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Go to More Parties? Social Occasions as Home to Unexpected Turning Points in Life Trajectories

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Abstract

Reviving classical attention to gathering times as sites of transformation and building on more recent microsociological work, this paper uses qualitative data to show how social occasions open up unexpected bursts of change in the lives of those attending. They do this by pulling people into a special realm apart from normal life, generating collective effervescence and emotional energy, bringing usually disparate people together, forcing public rankings, and requiring complex choreography, all of which combine to make occasions sites of inspiration and connection as well as sites of offense and violation. Rather than a time out from "real" life, social occasions hold an outsized potential to unexpectedly shift the course that real life takes. Implications for microsociology, social inequality, and the life course are considered.

Keywords

emotions, interaction rituals, life course, microsociology, qualitative methods

Over a century ago, Durkheim wrote that in precapitalist societies, people's lives were divided into two kinds of time: the profane time, when people worked in the fields or at home, which was monotonous and dull, and the rarer, sacred time, when people put down their work and came together in celebration. These gathering times made a strong contrast to the dull working hours. When members of a group came together, the bodily assembly and shared focus of attention generated strong emotions that bound together members of the group, instilled shared beliefs and identity, and made new thoughts and actions possible. In Durkheim's ([1912] 1965:250) words, when a person participates in a gathering, "everything is just as though he were really transported to a special world, entirely different from the one where he ordinarily lives, and into an environment with exceptionally intense forces that take hold of him and metamorphose him."

Today, Durkheim's work on gathering times is seen as part of his larger interest in solidarity and collective conscience. By

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generating collective effervescence—the heightened energy and sense of communion fostered when people assemble together—gathering times instill shared norms and symbols and help the group decide who and what lies outside its bounds (Collins 2004:32–42, 48–9; Sewell 1996a:865–67, 871, 876).

Drawing from a range of qualitative data, this paper shows how Durkheim's work on gathering times can be read in a different light: as key to understanding surprising and idiosyncratic changes in the life course. That is, social occasions are more likely than other kinds of time to house events that unexpectedly shift the trajectory of individual lives. They do this by thrusting people into a special world, building collective effervescence and emotional energy, gathering usually dispersed people together, requiring that participants publicly rank their relations, and demanding complex choreography, carried out while others watch and judge. The more social occasions do these five things, the more likely they are to become unexpectedly consequential, opening people to changes in their bonds, habits, thinking, and plans.

OCCASIONS AND THE SOCIOLOGY OF THE UNEXPECTED

By social occasion, I mean the phenomenon originally defined by Goffman (1963:18) as "a social affair, undertaking, or event, bounded in regard to place and time and typically facilitated by fixed equipment."[1] Social occasions include birthday parties and weddings but also doctor's visits, first dates, nights on the town, and family dinners. Occasions are a "normatively stabilized structure," a "shifting entity, necessarily evanescent, created by arrivals and killed by departures" (Goffman 1967:2; discussed in Wynn 2016:278). They involve a degree of mutual engrossment and a shared orientation to the occasion's unfolding (Goffman 1963:18–9).

To Goffman's definition, I would add that the people present at a social occasion are often *socially relevant* to one another: they tend to be of the same family, friendship, or professional circle, or they are brought together by some common interest, activity, or complementary institutional roles. It is in part the social relevance of the people gathered together that makes social occasions matter after they end.

Goffman's work came at a flourishing time for the study of social occasions. In 1949, Simmel's article on sociability had been translated into English, and inspired by that work, Chicago colleagues Foote and Riesman won a major federal grant in the 1950s to conduct participant observation of middle-class sociability (Riesman, Potter, and Watson 1960a, 1960b). Their project boasted an impressive budget and an equally impressive number of research assistants, but it encountered significant setbacks and crises of conscience. Perhaps the most interesting work to come out of the project was an achingly honest and frustrated methodological reflection on how difficult it is to rigorously study social occasions as a participant observer (Riesman and Watson 1964). Drawing as it did on Simmel, who believed that sociability is a play state, cut off from the larger concerns of life, the project also failed to articulate the payoff of spending

[1]Since Goffman, the word *event* has taken on a technical meaning in historical comparative work (Sewell 2005:100), one that bears directly on the arguments of this paper. Given this development, I would eliminate the word *event* from Goffman's definition of social occasion. Social occasions are not events except in the colloquial sense of that term. They do tend to *house* events, in the technical sense that they house happenings that significantly transform the structure of people's lives.

so much time and money observing middle-class parties.[2]

Goffman took his approach more directly from Durkheim and saw social occasions as key to his larger study of face-to-face interaction and the self.[3] As Wynn (2016) has recently written, Goffman positioned social occasions as a roomy home for smaller forms of social interaction like gatherings and encounters. Much of Goffman's writing on how people present themselves to others, work to manage impressions, and find the self emerging in interaction helps capture what is at stake during social occasions. By bringing together people who matter to one another more than strangers on the street, social occasions amplify our general concern to present ourselves well.

Since Goffman, ethnographers and conversation analysts have featured a great variety of social occasions in their work, but the study of social occasions as a *general category of experience* has not proceeded much.[4] While aspects of social interaction that dovetail and overlap with social occasions have received significant theoretical attention, our conceptual understanding of social occasions in their own right has remained largely where it was many decades ago.[5]

This changed in 2016, when Wynn published a paper in *Sociological Theory* that made the case for social occasions as a basic unit of sociological analysis. Wynn's paper excavated Goffman's work on the topic and provided a new framework for examining social occasions involving resources (economic, physical, human and social, and symbolic), patterns (citadel, core, and confetti), and properties (longevity, repetition, porosity, density, and turbulence). A core idea in Wynn's paper is that we need a way to meaningfully distinguish different types of occasions and a way to comparatively analyze their dynamics and component parts.

This paper builds on Wynn's work, providing one compelling reason for a renewed focus on social occasions: they are sites of unanticipated turning points in the lives of those attending.[6] Compared to many other things people do throughout the day, things like grading papers, clearing email, or unloading

[2]Riesman was interested in play and leisure, Foote in the development of individual competencies and identities. Foote left the project midway through, so the opportunity to study how social occasions shape people's future selves was missed. Yet the articles that emerged from the project (Riesman, Potter, and Watson 1960a, 1960b; Riesman and Watson 1964) yield important insights about how social occasions bring forth events that shift the course of attendees' lives if they are read in that light.

[3]The limitation of Simmel's approach is sharply critiqued by Goffman (1961b:21): "Simmel's embarrassing effort to treat sociability as a type of 'mere' play, sharply cut off from the entanglements of serious life, may be partly responsible for sociologists having failed to identify the rules of irrelevance in sociability with similar rules in serious areas of life."

[4]On quinceñeras and debutante balls see Rodriguez 2013; doctor's visits see Maynard 2003; job interviews see Rivera 2015; weddings see Sniezek 2005; funerals see Howarth 1996; parades see Bruce 2013; music and community festivals see Li, Moore, and Smythe 2018 as well as Wynn 2015; nights out on the town see Grazian 2007, Hoang 2015, Mears 2015; country dances see Bourdieu 2004; counterculture gatherings see Schelly 2014; college parties see Armstrong and Hamilton 2013, sacred harp practices see Clawson 2011, and opera performances see Benzecry 2011.

[5]On aspects of interaction that dovetail with social occasions see the work on emotional energy and interaction rituals (Collins 2004; Rivera 2015; Summers-Effler 2002, 2004); conversation (Maynard and Turowetz 2017); acts of disrespect (Anderson 2015); and humiliation (Lizardo and Collett 2013).

[6]Indeed, two of Wynn's features, repetition and resources, are essential to understanding which social occasions open people to unexpected turning points and will be discussed later.

the dishwasher, the time people spend participating in social occasions is likely to be indeterminately consequential. Rather than sites of mere play, bracketed off from the serious concerns of life, social occasions are key to how serious life unfolds.

Over the past few decades, scholars from a range of fields have pioneered work on rapid changes to the status quo that people do not see coming and whose outcomes are uncertain. Understanding social life as contingent, path-dependent, and eventful has gained traction across the social sciences.[7] Unintended consequences and chance play crucial roles in historical and personal outcomes.[8] Scholars within and outside the academy have persuasively argued that much of our current society emerged from dramatic changes in collective behavior or the state of a system that occurred when least expected.[9]

The bulk of this work has focused on historical change, but the opportunity is there to take the ideas to the micro realm—and to the life course. Recently, Meyer and Kimeldorf (2015) suggested that scholars of events expand their scope from historical events that change macro structures to smaller and more frequent occurrences that change individuals or groups of people, a call this paper takes up.

Sewell (2005:100) defined *event* as "that relatively rare subclass of happenings that significantly transforms structures." He used the term for happenings that transform the structure of society, but the idea is also useful for studying events that transform individual lives. Swidler's (1986) concept of unsettled periods can be similarly ported over. She used the term mostly for historical periods in which dramatic change in culture becomes possible, but we can use it for more immediate situations in which change in a person's life becomes possible. The question becomes: where in the relatively smooth fabric of everyday life do happenings that transform people's lives tend to emerge? What are the unsettled situations of our daily existence, the situations in which dramatic change in our identities and trajectories becomes possible? Social occasions are one such unsettled situation, a pocket of everyday life hospitable to events.

This brings us to Goffman's (1967) concept of fatefulness. While many activities are consequential only in the limited sense that a problem will arise if one fails to do them (think replying to email or taking a shower) and other activities have uncertain outcomes but are utterly inconsequential (think playing a game on your phone while waiting for the doctor), some activities are both indeterminate and consequential (think rolling the dice with money on the line). These activities Goffman termed *fateful*.[10] The claim I make for social occasions—from those marking a status change, like weddings, to those that are officially consequential, like doctor's visits and job interviews (Maynard 2003; Rivera 2015), to those with no built-in consequentiality whatsoever, like drinks at the pub—is that they

[7]On the importance of events, process, and temporality to social and historical realities see Abbott 1990, 1992, 2016; Aminzade 1992; Sewell 1996a, 1996b, 2005; and Wagner-Pacifici 2010. On the linked ideas of timing, sequence, contingency, and path dependence see Ermakoff 2015; Mahoney 2000; and Pierson 2004.

[8]On the role of chance encounters in life trajectories see Bandura 1982. On unanticipated consequences, chance, and serendipity in historical and personal trajectories see Merton 1936, [1989] 1998; Portes 2000; Tilly 1996; and Zelizer 2010.

[9]On society as a complex system and the role of unpredictable events in shaping it see Arthur, Durlauf, and Lane 1997; Gladwell 2000; Taleb 2007; and Watt 2003.

[10]See Goffman 1967:152–153, 159–160, 164.

possess a comparatively high chance of prompting indeterminate occurrences that spill past the occasion's designated parameters to alter the trajectories of people going forward. In the relatively smooth fabric of everyday life, social occasions are potentially fateful situations.

In a 1981 presidential address to the Western Psychological Association, the psychologist Bandura (1982:749) noted that fortuitous encounters play a central role in shaping the course of human lives but that "psychology cannot foretell the occurrence of fortuitous encounters, however sophisticated its knowledge of human behavior becomes." This sociological paper responds by identifying one concrete situation in which fortuitous encounters tend to emerge: social occasions.[11]

Bandura (1982:749) put forth three kinds of impacts that fortuitous encounters might have: some touch people only lightly, others have more lasting effects, and still others "branch people into new trajectories of life." This third kind of impact is echoed in philosopher L.A. Paul's (2014:17) discussion of transformative experience, which she defines as "giving you new information in virtue of your experience" and "changing how you experience being who you are." When I say that social occasions house events that unexpectedly change the structure of people's lives, I mean they house transformative experiences, like meeting one's future spouse or realizing that one cannot take one's colleagues any longer, and smaller or more ancillary experiences, like discovering a new band or beginning to forgive a friend for past bad behavior. Social occasions house events that change people all at once and as part of a sequence, that endure and peter out. What is more, they bring about these changes across exercise routines and vacation plans, romantic ties and professional trajectories. As we will see, when social occasions strongly exhibit the five features described below, they have a higher chance of housing events with lasting effects, some of which branch people into new trajectories of life.

[11]Indeed, the overwhelming majority of fortuitous encounters Bandura describes in that paper occurred during a social occasion (and one prominent exception, a graduation gift, was likely given at a graduation celebration, but the details were not filled in).

METHODS

Field Notes and Informal Interviews

In 2009, I began taking informal notes on social occasions, asking permission to write down something a person said or things that were happening, discussing the occasion with people as we attended it, and writing up longer notes when I got home. Following Riesman et al. (1960a:323–24), many of these notes concerned the internal dynamics of social occasions: who invited whom, where people stood, how people figured out when to leave, what constituted a violation of the occasion, and what made an occasion go well or poorly.

Beginning in 2015, systematic notes about how social occasions alter people's thinking, bonds, habits, and plans were collected in five US cities: two on the East Coast, one on the West Coast, and two in the Midwest. More occasional notes were taken on trips to other US cities and, more rarely, to other countries. I talked to people about occasions as they unfolded, as people prepared for occasions to come, and as they reflected on occasions recently passed. Some of the people included in the earlier informal notes were re-contacted and their permission requested to use the notes for the present study.

As Riesman et al. (1960b:17) have noted, participant observers of social occasions encounter the problem that many occasions are only available to

those personally or professionally connected to the host. I tried to take notes in as many social spheres as I had access to, and over time, the notes came to include people I met in graduate school, on a postdoctoral appointment, and during my first years teaching. They also came to include people from the working-class and middle-class white ethnic and African American communities I grew up in and met in college. These people were a mix of LGBTQI and straight, people of color and whites, atheists and religious, and working class, middle class, and upper middle class. Still, they entered the study because their lives intersected with mine, not because they represented a larger population. When a person indicated they did not wish to be included in my notes, I honored this request.[12]

Once it became clear that social occasions are more likely than other times of the day to house bursts of change in people's lives, I began to ask what other situations provoke unexpected shifts in thinking, bonds, habits, and plans. As people I knew entered romantic relationships and left them, moved across the country, or quit smoking, I asked permission to take notes. When they agreed, I wrote down as many layers of context as I could as close to the time of the change as possible. Following turning points in this way served as a check that I was not overstating the impact of occasions; it also allowed me to uncover a number of additional situations that, like occasions, tend to house bursts of change.[13]

Event Journals

During the fall 2017 semester, 15 undergraduate students wrote weekly event journals as part of a college course.[14] The students ranged from ages 18 to 21, with one returning student in her midtwenties and another in her forties. Students were asked to write a minimum of five single-spaced pages per week, to describe their day-to-day activities as well as more singular events and experiences, and to comment on their ongoing emotions, relationships, habits, and plans as they evolved over the semester. In some cases, students wrote about events

[12]The difficulty that Foote and Riesman's Sociability Project encountered in observing social occasions is instructive here. Among the issues that ultimately tore the study team apart and caused significant psychological strain: no two people at an occasion are experiencing it (or can report on it) in the same way, firsthand observation is restricted to occasions one is invited to (and one can only expand one's social networks so far), there is deep moral ambiguity and visceral unpleasantness in asking one's friends and relations to become research subjects, turning what should be fun into work is a strain, and taking proper field notes on social occasions took considerably more hours per occasion than anticipated and limited how many occasions they could observe. On top of this, their colleagues were deeply suspicious of the project, and one barred them from attending departmental occasions entirely (Riesman et al. 1960a, 1960b; Riesman and Watson 1964). I hope this article shows how important it is to wade through anyway, to take the study of social occasions seriously because they are key sites of unpredictable but stratified turning points, from sexual assault to job leads.

[13]One important question here is whether sitting alone at one's desk prompts bursts of change as much if not more than social occasions. I found scant evidence for this in the fieldwork or journals (including among students who thought of themselves as introverts). When sitting alone came up as a catalyst for change, it often played the role of helping people to interpret occasions just passed and figure out exactly what the consequences would be. Talking to people after occasions also accomplished this.

[14]Student journals were collected as a weekly class assignment. After the class ended, an Institutional Review Board granted approval to request students' permission to analyze the journals as data for this project, and approval from students was formally acquired. The excerpts that appear in this article were shown to individual students for final approval.

that occurred only minutes prior to writing, in many cases about events that occurred that day and in most cases about events that occurred within the past couple of days. Students also sometimes included what they were doing or thinking at the time of writing, their current interpretations and updates on earlier events (Holmberg, Orbuch, and Veroff 2004), as well as their anticipation of events and activities to come.

College students proved particularly strong journal keepers for a project on events and change. Young adulthood is an event-rich time, in which many aspects of identity are being reconstituted (Kiecolt and Mabry 2000; Shanahan 2000). Over the semester, students spent their first months away from their parental home, had sex for the first time and got drunk for the first time, made new friends and became estranged from old ones, broke up with longstanding partners, and started new relationships. They came out, joined sports teams, made decisions about careers, and experienced their first panic attack. Their journals allowed me to follow events as they emerged, access the interpretations students made of their own experiences (Emerson 2015:21–5), and compare those interpretations to my own.[15]

Students were given no set parameters for what to include in the event journals—sometimes they wrote about day dreaming or binge-watching TV. While these journals were no doubt tailored to the professor who would be reading them and to the fellow students who would be hearing parts of them aloud (Orbuch, Veroff, and Holmberg 1993:816), the journals had the virtue that they were written immediately following (and sometimes during) students' activities and described ongoing relationships, plans, and emotional states in narrative form, in students' own words (Holmberg et al. 2004:1–2). I am indebted to the students who granted permission for specific excerpts of their journals to appear in this text and to the students as a whole for their intellectual contribution to this project.

Retrospective Accounts

In 2014, 2015, and again in 2017, research assistants and I culled the *New York Times* marriage section, subreddits and blogs, and three dozen memoirs and autobiographies for accounts of turning points and transitions, including how people met their spouse (Orbuch et al. 1993), made friends, became a parent, changed jobs, came out, stopped speaking to relatives, and found religion.[16] We paid particular attention to the context and consequences of the turning point. While these accounts often reflected people's current way of explaining events in the distant past (Orbuch 1997; Orbuch et al. 1993:816), they helped extend the people included in this study beyond the researcher's circle and beyond a group of college students.

The limitations of these three sources of data were significant and not fully mitigated by combining them. Still, they made it possible to access two phenomena fairly difficult to observe: social occasions as people experience and interpret them and second, bursts of change in people's

[15]Sociologists have incorporated college student journals into qualitative research studies on topics such as mental illness (Lynch 1983), roommate woes (Emerson 2015), and urban nightlife (Grazian 2008). Sociologists have also asked research participants to keep diaries on topics including: chronic pain (Broom et al. 2014), daily spending and budgeting (Edin and Lein 1997), and sexual practices (Coxon 1996).

[16]Reddit is a news and discussion website used primarily by young people. Subreddits are forums dedicated to specific topics, such as coming home from military deployment or post partum depression.

bonds, habits, thinking, and plans as they emerge and play out over time.

The next section explores some features of social occasions that open the door to unexpected bursts of change. These features are not present in all social occasions, nor are they exclusive to them. But social occasions display many of these features prominently and in combination, making them hospitable to events that shift people's course. The more a social occasion exhibits these five features, the more likely it will be fateful for those involved.

FIVE FEATURES OF SOCIAL OCCASIONS THAT PROMPT BURSTS OF CHANGE

A Special World Set off from Ordinary Life

Social occasions pull people out of mundane life into a special world of sociability. We can glimpse this special world in the effort people make to decorate their bodies and dress: to curl their hair or iron a shirt. Particularly for young women, occasions involve lengthy and painful preparation, like pouring hot wax onto sensitive body parts and squeezing into shoes that make toes bleed. The hours people spend cooking, the extra cleaning and decorations, and the kegs of beer they haul in also indicate that a special world is being created. Set apart from mundane life, social occasions are put on, cleared up, and broken down.[17]

Occasions that come rarely, or in Wynn's (2016:281) terms involve low repetition, make the occasion feel more special to the people involved. If the occasion is the first or the last such occasion a particular person attends, this too can make it feel more special. Occasions that mark a status change (Turner 1987) or demand significant resources (Wynn 2016:279–80) also make the occasion feel more special to those attending. The more special an occasion feels to the persons assembled, the more likely it is to delight and disturb, insult and inspire: to prompt turning points people do not expect.

This special world of the occasion offers release from some of the duties and norms of mundane life, allowing for a freedom of sociability and for behaviors that would not be appropriate or acceptable during mundane times.[18] In this freeing and special time, people find themselves open to new intimacies.

A man in his eighties, recounting an occasion in which the neighbor, who was turning 70, came over with his wife and grown son for a belated birthday dinner:

> For 20 years we've been neighbors, and we've been pleasant to each other, we've sometimes gone to their house, but the other night they came to our house for this special celebration: it was very intimate. We talked about how we met our significant others, with the kids adding their recollections, quite different from our own, and it was an astonishing conversation. I would say we have crossed over the threshold from neighbors to friends.

Here, a birthday dinner pulls two couples out of their usual routine of pleasantries and the occasional stop over, into a special world of the birthday celebration, a world that feels "very intimate." With a special dinner prepared, the couples feel moved to say things they wouldn't normally say: to tell the stories of how they met.

[17]When women are present, they tend to shoulder the bulk of the effort to put on social occasions. For a terrific description of the work that women do to put on weddings, see Sniezek (2005).

[18]The behaviorally freeing aspect of social occasions has been discussed in Bakhtin 1984:6; Durkheim [1912] 1965:24–48; Simmel 1949; and Turner 1987:17, quoting Kuper 1947.

Their grown children get caught up in this intimate feeling and add their own memories of their parents' unions. By the end of the evening, longtime neighbors have crossed over the threshold to friends.

The special world of the occasion can also turn complete strangers into friends. From a series of field notes:

> Last night I attended a holiday party at the house of a lovely senior professor. A roast pig sat atop a table and rows of deep pots held her glorious Mexican cooking. The desserts piled high and a mariachi band played off to the side. Some time through this dazzling, magical party I was introduced to the host's newest junior colleague, a tall guy with a warm smile. The guy said something like, "[O]h I've been hoping to get the chance to meet you" and we pulled away to chat. After the party, he emailed to ask if I wanted to have lunch. We kept emailing over winter break and met up when we both got back. I hadn't thought it possible to make a best friend so far after graduate school, but best friends is what we became.

As the specialness of occasions opens the door to welcome new intimacies, it also opens the door to less welcome ones. A man in his thirties recounts a friend's birthday party that he attended the evening before:

> It was a strange party. He had like 20 people over to his little apartment and when we got there, he was dressed in this weird animal costume; everyone else was wearing shorts and T-shirts. He kept saying, "It's my birthday, I can wear whatever I want." Then he started talking about how he hates his department and wants to stick it to them. I was trying to pull him aside and say "Hey, cool it. You're going to have to see these people tomorrow in the office." He kept asking if we wanted to take Jell-O shots. You can't serve Jell-O shots when you're 30 years old. That doesn't work.

Occasions like parties and celebrations construct a special world in which the usual distance between people is somewhat relaxed and people feel they can take certain liberties with their behavior. But occasions do not seal the consequences of this behavior off from life beyond. The liberties people take during occasions cause lasting damage to reputations and relationships.

As the special world of the occasion opens the door to welcome and less welcome freedoms, it also extracts obligation. The specialness of occasions obligates participants to prepare sufficiently, honor the people assembled, and honor the occasion itself. When people fall short of these obligations, sharp rebuke or deep shame can result. A woman recalls her father failing to give the church service his attention:

> I hated going to church because my dad would fall asleep in the pew. He was going to school at night so he was always exhausted when he had to get up early. He'd start snoring and the minister would glare at him and I'd be just mortified. That's why I joined the choir, so I wouldn't have to sit next to my snoring father in church.

Here the humiliation of a father snoring in church prompts a young woman to join the choir. Angelou (1969) describes a far worse failure to honor those present, this time at her high school graduation. On this occasion, a white speaker got up on stage and recited the great things that were in store for the white high school students down the road. He then mentioned two young men who graduated

from her high school and went on to become local sports figures.

> The white kids were going to have a chance to become Galileos and Madame Curies and Edisons and Gauguins, and our boys (the girls weren't even in on it) would try to be Jesse Owenses and Joe Louises.
>
> The man's dead words fell like bricks around the auditorium and too many settled in my belly. Constrained by hard-learned manners, I couldn't look behind me, but to my left and right the proud graduating class of 1940 had dropped their heads. . . .
>
> Graduation, the hush-hush magic time of frills and gifts and congratulations and diplomas, was finished for me before my name was called. The accomplishment was nothing, [the speaker] had exposed us. We were maids and farmers, handymen and washer-women, and anything higher that we aspired to was farcical and presumptuous. (178–80)

The more special the occasion, the greater the obligation to honor it and to honor those assembled and the more damaging and memorable are acts of disrespect (Anderson 2015) that occur over its course.

In modern society, gathering times continue to transport people to a special world apart from ordinary life. In the freedoms it permits and the obligation it extracts, this special world constitutes one of the key ways that social occasions become fateful.

Collective Effervescence and Emotional Energy

As gathering times pull people into a special world apart from mundane affairs, they produce collective effervescence: the electrical charge and sense of union generated when people assemble together (Durkheim [1912] 1965:246–47). As Durkheim ([1912] 1965:240) describes: "In the midst of an assembly animated by a common passion, we become susceptible of acts and sentiments of which we are incapable when reduced to our own forces."

In *Interaction Ritual Chains*, Collins (2004) draws directly from Durkheim and Goffman to extend the argument that gathering times generate collective effervescence and make new thoughts and actions possible. For Collins, the core of Durkheim's theory lies in the interaction ritual, which he breaks into four ingredients: co-presence, a shared focus of attention, barriers to outsiders, and a shared mood (2004:48). Once an interaction ritual gets going, its outputs are profound: group solidarity, emotional energy in the individual, sacred objects, and standards of morality (2004:48–9). Adapting Durkheim and Collins for our purposes, we can see that social occasions host powerful interaction rituals and that the emotional energy produced when people assemble together and focus their attention helps generate the kinds of events that shift the trajectory of people's lives.[19]

From notes collected over a year and a half:

> The bride was born and raised in Philadelphia but held her wedding in

[19]Collective effervescence is a momentary intensification of shared experience, an emotional alignment that emerges when people assemble together (Collins 2004:35, 36, 108). By contrast, emotional energy refers to the longer-term product of those temporary feelings: an energy that resides in individuals and manifests as confidence, group solidarity, or a sense of membership (Collins 2004:39,108). Social occasions are good at producing momentary collective effervescence and longer-term emotional energy, both of which help explain why social occasions prompt fateful occurrences.

> Detroit, the city where she now lives. A large delegation of the bride's Philadelphia friends and relatives made the trek, including her best friend from grade school: lover of musical theatre and barista. This friend came on Thursday night and stayed until Monday morning, attending a baseball game, BBQ, lunch in the park, and Sunday brunch that the bride organized for her guests. It was the kind of magical, handmade wedding that honored the friends and family assembled more so than the couple: by the end this grade school friend had gotten to know and like a number of the bride's Detroit friends and had come to see the city through the eyes of the splendid occasions held all across it. Shortly after the wedding ended, and to the astonishment of her relations, this friend started talking about relocating to Detroit. The friend did not own a car and had never lived outside of Philadelphia. Now within a year, she has done it. She said the wedding reminded her how much she loved her best friend, and meeting her best friend's new friends made her think: these are the people I want to be around. The thing was, she had been to Detroit and met all these friends before, just not in the effervescent context of a wedding.

Here, a woman gets caught up in a close friend's wedding, reaffirms her bond to the bride, strengthens her relationship with the bride's local friends, and deepens her bond to the city. The wedding builds an emotionally charged, magical realm of connection and inspiration, which alters her life path.

And yet, the intense energy of social occasions also opens the door to offense and violation, particularly for those occupying a marginal status within the group (Summers-Effler 2002).[20] With the energy of the occasion pumping through our veins—not to mention alcohol and drugs—adult supervisors squeeze the knees of interns and fraternity brothers urge a new recruit to drink until he becomes gravely ill. Participants stray into flirtation with someone other than their spouse or indulge in group mockery of an awkward member. The effervescence that produces the funniest stories of a person's youth can also prompt fights, falls, and sexual assault (Kingkade 2015; McMurtrie 2014).

In ways positive and negative, the effervescence and emotional energy that social occasions produce is fateful. The more the occasion produces for the group as a whole and for specific individuals within it, the more fateful the occasion is likely to become.

Worlds Colliding

A third way that social occasions open the door to unexpected bursts of change is by

[20]As Collins (1990) and Summers-Effler (2002) have written, some interaction rituals are based in solidarity and increase the emotional energy of all involved, whereas others are based in power and transfer emotional energy from lower status persons to higher status ones. On this point, Summers-Effler is particularly important. When women participate in interaction rituals, they typically do so from a subordinate social position and experience both emotional drain from being in that position and the psychic cost of suppressing their feelings about it. Some positive emotional energy counters these forces because when they accept a subordinate position, their interactions tend to go well. It may not feel wholly good to downplay one's professional accomplishments at a party, but it feels somewhat good when downplaying them results in positive interactions rather than tense ones. At the same time, under certain conditions, subordinated people can build collective identity and critical consciousness through interaction rituals with one another (Summers-Effler 2002). Both kinds of interaction rituals find a home within social occasions. Moreover, if the self is fundamentally driven to seek interaction and emotional energy from others, then social occasions are key sites for the development of self-awareness, reflexivity, self-discovery, and change (Summers-Effler 2004).

bringing together people who are normally separate from one another. By worlds colliding, I mean three things: that people who do not know one another but who are part of the same larger network or share an institutional affiliation get to meet, that people who haven't seen one another in a while find themselves in the same place, and that people from many different facets of an individual's life come together all at once.[21] Adopting Wynn's (2016:281) concept of repetition, the frequency with which particular people meet for a social occasion is inversely proportionate to its fatefulness. The more an occasion brings together people who do not usually meet, the more likely it is to house events that unexpectedly shift people's bonds, habits, thoughts, and plans.[22]

A writer in his thirties, describing to me how he met his wife:

> An old acquaintance passed along a weekend invitation to a salon-style brunch. I walked in to the bright, sunny, high-ceilinged apartment and noticed, on the far side of a fashionable and intimidating crowd, a woman in vivid conversation on the fire escape. I approached her and introduced myself and we climbed the fire escape to the small roof garden. Though the brunch was well attended by many of her professional colleagues, she admitted she'd also been hesitant to come, and seemed in no hurry to return to the networking opportunity. She asked what I did and I said I was working on a book, which she asked me to describe. To my great astonishment, she showed an uncanny familiarity with the subject of one of the chapters and seemed pleased to talk about it. We returned to the party and she said she had to leave, but I invited her to a birthday party (my own) that evening, and we exchanged phone numbers. That was six years ago, and now we have a son.

Here two strangers, each with their own connection to the host, appear together at the same occasion. Their conversation reveals significant shared appreciations, and after an intimate chat, the man extends an invitation to another social occasion: his birthday party. Six years later, they are married with a child.[23]

Just as occasions bring strangers together and launch marriages, so they bring strangers together and launch careers. The author Michael Lewis (2012):

> I did what everyone does who has no idea what to do with themselves: I went to graduate school. I wrote at nights, without much effect, mainly because I hadn't the first clue what I should write about. One night I was invited to a dinner, where I sat next to the wife of a big shot at a giant Wall Street investment bank, called Salomon Brothers. She more or less forced her husband to give me a job. I knew next to nothing about Salomon Brothers. But Salomon Brothers happened to be where Wall Street was being reinvented. . . . A year and

[21]In dramaturgical language, this is known as audience desegregation. Goffman (1959:137–42) has written extensively about the problems it presents for people.

[22]On the significance of strangers at occasions, Goffman (1961b:14) wrote, "if a gathering, on its own, is to generate a group and have group formation mark the gathering as a memorable event, then a stranger or two may have to be invited—and this is sometimes carefully done on sociable occasions." To broaden his insight: social occasions that include strangers have a higher chance of becoming fateful.

[23]Riesman et al. (1960b:21) describe three female roommates with nonoverlapping social networks who hold joint parties so that each can "go prospecting among strangers." Whether parties are intentionally organized to turn strangers into couples, they in fact accomplish this.

> a half later Salomon Brothers was handing me a check for hundreds of thousands of dollars to give advice about derivatives to professional investors.
>
> . . . The book I wrote was called "Liar's Poker." It sold a million copies. I was 28 years old.

Social occasions thrust people together who would not normally meet and do so within a special realm of effervescent solidarity, making new connections and plans possible. Yet these outcomes are highly contingent: subject to things like who sits next to whom.

The bringing together of people who do not usually meet is also a recipe for embarrassment (Lizardo and Collett 2013) and for moments of acute disrespect (Anderson 2015). Particularly for members of minority groups whose work and social lives place them among the dominant majority (Anderson 2015; Lizardo and Collett 2013; Tavory 2009), occasions involving strangers become times when the deference typically paid someone in their position—judge, boss, or head of the household—is denied, often seemingly without malice or conscious effort. A national security professional and Asian American woman describes this downward misrecognition:

> … the U.S. Admiral in Japan […] spent an entire meeting assuming I was a translator, not realizing I was actually the staffer for the Military Personnel Subcommittee that he wanted to be talking to about his pilot retention issues until it was too late and our delegation had to leave. His assumptions about what a congressional staffer should look like got in the way of effectively communicating his needs to the legislative branch. (Eoyang 2018)[24]

Here, a professional occasion in which strangers meet becomes deeply frustrating for a congressional staffer and Asian American woman assumed to be the translator. A parallel emerges at academic occasions when attendees question the credentials of Black and female professors, asking if they hold a PhD, teach graduate students, or have published.[25]

Just as the coming together of socially relevant strangers prompts enriching and damaging occurrences, so the coming together of people who meet infrequently or who do not typically appear together all at once opens the door to a mixed bag of fateful events. At weddings and conference dinners, people who haven't seen one another in a while or who typically meet in smaller, more segregated groupings find themselves sharing the same halls and sitting at the same tables. Caught up in the shared mood, vague acquaintances become swift confidants and lapsed friends reconnect. New romantic pairings form that threaten or delight longer established relationships. Previously private information circulates that embarrasses and exposes people, and attendees observe people they know acting in ways that appear incongruous or threatening to the versions they recognize (Goffman 1956; Lizardo and Collett 2013). Meanwhile, guests who wish to avoid one another become such a problem that the host feels significantly drained or forced to choose sides. The more an occasion brings together socially relevant people who have not yet met, do not usually meet, or do not typically appear all together, the more likely it is to prompt unexpected events, both welcome and unwelcome, that matter down the line.

Forced Public Rankings

During mundane times, people can typically keep their estimations of one

[24]I was inspired to consider misrecognition by the work of Wypler (2016), writing about Queer women farmers misrecognized as men.

[25]On this point I am indebted to conversations with Elijah Anderson.

another fairly ambiguous and unspoken. But during social occasions and particularly during special occasions, hosts are forced to decide who is invited and who is left out, who will be awarded special privileges and honors, and who should sit next to whom. These decisions are taken as indications of who is more or less valued and who is more or less remote. The rankings that emerge during social occasions are not mere reflections of the rankings that members hold outside of them but in fact reconstitute and transform these rankings (Goffman 1961b:27–31). The more an occasion forces public rankings, the more it opens people to fateful events.

When a woman gets married, she must decide who will walk her down the aisle: her biological father who has recently started coming around or the stepfather who raised her as his own. When an academic retires, someone must decide if the person merits a conference and who among the pool of former students and colleagues is close enough to the retiring person and intellectually impressive enough to speak at it. Virtually all special occasions ask the hosts to publicly rank the guests, at the very least by deciding who to talk to in the limited time span of the party.

A former editor of a Condé Nast magazine describes the terror-inducing seating chart at the company's annual holiday lunch:

> The holiday lunch was held, as it had been for years, at The Four Seasons, in a private dining room off the pool room, right before Si Newhouse, the company's chairman, flew off to Europe to begin his winter vacation (in Vienna, always, for the opera). Many of the company's senior executives attended, but it was most notable for being the only time all the editors-in-chief and publishers were in the same room at the same time the entire year, and was therefore employed as an opportunity to let the seating arrangement speak to one's — and one's title's—current standing in the company.
>
> This rendered the event the subject of a great deal of anticipation and fascination—not only among those of us in the room as we all strained to see how we'd made out in comparison to our rivals (and how others had made out in comparison to their rivals) but by the New York media world at large. (France 2016)

Here, the combination of forced public ranking (the seating chart) and worlds colliding (the editors assembling only once a year) makes the occasion fateful for those attending. An even stronger determination of where people stand than the seating chart is the guest list itself. A college student recounts some of the more painful turning points of high school.

> [I]t was the summer of junior year, and classes had just ended, so we had all decided to go to the beach. On our way to the beach, S suddenly turned to all of us and said, "Hey guys, save the date because my birthday is coming up soon!" I was happy; I thought that I had finally been accepted as a part of their group, but that was not the case. The birthday did come up, but S forgot to follow up with her invitation. I was extremely sad to say the least. . . .
>
> On another occasion, we had all decided that we would be going out on a Friday night. I was at my house, getting ready and everything. The place where we would be going is very far, and the taxi fare is high, so when we go there everybody shares. At around 9 pm, I called O. She didn't reply. I was getting worried, because I hadn't found the means to get to the club yet. I called her again half an hour later and she replied. She told

> me that all of the girls had gotten ready together, and that there was no more space in the car. She apologized and asked me to find another way to go, but she didn't seem that concerned about it. I was sad; I was very sad. I couldn't handle it anymore, and so I closed the phone and started sobbing.

It is not only teenagers who take a lack of invitation as a blow to the self and their relationships. In fieldwork, I observed a woman in her late thirties with a strained relationship to her best friend take the failure of this friend to invite her to her son's first birthday as a devastating indication that the friendship was over.

Social occasions with assigned seating, closed guest lists, or limited space in the car force hosts to decide who should be included and who should sit where, but occasions with an open guest list and no assigned seating also ask attendees to rank one another: by deciding who to talk to, sit next to, dance with, and leave with—decisions that are public in the extreme. Indeed, social occasions can operate as de facto popularity contests: While some succeed in controlling the attention space (Collins 2009:413–62), others watch the eyes of the person across from them start to drift. As Bourdieu (2004) described of country dances, some of the people find plenty of partners while others remain on the periphery and watch the more desirable people get chosen over and over.

A college freshman who has been attending school-sponsored parties all semester, but with limited success, finally works up the courage to ask a woman to dance:

> I tried to make eye contact first, and after a minute of less-than-gentle mental encouragement, finally blurted it out. "Would you want to dance with me?" I had not the faintest goddamn clue what a more graceful pickup line would be. Candidly, I don't recall her response, but it had something to do with her friend and . . . it was a "no." Fucking wonderful.

After this rejection, the young man stumbles home too drunk to manage himself properly and in the subsequent days, falls into a bout of depression so deep that he seeks counseling.

When one goes to buy snacks at the corner store or sits with one's dog watching Netflix, one is not, in quite the same way, at risk of failing to capture the attention of one's socially relevant others. These moments where people's standing is publicly ranked and displayed put people's selves on the line: They can gratify or insult, honor or shame. The more an occasion forces people to publicly rank their friends, relations, and co-participants, the more it opens the door to events that spill past the boundaries of the occasion to matter in the later lives of those attending.

Complex Choreography (While Everyone Is Watching)

All social interaction requires participants to manage themselves to some degree: to discipline their affect, maintain appropriate levels of involvement, forgo some topics, and heed their turn in the conversation (Goffman 1961b). But the choreography of interaction during social occasions is particularly complex, and much of it is carried out as relevant others watch and judge. Participants must work out the order and manner in which to greet people, the topics appropriate for *this* particular person at *this* time of night, the transitions between rooms, and how to dance competently with partners one does not already know. Even when people have enjoyed a social

occasion, the exhaustion of this effort to be "on" for a prolonged period is felt in a big exhale when participants return home to the comfort of the couch cushions.

The more special the occasion and the more it brings together people who do not usually meet, the more complex the choreography tends to be and the more it matters to people when they fall short (Wynn 2016:278). A college freshman describing a school-sponsored dance he had attended the night before:

> I walked into the dance floor and started dancing near a group. Then began the internal dialogue. "Hey, she's cute, you should ask her to dance!" "Ok, but what do I say—'Hey, do you want to dance?'" "No, that's too forward. . . . " "Ok, but what else can I say?" "I don't know! It's not like there's a goddamn manual on this stuff." "Wouldn't it be nice if there was a manual? . . . " "Ok, seriously, how the fuck am I supposed to do this? I literally have no clue."

Here, complex choreography paired with forced public rankings makes this school dance a risky and ultimately crushing experience. In the next journal excerpt, in which a college woman recalls a high school dance, choreographic demands combine with the four other features to make a school dance fateful in another way.

> I made my boyfriend go all over hell's half acre to buy my corsage to match the skirt (even though hardly anyone did corsages at this dance except Serious Couples). He picked me up and I was so, so nervous. He drives me to Semi, parking close to the venue. He turns to me and suddenly he is kissing me like he's never kissed me before, but not in a good, stop your heart way. He is all over me, leaned awkwardly over the middle console of the car, bending my neck at an odd angle. I am hyper aware of how my perfect red lipstick is being smeared all over my face and how the unease in my stomach has gone from a whisper to a rumble.
>
> I push down the worst of my feelings and walk into the dance holding his hand. My lipstick is everywhere and I fixate on that as the source of my discontent. We are inseparable throughout the night, not by my choice. I'm a really social person, almost to a fault, and having him tethered to me makes me feel not like myself.
>
> At last, I catch sight of the person I've wanted to see all night. She wears a blue dress, her dark hair down around her shoulders. She intercepts me as I exit the bathroom, and gives me a hug, sweeping me off towards the bathroom once more. I give my boyfriend an apologetic look over my shoulder but secretly am thrilled.
>
> I get picked up from the afterparty around 1 am. In the silence of the car, the rumble that started while I was kissing my boyfriend becomes a fully formed thought that sits in my stomach and will not quit throbbing: you are gay, you are gay, you are gay. I come out to my mother the next day. I break up with him the day after Valentine's Day, nearly a month after Semi. He knew it was coming. We part as friends, and he promises me he'll support me as I figure myself out.

Here, a young woman attends a semi-formal high school dance. The dance requires big outputs of money and planning and brings high expectations for how it will go. The specialness of the occasion and its emotional charge create an opening for unwelcome new behaviors: intense kissing that ruins the woman's lipstick and builds a lingering sense of unease. It brings together people that she can usually keep fairly separate, her boyfriend and the female friend she has

a crush on, and it forces her to decide which person to spend time with. She struggles to sufficiently honor her date and adhere to the obligation to stick by his side. She leaves with a deep, bodily realization that she should not have been there with a boyfriend at all. She comes out to her mom the next day and breaks up with her boyfriend a few weeks later, the day after Valentine's Day (yet another special occasion). On her journey to self-discovery, these two special occasions act as crucial catalysts.

SOCIAL OCCASIONS AS OPENINGS FOR STRATIFIED TURNING POINTS

Much of microsociology has been a closed system—interested in what people do when they come into each other's presence (Goffman 1959), how emotions are conjured in interaction (Katz 1999), or the internal order of conversations (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974). But a significant line of interactionist work has focused on how the microdynamics of situated interaction generate consequences down the road.[26] This article adds to microsociology's longstanding concern with the long-term effects of situated interaction by showing how social occasions prompt unexpected turning points in the lives of people attending.

Caught up in the energy of an occasion, people get pressed into jobs they did not know they wanted. Strangers become friends and friends turn the corner into romance. But occasions also bring breeches and rifts, poisoning previously warm relations. Particularly for marginalized people, social occasions open up considerable opportunity for slights and insults. Following recent work that highlights issues of power and marginality in the study of social interaction, social occasions are key sites for what the sociologist Elijah Anderson (2015) termed *moments of acute disrespect*.[27]

While the features of occasions make acts of disrespect particularly likely, they also make them particularly hurtful. Occasions make people vulnerable to those around them and often bring the presumption of solidarity and respect, so that moments of disrespect that occur over their course catch people off guard, when they are imbued with a warm feeling and expecting to be treated well. Occasions also gather socially relevant others—family members, neighbors, friends, and colleagues. As Dennis (2017) shows, microaggressions between colleagues and friends harm ongoing personal relationships and professional trajectories. Damaging acts committed during social occasions create issues with people who are part of our past and matter for our future.

Social occasions create opportunities for more direct harm and manipulation as well (Simmel 1949:254). The slew of recent accounts of powerful men (and some women) urging subordinates to submit to unwanted sexual acts during and directly after one-on-one as well as larger group occasions (e.g., Kantor and Twohey 2017) as well as the general prevalence of date rape and party rape (Armstrong, Hamilton, and Sweeney 2006; Cook and Koss 2005; Mitzali 2017) show the strategic usefulness that can be made of a break from ordinary life in which the usual distance is relaxed and people meet for sociable contact.

Social occasions also reinforce inequality by limiting those who can attend in

[26]On the way that situated interaction spills over to affect the later lives of those participating see Anderson 1990, 2015; Durkheim [1912] 1965; Goffman 1959, 1961a; Katz 1988; Maynard and Turowetz 2017; and Summers-Effler 2002.

[27]This focus on inequality and stratification in interactionist work can be seen in Anderson 2015; Auyero and Swistun 2009; Collins 1990; Duneier 1999; Lizardo and Collett 2013; Pattillo 2007; Stuart 2016; and Summers-Effler 2002.

the first place. Particularly for middle-class professionals, the workweek includes a number of work-related occasions within it. By contrast, many employed in restaurants and stores work holidays and so miss out on even family occasions.[28] Whereas large extended families living close by may feature social occasions every weekend, people separated by long distances or whose close family and friends have died find holes where their social occasions used to be. If social occasions are settings that imbue people with emotional energy, reaffirm bonds, and inspire new ideas and connections, then we should begin to ask which kinds of occupations, socioeconomic positions, family configurations, and phases in the life course give people access to them.[29]

With a few exceptions for large public meetings or parades (Wynn 2016) and for occasions people are forced to attend, occasions also restrict their members to those who get invited, can pay for a ticket, or who personally know the host. They require the working legs to traverse fields of grass or walk up flights of stairs, a driver's license to get across town, or the extra money to pay a babysitter. In short, occasions are accessed and experienced unequally, producing stratified turning points—from job leads to humiliation to sexual assault—that help explain the unequal trajectories of different individuals and social groups.

SOCIAL OCCASIONS AND THE LIFE COURSE

The question of how and why people's lives diverge remains an open and perplexing one: it has not been answered by explanations of early childhood competencies, events, or behaviors; appeals to genetics or epigenetics; or group-level characteristics like race, class, gender, or cohort.[30] The limits of our current models for predicting the trajectories of people's lives leave scholars with two possibilities. First, there is unobserved heterogeneity: unmeasured differences in people's character, biology, family, location, or the interaction of these that might explain more of the variation. This possibility is an attractive one because it allows us to continue to think in terms of the characteristics of people. If we could only put enough variables into that equation, we'd arrive at stronger predictions about how people's lives turn out.[31]

A second, more provocative explanation for the stunning variation in people's life paths is that contingent events operating at the level of individual experience set chains in motion with their own inertia. Such contingent events are shaped by things like institutional racism, gendered opportunities, and the historical moment, but they occur irregularly to individual people, pushing us down idiosyncratic paths. This second possibility asks us to leave a strict variables framework and consider timing, sequence, and path dependence: to think of life as eventful (Sewell 1996b). It asks us to include in our analysis not only the characteristics of people but the characteristics of situations they pass through (Lizardo and Collett 2013).

While scholars crossing many fields have accepted that unpredictable events shape the course of history, the idea that unpredictable events shape the course of individual lives makes us a bit

[28]I thank Taylor Laemmli for this point.

[29]The journal editors provided crucial comments on this point. I also thank the editors and three anonymous reviewers for significant comments throughout.

[30]For a nice overview on the persistent variation in the timing and occurrence of major life events, see Shanahan (2000).

[31]This approach continues to advance our knowledge. See for example the major breakthrough in adding skin color in its own right as a factor in well-being (Monk 2015).

uncomfortable. The realm of *happened to be sitting next to* seems the domain of movies and novels, of commencement speeches and biographies, not social science. Perhaps the course of an individual life *is* set by who the person happened to be sitting next to, but how do we make *happened to be sitting next to* part of the scientific enterprise?

The answer proposed here is to closely study the moments in which bursts of change emerge. We can study the moment that a person meets a future friend, decides to leave town, or considers a colleague in a new romantic light. Lucky for us, these moments are not scattered randomly across everyday life but cluster in certain kinds of situations, one of which is the social occasion.

Life course scholars have tended to focus on big transitions like joining the military, getting married, and having a child (e.g., Sampson and Laub [1993] 1995). This paper has followed Vaughan (1986) and investigated the earlier beginnings of such transitions, locating these beginnings in moments like dancing with an old friend at a wedding, getting harassed by a colleague at a party, or spending a rare afternoon cozily visiting a friend's child. In this framework, life's big turning points are the conclusions to sequences of earlier turning points that led people there, and social occasions are one place to find such earlier turning points.

Differently put, our trajectories through life vary in ways that cannot be fully explained by the characteristics of people because each one of us is subject to fateful situations: forms of experience that pull us out of our routines and open us to bursts of change going in many directions. The social occasion is one such form of experience and as such, merits attention by anyone interested in better explaining our stunningly varied life paths.

Once we incorporate fateful situations into our models of the life course, we can begin to ask how they intersect. For a couple in their sixties who are happily settled into their routine, attending a wedding may pump them up with energy and suggest a new book to read, it may strengthen (or complicate) their relationship with the friends who invited them, but it is unlikely to change where they live or with whom. For a single woman just finishing college and figuring out her next steps, attending a friend's wedding could be far more consequential. Bringing the characteristics of situations together with the characteristics of people allows us to grasp who is open to which kinds of changes and when.[32]

CONCLUSION

Durkheim placed gathering times at the center of the sociological enterprise, but subsequent work on social occasions has been episodic. After a heyday of research on social occasions in the 1950s and 1960s, sociologists turned their attention to adjacent interactional dynamics or specific kinds of social occasions. Until Wynn's 2016 paper, we had not seen a formal treatment of social occasions as a general category of analysis in over 30 years. Since the Sociability Project of the 1950s, we have not attempted to quantify anything about them: who has access to which kinds of occasions, how different kinds of people fare when they attend them, or how to understand patterns in their consequences. Indeed, some of the classic sociological works on social occasions posited that they have no serious consequences at all. This paper has

[32]Lizardo and Collett (2013) studied how certain features of encounters produce embarrassment and how these features combine with the characteristics of people to create uneven levels of embarrassment in the population. This study builds on that foundation.

argued that social occasions are important to study because compared to other ways people spend their time, social occasions show a high chance of prompting turning points in people's bonds, habits, thinking, and plans.

Indeed, a rich variety of phenomena—the development of weak and strong ties (Granovetter 1973), embarrassment (Lizardo and Collett 2013), fortuitous encounters (Bandura 1982), the emergence of religious identity and belief (Pagis 2013), meeting one's future spouse (Bredow, Cate, and Huston 2008), the activation of job networks (Ioannides and Loury 2004), the building up or draining of emotional energy (Collins 2004), peer pressure (Borsari and Carey 2001), acts of acute disrespect (Anderson 2015), critical consciousness (Summers-Effler 2002), binge drinking (Borsari and Carey 2001), and sexual assault (Armstrong et al. 2006)—become more meaningful by considering social occasions, because social occasions *are where they happen*. It is here inside the electric, intense, connected energy of occasions that people make new friends, heal old wounds, hatch plans, and cross the line.

To say that social occasions are fateful for the individuals involved is to speak in probabilities, not in absolutes. Not every social occasion gives rise to a burst of change, and certainly fateful moments occur outside of them. Indeed, for marginalized people, mundane activities like taking the bus or walking down the street become eventful in ways that are deeply unwelcome (Anderson 2015; Gardner 1980; Tavory 2009:61). Still, social occasions represent a pocket of fatefulness in everyday life, a form of experience more hospitable to bringing about some unanticipated change than many other things people do throughout the day.

What is more, occasions that are considered very special, produce high levels of emotional energy, bring together people who do not usually meet, force public rankings, and demand complex choreography are more likely to be fateful than ones that do less of those things or do them less for a particular person attending. Thus, a single hour spent in high school biology class, which happens every day with the same group of people and typically produces quite low levels of collective effervescence, is unlikely to be fateful for the students attending. That same hour spent at a best friend's wedding brings a far greater chance of shifting a person's course. In this way, we can begin to see patterns in what appears random and map the turning points we don't expect.

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