Re-ordering temporal rhythms: coordinating daily practices in the UK in 1937 and 2000

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The context of this paper

- There are many accounts of how daily life has changed, often premised on the basis of radical change, and as a consequence of consumer culture.
- Prominent accounts point to individualization, the fragmentation of social groups, and the rise of material self-interestedness (for purposes of lifestyle, status and identity).
- All such accounts of coalesce within popular and (socially) scientific prognoses of time pressure.
The paradox of time pressure

Surveys consistently reveal that people feel increasingly time pressured, but time diary time data demonstrates that we have more free time than at any point in the past!

Five sets of theoretical explanations:

• Economic restructuring (workplace competition, dual burdens)
• Rationalisation (fragmentation, re-sequencing)
• Consumer culture (work-spend cycles)
• Reflexive modernisation (intensity of leisure/cultural activities, rush as badge of honour)
• Temporal re-ordering (time-space compression, acceleration)
Critique of theories

• No evidence of ‘work more’
• Assumptions of a past where ‘daily times’ were unproblematic
• Theories of temporal change premised on different visions of ‘more’:
  - doing ‘more’ work, leisure, consumption
  - doing ‘more’ and doing it faster
  - activities and interactions stretched across ‘more’ space
  - that some groups suffer ‘more’ at the hands of time pressure: working mums, dads, the professional middle class…
1. Interviews conducted with twenty households (27 respondents) located in a suburb of Bristol, England. Respondents asked whether they felt society was more time pressured than in the past, whether they felt pressed for time, to recount and reflect on the previous weekday and weekend day, and to describe how they organised the passage of time in their daily lives.

2. ‘Day in the life of’ diaries from two days in 1937 – Saturday 12th June and Monday 12th July. Fourteen female diarists selected on the basis of the legibility of their diaries on both days.
Harriedness in 2000

• All respondents felt that life was subject to increasing time pressures and were particularly fluent in identifying generic reasons as to why this was the case (consumption, work, family, not wasting time)

• However, respondents were ambivalent about describing their day-to-day life as being ‘harried’:
  ➢ To not be harried was in someway regarded as not leading a full life.
  ➢ To be too harried was seen as an of not making enough time to spend with the people most important to them.

• In negotiating this ambivalence, respondents’ described their daily lives in terms of ‘hot’ and ‘cold spots’.
Temporal rhythms of daily life in 1937

• The importance of ‘fixed’ institutional events – especially work and meal times. Leisure and consumption fits around the rhythms of paid and unpaid work.

• Material constraints coordinate practices. E.g. for Mrs Friend ‘laying the kitchen fire’ led to the coordination of a set of domestic practices. Monday was ‘bath day’, ‘laundry day’ and ‘stew day’ (with Sunday’s leftover meat).

• In 1937, the coordination of practices was less a matter of personal scheduling but structured around the fixed temporal constraints of institutionally timed events and the material hardware of daily life.
Negotiating time (2000)

- **Fixed household socio-temporal routines** – self-imposition of predictable routines.

- **Personal lists.**

- **Shared diaries and schedulers** – e.g. personal diaries, household calendars, chalk boards and notes on fridges.

- **Use of coordinating devices** – e.g. mobile phones, e-mail and traffic warning systems in cars.

- **Use of time saving and shifting devices** – e.g. answering machines, VCRs and a variety of domestic appliances (including freezers, microwaves, dishwashers, automatic timing systems on ovens and washing machines).
Negotiating time (1937)

- Technologies positioned as constraining rather than enabling
- No scheduling devices
- Planning and note-making:
  ‘planned the week-end menu with the aid of the maid, then I went to telephone and order everything required up to Monday’s breakfast’ (Mrs Cotton, Saturday)

  ‘most working class people cook the joint on Sunday, but I cook on Saturday to lessen the work next day’ (Mrs Hodson, Saturday)

  ‘remember I meant to pop into the neighbour with [who has] a young girl to see how she is. I must do that tomorrow’ (Mrs Beken, Monday)
‘I like to make Sunday a day of leisure more or less. I particularly want to be as free as possible this Sunday, as my husband will be off duty, which is unusual’ (Mrs Hodson, Saturday).

‘straight down to the town front [she lived in Brighton], we went for a Donkey ride, stopped at a café for ice cream and returned home for 12.45’. After lunch the afternoon was then spend ‘idling on the roof, where I sunbathed, the child played and my husband did his stamps (his hobby)’ (Mrs Cotton, Saturday).
In the 2000 interviews respondents talked extensively of daily life as an experience of being ‘rushed’, ‘harrried’, a matter of ‘juggling’ activities, of ‘fitting it all in’, and of not ‘wasting time’.

This also true of 1937:

‘7.45: Start the ironing. Must sandwich this in somehow with all the other jobs to do.’ (Mrs Beken Saturday, 12th June)

‘8.00: Fly along to little general shop for last minute shopping.’ (Mrs Beken Saturday, 12th June)

‘10.45: The market was much busier, but I hurried my shopping so that I did not miss the bus home.’ (Mrs Elliot, Saturday 12th June)
Temporal experiences (2)

However, when placed in context, 1937 narratives of ‘rush’ were to keep within collective rhythms, rather than to coordinate across ‘flexible’ personal schedules:

‘9.05: Caught the bus to Burnley. Went to the market which was quiet as it was early for shoppers and then to ‘Woolworths’ to buy cardboard box for sending a parcel in. 10.00: Go to get fruit and veg from the market before all the decent stock goes and then to the butchers for the same reason. 10.45: The market was much busier, but I hurried my shopping so that I did not miss the bus home.’ (Mrs Elliot, Saturday 12th June)
Temporal structures were held together by a combination of fixed institutional events and constraints surrounding domestic, work and social network coordination in both years.

By 2000, there were fewer fixed institutional events and the temporal boundaries of those events were less clearly defined.

Constraints of coordination have shifted in tune with the changing materialities of daily life and spatialities of social networks.

The weakening of institutionally timed events and erosion of fixed temporal rhythms does permit greater individual flexibility in personal schedules. The problem has become one of aligning one’s schedule with those of others; especially in contexts where institutionally timed events have not wholly disappeared but simply become more malleable.
It is neither work-spend cycles, an intensification of leisure and cultural activities nor an acceleration of daily life that fundamental re-orders temporal rhythms.

Rather, in the contemporary period there are fewer institutionally timed events and fixed temporal rhythms, which allows for greater individual flexibility in personal schedules. The problem then is aligning one’s schedule with those of others; especially in contexts where institutionally timed events have not wholly disappeared but simply become more malleable.

Routines and rhythms are made and remade everyday, in micro and detailed ways. And, today, those rhythms and routines are ordered around complex forms of coordination within social networks and material infrastructures (including infrastructures of mobility).