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## **SEX, LIES AND TIME-USE STUDIES**

Draft paper for the International Association for Time Use Research (IATUR) Annual Conference, Brussels, 2003.

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### Introduction

Some ambitious claims have been made about the potential of time-use studies to give us objective, 'scientific' insights into how societies function. For example, Harvey and Pentland claim that 'Time use methodology provides hard, replicable data that are the behavioural output of decisions, preferences, attitudes and environmental factors' and 'There is no area of human behaviour for which time use studies cannot provide valuable and interesting data' (Harvey and Pentland, 1999, pp. 39 and 42), while Robinson claims that time use diaries 'provide unique, scientific insights into how daily life is and has been changing', covering 'the complete range of human behaviour' (Robinson, 1999, pp. 47 and 48). Although many researchers are increasingly aware of some of the difficulties involved in obtaining accurate and objective data (see for example Gershuny, 2000), there seems to be a general optimism that difficulties can in principle be overcome.

In contrast, this paper sounds several notes of caution. In addition to identifying problems stemming from the over-simplified reporting of complex findings, it argues that we should always be alert to the subjective and value laden nature of much time-use research and the complex and contested nature of the 'reality' that studies purport to reflect. This means that while time-use studies do not deliberately mislead or lie, the 'truth' they offer is less complete than is commonly supposed. In developing this argument the paper draws on recent feminist theory, and focuses on sex differences in time use.

### The misrepresentation of findings

Many time-use researchers use sophisticated methodology and are self-consciously aware of the limitations of their findings. However, such subtleties frequently

disappear in media reports and general public discussion. For example, as Gershuny says, the widespread perception that people in western nations are ‘running out of time’ conceals wide variations across ‘class’, with problems of ‘time poverty’ heavily concentrated amongst educated groups and concealing an overall long-term rise in leisure (Gershuny, 2000 and 2002)<sup>1</sup>. My own sense that findings are often presented in misleading ways was generated by a recent *Guardian* report that research for the Equal Opportunities Commission had found that ‘a third of all childcare in the UK is carried out by fathers’ (Ashley, 13 January 2003, reporting on O’Brien and Shemilt, 2003). This seemed hard to reconcile with other reports that nearly half British fathers work so long that they are ‘barely seeing their children grow up’, and that men’s long working hours are ‘harming family life’ (*Changing Times*, October 2002 and *The Guardian*, 26 October 2002, commenting on La Valle et al, 2002. For similar findings about long hours, see for example Cousins et al, 2002; Ferri and Smith, 1996). In fact, the EOC study did not justify the *Guardian* report. Rather, it found that fathers carried out a third of *parental* childcare (excluding that provided by relatives and paid carers, a majority of whom are women). It also defined fathers as those who live with their children or stepchildren (excluding the 20% of families headed by a lone parent, ninety per cent of whom are women) and it considered only ‘active’ childcare (excluding time ‘on call’, which is disproportionately the responsibility of women). A closer reading of studies on fathers’ working hours similarly finds more nuanced and complex findings than media reports suggest.

Studies may also be misleading if readers are not aware of the research methods used and their implications. The EOC study of fathers was based on secondary rather than primary research, and, in line with most other studies, it drew on Labour Force survey data when calculating fathers’ hours of paid employment. However, it used time diary data for their childcare activities. The implications of this for the reliability of its findings were not explored, although there seems to be evidence that surveys produce over-estimations, and that diaries provide more accurate and meaningful results (Harvey, 1999; Robinson, 1999; Gershuny, 2000). Awareness of such issues contributes to the need for both writers and readers to pay attention to the small print.

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<sup>1</sup> As Gershuny notes, those who write and read about time use are also those in the group which is experiencing a decline in leisure (Gershuny, 2000:74).

### The nature of truth and reality

A more fundamental set of problems arises from the ‘common sense’ assumptions about truth and reality that seem to underlie many time-use studies. These tend to assume that data is simply there to be discovered, and that in principle it is possible to ascertain how people spend their time. From this perspective, if respondents misremember what they did, or if they deliberately lie, or if observers fail to record their actions accurately, the solution is to develop more reliable research methods (for example, by using time diaries rather than surveys, or prompting respondents to record multiple activities).

I am not disputing the fact people spend quantifiable periods of time travelling, reading, or looking after children. However, I am concerned about the extent to which any observation of time use inevitably involves selection, interpretation and the imposition of meaning rather than the straightforward recording of ‘what people do’.

### *The selection of activities*

In the first place, the recording of data inevitably involves identifying a few activities as significant and worth recording and rejecting others as trivial and uninteresting. Such selection and rejection necessarily involves value judgements, usually by both researchers and those whose behaviour is being researched. This is clear if we consider what would happen if we programmed a computer to record exactly what we are doing in any given time period. This would in principle be accurate and objective, but because it would be unselective, it would also be meaningless. As I write this, for example, the computer might record that I am breathing, pumping blood around my body, blinking, sitting, pressing keys, looking at a screen .... It might however take it some time to mention what I would probably record as my primary activity – that is, ‘working’, or ‘writing a paper on time use’.

This kind of discussion can seem fanciful and self-indulgent. As Gershuny says, ‘we know we need not mention’ such things as ‘wearing clothes, standing up, breathing’ when ‘we give accounts of our days’ because these are ‘of necessity’ (Gershuny, 2000:258). However, this knowledge is both culturally acquired and context dependent: a stalker is not simply ‘running’; breathing heavily defines an activity

which could not be captured by ‘made a phone call but didn’t talk’; and if the computer were re-programmed to ignore ‘necessary’ physiological activities it would have to record ‘ceased writing a paper on time-use studies’ if I were to collapse and die. In principle, these contrived examples raise the same kind of problem that may occur when trying to measure time spent in childcare. If someone goes out to another house and babysits, they are likely to mention this as an activity (or one of a number of activities if they also watch television and drink tea). If, however, they are in their own house with a child sleeping upstairs, they may not see this as an activity, but as a natural condition of being (albeit one that prevents them leaving the house). As discussed above, such ‘passive childcare’ was not included in the EOC study of fathers’ contribution to childcare; in general, time use researchers have either failed to see it or have assigned passive childcare activities to all adult members present in the household, regardless of who will actually respond if a child awakes (Land, 2002). To demand that such time use be recognised and recorded, is therefore to reveal the subjective nature of supposedly objective accounts (a subjectivity which can include both researchers and respondents).

#### *Primary and secondary activities*

Although research methods that enable respondents to identify a number of activities for any one time period can obviously reduce such problems, they do not resolve them entirely, as these activities are still selected from an open-ended range of possibilities. The frequently made distinction between primary and secondary activities also involves subjective judgements. These can at times be politically and practically significant. For example, in the recent UK fire service dispute, supporters of the fire-fighters saw time on call in the station as ‘work’, while their opponents attempted to portray this primarily as a card-playing, television-watching form of leisure. Similarly, the value of maintenance settlements awarded after divorce may depend on whether we decide that childcare, possibly including passive childcare, should be recorded as a primary activity.

### *The instability of meaning*

Further complications arise from the assumption that we can find words to describe what people do in any straightforward way. At the risk of sounding like a fully-fledged post-modernist, I would argue that we need to be aware of the instability of the meanings attached to words, and the extent to which these create rather than simply describe our sense of the world. We must also be aware of their political importance and the extent to which dominant meanings may serve the interests of privileged groups. Such issues are relevant not only to the coding attached to activities by researchers, but by the words used by respondents to describe their activities, as the vocabulary available to them is also socially produced.

Some feminists have long argued that language is not a neutral medium of communication, but involves a way of structuring our thought that is based on men's perceptions and cannot accommodate women's experiences (see Spender, 1985). Thus for example there is no word readily available for either researchers or respondents to describe the activities of the 'non-working' mother whose time- and energy-consuming chores therefore disappear from public consciousness. Many time-use researchers are of course very much aware of this. Much of the impetus behind the recent growth in time-use studies came from the Beijing conference on women and its demand that the economic importance of unpaid domestic work be recognised. The 'official' redefinition of housework and childcare as forms of productive work can in a sense be seen as a feminist victory, reflecting the shifting balance of power between women and men. However, this change in perception is far from universal, while the language used by researchers can still serve to devalue and marginalise activities typically associated with women; for example, the term 'passive care' has negative overtones in a society which stresses the importance of active citizenship (Land, 2002). As we have seen, dominant understandings of 'childcare' can also serve to exaggerate men's childcare role by excluding time 'on call'. They may also obscure the real allocation of parental responsibilities and time. A wider interpretation of childcare activities might include time spent setting up paid childcare arrangements, time spent preparing children's food, time spent shopping for that food, time spent worrying about a child's diet or time spent discussing children with friends and teachers. This would not only produce a much higher overall figure, but would

probably reduce time spent on childcare by fathers rather than mothers (for discussion of similar points in relation to US research, see Budig, 2002).

At a more abstract level, much recent feminist theory has drawn on post-structuralist linguistics and psychoanalytic theory to reject binary, either/or forms of thought and to develop arguments about the essentially precarious nature of adult identity, including our gender identity. From this perspective, the terms ‘woman’ and ‘man’ are not stable or unified categories; rather, all women and men have different (and ever changing) subjectivities, and the categories themselves are linguistically and/or socially constructed rather than biologically given.

This kind of analysis creates obvious difficulties for feminists like myself who want to be able to talk about women and men in order to reveal, analyse and contest continuing inequalities between them. It was therefore at first a great relief to find that in the world of time-use studies men are men and women are women, with hardly a shifting signifier or fluctuating identity in sight. It has also been refreshing to find that, in contrast to my own background in politics departments, the analysis of sex differences is central to much work on time use, rather than marginalised as ‘something for the girls’. Nevertheless, as discussed in the next section, I think there are a number of problems involved in any comparison of the activities of men and women, which time-use studies have only infrequently addressed (for a recent attempt to balance the need to discuss women and men in the context of power relationships without losing sight of the fluid nature of gender and the variability of women’s experience, see Silva, 2002).

### ‘Women’ v ‘men’

#### *Which women, which men?*

In the first place, any study which simply compares ‘women’ and ‘men’ is abstracting sex differences from other social groupings and begging the question of which women and men we are talking about. There is a danger of assuming that women and men are unitary groups, and that sex overrides other sources of identity and experience. In practice, this can mean that researchers equate their own perceptions and priorities with those of their entire sex, losing sight of a range of experiences or marginalising these as ‘different’. A sign of privilege is the ability to treat particular experiences as

representative or 'normal'. While men have tended to do this as a sex, treating themselves as the standard against which women should be measured, the same has also been true of women who are white, middle class, able bodied, heterosexual, married and at particular stages in the life cycle. For example, some nineteenth century feminists complained that women were confined to the home and treated as frail creatures in need of male protection; as the former slave, Sojourner Truth famously declaimed, she was strong not weak, and abused rather than protected by men, but 'ain't I a woman?' (quoted in Bryson, 2003:39).

The 'normalising' of particular experiences may lie behind the tendency of much time use research to focus on the domestic division of labour between heterosexual couples. Although this is clearly important for the ability of many women to participate in employment or politics, it is based on a rather dated model of family life which loses sight of lone parent households, people living on their own and same-sex partners. It is also more relevant to the experiences of white families in the UK and the USA than to Afro-Caribbean or African-American families, which are significantly less likely to include a male partner. In order to avoid misrepresentation, such studies should therefore recognise their limitations, and the ways in which 'race', class and other structured inequalities may fracture or override patterns, experiences or identities based on sex.

### *Beyond dichotomy*

The classification of the population into two sexes forms the basis of our legal as well as our cultural identity, making 'sex' in many ways much easier for researchers to handle than categories based on class or 'race'. At the most basic level, the majority of the population can easily identify themselves as male or female, and do not see such classification as politically problematic. However, it is important to remember that the idea that we are all either male or female is essentially a fiction imposed on a much messier reality, in which even anatomical sex differences take the form of a continuum rather than an absolute and dichotomous division.

Some recent feminist theorists have argued that, rather than thinking in terms of men/women, male/female and masculine/feminine, we should explore the ways in which the interaction between biological sex, sexual orientation and other attributes



and modes of behaviour throws up a multiplicity of genders. Others see gender not as a natural outcome of biology or even as something that is socially conferred, but as something that one *does*, an *act* that requires repeated performances of gender-appropriate behaviour and that can never be finally secured. As such, gender is essentially precarious and has to be constantly reaffirmed, giving rise to the notion of ‘doing gender’.

### **‘Doing gender’**

Some have used this notion to explain patterns of time use, particularly the domestic division of labour. It is argued that people are in effect making statements about their gender at the same time as performing other tasks: 'her doing the laundry and his fixing the light switch not only produces clean clothes and a lit room, they also produce a reaffirmation of gender roles' (Blumberg, 1991:20. See also West and Zimmerman, 1991 and, on caring roles, Bubeck, 1995:160)). From this perspective, men’s reluctance to clean the house does not stem from an inherent dislike of the task, but from the threat that its performance might pose to their masculine identity. Brines has drawn on such arguments to account for the finding that in US households where women earn more than their male partner, or in which he is unemployed, men’s contribution to housework is particularly low: she argues that such men are compensating for the loss of the masculinity associated with the male breadwinner role: ‘It appears that by doing less housework, economically dependent husbands also “do gender”’ (Brines, 1994:652). However, the attributes associated with masculinity are themselves liable to change, and it seems likely that in more egalitarian societies it is increasingly possible for men to perform caring work without loss of masculinity – hence the finding that UK fathers spend significantly more time with their children in households where women are the main earners (O’Brien and Shemilt, 2003). As discussed below, issues around gender identity may also affect the reporting of activities as much as or even more than their performance.

### Unreliable witnesses

It is quite widely acknowledged that studies of time use based on surveys can be misleading and inaccurate. At the most basic level, they are often demonstrably wrong

in that respondents report a level of activity that adds up to more than 24 hours a day (Gershuny, 2000). Mis-reporting may be motivated by self-interest, and we should be particularly suspicious of surveys carried out by employers, as workers are likely to believe that their answers will affect future employment plans. More frequently, inaccuracies are likely to reflect poor memory and the subjective nature of our sense of time passing. They may also reflect a conscious or subconscious desire to conform to social expectations. As discussed above, this includes expectations of appropriate gender behaviour and means that it may be difficult to disentangle genuine changes in behaviour from changes in gender norms. For example, when surveys report that Portuguese men spend much less time on housework than Swedish men, this may involve some under-reporting of housework by the former<sup>2</sup> and over-reporting by the latter. Gender expectations may also mean that men are more likely than women to over-report their hours in paid employment, and the continuing belief in the importance of fathers' breadwinning role (see Hatter et al, 2002) may have affected the survey findings on which claims about the excessive hours worked by UK fathers discussed at the beginning of this paper were based.

Many who recognise the potential shortcomings of survey evidence see time diaries as more accurate. However, it is not clear that all problems of mis-reporting are resolved by the diary method. Even when the respondent is guaranteed anonymity and completes the diary entirely on their own, the knowledge that it is going to be seen by someone else is likely to have some impact on behaviour. This is particularly likely for research conducted on behalf of employers, such as the transparency review taking place in UK universities<sup>3</sup>. More generally, the impact of keeping a time diary is likely to parallel that of someone who is required to write down everything they eat for a week before going on a diet, and who finds that the very act of knowing they must write it down acts as a constraint on normal eating patterns. In a society in which women are expected to be responsible for home and family and 'real men' are not, it

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<sup>2</sup> In informal discussion after one presentation at the 2002 IATUR conference, one participant commented that the one thing that Portuguese men would never do was hang washing out on the balcony, because this would be a shameful public admission that they were doing 'women's work'. A Canadian participant also said that he knew men who regularly vacuumed – but who ducked behind the sofa when he could be seen through the window.

<sup>3</sup> This requires university lecturers to complete a 24 hour time diary for 3 randomly selected weeks, recording activities under the general headings of administration, teaching, research and 'private' activities. My impression is that many lecturers simply invent plausible diaries because this is quicker than keeping an accurate record, while others deliberately overstate their hours of work or time spent on particular activities.

is plausible to expect some modification in behaviour for the diary period to maximise conformity to accepted gender roles, while in less divided societies men may subconsciously exaggerate their egalitarian credentials and domestic involvement.

The inaccuracies produced by gender expectations is likely to be further exaggerated by the problems of simultaneous activity discussed earlier, although the direction of any resulting bias is likely to be complex. For example, men in a 'traditionally gendered' society men be less likely than women to report childcare as one of a number of activities; they may however be more likely to report 'passive babysitting' as an activity if this is an unusual responsibility, while women may see this as too obvious to mention.

None of this means that findings are meaningless, and 'common sense' tells us that there is likely to be a sound basis to such frequently reported findings as the gradual convergence in time use between women and men in the Scandinavian nations. However, once again I think it important to remain cautious, and to be aware that we may be gaining information about expectations and perceptions as well as actual behaviour.

### Conclusions

Many of the concerns which I have raised in this paper have been thoroughly discussed by time-use researchers. However, my impression is that while writers frequently wrestle with them at a theoretical level, they do not always fully follow through their implications. I believe that we can learn an enormous amount from time-use studies. I also believe that we will learn more if we understand that they can never deliver a final 'truth'.

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