

# Introduction

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Across the social sciences, the study of time has been preoccupied with causality. Despite the standardization of time, a particular interval can seem to pass slowly or quickly from the standpoint of human perception. What brings about variation in our temporal experience?

When social scientists address this question, they tend to employ an analytical framework borrowed from the natural sciences. Within that framework, it is assumed that the situation determines the perception of time. One's objective circumstances are thought to be antecedent, external, and coercive to one's subjective temporal experience. This is the causal logic of determinism.

In recent years, an abundance of research has appeared in anthropology and sociology that emphasizes other ways of understanding temporal experience. Michael Flaherty reviews some of this work in his chapter, and the authors of other chapters acknowledge and discuss previous work specific to their own ethnographic studies. With our introduction, then, we want to identify the aims of this book, not review prior research.

If you ask people to describe situations during which they perceived time to pass slowly, there will be stories that appear to fit the causal logic of determinism. Let us consider, for example, the temporal experience of a bystander during a terrorist incident at an airport (Magnuson 1986: 74). A woman is working at a gift shop when, without warning, men pull out guns and begin shooting people waiting for their flights. Security guards arrive quickly and begin to shoot back at the terrorists. "It seemed to go on forever," said the woman at the gift shop, but the incident lasted only five minutes as measured by a clock. It is easy to attribute this temporal distortion to the effect of sudden violence. Yet this is only one way to alter time and temporal experience.

If we examine temporal experience more carefully, we find countless cases that contradict the deterministic framework. These anomalous cases are so numerous that, once assembled, they provide the foundation for a very different line of inquiry. Time was imposed on the woman working in that gift shop, but, in the following excerpt from an interview (Flaherty 2011: 2), a young college student describes how she imposes herself on 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.

We witness comparable distortion in temporal experience: time is perceived to pass slowly during the aforementioned terrorist incident as well as the last weeks that two college students spend together. But there is a crucial difference. This perception is inflicted upon the woman working in the gift shop, while it is desired and orchestrated by the college student. In the latter case, we see an individual change temporal experience by exercising a measure of willfulness.

Recognizing the relevance of self-determination, Flaherty (2002, 2003, 2011) has conceptualized time work or temporal agency. This concept sensitizes us to the intentional alteration of our own temporal experience, or that of others. Instead of assuming that time simply happens to us, the analysis of temporal agency reverses the direction of the causal arrow to show how we make time happen. This line of inquiry reveals how individuals and groups act as the architects of their own temporal experience (exemplified by the college student in the foregoing extract). In its original formulation, however, the concept of time work is more than fifteen years old, and the conceptualization emerged from data collected exclusively in the United States. The chapters in this edited collection show us how people in diverse societies modify various dimensions of temporal experience.

What is more, the original formulation sensitized us only to intended time work. The individuals in question chose to modify their own temporal experience. By and large, they were self-consciously aware of what they were doing and why they were doing it. With this book, we identify an exciting new direction for research: the study of less conscious or unintended forms of temporal agency. People in various social settings often follow local practices for reasons that have little or nothing to do with temporal agency. Nonetheless, it is evident to an outside observer that these practices influence their temporal experience. The chapters in our edited collection include examples such as praying, fasting or breaking a fast, making tea

with other unemployed men, redefining the fraudulent past of one's family, and pursuing traditional activities in order to maintain ethnic identities. These studies greatly extend the analytical reach of time work as a frame of reference.

Is the theory of time work applicable to people across different societies and social situations? Intentionally or unintentionally, do people in diverse settings control, manipulate, or customize aspects of their own temporal experience? If so, what dimensions of temporal experience do they alter, and what local theories or practices do they employ? These questions are the impetus for ongoing collaboration between Flaherty and a team of anthropologists at Aarhus University in Denmark. One product of this collaboration is an edited collection of cross-cultural studies that focus on time as a problematic experience in the lives of young people (Dalsgård et al. 2014).

The publication of that book was followed by Flaherty's year-long stint (from October 2016 to September 2017) as senior fellow and visiting professor with the Aarhus Institute of Advanced Studies (AIAS). During this stay, Flaherty, Anne Line Dalsgård, and Lotte Meinert organized a symposium called *Time Work: New Research on Temporal Agency*. With funding from AIAS, this symposium brought together a distinguished group of interdisciplinary scholars to share their most recent work on temporal agency. These fascinating and rigorous studies are international in scope, including Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, Egypt, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Niger, Russia, Uganda, and the United States. With the assistance of our fine editor, Tom Bonnington, the essays were subjected to anonymous peer review. We thank the three anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments. In this book, we present these essays as an edited collection that examines the current state of research on temporal agency.

## OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

In his chapter, "The Lathe of Time: Some Principles of Temporal Agency," Michael Flaherty establishes the conceptual framework for our book. A lathe is a machine for shaping material of some kind. With this metaphor, Flaherty introduces the reader to the notion of time work and provides a rationale for its conceptualization. In addition, he reviews existing research concerning time work and extracts some principles of temporal agency. Time work would not be possible were it not for the fact that human beings make constrained choices to intervene in, and thereby modify, the course of social interaction. We decide how to respond to our circumstances, but we are not at liberty to choose whatever temporal experience we might wish

for. The realization of time work requires proper motivation, necessary skill, and other resources that may or may not be available. Hence, the outcome is uncertain: one's effort at time work may succeed or fail. Temporal agency may or may not be supported by one's relationships, organizational affiliations, and cultural heritage. In time work, people exhibit temporal dispositions, but these preferences are conditioned by one's socialization. Much of time work is directed toward solving existing or anticipated problems with temporal experience.

We have organized the balance of our edited collection into five thematic parts, each containing a pair of related chapters. In the first of these sections, "Temporal Afflictions," we present two chapters that investigate efforts to address the problematic experience of time as an unhealthy or disruptive factor in social interaction.

In their chapter, "Repetition Work: Healing Spirits and Trauma in the Churches of Northern Uganda," Lars Williams and Lotte Meinert argue that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or psychological trauma can be conceptualized as a form of time disturbance that collapses the past-present-future structure of time, causing flashbacks. Their findings suggest that repetition in the rhythms of prayer and other religious practices is an effective way to deal with these problems. The afflicted people regard praying as a religious practice, yet the authors suggest that this may also be a form of time work. The empirical material for this chapter is based on anthropological fieldwork in the Gulu area of northern Uganda between 2010 and 2017, where Williams and Meinert have examined how people attempt to heal the traumas and spiritual afflictions that remain after years of violent conflict in the area. Their data reveal the intrapersonal and interpersonal use of repetition in rituals, prayer, and the recitation of passages from the Bible and the Quran as techniques for handling trauma and spiritual troubles. By means of these strategies, the afflicted people stabilize and synchronize the flawed temporal experience at the heart of PTSD. Williams and Meinert explore these practices with the concept of time work and interpret the observed repetition as a form of temporal agency, which is used to alleviate the crippling legacies from a violent past.

What can we learn about attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) if, in accord with Mikka Nielsen, we view it as a temporal disturbance? In her chapter, "ADHD and Temporal Experiences: Struggling for Synchronization," Nielsen describes how her Danish interlocutors modify temporal experience when struggling with the symptoms of ADHD. She observes that ADHD is not simply an individualistic phenomenon, because the symptoms arise in problematic relationships and clashing forms of interaction, and result in difficulty with interpersonal coordination in different social contexts.

Nielsen seeks to understand ADHD as a disruption in one's experience of time and a state of desynchronization or arrhythmia. Having interviewed adults diagnosed with ADHD in Denmark, she demonstrates how differences in their perception of time, their physical restlessness, and their experience of speedy thoughts are connected to temporal impairment, which is manifest in an embodied experience of being "out of sync" with others. Nielsen shows us how her interlocutors use ingenious strategies for resynchronizing with the temporal regimes of the surrounding world. This time work helps to integrate them with the collective rhythms of everyday life.

The next thematic section, "The Politics of Time," is devoted to the role of power in temporal agency. Here, we examine individual and collective efforts to impose or resist various forms of temporal experience. These studies concern how groups use temporal agency in response to state-sponsored time work.

Approximately thirty thousand people were abducted, tortured, and assassinated during the last civil-military dictatorship that ruled Argentina between 1976 and 1983. To date, 130 of their surviving offspring—the "living disappeared"—have been identified. As infants, they were abducted, and their identities were altered by people who had a hand in the suffering and disappearance of their parents. In many cases, they were subsequently raised as unwitting members of their abductors' families. In her chapter, "Hacking Time and Looping Temporalities in the Identification of the Adult 'Living Disappeared' in Argentina," Noa Vaisman explores the role of time work and temporality more broadly in the process of DNA identification of these individuals. The identification process can be viewed, she argues, as a form of time hacking—that is, an intervention and work on a person's sense of time through the decoding and uncovering of sensitive information. DNA identity tests transform an individual's understanding of chronological-biographical time. Vaisman conceptualizes this transformation as a looping of the past into the present, which brings about an individual's often uncertain or even reluctant manner of confronting the request to be identified and the information that emerges once relations with one's biological family are confirmed.

Prior to colonization, the Inuit people of northern Canada pursued a nomadic existence by living off the land. The government had forced them into small settlements by the early 1960s and had imposed a rational temporal regime through the domination of work, economics, and bureaucracy. Thus, the contemporary Inuit have a foot in each of two different ways of life—one indigenous and one colonial—with divergent temporal practices. In her chapter, "Temporal Front and Back Stages: Time Work as Resistance," Lisa-Jo van den Scott shows us how the Inuit strive to maintain their cultural

boundaries by performing nonmembership in Western temporal practices. For example, they drop in rather than call first to arrange a meeting, and walk into someone's house instead of knocking and waiting at the door. Van den Scott lived in the village of Arviat, Nunavut territory, Canada, for more than five years. With meticulous ethnographic description, she immerses the reader in temporal resistance as a form of political time work. Erving Goffman famously demonstrated the analytical power of distinguishing between front stage and back stage settings. Van den Scott elaborates on this distinction by showing us that, during back stage intervals, the people of Arviat enact Inuit time in resistance to the encroaching temporal paradigms of Canadian society. Temporal practices demonstrate group membership; by the same token, violating these temporal norms is an effective way to perform nonmembership.

In the following thematic section, "Spirituality and Atheism as Temporal Agency," the juxtaposition of two chapters is both ironic and revealing. One of them describes how the inhabitants of a village in rural Brazil use Catholic beliefs and practices as time work. The other explores the performance of atheism as time work among young people in Kyrgyzstan mocking and resisting the resurgence of Islam in a formerly communist nation.

What would the concept of time work be like if, rather than emphasizing its subversive dimension, we shift our gaze to examine the ways in which it produces normal temporal experience? How is the concept of time work changed if we focus on practices that maintain or rectify temporal experiences considered acceptable or even prescribed by the people in a particular community? These questions have been largely overlooked in previous research. In her chapter, "*Se Deus Quiser*: Catholicism as Time Work among the Xukuru of Pernambuco," Clarissa Martins Lima considers these questions from the standpoint of the residents of Vila de Cimbres, an indigenous village of the Xukuru do Ororuba ethnic group located in northeast Brazil. Her findings show that even though time assumes a number of different forms among the Xukuru, God is considered to be responsible for determining the directions that they take. Thus, one's adherence to Catholicism is a way of confirming divine intentions concerning temporal experience. She also observes, however, that it is precisely in rectifying what is predicted by God through Catholicism that the Xukuru attempt to control their future and even interfere with divine will. In this sense, the Xukuru's Catholicism can be thought of as a form of time work that is simultaneously normative and subversive.

In Kyrgyzstan, atheism has gone from being state-imposed and conspicuously present in public space during Soviet times to being privatized, whereas religion—in particular Islam—has become more prominent in com-

munity life. Atheists, and young atheists in particular, perceive that their lack of faith is viewed as highly controversial by the larger community, and complete disengagement from religion is rarely an option for them. In her chapter, “It is Just Doing the Motion?: Atheist Time Work in Contemporary Kyrgyzstan,” Maria Louw explores how young Kyrgyz atheists struggle to maintain their atheist sensibilities in social contexts that have become marked with religious practices. These practices include the five daily prayers and fasting in the Ramadan as well as more local rituals, such as the commemoration of ancestor spirits and subtler aspects of daily interaction. Together, these observances make for an Islamic rhythm to social life, thereby placing human lives in a larger temporal framework where ancestor spirits interfere with the lives of the living, and life here and now is merely a prelude to the afterlife. Young Kyrgyz atheists rarely contest this narrative openly and directly, but they do not succumb to it, either. Instead, they strive to create alternative temporal experiences through, for example, subtle ironizing, joking, and playfulness in everyday life, as well as on social media, and through efforts to empty religious acts and phrases of their eschatological meaning.

The two chapters in the next thematic section—“Reinventing the Past, Present, and Future”—both concern people confronting problematic circumstances. Facing very different dilemmas, they deal with their respective issues by inventing new versions of time comfortably at odds with the facts of life.

In their chapter, “Inventing New Time: Time Work in the Grief Practices of Bereaved Parents,” Dorte Christensen and Kjetil Sandvik conceptualize a novel category of temporal agency inspired by Martin Heidegger’s (1962: 469) statement that “saying now . . . is the discursive articulation of a making-present.” Extending their previous research on grief, they use ethnographic methods to study how bereaved parents engage in ritualized time work at the Danish website *Mindet.dk*, how they perform parenthood on their children’s graves, and how they continue trying to be parents by including the dead child in the family’s everyday life. Bereaved parents profoundly renegotiate basic social boundaries by creating innovative ways of keeping the child present in routine activities. Instead of trying to reinstall the temporal normality that existed prior to the death of their child, or conform to society’s views concerning how to mourn, let go, and move on, they strive to invent delicate ways of making the dead child present in their lives and live on *with* rather than *without* the deceased. Christensen and Sandvik conclude that these mourning practices transgress the aim of returning to social normality. In fact, these practices can be seen as the parents installing not only a new temporality but a new social

world. Through their time work, these parents eventually transform the temporal collapse instigated by the child's death into an unprecedented cosmological and temporal order.

In his chapter, "Now Is Not: Future Anteriority and a Georgian in Russia," Martin Demant Frederiksen revisits his 2009 conversations with Gosha, one of Frederiksen's interlocutors during fieldwork in Batumi, Georgia. At that time, Gosha was a young unemployed musician desperate to migrate to Russia. He had been reluctant to talk about his life from the perspective of the troublesome present. Rather than admitting he was stuck, Gosha would narrate his present from a future-anterior perspective, pretending to be looking back from a new life in Moscow during 2019. Lightheartedly, he imagined a future when he would be a famous lead singer in Russia's most popular rock band and Frederiksen, who was equally assigned a fictional role, would be a reporter interviewing him for an article in the *Rolling Stone Magazine*. Frederiksen was skeptical, but, in retrospect, he had to revise his disbelief. As in the 1989 film, *Back to the Future Part II*, which presents a vision of the future with hoverboards, flying cars, and self-drying jackets, the future envisioned by Gosha did not really come about. Yet, in its own magical way, it did. In his tracing of Gosha's imagined and actual biography, from 2009 to 2019, Frederiksen describes the porous relationship between present and future in Gosha's life and accounts for a form of time work wherein the temporal experience of the present is actively suppressed and surpassed.

In our last thematic section, "Time and Deprivation," we have two studies that focus on time work occasioned by doing without the necessities of life. Via temporal agency, young men in Niger create a new social institution to fill the hours left empty by their unemployment. And, in Egypt, people fasting during Ramadan have recourse to time work while dealing with hunger and thirst as expressions of piety.

For young men in Niger who cannot secure stable employment, waiting has become something of an endemic condition. They have created spaces specifically for waiting, known as *fadas* (tea circles), and they repair to these spaces frequently to drink tea, socialize with friends, play cards, and listen to music. The *fadas* exemplify how young men carve out spaces of relevance in a landscape of unevenly distributed access to work and wealth. Some scholars have referred to the period of stagnation, helplessness, and vulnerability experienced by young unemployed college graduates in the Middle East and Africa as "waithood." Because it homogenizes the period of suspension that young men endure, waithood cannot account for the various forms of anticipatory temporality that emerge among youth in urban Niger. Waiting may be a suspension of time, but it is not necessarily a suspension



of activity. In her chapter, “The Work of Waiting: Boredom, Teatime, and Future-Making in Niger,” Adeline Masquelier considers how the *fada* constitutes a workspace-in-waiting and how waiting at the *fada* has become a form of temporal agency. In particular, her study reveals how waiting enables the emergence of a new sociality, epitomized by what she calls teatime. Time work, Flaherty (2003: 19) argues, “integrates agency with temporality.” Inasmuch as idleness can be said to contain space for action, at the *fada*, it leads young men to intervene with the structuring of time to produce particular outcomes. In accord with this perspective, Masquelier suggests that far from being simple tactics for passing time, teatime—that is, the making and drinking of tea—creates agentive, purposeful forms of waiting. By creating ideal conditions for actualizing aspirations, these modes of waiting effectively constitute attempts to realize a collectively imagined future.

Ramadan is a special period set aside annually in the Muslim calendar to fast, pray, and study the Quran. In their chapter, “Balancing Blood Sugar: Fasting, Feeling, and Time Work during the Egyptian Ramadan,” Mille Kjærgaard Thorsen and Anne Line Dalsgård argue that the Ramadan is not only a period of abstention and piety, but also a period of substantial time work. On the collective level, Ramadan structures time and its content; on the level of individuality, it operates through a disciplining of one’s body, evoking certain emotions and concomitant microtemporalities throughout the day and month. As Thorsen and Dalsgård demonstrate, however, people who observe the Ramadan in Cairo are not just passive subjects to this disciplining; they are also experiencing and creative subjects who may try to change their circumstances. Drawing on Flaherty’s notion of time work, Thorsen and Dalsgård show how, during the obligatory fast from dawn to dusk, certain perceptions of time are evoked and altered by means of temporal agency. Their approach to time work derives from an understanding of human agency as driven by cognitive reflections as well as physiological and emotional processes. Thus, their conceptual orientation is one of embodied sociality as they focus on the emotional substratum of temporal experience and the intertwining of the somatic, the subjective, and the social in the experience of the yearly fasting. They suggest that the biochemistry of the human body may provoke certain temporal experiences and drive us to a desire for change, but also constrain our attempts at making these changes come about. The ethnographic data stem from fieldwork conducted in Cairo during 2015 and 2017, including participant observation among families with members diagnosed with diabetes.

In these eleven chapters, we examine how people in very different social and cultural situations modify and customize their own temporal experience. All of the authors make use of observations from field notes or

excerpts from in-depth interviews. We hope that the analytical contrasts and resonances make for new insights and inspire further research. The five thematic sections of the book are followed by an afterword written by Carmen Leccardi. We will let her have the final word and here simply express our gratitude for her interest in the work we have assembled.

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