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Subjective time pressure: General or domain specific?



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ABSTRACT

Chronic time pressure has been identified as a pervasive societal problem, exacerbated by high demands of the labor market and the home. Yet time pressure has not been disaggregated and examined separately across home and work contexts, leaving many unanswered questions regarding the sources and potentially stressful consequences of time pressure. Using data collected in the United States General Social Survey waves 2002 and 2004, this study disaggregates time pressure into the domains of home and work, and asks whether considering time pressures within distinct work and home contexts reveals distinct predictors or associations with stress. Findings show that both predictors and stress associations differ across work and home pressures, revealing both methodological and theoretical implications for the study of time pressure and work and family life more generally.

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1. Introduction

Subjective time pressure, or the sense that one's duties and responsibilities exceed one's ability to complete them in the time available, is arguably a persistent characteristic of modern life for many individuals (i.e., Gleick, 1999). Particularly in the United States, discourse on time scarcity is well-established and widespread (e.g., Clarkberg and Moen, 2001; Gleick, 1999; Gross and Sheth, 1989; Hochschild, 1997; Schor, 2004). Yet research on the experience of time pressure is relatively scarce. More is known, for example, about how time is experienced subjectively than how a *lack* of time is experienced (see, for example, Dapkus, 1985; Flaherty, 1991; Flaherty and Meer, 1994; Meck, 2005). In particular, we do not understand whether time pressure differs across important life settings, such as the contexts of work and home.

At chronic levels, research suggests that feelings of time pressure may increase overall stress and challenge one's mental health (Zuzanek, 1998; Roxburgh, 2004). Time pressure is conceptualized as a stressor, constituting one example of how social roles challenge or strain individuals, and potentially create a stress response (Goode, 1960). The social stress paradigm posits that potential stressors are, ideally, best interpreted and understood in context. For example, stressors may carry over from one domain to another (see Thoits, 1995). The domains of home and work, in particular, are distinct contexts that are highly demanding of individuals' time (Coser, 1974). In these contexts individuals engage with different roles, behaviors, goals, networks, social interactions, and habits (Clark, 2000; Eby et al., 2010). The contexts of home and work are also, quite often, distinct places (Gieryn, 2000). Yet we do not know whether time pressure differs across these two settings.

In this study I examine whether time pressures at home and work are distinct by asking (1) whether time pressures at home and at work are key components of an overall sense of pressure; (2) whether the social distribution of time pressures differ across home and work domains, and (3) whether time pressures at home and work have different associations with

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stress. We know relatively little about the experience of time pressure, particularly the contexts in which time pressure arises, and how social roles, time pressure, and stress are related across the distinct contextual domains of home and work.

2. Background

2.1. Definition, significance, and sources of subjective time pressure

Subjective time pressure refers to the sense or awareness that there is too much to do and not enough time in which to do it (e.g., [Roxburgh, 2002](#)). Subjective time pressure, therefore, lies at the intersection of time experience and social roles: it involves both the perception of time, and of role obligations perceived as necessary to accomplish within a given time period. Phenomenological analysis confirms that the experience of time pressure involves both experiencing tempo (pacing of time) and experiencing limits and choices (having to choose one action versus the other) ([Dapkus, 1985](#)). The experience of time and its constant progression, the sense of the burden of one's social obligations, and the reality that one cannot do everything at once, are all components of the perception of time pressure.

The experience of time is intimately connected with society, yet a full sociological understanding of time pressure remains lacking. Societies imbue individuals with the tools and experiences that make up their consciousness and interpretation of time, and provide them with the resources to judge whether a given experience feels in sync with the normal pace and flow of daily life ([Flaherty, 1991](#)). Temporal aspects of daily life, such as what days or times of the week stores are open, whether to rest during the day, and even the modern calendar, are intertwined with social life and fade into the background of everyday experience ([Sorokin and Merton, 1937](#); [Zerubavel, 1981](#)). Yet at times we feel that time is simply too short to finish everything we need to get done. Modern life, particularly in the United States and other similar nations, is often described as highly time pressured (see [Hamermesh and Lee, 2007](#)). Nonetheless the phenomenon of subjective time pressure – the perception of *lack* of time, relative to demands – is relatively understudied.

Feelings of time pressure are of greatest theoretical and practical concern when they become frequent and characteristic of daily experience. The sense of time pressure seems to be typical of a normal, healthy human experience ([Goode, 1960](#); [Levine, 1997](#); [Zuzanek, 1998](#)). It is produced by social roles creating strains and challenges that individuals must work against – an instance of the general phenomenon referred to as role strain ([Goode, 1960](#)). It is at high (sustained/frequent, enduring) levels of occurrence that time pressure is thought to be a problem, and may be considered a chronic strain or stressor ([Roxburgh, 2004](#); [Szollos, 2009](#)). At chronic levels, subjective time pressure is thought to potentially create unhealthy levels of stress, constituting one pathway by which social roles and institutions affect psychological well-being (also see [Maule and Hockey, 1993](#); [Pearlin et al., 2005](#)).

Empirically, researchers most often measure chronic subjective time pressure based on questions that tap into *overall* feelings of pressure. For instance, one common measure uses a question about how frequently one feels rushed. This question is found in several survey years of the General Social Survey, as well as in other national surveys (e.g., [Hamermesh and Lee, 2007](#); [Mattingly and Sayer, 2006](#); [Robinson and Godbey, 1997](#)). Other researchers use more complex measures of time pressure, combining multiple items, such as “How often do you wish there were more hours in a day?” “You feel rushed to do the things you have to do,” or “You never seem to have enough time to get everything done” into scales that tap into overall feelings of time pressure ([Hilbrecht et al., 2008](#); [Robinson and Godbey, 1997](#); [Roxburgh, 2002, 2004](#); [Van Emmerik and Jawahar, 2006](#); also see [Tézli and Gauthier, 2009](#)). These measures tap into an overall self-assessment of time pressure, which allows the researcher to rate total levels, but the measures do not directly address the contexts in which respondents feel time pressured.

Studies of overall feelings of time pressure confirm that reported feelings of chronic time pressure are not purely perceptual, but implicate the greater presence of objective time constraints ([Gimenez-Nadal and Sevilla-Sanz, 2011](#)). Those who are time pressured have less time alone ([Mattingly and Bianchi, 2003](#)) to engage in leisure, relax, and recuperate from stress. For instance, parents of young children, and individuals who do more housework (usually women and girls; see also [Hilbrecht et al., 2008](#); [Sayer, 2005](#)), have greater time demands and consequently report greater time pressures ([Mattingly and Sayer, 2006](#); [Roxburgh, 2002](#)). Workers, and particularly those who work longer hours, also tend to report greater feelings of time pressure ([Gimenez-Nadal and Sevilla-Sanz, 2011](#); [Hamermesh and Lee, 2007](#); [Roxburgh, 2002](#)).

Although work and home obligations are common sources of time pressure identified in the literature, other key dimensions of experience have been linked to greater overall feelings of subjective time pressure, particularly socio-economic status and emotional state. Experimental, demographic, and economic studies have reported various measures or proxies for socio-economic status as predictors of overall subjective time pressure. These studies suggest that time pressure is linked to socio-economic advantage either because greater earnings drive up consumption ([Hamermesh and Lee, 2007](#)), or because greater financial resources increase the perceived value of time ([DeVoe and Pfeffer, 2011](#)). Alternative explanations, such as the possibility that time pressure is linked to SES primarily through workplace demands (i.e., [Schieman et al., 2006](#)), have not been explored.

Mood is another likely source of time pressure. Research suggests that although time pressure may have depressing consequences, particularly if one does not have the economic resources to deal with the pressure ([Roxburgh, 2004](#)), negative mood states – whether rooted in life circumstances or personality traits – may, in turn, make tasks seem insurmountable, increasing the sense of time pressure (i.e., [Kangas and Meyerson, 2008](#)). Those who are depressed also experience a distorted

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