

TIME-USE EXPERT EXPLAINS HIS RESEARCH METHODS AND SURPRISING FINDINGS

A sociologist who has spent his career studying how Americans use their time described his research at a recent MARIAL colloquium. John P. Robinson is director of the Americans' Use of Time Project at the University of Maryland, the oldest and most comprehensive study of how Americans use time. Since 1965 he has analyzed data that tries to document how Americans spend the twenty-four hours in a day. The data is derived from time-diaries that Americans fill out to show what they did each hour of the day.

With that information, Robinson has studied continuities and changes in the relative amounts of time mothers and fathers spend on paid work, housework, children, sleep, TV, and other ways of spending time. Many of his findings are surprising, because they seem to contradict the conventional wisdom that suggests Americans are overworked, exhausted, and in general time deprived. “In the course of my research, just about everything I’ve heard about time is wrong,” said Robinson.

One of the biggest myths, he said, is that people have less free time than they did years ago. His research shows that Americans actually have more free time than they did when the studies were first taken in 1965. This finding was detailed in *Time for Life: The Surprising Ways Americans Use Their Time*, which Robinson wrote with Geoffrey Godbey, professor of leisure studies in Penn State’s College of Health and Human Development. Published in 1999, the book contains results from the 1995–1997 national time-diary study of more than 10,000 respondents of all ages across the country. These respondents reported

on all their activities across a twenty-four-hour day to compare with earlier national studies completed in 1965, 1975, and 1985.

The most recent study found that Americans between eighteen and sixty-one years old reported 41 hours a week of free time in their daily diaries, compared to about 25 hours a week in 1965 and 39.5 hours in 1985. A notable gender gap in free time emerged, with men reporting 5 more hours a week of free time than women—43.6 hours for men vs. 38.5 hours for women.

In his MARIAL lecture, Robinson explained his methodology and said the numbers don’t lie. “This is a zero-sum property. The diary always has to have 168 hours per week.” Each diary documents a single day in the respondent’s life. “We ask people to tell us what they did. What were you doing yesterday, beginning at midnight. What time did you start? What time did you stop? Who was with you? Were you doing anything else at the time?”

Robinson said Americans generally overestimate when asked how much time they think they spend doing certain activities, such as working. When he compares their estimates to what they actually record in their time-diaries, they are different numbers. “More and more people have been reporting longer work weeks, but there is an exaggeration factor here,” he said. Overall, he said, people estimate they work forty-five hours per week, but the time recorded in their diaries shows they work about forty hours per week.

“There is a distinct difference between what people purport to do and what they record in their diary,” he said. Women tend to overestimate their work hours more than men, Robinson said. “This is for paid labor. The time-diaries show they work fifty hours per week, but they estimated eighty hours per week.”

Both men and women overestimate how much time they spend on housework, volunteering, and attending religious services, he said. They underestimate how much free time they have, he said, a finding that no one seems to believe. “Over time, we have had an increase in leisure time,” Robinson said.

Robinson’s forthcoming book, *Changing Rhythms of American Family Life*—which he wrote with Suzanne Bianchi and Melissa Milkie—offers some provocative and controversial answers to such questions as: how have parental practices been impacted by parents’ increased work hours? How have the relative contributions of men and women to paid work, family, and alternative pursuits changed—and with what implications for gender equality now and in the future? ■



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