



Busyness as the badge of honour  
for the new *superordinate* working class

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## ABSTRACT

There is a paradoxical relationship between, on one hand, the observation that, in general, people feel busier now than they did previously, and on the other, the evidence (from time diary data) that societies have somewhat less, or at least overall, *no more* work than they had previously. But the connections between amounts of work and feelings of busyness are in fact neither direct nor simple. In what follows, a line of theoretical argument from Thorsten Veblen, and dating from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, concerning the social construction of leisure, is redeployed, in the context of the changed economic circumstances at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, to the construction of feelings of busyness. Work, not leisure, is now the signifier of dominant social status. Evidence from three UK time diary studies (1961, 1983/4 and 2001) shows that over this period the Veblen-type negative relationship between social status (as indicated by human capital) and work time is reversed—high human capital is now associated with longer hours of work. This is *consistent* with the Veblen-derived theoretical line; however a complete demonstration of the theoretical position would require historical evidence on both time allocation and feelings of busyness for the same individuals, which is not available for the UK.

## NON-TECHNICAL SUMMARY

There are three approaches to the resolution of the paradox of busyness:

- The first is through social differentiation. Though the aggregate of societies' work times may have reduced, their distribution may have become more polarised, so that some sorts of people are now genuinely busier (hence the *relative* growth in “busy” versus “not-busy” feelings).
- The second is that feeling busy does not necessarily relate solely to “work”, however broadly defined. A growth in the intensity of leisure consumption could also be the cause of busy feelings.
- The third is that the meaning of “busyness” has changed in a systematic way: in what follows I argue that activity patterns that once signified low social status, now signify high status.

These three lines are not mutually inconsistent. Indeed the third argument may well be nested within a particular case of the first. In what follows I argue that the growth in the importance of “embodied capitals”—and particularly “human capital” (ie work skills saleable in the labour market)—relative to the ownership of financial capital or other productive assets, in the determination of life chances, may in turn change the implication of long hours of work for social status.

UK time use data for the period 1961-2001 do indeed indicate a reversal of the previously negative leisure/status gradient. They do not however show substantial evidence of increasing leisure density. The tentative conclusion is that the growth in *expressions* of “feeling busy” may be explained, not just by the growth of a new busy group, but also by the proposition that the assertion of “busyness” now reflects an aspiration to high social status.

## **Busyness as the badge of honour for the new *superordinate* working class**

### **1. On the rating of a subjective state.**

“Busyness” plainly relates to externally observable work or leisure activities, but nevertheless the state itself is entirely subjective. I will argue in what follows, that there may have been fundamental changes in the connection between the external circumstances of work and leisure and internal feelings of “busyness”. Through the last century there have been fundamental shifts in the relationship between the pattern of daily activities, and patterns of societal sub- and superordination. “Are you busy?” may have had a quite different meaning as addressed to an upwardly mobile member of the Victorian English or American middle classes, as compared to an office worker at the turn of the third millennium. Individuals’ representations of their states of “busyness” play an important, and changing, role in establishing their positions in the order of social stratification. A leisure class (and hence I presume *not busy*) at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century perhaps, but the dominant groups in the early 21<sup>st</sup> are in the most straightforward sense of the word, *workers*. I will suggest that, reflecting this fundamental shift in social structure, the social construction of “busyness” has also changed.

The problem addressed in this paper is a paradox. There is a well documented, cross-nationally consistent, historical growth of busy feelings through the last part of the twentieth century. But there is an equally well documented, long term, and very substantial growth in leisure time in pretty much every country for which we have appropriate evidence. There are in principle three general approaches to an explanation of this apparent contradiction.

The first relates to the observable changes in the allocation of time between work and leisure. It may be that, though *average* work time is declining, the work time (and hence feelings of “busyness”) of specific groups of people are moving differentially, so as to produce particular groups who are particularly susceptible to busy feelings. Thus Jacobs and Gerson 2004, p123 point to “the increasing time pressures facing dual earner couples, single mothers, employed parents” among others as explaining the increase in “time squeeze” perceptions. Similarly,

Bittman, 2004, pp154-157, entirely accepting the long term cross-national trend of increase in leisure time, points to the polarisation between household level unemployment on one side, and dual career couple households on the other, and identifies the growing size of the latter group as the reason for the ready and initially uncritical acceptance of Schor's original (1991) overworked American thesis. Bittman's particularly helpful contribution, which forms the background to this paper, is his combination of evidence of change in the aggregate of both paid and unpaid work within multiple job parent households as the key issue. Undoubtedly, taking this broad view of work, and despite the overall growth in leisure time, a growing number of households face a time squeeze.

The second approach, from Linder (1970), is that feelings of rush or "busyness" may relate, not to work, but to changes in the density of leisure. I discuss this line of argument in the next section.

A third approach to the resolution of the paradox, entirely consistent with the forgoing, involves, not the externally observable evidence of historical changes in work and leisure time, but a change in the way feelings of "busyness" are constructed out of these. In what follows, I first address some theoretical approaches which contribute to an understanding of this change, and then consider some evidence on the externally observable behaviour that might be expected to underlie the subjective rating of the phenomenon. What emerges is the hypothesis that the growth in busy feelings may in part reflect an increasingly positive view of "busyness", resulting from its association with the increasingly busy lifestyle of the most privileged groups in developed societies. The empirical part of this paper is brief and suggestive rather than conclusive. But it does provide a new perspective on the paradox, that certainly merits further investigation.

For the moment I will maintain "busyness" undefined, in a cage of quotes, but I get round to a definition by and by.

## 2. Some sociological and economic perspectives.

### the leisure class

Veblen's concern, in his too-little read classic *Theory of the Leisure Class*, is not the contrast between work and leisure, but between two altogether much less familiar concepts: "industry" and "exploit". Industry, in this context, is not a branch of production. The word is used in the abstract sense, of a quality of approach to specific daily activities. Industry implies a regular, unchanging, unimaginative, attachment to a routine or repetitive task, such as planting or weeding (or work on a factory production line), normally involving the transformation of some inanimate object through the moderate application of human strength. Exploit, by contrast, involves some form of conflict or competition with an animate, cunning, and possibly intelligent, agent. In the most primitive societies, Veblen tells us, there is at first a leisure *sex*; women are engaged in industry, which involves in this context, gathering or gardening, or the laborious preparation of the products of these activities, while men pursue wild animals for food, and gossip and gamble with their fellows. Hunting *is* a game, if a serious and dangerous one, and the contrast between the freedom of this male play and the constraining nature of female industrious labour, provides an initial model for relations of super- and subordination.

The agility and skill with weapons, gained from hunting, is readily redeployable to brigandage. Veblen describes the move from "primitive" societies to the "barbarian stage" as involving petty warfare in search of booty, in the form of food and captives, and his version of a class system now emerges in a nascent form, with slaves devoted to labour, and a superordinate class devoted to exploit and to exploitation. The men of the dominant class in the feudal system similarly deployed their own prowess in warfare, and also raised an intermediate cadet class, superior in status, modest in wealth, specifically tasked with practising strenuous warlike games—running, jumping, riding and the use of weapons—producing skills deployed at the behest of the dominant class to subject the serf class to industrious labour in exchange for "protection".

This deeply rooted linkage of superordination with exploit, and hence the conspicuous abstention from labour as an assertion of superior status, is the origin, in Veblen's account, of

the deployment of leisureliness as “the badge of honour” in his contemporary society. The inheritor class engaged in leisure pursuits analogous to the exploit of bygone days—hunting and athletic sports, unpaid participation in politics (i.e. gossip and gambling), scholarship or administration—as an assertion of its superordinate status. In the case of non-inheriting middle class men who had to work....at least their wives and servants could be maintained in “honorific and wasteful idleness”. Veblen’s best-known surviving conceptual innovation, “conspicuous consumption” relates to this upwardly mobile group which, in his original account, relied on the wasteful deployment of unnecessary goods and services by an idle retinue, expressly to disguise and distract from the shameful *busyness* of the master of the house.

At one level this could all be viewed as a dismissible cod-history of leisure. Is it really appropriate to view men in hunter-gatherer societies as leisured and women not? Were the non-employed wives of middle class men in the 19<sup>th</sup> century *genuinely* maintained in a conspicuously idle state, as Veblen suggests, or would they in fact have seen themselves as busy with good works and keeping up their social responsibilities? This would however lose a message of real importance about the social construction of the meaning of work in terms of the social order. Veblen’s Victorian superordinate class, for whom leisure was the badge of honour, considered “busyness” as quite anti-honorific. Labour, the reverse of leisure, and a *characteristic* of subordinate status, was, after all the *name* of the subordinate class. But would it still be appropriate so to characterise and name the least privileged part of our societies?

Veblen’s book is very firmly located at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The superordinate leisure class he was describing was disappearing even as he wrote about it. In what follows I consider two later lines of theoretical development, both of which derive directly from Veblen’s: “the harried leisure class” thesis, which suggests that leisure itself may cease to be leisurely; and “the superordinate working class” argument to the effect that conspicuous leisure has lost its association with high social position, and thus ceases to be “the badge of honour”. These imply that, even with no dominant leisure class, the underlying point of Veblen’s argument—that social position is signified through the representation of the activities of daily life—still works well at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **the *harried* leisure class**

Staffan Linder, another social scientist of Nordic extraction working in the US, constructed (in 1970) a marginalist model of the process of allocating time between work and leisure. He adopts the common economists' expectation that work and leisure are brought into balance at the point at which marginal utility from each is equal. This has two important implications.

The first is cross-sectional. The marginal utility of paid work can be estimated by the wage rate. People with higher wage rates will *ceteris paribus* choose longer hours of work, thus reversing the negative association discussed by Veblen. A more sophisticated version of the same argument comes from Gary Becker (1965) who conceptualises consumption as a process of "production of final satisfactions" in which purchased goods and services take on the roles of "capital and materials", with leisure time as "labour", and are all combined to produce final utilities. Becker then postulates alternative "consumption technologies", some requiring more purchased goods and services and less leisure time, some requiring fewer purchased inputs and more leisure time—respectively "good-intensive" and "time-intensive" approaches. Clearly those with higher wage rates can generate final utility more effectively by specialising in the goods intensive route, those with lower marginal wage rates, the time intensive. He has the same result as Linder: higher wage rates mean longer work hours.

The second implication of Linder's theory is historical: as productivity rises over time, and with it the wage rate—so the marginal utility of work increases over time. This has two alternative consequences. Either the utility of the marginal minute of consumption time remains unchanged, historically speaking—then as a result of the rising marginal value of paid work, work time might also be expected to increase. Or the marginal utility of leisure time must also increase.

This is the heart of Linder's book. He proposes that that a continually increased marginal utility of consumption time is achieved by combining each minute of leisure time with the deployment of ever more goods and services. In short: productivity growth is answered by what we might call (an unattractive neologism) *consumptivity* growth. The mechanism through which this is achieved is never spelt out explicitly. It may be that of Galbraith's *New Industrial State* in which vertically integrated manufacturing combines with a powerful

advertising industry to instil desires for new products into a compliant population, or that of Young and Willmott (1973) who quoting Linder, discuss the “marching column” of consumers, with each rank seeking to emulate the possessions of the rank immediately ahead of it—which, as Fred Hirsch (1976) observed, always fails since the next rank itself moved at the same speed.

The surprising result emerging from both Becker and Linder is that if working hours remain constant, any growth in real output per hour of production must be matched by a compensating growth in the extent of consumption per hour. The harrying of Linder’s title, reflects the ever-less-leisurely leisure of both rich and poor—necessitated not just by the micro-economic rationality of the ideal consumers in Galbraith’s and Becker’s and Linder’s models.. This is the world first described in a 1950s short story by the US science fiction writer Frederick Pohl: (“The Midas Plague”) in which consumers have a compulsory quota of consumption, in order to keep turning the wheels of industry. Whatever the mechanism, here is certainly one plausible explanation for growth in feelings of busyness: the increasingly high-pressure business (or “busyness”) of leisure.

### **the new superordinate working class**

The third line of theoretical argument has its starting point in Linder’s and Becker’s predictions that those with higher levels of earning power will choose longer hours of paid work time. This might be combined with a quite distinct theoretical proposition:, of the growing importance, indeed the primacy, of embodied capital as means of transmitting social position between generations. This has the effect of increasing the importance of paid work relative to leisure for those in privileged social positions.

By embodied capital I mean primarily what economists call “human capital”—accumulated skills directly marketable in the labour force—though I would also include social and cultural capital to the extent that, following the lines of Bourdieu’s discussion in *Distinction*, these also contribute to and interact with directly marketable skills to produce income and economic security. In fact these terms are all rendered problematical by the imprecision of the “capital” metaphor (e.g. real capital is depleted in use and depreciates over time, while embodied capital is enhanced whenever it is deployed, and appreciates over time). It would

be better to use Sen's (1999) term, economic *capability*. But irrespective of terminology, economic capabilities or embodied capital have risen in importance relative to the possession of fixed assets such as savings, shares, land and so on.

The argument needs to be put with some care. The issue cannot simply be decided on the basis of the ratio of investment-derived or rental income to labour income, nor by the number of *individuals* primarily dependent on investment as opposed to labour incomes—since, *inter alia* the period that concerns us has also seen a very considerable growth of fixed wealth in the form of pension funds and entitlements. It is rather that embodied capital has become increasingly important for establishing the economic positions of individuals at the top-end of the income distribution, and more specifically for the transmission of top-end social position between successive generations, *during a particular part of the life-course, the earlier adult years between the ages of, say, 20 and 50 years*.

There two reasons for this change: developments in production technologies which enhance individuals' ability to extract what Sorenson (2000) describes as additional “rent” from their economically salient work skills; and demographic change, specifically the increase in life expectancy which delays and reduces the inheritance of fixed capital.

Innovations in the technology of production have led to enormous increases in the volume of professional and technical work. In terms of work time in UK engineering, scientific and professional work grew from 17% of all paid work in 1961 to 39% in 2001; other less skilled service work constituted 30% of work time at both time points; and other manual workers 53% to 30%<sup>1</sup>. However IT and globalisation of trade enabling disaggregation of production led to less vertical integration, separating design, marketing, finance, transport and distribution to distinct companies and producing new markets for skills, in which those with high levels of human capital can earn higher wages than would have been possible within the vertically integrated firms.

The demographic effect works in two connected ways. People live longer, building up savings during the employed stage of their adult lives, but then depleting them through the lengthening non-employed phase. And as a result, their children inherit those savings later,

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<sup>1</sup> These estimates are drawn from Table 1 of ISER Working Paper 2005-9 Table 5.

or perhaps not at all. Since there are now different expectations about financial transfers through the life course, parents must adopt different strategies for reproducing their own positions for their children. The best-off parts of society, during the first half of their adult lives, have increasingly to derive their income from human capital not fixed capital. So increasingly parents of the superordinate class must reproduce their own position in their children *in vivo* by investing in their children's human capital, rather than *post mortem* through receipt of fixed capital.

And human capital differs markedly from fixed capitals in its connection to income. Fixed capitals produce income directly, insofar as time passes and interest, or rents, or dividends, accumulate. Their owners, while this time passes, can devote their own time entirely to play—the case of the Victorian leisure class. Human capital by contrast, only produces income to the extent that its possessors allocate their own time to paid work. If human capital, or more generally embodied capital, is replacing fixed capital as the source of the income of the economically best-placed over historical time, this means also that those who embody the human capital constitute a new, *superordinate*, working class.

We might also note that the substance of what passed for the leisure of the privileged class in the late nineteenth century and what constitutes the paid work of some members of the best-paid groups at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup>, are not markedly dissimilar. A Victorian gentleman might have spent his days playing various games or sports, as a politician or administering charities, overseeing the running of his estates or taking an interest in the management of his investments, or organising the good works of a charitable institution, while his sons might be encouraged to spend some time in a fashionable regiment or contribute to the development of the arts or sciences.

Progressively through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, these previously “amateur” activities came to be undertaken, not for love, but for money. Sometimes these transitions into paid work were unproblematic, as in the case of participation in national politics in the UK (where salaries for Members of Parliament were introduced in 1904). But in other cases they were strongly contested. We might remember for example that through the middle part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the major regulatory activity of US and British national athletics associations was concerned, not with preventing drug-taking, but rather with athletes taking money payments for their

sporting activities<sup>2</sup>. The effort devoted to protecting amateur status in leisure activities represents, from this perspective, rearguard action protecting outmoded signifiers of social status.

Placed among the best paid occupations for women and men in European and North American societies of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, are just those sports, politics, business, civil and NGO management, armed services, academic and arts activities that formed the unpaid vocations of the leisured Victorian gentleman (a point first noted by Bourdieu 1984). Such examples may represent only a small proportion of the top tier of occupations, but they nevertheless serve to remind us of the continuing significance of Veblen's core conceptual device, the contrast between labour and exploit. "Exploit", a form of play, is about confronting knotty problems, and competing with worthy opponents. It would be an exaggeration to say that work, even for those with the best jobs in modern societies, is now play. Nevertheless exploit, an honorific (and often enjoyable) class of activity, is undoubtedly a central characteristic of those best-paid jobs.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century changes discussed in this section have even more important implications for the demand for labour at the other end of the spectrum of social privilege. Technological advance means that year by year, a larger proportion of the previous demand for unskilled but intelligent (in the modest sense of *directable*) human labour can be replaced by machine. And the ever-cheaper (if we ignore indirect costs) and ever-faster global transport system, combined with ever-broader bandwidth communications, and the doctrinaire imposition of global trading access, means that the remaining demand for low human capital labour from rich countries can increasingly be satisfied by people in (or imported for this purpose from) poor countries.

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Briefly to restate the three arguments of this section:–

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<sup>2</sup> Bascomb 2004 provides a representative account of the impact of this in the case of 1950s middle distance running.

- Veblen saw the capitalist class—the owners of shares and idle money balances (and inheritors of property in general)—pursuing what the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century considered to be leisure on the basis that it corresponded to the antique practices of the ruling classes of the feudal system. There was an association of leisure with the privileged class, and hence leisure becomes “the badge of honour”.
- Linder and then Hirsch argued that leisure time in effect becomes polluted by a desire for ever-more intensive consumption of purchased goods and services, a tendency driven either by the micro-rationality of optimising the utility derived through the day, or by the macro-rationality of Galbraith’s *New Industrial State* which needs to promote more intensive consumption to balance the ever-increasing productivity of the industrial (and service) corporations—the “harrying” of the leisure class.
- Linder (and more convincingly, Becker) establish that, *ceteris paribus*, individuals with high levels of human capital may be expected to work longer hours than those with low. And there are various reasons for thinking that the superordinate class is, at least for the most active part of the adult life course, increasingly dependant on human capital rather than fixed capital for its income. This would imply that, over the 20<sup>th</sup> century, an increasing proportion of the superordinate class would work longer hours for money—and over the same period technical change and globalisation have made it increasingly difficult for those with low levels of human capital to find any sort of paid work.

Moving forward from the *fin du siècle* world described by Veblen, leisure time becomes less leisurely, increasingly crammed with consumption, and particularly following Hirsch, producing ever diminishing returns of satisfaction. The best-off are increasingly employed in paid jobs which are intrinsically as well as financially rewarding, while a growing part of the paid work of the least privileged (i.e. those with the lowest levels of human capital) disappears altogether. Long hours of paid work are thus increasingly associated with advantaged social positions. It is not implausible to suggest, that by a similar process of association to that identified by Veblen for the 1900s, work—and hence “busyness”—at the

start of the third millennium, succeeds leisure as “the badge of honour”, the signifier of high social status.

### **3. Substantive evidence of behaviour related to “feeling busy”**

#### **A definition of “busyness”**

Now we can turn to a more formal definition of “busyness”. Busyness is a subjective state, which results from the individual’s assessment of her or his own recent or expected activity patterns, in the light of current norms and expectations.

“Recent or expected activity patterns” refers to behaviour which is externally observable. There are two parallel usages. The first relates straightforwardly to the duration of paid work time. If we are “busy” in this sense, we have long hours of paid work, large parts of our normal days are taken up with the provision of goods and services for others in exchange for pay. The second concerns the density of paid work taken together with both unpaid work and leisure time, reflecting such characteristics as the frequency of change in activities, the variety of different activities undertaken, or the degree of close-packing (i.e. the multiplicity of simultaneous activities)<sup>3</sup>. Either or both of these might provide the observable behavioural referent for busyness.

“Current norms and expectations” refers to the subjective basis on which these empirical referents are evaluated. Some parts of these evaluations may be physiological (or more narrowly psychological) in their origin, in the sense that, for example, a densely packed sequence of urgent or taxing activities might induce symptoms of stress (Zuzanek 2002). It seems reasonable to assume that these physiological processes have not changed over the last century. Other parts may relate more directly to sociological factors—such as the signification of the resulting subjective state for the individual’s social position. As I have suggested, we have some grounds for suspecting that these processes of signification have indeed changed over the last century.

We observe our own behaviour in terms of the rhythms and duration of our work, and the density of our work and leisure activities, and conclude whether or not these mean that we are “busy” on the basis of physiological reactions and socially constructed meanings. Since human physiological reaction do not change over the course of a century, changes in feelings of busyness must result either from changes in externally observable activity patterns, or from changes in the socially constructed system of meanings. In this paper I shall deploy empirical evidence only for the former of these. Nevertheless, as we shall see, the implications of this evidence are reasonably unambiguous.

My core supposition is that the generally observed growth in expressions of busy feelings reflects change, as much in the social construction of these feelings as in the overall level of busy behaviour. To test this, I will consider two different sorts of findings related to activity durations, concerning the overall levels of work and leisure, and the distribution of work and leisure activities between people with lower and higher levels of human capital. I will also consider evidence on the density of activities, in relation to the second of the two “busyness” usages, and also specifically in relation to the Linder/Hirsch hypothesis of overcrowding of leisure.

### **Evidence on activity patterns**

There are three distinct classes of evidence that might in principle be deployed to reveal the sorts of activity patterns that are relevant to this discussion: straightforward questionnaire measures of the frequency or duration of activities; the so-called “opportunity samples”, in which individuals record their current activities at randomly chosen instants (often referred to as “beeper studies”, referring to the signal originally used as a cue for respondents to complete their records); and activity sequence logs, in which respondents provide a continuous record of each successive activity, with start and finish times, throughout a specified period (normally between one and seven days)—“time budget diaries”.

Questionnaire-based time measures are plentiful. Estimates of hours of paid work from this source are available from the Current Population Survey in the US, and the standardised

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<sup>3</sup> Bittman and Wajcman (2004 pp177-8) provide a very usefully summary of measures of leisure density.

instruments of the Labour Force Surveys across Europe. Similar estimates of time spent in various sorts of unpaid work are available from sources such as the Panel Study of Income Dynamics in the US, the British Household Panel Survey, and German Socio-economic Panel. This category of evidence however presents serious problems. It provides “stylised” estimates for very general categories whose scope is difficult to control. For example, does respondent’s answer to the paid work question include unpaid waiting preparation time at work, meals at work, or travel to workplace? What is the reference period and how does this relate to the respondent’s own knowledge of her/his own activities?

Some of these issues are less problematical for paid work, where the length of the work-week is a salient category of knowledge. But they are more so for unpaid work; how many of us (other than complete non-participants in the activity) know how much housework we have done in the past week? There also are currently unresolved disputes about the degree of specific biases attached to stylised estimate measures, in particular for paid work (Jacobs 2004 vs. Robinson and Bostrom 1994). But the real shortcoming of this sort of evidence for present purposes resides in its highly aggregated nature: to investigate the behavioural phenomena listed in the previous subsection we need to consider not just the overall durations (or frequency) of a few broad activities, but also the spacing and succession of changes in more detailed activity classifications.

The opportunity sample-based measures have a symmetrical problem for current purposes. They yield very detailed and specific pictures of particular events at particular points in the day. But they provide no information whatsoever about the rhythm of activities throughout the day or week for any particular individuals. Clearly, time budget diaries, which provide complete and detailed sequential listings of activities, together with information about location, co presence and close-packing (simultaneous activities) are the natural instrument for the investigation of busyness.

And there is a great deal of available time budget diary information, from more than 50 countries, and in some cases stretching back more than 40 years to the early 1960s (<http://iser.essex.ac.uk/misoc/timeuse/> lists around 500 national scale studies). Some countries (including Japan, Netherlands, Sweden, Finland, Norway, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Canada, US and Australia amongst others) can provide comparable surveys

over several decades. In this paper, just for reasons of compactness of discussion, I will discuss evidence from the UK—but the results I present here are representative of the wider evidence base (Gershuny 2000).

### **Three UK time diary studies**

The three UK studies used here are the BBC Audience Research Department “Viewer/Listener Availability Survey” of 1961 (N= 8360 days covering those aged 20-60, which is the sub-sample discussed in what follows), the Economic and Social Research Council time diary study carried out in 1983 and 1984 (N= 5183 days), and the Office of National Statistics 2000/1 time diary study (N= 11651 days). All three are based on national probability samples of households, with one respondent per sampled household in 1961, and all adult members of the sampled households asked to respond in 1983 and 2001. Each of these samples has been reweighted (after removal of diaries with more than 30 minutes of unclassified time use per day) so as to represent the demographic characteristics of the general population at the survey date, and also to provide an exactly equal representation of each of the seven days of the week.

The three surveys all involve respondents recording their activities, in their own words, continuously through the day. But many of the details of the studies differ. The 1961 BBC study was intended to reveal when prospective viewers or listeners were available to receive broadcasts at home. It was collected for 7 successive days, and as a result can be used to reveal the intrapersonal variation in activity patterns between days (though in what follows the days are treated independently). But it covered only the 17.5 hours between 6.30am and midnight each day. It also invited respondents to record only a single activity for each half hour of the day.

The seven day diary sample for the 1983 study covered all twenty-four hours of each day. Respondents were offered 15 minute time slots, and were provided with a separate space to record other activities undertaken simultaneously with the “primary” activity. The 2001 study collected only 2 days of data from each respondent, but encouraged respondents to

report in a slightly more detailed way, providing recording “slots” with a minimum duration of just 10 minutes.

The differences in instrument design obviously pose some difficulties for comparative purposes. But fortunately, as we shall see, the very detailed information provided by the diary allows us to adopt a conservative “lowest common denominator” approach to the problem of comparison.

### **Estimators of the behavioural correlates of busyness**

The two distinct usages of “busyness” (relating respectively, to the duration of work time, and to the density of activities in general) mean that the discussion that follows will have to deploy a range of different indicators. The primary measure of the objective burden of paid work is clearly the duration of working time. The length of the working year has been the familiar currency of the discussion of feelings of busyness, from (taking the US literature as example) the overworked (or not) American in Schor’s 1991 book, via Robinson and Godbey (1997/1999) to Jacobs and Gerson (2004). But it is by no means certain whether it is the length of the working year or of the work week that is the principal issue for the understanding of busy *feelings*. Indeed the length of the working day may in fact be more important than the length of the working week—so we will also consider this statistic in our discussion of paid work<sup>4</sup>.

In order to deal with the problem of the missing night-time (midnight to 6.30 am) evidence in the 1961 survey, I have adopted the radical solution of truncating the coverage of the two later surveys to correspond to the earliest, and then for the overall duration statistics, adding in an extra 390 minutes for sleep. This leads to a small overestimate of total sleep-time in each of the studies, but the similar proportions of all of the three samples who are awake at midnight and at 6.30 am suggests that no substantial bias in estimates arises from this procedure.

As regards the broader concept of busyness as relating to the density of packing of work and leisure activities through the day, we also need to consider such issues as the frequency of changes in activities, numbers of different activities undertaken in the course of work and non-work days, and the extent of simultaneous occurrence of activities. These sorts of statistics are much more vulnerable to the details of design of research instruments and of activity coding frames than are the measures of overall duration of broad activity categories. Unfortunately the UK datasets have very different designs in the successive decades of data collection. And in particular there is no way of producing simultaneous activity indicators for the 1961 data, so this, indisputably important class of statistic is not discussed in the next section. But there are, nevertheless, some steps we can take to solve some other aspects of the resulting problems of comparison.

In addition to the truncation of the later surveys to the 17.5 hours per day coverage of the 1961 survey, I have adopted two further transformations of the diary material prior to the calculation of the statistics presented in the following section.

1. Aggregating the very detailed (in each case in excess of 200 categories), but differing, activity classifications used in the three surveys, to just eight general activity types—paid work, unpaid work, shopping and associated travel, leisure out of home (and associated travel), sleeping and personal care, eating at home, media related leisure, and other home leisure.
2. Selecting a single activity for each half-hour period during the 17.5 hours now included in the 1983 and 2001 surveys. In the 1983 case this was achieved by randomly selecting among the two 15 minute periods registered in the original diary, and in the 2001 study, by choosing the modal activity if two of the ten minute periods are in the same activity, or otherwise randomly among the three.

These standardisation procedures provide the basis, both for the comparisons of the duration of the activities, and for the calculation of an indicator of the density of the packing of

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<sup>4</sup> Clearly there are empirical questions here that may be resolved by comparing the relative degrees of association of the working year, working week and working day, with expressions of busyness—but this lies outside the scope of the present article.

activities through the day, in the form of a count of the number of changes of activity experienced each day.

## 4 Empirical results

### Change in durations of work and leisure activities in the UK

Table 1 provides the basic statistics on change in minutes per day of work time in the UK. I include the unpaid work minutes as well, on the basis that these may also influence feelings of time pressure, and the residual category is added as an indicator of the total effect of the two sorts of work. The use of day weights means that these figures may be straightforwardly scaled up to give weekly estimates.

**Table 1 Change in activities, UK, adults aged 20-60**

	Paid Work			Unpaid Work			Nonwork		
	1961	1983	2001	1961	1983	2001	1961	1983	2001
<b>Mins/day</b>									
<b>All</b>	307	232	262	193	220	213	939	987	965
<b>men</b>	434	312	323	83	133	146	923	995	971
<b>women</b>	183	156	203	303	304	277	954	980	959
<b>std errors</b>									
<b>All</b>	3.1	3.5	2.6	2.2	2.4	5.4	2.2	2.8	2.1
<b>men</b>	4.1	5.3	1.7	2.0	2.7	2.8	3.3	4.4	3.2
<b>women</b>	3.8	4.1	3.2	3.1	3.3	2.4	2.8	3.4	2.7

The messages of the table are quite clear. Men have overall substantially reduced their paid work weeks over the 40 years (though there was a small increase between 1983 and 2001). Over the same period men have nearly doubled their amount of unpaid (house-) work and shopping, but this still leaves just under 50 minutes *more* uncommitted time per day in 2001 than they had in 1961. Women have increased their paid work, but decreased their unpaid, leaving no substantial change. There have been systematic changes at either end of the age distribution which might be expected to influence these results—later entry into the workforce as a result of the growth of higher education over this period, and the substantial increase in withdrawal from the workforce of people aged 55+. But similar tables for the more restricted age range 25-55 (not shown here) exhibit just the same patterns of change.

There is no evidence here of an increase in behaviour of a sort that might be expected to contribute to busy feelings. But these are just averages, and as Jacobs and Gerson 2004

stress, averages can mislead us. So we must look more carefully at the distribution of these activities among different sorts of people—and also at different sorts of days.

### Reversal of the status/leisure gradient

Table 2 breaks down the historical changes by educational level (where lower human capital is indicated by incomplete secondary education, and higher by human capital by completed secondary or more). We see here exactly the reversal in the relationship between privileged social position and leisure that was outlined in the theoretical discussion. For men, in 1961 the paid work hours of the lower human capital group was about an hour per day more than the higher human capital group. By 2001, the lower human capital group had nearly half an hour *less* paid work per day. This change is partially compensated for by the faster growth of the low human capital group’s unpaid work, but still leaves a reversal of the two groups’ non-work time relationship: the higher human capital group having approximately three-quarters of an hour of extra non-work time in 1961, and a quarter of an hour less non-work time in 2001. The differences by human capital levels are somewhat less marked for women, but show the same general pattern.

**Table 2 Change in activities, UK adults aged 20-60, by human capital level**

	Mins/day	Paid Work			Unpaid Work			Nonwork		
		1961	1983	2001	1961	1983	2001	1961	1983	2001
<b>men</b>										
Lower human capital		447	307	315	80	128	150	914	1005	975
higher human capital		365	337	341	103	155	139	972	948	961
<b>women</b>										
Lower human capital		182	145	184	306	307	289	952	988	967
higher human capital		186	212	251	286	287	249	968	941	940

There are in fact three distinct processes in train here, each of which is clearly consistent with the basic line of the “reversal of the social advantage/leisure gradient” argument. The first of these is a straightforward process of changing differential rates of selection into and out of employment, as we see from Table 3.

**Table 3 UK employment by sex and human capital level adults 20-60**

% 1961 1983 2001	men		women	
	lower human capital	higher human capital	lower human capital	higher human capital
1961	94	88	42	34
1983	82	85	49	62
2001	83	93	67	80

In 1961 both men and women with higher levels of human capital were significantly less likely to be in employment than those with lower levels. The change for men is not entirely linear (reflecting perhaps higher rates of unemployment for both lower and higher human capital groups during the 1980s), but by 2000 the disparity had been more than reversed, to give the higher human capital group 10% more employment than the lower. And for women the change is even more dramatic, with the higher human capital group increasing their employment rate two and a half times over the period, to give them a 13% employment lead over lower human capital women.

The second component underlying the reversed gradient in Table 2, is the change in the average work and non-work times of employed individuals, as set out in Table 4.

**Table 4 Change in activities, UK employed adults 20-60, by human capital level**

	Mins/day	Paid Work			Unpaid Work			Nonwork		
		1961	1983	2001	1961	1983	2001	1961	1983	2001
<b>men</b>										
lower human capital		470	384	370	72	106	139	898	950	931
higher human capital		425	365	367	88	147	134	927	928	939
<b>women</b>										
lower human capital		355	276	265	185	232	255	899	931	920
higher human capital		359	296	296	174	233	224	907	911	920

We can see that weekly paid work time has fallen substantially for all four groups. But (as was the case in the US but not in continental Europe, presumably reflecting the advent of Thatcherism in the Anglophone countries) virtually all of the change took place through the first half of this 40 year period, with little if any change in the second. Note that employed women's unpaid work has increased substantially through this period; this reflects coincident changes in the processes of selection into employment. It is well established that domestic work is strongly influenced (for both sexes, but particularly so for women) by family status—partnership and children. And the dramatic growth of women's employment shown in Table

4 has been strongly concentrated among women with partners, and particularly among those with both partners and co resident children.

The third process relates to the concentration of work into work *days*. Table 5 includes only those days including at least one minute of paid work. Paid work time has still fallen overall for both men and women. But the reduction over the period now appears rather smaller than in the previous tables for the lower human capital groups, and there is hardly any change at all for the higher human capital groups. Now add-in the growth of unpaid work time for all four groups, and at last we see some evidence of decline in non-work time, of 10-15 minutes for low human capital groups, and of half to three-quarters of an hour for those with higher human capital.

**Table 5 Change in activities, UK employed adults 20-60, by human capital level, workdays only**

	Mins/day	Paid Work			Unpaid Work			Nonwork		
		1961	1983	2001	1961	1983	2001	1961	1983	2001
<b>men</b>										
lower human capital		556	520	519	47	69	93	837	851	828
higher human capital		525	511	537	51	95	85	863	834	818
<b>women</b>										
lower human capital		468	420	423	141	183	199	831	837	818
higher human capital		467	439	463	126	177	167	848	823	810

So, in summary: (1) over the period, paid work has declined overall for both men and women, while the increase in unpaid work for men and the decrease for women leave the total of non-work time slightly increased for men and unchanged for women; (2) within this overall change, higher human capital groups have increased their paid work time relative to the lower human capital groups; and (3) paid work has become more concentrated into workdays (reflecting *inter alia* the virtual end of Saturday working outside the consumer services sector) and for the higher human capital groups particularly, workdays now have substantially less non-work time than they did 40 years ago.

## Changes in the intensity of activities.

We can turn, finally, to consider changes in the degree to which activities are tightly packed into the day, as an indicator of change in the alternative broader sense of “busyness” as intensity of work and leisure activities. We estimate this by working sequentially through the successive activities listed by the diarists throughout the day, counting the number of changes in activity as we go. Obviously, the statistics that result are critically dependent on the level of detail to which the activities are coded. If the activities that are coded as “clothes care” in one survey are classified variously as “washing clothes” “ironing” and “folding clothes” in another, then exactly the same sequence of activities might yield 2 changes in activity in the former case and 4 changes in the latter. Similarly, alternative designs of diary or instructions to diary keepers might produce artifactual differences in intensity counts. For these reasons I have adopted the very conservative approach of radically reducing the original 200+ activity classifications found in each of the surveys to just the eight broad categories listed in a previous section. This has the effect of reducing the 25 or so changes in activities that we normally expect to find in the course of a day, two- or three-fold, but it does give us a little more confidence in the comparison.

**Table 6. Number of activities per day by human capital level and employment status**

		<b>ft</b>	<b>pt</b>	<b>ne</b>
<b>lower human capital</b>				
	<b>1961</b>	7.8	11.0	12.9
	<b>1983</b>	8.9	12.4	12.5
	<b>2001</b>	9.5	11.8	12.1
<b>higher human capital</b>				
	<b>1961</b>	8.6	11.1	12.8
	<b>1983</b>	9.6	12.8	12.6
	<b>2001</b>	10.3	12.1	12.4

Table 6 may initially suggest a substantial increase in activity intensity during the day. For the full time employed, among both the lower and the higher human capital groups, we see a quite substantial increase in the numbers of changes in activities through the day. But why is it that part-time or non-employed people appear to have greater levels of activity intensity? In fact this has to do with the differing prevalence of work and non-work days for the various groups.

**Table 7 Number of activities per day by human capital level, sex, employment status and day type**

	workday				non-workday				
	lower human capital		higher human capital		lower human capital		higher human capital		
	men	women	men	women	men	women	men	women	
<b>fte</b>									
1961	7.0	8.3	7.8	8.7	9.8	11.2	10.6	11.5	
1983	7.9	8.5	8.5	9.2	10.7	11.2	11.2	12.1	
2001	8.0	9.3	8.8	9.9	10.5	11.3	11.2	11.9	
<b>pte</b>									
1961	7.7	12.5	9.7	10.9	9.9	12.0	11.2	13.7	
1983	8.7	12.1	7.0	12.6	11.3	13.0	12.7	13.4	
2001	9.5	11.7	9.6	12.1	11.4	12.4	11.4	12.4	

Workdays are dominated by 6 to 8 hours devoted continuously to the single category “paid work”. Non-workdays have as a result substantially more changes in activity. And as we have already seen, paid work time has become proportionately more concentrated within workdays, implying an increase, over the period, in the ratio of non-work to workdays. Once we re-specify the analysis to take account of this, as in Table 7, we get a much better picture of what is actually happening.

We might interpret Table 7 as follows. Since employed men are increasing their contributions to unpaid work over time, while employed women are, over time increasingly likely to belong to demographic categories which have relatively higher levels of housework responsibility, both groups are increasing likely to have unpaid work as well as paid work responsibilities on a workday—hence the small increase in the intensity index. But on non-workdays, we do not see any very substantial changes in activity intensity (note that the estimate for part-time employed men is based on a very small number of observations).

## 6 Conclusions

The apparent paradox of a historical growth in feelings of busyness over a period through which work time has declined, is not in fact particularly puzzling.

One line of explanation, not investigated empirically in this paper, is that the growth in busy feelings reflects the experience of particular groups of people (or groups of households) who because of the growth of women’s employment in general, and of women with children in

particular, are now clearly busier—in the objective sense of the cumulation of paid and unpaid work responsibilities—than their earlier historical comparators. Bittman 2004 provides a clear demonstration of this for Australia; very similar results (not reproduced here) emerge for the UK. A second points to growth busyness related to leisure density—this is not strongly supported by the time use evidence, but merits further investigation.

The third line of explanation, running in parallel with these, is the change in the social construction of busyness. The empirical part of this paper demonstrates the historical reversal—over a remarkably short period—of the relationship between privileged social position and the objective indicators of busyness in the UK<sup>5</sup>. The most-privileged now work more than the less so. Veblen’s famous arguments are to the effect that the prestige of leisure in the 1900s, reflect its association with the daily practices of the superordinate class. Similar considerations should now accord a similar degree of prestige to the relatively long hours of work which are, as I have demonstrated, now a characteristic of the best-placed individuals in the society.

The evidence does not show directly that such a change in social construction has indeed taken place. A test for this would be that groups placed lower in the social order, and with relatively shorter hours of work, also now rank themselves as busier than did equivalent groups earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century—reflecting the hypothesized higher status of work in the society generally. The survey data such as that used by Bittman, or Robinson and Godbey, which combines time diary evidence with answers to consistently phrased questions about feelings of busyness or rush over several decades—to which I currently do not have access—could provide this sort of evidence.

Nevertheless, following directly from the theoretical arguments advanced here, and at least *consistent* with the empirical materials, is the following proposition, which serves as one part of the resolution of the paradox: busyness, and not leisure, is now the “badge of honour”.

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<sup>5</sup> Earlier versions of this result for other countries are provided in Gershuny (2000 pp 190-191), and a similar result for Finland is presented in ISER Working Paper 2005-7, pp19-20 .

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