

93. Time Poverty

Definition of the Term

While material affluence has increased over the last decade, time affluence has declined (Giurge, Whillans & West, 2020; Williams, Masuda & Tallis, 2016). In 2018, 80 percent of employed US residents reported that they “never had enough time” – an increase of 10 percent since 2011 (Whillans, 2019; Rheault, 2011). Not having enough time is a pervasive feeling that affects people all over the globe (Hamermesh, 2019), including those in low-income brackets through to the wealthiest (Giurge et al., 2020). These societal developments have led to a body of research studying the concept of “time poverty,” which refers to the *acute feeling of having too much to do and not enough time to do it* (Goodin et al., 2005; Giurge et al., 2020; Perlow, 1999; Rudd, 2019; Trupia & Mogilner, 2023).

Recognizing time as a basic resource and “currency of life” (Krueger, 2009; Mogilner et al., 2018), the term “time poverty” borrows from the idea of income poverty (Williams et al., 2016). Various terms “time scarcity,” “time famine,” “time stress,” “time pressure,” “time crunch,” “busyness,” or “time constraints” in the literature (Williams et al., 2016), the concept of time poverty has been investigated using two main approaches. Some scholars have examined it by considering the *objective* amount of time people spend on specific activities during the day to judge how much discretionary time a person has leftover (As, 1978; Poortman, 2005). Other scholars have instead focused on time poverty as a perceptual phenomenon (Lehto, 1998; Zuzanek, 2004), measuring people’s *subjective* sense of how much (or little) available time they have in the day. This latter approach accommodates findings showing that people’s reported time poverty can diverge from objective time use. For example, people paradoxically feel *less* time poor when they spend some of their time helping others (Mogilner, Chance, & Norton, 2012). Owing to the greater implications for policy and societal well-being, as well as consumer behavior and outcomes, it is the *subjective* experience – even if not absolutely reflective of an objective time deficit – that captures how current research conceptualizes time poverty.

Key Findings and Insights

Prior research on time poverty has examined its antecedents, consequences, and how to alleviate it. Unfortunately, very little is still known about its antecedents. From a theoretical perspective, a comprehensive literature review by Giurge et al. (2020) proposed the key drivers of time poverty as (1) *societal*, given the acceleration of daily life due to modern technology; (2) *organizational*, given the nature of work becoming more complex and knowledge-intensive; (3) *institutional*, due to increased bureaucratic time burdens; and (4) *psychological*, due to people valuing money over time. From an empirical perspective, however, few of these potential antecedents have been systematically tested. One promising line of inquiry has involved the role of goals. For instance, research has shown that when people perceive greater conflict between goals that compete for their time (e.g., parenting versus working), or when people are closer to achieving a task-related goal, they feel they have less available time (Etkin, Evangelidis, & Aaker, 2015; Jhang & Lynch, 2015).

A larger body of research has sought to identify the psychological and behavioral consequences of being time poor. Prior studies have shown that time poverty negatively affects people’s subjective well-being (Kasser & Sheldon, 2009; Sharif, Mogilner, & Hershfield, 2021), and is associated with worse mental health and higher levels of reported depression, stress, and emotional exhaustion (Roxburgh, 2004). Time poverty has also been linked to reduced physical health, affecting insomnia, fatigue, obesity, and high blood pressure (Yan et al., 2003). People who are time poor are less likely to spend time on sports and exercise (Kalenkoski & Hamrick, 2013) and more likely to delay visiting a doctor when sick (Vuckovic, 1999). There is also evidence of negative interpersonal consequences. People who are time poor are less willing to slow down and help others (Mogilner et al., 2012), and communicating one’s state of busyness is misperceived as boasting, which has negative interpersonal consequences (Trupia, Mogilner, & Engeler, 2023).

In the consumer domain, time poverty has been shown to affect how people process information and make consumption decisions. For instance, when under time pressure

(e.g., have unlimited time versus 15 seconds to make a decision), consumers process information faster and tend to focus on the most important attributes (Zur & Breznitz, 1981). When people have less available time in the day, they are more likely to consume fast food (Kalenkoski & Hamrick, 2013). When consumers feel time poor, they are more impatient and are, therefore, willing to pay more to expedite shipping when shopping online (Etkin et al., 2015).

Marketers have leveraged these societal trends. For example, Dunkin Donuts positioned its food as “the food for a busy lifestyle,” Roomba marketed its automated vacuum cleaner with the slogan “more family time, less cleaning time,” and Starship encouraged students to use their autonomous robots – which deliver groceries, pizza, and coffee around the campuses of major universities – to “save time” (Bergman, 2021).

Given its negative consequences, researchers have started to focus on how to *alleviate* time poverty. One key finding in this stream of literature is that delegating time-consuming tasks positively impacts people’s happiness by reducing their feelings of time poverty (Whillans et al., 2017). For instance, in one study, people were given \$40 to spend on either a time-saving purchase (e.g., cab ride) or a material purchase (e.g., boots). Participants who spent their windfall on time-saving products felt greater life satisfaction than those who spent the money on material products (Whillans et al., 2017; see also Kasser & Sheldon, 2009). This suggests that “buying oneself time” through outsourcing specific tasks is a viable way to improve well-being.

In the marketing literature, researchers have explored consumers’ adoption of autonomous products to help with people’s household chores, such as robot vacuum cleaners or cooking machines (De Bellis & Johar, 2020; De Bellis, Johar, & Poletti, 2023). Although consumers still appear reluctant to adopt automated products to which they can delegate tasks (e.g., De Bellis et al., 2023), this nascent body of research has been accumulating evidence that these products help save time and, therefore, serve as a potential remedy for time poverty.

Outlook

Although studied across different academic fields, the concept of “time poverty” has not been well-defined or consistently measured. Scholars have used myriad terms, definitions, and measurement scales for time poverty, making it difficult for future research to have a solid foundation on which to build (Giurge et al., 2020). As Williams et al. (2016, p. 1) put it: “The many ways time poverty is conceptualized and measured across studies has limited its adoption.” Thus, future research should establish a consistent definition for time poverty and empirically validate a reliable measure (Trupia & Mogilner, 2023).

In consumer behavior, research on autonomous products has primarily focused on the barriers to adoption (De Bellis et al., 2023) and shown that “buying time” makes people happier (Whillans et al., 2017). Future research would benefit from understanding what people are doing with the time they save and how consumption patterns change as a function of adopting “time-saving” products, including the use of generative AI in their daily life and work. While the consequences of time poverty on people’s happiness and well-being are well-known, the effects of time poverty on consumer-related behaviors are less clear. For instance, who are the most time poor segments of consumers? How do these consumers make trade-offs between saving time, price, quality, and quantity? Do these consumers buy more or less frequently? Moreover, do they end up differently satisfied with their purchases?

Finally, there are many unanswered questions on the best or most effective ways to alleviate time poverty so as to improve consumer well-being. For instance, although gaining available time through time-saving purchases has been shown to improve subjective well-being (Whillans et al., 2017), having too much available time has been linked to lower subjective well-being (Sharif et al., 2021). With the definition of time poverty including both having too much to do as well as not enough time to do it, the question remains whether consumers would prefer having “less to do” or “more time.” Which is a more effective route at reducing people’s feelings of time poverty and stress? And are there systematic differences across consumers on these effects?

We hope that this entry helps spur future research investigating this important construct.

MARIA GIULIA TRUPIA, ISABELLE ENGELER
AND CASSIE MOGILNER HOLMES

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Related Terms

Time scarcity
Time affluence
Time windfalls
Time stress
Time saving

Other References/Further Recommended Literature

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