

An ethnography of clubbing: the rules and rituals of clubbing and nightclubs as places of transgression and transformation

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Queuing up outside *Digital* for 'Pound-dance' at 11.45pm on Wednesday night is a very different experience to all the clubbing nights I have gone on before. I am in the queue with a group of friends, all of them already very drunk, and we are waiting to reach the bouncer with the guest list. Here we tell him our names, have our hand stamped and bag searched, and then proceed into the club. We walk past the cloakrooms but have no need for it; we've learnt to bring the smallest bag we can and to bear the cold to avoid bringing a coat. Helen stumbles off ahead down the ramp leading to the main dance area, the 300ml or so of vodka from 'predrinks' is showing its effects, and we proceed to the bar to stock up on the £1 drinks before midnight.

Although I have been clubbing a number of times before, to the same club and with the same people, tonight is different. Rather than a 'clubber', I am here as a student anthropologist conducting fieldwork on nightclubs. My interest in nightclubs comes not from being a fanatical clubber, I enjoy it in on occasion, but I have friends who seem to live and breathe clubbing and so I wanted to find out what the great appeal is. My first development on the idea was to consider the concept of social roles and how clubbing is strongly linked to the image of 'student'¹. That is not to say that only students or young adults go clubbing, but that it is an activity closely associated with this social group and has become a common feature for identifying this social role. One need only consider a university's freshers' week to see the popularity of clubbing among students. However, as I was conducting my fieldwork it also became apparent that nightclubs were spaces detached from the usual norms and rules of society and I found myself making a comparison with Van Gennep's (1960) and Turner's (1995) ideas of liminal spaces within rituals. In this project I will examine the

¹ Social role and role-playing is defined as "how the self is presented to others or to what people who interact expect of each other" (Barnfield, 1997: 413).

concepts of rituals, transgression and social roles by exploring the events of the night as they appeared to me in the field, and through conversations with other clubbers, predominantly my friends, bouncers, bartenders and staff members. I will then explore and reflect upon the practicalities I experienced in the field and the concept of doing fieldwork in a nightclub.

Rules and Rituals: 'getting ready' and 'predrinks', how to conduct a night out

On the evening of Wednesday 28th March I invited my friend Helen to get ready at my house before we went clubbing. I have interpreted this process of 'getting ready' as a ritual which must take place in order to transform the individual in question into a 'clubber', without which one is unable to perform the act of clubbing. 'Getting ready' is a period of the night which happens generally from 7pm onwards and generally involves showering, getting dressed, the application of make-up, perfume or aftershave and styling of hair. The most important part of this ritual is the selecting of which clothes to wear because they are a means of symbolic communication between yourself and other clubbers. In his work on the presentation of the self in everyday life, Erving Goffman (1990) wrote that the performer uses a 'personal front', such as clothes, which is used as a vehicle for conveying signs and expressing their identity as a performer (*Ibid*: 33). Similarly, within the context of nightclubs, through certain clothes one can establish themselves as a clubber and transmit their intentions for being at the club. For example, Helen chose to wear a short skirt and tights, a sparkly fitted top and high heels. When I asked her why she wore it she said it was because she wanted to reveal some skin like everyone else, but not be 'too slaggish. It's either boobs or legs, but not both'. Furthermore, on a separate night out, my friend Jess wore a very short black satin dress, and when I asked another friend Julianne why she thought Jess wore it, I was told it was because 'she's on the pull', meaning she had the intention of impressing a particular man that night. Clothes therefore, can act as sign vehicles for the clubber through a mutual understanding of what certain clothes mean. Helen and Jess were able to control how they would be perceived and

classified by knowing how their clothes would be understood. Furthermore, Helen described how 'wearing something different or nicer than what you would normally wear in the day helps to put you in the right mind frame for the night'. 'Getting ready' is therefore a ritual where the individual knowingly creates a symbolic image of their body, an act which mentally and physically transforms them into a clubber and prepares them to enter the liminal space of the club.

The second ritual of clubbing is 'predrinks'. This occurs after everyone has carried out the ritual of 'getting ready' and gathered either at a friend's house or a pub/bar. 'Predrinks' is often the time when clubbers will drink the majority of their alcohol for the night: on a big night out around a bottle of wine per person, or around 500ml of a spirit. I was told the purpose most widely associated with 'predrinks' was to get the majority of the group together in one place and to get 'nicely drunk' cheaply which can then be sustained once at the club. As a ritual, the purpose of 'predrinks' is to set up and denote the type of night about to be undertaken and further transform the participants into clubbers. For the first night of my fieldwork I attended a 'predrinks' at my friend Roisin's which lasted from around 9pm until 11.20pm. Throughout this time members of our group turned up, each with either a bottle of spirits and mixer or wine, and we proceeded to listen to music and drink until everyone was ready for the night ahead. During 'predrinks' the conversation was primarily focused on other nights out people had recently had at University, the funny things people had done and said whilst drunk, and our aims for the night ahead. Although it was a friendly conversation, I also felt people were competing to see who was the most experienced and successful at clubbing. This I feel relates to the concept of clubbing as an activity which helps identify you in the role of 'student', and the more stories you have to tell of nights spent clubbing the more successful you are as a member of this social group. Within my group of informants it became clear that Roisin was able to top all of our stories and established herself as the most experienced clubber and consequently the most successful, fun-loving popular 'student'. Her stories generally consisted of being extremely drunk which resulted in funny and awkward situations, while still managing to make it to lectures the next

morning. Once 'predrinks' had been sufficiently performed it was time to get the bus into town: we were now mentally and physically transformed into clubbers and so were able to cross into the liminal space of the nightclub. In comparison to Schechner's writings on performance and rituals, 'predrinks' could be seen as a period of training, or a time of separation where 'old habits, the old body, old ways of thinking and doing are fiercely attacked, deconstructed, and eliminated even as new ways of doing, thinking, and feeling are being built' (1994:643).

In the club: transgression and transformation

Victor Turner considers ritual processes to contain a liminal phase which is detached from the setting of everyday life, betwixt and between, characterized by ambiguity (1969: 95; 1990: 11). I believe this liminal nature is also present in the social setting of nightclubs, a space where the social norms and rules no longer apply and instead where transgressive behaviour can occur safely without fear of repercussions. For example, at the beginning of each of my four evenings spent clubbing the sorts of transgressive events that occurred included louder and more boisterous than usual behaviour, individuals performing very provocative dance moves, other dancers showing off flashy dance moves, and lots of strangers talking and actively engaging with each other. As the nights progressed increasingly people paired off and started to 'make out' (kissing and touching each other), initially moving off to the corners of the room but gradually becoming more public and visible. The conversations became more explicit and the encounters became more obviously intent on propositioning sex. All of these events and social encounters I believe occurred because the clubbers knew the liminal nature of the space they were in permitted behaviour otherwise normally taboo. Nathan, a friend I regularly go clubbing with, recalled how he had encountered a couple having sex in the toilets of a nightclub, and although taken aback he said he was 'not particularly surprised as it was one of those things you expect to happen in a club'.

This dependence on setting is comparable to Goffman's idea of 'fronts' which are elements of a performance, such as the location, which defines the situation for the audience and the performer. The performer 'cannot begin their act until they have brought themselves to the appropriate place and must terminate their performance when they leave it' (1990: 32-33). When I asked my friends why they liked clubbing the general answer was quite simply that it is fun. It is a way to be with your friends for not too much money and more often than not you are guaranteed a good time. On top of this however, I was also told repeatedly how it is enjoyable because it is a way to let loose, relax and forget the world. Eirlys answered that it gave her 'the opportunity to be someone you can't always be normally. It offers adventure and a range of experiences'. Jeandré, a bar tender at a smaller club called Cascas also told me of times when men will buy rounds of drinks for the whole club and 'suddenly they'll have friends and be the most popular guy there'. For those who want it therefore, nightclubs also offer the opportunity of escapism, giving clubbers the chance to behave differently and perform in a way normally prohibited, and this is enabled through a shared knowledge of what is allowed in such a space. However, there are moments when misinterpretations occur. For example, at *Digital*, Helen and Mel were approached and unwantedly 'hit on' by two men. The men's intentions of clubbing had clashed with those of the girls and they had misread their symbolic communication of dress and behaviour. The liminal nature of the club therefore opens the way for a variety of different social encounters not performed in other spaces but it also creates the possibility for misunderstandings.

Furthermore, this transgressive behaviour is actually a necessary feature of clubbing and required for identification as a 'clubber'. For example, in my last night in the field I went to a club night called 'Bastard Pop' at a club called *Audio*. Here I observed that abnormal behaviour fitted in better with the club setting and identity of 'clubber' compared with more modest behaviour. A friend of mine called James had taken to the dance floor and was dancing in a very flashy and eccentric way. As the rest of the group joined James they all made jokey comments about his

dancing because it was far more flamboyant compared to the usual bopping up and down most people performed. In comparison however, Cameron had forgotten to bring any money to the club and had not participated in 'predrinks'. This lack of preparation forced him to remain sober and consequently he was unable to let loose and fully engage in the clubbing. If we compare this idea to Van Gennep's (1960) ideas on rites of passage Cameron can be seen as not participating in the necessary prerequisites and thus was unable to progress into the next stage of the ritual (*Ibid*: 1). In observing these two different styles of behaviour it became noticeable that although James was far more over the top in his behaviour he fitted in and fulfilled the requirements of clubbing and 'clubber', and therefore 'cool student/youth', far better than Cameron.

Using clubbing to demonstrate the occupation of a social role is also comparable to Goffman's idea of 'idealization': when a performance is socialised and moulded to fit the understandings and expectations of the society in which it is performed there is a tendency for this performance to be idealised (1990: 44). Clubbing has become strongly identified with the social group of students and young people and therefore it could be seen that when clubbing these young people are conducting an idealised version of the role of clubber and fun-loving student in accordance with social expectation. For example, Cameron told me how he does not like clubbing much but he joins in because all his friends do it and because 'it's the cool thing to do', a statement also supported by the competitive conversation won by Roisin during 'predrinks'. To be a clubber is to be cool and so through its performance Cameron is able to identify himself in a desirable social role.

These rules and expectations are what make nightclubs liminal spaces and if broken threaten the ability of the club to remain a safe place of transgression. For example, at *Digital*, my friend Mel had her phone stolen and once we realised what had happened the club stopped performing its function as a space of transgression and fun because an unexpected event had caused us to end our activities as clubbers. Similarly, this happens when people get too drunk because the dangers and realities of the outside world gain precedence again and one is transformed from 'clubber' to 'carer'.

A club can therefore only remain a transgressive place for as long as the individual remains a 'clubber' and this can only occur when the space fulfils the expectations of the participants. If either of these requirements is challenged then the activity of clubbing cannot take place because there is not a sufficient distance from the normal everyday world.

Anthropologist in the field: the practicalities of conducting fieldwork in a nightclub

So far my ethnography of clubbing has been focused on how the transgressive and transformative experiences of clubbing are created through rituals and social expectations and how these features are needed to create and sustain the role of 'clubber', which is connected to the social role of student/youth. However, it is important to discuss the practicalities of conducting fieldwork in a nightclub and how I believe my presence has influenced the encounters I observed and experienced. On my second night out I went to a club called *Coalition* and their club night 'Secret Discothèque'. Outside I spoke to a man who works for *Coalition* as a sales representative and photographer but he was very wary to talk to me. He asked if I was a reporter and did not believe my answer that I was a student conducting fieldwork. Similarly, earlier in the evening I spoke to a bouncer and asked if many fights broke out. He told me hardly ever but then later in the conversation also said that the police are constantly helping them out. It seemed that he too was suspicious of my motives for asking such questions and it is possible that he feared I might expose something illegal about the club's activities. In studying nightclubs it seems I was threatening the club's function as a liminal space by trying to expose its transgressive elements.

Furthermore, it became apparent to me that in studying nightclubs and asking my friends questions concerning why they were doing certain things I was breaking the mind-set they were trying to create. When I first proposed my research project to my friends I was surprised by their unenthusiastic reactions, especially when they were all huge fans of clubbing. I had been expecting their responses to express how lucky I was to be able to study such a cool thing, but instead they

were concerned and Roisin asked nervously if I was going to be bringing a clipboard. I feel this lack of enthusiasm came firstly from the threat I posed to the image of a clubber and consequently to their identity as 'cool students' by behaving in a way unsuitable for the club environment. Secondly my fieldwork damaged the club's function of enabling escapism and recreation. As I have already stated, my friends saw the point of clubbing as a way to let loose and forget the world, using the rituals of 'getting ready' and 'predrinks' to put them in the right physical and mental state in order to transgress and transform within the club. In asking questions and making them reflect upon their actions I was damaging, if not inhibiting, their ability to become a clubber, the very thing I wanted to observe.

Lastly, Turnbull (1990) has emphasised the importance of complete physical and mental participation when doing fieldwork and that after one has studied anthropology or has a specific focus in mind they are subsequently unable to observe freely (*Ibid*: 53). I feel I encountered a similar problem on my fieldwork because I was going to clubs with the intention of observing social encounters and consequently I was unable to fully mentally participate in the clubbing. I lacked the intention to be transgressive and so could not fully occupy the role of a clubber because I was aware of also performing the role of anthropologist.

Clubbing therefore is an activity which you can physically perform by behaving in certain unrestrained ways. However to truly be a 'clubber' one must also be in the mind-set of a clubber and this is created through rituals prior to entering the club space. These rituals further remove the nightclub from the everyday world which enables it to offer escapism through its allowance of transgressive behaviour. This separate nature of nightclubs make them comparable to the liminal spaces Van Gennep and Turner see as occurring in rituals but is a feature only sustained so long as outside forces are kept away and the participants are able to remain in the mind-set of clubbers. Clubbing is an activity associated with the social role of student and in particular someone who is 'cool'. It is therefore an activity one can use to create and control an image of themselves through

the social expectations surrounding it. Clubbing has a strongly performative element to it and despite its transgressive and possibly chaotic or dangerous appearance it is an activity governed by rules and restrictions. There is therefore more to clubbing and nightclubs than may first seem and this makes them places of both individual and anthropological interest.

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