1

Making Time

It is commonplace to observe that "time flies." Paradoxically, it is no less familiar to find ourselves in circumstances where time passes slowly. Why do we experience variation in the perceived passage of time? This question concerns causality as well as the subjective side of temporality. Presumably, perceived duration is shaped by the interplay of self and situation, but how?

Rarely have scholars in the social sciences addressed this question. For the most part, they have done so within a deterministic framework imported from the natural sciences. With this conceptual framework, we must assume that there is an antecedent cause (variation in one's circumstances) that, in linear fashion, brings about a subsequent effect (variation in the perceived passage of time). The cause precedes the effect; the past determines the future. This is the temporal structure of determinism.

Consider, for example, this journalistic account of a terrorist incident at Rome's Leonardo da Vinci airport:

> The attackers raked the 820-ft.-long terminal with bullets, hitting people waiting for an El Al flight and others at nearby TWA and Pan Am counters. The men jumped up and down in a frenzy, screaming as they fired, and security guards shot back.
>
> "People were falling all over the place," recalled Anna Girometta, who operates a gift shop near the coffee bar. "It seemed to go on forever." Five minutes later, the carnage was over.[1]

Note the contrast between Girometta's statement, "It seemed to go on forever," and the reporter's matter-of-fact observation that the incident actually lasted only five minutes. It is tempting to attribute this temporal divergence solely to the causal impact of sudden violence.

When, however, temporal experience is examined more carefully, we begin to notice a great many anomalous cases—anomalous because they do not seem to fit comfortably within a deterministic framework. In fact, so numerous are these cases that they appear to rival the deterministic category for modal frequency. Witness, for example, the following excerpt from an interview with a twenty-year-old college student:

> 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.[2]

This narrative is quite unlike the terrorist incident in Rome, but these otherwise divergent situations produce comparable distortion in temporal experience. Both Girometta and the student perceive time to pass slowly. Yet there is a crucial difference in the etiology of their respective experiences. Girometta's circumstances are thrust upon a seemingly passive (indeed, reluctant) subject, whereas the student actively and purposefully constructs her circumstances.

So often, we seem to be victims of temporality—our dreams "mocked to death by Time," as Zora Neale Hurston put it.[3] But just as frequently, we strive to control or manipulate the various dimensions of temporality. In the writings of Erving Goffman, "individuals attempt to buffer themselves from . . . deterministic demands that surround them."[4] How does our understanding of temporal experience change when we assume Goffman's perspective?

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. Yet the willful modification of our own temporal experience is often realized through subtle and guarded practices. Consequently, these practices have not been the subject of systematic inquiry, despite what they reveal about the relationship between self and society.

Temporal creativity is often directed at resistance to the effort of others to impose themselves on our experience of time. They expect us to make time for this instead of that. They want us to do something more or less frequently,

and they want us to do it now, not when we want to. The struggle for temporal autonomy is ongoing in nameless and innumerable engagements across the spectrum of social interaction.

This book examines how people alter or customize various dimensions of their temporal experience and resist external sources of temporal constraint or structure. 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 agency.

Cause and Effect

By raising the specter of intentionality, we can glimpse the alternation between yin and yang in the human experience of causality: sometimes things happen to us; sometimes we make things happen. I use the word "specter" knowingly because, ever since their inception, the social sciences have been haunted by the concept of self-determination. The controversy provoked by this concept is manifest as a simmering debate concerning one of the central and still-unsettled issues in the history of social thought. Moreover, this debate is noteworthy for fierce and uncompromising positions as well as the ridicule of opponents in ad hominem attacks. Undoubtedly, these characteristics are indicative of the fact that something fundamental is at stake: nothing less than the epistemological framework of the social sciences.

John B. Watson was the champion of behaviorism—the dominant school in psychology during the 1920s and 1930s. As such, he rejected the relevance of mind, self, and other aspects of subjectivity. Claiming "that 'consciousness' is neither a definable nor a usable concept," he asked, "Why don't we make what we can *observe* the real field of psychology?"[5] For Watson, only one question drives scientific research: "Can I describe this bit of behavior I see in terms of 'stimulus and response'?"[6] As he noted, Pavlov had rung a bell and a dog had salivated (despite the absence of food). The cause precedes the effect in time. This is the temporality of behaviorism and the stimulus-response sequence. Watson wanted to use this sequence as a model for the study of human behavior. He concluded that psychology need not concern itself with the "meaning" of human conduct because that word "has no scientific connotation."[7]

Meanwhile, George Herbert Mead was teaching an influential course, Social Psychology, at the University of Chicago, and he would begin his lectures in 1927 with scornful humor at Watson's expense:

> There remained, however, the field of introspection, of experiences which are private and belong to the individual himself—experiences commonly called subjective. What was to be done with these? John B. Watson's attitude was that of the Queen in *Alice in Wonderland*— "Off with their heads!"—there were no such things.[8]

Mead viewed Watson's behaviorism as an ill-conceived form of determinism that left no room for essential features of human experience: consciousness, choice, and self-determination. Human beings do not respond immediately and unthinkingly to a prior stimulus in the manner of Pavlov's dog. Rather, the individual interprets the situation and considers various responses to the stimulus in question. Instead of reacting mindlessly, human beings decide how to proceed, thereby acting on the basis of subjectively meaningful intentions. Moreover, since choice is exercised, Mead stressed that one's response "is something that is more or less uncertain."[9]

During the 1930s, two new antagonists entered the fray. They were vying with one another to define the young discipline of sociology, so it is appropriate that their respective contributions can be found in a series of introductory and methods textbooks. The first of these books was published in 1931, the year Mead died, but its author, Robert MacIver, bluntly echoed his predecessor's contempt for the behaviorists:

> They fail to perceive the essential difference, from the standpoint of causation, between a paper flying before the wind and a man flying from a pursuing crowd. The paper knows no fear and the wind no hate, but without fear and hate the man would not fly nor the crowd pursue.[10]

For MacIver, then, it was apparent that self-consciousness, emotions, and other subjective processes play a crucial role in the determination of human conduct.

In contrast, like Watson, George Lundberg wanted to use the natural sciences as a model for his own discipline, so he insisted that "relevant data . . . are manifest in human behavior of *any observable kind*."[11] As for the elements of subjectivity–"thought, experience, feeling, judgment, choice, will, value, emotion, etc."–Lundberg scoffed at their relevance by comparing them to a fictional substance once thought by primitive chemists to be essential in combustion: "These are the phlogiston of the social sciences."[12] And, of course,

when he wanted an example of similarly outdated thinking in sociology, he turned to MacIver's writings:

> I do not declare MacIver's analysis of the man and the crowd as *false*. I merely point out that possibly I could analyze the situation in a frame of reference not involving the words "fear" or "hate" but in operationally defined terms of such character that all qualified observers would independently make the same analysis and predict the behavior under the given circumstances.[13]

MacIver countered with the assertion that social scientists must strive to understand subjectivity in order to grasp the meaning of human conduct: "To the agent himself these subjective urges are important as conditions and explanations of his act."[14] His use of the word "agent" anticipated the further evolution of this debate.

The dispute is not of merely historical interest; it is ongoing and, at times, no less acrimonious. Nearly fifty years after Mead's death, his writings were seminal in the effort by Anthony Giddens to reconcile action and structure within a single theoretical framework. To that end, Giddens reconceptualizes self-determination as an integral aspect of human action, which he dubs "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. The sense of "could have done otherwise" is obviously a difficult and complex one.[15]

Giddens does not cite MacIver's earlier use of the word "agent," although he seems to wield it in much the same way. But Giddens does acknowledge that this formulation establishes a challenging criterion for those who are more empirically oriented than he is. Indeed, we already have observed some ambiguity in the causal roots of our temporal experience. Nevertheless, like Mead, Giddens views choice as the driving force in social interaction, and this position suggests that human action is characterized by self-determination: "We may define action . . . as involving a 'stream of actual or contemplated causal interventions . . . in the ongoing process of events-in-the-world.'"[16] Thus, an individual is presumed to be the agent of his or her conduct.

Like Mead and MacIver, Giddens has faced opposition from the other side in this debate. He has been pointedly criticized by Randall Collins for electing to integrate agency and structure rather than microlevel and macrolevel sociology. Collins contends that the latter distinction poses the question of

"whether one type of explanation takes priority over the other, or whether the two types [of equally deterministic analysis] can be integrated into a combined theory."[17] According to Collins, the distinction between agency and structure does not pose "an explanatory question but an ideological one" because this distinction represents nothing more than an effort "to show that human beings control their own destinies; it is a defence [*sic*] of free will."[18]

Writing in 1992, Collins makes a threefold argument for dispensing with the concept of agency (thereby contributing to the enduring controversy). First, advocates for agency have misinterpreted microlevel sociology (especially the work of Erving Goffman and Harold Garfinkel) that, Collins insists, reveals the patterned behavior of social order, not an agentic free-for-all. Second, he refuses to accept political revolutions as evidence of agency because, "far from being miracles of indeterminism and free will, [they] are explicable by macro-social conditions which are already well understood."[19] Third, he denigrates the notion of self-determination by relegating it to the realm of "fantasy" and baseless rhetoric: "Giddens' theory is limited by the ideological romanticism of agency."[20] With the vehemence that is typical of this dispute, Collins recommends that we "stop worrying about agency."[21]

Quite the opposite has occurred. There has been considerable discussion on this topic in recent years, but the ensuing literature is characterized by ambiguity and further debate. Many sociologists are troubled by the consequent incoherence in our theoretical framework, but, unlike Collins, they call for repair rather than abandonment. Peter Callero argues that "any attempt to conceptualize social structure must ultimately confront the dilemma posed by the problem of agency," but no one has managed to do that in persuasive fashion.[22] In keeping with such proclamations, moreover, almost all of the recent writings on agency involve taxonomy and theory construction.[23] As a result, our current conceptualization of agency is still criticized for being disembodied and "curiously abstract."[24]

Clearly, this is a matter of some moment, but the crucial issues are empirical, not theoretical. We have failed to resolve this enduring controversy because we have not paid sustained and empirically grounded attention to routine agentic practices in everyday life. What we need is close, systematic observation of agency and, within the specific context of our efforts to customize temporal experience, that is the aim of this study.

Time Work

From the beginnings of social psychology, it has been an article of faith that the self plays a large and active role in the determination of human experience. According to William James—pragmatist philosopher and author of a

nineteenth-century introduction to what was still a new field, *The Principles of Psychology*—"My experience is what I agree to attend to."[25] This declaration is something of an overstatement but instructive nonetheless. He points out that, in general, I disregard those things which "have no *interest* for me."[26] In so doing, I exercise a measure of self-determination in the selection of that environment to which I will have to respond. Curiously, however, he does not apply this perspective to temporal experience in his chapter, "The Perception of Time." For James, temporal experience is determined by one's circumstances, not selective attention: a busy interval will seem to have passed quickly, while an empty tract of time "seems long in passing."[27] It would appear that the individual in question has no choice in the matter.

A related disjuncture can be found in the writings of his protégé, George Herbert Mead, during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Unquestionably, time is the foremost issue in Mead's intellectual agenda, and Barbara Adam, a British sociologist, is correct to assert that Mead's analysis of temporality has implications for "the very foundations of social theory."[28] As we have seen, self-determination demands a different perspective on causality and temporality. The self is irrelevant if the past determines the future, but, argues Mead, environmental stimuli do not determine the individual's response. Rather, he posits that any environment offers a potentially endless array of behavioral options. As German sociologist Hans Joas puts it, in opposition to the deterministic temporality of behaviorism, Mead's social psychology assumes that one's selective attention is "constitutive of the environment and not an epiphenomenon to the environment."[29] In his own words, Mead asserts that our capacity for self-consciousness makes for self-determination because it "enables the individual to test out implicitly the various possible completions of an already initiated act in advance of the actual completion of the act—and thus to *choose* for himself, on the basis of this testing, the one which it is most *desirable* to perform explicitly or carry into overt effect."[30] Like James, however, Mead does not consider the possibility that one can selectively attend to or otherwise modify the environment for the express purpose of customizing one's temporal experience.

Although Mead did not imagine the reflexive modification of temporal experience, his insight concerning self-determination has changed the way many of us think about the relationship between subject and object, knower and known. His pathfinding studies demonstrate that, more often than not, human behavior is self-consciously purposive. We *intend* specific outcomes to result from our conduct and, frequently, the object of those intentions is the self or subjective experience. Herbert Blumer (Mead's most prominent student) advances this line of inquiry when he avows that "by virtue of possessing a self" the human being can be both subject and object, which makes

possible "self-interaction."[31] This means that one must "construct and guide" one's behavior "instead of merely releasing it in response to [environmental] factors."[32]

The writings of Mead and Blumer suggest that self-consciousness plays a decisive role in what we experience as the textures of time. When one turns consciousness back on oneself, the self becomes both subject and object, both knower and known. That person can choose from among various responses to the situation at hand, not merely react in unthinking fashion to environmental stimuli. As the object of his or her own consciousness, one can select the kind of temporal experience one prefers. Then, having identified a particular type of temporal experience as the goal, the individual arranges circumstances such that they act back on him or her with the desired effect. In other words, an individual attempts to shape the personal experience of time obliquely by exerting control over self and situation.

Related ideas can be found in the research by Howard Becker and his students. It is Becker who had the audacity to report that "some people take some drugs . . . because they want to get 'high'"—*not* because extraneous factors (such as personality traits or poverty and the need for escapism) force them to do so.[33] In contrast to conventional ideas about why people use drugs, we must view this behavior as an intentional effort to manipulate one's own subjective experience. Likewise, prior to the research conducted by Clinton Sanders, tattoos were thought to be "caused" by psychiatric or interpersonal problems of maladjustment. Subsequent to his careful ethnographic studies, however, Sanders concludes that the great majority of those who purchase tattoos are "customizing the body" through "the exercise of choice" in agentic efforts at aesthetically driven self-decoration.[34] Are there analogous efforts to customize temporal experience? If so, how prevalent are they, and what forms do they take? These are just a few of the questions this book addresses.

Agency has become a pivotal component in the conceptual framework of contemporary social psychology. Much of this body of research deals with "control or regulation of the self"—that is, what Morris Rosenberg refers to as "*agentive* reflexivity."[35] It does not focus on time, per se, but this literature has heretofore unexamined implications for the etiology of temporal experience. Elizabeth Menaghan argues 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."[36] 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 an individual set in motion

events that are designed to loop back on this same individual. In a far different context, Dawn Robinson and Lynn Smith-Lovin observe that people engage in "selective interaction as a strategy for identity maintenance."[37] Their findings suggest that, more often than not, one chooses to interact with those who confirm one's self-image. These studies reveal a causal circularity. One attempts to modify the situation in an effort to modulate the contour of one's own experience. David Heise makes this loop of self-determination more explicit when he states that "people try to control experiences," but his work concerns emotional, not temporal, experience.[38]

Etiology is the study of causes, origins, or reasons. When we bring this line of analysis 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"—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)?

What role, if any, does self-determination play in the etiology of temporal experience? No one has asked this question, but several scholars have tried to connect time and agency, thereby reestablishing a theoretical linkage that had been neglected since Mead's initial breakthrough. Giddens calls for "the incorporation of *temporality* into the understanding of human agency," and Glen Elder views this petition as part of "a general conceptual trend that has made time, context, and process more salient dimensions of theory and analysis."[39] Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische have asserted that the "agentic dimension of social action can only be captured in its full complexity . . . if it is analytically situated within the flow of time."[40] Drawing explicitly from Mead's lectures, they "reconceptualize agency as a temporally embedded process."[41] Given their strictly theoretical agenda, however, these scholars make no effort to examine this relationship empirically.

Andrew Pickering has studied the routine work of natural scientists and documented the emergence of agency within the "real time of practice."[42] To put it another way, he examines how scientists display agency in the context of their laboratory-based research. There is, for instance, the imagination and assembly of "a new kind of machine . . . that" they "hope will display certain powers."[43] The design and manufacture of scientific technology certainly represents a kind of willful intervention. Nonetheless, while his empirically grounded inquiry links time and agency, it has nothing to do with the application of

agency to time itself (i.e., intentional effort to customize one's own temporal experience).

Much the same can be said of the literature on the sociology of time. This field has been greatly enriched by Eviatar Zerubavel's research on the social construction and social organization of temporality.[44] His writings explore the standardization of time as well as struggles to overthrow existing standards.[45] As such, the emphasis is on collective efforts to establish or modify temporal systems for practical or ideological reasons. My own research represents the social psychology of variation in the perceived passage of time.[46] In previous studies, I have shown that the perceived duration of an interval of time reflects the density of information processing occasioned by one's immediate circumstances. Time is perceived to pass slowly when the density of information processing is high; time is perceived to be roughly synchronized with clocks and calendars when the density of information processing is moderate; and time is perceived to have passed quickly when the density of information processing is low. Put differently, variation in one's perceived passage of time is caused by variation in the nature of one's situation. With Zerubavel, we have a macrolevel analysis of the formulation and adoption of temporal systems. With my previous research, we have microlevel studies of temporal determinism. Neither of these lines of inquiry tell us how individuals control or manipulate their own experience of time.

Brief sightings of such effort can be found in various studies that are chiefly concerned with other matters. During his fieldwork in Algeria, Pierre Bourdieu witnesses the agentic manipulation of a temporal dimension of gift exchange and vengeance:

> But even the most strictly ritualized exchanges, in which all the moments of the action, and their unfolding, are rigorously foreseen, have room for strategies: the agents remain in command of the *interval* between the obligatory moments and can therefore act on their opponents by playing with the *tempo* of the exchange.[47]

Within a very different setting, William Corsaro observes that "repetition prolongs routines, allowing children to savor the shared meaning of the activity."[48] In contrast, Martha Copp notes that workers "made time seem to pass faster" through the use of "simple jokes and play."[49] Angus Vail reports parallel forms of temporal elitism and one-upmanship within the otherwise divergent art worlds of tattooing and opera. For example, a devotee of Wagnerian opera can go one up on a fellow enthusiast by claiming attendance at more "Ring" cycles. In similar fashion, "fine-art tattoo collectors discuss their collections in terms of hours spent getting, and traveling to get, tattooed."[50] Finally, Michael Bull

alerts us to the use of personal stereos by employees intent on reappropriating some of their time:

> In these daily strategies of management, time is also repossessed and made "their own." Commuters going to and from work extend ownership of their time through the use of their personal stereo[s] and often report that time becomes more "productive" and "pleasurable" for them in doing so.[51]

These authors glimpse something tangential to their own interests, but it is the focus of this study.

We need a concept that sensitizes us to these and kindred ways in which we customize temporal experience. By "time work" I refer to intrapersonal and interpersonal effort directed toward provoking or preventing various temporal experiences.[52] This concept implicates the agentic micromanagement of one's own involvement with self and situation. Time work is the self-selected cause of one's temporal experience, but it has not received systematic empirical scrutiny. As we have seen, the literature on agency has not come to terms with temporality, and the literature on temporality neglects agency, but time work integrates these largely separate bodies of research.

Questions and Ambitions

Does agency exist? And if so, does it matter? The study of time work may clarify the still uncertain relationship between determinism and self-determination. Therefore, this study was prompted by the following question: To what extent and in what ways do individuals purposefully construct lines of activity or social situations in order to create or inhibit diverse forms of temporal experience?

There is a tendency for people to assume that time is somehow "out there," cosmic, coercive, unchanging, and unchangeable. Nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed, as we will see, their own practices belie this assumption. A related myth, this one promulgated by the media, is that the public is victimized by a temporal regime over which it has no control. We must clarify the self's contribution to the textures of temporal experience, but parallel confusion reigns in the behavioral sciences.

Social psychology conceives of agency as an exercise of will, the expression of personal choice, the source of novelty and improvisation in human conduct. Yet the predominant conceptual trope for agency—that of "work"—connotes duty, compulsion, enforcement, veiled (and unveiled) coercion. This conceptual genealogy—that is, the use of "work" as a metaphor for agency—begins

with Erving Goffman's essay, "On Face-Work."[53] But if agentic practices are shadows of human freedom, why conceptualize them in terms of necessity? And if the forms of social interaction are obligatory, why conceive of them as agentic? We are left with troubling incoherence, but careful examination of our efforts to modify or manipulate temporal experience may enable us to reconcile these seemingly contradictory images of time and 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 "taking time" for themselves while they are ostensibly "on the clock" at work.

To be sure, these are analytical categories, but they are empirically grounded in forms of common parlance that mark different ways of "doing time." As such, this terminology reveals a spectrum of intentions or motives on the part of people in varied circumstances. What is more, these dimensions of time work are clearly distinguishable from one another. Timing concerns when something happens—not how long it seems to take (duration), how often it occurs (frequency), what precedes or follows it (sequence), or whether it happens at all (allocation). Making time for something (allocation) does not mean that it happens with any specific regularity (frequency) nor at any particular hour of the day (timing); it may be something that occurs "every now and then." Conversely, one may exercise control over when to have a meeting (timing) yet have little or no say in what transpires during that interval (allocation). Selecting the best day for a certain activity or experience (timing) may have nothing to do with what happens on the day before or the

day after (sequence) but simply may reflect the fact that one has fewer obligations at the end of the week. The decision to set time aside for something (allocation) need not concern antecedent or subsequent events (sequence). And stealing time while at work is not quite the same thing as allocating one's own time to disparate activities or experiences.

The goal is to examine closely one family of agentic practices, forms of time work in everyday life, but there remains the issue of how we should approach this topic. Peggy Thoits has called for research that is based upon "detailed qualitative accounts of intentionality and agency."[54] In accord with her recommendation, my data consist of first-person narratives that describe how individuals engage in time work.[55] Hundreds of people from all walks of life tell us about the inventive ways in which they customize temporal experience. Their modest stories have significant implications for matters of some consequence in sociological theory.

Each of the following six chapters focuses on a particular form of time work. We take these topics up in descending order of their portion of the data: duration, frequency, sequence, timing, allocation, and taking time. In the concluding chapter, we consider the ironic place of these agentic practices in the causal dynamics of human conduct and experience.