

An Erotics of Time: Toward the Cross-Cultural Study of Temporal Experience

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Abstract

Research in anthropology and sociology has focused on the social organization of time and time reckoning. There is, consequently, an emphasis on cross-cultural differences in the meaning of time. This line of inquiry neglects variation in the perceived passage of time as well as temporal agency. Following a review of extant research in anthropology, I call for cross-cultural research on the perception of time or subjective temporal experience. Using a theoretical framework for the study of social interaction, I point to scattered evidence for cross-cultural uniformity in the perception of time and temporal agency. I conclude with a call for further investigation of these topics.

Keywords: time; temporal experience; agency; ethnography; cultural diversity.

Unfortunately, this paper will not be nearly as exciting as the title might suggest. It is taken from the last line of Susan Sontag's famous essay, *Against Interpretation* (Sontag 1964:14). In this essay, she is critical of intellectual analysis because it obscures and diminishes our sensual experience of art. Her concluding line is a declaration: "In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art".

Something similar can be said about the study of time in the social sciences. Previous research has focused on the interpretation (or "hermeneutics") of cross-cultural differences in the meaning of time. This literature emphasizes the social organization of time and time reckoning. In so doing, it fails to examine how time feels – that is, variation in the perceived passage of time. Paraphrasing Sontag, I call for an erotics of time, which would focus on the cross-cultural study of temporal experience and temporal agency. Moreover, I present scattered evidence suggesting cross-cultural uniformity in these neglected dimensions of temporality.

Prior Research

The people in one society may agree to meet at a certain hour, but in a society without clocks, people may agree to meet when the sun is at a certain point in the sky. Systems of time reckoning represent a fundamental basis for intersubjectivity and interpersonal coordination. They entail abstract conceptions of time and temporal norms. They are byproducts of the social construction of reality, but, once they are established, they are objective facts of life that confront individuals with exteriority and constraint.

In our societies, at least, there is also variation in the perceived passage of time. This variation is often manifest as distortion in our experience of objective or standard temporal units (such as years, months, weeks, days, hours, minutes, and seconds). By "distortion", I refer to the fact that subjectively we may perceive time as passing slowly or quickly relative to the standard temporal units of clocks and calendars. In addition, we may experience a rough synchronicity between subjective and objective time.

In anthropology and sociology, prior research has emphasized cross-cultural differences in the social organization of time and systems of time reckoning while neglecting variation in the perceived passage of time. Durkheim ([1915] 1965) taught us that time is a social institution. In any given society, it is the socially constructed product of particular circumstances. As such, people with different cultural arrangements should be expected to understand time in divergent ways and exhibit unfamiliar temporal practices.

And, of course, the existing research literature confirms this perspective. Beginning with Martin Nilsson's (1920) study, *Primitive Time-Reckoning*, we find a persistent stream of ethnographic research, and the findings are dominated by descriptions of temporal differences. In 1937, Irving Hallowell distinguished between the temporal orientation of Western Civilization and that of the Ojibwa-speaking Indians of Canada. In 1939, E. E. Evans-Pritchard described time-reckoning among the Nuer of Africa. In 1953, Paul Bohannan studied concepts of time among the Tiv of Nigeria. In 1963, T. O. Beidelman observed a distinct system of time reckoning among the Kaguru. In 1969, Alfonso Ortiz examined

conceptions of time among the Tewa. In 1977, Douglas Givens wrote an analysis of Navajo temporality. These studies (from more than six decades of research) documented remarkable differences in time reckoning.

In a related vein, it is useful to consider the politics of punctuality. Iutcovich, Babbitt, and Iutcovich (1979) reported that Pakistani norms concerning punctuality diverge from our own. Likewise, Robert Levine (1997) has described the difficulties he encountered due to unfamiliar punctuality norms in Brazil. In 2000, Elizabeth Devine and Nancy Braganti warned would-be travelers that Latin American practices concerning punctuality differ from those in North America and Western Europe. Moreover, there are multiple examples of one temporal regime imposing its punctuality norms on the people of another culture. E. P. Thompson's (1967) magisterial article, "Time, Work Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism", revealed the brutality that was endured by a British population not long removed from the less punctual rhythms of agricultural life. In her study of culture and personality under the new Soviet regime, Margaret Mead (1951: 95) noted the ruthlessness with which authorities imposed an unfamiliar system of time reckoning on Russian citizens: "Punctuality has been exceedingly difficult to instill into a population unused to regular hours, and heavy fines and jail sentences have been introduced on a drastic scale – for example, lateness of twenty-one minutes might mean a loss of a third of the salary or a three-month jail sentence." A Navajo woman interviewed by Schulz, Knoki, and Knoki-Wilson (1999: 186) implicates a similar politics of punctuality in North America:

The work world is a lot different from the traditional world of telling time by the sun. You had a lot of tasks to do and as long as you got them done before the sun went down, that was the main thing. Nobody really cared whether you adhered to a particular schedule or what. But now we have to teach [our children] the value of appointments and keeping on time and things like that. Because that's what they need in order to survive in the work world.

One temporal regime would not need to impose its system of time reckoning on the people of another culture were it not for pre-existing differences in punctuality norms.

Eminent anthropologists have discussed temporality, but only from perspectives that differ markedly from my own. Claude Lévi-Strauss ([1962] 1966, [1964] 1969) viewed cognitive systems, such as time reckoning, as locally produced and variable aspects of cultural arrangements. His analysis concerns the temporal structure of various myths and tales, but these texts are imaginary, and they cannot be equated with the actualities of human temporal experience in those societies. Our own stories, for example, routinely depict time in ways that are incommensurate with real temporal experience. In the writings of Lévi-Strauss, we find the analysis of time and narrative, not the sensations of temporal experience.

Unlike Lévi-Strauss, Clifford Geertz (1973: 394) is avowedly concerned with "the Balinese sense of time". Ostensibly, he seeks to understand "the way in which they experience time" (1973: 361), but he *infers* their temporal experience from three quite indirect forms of evidence. First, their "depersonalizing" (1973: 390) terms of address and greeting nor-

ms are supposed to create a “‘detemporalized’ conception of time” (1973: 398). Second, Geertz (1973: 393) observes that their two calendars “don’t tell you what time it is; they tell you what kind of time it is”. Third, there is “the ceremonialization of social intercourse” (1973: 399) via ubiquitous formality and ritualization, which allegedly produces a “particulate” sense of time (1973: 394). Geertz (1973: 398) concludes that, in concert, these factors make for “the immobilization of time”. The problem, however, is that none of this interpretation is based upon asking Balinese people about their temporal experience. Yet this phenomenon is inherently subjective; temporal experience cannot be observed or inferred from that which is observed.

Another anthropologist, Maurice Bloch (1977: 282), is critical of Lévi-Strauss, Geertz, and other “cultural relativists” for claiming “that concepts of time are closely bound to social organization and therefore vary from society to society”. Actually, asserts Bloch (1977: 282), there is little variation: “it by and large boils down to only two notions of time. On the one hand we have concepts rather like our own folk everyday concept of linear durational time and on the other hand a concept of a static notion of time often referred to as cyclic”. Bloch (1977:284) admits that “the Balinese have a non-durational notion of time” in ritual and religious contexts. But simultaneously, argues Bloch (1977: 285), there is a second system of time reckoning that operates alongside the first: “By contrast [moreover] the contexts in which notions of durational time are used are practical activities”. According to Bloch (1977: 285), it is “a recurrent professional malpractice of anthropologists to exaggerate the exotic character of other cultures”. Concentrating on the superstructure of exotic rituals, declares Bloch (1977: 285), “obscures the fact of the universal nature of a part of the cognitive system available in all cultures”. Bloch (1977: 285) believes that all societies have notions of durational time because all cognitive systems are “constrained by nature”.

Bloch (1977: 282) is well aware that his initial assumption is questionable:

In reducing the evidence to two types I am, of course, talking about claims concerning the perception of duration not the ways in which time is divided up, or metaphorically represented. These are, of course, legion but are not relevant to our argument.

With two dubious sentences, he sweeps aside a huge amount of cross-cultural variation in time reckoning. Equally dubious is his assertion (1977: 283) that cross-cultural uniformity in time reckoning reflects an underlying uniformity in the syntax and semantics of all languages. On the contrary, there is strong support for Sapir-Whorf in recent research from linguistics (Deutscher 2010; Evans 2014) as well as economics (Chen 2013).

Bloch is simply wrong. Our own linear or durational time did not arise from nature. For more than fifteen centuries, we have been counting years since the birth of Jesus, and there is nothing natural about that system. Indeed, our current time reckoning was instantiated by the calculations of a monk at the behest of a Pope. In other words, our linear or durational system of time reckoning emerged from a religious superstructure – precisely the context that Bloch identifies as the source of “a non-durational notion of time”. Furthermore, from countless ethnographic studies, we have learned that, where cognitive

systems *are* “constrained by nature”, it is static or cyclical notions of time that emerge. Of necessity, the “practical activities” of hunting and gathering, pastoral, and agricultural peoples are organized around the recurrent cycles of nature: night and day, phases of the moon, and seasons of the year. It should come as no surprise, then, that their notions of time are predominantly static and cyclical, but, contradicting Bloch, this view of time reflects their existential reliance on natural rhythms, not the imagined exaggeration of exotic religious rituals by anthropologists.

Bloch’s argument merits special attention because there are misleading similarities with my own analysis. Both of us are critical of anthropology for neglecting the cross-cultural study of temporality. Both of us acknowledge that certain aspects of temporality differ from one society to the next. And both of us suggest that other aspects of temporality may be universal. In crucial ways, however, our respective analyses are divergent. Bloch (1977: 282) examines how we *think* about temporality: cognition, classification, and “concepts of time”. I explore how time *feels*: variation in the perceived passage of time and our efforts to modify temporal experience. Bloch (1977: 285) believes that some aspects of temporality are universal because they are “constrained by nature”. I contend that variation in the perceived passage of time always and everywhere operates under the same principles because these principles are constrained by generic and immutable properties of society: self, socialization, interaction, and the social construction of reality.

Indisputably, time reckoning and temporal norms differ in other cultures. Is this also true of other dimensions of time and temporal experience?

Theoretical Framework

Prior research has emphasized cross-cultural differences in systems of time reckoning while neglecting variation in the perceived passage of time and temporal agency. We can begin to address this oversight by pursuing an erotics of time that is centrally concerned with our temporal sensations – that is, the study of variation in temporal experience. Doing so does not require that we abandon social science research, but it does necessitate a different theoretical framework.

The sociological version of social psychology presumes that principles governing the self and social interaction are cross-culturally valid. “Every individual is conscious of an inner flow of time”, argue Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966: 26), because all human beings are characterized by a unique self-awareness of their own existence. As Norman Denzin (1969: 926) puts it, “human affairs, wherever they occur, rest on the same interactional processes”. In his essay, “On Face-Work”, Erving Goffman (1967: 44) adds “that underneath their differences in culture, people everywhere are the same”. What is the basis for this assertion? Goffman responds to this question by invoking neither biology nor psychology but rather the study of self and social interaction:

If persons have a universal human nature, they themselves are not to be looked to for an explanation of it. One must look rather to the fact

that societies everywhere, if they are to be societies, must mobilize their members as self-regulating participants in social encounters. One way of mobilizing the individual for this purpose is through ritual; he is taught to be perceptive, to have feelings attached to self and a self expressed through face, to have pride, honor, and dignity, to have considerateness, to have tact and a certain amount of poise. These are some of the elements of behavior which must be built into the person if practical use is to be made of him as an interactant, and it is these elements that are referred to in part when one speaks of universal human nature.

In this passage, Goffman identifies intrapersonal and interpersonal processes that can be found in every society. Do they serve as a foundation for cross-cultural uniformity in temporal experience?

What I am suggesting is that, beneath the undeniable differences in culture, there are dimensions of temporal experience that are everywhere the same. In other words, these are forms of temporal experience that can be found in every society. As we have seen, this is not the typical line of inquiry one finds in the anthropological literature. Nonetheless, there are some anthropological allies in this seemingly quixotic endeavor.

In their influential textbook, *Personality in Nature, Society, and Culture* (1959: 53), Clyde Kluckhohn and Henry Murray offer an enduring aphorism that avows three levels of diversity in human experience:

EVERY MAN is in certain respects
 a. like all other men,
 b. like some other men,
 c. like no other man.

The universal element (a) in their statement does not refer to only biological or psychological uniformities in our genus and species. As they are quick to point out, much of what is common in human experience is rooted in “societies and cultures” – an abstract phrase to be sure, but one that presumably makes reference to the universal exigencies associated with self, socialization, interaction, and the social construction of reality. I suspect that Anne Line Dalsgård (2004: 138) is in accord with this perspective when, in *Matters of Life and Longing*, she asks the following question: “Can we assume that all human beings possess a need for recognition from other human beings?”

Hoyt Alverson (1994: ix) brings us to the crux of the matter with this question: “Are there universal as well as culturally particular experiences and expressions of time?” He (1994: xii) asserts that “anthropology and other human sciences have overstated the . . . diversity of temporal experience.” Furthermore, his (Alverson 1994: xi) linguistic research demonstrates that terminology concerning the perception of time “could in general be translated quite exactly” between languages as different as English, German, Setswana, Mandarin, and Hindi. This line of inquiry suggests that people in different cultures have the linguistic resources with which to think and talk about parallel temporal experiences.

Theory Construction

In accord with Alverson's position, let us formulate a theory that accounts for variation in the perceived passage of time and then see if this theory is applicable to societies where peoples' lives are quite different from our own. My conceptual and methodological framework is derived from the sociological social psychology of George Herbert Mead (1934), Alfred Schutz (1962), Harold Garfinkel (1967), and Erving Goffman (1967).

As with other facets of social reality, time is taken for granted and, as such, it tends to be invisible from the perspective of natives in any particular culture, including our own. Thus, in order to interview people about their temporal experience, it is best to begin with situations in which they experienced distortion in the perceived passage of time. Using the (objective) time of clocks and calendars as a point of reference, we can observe that, from a subjective standpoint, time can seem to pass slowly, quickly, or synchronically. Individuals experience distortion in the perceived passage of time when they feel that it is passing slowly or has passed quickly.

What happens when you ask 750 people from all walks of life to describe circumstances in which they perceived time to pass slowly? Their responses can be coded into six categories of sufficient causation: suffering and intense emotions, violence and danger, waiting and boredom, altered states of consciousness, concentration and meditation, shock and novelty (Flaherty 1999). The resulting data form a U-shaped curve. This pattern is paradoxical because it indicates that time is perceived to pass slowly when situated stimulus complexity is either extremely low or extremely high. In other words, people experience protracted duration where there is little or no overt activity (e.g., solitary confinement) and where there is a great deal of overt activity (e.g., violence). On the face of it, these circumstances are contradictory, yet they produce the same form of temporal experience. Moreover, this pattern is not caused by the (1) liveliness of the situation, (2) pleasantness of the situation, (3) degree of volition, or (4) personality of the individuals in question.

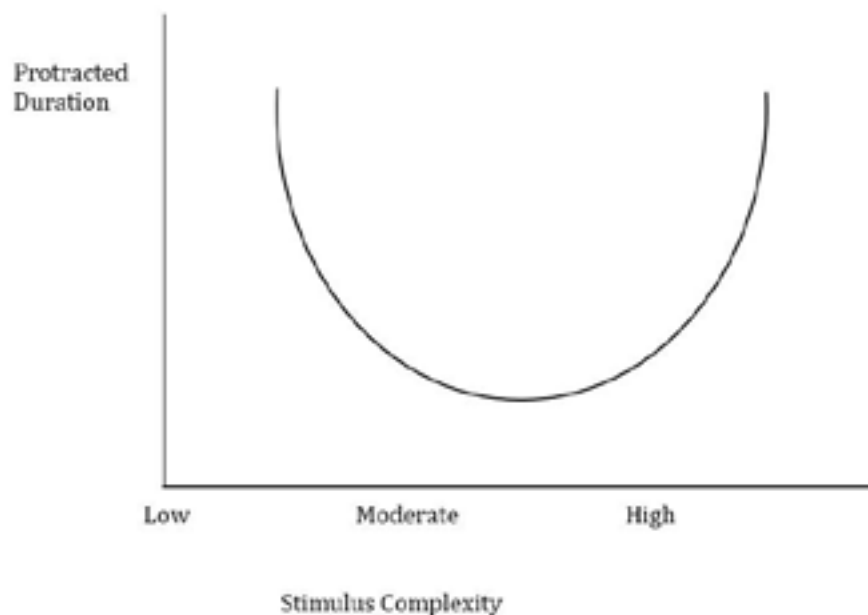


Figure 1: Relationship between Stimulus Complexity and Perception of Time

How, then, are we to resolve this paradox? These empirical materials share an underlying unity that leads to their common effect on the experience of duration. The situations at both ends of the continuum represent severe departures from the more habitual realities of everyday life. Problematic circumstances provoke emotional concern and cognitive involvement with self and situation, thereby increasing perceived stimulus complexity (regardless of whether the situation is “busy” from an overt standpoint). In turn, a heightened level of perceived stimulus complexity increases the density of experience per standard temporal unit (e.g., minutes or days). Thus, time is perceived to pass slowly when the density of information processing is abnormally high.

Now let us turn our attention to the perception that time has passed quickly, or temporal compression. Two different but related processes leave the impression that time has passed quickly. First, some situations demand a great deal of challenging but unproblematic activity (as in a “busy” day at work). Given that one is familiar with, and possibly trained for, the demands of this situation, one can act without much self-consciousness or attention to time itself, thereby reducing the density of experience per standard temporal unit. When one looks back, time seems to have flown by. Second, it is also the case that the erosion of episodic memory reduces the density of experience in almost all remembered intervals, resulting in the nearly universal feeling that “time flies”. If time is perceived to pass slowly when conscious information processing is high, it makes sense that time is perceived to have passed quickly when conscious information processing is low.

And what about synchronicity? How is it possible for one’s subjective temporal experience to be roughly synchronized with the objective time of clocks and calendars? In concert, socialization and the routines of social interaction make for familiarity with the normal density of information processing per standard temporal unit. Under normal circumstances, this familiarity enables one to translate subjective experience into standard temporal units and vice versa. It follows that I can agree to meet with someone in ten minutes, and do so without the aid of a clock, because I have learned what ten minutes “feels like” in terms of subjective experience.

In short, variation in the perceived passage of time reflects the density of conscious information processing occasioned by one’s circumstances. Protracted duration is experienced when the density of conscious information processing is high; synchronicity is experienced when the density of conscious information processing is moderate; temporal compression is experienced when the density of conscious information processing is low. We can summarize this relationship with an S-shaped figure.

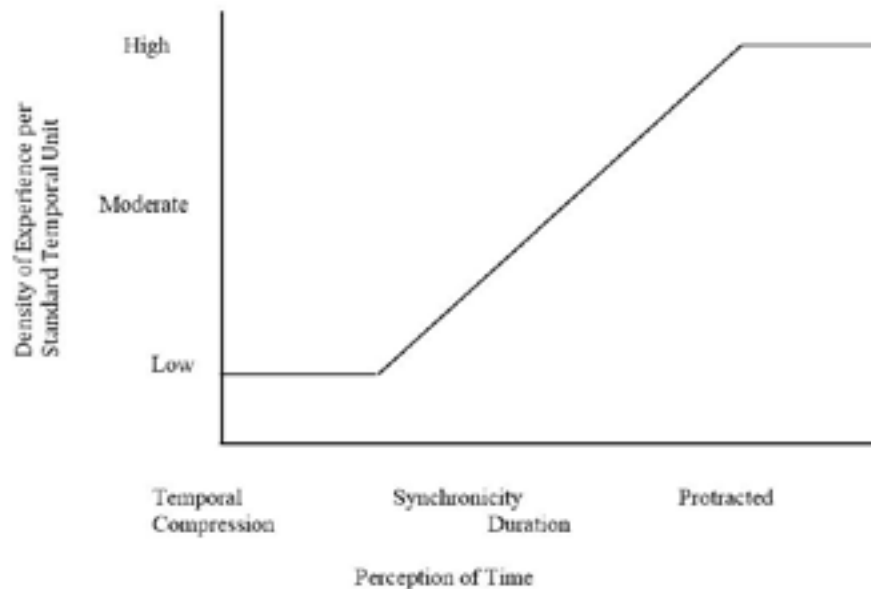


Figure 2: Relationship between Perception of Time and Density of Experience per Standard Temporal Unit

Temporal Agency

As it stands, this theory would seem to assume that one's circumstances shape one's temporal experience in deterministic fashion. For example, let us consider violence and boredom, which represent the opposite ends of our U-shaped curve. We might say that violence or boredom cause one to perceive time as passing slowly. These circumstances appear to be thrust upon passive (indeed, reluctant) subjects. It is against their will that they experience protracted duration.

Yet our data include a number of instances where subjects "choose" or "volunteer" to change the contour of their own temporal experience. Examples include recreational drug use, meditation, and experimenting with a sensory deprivation tank. Even some forms of suffering (such as going to the dentist) are more or less voluntary. In the writings of Erving Goffman (1959: 114) "individuals attempt to buffer themselves from . . . deterministic demands that surround them". How does our understanding of temporal experience change when we assume Goffman's perspective?

There is noteworthy contrast between Pavlov's famous experiment and George Herbert Mead's (1934: 25) description of human intelligence:

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.

In Pavlov's experiment, the environment determines the organism's behavior; in Mead's conceptualization, the organism is "determining its environment". Mead is theorizing the basis for self-determination in human experience. William James (1890: 402) puts it more succinctly: "My experience is what I agree to attend to". In accord with the writings of James and Mead, Anthony Giddens (1979: 56) has defined self-determination as "agency": "It is a necessary feature of action that, at any point in time, the agent 'could have acted otherwise': either positively in terms of attempted intervention in the process of 'events in the world', or negatively in terms of forbearance". Elizabeth Menaghan (1995: 323) adds that "the individual is increasingly conceived as an active agent who may be more powerful in shaping his or her own trajectory and even in altering social arrangements than prior formulations have recognized".

A tragic example is the recent phenomenon of "suicide by cop". Individuals who want to die but cannot bring themselves to do what is necessary sometimes threaten police officers in an intentional effort to provoke the officers to do the killing for them. Here, we see the individual set in motion events that are designed to loop back on this same individual with a particular effect. There is a linear determinism in classical causal analysis, but, contrastingly, what we see in instances of suicide by cop is a loop of causal circularity or self-determination. One attempts to modify the situation in an effort to modify one's own experience.

What role, if any, does self-determination play in the etiology of temporal experience? Etiology is the study of causes, origins, or reasons. When we bring this line of inquiry to bear on our experience of time, we ask questions about its causation, about why we have a particular form of temporal experience. Is it due to determinism – that is, the causal impact of situated factors beyond our control, such as those that emanate from nature and social organization? Or is it a product of self-determination – the individual choosing to arrange circumstances such that they act back upon him or her to make for a desired form of temporal experience? There is a fundamental difference in the etiology of homicide and suicide. Is temporal experience more analogous to murder (where the outcome is imposed on the individual) or suicide by cop (where the individual arranges and desires the outcome)?

Our experience of time reflects desires as well as circumstances. By weaving our desires and circumstances together, we create much of what we experience as the textures of time. We need a concept that sensitizes us to the ways in which we try to modify our own temporal experience or that of others. By "time work" I refer to intrapersonal and interpersonal effort directed toward provoking or preventing various forms of temporal experience (Flaherty 2011). This temporal agency implicates the micromanagement of one's own involvement with self and situation. As such, time work is the self-selected cause of one's temporal experience.

To examine this concept empirically, I have asked 406 people from all walks of life to describe the ways in which they attempt to control, manipulate, or customize their own

experience of time or that of others. In effect, my informants ask themselves, “What kind of temporal experience do I want to have?” Then, having answered this question, they employ folk theories and practices (which I call “time work”) to bring into being circumstances that provoke the desired form of temporal experience. They have constructed their own circumstances and have done so, moreover, with the intention to modify their experience of time. Rather than be at the mercy of forces beyond their ken or control, these people exercise a measure of self-determination or temporal agency.

Time is a multidimensional phenomenon. Not surprisingly, then, our efforts to modulate temporal experience are heterogeneous but not endlessly so. Common features in my data 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. Hence, a number of respondents try to customize the order or succession (first, second, third, etc.) of their activities or experiences. It is also possible to seek the optimal *timing* of an event, which involves choosing when something should happen (for example, deciding what day of the week is best for a certain activity or experience). In addition, 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. And some respondents admit stealing or *taking time* for themselves while they are ostensibly “on the clock” at work.

How do we recognize time work in everyday life? Let us examine some empirical instances.

For centuries, students and employees have developed ingenious ways to accelerate the perceived passage of time. Students doodle in their notebooks, text one another, and carry on private conversations with those sitting nearby. If only they were this diligent with their schoolwork! Meanwhile, their parents at the automobile factory have invented a game they call rivet hockey. The ostensible goal of this game is to hurt a fellow worker by kicking a rivet in such a way that it hits him in the shin, but the actual goal is to make time at work seem to pass more quickly. In contrast to these forms of temporal agency, a young woman may try to decelerate the perceived passage of time:

When I’m out with my boyfriend, especially when we take walks on the beach, I try to keep his mind, as well as my own, off the end of the school year when we have to separate for the summer. I talk about present problems with classes, past times, anything but the future. I try to keep him laughing to forget about leaving. I try to make the time we spend together seem longer.

She is attempting to slow the perceived duration of temporal experience so that she can savor time with her boyfriend.

For others, time work is directed toward the modification of frequency. Identity is related to frequency. If, for example, you wish to think of yourself as a writer, how do you motivate yourself to write more often?

I have the free will to sit down at any time to write. Unfortunately, this does not occur on my own, mostly because I have come to rely on one of two things to lead me to write. The first I call “inspiration”. It could be a mood, an event which sends my creative wheels spinning, or something from my past suddenly seeming more significant than it once did. The other way in which I sit down to write is when I have a creative writing assignment due. Though I do not set the dates on which my writing is due, I do force myself to take creative writing classes so that I will write more often.

Repeatedly, time work is manifest as a causal loop. As in the case of suicide by cop, one arranges circumstances to which one must then respond and, ultimately, this response entails the modification of one’s own temporal experience. In the previous excerpt, the young man writes more often; that is the effect, but what is the cause? It would be absurd to say that the increased frequency of his writing is “caused” by assignments in courses he does not have to take. He takes creative writing courses knowing that, by doing so, he brings about a particular set of external demands on his time.

While the previous young man attempts to increase the frequency with which he writes, another young man tries to maintain the frequency with which he sees his girlfriend:

I work all week and I like to have the nights to myself to do my work and rest. 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. I’d like to see her more often, too, but it’s more convenient this way.

He wants to ration the time he spends with his girlfriend, not maximize it. By the same token, however, his success in maintaining the rate at which they socialize marks her failure to increase it. In addition, this excerpt epitomizes the intriguing and uniquely human possibility that we may look upon *enjoyable* conduct or experience as “bad for us” – at least beyond a particular frequency. Consider the following example:

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. So I will usually switch my plans or the order of them so I won’t end up

seeing him at certain places when we don't plan to meet.

This person moderates the frequency of a desirable experience, albeit to manage her identity in the eyes of an unwitting boyfriend.

The concept of temporal agency helps us to understand our compliance with traditional timing. While spending a semester abroad in Spain, a young woman made it a point to accommodate the unfamiliar schedule of her host, a sixty-two-year-old woman: "Every day, we made sure that we were home at 2:30 to eat the big meal of the day together." It may seem that her use of the plural, "we", is affected; after all, she is the one who is adapting to a foreign schedule. Yet the student's effort at adaptation illustrates an important insight: choosing to conform with temporal expectations (here or abroad) is a species of temporal agency. Indeed, it is crucial to see that the host's conduct emerges from comparable effort – albeit to sustain a familiar routine.

Employers and employees have been engaged in stealing time from each other since the dawn of industrial manufacturing. Today, an employee who seems to be busily at work may actually be playing a computer game with someone in Belgium. Employers counter this problem with keystroke programs that monitor what employees do with their computers. Employees counter this effort to control their behavior by getting up from their desks to wander around for a while, but employers in Norway use a software program that alerts them when an employee has been away from his or her desk for more than ten minutes. Corporations steal time from employees when they demand that people work "off the clock" or fail to pay them at overtime rates. Perhaps the most extreme example from the employee side of this contest is a computer programmer in California who paid a man in China to do all of his assigned work for one-fifth of his US\$250,000 salary, thereby re-appropriating a great deal of his time.

There is, then, a wealth of evidence in support of the idea that we attempt to control, manipulate, or customize our experience of time. Instead of passively allowing time to happen to us, we try to modify the contours of our temporal experience. However, is this concept applicable to other societies, especially those that are quite different from ours?

In her ethnography, *Matters of Life and Longing*, Anne Line Dalsgård (2004: 67) is struck by the contrast between Denmark and Brazil, the site for her research: "I had entered a world remarkably different from the middle class world I inhabit in Denmark. Scarcity, physically arduous work or, for the unemployed, lots of spare time – these were the characteristics of life in the neighborhood". She observes (2004: 177) that "the experience of time as flexible was familiar to the women I knew, but a constant source of wonder to me. Time was not a rigid structure, as few things had to be done at a fixed hour". Yet, despite these differences, she also describes (2004: 145) a form of time work that is quite familiar:

I remember meeting Sonia in the street one evening; I was tired and on my way home, she excited, with a box of domino pieces and a packet of cigarettes. "Where are you going?" I asked. She said: "To Maria's house. Dominó! In order not to feel the time pass".

The use of a game to distract oneself from the perceived passage of time is a tactic that would be just as easy to find in Denmark.

Less familiar forms of time work are evident in a revealing study by Tea Torbenfeldt Bengtsson (2012), a Danish sociologist. She has examined the relationship between boredom and risk-taking behavior among juvenile delinquents in Denmark. These young men confront the problem of boredom (or nothing to do) when they are in juvenile detention centers as well as when they are at liberty on the streets. In confinement, they seek to alleviate boredom by means of resistance to institutional rules. On the streets, they avoid boredom by participating in various types of petty crime. With Bengtsson, we must view both lines of action as time work, and we must also acknowledge some degree of irrationality in these endeavors. Resisting institutional rules can lengthen one's sentence in secure care; engaging in petty crime can get one sentenced to secure care. Either way, one spends more time in boring circumstances. Yet this rational calculus is less compelling for these young men than is *making their time* (in confinement or on the streets) more exciting, albeit temporarily so. We witness similar dynamics in Martin Frederiksen's (2013) book, *Young Men, Time, and Boredom in the Republic of Georgia*.

Happily, a number of scholars at Aarhus University are finding the concept of temporal agency (or time work) useful in their own research. There is great intellectual progress where there is a spirit of collaboration and mutual inspiration. That spirit is epitomized by a recently published book, *Ethnographies of Youth and Temporality: Time Objectified* (Dalsgård, Frederiksen, Højlund & Meinert 2014). The chapters in this book examine how youth in various societies confront time as a problematic fact of life as well as the strategies they have devised to deal with troublesome temporal experience. From Lotte Meinert and Nanna Schneidermann's (2014) chapter, we learn that traditional naming practices in Uganda condense time by linking one's identity to the present (i.e., the circumstances of one's birth) or the past (i.e., one's predecessors in the kinship system). More recently, young men have been renaming themselves. Like the traditional system, self-naming condenses time, but, with self-assertive and insurrectionary intent, it does so by linking one's identity to a hoped-for future as a pop musician. Both of these naming practices represent temporal agency, but the former reproduces the status quo while the latter challenges it.

Time work is also apparent in a recently published book, *Taming Time, Timing Death: Social Technologies and Ritual*, edited by Dorthe Refslund Christensen and Rane Willerslev (2013). The chapter by Murray Last (2013) presents compelling evidence that the people of Northern Nigeria are timing their deaths to coincide with important religious holidays. As he puts it, they are dying on time. In the chapter by Christensen and Kjetil Sandvik (2013), they show us how Danish parents use time work to mourn the deaths of infants and stillborn children. These parents use an online memorial site to structure their ritual performance of grief. Their children did not live long lives, but by means of this commemoration, these parents stretch the time of these children to ensure that their memory endures. Consider, for example, this inscription: "You gave us a day which lasts forever".

It is tempting to celebrate time work as the existential triumph of individuals in difficult circumstances, but we must remember that corporations and political regimes also engage in temporal agency. In his article, "Patients of the State: An Ethnographic Account

of Poor People's Waiting", Javier Auyero (2011) describes how the political regime in Argentina makes the urban poor of Buenos Aires wait for all manner of social services, thereby creating a sense of subordination and political resignation.

The Cross-Cultural Question

So, it would seem that people who live in very different societies (the USA, Denmark, Cameroon, the Philippines, Nigeria, the Republic of Georgia, Brazil, Nepal, Romania, Uganda, and Argentina) engage in time work. In some cases, their motives and strategies differ, but we recognize what they are doing as parallel forms of temporal agency. Now let us ask ourselves if this is also true of variation in the perceived passage of time.

Do people in very different societies experience the passage of time in parallel ways? As we have seen, the evidence suggests that in societies like our own variation in the perceived passage of time is determined by the volume of conscious information processing per standard temporal unit. Protracted duration is experienced when the density of conscious information processing is high; synchronicity is experienced when the density of conscious information processing is moderate; temporal compression is experienced when the density of conscious information processing is low. Is this theory applicable to societies that differ from our own?

There is ample evidence in support of the assertion that various societies have created unique and divergent forms of time reckoning. This assertion seems irreproachable, however, only at a rather distanced and abstract level of analysis. Aside from the study of time work, the existing research literature tends to intellectualize temporality by emphasizing formal and definitional matters – such as systems of time reckoning, cosmology, and different ways to speak or refer to time – which are likely to reflect cultural differences. In so doing, we neglect variation in the perceived passage of time – in other words, the erotics of temporal experience.

In our own societies, variation in the perceived passage of time is typically recognized as distortion of standard temporal units. Someone may say, "I know that traffic accident only took seconds, but it felt like hours". What we witness in statements of this type is the individual struggling to translate deviant experience into standard temporal units. Alternatively, our subjects may take poetic license with their temporal experience. Attempting to describe his months of solitary confinement, Arthur Koestler (1960: 120) writes, "Time crawled through this desert of uneventfulness as though lame in both feet". Is it possible to recognize such distortion in a society without clocks or calendars?

Is it possible, moreover, to recognize such distortion in a society that lacks the linguistic resources we have for describing variation in the perceived passage of time? Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956: 58) observed that "the Hopi language contains no reference to 'time', either explicit or implicit". Can you experience distortion in the perceived passage of time if your society has no word for "time"? It is not sufficient to leave the analysis at the level of linguistics, for we have seen how individuals such as Arthur Koestler can work around the impediments of language when trying to describe an uncanny temporal experience

(uncanny precisely because one lacks the linguistic resources with which to articulate it easily). In Somalia, there are at least forty-three words relating to camels, including “nakhur”, which is a camel that will not give milk until her nostrils are tickled (Jacot de Boinod 2006: 152). It must be very convenient for the people of Somalia to have such a word, but, despite lacking an English equivalent, one has no great difficulty with representing the concept.

Do human beings, always and everywhere, experience and express the perception that one thing is longer (or shorter) than another? What circumstances could serve as the existential basis for a cross-cultural theory that accounts for variation in the perceived passage of time? We can begin to address this question, at least in speculative fashion, if we consider the following scenario from a short story by Italo Calvino (1969:95):

I have the impression this isn't the first time I've found myself in this situation: with my bow just slackened in my outstretched left hand, my right hand drawn back, the arrow A suspended in midair at about a third of its trajectory, and, a bit farther on, also suspended in midair, and also at about a third of his trajectory, the lion L in the act of leaping upon me, jaws agape and claws extended.

Let us assume that Calvino's narrator is not someone whose life is regulated by our standard temporal units. Is it not still reasonable to assume that, like someone from our own societies, he will define this situation as one of problematic circumstances? It seems equally reasonable to think that emotional concern and cognitive involvement will be heightened, thereby intensifying stimulus complexity and the density of experience (per ordinary moment, in this case), which, in turn, will bring about the feeling of protracted duration. Indeed, the ensuing events may seem to transpire in slow motion.

If the foregoing scenario seems unrepresentative of daily life, then let us consider a more familiar problem. The folk saying, “a watched pot doesn't boil”, refers to another situation in which there is the perception that time is passing slowly. In this case, however, there is too little happening instead of too much. But, once again, there is no need for recourse to clocks or calendars. Together, these scenarios imply that the people of divergent cultures could conceive of time in dissimilar ways even while experiencing its passage in much the same way. Is it possible, then, to specify a minimal model for the experience and expression of protracted duration? The prototypical statement could be phrased in the following fashion: “That day felt like a year”. Only three conceptual elements are requisite, and they would seem to be universal, regardless of how divergent temporal systems might be otherwise. The individual in question would need a term for “day”, a term for “year”, and a term for “felt like”. It is noteworthy that this individual would *not* need a term for time. If future research can show that these conceptual elements are found in all cultural contexts (especially, of course, those that are quite different from our own), then there is reason to believe that people everywhere have the linguistic resources with which to experience and express the perception that events are transpiring slowly.

Again, however, we cannot leave the argument at the level of linguistics. Even if people in other cultures can be said to have the minimally necessary linguistic resources, is there any evidence that they make use of them? With the assistance of two sociologists at the University of Buenos Aires, I have conducted research on how people in Argentina perceive variation in the passage of time (Flaherty, Freidin & Sautu 2005). Despite having a very different sense of punctuality than we do in North America, the data suggest that people in Argentina and in the United States experience the passage of time in much the same way. By itself, however, this study is not terribly convincing. Argentina has been heavily influenced by colonialism and neocolonialism, so let us examine some bits and pieces of evidence from widely scattered times and places.

Consider, for example, the great westward migration of settlers in the United States during the middle of the nineteenth century. Their journey was not organized on the basis of a contemporary concern with precise punctuality, although calendars and seasons certainly figured in their calculations. Still, on Monday, September 15, 1862, Jane Gould (Schlissel 1982: 228) made the following entry in her diary:

The road is the worst I ever saw. Lou and I walked the whole ten miles, till we came to within a mile of Ragtown. We saw the trees on Carson River and thought we were almost there but we kept going and going and it seemed as if I never could get there.

Clearly, this woman is experiencing and expressing protracted duration, but neither the experience nor the expression relies on the standard temporal units of our clocks and calendars. This woman's diary takes us back to an era before behavior and experience were organized on the basis of clocks, but she is obviously a product of European heritage.

For greater cultural contrast with our own societies, let us re-visit one of the earliest contributions to the anthropological study of time. In his book, *Primitive Time-Reckoning*, Martin Nilsson (1920: 42) observes that for the people of Madagascar, "‘rice cooking’ often means half an hour, ‘the frying of a locust’, a moment". Regrettably, he does not report anyone using these terms in an effort to translate uncanny temporal experience into terms a listener might understand (i.e., "I know it only lasted as long as the frying of a locust, but it felt like rice cooking"). Back in the United States, and back in the nineteenth century (1867), thousands of Native Americans massacred General George Armstrong Custer and all 209 of the soldiers under his command at the Battle of the Little Big Horn. Soon afterward, those investigating the massacre asked one of the warriors how long the battle lasted (Ward 1996: 302). "The fighting", he remembered, "had lasted no longer than a hungry man needed to eat his dinner". Here, one may object that in this instance a person from a European heritage posed an etic or outsider's question to the native member of a culture in which that question might not have arisen otherwise, but it is clear that the warrior in question understood the question and answered it clearly.

Finally, we can turn to rural China – a part of the world where the rhythms of activity were governed by little more than the rising and setting sun and the changing seasons. Yet, when a wedding separates two sworn sisters (Yao 1993: 26), one writes to the other

of her sorrow in words that concern distortion in the perceived passage of time: “Elder Sister being gone three whole days, feels like years”. In our own societies, we know that suffering and intense emotions (e.g., loneliness and longing) can make for the experience of protracted duration. Here, in a culture quite different from our own, we find the minimal model in pristine form.

Conclusion

Is the S-shaped model for variation in the perceived passage of time only applicable to our own culture? Do people in very different cultures engage in comparable forms of temporal agency? As we have seen, there are eloquent arguments on both sides of these issues. Ultimately, of course, arguments do not suffice, however sophisticated they might be. These are, after all, empirical issues, and they will be resolved only as a result of systematic observation.

It is the responsibility of anthropologists to do the necessary research. To date, anthropological research has concerned time reckoning and the social organization of time. Not surprisingly, this line of inquiry concludes that the people in various cultures conceive of time in very different ways. We need a new line of anthropological inquiry – what I have called an erotics of time – that concerns temporal experience and temporal agency. These dimensions of time may be cross-culturally uniform even in societies that conceive of time in very different ways.

For now, we do not have much data with which to test this hypothesis. There are just bits and pieces of evidence from widely scattered sites. In concert, however, these glimmerings of data suggest that variation in the experience of time occurs not because there are different kinds of people, but because people find themselves in different kinds of circumstances.

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