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# Self-help Books on Avoiding Time Shortage

Jörgen Larsson & Christer Sanne

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**ABSTRACT.** Self-help books are tokens of our reflexive individualized society. The widespread experience of too high a pace in daily life and too little time for recovery and for social relations have resulted in books focusing on avoiding time shortage. In our analysis of the advice in such books we found time-management categories such as streamlining activities and buying services. Other identified categories focus on life-management strategies such as setting limits to time-consuming aspirations. Questioning personal aspirations in areas such as work and consumption appears to be an adequate way of avoiding time shortage and increasing one's quality of life but this is also a challenging task due to the importance most people attach to these areas for identity creation and social acceptance. **KEY WORDS** • life management • self-help books • time management • time pressure • time use • work–life balance

## Introduction

Time shortage appears to be modern man's predicament. There is a common understanding that things are moving faster and there is a growing concern, in public debate as well as in academia, of how one is to keep up with this pace of life. This modern understanding also implies that the individual is responsible for managing his or her own life, rather than falling back on traditional patterns of action. These double understandings have given rise to a literature of self-help books and this article intends to study a selection of such books to examine how they suggest dealing with the predicament. The article starts with a discussion of social change linked to time shortage and individualization. We also discuss the meaning and distribution of time shortage. Our main area of interest

is strategies for avoiding time shortage as described in the increasing number of self-help books – what are these books really saying? In the end, different strategies for avoiding time shortage are discussed in relation to time and life management in post-traditional societies.

### **Time Shortage**

Benjamin Franklin coined the expression 'time is money', and the concept of time remains heavily imbued with economic terms: time as something to use, spend or waste. Time is regarded as a resource among other resources, or even a commodity among other commodities. To the historian Thompson (1967) this derives from the period of industrialization when workers were instilled with a hitherto unknown time discipline and with the idea of pricing of time: 'Time is now currency, not passed but spent' (p. 61). The economic approach is based on the assumed scarcity of time, which requires that it be put to optimal, utility-maximizing use.

Thus the idea of time shortage is rooted in industrialization. The temporal norm of shortage became internalized in people, which is manifested in their being 'pressed for time' (Nowotny, 1994: 9). The gradual internalization of clock time also relates to the experience of time shortage. Clock time, with seconds, minutes, hours and days, is characterized by invariance, context independence and precision (Adam, 1995). The experience of time shortage ensues from the confrontation of people's shifting everyday life with clock time.

A prominent trait in the development from early to late modernity is a strong increase in the speed of technological development, an acceleration that seems to grow successively stronger – as a third-order growth – as indicated by the unparalleled 'digital revolution' of information handling and communication.

Corresponding trends of an acceleration of social change are also visible, noticeable in the basic structures that organize the processes of production and reproduction: the family and the occupational system (Rosa, 2003). Previously supposedly life-long conditions tend to become 'temporalized' by rapid changes regarding employment offers and occupational patterns, by changes in social life, by geographical mobility and so on. Rosa exhibits how this becomes visible in the way we (subconsciously?) express private situations as temporary ('I am living with Mary' rather than 'Mary is my wife'). With the transition from early to late modernity, the idea of time shortage is no longer just connected to the area of production but permeates all areas of life.

Superficially it is paradoxical that the speeding up of technology, allowing things to be done in less time, should produce a universal sense of time shortage. But this process, inherent in the capitalist mode of production, also implies a social change. Increasing opportunities prompt choices since we are offered

more possible action than our biological time frame can accommodate. Even if shorter time is devoted to each activity in an accelerated pace of life, the possibilities still multiply faster. The development from subsistence to surplus is evident in the multiplication of opportunities for consumption and activities; the giant malls popping up in the modern 'edge cities' may serve as an emblem of this. We may have a Faustian aspiration to take it all on board but are left with the compulsion to forgo many opportunities. This amplifies a sense of time shortage.

### **Time shortage in everyday life**

Time shortage is a common experience: 60 per cent of the Swedish respondents (aged 20–64) experience that they often have so much to do in the weekdays that they have difficulties in managing it all (SCB, 2003). The situation is most acute for parents with small children (75 per cent). A Danish study confirms that almost all parents (88 per cent) in households with children feel pressed for time and 79 per cent would prefer a lower pace of life (Jensen, 2001). Esping-Andersen (1999) even suggests that the 'hallmark of new, emerging family forms is that they suffer from a scarcity of time'. Repeated German studies also show that people perceive that time is running at too fast a pace and indicate that they would prefer a much slower one (Allensbacher Institut, 1999). The experience of time shortage also seems to be mounting. Robinson (1997 in Roxburgh, 2002) reports, from the USA, an increase in the number of 18–64-year-olds who 'always feel rushed', from 24 per cent in 1965 to 32 per cent in 1992 and 38 per cent in 1995. The concern about time shortage is based on the notion that it reduces our well-being through 'lower life satisfaction, and poorer quality in relationships particularly with family members' (p. 4). Esping-Andersen (1999) is concerned with the declining family stability and points out that two-career households are the ones most likely to divorce. Daly (1996) stresses the importance of a critical mass of time for basic family functioning; if the family falls below this minimal level, the family unit is threatened. This is reflected in surveys as the need for 'quality time' for doing what one regards as essential: time for interacting with significant others (Southerton, 2003).

Roxburgh (2002) has examined 'who are the time pressured'. In brief, the most time-pressured individuals appear to have the following characteristics: female, with partners who do little household work, full-time employment, high income, high demand–low control job and children at home. Women with additional roles outside the household, for example as caregivers or volunteers for social work, also report higher time pressure. Many responsibilities, each demanding attention and consuming time, produce a time shortage.

One understanding of time shortage is that one's time is tied up by *necessary time* – for life-supporting activities like sleep and eating – or by *contracted time*

for paid work, or by *committed time* due to household work and other private-life engagements. This leaves a lack of *free time*. These are the four time-use categories suggested by Ås (1978). He also points out that they indicate an order of priority where *free time* is more or less a residual. Time-use studies, however, usually show that even employed adults report a considerable amount of free time; on average in the order of four hours per weekday in Sweden (SCB, 2003). Gershuny (2000) reported similar results in cross-national studies. In spite of this, a majority claim to suffer from time shortage. How can this apparent paradox be understood?

A statistical anomaly may be a partial explanation since data include people who are in reality on some kind of leave – sick leave, parental leave and so on – which means that the paid work is unequally distributed even among the employees. Another statistical problem is to account correctly for paid and unpaid work. In the Swedish case the total number of working hours for paid and unpaid work is equally distributed between men and women. But Swedish women do a larger share of unpaid work – almost four hours per day compared with 2.5 for men (SCB, 2003: 166).<sup>2</sup> Detailed time studies show that much of the recorded free time consists of time slots left over between activities and therefore difficult to use in a meaningful way. This is particularly true for typical women's activities in the household which are often non-continuous including tending, waiting times and so on. This contributes to gender inequalities in spite of the statistical evidence.

Two more profound explanations to the paradox might be offered. In the first place many 'free-time activities' of everyday life – making social calls, reading, physical exercise and so on – are not so 'free' but rather required in a broad sense. This may be expressed as a 'rhetoric of obligations' to maintain your status in society and your employability which contradicts the assumed individualistic freedom (Rosa, 2003: 18).

Moreover, in the end the amount of free time may not be of such paramount importance as how people are able to cope with their life situation in terms of scheduling and accomplishing what they have to or like to do, the *timing* of activities: when to do things due to other people's schedules and institutional conditions. Southerton (2003) stresses the importance of timing and coordination as factors explaining the experience of time shortage. His exploratory survey of people's narratives regarding the time squeeze shows that people tend to explain it in terms of more activities, more work and more consumption. Such explanations are in line with academic analyses like those of Schor (1991) and Hochschild (1997). But these explanations are not congruent with the respondents' experiences of 'harriedness' (a term that connotes hurry as well as a degree of anxiety) which was not so much connected with doing much as with doing things at particular times (Southerton, Shove and Warde, 2001). Hence Southerton's remark that 'the debate concerning the time squeeze should be less

about the amount of free time available in everyday life and more about peoples' experiences . . .' (Southerton and Tomlinson, 2003: 3).

In conclusion, we assume that the experience of time shortage is a product of having too much to do (at work, in one's private life or both) in combination with the fact that many activities need to be coordinated with other people or institutional conditions. Thus the experience of time shortage is characterized by having *too* high a pace and/or of having *too* little time for recovery and close relations. Having too high a pace is similar to harriedness, the term Southerton uses. Based on our experience, a description of time shortage should also include having too little time for recovery and close relations (compare Larsson, 2004). Stress-related research points to the importance of recovery through enough time for sleep, relaxation and exercise in order to stay healthy. The relevance of sufficient time for close relations is manifested by the popular concepts such as work–life balance and quality time. Evidently this meaning of time shortage is a subjective judgement of what is *too* high or *too* little, based on individual feelings of dissatisfaction and lack of control.

### **Individualization and Self-help Books**

People's experience of time shortage is the subject of public debates regarding collective strategies such as working hours legislation and trade union efforts for realistic workplace staffing. But individual responsibility and possibilities remain in focus. This is partly due to the fact that the experience of time shortage is hard to affect by political action because it originates in people's actions and minds. The focus on the individual also mirrors the far-reaching individualization of modern society – the process which means that traditional roles and constraints now decreasingly determine people's lives and the individual is given the burden to find personal solutions to structural problems (Beck, 2002). Modernity confronts the individual with many possibilities and choices. But due to its non-authoritarian character it offers little help on what we should choose and how we should act. Contemporary writers underline these trends and how they make people increasingly personally responsible for their biographies. Giddens (1991) describes how tradition and guiding norms fail to prescribe how to act and how the individual has to construct a coherent narrative to maintain his or her identity. Beck (1986/1992) underlines the reflexivity of modern society and that the individual is made the agent of their identity making and livelihood – there is no given set of actions and attitudes which just can be copied. The idea of self-management claims that we are able to 'succeed' if we make the right choices. Identity making being dependent on people themselves and what they do increases the strain on individual choices. These factors might contribute to the experience of time shortage, for example by becoming involved in too many or too demanding activities.

Self-help books try to guide us in our choices in order to cope with these contemporary existential anxieties by broadening our perspectives and providing a base for reflection. One could say that all literature serves this aim, for example novels as well as religious texts. But self-help books offer advice on how to achieve one's own goals (unlike, say, the Bible or the Koran which hand down decrees from an authority). Self-help books emphasize that all individuals have a certain range of possibilities and aspire to be a tool for using them and take control over one's life. In this way they confirm the idea of manageability of life in our society. Their popularity can be seen as an effect of the aforementioned reflexive individualized modern society. Hochschild (1994) assumes that advice books, along with other commercial and professional conveyors of guidance, become more important when the role of traditional spheres of authority is diminishing.

Self-help literature also mirrors society since these books reflect contemporary norms and values and give an insight to the problems people are struggling with. Sociologists have used them for scrutinizing contemporary culture. One example is Giddens (1991) who uses a book about 'self-therapy' to illustrate how the self today is a reflexive project where we ourselves are responsible for achieving the fundamental goal of building a coherent and positive sense of identity. He means that the self-help book focuses on the individual as being authentic and true to themselves instead of being a 'prisoner' of earlier experiences and other people's expectations. It is at the same time evident that such books pay little attention to how societal structures affect our life chances through factors such as class, age, ethnicity, norms and so on.

In our study we have examined self-help books and focused on how to use our time – our daily time and the rest of our life.

### **Content Analysis – Advice in the Self-help Books**

The main question raised in this article is what advice self-help books give for avoiding time shortage. We found that the advice can be grouped into six core categories or strategies: streamline your tasks; buy household services; mind your basic needs; set limits in relation to others; set limits to your time-consuming aspirations; and finally, use effective change methods. Each category is described below and will be briefly commented on regarding its likely effect: Would it lead to less time shortage?; and feasibility: How willing and able to implement them can people be expected to be? Our choice of focus is based on the action orientation of the research project of which this article is a part.<sup>3</sup>

In order to answer our research questions we searched literature about time, stress, quality of life and so on which contained advice on how to avoid time shortage. Among these, we selected six books (two from the USA and four from

Sweden). Our criteria of choice were the extent of specific advice on avoiding time shortage, and the range of advice offered. Some of them are explicit self-help books, while the remaining ones give indirect advice on avoiding time shortage. The analysed books are: *Circle of Simplicity* (Andrews, 1997), *Ett liv utan stress – både i arbetet och privat* (*A Life Without Time Shortage – Both at Work and in Private Life*) (Bengtsson, 1999), *Kvinnor och hemstress* (*Women and Home Stress*) (Blom, 2001), *En Lägre växel. Råd om du vill arbeta mindre och njuta mer* (*Downshifting – How to Work Less and Enjoy Life More*) (Drake, 2001), *Unwinding the Clock: Ten Thoughts on Our Relationship to Time* (Jönsson, 2001), and finally *Kvinnors vägar ut ur stressen* (*Womens' Ways Out of the Time Squeeze*) (Larmén, 1996). The literature was read in order to identify the range of specific advice on avoiding time shortage. Over one hundred different pieces of advice were distilled and organized in our six categories based on internal similarities and mutual exclusion. Further literature was scanned to confirm that this covered a satisfactory spectrum of advice.

### Streamline your tasks

Much of the advice in the analysed self-help literature concerns 'streamlining', finding ways to use less time to do the same task, at work and in private life. Streamlining unpaid work can often be viewed as recapturing traditional 'housewife' experiences, for example to air clothes and to remove stains instead of washing them so often. But most streamlining tips deal with workplace activities and, within that area, mainly with managing paperwork. Piles of paper are assumed to cause inefficiency. Thus, taking control of one's desk is paramount in order to take control of one's entire work situation. Incoming papers should be handled right away: throw them away, act on them, file them or put the task on the 'to-do-list'. People who are reluctant to throw away papers are advised to arrange a 'wastepaper basket with delay': when the basket is full, only the lower half is emptied. Using a 'to-do-list' is perhaps the most central advice. This should provide an 'overview' and help to focus on the most important and urgent tasks. It is also recommended to strive for large chunks of undivided time enabling efficient working: shut your office door (with an explaining note) and switch off the phone.

It is obvious that working faster may satisfy one's employer and bolster one's career opportunities. Others, like family members or colleagues, may also gain from and appreciate higher efficiency. The work-related and the social gains are undeniable. To oneself it is also satisfactory to achieve more. A first-order effect should be a reduced sense of time shortage. But will a strategy of streamlining relieve the feelings of time shortage in the longer run? One crucial condition is that the streamlining is not followed by an increased amount of commitments and activities. Since the expectations from the outside world, as



well as the aspirations from within, are seldom fully met, the long-term effects are rather ambiguous. Any time gap that is created risks being filled quickly with new chores and activities. Well-known studies on the effect of 'time-saving' household equipment support the view that the 'saved' time tends to vanish with an unconscious lowering of norms and aspirations, for example for a higher level of cleanliness (Cowan, 1983; Burton, 1992).

### **Buy household services**

Using money in order to minimize household work constitutes a long tradition, together with 'time-saving' equipment such as washing machines, dish washers, vacuum cleaners and microwave ovens. This equipment is taken for granted in the analysed self-help literature which instead focuses on buying household services. The most common suggestions concern cleaning the home. Other, related advice is to use convenience food, eat out, arrange for home delivery of groceries or other means of rational purchases.

Household work indeed takes much of people's time. Research also shows that the women who have to do most of the household work themselves experience higher time shortage (Roxburgh, 2002). To buy these services certainly has a high potential of relieving a time squeeze, but the strategy also has its limitations. Unless household services are to be paid for with reduced consumption in other areas of the household, they will require more work, that is, longer working days, which would obviously jeopardize their positive effects. If these services are to be paid for with more work, they will only serve the strategy if one's net hourly wage is higher than the hourly price for the services. Subsequently, this strategy is limited to people with high incomes living in countries with low taxes.<sup>4</sup> Like streamlining, this strategy also stands the risk that the 'saved' time is quickly filled with new commitments and activities.

### **Mind your basic needs**

Much of the advice revolves around our basic need for relaxation and for physical exercise at regular intervals and how to allot time to meet these needs. The underlying rationale is to increase one's physical and emotional capacity and avoid tiredness, which tends to lead to feelings of time shortage. Relaxation techniques such as meditation or t'ai chi exercises are suggested. The importance of getting enough sleep at regular times is also stressed; this may require practical changes like having separate bedrooms if one has a partner who snores. Other suggestions for minding your basic needs are about food, physical exercise and spending time on hobbies and the things one 'loves to do'.

Meeting the basic needs of sleep, rest, exercise, food and so on is common sense if we are to function normally and be able to cope with high time

pressures. Research on stress shows that some recovery time is necessary in order to avoid becoming ill. More advanced techniques, such as meditation, might have particularly positive effects, especially if they lead to new insights as discussed in the strategies below. Doing regular exercise and eating healthy may be ways of coping with – or even surviving – a demanding situation for some people, but such ambitions may also add to the individual's perceived time shortage as still another required activity; the balance is likely to vary and it does not appear to be an obvious way to remove the underlying reasons for the experience of time shortage.

### **Set limits in relation to others**

A fourth strategy is to set limits in relation to one's surroundings, at work as well as in one's private life, to avoid being swallowed up by demands and expectations. At the core of this advice is to learn to say no – verbally and practically – it is even suggested that one could practise different 'no' phrases in front of the mirror!

The advice on setting limits at work includes being frank about how many tasks, responsibilities and working hours to accept. Tips include developing realistic goals and a job description together with one's manager and being very clear about the importance of a good work-life balance. It is also important to stick to these priorities and not stretch oneself too much, for example by refusing additional tasks or responsibilities unless others have been removed, and by learning 'to sit on one's hands': refraining from volunteering to do things. Setting limits is also about refusing to be reachable at all times, for example allowing mobile phones and email connections to be turned off every now and then.

As for setting limits in private life the self-help books are often centred on how to get one's partner and other family members to do a reasonable share of the household work. Persistent nagging may be destructive and must be replaced by firm action. One suggestion is to stay away from home a lot for sufficiently long periods of time and make clear that one cannot do any household work during this time. A more tangible tip is, for example, to stop doing the ironing. Mothers who really do want to share the work and the rewards of having children are advised to let, even urge, the father to spend a lot of time *alone* with the children.

The advice is also about setting limits to people outside the household, to refrain from always being pleasant to others and avoid assuming responsibility for other people's well-being. Smart use of the telephone is a popular area for advice: let the answering machine pick up the call and ring the caller back only if or when inclined to do so.

Setting limits is to manage the demands and expectations of others when

they threaten to become exploitative. That this is effective is supported by the 'scarcity theory' which states that subjective time pressure is affected by the number of roles that one has to manage (Banett and Baruch, 1987 in Roxburgh, 2002). The more roles and responsibilities, the less time for each activity. But there are many obstacles to this. Setting limits at work carries the risk of one becoming less popular among managers and colleagues and harming career development. Employees might hesitate to set limits when job security is low. And many people identify themselves with the organizations they work for – saying *we* about the company – which makes it harder because they then set limits to their own aspirations.

Setting limits in social relations is in line with the concept of 'pure relations' (Giddens, 1992), where a close relationship only lasts as long as both parties find it sufficiently satisfactory. Advice in line with this theory is, however, ambiguous since the self-help books tend to view spending time with friends/relatives as one of the most rewarding activities, perhaps the very essence of a good life. The advice seems to be contradictory, but can also be interpreted as to drop or limit less prioritized social contacts in order to get more time for a limited number of truly valued relations.

### **Set limits to your time-consuming aspirations**

The advice in the four strategies above is about managing time according to commonly accepted norms and values. This strategy rather challenges the aspirations underlying our society's dominant ways of life: what we strive for, our ambitions and what we long for. The core idea is that many of the predominant aspirations are time consuming but do not contribute to our well-being. Setting limits to some of the time-consuming aspirations would make room for other, more valuable, aspirations like striving for closer relationships, a sense of community, meaningful activities, self-knowledge or learning to seize the moment.

To always strive for perfection, to produce an excellent report at work, to create the perfect home or look is all evidently very time consuming. Such striving to do our very best is deeply rooted in our culture. The general advice is to *lower one's aspirations of perfection*, to learn when something is 'good enough'. Practical tips are, for example, to adopt a care-free hairstyle and to practise having dust angels under the beds.

Aspiring for career success usually implies putting in long hours of work. But self-help books often hold that career success can only provide material and superficial rewards, not more valuable assets such as self-esteem, love or freedom. We are advised to *lower our aspirations of career success* by identifying our true problems and needs and trying to find more direct paths to meet these needs. The most common advice is to 'downshift': to reduce the amount of time

spent in paid employment. This may mean being able to negotiate with your employer a cutback in working hours, finding a part-time job or searching for a job with less responsibility. Another advice is to look for a job you find meaningful and a worthwhile use of one's time and life, thus escaping the sense of wasted time and time shortage. To have plenty of time should also be something to be proud of, contrary to the image that a busy schedule is the sign of an important person.

Buying and owning more or new things is a core aspiration in our consumer culture. The self-help books we read claim that these aspirations are time consuming not only due to the long working hours required to make the necessary money, but also because of the time used for choosing, purchasing, transporting, installing, using, insuring, maintaining, storing and finally disposing of the goods. The core advice is to try to *lower one's aspirations of 'having it all'* by questioning all purchases: do I really need this, will it raise my quality of life, is it worth the time required to pay for it and handle it? Some advice is about our shopping: stop shopping as entertainment (and rationalize grocery shopping by doing it all once a week) or swap clothing with friends instead of buying new items. Another time-and-money-consuming area is gift giving; the advice is to discuss the gift culture around birthdays and Christmas in one's social environment. Systematically avoiding advertisements and commercials may also lower our acquisitiveness. Other advice is to lower one's basic costs by moving to a cheaper area or to a smaller place, to drive less or do without a car.

The dominating aspirations in our culture mentioned above are part of what Schor (1991) has described as the 'work-and-spend character' of our economy. The central counter-strategy is downshifting and we have no doubt that it would go a long way to relieve time shortage. But even if downshifting is possible, it is impeded by major obstacles such as institutionalized working hours as well as the importance we attach to work and consumption as rewarding and identity-shaping parts of life.

The present labour market does not encourage individuals to adapt the number of working hours to their preferences. Most jobs and workplaces are organized with full-time job positions which do not admit cuts in the working hours. However, an American study (Schor, 1998) indicates that: 20 per cent of the US workforce voluntarily changed to a lower-paying job, reduced working hours, went back to education and so on during the five-year period of the study (and another 12 per cent had done this involuntarily). The most common reason for the change was to have more time in general and, specifically, with the children. Schor also claims that most households in the rich part of the world can afford to downshift<sup>5</sup> – she dares estimate that most households can get by on 20 per cent less income without much ado, that is, without any major changes to their lifestyle. Even if shorter hours (with an accompanying cut in salary) are agreed, many people have experienced that this does not always automatically

reduce one's tasks and responsibilities. Achieving shorter hours on an individual basis and really easing one's workload is probably a very demanding task.

But downshifting is also obstructed by the fact that work and consumption are rewarding parts of life. Work is not just a disutility suffered in order to be able to consume (as in the economic textbook). Work is often socially rewarding because it is an important social arena. Hochschild (1997) describes how paid work (and not the time off work), in some instances, may become the attractive pole of life by allowing people to develop and make use of their talents among peers, whereas home becomes a place of non-rewarding chores and social isolation.

In the same vein, consumption can be attractive as well as addictive. We quickly get used to enhanced material standards of living, adjusting our expenses for housing, travels and so on to the current income level. And this has a 'ratchet effect': stepping up comes easily while stepping down meets hard resistance. Roxburgh (2002) even interprets Schor as saying that 'the well-off are more likely to perceive their needs as greater and to be engaged in a work-spend cycle that creates a distorted sense of needs' (p. 13).

Behind these trends lies the fact that both work and consumption are central for shaping our identity, as professionals in a certain field of work and through the consumption possibilities that the salary entails. In modern society we increasingly identify with what we do and what we have, and less with things such as class or religion (Bourdieu, 1984). Consumption becomes – with the willing aid of marketing forces – a very important factor for building up and signalling our identity. For people with children this has even stronger implications. Children are situated between their parents and society; the parents' wish to avoid time shortage by reducing paid work may clash with the social pressure on the children to consume in line with their peers.

### Use effective change methods

The fact that so many people suffer from a time shortage indicates that changes to avoid it are hard to implement. Many things stand in the way: our habits in doing and thinking, our psychological drives, other people's expectations, societal structures and so on. Decisions to change often fail – New Year's resolutions tend to be forgotten by mid-January. This last strategy deals with effectiveness in change methods.

The first condition for effective change is a *clear picture of the present*. It is suggested we assess how we use our time today and ask ourselves if the total load of external demands and internal aspirations are realistic. A clear picture of the present helps us to *reflect on how we want to live our life* – to determine in which direction to go. One suggestion is to take 'time out' to reflect on our

pace of life and what is really important to us. To live differently may require *reprogramming*: leaving old patterns of behaviour and thinking behind, altering our view of our situation and ourselves and changing our aspirations. Goal-images can depict the desired situation and help us to follow our 'gut feeling' or 'inner voice'. Self-help books do not exclude the advice of *seeking support from others* (even if they, by definition, are about what we can do ourselves). Such support can give strength, encouragement and joy in order to manage the required changes. Household members should be involved in serious family meetings about how to avoid time shortage. Different kinds of study circles, women's groups or groups at work (even specific simplicity circles) can give us recognition for our experiences as well as inspiration for how to solve our problems. These methods can be applied to implement all of the strategies described earlier, but may be especially relevant for setting limits to others' and to our own aspirations.

### Discussion

How relevant and how applicable is the advice forwarded in the self-help books for post-traditional Western countries? We noted that late modernity implies an acceleration of technological as well as social change; in particular the latter evidently invites guidance for people's orientation in the new circumstances. One example of change is the growing trend in today's working life that neither working hours nor working tasks or duties are defined and delimited – work is goal oriented rather than clock-time oriented. This leaves the individual with the burden of organizing and deciding when the quality of the work is sufficient. We are also faced not just with a material abundance but also with a bulging supply of time-spending opportunities – the current offer for the latter is tremendous: TV programmes, news, books, magazines, theatres, movies, evening classes, lectures, holiday destinations, voluntary organizations, sporting events, exercise, outdoor activities, the internet, computer games, listening to and playing music, visiting friends and family or talking on the phone.

Another time-related social change is that the post-traditional society does not support us by giving us defined gender roles. Increasingly, partners have to negotiate in order to find a distribution of work and responsibilities which is satisfactory for both parties. In practice, however, gender still remains a central factor for understanding time shortage. Negotiating about a reasonable distribution of work normally starts from a situation where women carry the dual burden of both employment and the bulk of the household work. There are also claims that women with career aspirations have to work harder in order to progress up the ladder, with likely effects of increased time shortage. Similarly, modern men who want to participate actively in the children's upbringing face

problems when faced with the more traditional role of a man devoted to his career.

By and large, economic restraints seem to become less prominent than the available time for material consumption as well as for time-spending opportunities. The advice in the self-help books, in particular the first three categories – *streamlining*, *buying services* and *minding your basic needs* – is also clearly in line with the view of time as a resource which should be put to utility-optimized use. Streamlining expresses a core principle of time management; buying services refers to specialization; and minding basic needs is a means of maintaining long-term capacity. All fit within the concept of time management and can be seen as important personal abilities in a post-traditional society. Negotiating about a reasonable distribution of work also contains elements of time management since it might involve allotting activities to the one who can do them most efficiently.

But we are also concerned that these three categories are not sufficient to relieve the time shortage. Luhmann (1975) says that one must change perspective:

Time as such is not scarce. The impression of the scarcity of time arises only from overtaxing of experience by expectations. Experiences and actions need time and can therefore be accommodated in a given span of time only in a limited fashion. (cited in Nowotny, 1994: 133)

In line with Luhmann we believe that avoiding time shortage also requires one to set limits in relations to others and in particular to set limits to one's time-consuming aspirations. This includes advice for how to lower aspirations of perfection, career success and 'having it all'. These strategies tally with the concept of life management which concerns 'how people actively take part in and shape their trajectories across the life span' (Freund, 2001) and can be described as the careful selection and persistent pursuing of life goals. The final strategy, using effective change methods, can be seen as a tool for employing life-management strategies.

Can people be expected to be able and willing to employ life-management strategies? A common argument is that individual strategies can only to be relevant for a minority with plentiful resources and therefore uninteresting for emancipatory oriented sociology. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) also points out that traditional roles may be less limiting today but instead new constraints are mounting based on our dependency on the labour market as well as on standardized consumption patterns.

We conclude that a condition for life management is that the individual mainly has an 'internal locus of control' (Perski, 2001) – that they usually feel they can and also must take care of their own problems. This is distinguished from people with a mainly external locus of control who place the possibilities

of solving their problems outside themselves, in their surroundings. To employ life-management strategies also involves an instrumental and self-controlled attitude. Spontaneity as well as the capacity to give time an intrinsic value may suffer. For some people, life-management strategies may still be the only way to take control and get out of an unsatisfactory or even pathogenic life situation.

There are several reasons why life management strategies for avoiding time shortage seem to have had little impact so far. The experience of time shortage may be such a 'new' problem that our culture has not yet integrated it into the socialization process. There is, as yet, little cultural experience showing that such strategies are effective. The concept may become more commonplace with time; Sabelis (2001) points out that children are 'completely socialised into the custom of thorough planning – they may easily take *life management* for granted' (p. 395). Another explanation is that the negative impact of experienced time shortage is balanced by the satisfaction derived from the activities; it has been shown that among activities which rank high in inherent satisfaction (measured as 'process benefit'; see Juster, 1985) are not only activities like being with children or gardening but also things like paid work. Such high evaluation of work – or perhaps of the social setting of work for some employees – is also stressed by Hochschild (1997) as discussed earlier.

The mentioned requirement of an attitude for self-governing as well as mixed experiences of work may explain why people normally do little to *avoid* time shortage but are rather occupied with *handling* time shortage, juggling their activities and to coordinating schedules, as claimed by Southerton (2003). Life management for avoiding time shortage is instead about reinterpreting one's subjective demands but this seems to be a far-fetched alternative for many people.

In the end, we still argue that the strategy of setting limits to time-consuming aspirations can be seen as a strategy towards the new work- and consumption-oriented constraints which Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) describes. Putting a managing perspective on one's time and life is more or less relevant and possible for all people in a post-traditional society. Beck argues that sociology as an institutionalized rejection of individualism no longer is possible. Even if individualization today often is contemporary with growing societal inequalities, Beck rejects the stereotype that individualization breeds a me-first society. He rather sees signs of an altruistic individualism based on new ethics combining personal freedom with engagement with others. Beck's new ethics of individualism is congruent with the advice found in the analysed self-help books:

At the centre of the new ethics is the idea of the quality of life. What does this imply? For one thing, control over a person's 'own time' is valued more highly than more income or more career success . . . Time is the key which opens the door to the treasures promised by the age of self-determined life. (p. 212)



## Notes

The paper starts with a discussion of social change linked to time shortage and individualisation.

1. An earlier version of this article was presented at the Sixth NESS conference in Turku, Finland, 2003.
2. Statistics Sweden is warning of a bias introduced by the method of measurement since paid work includes items such as short breaks and phone calls while these are normally deducted from unpaid work. Since women do more unpaid work this may create a systematic error hiding the fact that women in reality have a higher total working time.
3. This article is a prelude to a research project on how families may adapt their lifestyle to avoid time shortage. In future research we plan to collaborate with families who wish to avoid time shortages. With a deeper understanding of people's experiences and strategies we should be able to generate reflections on structural changes into a more time-friendly society. The project 'Family Life Without Time Shortage' is financed by Formas – a Swedish governmental research-funding agency focusing on sustainable development. This project is linked with sustainability since we will explore whether changes for avoiding time shortage can also be beneficial to the environment. More information can be found at [www.familjeliv-utan-tidsbrist.nu](http://www.familjeliv-utan-tidsbrist.nu).
4. We do not consider the use of illegal labour or subsidies for household services. In Sweden there is also a debate on the moral aspects of legally employing others to do household services, which is seen as a step back to a more hierarchical society. Nonetheless, there is growing evidence that young people and migrants in particular are increasingly employed, not least because of an enlarged EU.
5. It is obvious that aspirations tend to grow with the average income. Segal (1999) also discusses how the 'need required income' (NRI) to meet core economic needs has risen in the USA, not allowing for an increasing discretionary income. Even adding a second income to the household often demands such cost increases that little is left of the second salary (not least if children's day care is required but also things like a second car and so on). Segal's conclusion is, however, not necessarily relevant for a welfare state which offers other conditions for child care and transportation. Given data on expenditures for leisure trips and equipment, gambling, cosmetics, alcohol, tobacco, sweets and so on rather supports the idea that much consumption is non-essential and allows room for budget cuts.

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