Do occupations have their own time?

Findings of a pilot study on time cultures as exemplified by midwives, artists, site managers, and tram drivers

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Introduction

"We have different points on the route, when I drive by, the unit compares with the master computer how sharp we are running, plus one or minus one or plus zero in minutes. After a while you don't need a watch any more." (tram driver)

"Actually there aren't any time stipulations. You can't plan a birth. The kids come when they want, there's nothing you can do about it." (midwife)

"You have to figure out what's important at a given moment and what is less important and divide up your time on that basis." (site manager)

The quotes from the replies by the respondents to survey questions about the way they experience time show that their work requires each of them to treat time differently. Whereas the procedures in some gainful occupations are highly synchronised and strict observance is closely supervised, in other occupations such as that of the midwife they seem to be freer, almost indefinite and so open that one has difficulty organising one's own time, as another midwife said. At the same time there are occupations that can be described with reference to time as "time dividers" because those working in such occupations try to organise their time and that of their subordinates as effectively as possible so as to attain their own goal. "... keep the times as short as possible to get things done. Just get as much done as possible in a given time." (site manager) (Schapfel-Kaiser 2008, p 262)

But in this treatment of time in an occupation, times come into play that do not have their origin in the occupational activities. Thus the circumstances of one's personal life, one's own wishes for the future, and also the social function of the occupational frame of reference (transport system, health system) also have an influence on the way time is experienced, as does the overall social and cultural context. These different manifestations of time and their effect are examined with reference to midwives, tram drivers, site managers and artists in a recently completed doctoral thesis funded by the BIBB (The doctoral thesis was accepted at the Darmstadt Technical University and the formal advisor was Prof. Dr. Josef Rützel of the Institute for Occupational Pedagogy. The second advisor was the time researcher Prof. Dr. Karlheinz A. Geißler of the University of Munich)

The decisive questions were:
Are there different forms of time in occupations or is time as standardised universal time the only defining time?

Is it influenced by cultures and ambient conditions

Do occupations have their own time culture which determines the concept of time of those practicing the occupation in and outside of their employment?

How does time enter into the occupations differently?

Devoting oneself to the phenomena of different manifestations of time in various occupations can be done in two ways. One can let the people involved report on their experience and thus obtain an opinion that can then be underpinned through the application of the surveying and assessment methods of social science. (The results derived from that are summarised in the following section.)

But it is also possible to approach the phenomenon of time and uncover the emergence of difference on the basis of existing knowledge in philosophy, history and the social sciences:

Although in our everyday thinking time at first seems the same to everyone, as a normal phenomenon that can be measured by a clock, studied and compared, when examined more closely it becomes increasingly diffuse, even seems to vanish, changes its form and becomes ever harder to grasp, because "All our perceptions of ourselves and the world are conveyed through the way we imagine time, the way we explain it, use it, fill it." (Rifkin 1990, pp. 9 f.)

This relatively recent phenomenon of the penetration of time into all the niches of our life seems to us to be a normal part of nature, the fifth dimension of our lives. "It is an aspect of social development that no one planned or deliberately brought about. (...) We have slipped into an omnipresent sense of time. It has become a part of our personality." (Elias 1982, p. 146). As Norbert Elias aptly indicates here, this has not always been the way time is experienced.

If one goes back in the cultural history of time, one will perceive time as a social construct that has no significance and no name as long as the life-worlds in simple societies are largely identical (Hall 1959). Appointments are made in connection with natural processes - "when the sun goes down" - and no clear time scheduling is applied to arrangements extending into the future and the past. Instead, past and future are components of myths and thus directly interwoven with the present, as we still find today in other cultures (Wendt 1985; Levine 1997)

The need for a more intensive preoccupation with time and thus for its reification only emerges when more complex activities require more long-term planning and the division of labour. From that point on, time penetrates into more short-term processes on the basis of the observance of the course of planets as calendars and by means of water, hour glasses and sundials (Wendt 1993). But this does not happen in the same way in all social spheres; the clock, as a reified symbol that simply establishes a relationship between one movement and another (Böhme 1974), at first just determines the irrigation times for fields and speaking time in the Senate and thus limits time periods in the spirit of equitable distribution.

Along with this, regionally divergent, religion-shaped concepts of time develop that accord different preponderance to past, present and future (Schapfel-Kaiser 2008, chapter 2). In the beginning knowledge of time is limited to the ruling elite and used for forming the cultural identity of peoples and nations and for centralising control of complex activities. This will be clear if one thinks of the large buildings in Babylon and Sumer. The Hebrews also have a special position with regard to time. As a people without a space, they created an identity-forming "sanctum in time" by establishing the Sabbath (Schmitz 1993). Thus in some social spheres (agriculture, education, health) time remains more closely coupled with the rhythm of
nature and in others relating to trade and transport is directed more towards visualising the future and planning temporal processes in relation to that, while social spheres can be found that seem to be "exempted", such as the preservation of cultural folklore, religion and art.

Studies of the history, philosophy and sociology of time indicate that social subdivisions have developed as "subsystems" with their own times. With the decline of the Middle Ages this partialisation of society leads to the disintegration of unifying concepts of time and goes so far as to enable subdivisions of society to shape their temporal relationships themselves. "The functional differentiation allows such extensive subsystem autonomy that the blueprints for action and the goals of the subsystems can no longer be integrated into the society as a whole. That is, several realities and times co-exist in one society and one present." (Bergmann 1981, p.201, as well to see at Luhmann 1968)

If one conceives of occupations as constructs that turn those practicing the occupations into "agents of the time of a subsystem" of society, that explains why these "agents" are integrated into the time concepts of the overall system to different degrees and in different ways and form time concepts "of their own" that are typical of their occupation.

**Occupation time and parallel times - Simultaneity of different demands**

In the present study, the most representative possible gainful occupations were selected for the different forms of time in occupations which, as illustrated, can be explained on the basis of historical development and the social function assigned to them. (Whereby it must be admitted that some assessments were not quite accurate, especially as far as the tram drivers are concerned. Prior to the study I assumed that they were largely geared to a linear time perspective. It turned out, however, that their activities were characterised much more markedly by rhythmic repetition, because the routes, schedules and processes were recurrent, so that clock time in the classical sense did not dominate as assumed.)

- The midwives stand for occupations that deal with natural timelines, that is, the form of time that is (still) bound to the rhythms of nature.
- The tram drivers stand for occupations that are tied to clock time and whose procedures are strictly synchronised and provided with little scope for temporal variation.
- The site managers represent those occupations that visualise the future in that they plan and carry out projects and integrate themselves and other people's time into the planned project time.
- And finally, the artists represent occupations that have a strong personal time orientation, gear their activities to their own feelings and to the time of the materials they work with.

As subjects of their action, however, those who practice the professions are linked not only with the "occupation time" but also with a personal biography and the concomitant experience and intentions for the future. Thus they are at the same time "agents of their own time". In addition they have to co-ordinate different times in which they are integrated with their lives: the schedules of public transit, TV programmes, the children's school and supervision times, the opening hours of canteens, businesses and offices etc. "With the coexistence of times in a highly differentiated society, the individual faces a wide variety of pressures to harmonise their own time with the demands of the institutionalised time of others." (Nowotny
Even the preceding incomplete list clearly shows how much dealing with clock time is a precondition for successfully mastering day-to-day life in an industrial nation. If one wishes to study the differences in time in occupations, the relationship of individuals to different times and their own life becomes significant. The significance of life and death and whether life itself is seen as something malleable as in Rammstedt's concept (1975) of the "linear open future" affects the relationship between time and occupation. For that reason, the study dealt with not just the experience of time in the occupation but biographical developments and one's dealings with time outside occupational activity as well.

Figure 1: Factors influencing the subjective experience of time in the occupation

Figure 1 shows the different factors influencing the experience of time in occupations. In addition to a systematic evaluation of the interviews in terms of this structure, and reflecting it, a theory of each "occupation time" was developed on the basis of a detailed analysis of selected passages from interviews relating to occupational action (Schapfel-Kaiser 2008, pp 165-206). If one looks at the interview results in the occupations, one sees, by way of example, the following phenomena:

**Tram drivers**

Their career backgrounds differ and seem to depend greatly on coincidence and not so much on their calculated planning. Their own lives are therefore seen more as determined by outside forces rather than as capable of being influenced by their own decisions. Parallels appear outside their occupation with regard to their hobbies, which they have tended and still tend to pursue alone. The small number of cases leaves it unclear, however, whether their passion for highly structured gardening work is coincidental or owing to the need to make an additional contribution to feeding the family or the urge to have a clearly structured task in their leisure time as well (some of the statements suggest the third possibility).

"Everything is planned almost down to the last minute, even during the holidays. I don't have any time! ... No, I wouldn't say that if I didn't mean it. Everything is planned down to the last detail in my case." (ibid. p. 253)

Their identification with their occupation is pronounced to varying degrees. If one looks at the sphere of occupational action of the tram drivers one finds they have very little scope for creativity in their day-to-day work because the time connections between the "tram system" and the surrounding world are to a large extent regulated. (One can see the tram journey as a closed space that one enters and then must comply with its rules.)
of the tram drivers resides precisely in their adapting their own procedures to prescribed time patterns that recur over and over in almost the same form. Punctuality is their central goal and they strive to remain calm and courteous in "difficult times" and to take the interests of their customers (the passengers) into account as best they can. For them, the experience of time seems like flowing into the given requirements, just as their career path seems like acquiescence in the opportunities arising. Time here is not "their time" but "someone else's time", existing circumstances exiting from which goes hand in hand with rediscovering one's own time.

Midwives

Few parallels can be identified in their biographies, except for the similarity in the orientation of their hobbies towards spending time together with friends without claims to product-related benefits. But such hobbies lose significance with the start of employment (plus the fact that family life "leaves no time for it" as well). All midwives have a strong tendency to identify themselves with their occupation. At an early point in their lives they declared practicing the occupation to be their goal and geared their personal life projects to it, in some cases even changing their places of residence for that purpose.

In their occupation, time is flexibly placed at the disposal of the requirements of the moment. They consider it reasonable to let the natural process of childbirth structure time. However, their own procedures cannot be planned and create a state of tension between having to put aside their own needs on the one hand and having to exude calmness and level-headedness as supporters of a valuable process on the other. They give their time to life and give life the time it needs and in doing so they put something of a strain on their own possibilities. "... so you run from one woman to the next and then on top of that you have to apologise.... I can't ever organise my own time." (ibid. p.223)

It seems to be a peculiarity that in this field of social action no time demands are set in terms of duration because it is accepted that the length of time a birth takes can vary and the efficiency of a midwife is measured in terms of qualitative and not quantitative variables, i.e. the successful course of childbirth with as little damage to mother and child as possible. The midwives subordinate themselves to unplannability: "I always try not to let it show, although I never really have time for anything." (ibid. p. 244)

Site managers

They learn to schedule their own time and set themselves goals in their time at a remarkably early point in their life. Now they apply those skills in scheduling their time and that of others, set themselves goals, master the tool of long-term project planning and the partitioning of time in intermediate steps and target segments. Time is conceived as a line stretching into the future, and past time is reflected and thought of and interpreted to a large extent as capable of being shaped.

Using their own expertise and their hierarchic function they build up resistance to outside demands on the time they have scheduled and enforce their own time schedules. From the perspective of system theory they represent a function in which the time of a segment of society is controlled and therefore the time logic that applies there is internalised and at the same time adaptation to the times of other social segments is undertaken, as in the case of the subcontracted supply of building materials, the time of business partners or the logic of the supply of energy of another company.

They see their task as being able to use time as effectively as possible in terms of company goals or career goals. This objective takes up skills which they developed early and which
they developed for the purpose of learning to tell time in their childhood and in connection with the requirement imposed on them to keep an eye on "their time". We also see it in their achievement-orientatedness in their hobbies, in which, however, they have sometimes lost track of time. To some extent they continue to pursue those hobbies, and to some extent the hobbies had an influence on their vocational orientation.

For effective use of time, it is incumbent upon them to make decisions about when things can or cannot be accelerated through greater work input, when punctuality is necessary and when not, and when it is better to slow processes down instead. They know from their experience that speed does not always guarantee that the goal will be attained early and successfully. If one looks at their identification with their occupation, it seems that despite purposeful qualification pathways, including pathways with professional content, they can conceive of doing something "quite different" and working in a management position in a different industry.

Their life and career planning seems to be very conscious and considered. They see themselves not just as shapers of their time in the occupation but as shapers of their lives outside the occupation as well. "I set myself certain targets at the beginning of the year or at the beginning of the day or at the beginning of a building project and then I actually try to drive myself as well on that because I want to know, Can it be done? Can I do that?" (ibid. p. 256)

Artists
While the artist's profession is accompanied by the image of a highly individual personality, one was surprised by the many parallels that there were in the biographical interviews within the "artists' group". They mostly devoted themselves to their hobbies alone and where possible they avoided organised recreational events.

Figure 2: Phenomena of the experience of time in their occupation among artists

It is common to all the respondents that they have geared their entire life project to their occupational goals of being able to work as artists. They live alone, without families, and organise their time according to the dynamics of their creativity. They are limited only by the working hours in their side jobs (if necessary to make a living) or sleeping and eating. "I write as long as I feel a creative flow. Such effusions can last for several hours. Mostly sleep and my side job are what determine the rhythm of my work." (ibid. p. 264)

If time constraints arise in their occupation in connection with models or differing time
stipulations of their clients, they perceive them as quality-diminishing and unpleasant. They unanimously describe phenomena of "being outside of clock time" when they "lose themselves" in their acts of artistry, plunge into the happenings of the moment. For them these phenomena are inseparable from artistic performance because the time for art cannot be scheduled but requires the ability to wait for the right moment. "Patience is just the nicest time to understand something without learning." (ibid. p.267)

This also shows the parallels with the consumption of the artistic act, which takes place almost entirely outside of a time link with another social sphere. The viewer or reader is free to decide when to take in a work of art. In that respect, personal time, when art absorbs their entire being, is the decisive parameter for the artist. The elevated status connected with freedom to dispose of their time goes hand in hand with a large degree of dependence on the market, which decides whether they can realise their life projects or will have to switch to other activities to make a living. "What I want to achieve in my work is that some day they will understand me and be able to afford to support me so that I can live my life." (ibid. p.236)

**Parallels, differences and effects of time in occupations**

When one detaches oneself from the phenomena attributed to the individual occupations one sees parallels and differences between the occupations. If a synchronising function is attached to a particular extent to certain segments of society, standardised time (universal time) acquires greater importance in them. If they have fewer connections with other segments or are characterised by greater degrees of freedom in synchronising time, the importance of clock time decreases.

**Figure 3: Similarities and differences between occupations**

When we look at parallels and differences in the occupations studied, we see that both the managers and the artists are characterised by their ability to implement their personal goals in time and in part to create something new in their time. Thus they are oriented towards a future
not yet attained and try to shape the present time for that purpose. In the case of the managers, a linear time concept is dominant, based on a clearly outlined future, for the purposes of which plans of action are drafted over and over and adapted to the prevailing circumstances. The artists, on the other hand, are oriented towards the present moment, not sub-steps and a clear product goal, because the latter materialises only in the artistic process. While the artists concentrate on one act, the managers always have their eyes on several things at the same time. We find this simultaneity of several processes in the statements of the midwives as well.

The midwives are like the tram drivers in that they devote their time to the goals (or the benefit) of others, reaching a destination on time or a birth without complications. Thus they both display a strong present-orientatedness, involving no far-reaching projects for the future and few references to what is past. Their vocational activity thus seems static and characterised by the constant repetition of the same acts and in the other case the constant repetition of unplannable orders of events. They can be seen as supporters or "guarantors" of dynamic processes they do not control.

What the tram drivers and the managers have in common is that they have tasks that have a special synchronising function in terms of segments of society. Thus universal time in the form of clock time necessarily acquires paramount importance in both occupations, distinguishing them clearly from the other two occupations which have few links with other segments or are characterised by high degrees of freedom in synchronising time.

These different effects of occupations, worked out here only in part, show that "time competence", that is, forms of dealing with time, are developed in different forms. If tram drivers and midwives succeed in adapting to the given circumstances in terms of time, they at the same time develop inferior capabilities of imposing their personal time on others. Those very capabilities of integrating oneself into social time and acting there in support of others are learned by artists to a lesser degree and only spottily by managers. While the artists have adjusted their life projects to that and not established families, the site managers report of the difficulty they have in realising the time demands that they place on themselves as fathers, and say that this involves conflicts that arise in particular when they have "free time". "That is ... when you have too much stress and then suddenly everything is gone and then when things calm right down again, that is really bad." (ibid. p. 258)

**Prospects**

The findings submitted in conjunction with the pilot study, however self-critical one must be in assessing their representativeness (ibid. pp. 281 and 204 ff), do permit certain new conclusions:

- The study results submitted underpin the hypothesis that vocational action still provides an important contribution to identity formation and hence that occupation as a social construct has not lost its social and individual integration function. In the debate on the Dual System and its further development this function has been repeatedly and prematurely denied as an ideology. On the occupation concept, cf. the good overview in (Kraus 2006) and (Büchter 2005) on current criticism of the Dual System in particular (Baethge, Solga, Wieck 2007) and (Rauner 2008) on feminist criticism of the male vocational concept (Paul-Kohlhoff 2008)
- In fact it turns out that in view of the accelerated erosion of social reference systems (family, religion, local clubs etc.), or in case of the present survey, the collapse of the GDR, the significance of occupational identity has increased. The same thing is
stressed by Richard Senett in his recent study with regard to the occupation: "Most people want to believe that their life is more than a series of unconnected events. Well-constructed institutions respond to these needs, ...." (2008, p. 353, cf. also Dostal 2005)

- The study illustrates the different demands on "personal organisation of time" and makes it clear as well that the choice of an occupation is accompanied by different possibilities not only of generating income but also of learning to deal with freedom of action and shaping one's own biography. In this connection the recent economic pilot scheme of the BIBB: "Kompetenzen für die eigenständige und flexible Gestaltung der Berufslaufbahn - Flexkom", which proclaims biographical organizational competence to be the goal of initial vocational education and training (http://www.flexkom.info/index2.htm), and on the critical reflection of biographical forms of learning in vocational training (Schapfel-Kaiser1998 and 2003)

- These competences are becoming increasingly significant because the new type of "labour power entrepreneur" and "shaper of one's own biography" places new demands on all young people, who have to be enabled to place themselves in a reflexive relationship to their own life and their occupational actions in order to master that "modulation of one's own competence biography" as Philipp Gonon said in Zurich 2008 (Voss/Pongratz 2004 and Unger 2009).

- The present study shows that despite the wide propagation of a common everyday understanding of time in the form of clock time and calendar time, occupations as social constructs with different personal life-worlds produce different ideals of time and require different skills of "being in time". When occupations make different demands on "time competences", experiences with time can also be drawn upon to support a better choice of occupation as well as make it possible to improve the choice of personnel in work systems.

- Ultimately it becomes clear that dealing with time is a theme for occupational qualification processes themselves. In qualification processes, making time in the occupation the object of self-reflection seems to be just as useful as interchange within occupation groups about how to deal with time in the occupation. Studies in some occupations indicate that it is a special occupational requirement that decisively influences the quality of the work done.

The debate on the connection between time and occupation, work and life has only just begun. The pilot study presented here is only a first step in uncovering the connection between time and occupation. It could be extended to other occupations that make for a better comparison because they have comparable qualification pathways in terms of duration and organisational form and are more representative with reference to the different occupations in our society. At the same time, a larger number of cases could work out the influence of age and gender with reference to the experience of time, which was largely disregarded in the present work. In addition, a more developed study could usefully be supported by examples of participatory observations that would make it possible to align actual performance with the statements of those interviewed and thus obtain a better empirical base. Further, empirically founded research work is needed.

In conclusion let me say that the question of time also raises questions of principle. Time is inseparable from life in general, no more and no less. Separating it from life in its entirety leads to the attempt to functionalise time and thus to the instrumental rational ordering of life. Time then becomes dominated, controlled and partitioned. Behind that lies an image of the times in which life is dominated, controlled and divided into processes. And perhaps one's
own life itself is dominated, divided up and controlled. It becomes clear that the very capability of doing that is a precondition for sharing in social life and is developed to different extents in the different occupations.

But this always means running the risk that in the drive to "optimise the way of dealing with time" the questions of the meaning of that on whose behalf the dominating, dividing and controlling is done will no longer be asked. Answering that question takes time, leisure time, perhaps time shared with others.

"But time stands for love; the thing I give time to I give love to; violence is quick."

(Horkheimer 1952)

References


