Time Work: Customizing Temporal Experience*

MICHAEL G. FLAHERTY
Eckerd College

The literature on agency neglects temporality; the literature on temporality neglects agency. This paper integrates these largely separate lines of research with the concept "time work," which is defined as individual or interpersonal efforts to create or suppress particular kinds of temporal experience. Semistructured, open-ended interviews were conducted with 398 subjects, who were asked to describe ways in which they engage in time work. Analytic induction yielded five themes: in descending order of prevalence, the subjects reported efforts to control or manipulate duration, frequency, sequence, timing, and allocation. The variety and prevalence of time work suggests the sovereignty of self-determination; for the most part, however, time work contributes to cultural reproduction.

From the beginnings of social psychology, it has been an article of faith that the self plays a large and active role in the determination of human experience. "My experience is what I agree to attend to," according to William James (1890:402)—surely an overstatement, but instructive nonetheless. He points out that, in general, he disregards those things which "have no interest for me." In so doing, one exercises a measure of self-determination in the selection of that environment to which one will have to respond. Curiously, however, James does not apply this perspective to temporal experience in his chapter, "The Perception of Time." For James, temporal experience is determined by one’s circumstances, not by selective attention: a busy interval will seem to have passed quickly, while an empty tract of time "seems long in passing" (1890:624). It would appear that the individual in question has no choice in the matter.

A related disconnection appears in the work of George Herbert Mead. Time is the central issue in his intellectual agenda (Flaherty and Fine 2001). Moreover, Adam (1990:38) asserts rightly that Mead’s analysis of temporality has implications for "the very foundations of social theory." Why was time so important for Mead? What was he trying to do? In his influential course, Social Psychology, Mead (1934:v, 2–3) began his lectures with a critique of John B. Watson’s ([1924] 1998) version of behaviorism. Watson believed that human conduct is circumscribed by the temporality of behaviorism: a stimulus (i.e., cause) precedes a response (i.e., effect). In other words, the past determines the future. Mead recognized that this temporal framework excludes what he viewed as essential facets of human nature: choice, novelty, emergence, and improvisation. Thus Joas ([1980] 1997:167–68) concludes that "Mead’s theory of time" was formulated in opposition to the temporality of "mechanistic determinism."

Mead rejects the idea that human behavior is an immediate and unthinking response to a prior stimulus. Rather, he maintains, there is a moment between the stimulus and the response—which he calls the "specious present" (Mead 1938:220)—during which one interprets the situation and selects an appropriate response. Given a selective response, the specious present is the source of choice, emergence, and uncertainty in social interaction. What is more, from Mead’s (1932:12) perspective, "the past . . . is as hypothetical as the future" because it is always

* I am grateful for the assistance of Dianna Bass-Campolo, Lloyd Chapin, Lori Ducharme, Gretchen Flaherty, Timothy Fluharty, Susan Fuller, Martina Lebreton, Lisa Mills, Kate Nangeroni, Linda O’Bryant, Kristie Taylor, and Leslie Wasson. In addition, I want to thank Cecilia Ridgeway and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. Direct all correspondence to Michael G. Flaherty, Department of Sociology, Eckerd College, 4200 54th Avenue South, St. Petersburg, FL 33711; flahermg@eckerd.edu.

1 Here and elsewhere in this paper, emphasis is in the original.
interpreted and reinterpreted from the standpoint of the present, whereas in Watson’s behaviorism, the organism’s response is evoked by an antecedent stimulus that emanates from the environment.

As Joas ([1980] 1997:187) notes, in contrast to behaviorism and its deterministic temporality, Mead’s social psychology assumes that the individual’s selective attention is “constitutive of the environment and not an epiphenomenon to the environment.” Mead’s own words elaborate on those of William James:

Our whole intelligent process seems to lie in the attention which is selective of certain types of stimuli. Other stimuli which are bombarding the system are in some fashion shunted off. We give our attention to one particular thing. Not only do we open the door to certain stimuli and close it to others, but our attention is an organizing process as well as a selective process. When giving attention to what we are going to do we are picking out the whole group of stimuli which represent successive activity. Our attention enables us to organize the field in which we are going to act. Here we have the organism as acting and determining its environment. It is not simply a set of passive senses played upon by the stimuli that come from without. The organism goes out and determines what it is going to respond to, and organizes that world. (1934:25)

Like James, however, Mead does not consider the possibility that one can attend selectively to the environment or otherwise modify it for the express purpose of customizing one’s temporal experience.

Alfred Schutz (1962) is a pivotal figure in the study of temporal experience. Not only does he acknowledge his intellectual debt to James and Mead (Schutz 1962:216–17) but, subsequent to integrating their contributions with phenomenology, his own work would have a profound influence on the thinking of Harold Garfinkel (1967:ix). For Schutz (1962:215–16) the “objective or cosmic time” of clocks and calendars must be distinguished from “the inner time or durée within which our actual experiences are connected with the past . . . and with the future.”

Garfinkel makes explicit use of this distinction in his analysis of efforts by Agnes, the “intersexed” person, to manage her problems in becoming and being accepted as a “normal female”:

It is not sufficient to say that Agnes’ situations are played out over time, nor is it at all sufficient to regard this time as clock time. There is as well the “inner time” of recollection, remembrance, anticipation, expectancy. (1967:166)

Agnes is quite sensitive to the fact that she needs a particular past in order to realize a particular future. Consequently Garfinkel gives extensive consideration to the ways that passing as female involves temporal awareness and the manipulation of time.

Agnes does not passively accept what the environment offers as responses to her physical condition. On the contrary, Garfinkel observes that “her sex was for her a matter of willful election between available alternatives” (1967:125). This endeavor is fraught with complications, however, not the least of which are the tenses of time. Thus Garfinkel makes it clear that Agnes is no less willful concerning her temporality:

Time played a peculiar role in constituting for Agnes the significance of her present situation. With regard to the past, we have seen the prominence with which she historicised, making for herself and presenting us with a socially acceptable biography [i.e., one that ignored the inconvenient fact that she was raised as a boy until puberty]. . . . On the side of future events, one is struck by the prevalence with which her expectations were expectations of the timing in the fall of events. (1967:178)

Garfinkel (1967:136) demonstrates that “work had to be done”—work consisting of the “active and deliberate management of her appearances before others.” He concludes that “normal sexuality is accomplished through witnessable displays of talk and conduct” (p. 180). His findings suggest that normal temporality also may be accomplished through deliberate efforts to control or manage various dimensions of time.

Other scholars, influenced by Mead and Garfinkel, have tried to make the link between self-determination and temporality a central part of our conceptual framework. Along the way, self-determination has been redefined as “agency,” which is viewed as a general form of social action. Giddens
CUSTOMIZING TEMPORAL EXPERIENCE

(1979:54) calls for “the incorporation of temporality into the understanding of human agency,” and he contends (1979:56) that agentic conduct is based upon choice: “[I]t is a necessary feature of action that, at any point in time, the agent ‘could have acted otherwise.’” Similarly, Emirbayer and Mische (1998:963) assert that the “agentic dimension of social action can only be captured in its full complexity . . . if it is analytically situated within the flow of time.” Given their strictly theoretical agenda, however, these scholars make no attempt to examine this link empirically. Nor do they conceive of directing agency toward the modification of one’s own temporal experience.

Much the same can be said of the literature on the sociology of time. This field has been dominated by Zerubavel’s (1976, 1985) research on the social construction and social organization of temporality. His writings explore the standardization of time (1982) as well as struggles to overthrow existing standards (1977); thus he emphasizes collective efforts to establish or modify temporal systems. In contrast, there are social psychological studies that concern variation in the perceived passage of time (Flaherty 1991, 1999). In this line of research, I show that temporal experience reflects the density of information processing occasioned by one’s immediate situation. Put differently, these studies reveal how one’s circumstances shape temporal experience. In a departure from the deterministic implications of these findings, however, I have conceptualized “time work” as one direction for future research (Flaherty 1999:158; Flaherty and Meer 1994:717).

Time work integrates agency with temporality. The concept is derived from Mead’s (1934) lectures on self-determination and from Garfinkel’s (1967) analysis of gender “work” as well as the related “management” of temporal experience. Further inspiration can be found in willful processes such as “emotion work” (Hochschild 1979) and “customizing the body” (Sanders 1989). Thus we can define time work as one’s effort to promote or suppress a particular temporal experience.

Although time work has been conceptualized, it has not received systematic empirical scrutiny. Therefore this study was provoked by the following question: To what extent and in what ways do individuals purposefully construct lines of activity or social situations in order to create particular kinds of temporal experience?

DATA AND METHODS

To address this question, we need first-person narratives that carefully describe cognitive and behavioral efforts at the micromanagement of temporal experience. The content of these narratives should reveal something of the motivation for this conduct. It should not be difficult to generate such evidence. Sewell (1992:20) states “that a capacity for agency—for desiring, for forming intentions, and for acting creatively—is inherent in all humans.” Yet he also points out that agency is “culturally and historically determined” (p. 20), so this “highly generalized capacity” will be manifest only in “specific forms” that differ “from one social world to another” (p. 21). Sewell’s comments sensitize us to the relationship between one’s social location and certain kinds of agency.

With these considerations in mind, I designed and supervised semistructured, open-ended interviews with 332 undergraduates who were enrolled in an introductory sociology course from 1997 to 2000. They included 159 males and 173 females, almost all of whom were white. The respondents came from 49 states; but, as one would expect, they were fairly homogeneous as to socioeconomic background. Consequently, similar interviews were conducted with 66 individuals (29 males and 37 females) from various walks of life. Their occupations ranged from waitress to banker and from beautician to engineer.

The interviews were conducted by research assistants who were trained in the data-gathering procedures but were not privy to the theoretical framework. None of the respondents were at a loss for relevant responses, an indication of the prevalence of this form of conduct. In addition, college students enjoy a societal license for creativity and self-exploration, so this population may represent an exceptionally fertile source of temporal innovation.

The resulting 398 narratives constitute the data for this study, and will enable us to
consider the implications of time work for our understanding of agency in temporal experience.

The exact wording of each question was not specified in advance so, in a strict sense, there was no script for these interviews. My research assistants, however, used a standard opening statement as well as a list of especially relevant questions to guide them through the same sequence of topics. In all cases, the interviews began with the following introduction: “This study concerns ways in which people attempt to control or customize their own experience of time, or that of others. Is there any way in which you try to influence or manipulate the experience of time?” This opening was designed to make our respondents start thinking about time work—certainly not a subject uppermost in their thoughts when the interview began. Confirmation followed the interviewer’s recognition of a pertinent (but often tentative) response: “Yes, that’s what we’re looking for.”

Handing the respondent a pad of paper, the interviewer then prompted written answers to the following questions: “Is there a particular time or day during which you find yourself in this situation? Would you describe the physical location of this situation? Would you describe any relevant objects? Generally speaking, how would you describe the social situation? In other words, what is supposed to be happening? Are there any other persons involved in this situation besides yourself? If so, please describe them, including your relationship. Now we would like you to describe how you control or customize the experience of time, and please be as specific as possible.” Finally, the interviewer recorded each respondent’s age, race, gender, and occupation.

As Zelditch noted many years ago, “[A] single observer cannot be everywhere at the same time, nor can he be ‘everywhere’ in time” (1962:572). The interview format called upon respondents to describe their practices and the social settings within which they transpire. In effect, the interview prompted our respondents to reconstruct the elements of a situation during which they had attempted to control or customize some dimension of temporal experience. Put differently, the format of the interview was designed to produce narratives such that it was as if the researcher had been the respondent, present at the scene, and thereby able to record not only the objective features of the situation but also his or her subjective experiences of time (Denzin 1971). With this procedure, the respondent became what Zelditch calls “the observer’s observer” (1962:572).

The interviews were conducted one-on-one at a mutually agreeable time and place. They rarely required more than 45 minutes. Moreover, while time work is an aspect of ongoing interaction, these interviews were retrospective and were vulnerable to the usual hazards associated with that procedure. For example, respondents may have hesitated to report embarrassing or illegal practices. This problem was mitigated, however, by the use of students as interviewers as evidenced by a number of surprising admissions in the resulting narratives.

Also, of course, there is another virtue in separating the tasks of data gathering and data analysis, especially in qualitative research. It may have been difficult to articulate agentic practices that are taken for granted, but the interviews proved to be effective at evoking relevant responses. By the same token, however, the extent of this problem may indicate that time work is even more prevalent than my data suggest. In addition, the format of the interview may make some of these practices seem more thoughtful and less habitual than they are in everyday life. Yet, as we will see, respondents frequently accounted for their practices in terms of exigencies or logical principles, thereby testifying to their intentional character.

I used analytic induction to arrive at a typology of time work and its motivations (Katz 1988). Multiple readings of the first-person narratives revealed a number of themes and variations. Each new response was examined for its fit (or lack thereof) with previously gathered data. Negative cases prompted reformulation of the provisional categories until I arrived at a scheme of classification that encompassed all of the empirical materials. By disregarding the concrete idiosyncrasies that make each narrative unique, I was able to construct generic or abstract types of time work. Nonetheless, the
CUSTOMIZING TEMPORAL EXPERIENCE

idiosyncrasies figured in the recognition of variations on major themes. Novel responses served as the basis for new categories; familiar responses confirmed the identification of predominant motifs. The goal was to discover what people do to influence or manipulate their experience of time, as well as learning their reasons for doing so.

RESULTS

Time is a multidimensional phenomenon. Not surprisingly, then, our efforts to control or customize temporal experience are heterogeneous, but not endlessly so. Common features in the narratives track related forms of attention to particular dimensions of time, thereby serving as the basis for a classification of these practices into several broad themes that represent different types of time work.

To begin with, there are efforts to influence perceived duration: that is, many respondents report trying to make an interval seem longer or shorter than its objective length as measured by the clock or calendar. Other respondents focus on the manipulation of frequency by deciding how often something happens per standard temporal unit, thereby exercising control over the rate at which they experience it. Every event transpires within a temporal sequence: that is, some things precede it while others follow. Some respondents try to customize the order or succession (first, second, third, etc.) of their activities or experiences. In addition, some respondents seek the optimal timing of an event, which involves control over when something happens: for example, deciding what day of the week is best for a certain activity or experience. Finally, there are efforts to determine the allocation of time. Many of us recognize that, unless we set an hour or day aside, there may be no time left for purely personal experiences, once our various duties have been discharged.

To be sure, these are analytical or etic categories, but they are empirically grounded in emic terminology that marks different ways of “doing time.” As such, this terminology reveals a spectrum of intentions or motivations on the part of people in varied circumstances. What is more, these forms of time work are clearly distinguishable from one another. Timing concerns when something happens: not how long it seems to take (duration), how often it occurs (frequency), what precedes or follows it (sequence), or whether it happens at all (allocation). Making time for something (allocation) does not mean that it happens with any specific regularity (frequency) nor at any particular hour of the day (timing); it may be something that occurs “every now and then.” Conversely, one may exercise control over when to have a meeting (timing), yet may have little or no say in what transpires during that interval (allocation). Selecting the best day for a certain activity or experience (timing) may have nothing to do with what happens on the day before or the day after (sequence), but simply may reflect the fact that one has fewer obligations at the end of the week. The decision to set time aside for something (allocation) need not concern about antecedent or subsequent events (sequence).

Thus the process of analytic induction yielded five major themes. In descending order of prevalence, the subjects reported efforts to control or manipulate duration (n = 123), frequency (n = 89), sequence (n = 80), timing (n = 61), and allocation (n = 45). There was no difference in the order of prevalence between males and females. In fact, the number of males and females in each category differed by more than 2 only for duration, which was reported by 72 females and 51 males. Almost the same order of prevalence was found among students and nonstudents alike; the sole exception was that equal numbers of nonstudents reported efforts to customize sequence and timing.

The strong similarity between these distributions bolsters confidence in their comparability, but the sample does not permit us to conclude that these distributions are representative of population parameters. In the following sections, I explore each of the five major themes and present examples for illustration.

Duration

There is variation in the perceived passage of time, and from a deterministic stand-
point, one’s circumstances condition one’s experience of duration. Yet the evidence indicates that we would be hard pressed to find someone who, in passive manner, surrenders to the temporal dictates of the situation. If our circumstances make for (or can be anticipated to make for) the perception that time is passing slowly, we “act” in such a way that it seems to accelerate. For example, one young man describes how he speeds up a boring class: “I doodle in my notebook and talk to the person next to me. . . . I look at people [and] think of places I’d rather be or what I’d rather be doing.” Instead of imagining possibilities, a young woman in the same situation draws from her memories: “I write letters to my friends when I want time to go by faster, because it makes me think of fun times I’ve had when I’ve been with them.”

Some of the methods used in class are tried and true, such as passing notes (now electronically) and making faces in an effort to get a laugh from the person in the next seat. Other techniques exemplify what Joas ([1980] 1997:176) refers to as “the creative character of human intelligence.” Two women provide the following variations:

I’ll draw a circle someplace on my paper and start filling it in, like pie pieces, as time goes by. For some reason, this helps me focus more on the speaker, and I also do not want to look at my watch as much because the more I look, the lesser the piece I fill in will be. Time just seems to go by much faster when I fill in a larger piece.

When I was in high school, I used to write out the seconds on my notebook so class would seem like it was going by quicker, but I could never get the exact second; I was always off. It actually did make time go by quicker because I was challenged by this and spent my class time concentrating on this, rather than the boring class.

Other techniques are applied to many related circumstances: air travel, driving (especially long distances, but even while stopped at a traffic light), and, of course, slow periods at work. The objective length of the interval in question ranged from the months of a particular season (e.g., working at four jobs during “the summer I was away from my boyfriend”) to the moments before a fateful revelation:

My friend thought she might be pregnant, so I waited with her while she took the test. That one-minute wait was going to seem like an eternity for her, so I was there to make it go by quicker.

One variant involves filling otherwise “empty” time while the individual waits for something to happen. The following excerpt gives us an inkling of how finely drawn such effort can be:

The conditioner that I use needs to be in my hair for two minutes in order to work as it’s intended to. While I’m waiting, I wash my body with soap. . . . These two minutes would feel much longer if I were just standing there.

Similarly, a 71-year-old woman takes a pill every morning “that requires me to remain in an upright position . . . with nothing to eat or drink except water for thirty minutes.” Her response reveals the exercise of deliberation and selection:

My husband . . . sleeps later than I do, so I am alone and can choose to do what I want to make the thirty minutes seem to go by faster. I vary what I do, as each day presents some unfinished business. I might do household chores . . . or I might write letters, or, if I’m feeling indulgent and into a very good book, I might read.

In contrast, some individuals find themselves in (or anticipate) pleasurable circumstances, and they want to prolong the experience. For instance, one young woman tells us how she savor a weekend:

I always try to make the good days last a little longer by spacing [out] the things I’m going to do . . . so that there’s always something waiting to be done. I’ll also try to make the days seem longer by making it a point to stop in the middle of it and think about what I am doing and what I still have left to do, and for a while at least, put time on hold.

A 54-year-old psychologist uses a similar technique while she is on vacation: “I try to slow down my breathing, visually take in my surroundings, be aware of being in the present moment, be grateful for this time to be
peaceful and relaxed, and enjoy my surroundings or activity."

Whereas those who want to accelerate the perceived passage of time imagine or remember other circumstances, those who wish to prolong their experiences concentrate on the here-and-now of the current situation. There was less of this kind of effort in the data, however, and the subjects seemed less adept at slowing the experience of time than at speeding it up. That is, a few subjects described trying to slow the perceived passage of time but failing to do so.2

The variety of settings represented in the data suggests that almost no situation is free of efforts to control or manipulate one's experience of duration. It would appear that people from various walks of life are vigilant and creative in the use of personal or situated resources, and that they take the initiative to customize the perceived passage of time. What is more, their efforts often display enthusiasm, inventiveness, and versatility. Some of their efforts are behavioral and overt, but much of their time work involves subjective processes such as selective attention and interpretation.

Because these efforts frequently concern the taken-for-granted minutiae of everyday life, it is easy to see how such conduct can escape the notice of subjects and researchers alike. The efforts may involve doing something (e.g., filling in slices of a temporal pie chart) or not doing something (e.g., looking at one's watch), and there is certainly no end of things to do. Subjects read, listen to music, exercise, check their mail, watch television, eat, drink, take drugs, play games, engage in conversation, notice what other customers are purchasing, count exit signs on the interstate, and pursue countless other activities in order to alter the perceived passage of time. Indeed, these data suggest that a great deal of our conduct is directed toward this endeavor.

Frequency

It is possible to customize another aspect of temporality: how often things happen. We begin with those people who are trying to increase the frequency of certain activities or experiences. For one young woman, it is the rate at which she exercises:

To motivate myself . . . sometimes I'll use a walkman, run with a partner, or say to myself, "Yo—just do it!" I feel it's important to make time for physical activity. Over time, I've increased frequency in that now I run every day.

One can attempt to modify the rate of one's own behavior or that of others, and to do so for good or bad reasons. This brings us to the realm of seduction and manipulation.3 For example, one student tries to encourage truancy by telling his roommate that "missing class is not the end of the world." Another wheedles more money from her mother through the strategic use of sibling rivalry: "I tell her how I am struggling and that my brother [is] on Easy Street, and two days later a check will be in the mail." In other cases—a crucial consideration—we can observe the indirect manipulation of self as one creates or selects circumstances precisely because they call for behavior that one desires but does not always have the will to exhibit. In short, frequency can have important implications for identity. After all, writers write: "I do force myself to take creative writing courses so that I will write more often."

We also must consider people who are trying to establish or maintain the regular occurrence of an experience or event. Often this effort involves taking responsibilities and constructing personal schedules for oneself or others. A 47-year-old woman with two children states that, "[A]s their mother, it's my job to make sure they take a regular shower." Likewise, a 52-year-old father "set

---

2 To slow the perceived passage of time, one must concentrate attention on a particular aspect of self or situation, thereby increasing the density of experience per standard temporal unit (Flaherty 1999). Such effort requires cultural configurations and forms of mental discipline unfamiliar to the members of our society, a theme to which I return in the concluding section.

3 Not all intentional behavior is manipulative; conversely, it is possible to be manipulative in a habitual or relatively unconscious fashion. Time work varies along a continuum from habitual and unconscious practices to conscious and highly purposeful efforts, but my data indicate that the bulk of these practices are deliberate.
up times for my youngest son to feed and care for his pets.”

Students confront the need to create schedules that balance the demands of school, job, exercise, and social activities, but so does this 29-year-old insurance salesman:

My girlfriend would like to see me more often, but when she’s around I can’t concentrate. So I tell her she can only come over on the weekends, which she doesn’t really like, but it has to be that way so I can get my work done.

As Mead (1934) would have it, this individual seeks to control the frequency with which demands on his time emanate from the environment. With only the slightest change in emphasis, however, one’s schedule can become a vehicle for hedonism and self-expression. Each year, for example, a 48-year-old man organizes a golfing trip for 15 of his friends. A student does all of his work before dinner “so I can have guilt-free pleasure every evening.” “To have fun and learn new stuff,” another student strives “to maintain a consistent frequency of daily practice” on his bass guitar.

In addition, there are those who want to decrease the frequency of undesirable behavior or experiences. One young woman wears “a certain sweatshirt” until it feels dirty because this gives her “the satisfaction of not doing laundry all the time.” Another avoids eyestrain by wearing her glasses when she has a lot of reading to do “because my contacts tend to dry out.” A third reduces the amount of time she spends fighting with her father by calling home only when she knows he is not there, while a fourth attempts to “control how often I visit my ex-boyfriend” because “if I see him too much, then I’ll be really sad that we aren’t together.”

Nonetheless, there is a certain irony in the fact that a number of responses concern how one limits the frequency of desirable, even necessary, activities. There is, for instance, one 55-year-old woman who tries to impose a diet on her less-dedicated spouse:

I purposely prevent my husband from eating between meals so that he loses weight. . . . So I posted reminders on the fridge and pantry doors to remind him not to snack between meals.

Typically, however, respondents make efforts at self-control despite sexual attraction, peer pressure, and addiction. A young woman deprives herself of time with her boyfriend: “I specifically will not go places where I know he is at because I don’t want him to think I’m some obsessed crazy girl who can’t get enough of him.” A young man resists getting drunk with his friends “if I have a lot of work.” And a young woman enforces a quota on her habit: “I smoke, and I know that it’s bad for me, so I try to smoke only six cigarettes a day.” Contrary to the stereotypes, most students recognize the need for self-restraint within a context where there is almost always someone willing to do almost anything with you. Here again, we see willful resistance to the causal trajectory of immediate circumstances.

One might dismiss these responses as familiar forms of determinism: young people, away from home for the first time, resisting the temptations of one social context in the name of values imparted in a previous but equally social context. Yet it is difficult to apply that reasoning to other instances, where one’s modulation of frequency has more to do with self-satisfaction than it does with social responsibility. For example, one young man reports taking a break from something he enjoys in order to refresh his enthusiasm for it:

If I watch Letterman every night . . . it gets routine, and I probably won’t watch it for a very long time. Then the show becomes interesting again, and I’ll look forward to watching it. The same goes for listening to certain songs [and] reading certain kinds of books.

Moreover, it would appear that this dynamic is not uncommon, as it can be found in such diverse activities as golf and horseback riding:

The more I play, the less interested I become, due to a lot of factors—especially frustration. But the opposite happens if I haven’t played in a while. I can’t wait to get out and play a ton of golf.

I started getting very cold to the whole sport. The horse became a machine and my love for the animal became null and void. As I began to realize that it was because of the amount of
time I spent with the animal, I decided to spend less time there.

Exploiting a circular causality, these subjects temporarily refrain from something in order to stave off overfamiliarity, thereby renewing their enjoyment of the activity in question. Clearly, people do not allow natural or social periodicities to dictate their entire experience of frequency.

Sequence

Like many of us, one young woman eats her food in a particular order, but she also admits that she eats “all of something before starting to eat something else.” (As one might imagine, she finds salads especially vexing.) In any case, her statement suggests a more general point: the sequence of events is rarely left to chance, even in the smallest details of everyday life.

For another young woman, dressing presents a similar opportunity for the temporal organization of behavior:

I wear the first shirt in the closet and then move it to the back. This way, there will be variety instead of repeating the shirt in two days. This also allows for repeating the shirt every fourteen to seventeen days. If a certain shirt is first, and I really don’t want to wear it, I’ll wear it anyway because it’s in order. Shirts are ordered in a particular way: T-shirts, shirts with buttons and no collar, polo shirts. I alternate daily from each type of shirt, beginning with the T-shirts. If a T-shirt is worn, it will be put at the back of the T-shirt section, and the next day, a shirt with no collar will be worn.

This elaborate system reveals something of the same exquisite sensitivity displayed by Garfinkel’s (1967) subject, Agnes. It is an extreme case, to be sure, but, as one young man states, “planning is a way of manipulating time.”

Often, planning involves making lists and establishing priorities along a number of possible dimensions, such as relative difficulty or personal significance. The data revealed two countervariations in this regard and the following excerpts are typical of the predominant one:

I study subjects in order of importance. Chemistry is the most important to me, so it always comes first. Also, it is the hardest class, so I have to study more. Then comes microbiology because it is the next [most] difficult.

I do the exercises I like the least first, then save the easier exercises for the end of the workout. The exercises I do first usually require more strength and endurance, which I have at the beginning of the routine.

Others, however, express an equally reasonable but contradictory perspective:

When I’m at work, my boss leaves a list of things that must get done before closing if she will not be there. I read over the list, and I tend to do the simplest tasks first, mostly because it makes me feel like I got more accomplished. The more tasks crossed out on the list, the better I feel about my performance and the more refreshed I feel when I dive into the larger tasks.

I set up my practice routine in a way that lets me do the fun stuff first so I am in a positive state of mind when I work on harder things like putting.

Either way, it should be obvious that we are not dealing with taken-for-granted habits. Subjects repeatedly provide reasons or even espouse principles that account for their time work. One young man declares, “I always try to find a logical order of doing something,” while a young woman says, “When eating, I eat what is hot or warm and can get cold first.”

For others, time is a precious resource that can be “saved” through efficiency and conservation:

Sometimes I have a few things to do while I’m out, such as mailing a letter, getting a book from the library, going to class, and then going to lunch. I try to mail my letter on the way to class. Then, after class, I’ll stop by the library, which is on the way to the cafeteria, and pick up my book. Then I’ll eat lunch and go home. I’ve made one trip to class and back, but in between, I’ve accomplished three errands—mail, library, and lunch—and this has saved me time.

In a related vein, a 73-year-old man extols the virtue of being “methodical” when getting
ready to sail his boat and putting it away afterward.

The subjects have thought about the best way to do things. With these humble procedures, they intend certain effects at the personal level of temporal experience. By and large, they succeed in these efforts.

Of course, it is also possible to exercise agency by shaping the sequence of behavior for others, especially in particular roles and professions. A 35-year-old mother determines the after-school sequence for her children: “I make sure they eat a snack and do their homework; then we eat dinner, and they have to clean their rooms; and then, only when everything is done, can they watch TV.” A 47-year-old coach wields similar power over his players, albeit with some concern for instruction: “I talk to them and convince them to see the logic. . . . I try to show them that in order for these practices to be effective, they must follow a certain order.” Employees are no less subject to such efforts as when a 54-year-old male in middle-management has “to set up the sequence of the day” for the workers in his office.

Those who hold sway over the sequences of others often enjoy some latitude in doing so, but in some sense their own conduct still represents duty or responsibility rather than personal preference. Many people, however, seek to control or customize sequence for what can only be understood as self-actualizing purposes (Maslow 1968).4 For example, in the case of a 25-year-old teacher, temporal order has erotic implications:

It’s kind of funny, but I make my boyfriend undress in a certain way. He always has to take off his tie first. Then his shirt, then his shoes and socks and pants. I like for him to do it this way because I like to see his chest. And I like to watch him take off his pants last because it’s a good view for me.

In this candid statement, selective attention plays the crucial role envisioned by James (1890).

Furthermore, as with frequency, it is clear that people manipulate sequence simply to introduce more variety into their lives:

I don’t do the same things each morning. For instance, I don’t take a shower each morning as soon as I wake up. Some days, I don’t wear my contacts. I don’t always go to my mailbox. Doing this allows these activities to gain a certain novelty because I try to be spontaneous when I do them.

In other circumstances, resistance to the causal trajectory takes the form of self-directed negativity: “I always do the thing I don’t want to do first.” Sequence is often imposed on us by others or by the very nature of certain activities. Nevertheless, there is ample evidence to support the assertion that sequence is frequently another constructed aspect of temporal experience.

Timing

In a world that never seems to stop, a world increasingly characterized by the numbers 24/7/365, one might think that the timing of an action does not matter much, but, in fact, timing is often a crucial dimension of human behavior. Moreover, although nature and society dictate when many things happen, individuals do attempt to exert some control over the timing of various events. Countless aspects of one’s sense of efficacy fall under this rubric, an important source of personal satisfaction. For a 19-year-old man, the issue is when to study:

I know I do not do my best studying in the early evening. I have to wait until the dorm and dormmates calm down. And there is a piece of self-discipline involved. I need to study between 9:30 p.m. and 12:30 a.m. to achieve the best results. If I try to study earlier, I get too distracted.

A number of similar responses concerned exercising, but, in a related variation, one young woman described the optimal time to visit the market:

I try to eat around 5:00 p.m. and then go grocery shopping around 7:00 p.m. That way, the store isn’t crowded and I’m not hungry so I won’t buy junk foods.

---

4 In his essay “Where the Action Is,” Goffman (1967:172–85) implies that there is a spectrum of agency, with duty representing a paler shade than self-actualization.
Once again, we see a loop of self-determination through the construction or selection of intermediate circumstances.

Timing also is intrinsic to interpersonal coordination. Yet because it is so easy to overlook the pervasiveness and arbitrariness of the schedules by which we organize our lives, it comes as something of a shock to see how much of our conduct is encompassed by this category. All manner of agency can be expressed through permutations on a simple question: "When can we get together?" An utterance of this sort is frequently the precursor for meeting with others to exercise, study, shop, play musical instruments, eat, drink, dance, or take recreational drugs. Typically such efforts involve collaboration, but domination is another possibility. A 44-year-old ex-convict provides a chilling example:

I was in a cell by myself for three months, and then a 19-year-old kid was put in with me. On the first day, I came up with rules for when he could do certain things. I basically controlled when the talking started and stopped and when the lights went on and off.

Whether based on negotiation or on domination, the intended result of such efforts is the temporal organization of everyday life.

More than in the other dimensions, the narratives that concern timing reflect attention to strategy and the diplomacy of interpersonal relations. Certainly there are temporal aspects to impression management (Goffman 1959), but other instances show that timing is fundamental to the success of manipulation and related forms of purposive behavior. A 24-year-old female calls two male friends only at certain times "so they won't get the wrong idea," while a crafty young man describes the right time to approach his professor for a favor:

In the situation where I need an extension for a paper or project, I'll ask the professor at the beginning of class. Sometimes I'll even show up a little early. If I can talk to the professor before other people ask him [such] questions, I usually get the extension.

A 25-year-old receptionist is equally shrewd:

I've been living with my husband for three years, and we are still communicating and trying to overcome problems. Also, we both work full-time, and I'm in school full-time, so our morning coffee is often the only time we are together for the day. If there is a problem—like how he takes his laundry out of the hamper to wash it and throws mine on the floor—I certainly don't want to argue, but I want to address it. We're both awake in the morning and alert, receptive, not dragged down by the day and can reconcile problems.

But a 32-year-old engineer puts perhaps too fine a point on it:

Whenever I make an appointment at the barber, I always make sure to avoid the times right before lunch, a typical coffee break time, or closing time. I do this because I don't want the barber to cut my hair in a rush or in a situation where he feels that he has to finish the job quickly so he can have his break or go home. In this way, I minimize the chances of having the barber give me a bad haircut.5

These respondents have given a great deal of thought to when they should do things. Invoking Garfinkel's (1967:136) imagery, we can see that their practices demand "work" of one kind or another in an effort to "manage" the relationship between timing and desire.

In other cases, the control individuals exert over timing seems to express nothing more than personal style or interpersonal preferences. For a 51-year-old librarian, this entails stalling until just the right moment:

When we have a social event to attend which has no specific starting time ... my husband wants to be there right at the beginning, but I want to arrive a little late to ensure that we are not among the first ones there. He will tell me when he wants to go, but as that time approaches, I find little things to do that delay our departure, like finding just the right accessory to wear or remembering there was "something" I wanted to bring ... without making him too upset. And the reason I like to arrive a bit late is because I find it easier to melt into the crowd rather than make awkward conversation.

The reminiscence of a 38-year-old social scientist reveals even greater licence:

---

5 There is a body of folklore concerning the "best" time to do various things, such as having automotive work done, making business calls, and ordering fish in a restaurant.
I used to reverse day and night by staying up all night talking to whomever was around, wandering campus in the dark, reading, then going to class, if I went that day, and then going back to the dorm to sleep. I’d get up around 9:00 p.m., as things were getting socially interesting, and start over. This was mostly as a result of finding daytime quite boring, and the reversal provided some variety and better conversational partners.

In these narratives, we see temporal experience being molded to fit personal predilections.

Allocation

It is not unusual to hear a person talk about “making time” for something or someone, as if time could be manufactured from raw materials. This phrase is evocative when we pause to consider it, because there is a sense in which we “make” time by exercising control over its allocation. Thus a small but interesting segment of the data is devoted to this form of time work.

One of my students is in the process of finishing her dissertation while applying for jobs. A familiar balancing act is required, as she indicates in the following excerpt:

I am only allowing myself to spend four days a month on job applications—two days every two weeks. It could take all of my time if I let it, so I am trying hard not to.

Here we see a common process at work: a socialized self-discipline governs the distribution of temporal resources, thereby shaping temporal experience.

There is, then, a self-conscious tendency to set time aside for our various responsibilities (i.e., selves), but frequently this allocation seems to represent identities, emotional commitments, and strongly held beliefs rather than duty narrowly defined. The notion of “quality time” is a prosaic variation on this theme, and a young woman provides the following example:

My parents would set aside certain times of the week when we all would be together without any interruptions. We weren’t allowed to have friends visit or even talk to them on the phone. We’d talk about various things—school, current events—over dinner, and these conversations would often last until bedtime.

Similarly, other subjects set time aside for friends. In the past, those who were separated from loved ones would have devoted time to reading and writing letters. The contemporary versions are telephone calls and email:

One hour every day—first thing when I get up. . . . I am studying here for one year as an exchange student. All my family and friends and boyfriend are in Ireland, so it is very important for me to keep in contact with these people.

A 40-year-old sales clerk asks her “family to give one hour a week to God,” and a young woman makes time for prayer every night before she goes to sleep. Choices must be made; thus the allocation of time reflects values.

The pursuit of personal development is another variation on the theme of allocation. A 57-year-old realtor states that “exercise improves my mental awareness.” Likewise, a 50-year-old social worker sets aside time for her martial arts instruction:

I find that it’s the only place in my life where I’m usually totally in the moment. I just focus on pain and strength and really don’t have to think about other things that may be problems. It’s very therapeutic.

For a 49-year-old restaurant owner, personal development takes a less martial form:

So I started taking these [ballroom dancing] classes, and it’s been very therapeutic for me. Even though we’re busy doing something, I’m mentally relaxed; I don’t think about anything else but the dance. It’s weird for a man my age to do, but I really like it.

But the set-aside is not always about improving oneself; simply feeling better is often the issue. One young woman makes time for eating chocolate and watching soap operas “when I’m feeling stressed or need a break.” Another young woman, wanting “to feel relaxed [and] pampered,” gets a manicure. A third “decided to put aside thirty minutes a night . . . and devote it to a relaxing, hot bubble bath” while listening to classical music. A young man sets aside “one hour a
CUSTOMIZING TEMPORAL EXPERIENCE

day” when it is “peaceful and quiet” to sit in a “comfy chair” and read for his own enjoyment. For a 32-year-old plumber, pampering takes place on Sundays, when he lies on the couch in his living room to watch football on television with friends: “This is a time that I can set aside to relax and do something I enjoy.”

A more prevalent variation on this theme involves earmarking time for solitude and self-reflection. Some of the respondents, such as the 28-year-old mother of young children, establish regular intervals of “private time,” to use Zerubavel’s (1979) terminology: “I take out mommy time twice a day. The kids know when it’s mommy time, and they respect that quiet time.” Another young woman typifies a proprietary attitude by calling it “my time.” A third sets aside time to write in her journal “at least three days a week,” during which she feels “expressive” and “intimate with myself.”

These agentic practices require the modification of temporal experience in an effort to summon what Schutz (1962:230) refers to as the “specific cognitive style” in a “finite province of meaning.” Frequently, these efforts take place outdoors, as in the case of a 53-year-old airline pilot:

I enjoy cross-country running. It is the perfect way for me to set aside time for myself. Running in the woods makes the experience even more satisfying. It feels like I am one with nature.

In a related vein, one young man describes something akin to a religious experience:

I like to go camping with friends, but sometimes I'll go by myself. It's a great way to cut yourself off from everything and everybody. It's time for myself—a special, almost sacred time for solitude.

Nature is beside the point, however. Just as there are nature preserves, another young man creates what I call a time preserve in the midst of an electronic jungle:

There are days when I don’t answer the door if people knock. I don’t check email, and I don’t answer the phone if it rings. I don’t watch television or listen to the radio. I try to keep the world from barging in so I can concentrate on the moment, and I revel in being off-line.

In a world where technology connects us increasingly to one another, making oneself unavailable is an act of resistance.

DISCUSSION

Like time, human conduct is multidimensional. The individual, always and everywhere, is “a simultaneous multiplicity of selves” (Goffman 1961:132). Although time work can be the predominant theme in one’s response to the situation at hand, in many instances it plays a less prominent role in a multifaceted agenda. Even so, the data make it clear that time work typically is marked by purposefulness, regardless of its salience in particular circumstances. The young man who would be a writer not only wants to write; he wants to write more often. In addition, it is useful to remember that these empirical materials are framed by the verbal context of our interviews. The subjects were asked to describe ways in which they attempt to control or manipulate their own or others’ experience of time. Consequently, they understood and offered these examples of their conduct as being directed, at least in part, at customizing temporal experience. From their own perspective, then, the resulting narratives represent efforts at time work, even where it is not the principal aim of their activity.

Corsaro (1992:175) has shown that “socialization is not something that happens to children; it is a process in which children, in interaction with others, produce their own peer culture and eventually come to reproduce, to extend, and to join the adult world.” To paraphrase Corsaro, it would appear that much of temporal experience does not just happen to us. On the contrary, we see ample evidence of self-determination in the construction of situations to which one wants to respond, not because these situations are ends in themselves but because they are thought to bring about particular types of temporal experience.

We have examined one family of agentic practices: forms of time work in everyday life. Finding such conduct is not difficult because it seems to be quite prevalent, and people
acknowledge it readily when prompted by careful inquiry. In fact, they frequently take pride in their own ingenuity. Further, there is enormous variety in this conduct, and it would appear that no situation is immune to such effort. On the other hand, often there is little to see because so much of this effort is personal, even subjective, and it tends to transpire within evanescent circumstances. Put differently, the evidence indicates that agency, like forms of life in a tropical rain forest, is abundant, diverse, and vigorous. What is more, while particular types of agency are large and exotic, most are small, quick, and easily overlooked—so much so, in fact, that most species of agency have not been observed, recorded, nor classified.

Gecas (1982:17) observes that the “self-concept is, to a large extent, an agent of its own creation.” The findings of this study suggest that the self plays an important part not only in the design of the self-concept, but of much temporal experience as well. If we conceive of agency as personal initiative directed toward the realization of individually held aims, intentions, or desires, then agency animates concrete and familiar forms of conduct.

This study documents the use of time work in an effort to modify or manipulate five dimensions of temporal experience: duration, frequency, sequence, timing, and allocation. There can be no doubt that the empirical materials are suffused by what Mead (1934:45) termed “conscious” or “reflective determination.” Likewise, we can be sure that Garfinkel’s (1967) subject, Agnes, is not the only person who exercises control over time in an effort to realize a specific version of self. It follows that one’s circumstances are not simply antecedent to one’s response (behavioral or experiential); rather, one often plans for, and takes steps to create, just those circumstances to which one would like to respond.

In his introduction to Frame Analysis, Goffman (1974:8) asserts “that when individuals attend to any current situation, they face the question: ‘What is it that’s going on here?’” Apparently, many of the subjects in this study are asking themselves a markedly different version of that question: “What is it that could be going on here?” They give deliberate and frequently elaborate attention to what Joas ([1980] 1997:192) calls the “future possibilities” in current or anticipated circumstances.

Swidler (1986:277) asks us to view “culture as a ‘tool kit’ for constructing ‘strategies of action.’” In the empirical materials, we see people using cultural tool kits and associated lore to construct strategies for modulating their own temporal experience. They avoid watching the clock during a long flight and buy a magazine before boarding the airplane. Yet they also display a wealth of inventiveness and imagination. Many of them enjoy time work; they pursue it with enthusiasm, wit, and a cheerful sense of irony. They search for and seize opportunities for creativity. By and large, the subjects of this study derive a spectrum of personal satisfactions from their efforts to customize temporal experience.

Given the variety and prevalence of time work, it is tempting to celebrate the enduring sovereignty of the self and the efficacy of self-determination, but there is also evidence to indicate that such celebration may miss the point. The subjects in this study perceive themselves to be initiating lines of action that curl back around on them indirectly, through constructed circumstances, to shape their experience of time. Even so, social scientists cannot ignore the antecedent or anticipated circumstances to which these subjects are responding with agentic practices. As Mead (1932:15) points out, “[E]ven the emergent happens under determining conditions.” The requisite resources for particular types of time work may or may not be available, or other people may encourage or discourage certain categories of time work. In short, time work is conditioned by the social context within which it arises—a context with cultural, organizational, and relational dimensions.

The data reveal various strategies for controlling or customizing our experience of time. Yet Swidler (1986:276–77) notes that “[c]ulture has an independent causal role because it shapes the capacities from which such strategies of action are constructed.”
Despite their license for creativity, the subjects in this study appear to want temporal experiences that are in keeping with cultural prescriptions, albeit experiences that also provide a measure of self-satisfaction. Their culture teaches them to think of time as a commodity: something to be “saved,” not “wasted.”

In his classic study of the Protestant ethic, Weber ([1904–1905] 1958:48) quotes Benjamin Franklin’s famous aphorism, “*Time is money.*” Accordingly, if material success is viewed as a sign of salvation, then, as Weber ([1904–1905] 1958:157) points out, “Waste of time is . . . the first and in principle the deadliest of sins.” Franklin’s perspective on time has been diffused throughout a culture that still values efficiency and productivity—a culture, moreover, with a standardized temporal system (Zerubavel 1982). Yet because of the prevailing commitment to material success, Americans often find themselves in undesirable circumstances (e.g., class, work, and traffic). Thus it should not be surprising that we are more adept at speeding time up than at slowing it down. In the words of one subject, “I can’t think of how to slow it down.” Attempting to slow the perceived passage of time (e.g., to savor the moment) is perhaps hedonistic or self-indulgent in a culture that is still imbued with the Protestant ethic. The subject quoted above lacks the cultural resources for that kind of effort, but, like most students (and most employees), he is well-versed in making it seem to pass quickly. Thus one direction for future research would be cross-cultural studies of variation in time work.

Time work also is conditioned by its organizational context. Students and employees are encouraged to use time efficiently, but there are rival concerns. Henson (1996:81) observes that some temporary workers engage in “minute pinching” by “adding half an hour here, fifteen minutes there to their time cards,” and he witnesses “deliberate work slowdowns to extend the assignment.” For students, a frequently changing schedule of classes, coupled with the need to balance the respective demands of school, job, and social life, makes for certain challenges and not for others. Universities and businesses offer courses in time management, thereby providing resources for particular kinds of effort such as establishing priorities and constructing time budgets.

Organizations, however, also cultivate individual forms of adaptation and predictable types of temporal deviance. The regimentation of an elaborate schedule may produce a compensatory desire for free time. Given the close quarters in a dormitory, allocating time for solitude may seem especially seductive. Carving the academic calendar into an artificial structure of semesters (or quarters) creates the conditions for “incompletes” and other kinds of temporal extension. Procrastination may be the unintended consequence of soft deadlines and lack of direct supervision. The upshot is what Pickering (1995:22–23) describes as a “dialectic of resistance and accommodation.” We have, then, another direction for future research: the exploration of temporal cultures within organizations.

Finally, time work is conditioned by all manner of relationships. As with cultures and organizations, relationships encourage or discourage particular forms of temporal experience. Friends and loved ones demand time that could be devoted to career advancement; they must be held at bay. Yet we are motivated (and expected) to help them pass the time if necessary, and we have the interpersonal skills for doing so. Parents try to ensure that some things happen more frequently than others, with longer duration, in the correct sequence, and at the right time. Power, proximity, familiarity, loyalty, and access to a shared material world serve as resources in this endeavor. Yet the individual may feel the need to ration or even avoid time with a father or an ex-boyfriend. Roommates may wish to spend a certain amount of time on cleanliness or religious observance and to receive a reassuring call when someone will be coming in late. But relationships also provide a context for luring others from the straight and narrow path to types of time work that make for subversive

---

7 The weekend may be an ancient and collective response to similar forces. Sorokin and Merton (1937:620) note that the need for a day of rest is far more likely to arise among agricultural peoples than among nomadic pastoral tribes or hunting and fishing peoples.
activities and experiences. Future research could specify the time work that is typical in relationships of one kind or another.

When we consider the evidence of time work in this study, it becomes apparent that much of it is interstitial and compensatory. That is, a great deal of temporal agency operates within cultures, organizations, and relationships without challenging the status quo. Indeed, by compensating the individual in ways that do not threaten established patterns of conduct, most forms of time work reduce the friction between self and society. Emirbayer and Goodwin (1994:1413) argue "that intentional, creative human action serves in part to constitute those very social networks that so powerfully constrain actors in turn." In accord with their position, the findings of this study suggest that temporal agency is largely a product of existing arrangements and contributes to their reproduction.

REFERENCES


Swidler, Anne. 1986. “Culture in Action: Symbols


Michael G. Flaherty is a professor of sociology at Eckerd College. He is a former editor of Symbolic Interaction (1996–1999) and served on the editorial board of Social Psychology Quarterly from 1999 to 2001. His recent publications include A Watched Pot: How We Experience Time (NYU Press, 1999); his current research concerns the relationship between time and agency.