**The paradoxical habits of busyness and the complexity of intimate time-space**

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**Abstract**

Talk of busyness is everywhere. Obsessions with being busy mediate the temporalities of working and family life. The assumption that busyness is universal suggests a unified experience of temporality in the 21st century. This paper responds to this normative assertion through detailing the diversity of busyness detailed in three one-day diaries collated by the UK Mass Observation Archive on the theme of time pressure. The narrative analysis of the diaries responds to empirical and theoretical accounts of temporal variation to situate busyness in time-space. This analysis makes two contributions to scholarship on the geographies of temporality. First, it details how the negotiation of intimate time-space is framed within wider structural power relations. Second, it develops interpretations of habit though describing how everyday routines anticipate time pressure. Busy habits do more than respond to the demands of time pressure, they are also tactics to hold the body still while simultaneously moving it forward.

**Key words:**

Busyness, habit, time-space, temporality

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Busyness is a manifest condition of late modernity that characterises work, family and leisure time. Being busy has become a ‘mode of being’ (Martinsen quoted in Dryer et al., 2018), fetishizing the urge to engage in hectic doings and to experience the everyday through a rush of activities. This modern obsession with busyness would appear to correspond with theoretical interpretations of social acceleration, which identify the social and cultural contexts of speeded up temporalities. Yet, busyness is not simply a matter of getting things done quicker; it also engenders feelings of exhaustion and being overwhelmed (Shulte, 2014). Rather than interpreting busyness as propelling the body forward, its intensity is closer to the temporal condition that Ivor Southwood (2011) describes as ‘non-stop inertia’ and the fetishizing of frenetic inactivity. These paradoxical qualities of busyness subtly invert dichotomies that dominate theoretical and empirical studies of temporality: speed versus slow, transgression versus endurance, mobility versus staying; becoming versus being.

This paper develops an interpretation of busyness to foreground its paradoxical qualities through narrative analysis of three one-day diaries of individual time pressure from the UK Mass Observation Archive. This analysis develops empirical accounts of the diversity of temporalities (in particular Wajcman, 2015 and Sharma, 2014) that unsettle theoretical assumptions of universal temporal change to underscore the significance of uneven expressions of time (Baraitser, 2017). Using case studies of individuals employed in three distinctive time-space configurations (health care, IT project management and an engineering works) this study details how being busy is expressed through everyday habits that mediate contradicting experiences of time-space. In foregrounding the diversity of modes of busyness this paper makes two contributions to geographies of temporality. First, through diving down into the detail of three accounts of one day, the paper describes the complexity of intimate time-spaces and how these cannot be separated from broader power relations (Pain and Staeheli, 2014; Straughan, Bissell and Gorman-Murray, 2020). Second, the analysis develops scholarship on habit through examining how busy habits evolve as tactics of maintenance to hold the body in place, rather than busyness being a habit that must be overcome.

My account of busyness begins with an examination of scholarship on the diversity of temporalities. This review of empirical and theoretical contributions provides a basis to investigate the complexity of expressions of busyness. I then introduce the Mass Observation Archive and the three case studies of individual accounts of time pressure. Using narrative analysis of these case studies I examine how the diarists negotiate intimate time-space and their tactics for mediating this negotiation through habit.

**Differentiating temporalities**

The popularity of time for social theorists has generated various attempts to delineate and explain new forms of time in late modernity. Neologies of time pervade these theoretical accounts of the novelty of temporal experiences, for example: instantaneous time (Urry, 2000) timeless time (Castells, 2010) and chronoscopic time (Virilio, 1986 and Hassan, 2009). Scholarship on the social and economic foundations of acceleration have developed to foreground new temporalities, not as the inevitable outcome of the expansion of circulation and consumption but as cultural expositions of the unleashing of the forces of production (Rosa, 2013). Recent contributions to the theoretical study of acceleration are attuned to the diversity of different processes that are implied by socio-cultural speeding up. According to Hartmut Rosa (2013) the intensity of acceleration is due to the intersection of three distinct processes: the pace of life, social and technological change. Rosa argues that acceleration should not be considered simply as the inevitable result of the relentless pursuit of economic growth and consumption but is implicit to the project of modernity itself. Embedding the logics of acceleration in the structural and cultural aspects of everyday practices and institutions stimulates the process of ‘shrinking of the present’.

Though speed and acceleration dominate these theorisations of temporality, this ascendency is unsettled in empirical studies. Judy Wajcman’s (2015) analysis of ‘technologically tethered’ lifestyles considers how these practices come about through the priorities that individuals set for themselves and their positions in complex social networks. She cautions against technological determinism; if the potential for everyday life is to be experienced at a faster pace this not because of technology, but how this technology is used. Technology does not determine the speed of everyday life, but rather speed is ‘related to social norms that *evolve* as devices are integrated into daily life’ (p. 31 italics in original). Technologies are not isolated things but assemblages of ‘people, materials, equipment, components and institutions’ (ibid) and the significance of specific technological innovations is produced through their recurrent use in these assemblages. Wajcman’s empirically grounded account of acceleration does not prioritise a causal mechanism through which individual lives are produced through a commitment to speed, but rather foregrounds the inherently embedded quality of being pressed for time, as a tangled, fused and ultimately relational experience.

A further disconnection emerges in documenting how speed and acceleration are manifest in everyday life. As Wajcman (2008) observes that this may be explained by the difference between theoretical studies of speed and acceleration that focus on the individual, and empirical studies of time allocation and pressure which are inherently relational. Domestic rhythms and routines are collaborative and reticular, rather than individualistic (Nansen et al., 2009). Documenting the reality and experiences of time pressure and its co-ordination between individuals has been a consistent theme in empirical social science inquiry. This has developed through the seminal contributions of Arlie Hochschild’s (1989) writing about the second shift; emerging concerns in the 1990s about work-rich and work-poor households (Berthoud, 2007); and research on work-life balance and time pressure in families, particularly dual career households with young children (Bianchi, Robinson and Milke, 2006; Bittman and Wajcman, 2000; Craig and Brown, 2017; Folbre and Brittan, 2004; Jacobs and Gerson, 2001; Gershuny and Sullivan, 2019). Feminist accounts of women’s everyday lives have been particularly important in revealing inequalities of time (Bryson, 2008; Davies, 2001; Glucksmann, 2000). Research in science and technological studies documents how technology is implicit in the process of speeding up/slowing down and the orchestration of busy household schedules (Bittman, Rice and Wajcman, 2004; Gregg 2011; Mullan and Wajcman, 2019). The ambition of empirical studies of time-use is not to provide an overarching account of social change but rather to delineate the complexity, contingency and relationality of temporal experiences (Southerton and Tomlinson, 2005).

Time-use data is best suited to detailing inequalities in how time is spent rather than documenting socio-cultural change (Zuzanek, 2017). These data do not confirm or refute theories of social acceleration, though recent examinations have sought to discover how the speeding-up of society is captured in time-use data (Mullan and Wajcman, 2019; Sullivan and Gershuny, 2018). This lack of objective empirical evidence for social acceleration does not undermine its theoretical relevance. According to Rosa (2013) subjective experiences of time pressure, which are intensifying (Robinson and Godbey, 1997), confirm acceleratory logics rather than objective data on time-allocation. Yet this distinction between objective and subjective data does not fully resolve empirical debates about time pressure. The consistent finding from analysis of time-use data is the persistence of gender inequalities, and this holds for recent analyses of subjective experiences of time-use such as multi-tasking and feelings of being rushed (Sullivan and Gershuny, 2018).

The popular appeal that busyness is the zeitgeist of everyday temporalities as everyone is seemingly busy nowadays needs qualification. Even in popular accounts this fetishizing of busyness is queried (see for example Burkeman, 2016). Rather than differentiating between the relative utility of subjective and objective temporal data and what this might imply for the reality or otherwise of busyness (Gershuny, 2005; Rosa, 2013; Shulte, 2014). It is more appropriate to consider how temporal inequalities are implicit in accounts of busyness. Sarah Sharma’s (2014) ethnographic study of workers at differential vertices of the relentless pursuit of speed reveals how their temporalities are not united by a unidirectional fast pace of life, but requirements to calibrate their own temporal schedules to fit with the demands of institutions, relationships and employment situations. Her starting point is that the temporal is not a generalised experience of time but a form of ‘social power and a type of social difference’ (p.9). She develops this through the concept of power-chronography. Sharma acknowledges the contribution of geographers in foregrounding the spatial and temporal co-ordination of activity and offers spatial-chronology as a development of Doreen Massey’s (1994) formulation of power-geometry. Sharma contends that while Massey’s foundational writings about space as multiple and relational have inspired the intellectual project of the spatial turn, the temporal imaginary has received less attention. Though geographers have developed writings on time-space that foreground its multiplicity and the diverse time consciousness of global capitalism (May and Thrift, 2001), Sharma argues that these are too preoccupied with spatiality rather than temporal forms of power. It is not enough to acknowledge the multiplicity of social time (see for example Adam, 1995), an understanding of temporality should make visible the differential relations of power within time.

Sharma’s detailed ethnographic account demonstrates how different bodies are differentially (dis)invested by the logic of neoliberalism. She calls attention to the ‘bitter and dark struggle around time and the use of time’ (Lefebvre, 2004, p. 74). The privileged are expected to have dominion over time in order to engage in diverse temporalities (e.g. speeding-up at work, slowing down in leisure). This ideology that time should be both managed and ‘meaningful’ depends on temporal architecture that exploits other people’s time. In Sharma’s account the temporal narratives of the frequent business traveller cannot be lived without the tacit involvement of taxi drivers, maids, restaurant workers, airport staff etc. whose own temporal experiences uphold those with greater privilege.

These alternatives to social acceleration call into the question the possibility that bodies are equally accelerated and foreground the political dimensions of temporality. Wajcman’s research on the co-production of technologies, empirical analyses of time-use data and Sharma’s account of power-chorography unsettle individualistic accounts of acceleration and social change. They draw attention to temporal interdependencies and how these are mediated through assemblages of power facilitated by technology and social norms. From these perspectives the case for interpreting busyness as a bellwether of unidirectional socio-cultural change is harder to sustain. While the subjective manifestation of time pressure is not disputed in these accounts, no one now seemingly has enough time, these empirical and theoretical examinations reveal how lack of time is differentiated and that power continues to structure and condition distinct tropes of busyness and time pressure.

The disparity between predominately masculinist accounts of temporal speed and feminist details of how time is differentiated calls attention to the structured, cultural and gendered dimensions of time (Sullivan, 2006). But feminist theorisations of time do more than reorganise normative paradigms, they subvert these. The contribution of feminist theory to the study of temporality develops Julia Kristeva’s (Kristeva, Jardine and Blake, 1981) conceptualisation of women’s time to foreground the relational and non-teleological dynamics of time. This tradition is developed in Lisa Baraitsar’s (2017) examination of the relationships between care, time and thinking. Baraitser seeks to unsettle theoretical preoccupations with difference, transgression and rupture through examining the necessity of endurance. She is drawn to temporal expressions that signify a lack of dynamism, the non-event and immobility through ‘staying close to lived experiences of time that appear neither eventful nor vital, and whose “multiplicity” is overwhelmed by their singularity’ (p. 13). Her examination of endurance develops feminist ethics of care that situate dependency between repair and destruction (Butler, 2004). Accounting for time that is held in suspension through care emphasises the significance of non-productive temporal tropes, such as waiting, staying, delaying, enduring and returning.

Baraitser’s account of care and endurance underscores alternative approaches to busyness than hitching it the inevitability of speed and acceleration. In particular, her examination of maintenance - keeping something or someone going through difficult times and remaining optimistic - is redolent of the qualities of keeping busy as a form of self-care. Maintenance is not directed towards advancement and productivity, but a commitment to maintaining keeps forms of productivity going (2017 p. 61). This interpretation of busyness resonates between the perseverance of carrying on going and hope for the future. While this quality of busyness has been supplanted by more dystopic forms that busyness is corrosive, it reminds us that being busy is a mechanism of temporal orchestration that is essentially relational.

While it is easy to succumb to the clarity of neologies of time that delineate universal social-cultural change, recent empirical and theoretical examination of temporality unsettle these unified explanations. The contributions of Wajcman, Sharma and analyses of time-use data reinforce the continuation of temporal inequalities and the complexity of social, spatial and technological assemblages that structure and maintain these. Taking this further through feminist critique we can also, following Barasitser, appreciate the importance of not fetishizing progress against the necessity of endurance. What this means for an examination of busyness is that it requires attention to the details of differential time-space configurations and the repetitive stasis of being busy.

**Mass Observation Archive**

Methodological approaches to the analysis of time in everyday life distinguish between quantitative analysis of time-use (for example Gershuny, 2000 and Folbre and Bittman, 2004) and qualitative studies of temporality (such as Southerton and Tomlinson, 2005). The former provides a detailed account of how time is spent while the latter reveal the interplay of temporal schedules and how these are mediated through formal and intimate relationships. For this analysis of busyness as an intimate expression of time-space I use an alternative methodology: written one-day diaries. These diaries were collated by the UK Mass Observation Archive in Autumn/Winter 2017/18. The Mass Observation archive was originally established in 1937 to record everyday life in Britain and was revived in 1981. Since 1981 the Archive has published directives which invite volunteer correspondents to write in about their experiences of particular events or themes of everyday life.

The Autumn 2017 directive was a sponsored by a research team interested in time pressure and food. This directive elicited 137 responses, though three correspondents declined to provide a detailed diary, giving a total of 134 one-day diaries. The diaries were written over a six-month period with the first written on 9th September 2017 and the last on 9th March 2018. Correspondents were specifically asked to write about a day when either they or their partner was at work. If no one in the household was in work, they were asked to choose any day. The directive asked correspondents to write about everything that happened from when they got up to when they went to bed, including what time, where and with whom events occurred. When writing up the diary, correspondents were encouraged to reflect on why they carried out a specific activity at a particular time. As well as activities, correspondents were asked to reflect on how their day was organised: how the schedules of others influenced when or what they did, how much flexibility they had, how much planning they did, and whether parts of the day had gone as planned. Correspondents were encouraged to reflect on their thoughts and feelings, as well as the actual events and to comment on time pressures, specifically when they felt most and least pressed for time.

The diaries provide a unique dataset for the analysis of everyday habits of busyness. Unlike diaries used for time-use studies there is no proscriptive format for the Mass Observation dairy and one of the most intriguing details of the dairy is the diversity in correspondents’ interpretation of the directive. There are two broad approaches to writing these diaries: time-structured or time-narrated. Time-structured diaries detail activities at particular times, with specific clock-times normally listed on the left-hand side. Time-narrated diaries provide an outcome of the unfolding of activities usually, though not always, punctuated by the time when these activities occurred. Time-narrated account for two-thirds of the diaries contributed. There is though considerable variation in both types of diaries by length (they range from ½ page to 15 pages) and temporal detail. A few time-narrated diaries provide no references to clock-time at all, rather time is narrated through the temporal relationships of activities (using ‘before’, ‘after’, ‘then’ etc.). All diaries provide some spatial detail, illustrating that it is possible to describe a day without recourse to clock-time but not spatial detail.

Not being proscriptive means these accounts are not limited to an objective measure of time and correspondents are encouraged to reflect on their emotional experiences of time when writing the diaries. Correspondents mainly write about their own experiences rather than repeating normative expressions about time. Diaries are written both for the diarist and an unknown reader at Mass Observation. The diaries are, therefore, particularly useful for examining the inter-subjectivity of time pressure as they are simultaneously public and personal.

**Case studies of busyness**

For this paper I present the detailed analysis of three diaries. The diversity of the diaries does not lend itself to a thematic analysis of the entire dataset. Furthermore, Mass Observation volunteers are not representative of the UK population. Among correspondents to the Autumn 2017 directive: 61% are female; 54% are retired and 82% have or had occupations classified in groups 1 to 4 of the UK Office of National Statistics occupational classification (Managerial, Professional, Assistant Professional and Administrative occupations: in the 2011 UK census these four groups accounted for 65% of working population). This bias towards a middle-class sample means that the data cannot be used to confirm or refute temporal socio-cultural trends.

The distinctive quality of these data is the detail that they provide of different temporal experiences in discrete assemblages of time-space. To retain this detail, I have selected three case studies of individuals who work in very different types of organisation (health care, IT project management and an engineering works). I have chosen to differentiate by time-space at work as this is one of the main dimensions of busyness that emerges from the analysis of all the diaries, though it does exclude retired correspondents. The analysis of the case studies follows a narrative approach (Riessman, 1993). This analysis identifies how the diary is structured (how the diarist tells the time); how it is performed (the emotional tone of the diary); the substance of the diary (how each diarist narrates time pressure over the day); and what function the diary serves in revealing what correspondents think about busyness and the context and relationships that constitute being busy.

I introduce each case study with reference to the first three components of the analysis (structure, performance and substance). I then discuss how the function of the diaries reveals the significance of intimate time-space and differential busy habits.

***MOA Number: T4715. Pseudonym[[1]](#endnote-1): Linda. Female speech-therapist, 40-49, married with 2 school-age children. Diary for Tuesday 21st November 2017.***

Linda’s diary is a time-structured account of her day. Visually her diary segues between morning domestic, daytime work and evening domestic activities punctuated by time. Her first time reference is 6.13am when she checks her phone in order to ensure that she gets up by 6.25 and her last time point is 23.40 when she goes to bed. She records 44 time points in total over the day (her diary is 11 pages long); the smallest time gap between discrete points is five minutes and the longest one hour and five minutes. Her diary is observant of her own behaviour and interactions with other people and non-human entities. It is also humorous and written in a self-deprecating tone, and her reflections on her day are subtlety directed towards herself. Linda’s temporal awareness is not just related to recording clock-time. She has a clear perception of when things should happen, and how long activities should take. She needs to be up by 6.25am at the latest, she knows when her children need to be up, what time she needs to leave the house and when to bring appointments with patients to an end.

Linda’s close attention to time is matched by equal detail to the materiality of space. She details her routes to work, visits to patients and her return home, difficulties in parking, layout of the office (and the challenges of finding a hotdesk) and how patient visits are punctuated by intercoms, bells and access codes. Her diary presents an integrated account of time-space and the assemblage of routes, technologies, infrastructures, family members, pets, colleagues and patients that she encounters over the day.

Linda’s work is bounded in caring spaces and there is little flexibility within these. Consultations with patients are time limited but cannot be brought to a close by the resolution of patients’ conditions. It is up to Linda to manage the temporal boundaries of each appointment and if she fails to do this it will segue into later appointments. As she deals with patients with limited cognition visits are co-ordinated with other colleagues and family members. Her frustration is that despite her attempts at punctuality she finds this precision impossible to maintain. In particular, in moving between the bounded spaces of home, office and consultations she enters ‘Bermuda triangles of time’. These are spaces such as hallways, corridors, pavements where time is lost. One tactic to stay ‘on time’ is to set her car clock 15 minutes fast to trick her into thinking time is more advanced than it is and to avoid being late for appointments. Having the clock run fast means that she has to mentally calculate the ‘real’ time. What she does not have time for during the day is time for herself, and she is constantly behind with administration tasks, such as submitting her travel expenses. Linda has a managerial role and is also responsible for the shift rota but has put herself down for a day she has booked off. Her struggles to fulfil responsibilities for herself are her main source of temporal frustration. Linda’s adherence to time and her responsibilities for others is also affirmative. She is the last to leave work on the diary day and contrasts her commitment to colleagues who have their coats on ready to leave ‘on time’.

At home Linda has to cook for her family and, echoing her experiences at work, is requested to prepare this on time as her husband and son want to watch a football match. Linda does not keep to this request for punctuality and writes that the meal she provides is ‘horrid’, though none of her family dare complain. Thus while she has responsibilities at home as well at work, Linda has more temporal sovereignty over her domestic commitments compared to her spatial and time-tethered work routines.

Linda’ s pauses in activities in time-space are not just restricted to time that is lost in in-between spaces. In the morning Linda spends a few minutes feeding and stroking the family pet rabbit. In the evening, after 10pm, she loses track of time doing some knitting, making baby shoes for a colleague, an activity she finds ‘very absorbing’.

***MOA Number: P6034. Pseudonym: Alex. Male IT manager; 30-39, cohabiting, no children. Diary for Wednesday 6th December 2017.***

Alex’s diary is time-narrated. There are only six time anchoring points (times for when the alarm goes off, he leaves for work, meetings at work, leaving work to return home and when he gets home). The time in-between these anchoring points is narrated through his negotiation of relationships at work. Alex writes his diary around his anxiety about work and his relationships with different colleagues, vendors, sub-contractors, clients, software testers with whom he interacts during the day and how their interests in projects may come into conflict. His diary is personal and he does not explain his working context for another reader, which makes it hard to follow.

Alex’s contract is home-based and he spends a lot of time travelling to support specific projects. But on this day he is going into his employer’s office as he has been asked to answer some software questions relating to a large project that has recently completed and to identify improvements that the operators have requested in developing the software. Unlike Linda there is no requirement for Alex to be punctual and he leaves home slightly later than planned. Most of his day is spent in meetings and his work time is dedicated to negotiating complaints, criticisms and requests from different members of the project team. In contrast it does not take Alex long to fix the problem with the software. Alex is anxious about his working day not because of the challenges of the actual productive work that he has to do, but because of the working relationships that he has to manoeuvre around and he is conscious that he finds it difficult to be assertive.

Alex’s day is technologically-tethered (Wajcman, 2015), though his use of technology is not associated with dystopic acceleration. Alex uses technology as a ‘pallet cleanser for the mind’. In the morning, as part of his routine to get him ready to face the relational pressures of work, he plays a simple computer game (Simpsons tapped-out) and updates social media before heading for work. In the evening he watches a film on triple speed with his partner and enjoys being able to watch more television because of this facility.

***MOA Number: S5915. Pseudonym: John. Male engineering works manager, 50-59, married, no children. Diary for Friday 23rd February 2018.***

I classify John’s diary as time narrated, though it is a hybrid of Linda’s and Alex’s approaches. His morning routine is time-structured and his precision to temporal detail has been ‘honed’ over the last few years, though he hates not being able to spend more time with his ‘lovely wife’. After this precise morning routine, his diary takes a more narrative form and he shifts to write about what happens between different time periods. In total there are 28 references to specific times. In his diary he is critical of other people encountered during the day and he complains about the situation at work.

Most of his day is spent supervising colleagues at work. He reflects that he is the only one at work committed to the job and everyone else just turns up for the salary. After his regular morning tour of the works, John identifies a major technical problem at work. Tests on a new piece of equipment are not going well and he decides that it requires dismantling and review. He meets with the Managing Director to discuss the equipment and the MD informs him that the failure of the equipment is his responsibility and John should spend the weekend at work to fix this. John declines this suggestion. He writes in his diary that he is becoming increasingly frustrated that he is expected to do more at work with no extra pay, and to do work that he is not qualified to do. He writes that he is looking for a new job.

No progress is made on the faulty equipment. By lunchtime he is ‘fed up’ and focuses on clearing his desk. On a Friday work finishes at 1.30pm and John is in no mood to work beyond this time. He leaves work at 1.33pm - ‘the earliest for months’. John spends the afternoon writing a complaint about a neighbour’s planning application. He then goes to ‘cheer himself up’ working in his engineering garden-workshop and listening to classic rock music. He has set himself a deadline for the model he is working on and is pleased with his progress. On going to bed John reflects that the frustration of his working day is that more and more is expected of him with less support.

**Busyness in time-space**

The choice of one-day diaries to study busyness emphasizes temporal experiences rather than normative accounts. All three diarists are aware of the wider temporal contexts and normative expectations about time. However, the emphasis in the diaries is how feelings of time pressure emerge through material and relational contexts and the assemblage of people, power, technologies, infrastructure and institutions that stimulate the pinch points of busyness. The intimacy of the diaries also reveals the embodied and imagined practices of busyness in addition to the detail of the material co-ordination of space and time. The detail within the diaries is compatible with Peter Merriman’s (2012) call for closer attention in geographical studies of time-space with other ‘other registers, apprehensions, engagements and movements that appear to be important for understanding the unfolding of many events’ (p. 24), rather than framing the time-space of the everyday in simple Euclidian terms.

Linda’s close attention to time and space is necessary as her work is bounded in caring spaces and there is little individual flexibility within these (Power and Hall, 2017). Caring work demands this close attention to time-space (Bowlby 2012). In particular, care work is not easily demarcated by the conventions of arrival, progress and departure (Barasiter, 2017). Care is necessarily relational, and Linda has to co-ordinate her visits with other care professionals and relatives as well as patients. Her adherence to clock-time is not just about her own punctuality but is necessary for this synchronisation. The rhythm of Linda’s day is not dictated by norms, but produced through the interplay of biological, psychological and social dimensions of temporality (Stratford, 2015).

Linda’s daily rhythm is punctuated through negotiating spatial infrastructure, particularly road design and security devices. For Linda time-space is more than a container in which practices are played out but is produced in practice (Simpson, 2012, p.424). Her requirement to move between spaces of care lends itself to Henri Lefebvre’s method of rhythmanalysis (2004) which calls attention not just to the material and organisational production of space, but how rhythms intensify people’s awareness of surroundings, and the fusing of sensual and mental processes (Edensor, 2010). What does get lost in the rhythmic unfolding of Linda’s day is her own sovereign control of time. She does not have time to complete tasks her herself, such as her own expenses, as her priority is the co-ordination of others. At the end of the day she is over-whelmed by the intensity of these relational responsibilities (Straughan, Bissell and Gorman-Murray, 2020).

In contrast to Linda, Alex’s day does not involve such a close negotiation of spatial physical infrastructure. Alex’s work as an IT manager in the transport sector is characteristic of what Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (2005) refer to as ‘projective’ work. Projective working is facilitated through networks rather than hierarchical bureaucratic structures, which depend on the management of relationships between members. Individual performance in one project ensures recruitment to future projects and is not just measured through objective criteria of productivity, but through the skills of relationship management. The busyness of Alex’s day is not prescribed by the practical tasks that he must do but the expectation that he can simultaneously respond to competing demands and requests within the project team. Alex’s day foregrounds the challenges of managing relationships in projective working rather than the spatial barriers and flows negotiated by Linda. His experiences invert the assumptions of speed that infiltrate contemporary management ethos (Du Gay, 2017) and suggest that non-hierarchical organisational structures do not necessarily facilitate quick delivery of products and solutions.

Alex has less to write about clock-time as temporal precision is not a requirement of his project work. Instead he is consumed by the ongoing negotiations of de-territorial relationships at work between workers with different interests, which do not just include colleagues in the company he works for, but sub-contractors, clients and vendors. Unlike Linda this co-ordination is not dependent on the orchestration of spatialized clock-time as meetings can be carried out virtually and Alex has more flexibility about punctuality. He is though required to be present in the office to fix the IT issue and the urgency of this task requires face-to-face interaction.

The sleight of hand of busyness that Alex experiences is that while he supposedly has sovereignty over how he spends his time at work, he is continually negotiating his working time with others. The temporal synchronicity of individual work schedules is a key task of projective work (Wajcman, 2019), though this does not always require spatial co-ordination (meetings can take place in virtual space). Alex’s time is spent responding to a changing cast of co-workers and making decisions about how much time to invest in maintaining these relationships. His anxiety is not about the co-ordination of activities in time-space but the potential to affect and be affected by these revolving de-territorial relationships. The arrhythmic quality of Alex’s day is characterised by a continual nagging doubt about how he interacts with others. These relationships are not anchored by discrete time-space boundaries and Alex’s anxiety is overwhelming.

John is the most meticulous in recording exact time. His complaint that he is asked to do too much at work and his dissatisfaction with the managing director and colleagues who do not pull their weight, reflects his expectation that time and working relationships should be unambiguous and precise. His reflections on time pressure are more closely associated with hierarchical organisational structures than co-ordinating time-space or negotiating project work and, unlike Alex and Linda, can walk away from the request to dedicate more time to work. On this day he uses the bounded nature of working in a more hierarchical organisation to deflect a request to spend more time at work. Instead he keeps himself busy with his own projects at home.

John’s account of time pressure is relational, though in a different way to both Linda and Alex. He is obsessed with how much he is expected to do at work, and how little his colleagues do in return. His account of time pressure is closer to theories of reflective modernity. In these accounts the collapse of formal structure and repertoires have been replaced by the expectation that individuals should navigate life through reflective thought and the process of choice-making (Beck and Beck Gernsheim, 2002). John’s working environment is structured around a formal hierarchy, but his frustration is precisely that he is increasingly expected to be responsible for his time. His perception is that he fulfils this responsibility, but his colleagues do not. For John the pinch point of busyness is his perception of a lack of consensus between a hierarchical management structure and the enfranchisement of responsibility.

The diarists’ detailed and varied accounts of time over one day resonate with clock-time as a moral institution rather than spatialized demarcation (Snyder, 2013). Each diarist’s account of time pressure refers to diverse rhythmic and arrhythmic interplays of emotions and relationships in time-space. Linda’s account is spatialized, Alex’s is discursive, while John presents more precise temporal detail. The dynamic interplay between work organisational structures and temporal experiences underlines the complexity of temporal and spatial diversity, as well as the differential speeds at which social change occurs.

**Busy habits**

The diarists’ detailed negotiation of time-space is not simply reactionary, all three anticipate how the day will unfold. Although the diaries are restricted to 24 hours, they detail repetition in how they respond to the intensity of time pressure. Their emotions of time pressure are recursive: Linda’s frustration in navigating time-space; Alex’s anxiety about responding to competing demands of dispersed co-workers; and John’s displeasure with his colleagues’ work-ethic. This anticipation is also mediated through time habits. Linda keeps her car clock constantly 15 minutes fast to reassure her that she is not late, though she also takes time out in the morning to stroke the family rabbit. Alex’s morning routine of playing a simple computer game is purposively to provide a space for not worrying about the coming working day. John’s starts the working day with a tour of the workshop to ensure that everyone has sufficient work to do.

The habitual character of busyness corresponds with popular interpretations of time, particularly in self-help literature on time management. The rationale of these texts is that busyness intensifies non-productive agency and challenges the reader to cultivate more effective time-management habits to become more productive and less busy. The purpose of these texts is not to enable readers to do less, but to have more time for affirmative activities, particularly spending time with family members (see for example Mckeown, 2014; Vanderkam, 2018). Individuals are expected to become entrepreneurs of time, able to make judgements about how much time to dedicate to tasks and maximise productivity (Erikson and Mazmanian, 2017).

Each diarist’s busy habits are though more than simple distractions; but are ways of grounding the mobile body and in doing so are enacted and reflected upon. Linda must mentally calculate the time in her car; Alex purposely spends longer playing his computer game to delay leaving for work; John’s moral evaluation of his working colleagues is repeated throughout his diary, from getting up to going to bed. These busy habits are not obdurate practices that need to be reformed, rather they correspond with sociological examination of habits that interprets these as socially shaped dispositions that guide direct impulses towards certain outcomes. In John Dewey’s (1922) neo-pragmatist theory of action, habits constitute a large part of everyday conduct rather than these being planned or deliberated. Habit is not just about a slavish devotion to repetition and routine. They are acquired and influenced by prior activity but are simultaneously projective and dynamic. Habits may fix action, while simultaneously, as time-management pundits champion, be a way of moving the body forward.

This paradoxical quality of habit is developed adroitly in David Bissell’s (2011) interpretation of thinking habits, which is particularly useful for working through how negotiating busyness in time-space generates habits that simultaneously promote inertia and advancement. Bissell’s contribution takes reflective thought beyond a Cartesian interpretation of orientation and co-ordination of a passive body towards an understanding of habit that ‘gets to the heart of bodily experience, but also and, crucially, how thought itself is enrolled into the quietly powerful force of habit’ (p. 2650). This does not dissociate habit from reflectivity but presents reflective thought as a thinking habit. Reflective thought becomes a ‘potentially intransigent thinking habit that does not necessarily orientate itself around utility and productivity and is not enrolled into a project of individual self-styling’ (p. 2662). Bissell’s reading of habit does not rely on a division between passivity and action as the two are folded into everyday encounters. Thought is varied, identifying it with habit does not preclude rational calculation or intuition. Rather thought takes on different forms in response to intensive shocks of being in the world. One legitimate response is that ‘we need to reflectively and cognitively think less about how we navigate and get through life’ (p. 2659). This interpretation of thinking habit reprises the idea of maintenance as habit to simultaneously hold and move the body forward in order to mitigate its exposure to affect and in turn to be affected.

Bissell’s identification of the necessity of ‘erratic “mental chatter”’ (p. 2660) to the continuous folding of passive and active bodily afflictions is particularly pertinent in making sense of the diarists’ accounts of busyness. All three diarists narrate consistent thoughts about time pressure: Linda worries about punctuality, Alex is anxious about dealing with people at work, John bemoans his colleagues’ work ethic. These thoughts are not reactive or reflective but anticipate their negotiation of time-space. Repetitive, busy habits are named. Linda writes about entering a ‘Bermuda triangle of time’ when she leaves home in the morning, acknowledging that losing time is habitual. Alex describes his morning routine a ‘pallet cleaner for the mind’ and one that he has developed over time. John’s morning routine has been ‘honed’ over the years to maximise efficiency. This naming of habit creates and produces meaning and to echo Bissell they hold Linda, Alex and John in place while simultaneously moving them forward.

**Conclusion**

Michelle Bastian (2017) has recently called for a critical horology to examine what time telling can reveal about the hidden complexity of temporalities. This analysis responds to this task though detailing how one-day diaries reveal the intricacies of time-space. The diaries reveal the multiple ways in which vulnerabilities to external and internal pressures are expressed (Straughan, Bissell and Gorman-Murray, 2020). Rather than identifying busyness as a fault response to the mismanagement of time (as self-help books suggest), or the supremacy of subjective over objective temporal experiences (as theories of social acceleration and examination of time pressure require), busyness is simultaneously external and internal.

In detailing the diversity in time-space relations this paper develops Sharma’s conceptualisation of power-chronography at a more intimate scale. In particular, the analysis has dived into the detail of the everyday in a way that does not negate the potency of broader political relations (Pain and Staehali, 2014). The specific qualities of time pressure that the diaries reveal cannot be extracted from the wider organisation structures in which they occur. This is not to suggest that busyness is detached from socio-cultural changes in the organisation of work and the spatial geometry of 21st-century capitalism. As the case studies considered in this paper illustrate, differential time-space configurations required in caring or project-based work, both emblematic of employment situations in late modernity, sustain different expressions and registers of busyness, compared to more traditional hierarchical organisations. In the case of caring these are more closely scripted by spatialized clock-time, while for de-territorialised project work busyness revolves around the negotiation of reticular project teams. Attention to the detail of time-space underscores the diversity of time pressure and the intricacy of power and dependencies that constitute these experiences.

Though the diaries reveal differences in experiences of time pressure, they are similar in detailing how time pressure in anticipated. Busyness is enacted through habits and dispositions that foresee temporal pinch points to the extent that time pressure is both internal and external. Busy habits are repeated and named in such a way that they frame the diarists’ accounts of time as much as responding to the requests of others. But these busy habits are not simply fault responses to the challenges of negotiating time-space. Through anticipating encounters habits can modify individual vulnerability to external shocks and temporal pressure points. In this way recursive busyness simultaneously holds the body still while moving it forward.

The habits of busyness might hold the body in place, but as self-help authors suggest these are also open to change. Yet how this change can be brought about is not simply down to the force of sovereign will. If intimate habits are to be changed then this process will depend on the re-negotiation of relationships that constitute these practices. The value of endorsing the paradoxical habits of busyness is that this approach can open ways of doing and negotiation to reform the incessant arrest of being busy.

The analysis of one-day diaries can reveal the intricacy of mundane and repeated events though there are limitations to these data. First, the diaries do not capture how others respond to the diarists’ interpretation of time pressure. Indeed, significant others are silent in the dairies. Neither John nor Alex discuss their relationships (John simply refers to his ‘lovely wife’; while Alex’s partner is hardly noted at all). Second, the nature of the dataset means it is not possible to use these diaries to explore structural inequalities in time identified in time-use analysis (Sullivan and Gershuny, 2018). This does not though infer that social identities are inconsequential for these accounts of being busy. It is noteworthy that Linda works in a predominately predominantly female profession (Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, 2007), and her orchestration of time-space will be repeated in the working lives of women in other caring professions. Unlike John and Alex, Linda’s juggling of responsibilities does not stop when she gets home. Even her relaxation is relational as she is knitting a gift for a colleague, while John is making his model for himself. Linda’s day is distinguished by the perpetuation of relational activities. This is the gendered paradox of busyness: dependency is as Judith Butler (2004) writes what defines us, but it intensifies the habits of busyness through requiring the co-ordination of multiple responsibilities.

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1. The names referred to in the analysis are pseudonyms that I have given to each diarist. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)