Control Over Time Predicts Greater Life Satisfaction Among Millionaires

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We assess the time use of millionaires and the general population. Millionaires spend more time on active (exercise) than passive (television) leisure. Millionaires also spend more time on autonomous work. In turn, active leisure and autonomous work predict happiness: wealthy individuals reap happiness by exerting greater control over their time.

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Spending and Construing Time to Enhance Well-Being  
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Paper #1: Goal Conflict Encourages Work and Discourages Leisure  
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Paper #2: Control over Time Predicts Greater Life Satisfaction among Millionaires  
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Paper #3: To Thrive or to Suffer at the Hand of Busyness: How Lay Theories of Busyness Influence Psychological Empowerment and Volunteering  
Mahdi Ebrahimi, University of Houston, USA  
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Paper #4: Rethinking Time for Well-Being  
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Jennifer Aaker, Stanford University, USA

SESSION OVERVIEW

Time is one of our most precious resources. With only 24 hours a day seven days a week, consumers must decide how best to allocate their finite time to maximize well-being. Reflecting the importance of this decision, researchers have devoted themselves to understanding the happiest ways to mentally construe and spend time (e.g., Aaker, Rudd, and Mogilner 2011; Etkin and Mogilner 2016; Mogilner and Aaker 2009; Mogilner and Norton 2011). This stream of work has yielded many important insights: thinking about time (vs. money; Mogilner 2010) and expanding one’s sense of time (Chance, Mogilner, and Norton 2011; Rudd, Vohs, and Aaker 2012) increase happiness. Time spent socializing, volunteering, and on leisure pursuits make people happier than work (Aaker et al. 2011; Kahneman et al. 2004; Thoits and Hewitt 2001), and time spent on freely chosen activities makes people happier than imposed ones (Csikszentmihalyi and Hunter 2003).

While the prior work informs how to think about time and what to spend time on in order to enhance well-being, what leads consumers to construe and spend time in these beneficial ways has received less attention. Time spent on leisure may make people happier than work, for example, but what affects how people allocate time between work and leisure? Feeling time constrained may detract from well-being, but how can people construe their time in a more positive light?

This session tackles these questions. Four papers investigate factors that affect the expenditure and construal of time to enhance well-being. Papers 1 and 2 examine time spent on work versus leisure. Etkin and Chabot investigate the role of goal conflict and time scarcity. Five experiments show that perceiving greater conflict between one’s personal goals makes time seem scarcer, which leads people to spend more time on work and less on leisure. Whillans, Smeets, Bekkers, and Norton focus on wealth and autonomy. Two large-scale surveys of millionaires and the general population show that wealth predicts life satisfaction by enabling greater autonomy in work and leisure. Paper 3 (Ebrahimi, Rudd, and Patrick) examines time spent volunteering and the role of busyness and empowerment.

Five studies show that holding the lay theory that busyness is good (vs. bad) increases psychological empowerment, which makes people more likely to volunteer. Finally, Paper 4 (Hershfield, Mogilner, and Aaker) proposes a theory of how to reconceptualize time—by taking a “bird’s-eye” view of the past, present, and future—to improve well-being.

Together these papers inform what affects the use and construal of time to enhance well-being. Going beyond identifying specific happy ways to spend and perceive time, this session demonstrates a variety of novel factors—goal conflict, wealth, busyness beliefs, abstraction—that influence consumers’ propensity to spend and construe time in these beneficial ways. The findings advance understanding of the psychology of time allocation and perception and its connections to well-being, and suggest numerous interventions to improve consumer well-being. The session should have broad appeal to scholars interested in time, well-being, happiness, work vs. leisure, and volunteering.

Goal Conflict Encourages Work and Discourages Leisure

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Aside from basic needs, leisure is one of the most desired human behaviors. Leisure activities are enjoyable and done for their own sake, rather than their external benefits (Grazia 1962; Neulinger 1974). People desire leisure more than social interaction and sex, and even more than addictive behaviors like smoking (Hofmann, Vohs, and Baumeister 2012).

The desire for leisure is well-founded. In addition to being fun, leisure provides many physical and psychological benefits. Leisure alleviates stress, increases positive affect, reduces burnout, boosts life satisfaction, and improves well-being (Kahneman et al. 2004; Reich and Zautra 1981; Tinsley and Tinsley 1986).

Nevertheless, people frequently forgo leisure in favor of other activities (Gershuny 2005; Hofman et al. 2012)—namely, work. Even when working more provides few additional benefits (e.g., one’s basic needs are already met), many people choose to spend more time on work rather than leisure (Kuhn and Lozano 2008; Schor 1991). Given the appeal and benefits of leisure, why do people so often choose work instead?

We suggest that goal conflict plays an important role. Building on recent research, which shows that perceiving greater conflict between one’s personal goals makes people feel that they have less time (Etkin, Evangelidis, and Aaker 2015), we argue that goal conflict should increase the need to feel justified in how time is spent. Because activities that feel productive tend to be more justifiable than merely enjoyable ones (Giner-Sorolla 2001; Kivetz and Simonson 2002; Southerton and Tomlinson 2005), we predict that perceiving greater goal conflict will increase time spent on activities that feel productive (i.e., “work,” Laran and Janiszewski 2011) and decrease time spent on activities that feel enjoyable (i.e., “leisure”—even when those tasks are unrelated to the conflicting goals.

Five experiments tested our predictions. The first four followed the same basic paradigm: first, we manipulated perceived goal conflict by asking participants to list two personal goals and then describe a time when they did versus did not feel conflict between them; second, as an ostensibly unrelated task, we measured time spent on work versus leisure either via engagement in an activity (experiments 1a and 1b) or choice (experiments 2a and 2b).
Experiment 1a examined coloring. After manipulating perceived goal conflict, participants read that they would spend some time coloring simple shapes, and we manipulated how coloring was framed. Coloring is a simple activity that is fun to do (Lepper, Greene, and Nisbett 1973). Accordingly, in the “work-frame” condition, we told participants, “coloring is useful for cultivating creativity...spending time coloring helps people be more creative in their work’’; in the “leisure-frame” condition, we simply allowed coloring to be fun (as it naturally seems). We recorded how long participants spent coloring, then tested the effect of goal conflict in each frame condition. As predicted, when framed as work, goal conflict increased time spent coloring ($M_{high-conflict} = 218.33$ seconds vs. $M_{low-conflict} = 164.53$ seconds; $F(1, 311) = 3.27, p = .071$), but when coloring seemed fun, goal conflict decreased time spent coloring ($M_{high-conflict} = 186.61$ seconds vs. $M_{low-conflict} = 238.19$ seconds; $F(1, 311) = 8.29, p = .004$).

Experiment 1b replicated the results of experiment 1a with a different activity: watching a video. After manipulating perceived goal conflict, we framed watching a movie either as work (“Documentaries are a good way to learn and develop critical thinking…” ) or leisure (“Movies are a good way to relax and be entertained…” ), then measured time spent watching. As predicted, when framed as work (leisure), goal conflict increased (decreased) time spent watching the video.

Experiments 2a and 2b explored the proposed underlying process. Experiment 2a tested for mediation. After manipulating perceived goal conflict, we asked participants to choose a puzzle (one that would be effortful and feel like “work” vs. one that would be enjoyable and feel like “leisure”), then measured feelings of time affluence (five-items on 7-point scales from Etkin et al. 2015). Supporting our theory, perceiving greater goal conflict made participants feel that they had less time ($M_{high-conflict} = 2.93$ vs. $M_{low-conflict} = 3.54$; $F(1, 148) = 7.12, p = .008$), and these reduced time perceptions increased choice of the work task over the leisure one ($\chi^2(1) = 4.04, p = .045, \eta^2 = .027$). Experiment 2b examined moderation. After the goal conflict manipulation, we manipulated feelings of time affluence (via an awe induction, Rudd, Vohs, and Aaker 2012), then asked participants to allocate their next 15 minutes between a “work” activity (catching the video). As predicted, when framed as work (leisure), goal conflict increased (decreased) time spent watching the video.

In Study 1, Dutch millionaires ($N=863, M_{wealth}=€2,375,905$) reported their life satisfaction and how they had spent time in the last 24 hours. A nationally representative sample of Dutch adults completed the identical survey ($N=1,232, M_{wealth}=€37,500$).

Millionaires reported greater life satisfaction ($M=8.12, SD=1.00$) than the general population ($M=7.48, SD=1.32$); $t$-test $p<0.001$. Millionaires reported the same amount of overall leisure as the general population (40.4% and 40.7% respectively) but spent this leisure time differently. Millionaires spent significantly more of their time on active leisure (16.1% versus 10.5%; $p<0.001$) and significantly less of their time on passive leisure (24.3% versus 30.2%; $p<0.001$). These results held controlling for differences between the two samples including age, gender, and employment status.

Active leisure was positively – and passive leisure was negatively – associated with life satisfaction for both millionaires and the general population. These results were robust controlling for differences in observable characteristics of the wealthy and general population. Further, we observed two significant indirect effects: (1) to the extent that wealth predicted active leisure, wealth in turn predicted greater life satisfaction and (2) to the extent that wealth predicted lower levels of passive leisure, wealth in turn predicted greater life satisfaction. These results held controlling for demographic differences between the rich and non-rich. Overall, both groups derived benefit from active leisure, but the rich engaged in more active leisure and therefore reported greater life satisfaction.

Millionaires spent less time working and commuting than the general population; yet, this was entirely explained by the larger fraction of millionaires who were retired. Among the employed, millionaires spent a larger fraction of their time at work and commuting than the general population: 29.5% versus 24.5%, $p<0.01$. Among the retired, millionaires also spent a larger fraction of their time...
working and commuting: 9.1% versus 6.2%, \( p<0.01 \). Time spent working was not associated with life satisfaction, suggesting that work hours could not explain higher life satisfaction among the rich.

Study 1 revealed that the amount of time spent working did not predict differences in life satisfaction. In Study 2, we focused not on the amount but rather on the type of work that individuals completed. We suggest that the relationship between work and life satisfaction may critically depend on the extent to which people have control over the activities that they complete while at work. Thus, we assessed respondents’ level of autonomy at work, predicting that millionaires would report greater autonomy than the general population, and that this autonomy would be linked to greater life satisfaction.

Dutch millionaires (\( N=690, \text{M}_{\text{wealth}}=€3,351,234 \)) and a nationally representative sample of Dutch adults (\( N=306, \text{M}_{\text{wealth}}=€101,677 \)) indicated the number of hours that they worked yesterday and the fraction of those hours that they had control over work tasks. Both samples also reported on three components of work autonomy: the extent to which they had control over the methods they used at work, the extent they could control when they worked, and the extent they could control the goals they pursued at work. Respondents also completed the identical life satisfaction measure from Study 1.

Once again, the rich reported greater life satisfaction (\( \text{M}=8.10, \text{SD}=0.84 \)) than the general population (\( \text{M}=7.60, \text{SD}=1.09 \)); t-test \( p<0.001 \). Consistent with research demonstrating a positive association between income and job autonomy using representative samples (Bryson & MacKerron, 2016), millionaires reported greater job autonomy than the general population. Among employed individuals, both millionaires and the general population worked approximately 7.5 hours in the last 24 hours.

Of those hours, millionaires decided what to do and how to do it during 92.6% of the hours that they spent working as compared to 76.4% for the general population (\( p=0.01 \)). Millionaires also reported having more control over the methods that they used at work, when they worked, and their goals at work (\( p<0.01 \)).

Work autonomy predicted life satisfaction for both millionaires and the general population. Yet, as with active leisure, to the extent that wealth predicted job autonomy, wealth in turn predicted greater life satisfaction. Although both samples reported higher life satisfaction from greater job autonomy, the rich experienced greater job autonomy, which contributed to the gap in life satisfaction between the rich and non-rich.

An emerging body of research focuses on the distinct contributions of time and money to life satisfaction. While previous research has focused on the direct relationships between money and life satisfaction—in many cases directly plotting income against life satisfaction—our results suggest that wealth translates into life satisfaction to the extent that it influences a third key variable: time. When wealth enables people to take control over leisure and work activities, wealth is more likely to translate into greater life satisfaction.

**To Thrive or to Suffer at the Hand of Busyness: How Lay Theories of Busyness Influence Psychological Empowerment and Volunteering**

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Time is becoming an increasingly precious human resource and, with each passing decade, consumers report feeling increasingly busy (Gersheny 2005; Szollos 2009). Research finds that feeling busy has a negative psychological impact on consumers, hindering work-life balance and increasing distress, depression, and anxiety (Roxburgh 2004; Roxburgh 2006). The current research argues that how individuals view their busyness can have social and societal implications and asks, if people feel busy, are they simply less likely to volunteer?

Volunteering rates in the US have been declining for over a decade (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2007, 2011, 2016), and society’s current busyness epidemic is often blamed as the culprit. But although some empirical evidence does indeed support the notion that busyness breeds a lack of volunteering intent (Johnson 2004), is that the full picture? Other evidence suggests that it is busy individuals who are more likely to volunteer (Corporation for National and Community Service 2007). For instance, amongst full time workers, those who work more hours are more likely to volunteer (Wilson and Musick 1997). In an example close to home, reviewers for academic journals or conference special sessions (volunteers) are often also the most prolific (busy) researchers (Lindsey 1976). To help resolve this evidentiary inconsistency, we propose that it is not busyness perse, but rather people’s lay theory about the feeling of busyness (i.e., feeling “busy=good” or feeling “busy=bad”) that influences volunteering behavior.

We suggest that, when feeling busy, consumers who hold the lay theory that feeling busy is good should feel more invigorated, intrinsically motivated, and in control of their lives—feelings which give rise to greater feelings of psychological empowerment (Zimmerman and Rappaport 1988). In contrast, holding the lay theory that feeling busy is bad causes the individual to focus on the stress, hassle, and inflexibility associated with busyness. Stressful situations narrow individuals’ focus and deploy cognitive and emotional resources to deal with the immediate threat (LeDoux 1995) and lower feelings of empowerment (Mullainathan and Shafir 2013). Notably, we propose that even keeping objective busyness constant, holding one lay theory (feeling “busy=good”) allows individuals to psychologically thrive, while holding the other (feeling “busy=bad”) causes them to suffer. Moreover, because individuals who feel psychologically empowered are more likely to reach out to satisfy other people’s needs (Erez, Mikulincer, van Ijzendoorn, and Kroonenberg 2008; Wilson 2012), we also propose that holding the lay theory that “busy=good” (vs. “busy=bad”) should lead to greater volunteering.

Across five studies, we predicted and found that people are more inclined to volunteer when they hold the lay theory that feeling “busy=good” (vs. “busy=bad”) and that this effect is driven by enhanced feelings of empowerment.

Using a correlational design, study 1a measured the valence of participants’ busyness lay theory and their feelings of empowerment. Our findings reveal that people naturally hold different beliefs about the valence of feeling busy: Approximately 50% of participants believed the “busy=good” lay theory and 50% believed “busy=bad”. As predicted, the “busy=good” lay theory was significantly positively correlated with feelings of empowerment.

In study 1b, participants’ lay theories were manipulated by randomly assigning participants to listen to one of two ostensibly real science podcasts that discussed scientific findings that showed that feeling busy is good (vs. bad). Participants then responded to manipulation checks and reported feelings of empowerment (e.g. “I feel in control”). Analyses revealed that, as predicted, participants in the “busy=good” (vs. “busy=bad”) condition felt significantly more empowered.

Study 2 used a different lay theory manipulation: an ostensibly real science magazine article that claimed either that feeling busy is good or bad. After reflecting on the article’s findings by providing supporting examples from their own lives, participants responded to manipulation checks, reported their empowerment, and (in a purportedly unrelated survey) responded to a scenario-based measure of volunteering intentions (e.g. “How likely would you be to volunteer?
your time to help at a senior citizens’ home?”; Henderson, Huang, and Chang 2012). Participants in the “busy=good” (vs. “busy=bad”) condition were significantly more likely to volunteer and felt significantly more empowered. The effect of busyness lay theory on volunteering intentions was mediated by feelings of empowerment.

Study 3 provided additional support for the mediating role of empowerment by manipulating both lay theories of busyness (as in study 2) and empowerment (by having participants recall a time they either did or did not feel empowered). We expected that when people hold the lay theory that feeling “busy=good,” they already feel empowered and thus the empowerment manipulation should not influence their volunteering. However, when people believe that feeling “busy=bad,” they feel disempowered and thus boosting their feelings of empowerment should lead to greater volunteering. As predicted, our analyses revealed that participants in the “busy=bad” condition reported greater willingness to volunteer their time in the high (vs. low) empowerment condition, but participants in the “busy=good” condition were equally likely to volunteer across empowerment conditions.

Study 4 sought to conceptually replicate the prior effects of lay theory on volunteering using measures of real volunteering behavior. After completing the same lay theory manipulation from study 2, participants reported feelings of empowerment, and (in a purportedly unrelated survey) were given the opportunity to participate in at least one real volunteering event 1-2 weeks after the survey. Whether participants signed up for at least one event served our first measure of volunteering. Last, at the end of the experimental session, participants were asked to volunteer their time to assemble first-aid kits for families in need. Whether or not participants actually made at least one kit served as another measure of volunteering. The results revealed that participants in the “busy=good” (vs. “busy=bad”) condition felt significantly more empowered, were significantly more likely to sign up for a volunteering event, and were significantly more likely to assemble first-aid kits. Further, empowerment mediated the effect of lay theory on both measures of volunteering behavior.

Taken together, our research elucidates the link between feeling busy and volunteering behavior; connects the lay theory, empowerment, and volunteering literatures; and offers firms and consumers a novel volunteering intervention.

Rethinking Time for Well-Being

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In this conceptual paper, we examine the construct of time with the goal to improve how consumers think about and use time to advance consumers’ well-being, not just in terms of happiness but in terms of health, financial well-being, and a deeper sense of meaning (Aaker 2014; Baumeister, Vohs, Aaker, and Garbinsky 2013; Mick 2006). To this end, we briefly review prior work on time in the consumer behavior literature, and document a predominantly dichotomized view of time, which assumes a stark distinction between the present and the future. We then find inspiration from three other domains (emotions, financial decision-making, and social relationships) where researchers have demonstrated the positive effects of treating their given domain in a more integrated way. Finally, we propose our new, integrated treatment of time and discuss one way consumers can adopt it – by taking a “bird’s-eye” view of time where the future, present, and past become equally visible and thus subjectively relevant. From this perspective, events from different time points are treated and experienced as part of one’s overall life and being.

Much Western psychology-based research on time reduces it to a linear construct placing the consumer as the center point (Graham 1981; Ji, Guo, Zhang, and Messervey 2009). From that point, the line is parsed between the past, present, and future. Investigating how consumers navigate the journey from the present to the future is of utmost relevance to behavior and decision-making (Seligman, Raillon, Baumeister, and Sripada 2013). Thus, in an effort to understand time in a way that makes sense for consumers’ lives, the way that we as consumers and researchers have come to understand time is largely through temporal dichotomies between the present and the future, or the near versus distant future. For example, the influential research on temporal construal dichotomizes time between the near and distant future to understand how viewing potential outcomes through either temporal lens affects consumers’ judgments and predictions (e.g., Trope and Liberman 2010). Similarly, the research on intertemporal choice builds off the notion that consumers are peremptually choosing and making tradeoffs between the present and the future.

And yet, research from at least three domains speaks to the power of integrating across formerly bi-furcated categories. This work has shown that a more integrated approach leads to positive outcomes and enhanced well-being in the domains of (1) emotions (i.e., allowing for the experience of mixed emotions wherein oppositely valenced emotions co-occur; e.g., Larsen, Hemenover, Norris, and Cacciopo 2003), (2) financial decision making (i.e., when debt and savings are thought of as components of an overall goal; e.g., Sussman and O’Brien, in press), and (3) social relationships (i.e., when other people are included in the self-concept; e.g., Aron, Paris, and Aron 1995).

Here, we argue for a similar re-construal in the domain of time. Rather than pitting the present against the future, we propose a different lens on time: one that does not force a tradeoff between the two, and instead allows the present and future to co-exist. Our proposed rethinking of time wherein the present and the future are not dichotomized reflects the fact that the future will at some point be the present, and the present is perpetually shifting. As the writer Harriet Beecher Stowe anecdotally observed, “The past, the present and the future are really one: they are today.” To take an example from biology, the genetic blueprint of butterfly wings exists inside the caterpillar, and the “spine” of the caterpillar continues to exist within the newly formed butterfly. This approach to time highlights that all pieces of one’s time are equally relevant to one’s existence. The present is ultimately important, not because it should be weighed more heavily than the future, but because it is the future (or will be at some point). And along the same lines, the future is ultimately important because in a way, it is contained within the present.

One way to utilize this re-conceptualization of time involves adopting a new perspective of one’s time course, whereby individuals pull up and away from the ground-level linear trajectory where only the immediate present is visible, and instead assume a bird’s-eye view where the future, present, and past are equally visible and subjectively relevant. Namely, we propose a rethinking of time that involves consumers mentally lifting up and away from that shackled temporal line, obtaining a view over one’s time course such that moments and days and years in the future or past are equally visible and thus personally relevant. This approach is much like looking down on one’s calendar, with the squares representing each day or month laid out alongside each other. Every equivalent unit of time is the same size and is equally visible, reflecting its equal importance. A day is the same size as any other day; it is not distorted by its proximity to the square representing the current day.

Lastly, we discuss three ways that this analogy might benefit well-being. First, by shifting decisions from whether one can do something to when one can do something, assuming a bird’s-eye
view of time releases people from the cognitive and circumstantial constraints that previously kept them from spending time in personally important ways. Second, a bird’s-eye view may help consumers act more patiently: if a future reward is equally visible to a more immediate reward, consumers will focus on actual differences in value between two rewards, and the temporal distance will become less relevant. Third, a bird’s-eye view of time may boost meaning in life: past research has found that people who had an easier time simulating the past and future (measured both neurally and behaviorally) also reported greater meaning in their lives (Waytz, Hershfield, and Tamir 2015). Rather than needing to traverse great temporal distances in a linear fashion, a bird’s eye perspective could prompt consumers to more nimbly mentally jump from one period of time to another, leading to elevated levels of meaning.

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