

The Social Life of Busyness

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The Social Life of Busyness

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*In memory of my father, David Becket, and my mentor, David Morgan. Both
Davids exemplified the benefits of leading a busy and fulfilling life.*

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Contents

List of Figures	<i>ix</i>
List of Tables	<i>xi</i>
Acknowledgements	<i>xiii</i>
Chapter 1 Being Busy	<i>1</i>
Chapter 2 Busy Time	<i>11</i>
Chapter 3 Clock Time	<i>29</i>
Chapter 4 Organised Time	<i>65</i>
Chapter 5 Work Time	<i>89</i>
Chapter 6 Family Time	<i>113</i>
Chapter 7 Free Time	<i>133</i>
Chapter 8 The Social Lives of Busyness	<i>151</i>
Appendix	<i>159</i>
Bibliography	<i>165</i>
Index	<i>177</i>

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List of Figures

Fig 3.1. Distribution of Clock Points in MOA Time Database.	55
Fig 3.2. Percentage Distribution of Time References by Each Hour Period in MOA Time Database.	56
Fig 3.3. Percentage Distribution of Time References by Each Hour Period by Gender in MOA Time Database.	57
Fig 3.4. Percentage Distribution of Time References by Each Hour Period by Employment Status in MOA Time Database.	58

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List of Tables

Table 3.1.	Summary of Scoping Study of Longitudinal Time Use Analysis Research Publications.	37
Table 3.2.	Illustrations of a Time-structured Diary and a Time-narrated Diary.	52
Table 3.3.	MOA One-day Diary Format by Gender, Age and Employment Status of Diarist.	53
Table 3.4.	Number of Hours and Percentage of Time Spent Per Activity.	62
Table 4.1.	Number of Anecdotes and Percentage of References to Female Gender Identity in Self-help Books.	80

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Chapter 1

Being Busy

White Rabbits

This book is about the social life of busyness, the busyness that we experience and encounter in our everyday lives that makes us weary or elated and that pushes us towards and away from other people. Busyness can validate everyday life or be an excuse for not doing something. It is not an exact thing or practice; if we are busy, it is because of a sense of fulfilment or of being overwhelmed. As an excuse, it is simultaneously watertight and vague. If someone says they are too busy to do something, this is their final decision, though the precise details of busyness need not be revealed. Busyness can be a default position we assume about other people, especially if we require something from them. Acknowledging busyness is often interspersed within the requests of others: 'I know you are busy, but could you....?'.

By framing this account of busyness through its social life, this book addresses how busyness organises the social and simultaneously is of the social.¹ I am interested in how busyness frames relationships but equally in how its prominence may be explained through the economic and social contexts of relational work. Busyness is manifest in 'the effort of establishing, maintaining, negotiating, transforming, and terminating interpersonal relations'.² How this relational work is valued and who values it may also explain the popularity of busyness. Investment in relational work or collaboration can lead to tensions between doing stuff for other people and getting on with our own work or practices of self-care. Busyness is, therefore, of the social because it condenses the tensions of interpersonal relations. These tensions can be found at different scales, from those of intimate and family relations to those of corporate organisations, and are shaped by the uneven politics of time.³ Busyness can be draining but it can also engender feelings of worthiness. These experiences depend on how it is valued by others as well as its relationship to feelings of self-identification. However, while busyness might be experienced as relational, our attempts to nullify it are increasingly individual.

¹Bastian, Baraitser, Flexer, Hom, and Salisbury (2020, pp. 289-296).

²Zelizer (2012, p. 147).

³Sharma (2014).

2 The Social Life of Busyness

It is up to us to maximise time independent of others, whether we use time management strategies or implement a work–life balance to do so.⁴

My own interest in busyness was initially sparked by overhearing colleagues' declarations about busyness. As I was working in my office in a British university, halfway down a long corridor, I became aware of crescendoing complaints about the busyness of working life: colleagues running late for meetings, protesting that they had too much to do and complaining about the overwhelming stress of being busy. Details concerning what needed to be done and whether particular activities had been completed were more muted. In these overheard statements, there was little recognition of the virtue of keeping busy. The temporal quality of busyness that I especially overheard was not in the declarations of busy people saying they were getting things done; it was found in the anxiety concerning what needed to be done. Busyness did not mean synthesising the present with the past or the future; instead, it unsettled the flow of time. The intensity of disruption corresponds with the temporal condition that Ivor Southwood describes as 'non-stop inertia'.⁵ This is the overwhelming sense of being trapped by frenetic inactivity and, as a consequence, feeling that it is not possible to experience the satisfaction of getting things done.⁶ My initial curiosity about busyness did not align with the need to quantify busyness or peruse strategies for its amelioration. Instead, I was intrigued by why there was so much talk of busyness and what this chatter inferred about colleagues' fulfilment or neglect of their responsibilities and their anxieties about time. Busyness puzzled me because it is paradoxical, and paradoxes are the imaginative fuel of social inquiry.⁷

These paradoxical qualities of busyness have often meant that my own attempts to explain this temporal phenomenon have ended up with me chasing my tail or being stuck in cul-de-sacs. My reaction to colleagues' comments about their busyness initially took me in the wrong direction. Overhearing their complaints reminded me of the White Rabbit in Lewis Carroll's 1865 fantasy novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*; he is obsessed with time and cannot move beyond this obsession.⁸ So I started my study of busyness by revisiting Carroll's White Rabbit to see what I could learn about busyness from his fixations with time. I was familiar with the White Rabbit's comments about time, such as 'The hurrier I go, the behinder I get', and his reply to Alice's question 'How long is forever' – 'sometimes just one second'. These quotations are provided when 'White Rabbit quotes' is searched for online and adorn arty-crafty home decorations. Even the physicist Carlos Rovelli quotes the White Rabbit's explanation of forever in his

⁴Melissa Gregg details how time management strategies isolate workers from each other: Gregg (2018).

⁵Southwood (2011).

⁶See Rosa (2017).

⁷Holdsworth (2020a).

⁸Carroll (1865). The sociologist Dale Southerton also begins his recent book about time squeeze with a reference to the White Rabbit: Southerton (2020).

2017 book *The Order of Time*.⁹ I had assumed that the character of the White Rabbit was obsessed with time and was a pioneer of the twenty-first century busyness. Curiously, when I sat down to reread *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, I did not find these quotations in the original text. Carroll's White Rabbit is not a busy rabbit. He is obsessed with time and his pocket watch simply because he is late for a meeting with the Duchess. We do not learn why he is late or the purpose of the meeting he is rushing to get to. The White Rabbit is a plot device.¹⁰ Alice pursues him into and through Wonderland, but he has little to do or say until he reappears with the royal entourage as the King of Hearts's herald. At Alice's trial, the White Rabbit is deferential and nervous, and is anxious that things should be done properly and corrects the King of Hearts about procedure. Carroll wrote that he intended the White Rabbit to be the opposite of Alice; the elderly, timid and feeble rabbit that wears spectacles contrasts with Alice's youth.¹¹

Curious about where my interpretation of the busy White Rabbit came from and the source of the much-quoted aphorisms, I turned to Walt Disney's 1951 animated version of Carroll's book. Disney's White Rabbit is old and wears spectacles, as Carroll described him, but lacks the original's fastidiousness. The cartoon White Rabbit is rotund with a matching outsize pocket watch that is always falling out of his pocket. His watch carries him along; he is literally moved by time. Disney develops the White Rabbit's circular fascination with time. He joins the Mad Hatter and the March Hare at their tea party, where the Mad Hatter declares the rabbit's watch to be 'two days late' and, encouraged by the March Hare, destroys this 'mad watch'. Disney's White Rabbit, like Carroll's, is perpetually late and does nothing to resolve this. Disney exaggerates the White Rabbit's character and his contribution to the storyline, but this rabbit is also not the source of the quotations found online and elsewhere allegedly by the White Rabbit.

My pursuit of these White Rabbits and their musings about time and busyness proved to be a plot device that led me in the wrong direction.¹² Neither of these White Rabbits are the source of the much-quoted musings about time; the words are simply figurative expressions of the worry that surrounds not getting things done. While Disney's White Rabbit comes closer to the popular image of the time-obsessed leporid, the popularity of the quotes attributed falsely to the White Rabbit transcends both Carroll's original characterisation and Disney's interpretation. Falsely accrediting these aphorisms to Lewis Carroll is convincing because they appeal to popular obsessions with time-related problems. The misquotes also update the White Rabbit's fastidiousness about being 'on time' to more modern

⁹Rovelli (2018, p. 52).

¹⁰It has been pointed out to me that the film *The Matrix* also uses the White Rabbit as a plot device.

¹¹This description is taken from *Alice-in-Wonderland.net* (n.d.).

¹²For completeness, I have also checked the White Rabbit character in the Tim Burton movies *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. Neither of these films are the source of the quotes.

sensibilities concerning experiencing time. It is easy to turn the original White Rabbit's obsession with being late into musings about the misuse of time.

The lesson I learnt from this initial wrong turn was how easy it is to make judgements and convince ourselves about the certainty of time, or at least what is written about it, even though the temporal frustratingly remains just beyond our conceptual grasp. By perpetually being busy, we segue between having some sense of certainty about what we have to do, and feeling being overwhelmed because we have too much to do. Writing about busyness is similarly frustrating; at the moment that a precise conceptual interpretation comes into view, it very quickly falls away. Busyness defies an exact definition, but this does not imply that it is immune to interpretation.

My starting point is to offer a definition of busyness as the intersection of what others expect or request us to do and what we need to or want to get done. This account of the social life of busyness does not seek to define, remedy or perfect busy uses of time. Instead, my purpose is to interrogate how being busy oscillates around intersections of multiple and tangled responsibilities. I am intrigued by busyness because of how it is essentially relational yet at the same time uniquely individual. I am interested in how busyness articulates the acceptance and rejection of interdependencies. If, as Rovelli writes, 'the study of time does nothing but return us to ourselves',¹³ studying busyness does more than reveal us to ourselves; it also exposes our relationships with and responsibilities to others.

By framing this account of busyness through its social life, I am deliberately opening up a consideration of busyness beyond the realm of work and time management. Although my curiosity about busyness originated at work, I do not intend to suggest that busyness is exclusive to organisational cultures. While contemporary critiques of busyness are aligned with the relationship between busyness and productivity, the problem with including busyness in the more defined constraints of time management is that doing so makes an assumption about who is busy and in what ways. Busyness becomes the specific condition of workers doing some form of managerial or bureaucratic work. These workers may be lured into having the status of busyness as a badge of honour, as the time use researcher Jay Gershuny suggests.¹⁴ Equating self-worth with busyness also permeates other forms of employment, such as the 'Bullshit' jobs described by David Graeber that serve to maintain the status of middle management.¹⁵ This honour of being busy does not necessarily equate with being productive. If busyness is recognised as a fault, it is one to be put right through the application of productivity techniques.¹⁶ However, busyness is found beyond the closed world of professional time management. We cannot ignore the busyness of workers employed beyond a restrictive interpretation of professional work. Many such employees were classified as essential workers during the Covid-19 pandemic, thus, revealing

¹³Rovelli (2018, p. 147).

¹⁴Gershuny (2005, pp. 287-314).

¹⁵Graeber (2019).

¹⁶See, for example, Gregg (2018).

the necessity of their labour, such as health and social care workers, cleaners, retail assistants, delivery drivers and transport workers. Moreover, a relational approach does not prioritise the economic sphere over other domains of everyday life; instead, it interrogates the interrelationships between diverse responsibilities. The busyness of parents and carers, retirees, students, the unemployed and the under-employed is also equally valid. Extending the reach of busyness to consider diverse forms of work, the temporal demands of care and the experiences of people not in work opens up a diverse interpretation of busyness beyond understanding it as a failure of time management or productivity.

A final introductory note acknowledges the spatial and temporal limitations of this book. The data that I have collated, which I introduce below, and the social theories that I discuss in the next chapter are located within an Anglo-American economic, political and cultural location. However, cultural diversity is one of time's most intriguing attributes, and this will be equally relevant to studies of busyness. How we speak about time and its linguistic variations (e.g. the construction of tenses and temporal vocabulary), temporal cultural and social norms (e.g. when shared activities happen, judgements about being 'on time' and customs concerning waiting) and differential interpretations of time over the life-course (e.g. expectations of generational solidarity versus generational change) will have an impact on busyness. However, a consideration of the cultural variations in the concept of busyness is beyond the scope of this text because of the enormous amount of research data and various analytical techniques that this would require. My examination of busyness has, therefore, remained within a specific sociocultural location.

Busy Methodologies

Studying busyness can take the researcher in numerous directions. It can be examined as a symptom of sociocultural trends, quantified through detailed empirical examination or interrogated through philosophical inquiry. The almost infinite possibilities of busyness make it an equally irritating and intriguing topic for research, and it is necessary to define a framework to work within. This study of the social life of busyness prioritises the diversity of experiences within assemblages of time-space and intimate and public relationships. I am not seeking to either refute or confirm broad theoretical narratives of sociocultural change. For the most part, this study holds grand narratives in the background to bring to the fore the subjectivity of busyness and to consider the ongoing synthesis of thought and talk of busyness within social practices and habits. At times, this synthesis is illuminated by considering it in parallel with theorisations of temporality and how busyness evokes slippage between past, present and future. This orientation also requires examination not just of individuals but also of people in the social contexts of work, family, community, etc. If a study of busyness can add to an understanding of the social conditions of the twenty-first century society, it is through unpicking the relational context of everyday life and how we navigate responsibilities to ourselves and others. In other words, I am interested in how busyness is experienced in different spaces rather than assuming it is a universal temporal expression.

Prioritising an empirical examination raises the question of how busyness can be studied. Given its multiple and normative nature, busyness does not lend itself to the methods of conventional social science inquiry such as interviews or social surveys. However, at the same time, it is possible to find busyness in multiple sources. Rather than me designing a specific methodology to study busyness, I have based the research for this book on narratives about busyness that I found when looking for busyness elements in existing data. This method of repurposing data – using data for a different purpose to that which it might have been collected for – facilitates studying busyness in different domains rather than restricting it to specific experiences or contexts (such as those of a particular type of worker).¹⁷ To write this book, I, therefore, collected a bricolage of data on time in everyday contexts and examined these for narratives of busyness.

The decision not to collect primary data was as much an ethical decision as a practical one. My own collection of primary data sources would have been limited to a restrictive range of participants, and using secondary data also eschews the busyness of conventional social science inquiry. Busyness cannot be external to this study, by which I mean that it cannot be studied in isolation; it permeates the very research itself. I have not excluded my own practices from my study of busyness, and I outline below the autoethnographic techniques that I used as part of the bricolage of data. However, a study of busyness provides more than an opportunity to engage in autoethnographic practices; it allows an examination of the time-intensive practices of research itself. Collecting primary data makes temporal demands on researchers and participants and unavoidably involves collecting data that remain unused. I propose that an examination of busyness provides an ideal case study of how repurposing data can slow down the temporal intensity of research. My reuse of data that have been collected for purposes that are different to the use I have for the data, responds to a growing debate about the acceleration that universities expect regarding both teaching and research and the possibility of slow study.¹⁸

The primary data sources that I used are as follows:

- 134 one-day time diaries from the UK Mass Observation Archive (MOA)¹⁹ on the theme of time pressure that were written in the autumn/winter of 2017/2018.

¹⁷I borrow the term repurposing from big data research that explicitly uses data for a different purpose from that for which it was collected, such as the analysis of administrative data. See Woodall (2017). Repurposing has a different meaning from the more conventional term, secondary analysis; in particular, it captures the possibility of finding accounts of busyness in data that were not collected for this specific purpose.

¹⁸See, for example, Berg and Seeber (2016).

¹⁹The Mass Observation Archive (MOA) was established in 1937 to record everyday life in the UK by volunteer writers. It ceased collecting observations in the mid-1960s and was subsequently revived in 1981. The MOA issues three directives a year inviting correspondents to write about their experiences of a particular theme. One-day diaries are often requested in these directives. See <http://www.massobs.org.uk/> for further information about the MOA.

- A longitudinal study of Work and Family Time carried out with 13 families in southern Scotland between 2007 and 2010 which forms part of the UK Economic and Social Research Council Timescapes study.²⁰
- A sample of 15 self-help text books on time use and busyness published between 2004 and 2019.
- A scoping review of 41 published journal articles detailing longitudinal analysis of time use data.
- 87 short accounts of a writer's day collated by *The Guardian*, a UK-based national newspaper, between 2016 and 2018.
- Observations from teaching crochet in a series of 11 informal 'crafternoons' run by Keele University Student Union from October 2019 to March 2020.

Although I have attempted to identify data that do not restrict busyness to specific practices, such as particular types of work, as I have already noted, these data are constrained within a particular geographical location. All the primary data that were either collected in the UK or written in a transatlantic Anglo-American cultural space and my interpretation of busyness are necessarily constrained within these spaces. Moreover, the data selection and analyses come with the usual caveat about not being representative. I have had to use data sets that I could access and whose participants were selected by others. However, for the study of busyness, a requirement for representation is perhaps a red herring because it would imply that it is a discernible, objective thing that happens to us because of our socio-economic characteristics. Rather than using representation as a benchmark, I have prioritised different types of busyness.

I introduce the details of each data set because I use these to study different aspects of busyness in subsequent chapters of this book. To analyse this data, I used both quantitative content analysis and narrative methods. Because of the disparate, messy nature of the data, I found simple counting techniques a useful first stage in making sense of the data. Although initially this might appear to be at odds with my reluctance to try and quantify busyness, the technique of counting and deciphering numerical patterns in the data has proved to be an insightful and concise way of revealing the timing of busyness and the significance of numbers in the stories that are told about being busy. Narrative analysis investigates stories of busyness in more depth, though the approach I use varies between the data sets. The one-day diaries (from both the MOA and *The Guardian*) are ideally suited to a narrative approach that distinguishes between the structure, emotion, substance and function of each account.²¹ In other words, how the writer writes about a particular day, the emotional tone they use, what they have to say about time and busyness, and how the diaries reveal the relational qualities of being

²⁰The Timescapes archive was funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council to archive qualitative longitudinal data on personal and family relationships. For further information about the archive, see <https://timescapes-archive.leeds.ac.uk/timescapes/>

²¹Riessman (1993).

busy. In the family interviews, the narrative analysis follows the conversation between the interviewer and the interviewee to reveal the distinction between the symbolic busyness that families live by and the busyness they actually live with. Finally, regarding the analysis of self-help books, I am intrigued by the busyness of these texts and the different ways in which they tell stories of busyness as well as suggest strategies for making the most of our time.

The final element of this research is autoethnographic. Reflecting on my own experiences of busyness was unavoidable rather than a deliberate strategy.²² Rovelli's claim that studying time tells us more about ourselves than anything else cannot be denied when writing about busyness. Taking an autoethnographic approach also resists any attempt to rely on disembodied accounts of busyness. At the same time, I do not want to exaggerate my own busyness; it is no more exceptional than anyone else's. Indeed, as an academic who has the privilege of being awarded a fellowship, I have less reason to be busy than most. I have used autoethnography to examine how we can reflect on our use of time rather than to add to the stories of busyness. While I was writing this book, I kept a detailed time use diary to reflect on how keeping track of time is a valuable tactic of self-care. My reflections on this process lean towards what I have learnt from the discipline of tracking time, not what I have learnt about how I spend time. I have also been involved in teaching therapeutic busyness through working with a university student union to teach craft to students and staff (mostly, but not exclusively, crochet). While teaching crochet, I have learnt to adapt my expectations of what can be achieved through teaching craft as self-care and to assess how I use craft as a therapeutic practice for myself. This self-examination of how and when I craft develops a counter-narrative of busyness as an expression of frenetic inactivity to consider how the busyness of craft can be a therapeutic practice of actively stilling the body.

Chapter Overviews

This account of busyness starts with an overview of theoretical accounts of time. My intention is not to refute or confirm broad theoretical temporal narratives, but what theory can do is hold a researcher to task regarding resisting the appeal of normative accounts of busyness, and the review is organised for this purpose. Of particular interest are explanations of temporal change that make the case for individualism and/or social acceleration and how these accounts are challenged by empirical research that identifies the diversity of temporal experiences and the obduracy of uneven politics of time. I also consider the limitations of historical comparisons for making the case for the uniqueness of the twenty-first century busyness. Key ideas that are useful for interpreting busyness include moving beyond mind/body dualism so as not to differentiate between thinking and doing busyness and developing a temporal examination of this mental chatter and activity that focusses on the synthesis of past, present and future.

²²Lucherini (2017, pp. 429–435).