

**Understanding the Use, Experience, and Consequences of Time Allocation
in a Rapidly Changing Social Environment**

Sandra L. Hofferth,
Professor, Department of Family Science and
Director, Maryland Population Research Center
The University of Maryland
College Park, MD 20742
Hofferth@umd.edu

John P. Robinson
Professor, Department of Sociology
The University of Maryland
College Park, MD 20742
Jrobins1@umd.edu

September 30, 2010

Abstract

The study of how people use and experience time is not new. Research on the use of time goes back more than half a century in Europe and has become a standard part of most Western national statistical systems. In the United States, a series of small time diary studies was conducted from the 1960s through the present by individual social scientists, from the 1965-66 Multinational Comparative Time-Budget Research Project to the 2007-08 Child Development Supplement to the Panel Study of Income Dynamics. Furthermore, beginning with the development and implementation of the American Time Use Survey (ATUS) through the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2003, this research can now be accessed by a broader group of social scientists in the United States. This brief report describes the value of research on people's use of time and some important questions that can be addressed with such data and methods. It details the limitations of current research and needed methodological advances to better understand the use of time.

Introduction

The study of how people use and experience time is not new. Research on the use of time goes back more than half a century in Europe and has become a standard part of most Western national statistical systems. In the United States, a series of small time diary studies was conducted from the 1960s through the present by individual social scientists, from the 1965-66 Multinational Comparative Time-Budget Research Project to the 2007-08 Child Development Supplement to the Panel Study of Income Dynamics. Furthermore, beginning with the development and implementation of the American Time Use Survey (ATUS) through the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2003, this research can now be accessed by a broader group of social scientists in the United States. This brief report describes the value of research on people's use of time and some important questions that can be addressed with such data and methods. It details the limitations of current research and needed methodological advances to better understand the use of time.

Scientific Advances in Studying Time

One of the great scientific advances over the last 50 years is in the development and collection of data on how people spend time, particularly the ability to capture the temporal and social structure of "a day in the life in the U.S.," one that can be scientifically compared to that of more than 40 other countries (Robinson & Godbey 1999). In the studies of time that have been conducted, such as the American Time Use Survey (ATUS), a probability sample of Americans aged 15 and older provides a complete report of all their activities on the previous day. This allows social scientists to objectively calculate the amount of time spent in various daily activities and, along with information on how these are valued, to see whether there may be ways to improve people's quality of life. Progress in this direction has also been supplemented by the collection of subjective-meaning data by economists and psychologists at Princeton University, who envision such data as essential adjuncts to the central economic measure of a country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as a measure of the quality of societal life. These methods have benefitted from National Science Foundation support over the last 45 years.

A major characteristic of time is its scarcity. Each of us has only 24 hours in a day; we are all equal in this regard. Most recent surveys indicate that at least as many people say they are as concerned about lack of time as about lack of money. Economist Daniel Hamermesh (Hamermesh and Lee 2007) captured the dilemma in the title of his recent article "Time Crunch or Yuppie Kvetch?" Based upon U.S. time diary studies, economists and sociologists agree that Americans have more free time today than they did 45 years ago, and that seems to be confirmed by diary studies in other countries as well (Bittman & Folbre 2004). This suggests that a valuable cooperative effort may involve collaborations of U.S. social scientists with those from other countries to examine strategies for coping with the stresses, challenges and opportunities associated with time. This would require cultural sensitivity to the meanings of time and life in a variety of countries.

Further complicating the picture is that the results of those few surveys that have attempted to monitor trends in experienced time seem to agree with the cultural stereotype that people are stressed by lack of free time or other time pressures. At the same time, studies that have asked respondents how “rushed” or “time scarce” for time they feel, or how tired they feel after a day’s work show no shift over the last 20-40 years; nor do work attitude surveys show them ranking work time or work schedules as the major problems concerning them about work. Two recent qualitative studies of the experience of time were conducted by anthropologist Charles Darrah and his colleagues and by sociologist Hofferth and colleagues (Hofferth et al., 2009). The former concluded from the small sample of families they observed that busyness is more or less self-imposed rather than imposed from the outside. Focusing on children, the latter concluded that parents worry if children are not busy; in fact, active children are less stressed than inactive ones. These counterintuitive findings shed light on what we may mean by time pressure or stress.

Limitations of Existing Research and Data Collection

As impressive as these advances have been, they only scratch the surface in our understanding of how daily activity affects the societal quality of life. For this, we need far more insight into the planning and consequences of daily decision-making: about what we do, how we value it, and what difference it makes. First, time needs to be situated in the full context of family life, not just in terms of the disconnected individual reports that are currently measured in the ATUS diary data collections. Daily activities need to be collected from the set of relevant family or household members (of all ages) whose decisions are interconnected, not just that of one individual. Second, better outcome measures are needed. Among the aspects of daily activities that remain to be measured are their consequences – how much did the respondent gain or lose from the activity, how did it impact other people’s quality of life, and was there other societal benefit from that activity? In order to obtain information on the consequences of decisions regarding the use of time, the same individuals and their families need to be followed up at regular intervals in a longitudinal study.

A new issue that needs investigating using these methods is whether attractive electronic technologies crowd out personal contacts that are usually identified by diary respondents as more enjoyable than screen activities. What do people using these technologies give up in the process of adopting the latest technological gadget? Recent research suggests that children’s lives have not been harmed by increased screen time, but it is clear that the distribution of their activities has changed dramatically over the past 20 years (Hofferth 2010). These consequences may change over the longer term. Unfortunately, the American Time Use Survey does not allow researchers to determine the amount of time spent with new electronic media technologies such as cellphones, computers, and video games. This is a limitation of current data and methods.

Much can be gained by increasing scholarly use of existing data collected by commercial companies such as Nielsen Interactive and Knowledge Networks, firms that

can afford to collect such detailed data, but are may be unwilling or unable to share them with academic researchers. Access for conventional statistical analysis may require additional funding to purchase the data.

Finally, there is considerable interest in the influence of the environment on our health. Without detailed information on how much time we spend exposed to the different environments and the toxins and other effluvia that bombard us on a daily basis, we can never hope to adequately compute their influence on our lives. The linkage of individual diary information to information on local environmental conditions would provide a tremendous source of information for scholars of environmental health and social and economic inequality.

Conclusion

Although substantial advances in the collection and analysis of data on the use of time have been made in the United States over the past several decades, capped by the implementation of the American Time Use Survey in 2003, there are still a number of important limitations of the latter. Limitations include the collection of only one diary per household, age restriction to those 15 years of age and older, coding categories that do not capture the use of technology, and the lack of longitudinal follow-up so that consequences can be examined.

Finally, in studying time, more attention needs to be paid to developing methods to take advantage of devices such as cell phones that are commonly carried by the population. Integration of our research questions, methods, and new technologies would facilitate the collection of information on how people spend their time and what difference it makes to them and to society as a whole.

References

- Bittman, Michael and Nancy Folbre (eds.). 2004. *Family Time: The Social Organization of Care*. New York, USA: Routledge.
- Hamermesh, Daniel and Jungmin Lee. 2007. "Stressed Out on Four Continents: Time Crunch or Yuppie Kvetch," *Review of Economics and Statistics*, 89, 374-383.
- Hofferth, Sandra L. 2010. "Home Media and Children's Achievement and Behavior." *Child Development*. 81, 1598-1619.
- Hofferth, Sandra L., David Kinney, and Janet Dunn. 2009. "The Hurried Child: Myth vs. Reality." In *Life Balance: Multidisciplinary Theories and Research*, Bethesda, MD: AOTA Press, 2009.
- Robinson, John P. and Geoffrey Godbey. 1999. *Time for Life: The Surprising Ways Americans Use their Time*. University Park: Penn State Press.

This paper was submitted to the National Science Foundation as part of its SBE 2020 planning activity (www.nsf.gov/sbe/sbe_2020/). Its inclusion does not constitute approval of the content by NSF or the US Government. The opinions and views expressed herein are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the NSF or the US Government.

Hofferth and Robinson, Time Allocation

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.