

---

*Time Use: Expanding the Explanatory Power of the Social Sciences*, by William Michelson. Paradigm Press. 2005.

DAN RYAN  
Mills College  
danryan@mills.edu

---

William Michelson, a Canadian sociologist of time use, has written a book that aims to widen the appreciation of what time-use (TU) research is and to exhort TU researchers to tweak what they are doing to make it more broadly useful.

The book begins by reminding us that the subfield is neither new nor obscure. Michelson recounts early American studies by Bevens (1913) and by Soviet economists in the 1920s. Although thought of as a marginal specialty, the concerns of time-use researchers show up in literature familiar across the discipline; consider Hochschild's *The Time Bind* (1989), Giddens's incorporation of Hägerstrand's time-geography in his structuration theory (1984), or Schor's *The Overworked American* (1991).

Two chapters describe how TU research is done. The first, "Demystifying Time-Use [Data] Collection," does just that. In it, an "old hand" describes the methodological mechanics of collecting time use data: the text of survey questions, the technique of time diaries, the layout of data collection forms, and strategies for coding data. Though not likely of substantive interest to a general sociological reader, Michelson's almost ethnographic account is one of the best articulations of a research tradition's "how we actually do it" that I have seen. The inclusion of this sort of tacit knowledge, usually only available at the elbow of a practitioner, makes the book potentially useful to students of research methods – even those not interested in time use per se.

Each of the remaining seven chapters describes a topic or issue in which TU offers potential insights and offers explicit suggestions for how TU researchers could modify their practices to significantly enhance these contributions.

Time-use studies can uncover "hidden groups" in survey research, subcategories not taken into account during sample construction or groups for whom no sampling frame exists. Behavioral sampling – separating out respondents with particular patterns of time use – permits researchers to identify, for example, the subpopulation of fathers who work at home but spend a significant part of their day parenting.

When TU studies ask qualitative questions such as how activity episodes make respondents feel, it becomes possible to see how activity patterns in different structural positions – men and women for example – yield different levels of satisfaction even if quantitatively, in aggregate, they are similar. Stress

differences by sex, for example, "may be attached to the patterning of everyday life, not just as a reflection of a single kind" (or amount) of activity (103).

By studying episodic occurrences and sequences in people's days (for example, frequency of interruptions, number of activity switchings) researchers can empirically characterize the temporal fragmentation that gives rise to a "raising children effect," "gender effect," or a "not being on sabbatical effect" (103-4). Real differences between occupations (or between different classes of incumbents in an occupation) show up, for example, when we look at how work gets juxtaposed with domestic activity evenings and weekends. The same amount of driving may yield different amounts of stress for a working mom/dad and a "soccer" mom/dad because of the activities at either end of the drive.

When TU researchers ask about both primary and subsidiary activities, we see how examining activity in minute empirical detail can uncover the otherwise invisible taken-for-grantedness of everyday phenomena. In the domestic division of labor, for example, every episode of a man's vacuuming may appear in his mental accounting, whereas a woman who vacuums while a pot is on the stove and a kid plays in the next room may not count these as "what she was doing."

TU studies also offer alternative empirical takes on social interaction, the built environment, and risk. Asking not just "what were you doing?" but also "who else was present?" yields insights on interaction, groups, and social networks. When they ask "where were you?" and "where were you going?" TU studies provide data on spaces, places, and trips. When coupled with information about local environments, this data can measure exposure to risks as varied as air pollution, crime, and industrial accidents.

*Time Use: Expanding the Explanatory Power of the Social Sciences* speaks to social scientists outside of time use research and to time use researchers themselves. The author's goal for the second group is "to illustrate how analysts can extract more meaning from time-use data, so as to go beyond the description and analysis of time for its own sake and toward the strategic use of these data in the understanding and explanation of a wider range of societal issues and problems" (46). For the first group, the book draws attention to an extensive trove of research results and techniques and how they can supplement the work in many areas of social science research.

Giddens, A. (1984). *The Constitution of Society: Introduction of the Theory of Structuration*. Berkeley, University of California Press.

Hochschild, A. (1989). *The Second Shift*. New York, Avon.

Schor, J. (1991). *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure*. New York, Basic Books.