It makes you make the time:
An ethnographic study of busy people on their allotments

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Abstract

This paper, an ethnographic study of busy allotment-holders in Newcastle Upon Tyne, explores the juxtaposition of time spent on the allotment and time devoted to paid employment and caregiving responsibilities. Through interviews and participant observation this research captures the experience of garden time as an activity that is jealously guarded even in the face of extreme time scarcity. It examines the seeming contradiction of adding a very time-consuming responsibility (the allotment) onto a busy schedule, revealing the desire for unbounded time that underlies such a choice. The study is informed by, and aims to develop, the idea that paid work continually extends its reach into our lives, and that our understanding of work can be informed by what, nominally, goes on outside of it. It suggests a limited and often contingent level of control over their time that busy professionals experience, highlighting the pursuit of ‘obligatory leisure’ as a means of maintaining a healthier work-life balance.

The search for garden time

Writing of his garden at Dungeness, filmmaker Derek Jarman observes, ‘the gardener digs in another time, without past or future, beginning or end. A time that does not cleave the day with rush hours, lunch breaks, the last bus home. As you walk in the garden you pass into this time – the moment of entering can never be remembered’ (1994: 30). For Jarman, whose HIV-positive status in the early nineties prophesied imminent death, the garden stretched out time. In his narrative, this timelessness is suddenly pierced by his ‘person from Porlock’: a work-related phone call that interrupts his gardening, ‘talking of time with beginning and end, literal time, monotheist time, for which you are unfailingly charged.’

This paper, an ethnographic study of busy allotment-holders in Newcastle Upon Tyne, explores the juxtaposition of time spent on the allotment and time devoted to paid employment and caregiving responsibilities. Using data from interviews and participant observation it captures the experience of garden time as an activity that is jealously guarded even in the face of extreme time scarcity. It examines the seeming contradiction of adding a very time-consuming responsibility (the allotment) onto a busy schedule, revealing the desire for unbounded time that underlies such a choice.

Jarman’s sense of how time passes resonates with classic accounts of industrial work discipline. Mumford notes a one-sided development of man that begins with the discipline of the medieval monastery and ends with Franklin’s edict that time is money. Abandoned by nymphs and goddesses, cut off from the sensual, time takes on the character of an enclosed space that can be divided and filled up (1934: 17). This unitisation and monetisation of time is central to Weber’s analysis of the ‘restless, continuous, systematic work’ (1998: 172) that replaced earlier work rhythms, and is central to Thompson’s account of the regimentation of work and ruthless elimination of play under Joseph Crowley’s factory clock (1984: 384).

In contrast to mechanistic factory work, contemporary skilled labour affords a degree of flexibility and autonomy in terms of scheduling tasks and achieving targets, often making room for labour that is freewheeling and playful. However, critical analysis of working time among white collar and ‘no collar’ professionals highlights a long-hours culture that reduces time available for recreation and caring responsibilities outside of work (Bunting, 2004; Hochschild, 1997; Kunda, 1992; Ross, 2002). And even if the total number of hours worked has not increased
(allowing for the fact that data on longer hours is contested in, for example, (Robinson, 1997; Gershuny, 2000)), the intensification of work creates perceived time scarcity that derives from jobs that demand continuous learning and expanded availability, a feeling that is often compounded by job insecurity (Warhurst et al., 2008a). Why, would such people want to add a very time-consuming new hobby to their already full plates?

The allotment-holders in this study, which involved eighteen months of fieldwork at two allotment sites in an affluent area of the city, are from an educated, skilled group that includes teachers, engineers, business consultants and IT professionals. I was interested in finding out how this type of busy person fits an allotment into their schedule, also wishing to explore the texture of that experience. In what ways did work, caregiving and the allotment intersect? How did time in the garden feel compared to the hours they devoted to paid employment or caring duties?

The two allotment sites where the research was conducted have experienced overall increased demand in the past five years, including increased interest from professionals in their thirties and forties. This mirrors a nationwide boom in demand for allotments and a shift in allotment demographics, which has led to an estimated 30 applicants for every UK allotment plot, with projected waiting times of up to 40 years in parts of the country (Jones, 2009). As Dan, a housing officer who participated in this study comments, ‘suddenly people we knew had allotments. I mean my boss at work had one and he would rhapsodise about it’ (2011, personal communication). Monitoring the trend, recent studies allude to the role of allotments in creating a balanced lifestyle (London Assembly Environment Committee, 2006; Hope and Ellis, 2009; Kingsley and Townsend, 2009; Murray, 2007), proposing, for example, that allotments support mental health and help people relax (Hope and Ellis, 2009: 28).

This study explores how the idea of relaxation sits with the reality that allotment activity is often time-pressured, busy stuff, shoehorned into a hectic working week. In particular, it pays attention to how time is experienced inside and outside the allotment, also highlighting how ICT devices are managed in a way that enables garden time. While illustrating skilled professionals’ control over how they experience time, this study also draws our attention to the structural constraints that workers encounter when navigating their various responsibilities and desires (Warhurst et al., 2008a: 11). For example, a manager who dreams of balancing a busy morning at the office with a meditative afternoon of weeding is unlikely to reach such a goal effortlessly or without difficult trade-offs. In particular, this study is informed by the idea that our paid work continually extends its reach into our lives, and that our understanding of work can be informed by what, nominally, goes on outside of it (Jaros, 2010; Thompson and Smith, 2010; Thompson and Vincent, 2010) [Jaros p77; T&S p23; T&V p49]. And, being sensitive to the appeal of garden time, it explores whether the allotment might subtly steal time from the office, fomenting – in its welly-clad, sweet-pea-scented way – an intriguing form of resistance to the daily grind.

**Exploring allotment work**

Hawthorn Allotments is a large rectangular site comprising 130 plots, creating what one plotholder calls a ‘vegetable park,’ out of the moors that surround the city centre. Close to the Metro stop and bordered on one side by terraced houses, with a nearby Italian deli that serves toasted ciabatta and marinated olives, it is a

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1 The names of respondents and allotment sites have been changed to protect anonymity.
conveniently urban yet green spot. From the street that skirts the boundary fence the site appears to be an open expanse, checkered with sheds, greenhouses and enamel bathtubs. Entering through one of the wooden gates onto the grass paths that intersect the plots, however, you feel cosier, shielded from the northern wind and from the busy nearby road by leafy beanpoles, fruit bushes, and wooden structures. Most plots have somewhere to sit, often a bench tucked at the side of a shed, but sometimes a folding chair or even an upturned crate where you can have a conversation to the backdrop of birdsong and occasional roadworks.

In June and July of 2011, I sat in such a fashion with people on their plots over a three-week period, conversing about their vegetables, their allotmenting history, and their jobs. In total, I audio-recorded 31 interviews at Hawthorne of 30-60 minutes in length, with a mix of working, semi-retired and retired plotholders ranging from their late-twenties to mid-seventies. This particular article highlights interview data from working plotholders, but my overall sense of the site was influenced by testimony from the broader set of interviews.

Access to the site was straightforward as I am a member of the local allotment community and a close relative is the Chairman of a nearby site. The Secretary of Hawthorne Allotments, an energetic seventy year old, responded helpfully to my search for interviewees, giving me a key to the site, broadcasting my email invitation and contact details to the site’s members as well as allowing me to place posters on all of the entry gates to the site.

My own allotment activity, which is an integral part of this study, made the interviews a two-way conversation, often involving exchange of similar experiences. For the past seven years I have helped out regularly on my parents’ allotment plot at Blackberry Allotments, which is on an adjacent much smaller site alongside the Metro tracks. Since January 2011, I have kept a photographic journal of my own allotment experience and, in June 2012 I obtained my own plot at Blackberry Allotments, which, although it is only a third of the size of a regular plot, is a large undertaking for a full-time lecturer with two small children. In addition to my fieldnotes about my own allotmenting activity, I also conducted an additional five recorded interviews at the Blackberry site, with plotholders whom I know already. I live nearby and, due to similar allotmenting or caregiving responsibilities, I am in fairly regular contact with several of the interviewees from both sites, who have continued to inform me of their progress during the study. My own engagement in allotment activity has informed my conversations with allotment holders, helping me to develop questions and identify emerging themes.

As in much ethnography (Duneier, 2000; Van Maanen, 1991; Wacquant, 2004), my subjectivity is an integral aspect of the research and I have not tried to excise it, but have endeavoured to articulate feelings and experiences in a way that busy plotholders would read as a reasonable interpretation of their world. With this in mind, all participants were offered the opportunity to read and comment on their transcribed interviews (25 did so); and four of the participants read and provided constructive feedback on an early draft of this journal article as well as discussing ideas throughout.

Drawing on Pink (2007; Pink, 2009), the research design incorporated visual and sensory methodology, acknowledging the ‘sensuous interrelationship of body-mind-environment’ (2009: 25) at the allotment. Interviews were intentionally conducted on the plots so that smells and sounds of the garden worked their way into the conversation. Additionally, my photo journal and fieldnotes were focused on the visual, tactile, auditory and olfactory experience of the allotment, providing rich
sensory data. In keeping with the research focus, the interviews invited people to reflect on their sense of the allotment in relation to their working lives, aiming to capture the entanglement (Ingold, 2008) of the plot with places elsewhere. Finally, conversations often dwelled upon the role of childhood memories or family associations with gardening, reflecting on how these experiences were intertwined with the allotment present (Mason and Davies, 2009).

The transcribed data was coded using qualitative data analysis software with emergent themes identified using techniques drawn from grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The interpretation of the data, while somewhat inductive, is also deeply informed by my own critical theoretical orientation toward work and work-life balance, which is in turn entangled with my own efforts to negotiate work-life boundaries by growing my own potatoes. Writing up the data, I have endeavoured to respect this layered interpretation of social reality. In particular, within the constraints of article-length, I have endeavoured to retain some of the richness of expression that allotmenting encourages and to resist the tendency to reduce or resolve its contradictory aspects (Van Maanen, 1988: 116).

Social control of allotments through regulation and incentives

In Newcastle’s allotment sites, power is devolved, with each site overseen by a management committee consisting of a minimum of three, usually the Secretary, Chairman and Treasurer. They regulate activities, managing the waiting list and handling cases of plot neglect. Site regulations, funding, and special events such as the city’s annual Allotment and Garden Show are overseen by the citywide Allotments Working Group comprising representatives from the various sites, and an Allotments Officer who is employed by the City Council. However, most plotholder interaction is with the local committee in charge of a specific site, which has a degree of autonomy in terms of how strictly the regulations are enforced. Hawthorn allotments has a reputation for being a very well-managed site but this also means that regulations regarding plot neglect are quite strictly enforced out of consideration for the people on the waiting list as well as part of an effort to prevent weed infestation. Members are also responsible for maintaining the grass paths of their plots, and receive a warning if these become overgrown.

Blackberry allotments, being a smaller site, has a somewhat more relaxed management style in terms of the frequency of formal inspections and number of weed warnings issued but regulations are nevertheless enforced. At both sites there is a general sense that a neglected plot, overgrown is unwelcome and somewhat frowned upon. At the same time, there are plenty of positive incentives, for example, as well as hearing the compliments of fellow plotholders, successful or hardworking gardeners may find themselves nominated for citywide prizes such as Best Newcomer or Most Improved Plot. Through a mix of positive social incentives and negative incentives, allotments demand a certain, continuous level of attention. This socially regulated need for regular investment of time, as this study illustrates, makes allotments particularly attractive to busy people who find their hobbies are too easily put aside amidst intense work and caregiving schedules.

Wanting to Make Time

Andrew is an engineer at a factory that manufactures confectionery, using lean production to compete with factories in cheaper European locations. The job is intense and often fascinating but he and his partner, who also works a busy fulltime
job, recently took on the allotment because they felt that ‘work was becoming the be all and end all of everything’ (2011, personal communication). Unlike some of his other leisure interests, the allotment seems to demand time and, in doing so, has forced Andrew to curtail some of his extra working hours: ‘The weeds are growing, and you’ve got to keep on top of everything, it does make you make the time. My fallback position on a Saturday and Sunday morning would actually be to have gone into work.’ For Andrew, taking on an allotment is related to work’s tendency to expand into his free time. By competing successfully for his weekend hours, the allotment has enabled him to curtail that encroachment in a satisfying way.

For some plotholders, the desire for dilated, meandering time has emerged from a sense that, in embracing the structured intensity of working life, they have lost a part of themselves. Sam, a business consultant who, like Andrew, took on an allotment in order to create a kind of recreational obligation to balance the intensity of his work, feels he is gradually restoring a desultory way of spending time that he enjoyed as a student. He jokes that he had tried browsing in a bookshop recently, something that at one time would have taken up a whole afternoon, only to find that he was completely unable to do it: ‘I think I’ve forgotten what it’s like to have that time.’ His work life, which involves delivering customized training and advice to nonprofit and public sector organisations, has inured him to a particular way of filling every moment, but he feels that pottering about on the allotment has given him a different sense of time that reminds him of a lost part of himself, a part that he wants to restore.

Although pleasantly caught up in the demands of their professions, these plotholders are experiencing a need to carve out time for something other than their jobs and, once they do so, they savour the relatively relaxed and unpressured way that this time feels. However, the allotment also creates a new source of time scarcity. ‘What the allotment has done,’ Andrew comments, ‘although we enjoy it very much, it’s actually made other things in our lives more difficult. So you’re juggling more things.’ Those with additional caregiving responsibilities feel this tension particularly acutely, particularly given site rules that punish overgrown paths and plots with weed warnings, threatening serious offenders with possible expulsion. As one plotholder who goes back and forth to another city to care for her elderly mother comments, ‘At the same time that this is incredibly relaxing and fruitful, it also can be stress-inducing’ (2011, personal conversation).

The allotment appears to exacerbate time scarcity, and the willing embrace of its demands by time-pressed working people suggests the ‘constant busyness’ that Hochschild has called the new opiate of the masses (2008: 89). Being busy is increasingly a symbol of high status and our leisure time is immersed in a discourse of continuous improvement where we feel pressure ‘to organize “free time” productively, to fit in more activities’ (Webb, 2006: 176), a feeling that is interwoven with and interdependent upon intensification at work. Yet, as a kind of obligatory leisure, the allotment is also a kind of trick that busy people can play upon themselves in order to slow down. It is hard to fit in, yet demands attention due to the social pressure that discourages neglect, and in doing so gives access to a way of spending time that transcends busyness and makes time disappear, a realm in which the hand hoe and desultory chatter hold sway.

**Losing Track of Time**

For people whose days are governed by tightly scheduled calendars of meetings and deadlines, the sensation of losing track of time is a rare indulgence.
Hattie, an IT project coordinator and mother of two small children says that she completely loses perspective on time when she is on her plot; others comment that time ‘disappears’ or that they find themselves late for work after checking in on the plot in the early morning and getting carried away.

Many of the plotholders I interviewed associate this sense of timelessness with absorption in physical tasks, something that is suggestive of a state of flow (Csikszentmihályi, 1997). Several people spoke of time disappearing while digging or hoeing, awareness only returning when nagging hunger or fading light compelled them to stop. Dan, who is a relatively new plotholder, was pleasantly surprised by this sensation when he planted out his first potatoes: ‘I hadn’t noticed that the weather had gone from being sunny to chucking it down with rain and I was completely soaked through, and I also hadn’t realized that it was one o’clock in the afternoon and people had been coming in and going out and half the day had gone past and I literally had no sense of time whatsoever’ (2011, personal communication). This sense of timelessness is linked by some to a sense of autonomy, which facilitates the sense of flow. For example, Liam, a lecturer who is very familiar with Csikszentmihályi’s work, relates how his sense of ownership and self-direction allows him to lose himself in what he is doing on the allotment: ‘it’s one of the very, very few things in my life that is entirely up to me. If it all goes horribly wrong it doesn’t matter, it’s my learning experience’ (2011, personal communication).

Allotmenteers also link their sensation of time slowing down or disappearing to notions of space and place. At Blackberry allotments, where the entranceway comprises a tall wooden gate and a walk through a forsythia and ivy archway, the sense of boundary-crossing is palpable. And at Hawthorn, grassy pathways and sheltered nooks give a sense of spatial separation from the nearby road. In describing their sense of place, plotholders used terms that denote this separation, such as a ‘tranquil oasis from my life’ or a ‘protected place’. Crossing the allotment threshold, some find that their usual clutter of chores necessarily recedes into the background – as Louise, a teacher and mother of two, comments: ‘if I’m here, I can’t do the ironing’ (2011, personal communication). The space communicates a temporary sense that time is abundant – once in this mode, several plotholders said that they enjoyed being side-tracked by allotment neighbours and not planning out their garden tasks but rather feeling them out in a time-rich fashion. Yet, this meandering sensibility intermingles with a sense of getting along with garden tasks, of physical achievement and satisfaction when things turn from seeds into crops. The allotment, ostensibly, satisfies the need to feel busy and productive during leisure time while also permitting plotholders to lose themselves a little, submitting to a less structured, less intensified rhythm.

Thinking Time

Interestingly, this process of losing oneself in time and escaping from the demands of one’s job seems to lead unwittingly to strategic and creative reflection about work, resulting in constructive thinking time that has positive ramifications in the world outside of the garden. Garden time, for many of the plotholders, enables a type of thinking that they find difficult to achieve in other settings, and which adds value to their digging or weeding time in ways, which may help to sustain it against the backdrop of time scarcity.

Several plotholders emphasized that strategic thinking about work is something that happens unintentionally, in the background, while lost in gardening tasks. As Hattie explains, ‘it’s like a timeout for my brain, I can think about
something completely different, and often problems that I might have at work just solve themselves in the background’ (2011, personal communication). This is echoed by a nurse who notes that some of the issues related to cases she is handling seem to solve themselves while absorbed in garden tasks: ‘I suppose you’re multi-tasking without even realizing it’ (2011, personal communication).

Several of the plotholders noted that the garden was particularly useful in terms of processing conflict and worry or, as one plotholder put it, ‘digging your troubles into the soil.’ For example, a landlord describes how ridging up his potatoes after dealing with a difficult student tenant can lend him a ‘sensible, balanced, considered approach’ that he values greatly (2011, personal communication). This processing of tension through gardening activity is contrasted with time spent sitting and mulling over problems. As one plotholder, a former teacher, comments, ‘If I sat I’d end up almost doing a worrying type of thinking. This goes round and round in circles and sort of like a terrier’ (2011, personal communication). Thinking while allotmenting was likened to wandering freely, entering the wild blue yonder and ‘mindless boogie’ – a distracted state that seems simultaneously to process and smooth out troubles.

This sub-conscious problem-solving and planning was frequently highlighted by plotholders working in engineering, town planning, IT, teaching and healthcare. Having made time for the allotment and succeeded in slowing time down, these plotholders find themselves re-engaging with work problems in a way that does not seem to pierce the tranquility of garden time. The feeling of being unpressed and the act of directing the mind onto the garden leads, in turn, to insights that are valued in the busy world outside. This process of escaping work yet subconsciously meditating on it resonates with scholarship that treats work and life as overlapping domains (Warhurst et al., 2008b). For those in professions that demand creative and strategic thinking, the allotment can indulge a need to escape one’s job, while simultaneously generating insights about work that are instrumentally useful. The allotment is, simultaneously, a type of performance-enhancing leisure and an unfolding of self into a time and space that is disconnected from rationalised efficiency. It is a complex interplay, a dance between the timeless expanse of the wild blue yonder and the structured intensity of work.

Although the desire for such time is evident, this process unfolds for many working plotholders, as a tense, time-poor negotiation. The way in which plotholders manage work, caregiving and allotmenting shows a degree of control over their time and an ability to optimize the rhythm of their day. Intertwined with the intensity of contemporary work, the allotment can easily take on a tantalizing, frustrating quality, pointing to unrealisable dreams and desires. However, the need to stay on top of the weeds creates an extra push that can help to stem the encroachment of work into personal time.

**The Encroachment of Time Pressure**

David, an investment executive for a local firm, enjoys engaging in freewheeling conversation with other plotholders, but he is simultaneously aware that stopping to chat can take up 15 minutes of the 45 minutes he has available for his allotment visit (2011, personal communication). Business Consultant Sam is not so acutely time-pressured but feels constantly a little bit behind on his allotment tasks, and dreams of having a substantial window of time to get back on track: ‘If only my family would take a long weekend away somewhere and leave me alone, I’d come down and I’d sort all those weeds out and I would feel really good at the end of it’
This feeling of anxiety or frustration about getting behind can begin to interfere with the relaxed sensibility that the plot seems to offer. Caught up in childcare and doing her IT job, Hattie is increasingly finding it hard to visit her allotment regularly, and has received weed warnings from the committee — she comments that what used to feel like an escape is becoming a chore.

In the face of time scarcity, plotholders develop resourceful ways of getting more out of the available hours. David works long hours in his investment job but also needs to fulfill childcare duties during his spare time; the only way he could make the allotment work was to develop new ways to multitask: ‘So it meant my spare time somehow has got to be shared, or not even shared, it’s got to be doing looking after the kids and looking after the allotment. So we built a sandpit and gravel pit at the end of it to plonk the kids in, so I could then do a bit of digging’ (2011, personal communication). This kind of multitasking is a prevalent theme when looking at the broad array of allotment tasks that need to be squeezed in, such as cleaning mucky irregularly shaped vegetables that are deposited on the kitchen bench at home, often spoiling for want of time to clean them. Plotholders faced with a lack of time at home to deal with produce described techniques that they had developed for efficient processing, such as straining redcurrants instead of destalking them and roping in family members to help with podding broad beans while watching a movie.

For people who are already busy, the general sense is one of making many resourceful economies with time, their most scarce resource. David, who in addition to building the sandpit for his kids has replaced his gym evenings with lunchtime workouts, feels like he is trying to use ‘every single last minute of every day,’ while Dan jokes that he has no time left to sit on the couch, since he is always on the go.

Technology and garden time

Within this nexus of busyness and desire for a time out, plotholders manage technology in a way that enables garden time, freeing themselves from the constant email-checking, texting and phone ringing of life outside, yet remaining connected enough to carers and loved ones that they can enjoy their allotment time without worry. For some, the allotment provides encouragement to let go of technology, given the prevailing sense that using the phone at the allotment is somehow inappropriate to the culture and setting. David feels that the phone is out of place on the allotment and finds himself being short with work colleagues when they call him there. Dan feels that the allotment is a space where work should not intrude and says that taking a work phone call on his plot or even hearing someone else do so would irretrievably spoil his time there.

Disconnecting from mobile technology is one of the key ways in which plotholders interrupt their usual sense of time and escape the tasks and demands that structure their work day. A surveyor, who recently went through a difficult period at work feels that the allotment cut him off from technology in a healthy way: ‘When I was severely stressed I used to love this, because it was just somewhere…the phone didn’t ring, nobody could email me, and I just disappeared for a couple of hours’ (2012, personal communication). Creating a technology-free bubble at the allotment allows the movement from structured to unstructured time. Andrew the engineer explicitly avoids reading work emails at the allotment in order to experience time of his own in which his mind can clear. Hattie shares this practice of putting down her Smartphone, interrupting the stream of actionable emails and texts, while also escaping Facebook, which can easily eat up her scarce allotment time. For both, this distancing manoeuvre allows an expanse of time, however brief, to open up.
Hattie’s avoidance of technology at the allotment extends to her way of gaining information about what to grow and how to grow it: ‘I prefer asking people, because elsewhere in my life I’d been looking on the Internet and reading probably for information. But I really wanted to get away from all of that as part of the allotment.’ Talking to fellow allotment holders and sharing advice and insights represents a slower-paced rhythm of knowledge-sharing and is something that enhances Hattie’s sense of participating in a time-rich practice.

Other plot holders have a more technologically integrated approach to obtaining and sharing information yet still seem cognizant of the traditional culture in which they are immersed. Liam, who is the youngest plot holder I interviewed, obtains on the spot information about his vegetables using a gardening app from the Royal Horticultural Society, and keeps a photo diary of his plot, sending images to his mum and sister who have allotments in other parts of the country, for comparison or advice. Yet, as a newcomer to the site, he also feels self-conscious about his relative youth and is aware that his phone use disrupts the lo-tech norm of allotment culture, commenting ‘I am wary to be seen being on the phone by other allotment users’ (2011, personal communication). Even for those who integrate technology and allotmenting, there is a normative sense that the older tools and modes of interaction should prevail, something that paves the way for a generally slower pace.

For those with caregiving responsibilities, the phone is an enabling device that allows them to be selectively cut off but reachable. As Hattie comments, ‘my daughter is in care, and I need to be contactable. So it’s set to loud, and it’s put away, and I don’t look at it’ (2011, personal communication). Others carry a phone in case anything is going on with elderly relatives or in case they have an accident themselves, valuing the sense of being able to reach out in case of an emergency. And, aware of how they lose track of time at the allotment, some use their mobile as an alarm clock to signal when it is time to go to work, pick children up from school, or be home for dinner.

Mobile technology also creates opportunities for flexible working that enable plot holders to integrate working and gardening time in novel ways. Tom, a taxi driver, carries a wireless device that allows him to receive information about his next job while catching up on the weeding. In his white shirt and black tie, he rolls up his sleeves to do a little gardening during quiet spells on the daytime shift. For those in very flexible roles that demand being connected but not tied to an office desk, mobile technologies can be used selectively to carry out allotment work during work hours. Checking hourly that there are no urgent calls or emails coming in offers plot holders an opportunity to indulge in some garden time while simultaneously meeting the demands of work.

This strategic management of technology indicates a level of power and control that workers have in intertwining their work and leisure activities in ways that are optimal to them, something that resonates with Nippert-Eng’s (Nippert-Eng, 1996b; Nippert-Eng, 1996a) work on contemporary work-life boundaries. The way in which time is negotiated to maximize personal fulfillment is a reminder that juggling intense recreational activity and one’s job can be functional and pleasurable (Webb, 2006). However, the encroachment of time pressure is a looming constraint that threatens to sully the experience, changing the character of allotment time such that what has felt like an escape becomes a grind. In talking to plot holders about their allotment, the cost of such intensity also becomes clear, indicating that their desired level of garden time remains out of reach. This sense of unmet desire is reminiscent of Hochschild’s notion of the “potential self,” based on time-pressed parents who
'dreamed of living as time millionaires,' stockpiling camping equipment, musical instruments and sporting gear in their garages and attics for leisure moments that never seem to arrive (Hochschild, 1997). Yet, unlike equipment and tools, the allotment does not lay dormant, waiting patiently for attention. It is this aspect, the plot’s ability to grow unkempt and demand attention that makes it particularly appealing to those who want to rediscover time.

**Obligatory leisure and the potential self**

This study of busy people on their allotments illustrates that enjoyment of the allotment derives in a sense from its otherness, from its sharp contrast with the world of appointments and rapid-fire communications. Plotholders savour such time against the backdrop of demands and scheduled commitments that structures their daily lives. The pull of the outside world prevents this time from taking on an anomic quality, something that Dan, who remembers having no structure while unemployed, greatly values. He comments about his time on the dole, ‘After a while it palls, doesn’t it, because you’ve got no money and too much time on your hands.’ Others comment that, although they indulge in the fantasy of giving up work and spending all day on their plot, they are actually very glad to have their jobs. Sam, who is finding himself less committed to work as his career progresses, says ‘I’ve become a bit blasé about it but I’m sure if it was gone, I’d start to think, you know, I wish that was back.’

Nevertheless, while appreciating the value of their professional or caregiving identity and enjoying the sense of busyness that it imparts, they also feel a need for more time spent outside of that realm. Dan would like to work less than full-time to free up more hours for his allotment so that he didn’t always feel rushed or slightly behind, but at the moment this is not economically viable. Working within this constraint, the allotment provides a respite – and a comforting sense of a slower self – that contrasts with his intense work and childcare responsibilities. For others, such as Andrew working as an engineer in a UK factory, the constraint relates to what seems to be a hardwired rhythm of his chosen profession. He comments that long intense hours seem to come with the territory, meaning a 50, 60 or 70 hour week is the price to pay for an interesting and creatively challenging job. The allotment, by pulling him away from weekend factory work prevents his job from taking over his life, and he would like it if he had more time to spend there.

For those who are juggling multiple responsibilities and feeling time-pressured, the allotment can indeed seem a sort of potential self (Hochschild, 1997), part of a desired lifestyle that does not quite materialize. To have an allotment is to hold the promise of endless summer evenings, *alfresco* dining using salad vegetables plucked from the soil, and family time spent mucking in with the weeding and harvesting. These activities, and this expanded way of spending time, are often hoped for but not quite achieved. Yet, being pushed by the allotment to set even a little time aside for weeding and tending the plot sets in motion the realisation of that allotment self, however partially. Louise describes how she and her husband have bought extra tools so that the family can work together on the plot, and how they have had some success so far in fitting in some pleasant hours where the kids help with the jobs or just hang out. She is hoping that once they’ve had the plot for a little while it will fit around her teaching job and become part of their lifestyle: ‘we’ll come and we’ll sit of an evening and just unwind’ (2011, personal communication). This lifestyle seems quite far from their current fairly frenetic daily rhythm, and she jokes, ‘come back in a year’s time and ask us if it’s ever been like that!’ However, she and her husband feel
that the allotment is allowing them to push back a little against the pervasiveness of work, helping them as a family to carve out more quality time.

Inhabiting garden time, even as something that is shoehorned into an intense schedule, can facilitate reflection on work-life balance. Directly experimenting with spending time in a new way without encountering anomie can lead to a sense of personal rediscovery, and of wanting to spend more time that way. Some plotholders who are later on in their careers and relatively free of caregiving responsibilities or economic constraints have found that their allotment becomes part of a strategy of gradually cutting back on work without sensing a loss of status or social connection.

One, a computer project reviewer, who made a concerted effort to change his working pattern after two relatives died young, comments, ‘now I’ve turned jobs down because I’ve felt, no, that’s the summer, that’s when I’m picking in the allotment’ (2011, personal communication) Another plotholder, who has switched careers and now works a twenty hour week, feels he has learned the right balance through experiencing imbalance. Reflecting on the amount of time he spends on his plot versus managing his work duties, he says ‘I know what you might regard as getting it wrong is, I’d rather think this is what getting it right is.’ This learning process can come about in a less planned way, through periods of underemployment. For example, Sam, who has found some of his work temporarily drying up in the current recession, has found the allotment to be a valuable stop-gap in terms of filling the day, but along the way has tasted a slower pace of life that makes him ambivalent about stepping up his workload again, when the opportunity arises.

Being linked to a particular sense of self, the allotment can be difficult to give up, in spite of time pressure. David the investment executive comments that his allotment sometimes feels like a noose around his neck but he is unwilling to admit it: ‘I kind of deny it, you know -- it’s not too much, we’re not taking on too much, I can manage -- just because I enjoy it.’ However, the pressure is sometimes overwhelming, especially as competing responsibilities are added. A year after the original interviews, David had given up his plot due to the arrival of a new baby. Caught in a similar time-crunch, Hattie had moved to a different allotment site that offers mini-plots and is nearby her child’s nursery. And Sam who upsized to an ambitious full plot during the lull in his work, has since found that he was unable to manage, and is in the process of downsizing again. Although the allotment can exert a certain pressure on busy workers to carve up their time differently, it often gives way to intense careers and caregiving responsibilities. Nevertheless, the struggle is an impassioned one, in which the decision to give up or downsize is often tough and sometimes even soul-wrenching.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

This study illustrates that allotments appeal to busy people, in part, because they demand attention, pushing back against the encroachment of work into previously uncolonised areas of daily life. In pulling busy people away from their work and caregiving responsibilities, even for snatched periods, the garden offers an experience of time that is distinct and valued.

The boundary between allotment and outside is marked by a break with work. Smartphones are put away or ignored; banter about nematodes or how to space leeks holds sway; and a pottering absorption in physical tasks allows the mind to wander and open up. Yet this boundary is also blurred (Warhurst et al., 2008a), as work-related problems or puzzles solve themselves in the background while digging, or
pleasantly offer themselves up to creative reflection while planting out onion sets. These job-related thoughts, occurring in the expanded time of the garden, do not pierce the moment or violate the sense of escape that the allotment affords. Furthermore, in professions such as teaching and engineering, which demand creative and strategic thinking, these insights can be invaluable when carried back to work.

Although certainly not antithetic to one’s profession, the garden simultaneously suggests an alternate way of spending time that is compelling and which subtly militates against overwork. Having made time for the garden, plotholders rediscover a way of being that is not governed by deadlines, appointments and the constant stream of electronic communications. Each hour spent in the relatively timeless realm of the garden provokes critical reflection on the quality of life that derives from intensely structured time outside. Where economic and caregiving constraints allow, this can lead to a concerted effort to shift the balance and to arrest the extension of work.

Where structural constraints prevent this control, however, plotholders often struggle to find enough time to spend on their plot, and this shortcoming suggests an unrealised ‘potential self’ (Hochschild, 1997) that remains in a tantalizing relationship with the garden. Snatched garden moments are insufficient to bring about the type of experience desired, and there is a frustrating sense of being always a little behind. Yet, in requiring frequent attention, the garden exerts a pull on busy people that coaxes them into realising, at least partly, some of their gardening desires, whether this means a summer evening of family time working the plot or a long Sunday afternoon of weeding and picnicking. Incrementally, this way of spending time promotes an attachment and a level of enjoyment that makes giving it up or cutting back to make room for work a heavy decision.

Technology is strategically managed in a way that enables this experience, permitting plotholders to feel sufficiently connected to their responsibilities in a way that permits a temporary, guilt-free escape. Selectively cutting themselves off from text messaging, phone and email, plotholders interrupt the task-oriented communications that structure their work day. Yet, they also take advantage of mobile technology to flexibly intersperse work duties and allotmenting, to feel connected to caregivers, or simply as an alarm that snaps them out of the timelessness of the garden when it is time to return to duties elsewhere.

Busy people on their allotments demonstrate technologically enhanced control over how their time and responsibilities are carved up, using ingenious and resourceful ways to maximize their self-development and fulfillment. They illustrate a fulfilling and even exhilarating oscillation between tranquility and intensity that is made possible in the urban environment. Yet, there is also a sense that the intensity often becomes overwhelming or feels unsustainable; that the task of fitting everything becomes onerous, and that the plot, which has given so much pleasure, can become a worrisome burden. This suggests a limited and often contingent level of control that busy professionals experience in an intensified work environment. Amidst the pressure of juggling work demands and caregiving responsibilities, garden time is often sacrificed. Yet this sacrifice is made with a heavy heart that knows, and remains intriguingly loyal to, the enchanted other time of the garden.

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