

## Time Work

A review of



### **The Textures of Time: Agency and Temporal Experience**

by Michael G. Flaherty

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Reviewed by

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*The Textures of Time: Agency and Temporal Experience* summarizes an interesting and original research effort concerned with how people shape their experience of time and how they use it. These are different questions, and Flaherty makes an effort to fit them into a common conceptual framework, using the concept of agency. Experience and action are not driven by the environment, according to Flaherty, but shaped by ourselves as actors. The notion that we are acting on time seems reasonable enough, although it takes some creative imagination to explain how even time experience, at least partly due to external events such as an accident, can be said to be the outcome of intentional action.

The traditional approach to the experience of time refers it to the intensity of experience and the number of events. If more, and more important, things happen, we seem to experience a longer time. Many psychologists have approached this phenomenon. To

mention one example, Frankenhaeuser (1959) reported such results a long time ago. Similar to most psychologists working on time experience, she used an experimental design.

Many other approaches are possible. Age, gender, mood, and personality may also be related to time experience and how we deal with time. As we get older, time seems to proceed at a faster rate. In some cultures, care is taken that clocks show the accurate time; in others, not (Levine & Norenzayan, 1999). Work/life balance is a crucial factor in well-being and related to time stress.

These are well-known phenomena, and there is extensive research on the psychology of time (Eisler, 1975, 1976; Strathman & Joireman, 2005). A Google search on May 21, 2011, using the phrase “psychology of time” resulted in some 129,000 hits. Flaherty approaches time experience in an original manner, sociological rather than psychological. He has interviewed a large number of people about what methods they use to influence their experience and use of time.

The most common situation when we want to influence time experience is when we are bored and time proceeds at a very slow rate. The common tactic is to focus attention on something other than time, on some interesting task. Although not discussed by Flaherty, Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of flow (Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989) can be used to describe how intense interest seems to diminish the experience of time. It is more uncommon that we wish to prolong the present experience, but that happens, too, by focusing attention on the present (Carpe Diem: “Seize the day”). A number of time-related phenomena concern frequency, sequence, timing, allocation, and “taking time.” In all cases, Flaherty looks for, and finds, that people function as agents vis-à-vis their dealings with time. For this, Flaherty coins the term *time work*.

In several of his studies Flaherty found that intense experience, or a large number of events taking place in a period of time, could lead to a feeling of time passing either very quickly or very slowly. The clue seems to be whether the events are personally threatening. This is a very interesting finding that could be missed in laboratory work, which typically concerns neutral stimuli and does not dwell on individual differences.

There are large individual differences with regard to how people deal with time. Some people Flaherty interviewed were barely aware of if, and how, they acted to adapt to the passage and scarcity of time. Flaherty suggests that there may be a *time intelligence* dimension, perhaps a parallel to emotional intelligence, but he does not develop this interesting idea further.

Zimbardo and Boyd (1999) have suggested a way of measuring time perspective that seems to deal with “time intelligence.” Their approach has been successful in showing relationships between time perspective and risk-taking behavior (driving, substance abuse). Strathman, Gleicher, Boninger, and Edwards (1994) constructed and validated a scale for the consideration of future consequences that gave interesting results in accounting for health and environmentally positive behavior. Jones and Brown (2005) have examined the ramifications of cultural differences in time orientation.

There are a number of additional psychological concepts that could have been explored in relation to time work. Consider, as an example, Flaherty's concept of *time theft*. Employees may be paid for eight hours of work in a day, but it is not uncommon that they spend some of that time doing things for which they are not paid. There could be many reasons for time theft, one of them being that they simply are bored by their jobs. Interest seems therefore to be a potentially potent explanatory factor of how we spend time.

Frequency is an aspect about which psychology has much to say. People often have goals to diminish the frequency of some behaviors and increase that of others. The difficulties they encounter have their origins in emotions and the interplay between emotion and cognition (Sjöberg, 1980). Under the influence of strong emotions (negative or positive), people find it hard to stick to long-term goals such as giving up smoking or increasing physical exercise.

Flaherty more or less ignores psychological work on time (Fraisse, 1984). This is regrettable because a more interdisciplinary approach could have been quite fruitful. His book should be of interest to researchers in the fields of sociology and psychology of time. It offers an interesting approach in stressing that people actively deal with time and are not simply the passive recipients of it.


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