Chapter 1.7
Understanding Time and its Relationship to Individual Time Management

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INTRODUCTION

Time never has been an easy concept, since each of us has different time perceptions and experiences. Individual time management stories can vary dramatically because of a variety of reasons, such as different backgrounds, professions, social roles, cultures, gender and so on. The main focus of this book is on socially-constructed time, which demonstrates how humans interact with time in their social contexts. This perspective of time provides a good basis to understand how individuals experience time and furthermore manage their time. This chapter introduces the concept of time based on prior time research and its related concepts. First, it describes how difficult it is to interpret what time is and how scientists in different disciplines explain the nature of time.

This chapter also explains what time dichotomies are by providing examples. The time dichotomies described include quantitative and qualitative time, clock-based and event-based time, and linear and cyclical time, which are different forms or representations of the main stream time dichotomy - objective and socially-constructed time. A key contribution that social psychologists bring to time research is having a convergent understanding of time instead of separating the dual aspects of time. As primary time artifacts, clock and calendar are also introduced in this chapter. Clock is a common metaphor for measuring the objective time with seconds, minutes, and hours, while calendar is another popular tool for recording subjective or socially constructed time with meaningful schedules.

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Furthermore, in order to interpret individual time management practices, a conceptual research framework is proposed by integrating a few key time concepts (such as socially-constructed time, temporal structures and calendar tools, etc.) to understand what relationships exist between temporal perception and individual time management involving calendar tools. The main assumption is that individuals utilize their personal calendar tools to capture, manipulate, and create various temporal structures or sociotemporal patterns for achieving their time management goals.

Another objective of this chapter is to give an introduction of the primary concepts utilized in this research and to serve as a precursor for later chapters. These chapters interpret the complexity of temporal phenomena that individual time managers experience in their daily practices and explain how current electronic calendar tools could be better designed from a human-computer interaction point of view.

THE CONCEPT OF TIME

Everyone experiences time, but it is difficult to define and interpret it. Just as Bluedorn (2002) states, "*They are neither uniform nor the same from one moment to the next. Thus all times are not the same…Yet of its truth there can be no doubt, a truth that can be demonstrated easily because only one time need differ from all others to make it true*" (p. 3). Time is an important measurement of human affairs. However, who exactly knows what time is? The following quote from St. Augustine (1961)'s statement illustrates how difficult the concept of time is:

What is time? Who is able to easily and briefly explain that? Who is able … And surely, we understand it well enough when we speak of it; we understand it also when in speaking with another we hear it named. What is time then? If nobody asks me, I know, but if I were desirous to explain it to one that should ask me, plainly I know not.

- St. Augustine's Confessions, Book 11, Chapter 14 (Augustine 1961, p.294).

Different fields provide various explanations of the concept of time, but they are debatable and skeptical. Much time work has been done in philosophy, classical and modern physics, biological sciences, and some in anthropology and sociology disciplines. Mathematics and classical physical science think that time has an abstract dimension. A Newtonian assumes that time is absolute, true, and mathematical, flows uniformly, and is abstract and external to events. However, Einstein's famous relativity theory describes that a slowing of time for clocks with a constant velocity is related to a referent observer. Also, clocks tick at different rates if they are located in different positions within a gravitational field (Einstein, 1949). Coveney and Highfield (1990) point out that no two temporal intervals in the history of the universe are characterized by the same amount of entropy. In addition, the biological scientists regard time as an essential ingredient of our life and behavioral processes. However, it seems that time is not simply objective or subjective, so social psychologists bring both together, giving time dual aspects, which were considered the main time contribution of the psychology field (McGrath & Kelly, 1986). Bluedorn (2002) states "*And differing times mean variance among times, and that variance creates the potential to explain other phenomena because a constant explains no variance…but to be concerned about such differences suggests that the differences matter, and matter they do, profoundly.*" Therefore, based upon how human beings understand the reality of time, time has its dual aspects: objective and subjective perspectives.

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