the context of ‘everyday life crises’ can guide intervention campaigns addressing students’ NMUP towards addressing students’ experiences of temporal conflicts in their everyday lives as well as the structural and normative underpinnings of

everyday life rhythms and time norms. While acknowledging that “the discursive exchange about time is underdeveloped” (Nowotny, 2005, p. 6) prevention campaigns can contribute to developing an awareness of how temporal experience is embedded in social and cultural processes and how they may subtly contribute to everyday life crises of temporal agency.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

1. This article uses the term “non-medical use of pharmaceuticals” (NMUP) to refer to the use of prescription drugs without a prescription, or for other purposes, or in other ways than it has been prescribed by a doctor. This is in line with a larger share of the research literature on non-medical use whose definitions of the phenomenon refer to either modes of acquisition or motives for consumption. Yet the definition can be problematic (Dertadian, 2019) as it can cover practices with diverse lived meanings: such as the boundaries between what users or professionals consider to be medically legitimate and illegitimate uses or acquisitions of drugs and between what users or others experience or define as recreational and therapeutic uses (Dertadian, 2019, p. 79). While a definition of something termed ‘non-medical’ might better include specific empirical definitions of the term (e.g. Degenhardt et al., 2008, p. 8), a qualitative study like the one presented in this article who draws on the commonly used definition can provide useful insights into the role of lived experience and social and cultural context on the meanings of drug use.

Acknowledgments

I want to express my gratitude to Professor Geoffrey Hunt and Assistant professor Jeanett Bjonness, both from The Centre for Alcohol and Drug Research, Aarhus University, for very helpful comments and constructive feedback on earlier drafts of the article.

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