It makes you make the time: ‘Obligatory’ leisure, work intensification and allotment gardening

Abstract

This ethnographic study of busy allotment-holders explores the juxtaposition of time spent on the allotment with paid employment and caregiving. Highlighting the recent surge in allotment demand among professionals such as nurses and educators, the article examines the seeming contradiction of adding a very time-consuming responsibility onto an already packed schedule. It shows how the allotment’s normative structure creates a sense of obligation, helping busy professionals make the time to explore what most pleases. The research is informed by the idea that paid work continually extends its reach and that leisure is caught up in the dynamics of intensification. It suggests instrumental use of the allotment in ways that are functional for wage labour, yet it also argues that contemporary leisure has been over-characterised as an extension of internalized control and urges closer attention to the allotment as fertile soil for the post-work imaginary. [144 words]

Keywords: allotment, garden, intensification, leisure, time scarcity, work-life balance, work-life boundary, work ethic, post-work, resistance. Word count: 8474

Introduction

‘The gardener digs in another time, without past or future, beginning or end.’

-- Derek Jarman, Modern Nature
Over the course of their 200-year history, allotment gardens in the UK have been intertwined with wage labour, providing respite from the coal face or engine room and supplementing income during periods of unemployment or wartime shortage (Crouch and Ward, 1988). In recent years, UK allotment waiting lists have reached up to 40 years (Jones, 2009). Widening interest in the practice – including a surge in demand among younger professionals – has stimulated a body of research (Buck, 2016; Hope and Ellis, 2009) that celebrates the mental, physical and ecological benefits associated with gardening. However, there is a lack of research that examines how working age people integrate an allotment into their lives. Such research is vital in order to understand more fully the impact of contemporary time scarcity and to appreciate and develop the potential of allotments in moving towards a sustainable society.

Based on several years of participant listening (Forsey, 2010) and observation at two allotment sites in Newcastle Upon Tyne, the potato-growing efforts of educators, engineers and other busy professionals are used here as a window on contemporary leisure unfolding in a climate where ‘trends towards long hours and intensification of work are widely reported’ (Pedersen and Lewis, 2012: 465) and where the work-life boundary is often blurred, reframing ‘leisure as labour, life as work’ (Land and Taylor, 2010: 408).

This ethnographic exploration of the texture of time spent at the allotment responds to the call for more empirical work to investigate how paid work intersects with recreation (Land and Taylor, 2010; Lewis, 2003; Ransome, 2008), recognising that there is ‘more to work-life balance than paid work and unpaid caregiving’ (Ransome, 2008: 62). While finding resonance with theoretical framings of recreational activity as relatively ‘non-obligated time’ (Lewis, 2003: 345) that is
too easily given up (Hochschild, 1997) or as increasingly *obligated to* wage labour
(Ford and Collinson, 2011; Hochschild, 2008; Land and Taylor, 2010) the study
proposes a theoretical modification that accommodates the seductive spirit of
recreational activity in undermining the work ethic.

The gardeners in the study are caught up in two dynamics: a) ‘constant
busyness’ (Hochschild, 2008: 89), sometimes exhilarating, often stressful, which
eats up and/or reframes their leisure time as wage labour and b) an embrace of
the allotment’s normative structures that *obligates them to the garden*, forcing
them to set time aside from their paid job for weeding and planting. This added
garden obligation can itself become stressful but allows gardeners to gain access
to a sensual, poetic engagement that decentres the professional work ethic and
creates time for ‘what most pleases us’ (Aronowitz et al., 1998; Weeks, 2011).
Without trying to reduce allotment gardening to one or the other of these
intertwined dynamics, the study thus accepts the logic of colonization of leisure
by wage labour but infuses this with an intriguing trope of resistance that
unfolds among the brassicas.

The article is structured as follows. First, a brief review of scholarship on
work-life boundaries (WLB), intensification and recreation, highlighting the dearth of
existing research on how allotments are embedded into working life. The
methodological framework is then outlined and the findings are presented around
three overlapping themes that emerged from the data: 1. *Needing to make the time*,
which addresses the elevated sense of obligation that helps people carve out and
defend allotment time; 2. *Being at the allotment*, which explores the mental and
physical release that occurs in the garden and its entwinement with paid employment;
and 3. *Encroaching time pressure*, which looks at how the lure of the allotment
competes against the demands of work and caregiving. The concluding discussion reflects on the findings and urges a deeper engagement by sociologists of work in the realm of recreational activity.

**Framing the Study**

The New Local Government Network (Hope and Ellis, 2009: 7) upholds that ‘Allotments, particularly in cities, offer a retreat from urban living and escape from a fast paced world,’ while the *Growing Scotland* (Scottish Allotments & Gardens Society, 2007: 9) report notes that ‘One of the most frequent comments people give for choosing gardening activity is that it helps them to combat stress.’ In spite of the rising popularity of allotments among young professionals (Hope and Ellis, 2009; London Assembly Environment Committee, 2006), and the broad claims that are made about their role in reducing stress-induced cortisol (Van den Berg and Custers, 2011) or improving mental health (Kingsley et al., 2009; Wakefield et al., 2007; Wood et al., 2015), there is a distinct lack of academic research on how such people manage the allotment alongside paid employment and caregiving. An influential Kings Fund report (Buck, 2016: 25), citing quantitative research (Van den Berg et al., 2010) that found negligible impact on wellbeing in adults below the age of 62, notes that there is uncertainty about the wellbeing benefits of allotment gardening in this age group. Existing scholarship on wellbeing and allotments has shown the superior mental and physical health of older allotment users (Hawkins et al., 2013; Hawkins et al., 2011; Milligan et al., 2004) and explored how gardens help employees who are signed off from work to recover from burnout illnesses (Eriksson et al., 2011; Stigsdotter and Grahn, 2003) but in spite of the fact that fewer than half of plotholders are retired (Select Committee on Environment Transport and Regional Affairs, 1998),
there are no studies that specifically explore the texture and nuance of managing an allotment alongside a full-time job.

This study considers allotment gardening amid the detrimental effects on employee wellbeing of work intensification and encroachment. Intensification of work is concerned with ‘the effort employees put into their jobs during the time that they are working’ (Burchell, 2002: 72) while work extension is concerned with the duration of work time. Convincing evidence of work intensification across all sectors of the labour market persists (Burchell et al., 2002), driven by competitive pressures in both the public and private sectors that urge organizations to do more with fewer employees. The work extension data is ambiguous (Gershuny, 2000) but, among highly skilled workers, intensified work often goes hand in hand with longer hours (Lewis, 2003; Watts, 2009), often facilitated via changes in organizational ICT use and flexible working opportunities that enable people to extend their availability and work hard more easily (Burchell et al., 2002; Green, 2004; Green, 2006; Kelliher and Anderson, 2010).

While working longer and harder might be construed as a rewarding lifestyle option (Drago et al., 2009), Lewis (2003: 351) argues that ‘choice’ over working habits is illusory in a structural context where ‘long working hours and the intensification of work are often a consequence of fewer people with more work to be accomplished.’ Recent scholarship highlights the negative psychological and physical impact of working harder and/or longer in white collar and professional work at all levels of the career ladder (Boxall and Macky, 2014; Carter et al., 2013; Chesley, 2014; Pedersen and Lewis, 2012b), while Green (2006: 176) concludes that ‘the detrimental impact of intensification is unambiguous.’ Job intensification and extension arguably contribute to high levels of stress-related
absence in the UK, leading to 11.3 million work days lost in 2013-14, with incidences highest among health, education, welfare and housing professionals (Buckley, 2014).

Work intensification and extension has fuelled lively debate about the changing inter-relationship between life and work (Warhurst et al., 2008). The work-life boundary (WLB) is defined in terms of the ‘physical, temporal, and cognitive limits that define domains as separate from one another and define components within domains’ (Kreiner et al., 2006: 1319). Seminal work (Campbell Clark, 2000; Nippert-Eng, 1996) has given rise to an extensive literature (a review of which is beyond the scope of this article) in which the usefulness of the boundary concept and the emphasis on agency versus structural constraints is contested. This article is concerned with a specific aspect of the WLB debate, that which theorises the place of recreational activity within the work-life continuum by reflecting on how leisure is being squeezed, colonised and reconfigured as a site of capitalist value-creation.

Ransome’s (2007) model of the vital third realm of ‘recreational labour’ re-asserts the importance of human activity outside of paid employment and caregiving. Focused on activity that is intrinsically motivated, Ransome’s emphasis on relative freedom from extrinsic, objective coercion is consistent with Lewis’s (2003) definition of leisure around ‘non-obligated’ time. This conceptual privileging of the lack of obligation that underlies our recreational activity usefully distinguishes it from the necessary labour upon which our economic and physical survival (and that of our dependents) relies. Indeed, as Hochschild (1997: 14), ethnography of time-poor professionals shows, dust-coated camping and musical equipment often evidences an ‘illusion of leisure’ and ‘the promise of another self’ that is too easily indefinitely postponed.
Critical accounts of the fate of leisure under intensified labour (Ford and Collinson, 2011; Land and Taylor, 2010; Ross, 2002) have also tended to emphasise how leisure time becomes obligated to wage labour. 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) in a realm of ‘constant busyness’ (Hochschild, 2008: 89) where professional identity increasingly demands also being ‘an ideal partner; the perfect parent; and the super fit sports enthusiast who enjoys a fulfilling life outside work’ (Ford and Collinson, 2011: 268). In Land and Taylor’s (2010) study of branding in an outdoors-themed company, employees ‘put their “lives” to “work” in the creation of value for the company’ (396), representing a ‘deepening and intensification of control that transgresses work/life boundaries’ (409).

Touchstones for theoretical reformulation

Imbued with a critical and inductive spirit, this study embraces the potential of ethnography ‘to produce knowledge not prefigured in, and a basis for refinement and reformulation of, starting out theoretical positions’ (Willis and Trondman, 2000: 8). The above WLB scholarship forms a useful backdrop to the study but themes emerging from the data – which I felt were under-theorised in the existing WLB literature also required looking more widely for ways to frame how, in spite of these dynamics of control and colonization, leisure’s sensual and social dimensions also offer potential for resisting the encroachment of work. A useful touchstone is Bourdieu’s (1977) notion of habitus, which has guided reflection on the allotment’s pull. I have also found resonance with Thompson’s (1991) notion that, outside of spaces patterned on industrial time, we might ‘re-learn some of the arts of living’ (401). Garden time, which, as
Derek Jarman (1994) poignantly notes of the garden sanctuary he built at Dungeness during his battle with AIDS, is a realm ‘without past or future, beginning or end’ (30) has also been usefully contrasted with Mumford’s (1934) disenchanted notion of industrial time, where wage labour takes on the character of an enclosed space that can be divided and filled up. In analyzing and writing up the data, I have also looked to scholarship on the post-work agenda that considers the recreational realm as a social process that allows us ‘the time to reinvent our lives, to reimagine and redefine the spaces, practices, and relationships of non-work time’ (2011: 168). In dialogue with these ideas then, this project explores ways in which allotment gardening, while helping people cope with and be productive at work, also foments – in its welly-clad, sweet-pea-scented way – an intriguing alternative to the daily grind.

Methodology: Spending Time on the Allotment

Ethnography has contested meanings (Hammersley, 2017) but this study subscribes to a definition based less around specific techniques than on sustained personal engagement in a setting aimed at understanding the meanings that people attach to their lives (Hobbs, 2006: 101). Grounded in data collected via interviews on allotment plots, it attaches to Forsey’s (2010: 560) attempt to place ‘engaged listening on a similar footing to participant observation in our conceptualization of ethnographic practices.’ These conversations, which were coupled with participant observation around my own and others’ plots, were conducted with an ethnographic imaginary that is ‘aimed at revealing the cultural context of individual lives’ (567).

The research took place between 2011 and 2014 at two neighbouring allotment sites (referred to here as Hawthorn and Blackberry Allotments), together
comprising 160 plots, in a fairly affluent area of Newcastle Upon Tyne. Through family connections, I have a decade-long relationship with the Blackberry allotment, and have had my own plot there for five years. The study was therefore underpinned by an enduring relationship to the site that was enacted as a more formal participant observation involving a reflexive field diary during the study period. Given the rather solitary and task-driven nature of allotment gardening, recorded interviews were an effective and culturally appropriate (Hockey, 2002) way to spend time reflecting with gardeners on their plots. Typically involving chatting while helping with the weeding or while sheltering in a greenhouse, these informal interviews (some of which were also attached to a separate photographic collaboration that was used to develop early ideas, see [citation removed for reviewing purposes]) afforded a richly textured understanding of the meanings that these busy gardeners attach to their allotment activity in relation to paid employment.

Drawing on Pink (2009) the research design drew on 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 collected 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, sometimes dwelling upon childhood memories and reflecting on how these experiences were intertwined with the allotment present (Mason and Davies, 2009).

Early in the research period, plotholders were recruited via the allotment secretaries and personal contacts, to participate in a 30-60 minute recorded interview
at their respective plots. Recruitment was initially broad, with the goal of generating a rich understanding of the study site. Thirty-five initial interviews explored the relationship between respondents’ employment and caregiving responsibilities and their allotment practice. These were followed by more informal conversation, fieldnote collection and respondent validation throughout the research period.

This particular article focuses in on data gathered from thirteen of the respondents (age 25-60) who were juggling paid employment and the allotment, and who referred to themselves as facing the detrimental effects of work intensification and encroachment, in terms of feeling overload in what is expected from them at work or feeling pressure to work longer than they want to (Boxall and Macky, 2014; Green, 2001). Several of these were also managing caregiving responsibilities as parents of young or teenage children or as caregivers to elderly relatives. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, replacing their names and the site names, with pseudonyms. The participants are indicated in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Job discussed</th>
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<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>Engineer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>Business management consultant</td>
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<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>Property developer</td>
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<td>Dan</td>
<td>Housing officer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>Surveyor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hattie</td>
<td>IT project manager</td>
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<td>Liam</td>
<td>Lecturer</td>
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<td>Louise</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
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<td>Steven</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
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<td>Theresa</td>
<td>Nurse</td>
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<td>Liz</td>
<td>Civil servant</td>
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<td>Ken</td>
<td>Property manager</td>
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<td>Bill</td>
<td>IT Consultant</td>
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As in much ethnography (Duneier, 2000; Van Maanen, 1991; Wacquant, 2004), my subjectivity was treated as an integral aspect of this research and rather than trying to excise it, the write-up focused on articulating feelings and experiences
in a way that busy plotholders would read as a reasonable interpretation of their world, while respecting the deeply subjective character of my interpretation of events. With this in mind, all participants were offered the opportunity to read and comment on their transcribed interviews and five of the ‘busy’ participants read and provided constructive feedback on an early draft of this journal article as well as discussing ideas throughout.

The transcribed data was coded using NVivo 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 critical theoretical orientation toward work, which is in turn entangled with my efforts to grow potatoes while holding down an academic job and raising two children – indeed, the long gestation of this article is due, in part, to the seductive pull of my digging and planting obligations. The study aims to respect this layered interpretation of social reality and, within the constraints of article-length, tries to retain some of the richness of expression that ‘allotmenting’ encourages, resisting the tendency to reduce or resolve its contradictory aspects (Van Maanen, 1988: 116).

1. Needing to make the time

Participants in the study discussed the desire to have an allotment plot as emerging from a need to stem the encroachment of work into their free time, as well as a longing for a portion of time that is not so tightly organized or neatly accounted for. In a climate of extended availability and multi-tasking, this often meant finding a place where they could successfully switch off from mobile communications technology. Within this context, the allotment’s normative structure, which formally and informally requires plotholders to maintain particular cultivation standards, and
which subtly discourages mobile phone use was – at least partly – appreciated by those who needed an extra incentive to make time for leisure activities.

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 full-time job, recently took on the allotment because they felt that ‘work was becoming the be all and end all of everything’. 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 vegetable plot has enabled him to curtail that encroachment in a satisfying way.

For some plotholders, the desire for an allotment has emerged from a sense that, in embracing the structured intensity of working life, they have lost a part of themselves. Sam, a business management consultant who, like Andrew, took on an allotment in order to create what he calls ‘obligatory leisure’ 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. Unlike the bookshop, he feels that the allotment demands his commitment, as he does not wish to receive weed warnings from the committee and feels a certain social responsibility to keep his plot looking good. The allotment rules place certain demands on him which can feel a little pressured but, once there, he particularly values the sense of being ‘lost in time’, fully absorbed in weeding or hoeing for hours at a time.

For these plotholders the informal and formal social controls that require them to make time for the allotment are, intriguingly, a way of accessing a domain where a less structured sense of time and obligation holds sway. Although pleasantly caught up in the demands of their professions, they experience a need to carve out time for something other than their jobs, finding the extra encouragement of the allotment’s biological and social demands helpful. Once they have carved out some time to be at the allotment, they often find themselves pottering, savouring the relatively relaxed and unpressured way that this time feels.

Within this nexus of busyness and desire for a time out, plotholders particularly value the opportunity to switch off, however briefly, from the constant email checking, texting and phone ringing of life outside. Mobile phones allowed respondents to remain sufficiently connected to loved ones that they could enjoy their allotment time without worry but, at the allotment, were also let go. The prevailing sense was that using the phone at the allotment is somehow inappropriate to the culture and setting, something that, again, was distinctly valued. David, a property developer, feels that the phone is out of place on the allotment and finds himself being short with work colleagues when they call him there. Echoing this statement, Dan, a housing officer, 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 irrevocably 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 workday. Mike, 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’. Creating a technology-free bubble at the allotment allows the movement from structured to relatively 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, an IT Project Manager, 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 these plotholders, this distancing manoeuvre allows an expanse of time, however brief, to open up.

2. Being at the allotment

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. The plotholders I interviewed associated this sense of timelessness with absorption in physical tasks as well as notions of space and place. Interestingly, this process of losing oneself leads to constructive reflection on work problems and tasks in a ‘productive’ way that obligates leisure time to the demands of work intensification. Yet, at the same time, this opening up of contemplative time and
space, the experience of garden rhythms, provokes critical re-evaluation of work-life boundaries and agitates towards a de-centering of life away from paid employment.

**Losing track of time**

The notion that time ‘disappears’ or slows down while at the allotment was a frequent comment among respondents in the study. Several people spoke of losing their sense of time while digging or hoeing, awareness only returning when nagging hunger or fading light compelled them to stop. Hattie, who, as well as managing complex IT projects is also raising small children, says that she completely loses perspective on time when she is on her plot; Liam, a lecturer, likens his state at the allotment to a flow state (Csíkszentmihályi, 1997) commenting that he often finds himself late for work after checking in on the plot in the early morning and getting carried away. In a similar vein, Dan, who is a relatively new plot holder, 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’.

Allotmenteers often 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. At *Hawthorn*, grassy pathways and sheltered nooks give a sense of spatial separation from the nearby road. In describing their sense of place, plot holders used terms that denote this separation and the fond attachment to their plots, 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’. 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.

**Problems solve themselves in the background**

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 that 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’. This is echoed by Theresa, 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’.

Several of the plotholders noted that the garden was particularly useful in terms of processing conflict and worry or, as **Liz, a civil servant, put it**, ‘digging your troubles into the soil’. For example, **Ken, a busy property manager**, 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. This was echoed by several gardeners who likened thinking while allotmenting to ‘wandering freely’, ‘entering the wild blue yonder’ and ‘mindless boogie’ – a distracted state that seems simultaneously to process and smooth out work-related troubles and challenges, leading to creative and well considered solutions.

De-centring work

The ‘wild blue yonder’ is also a place where critical reflection on intensification and work-life boundaries occurs – this contemplation can involve a sense of personal rediscovery about ‘being oneself’ or ‘doing what’s important in life’. The expansive, sensually rich experience of the allotment motivates many plot holders to try and carve out more garden time, whether a few more hours at the weekend or even an extra day during the week to immerse themselves in their plots.

Business consultant Sam says he feels more authentic in the garden than in his business consultant role. He jokes, ‘when I come here I revert back to the more full version of the real me, which is a scruff’. In an effort to shift his existence away from his work identity and towards being more of a ‘scruff’, Sam is actively allocating particular hours during the week to hang out at his allotment, again using the sense of social responsibility towards the allotment as a pull. He enjoys his career very much and would not aspire to being a fulltime gardener, but feels his garden self is also an essential part of his identity that had become eclipsed by work and must be consciously excavated.

In a similar vein, housing officer Dan comments that having the garden has started to shift his sense of self away from work and given him a place to think about how he’d like to structure his life differently so that it is not so exclusively devoted to paid work and childrearing. Although he relishes his job and fears the type of anomie
that he experienced when on the dole in his twenties, he comments, ‘I’d like to work three days and I’d like to have the other days off to spend a good amount of time down the allotment and there’d still be time for reading and watching telly.’ This movement towards re-prioritising leisure emerges from enjoyment of being in the garden and, where structural constraints allow, it is actively protected. For example, Bill, a freelance IT consultant 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’.

This change is often made very incrementally but even a little time aside for weeding and tending the plot can sets in motion the contemplation – and even partial realisation – of a desired, slower self. Louise the teacher describes how she and her husband Steven, 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. This feels like a big achievement amidst their intense work schedule – like Louise, Steven is also an educator with a five-day 8:00-5:00pm schedule, on top of which is piled marking and preparation work that, he comments, ‘comes home with me’. Encouraged by their foray into gardening, they are hoping that the plot will help them stem the creep of intensified work rhythms into their evenings and weekends: ‘we’ll come and we’ll sit of an evening and just unwind’. This lifestyle seems quite far from their current frenetic daily rhythm but 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, gradually to carve out more unbounded time.
3. Encroaching time pressure

While the process of finding time to garden can pave the way to a slower self, it can also unfold for working plotholders as a tense, time-poor negotiation. Intertwined with the intensity of contemporary work, the allotment can easily take on a tantalizing, frustrating quality, yet the creativity and tenacity that plotholders show in clinging on to their plots underscores the importance of this treasured activity and the attachment that develops between a plotholder and his or her little patch of earth.

The data highlighted innovative ways in which plotholders protect their garden time. For example, property developer David works long hours in his 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:

‘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’.

This kind of resourceful multitasking is a particularly prevalent theme when dealing with aspects of the garden that must be completed after leaving the garden and re-entering the world outside. Cleaning mucky, irregularly shaped vegetables and destalking berries that are brought home from the allotment was mentioned in several interviews as a particular challenge. Plotholders devised creative ways to handle this, such as recruiting younger family members to pitch in with the task while watching a movie, but several interviewees lamented that carefully grown and harvested produce was often left to rot on the kitchen bench due to time scarcity.

Several plotholders commented that they feel constantly a little bit behind on allotment tasks and that, while they enjoyed the sense of responsibility that the allotment enforces, they wished that the committee would be more lenient toward
working plotholders and caregivers. This feeling of anxiety or frustration about getting behind can 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 sometimes becoming a chore.

Over the course of the research study, most plotholders held onto their plots in spite of pressure to work harder and/or longer, but several of them gave up or downsized their allotments due to increased pressure at work, a job re-location or the arrival of a new baby. Significantly, those who dropped out tended to do so with a heavy heart that, in particular, lamented the loss of a tranquil place to be that lies outside of the domains of work and home. In this vein, Liam the lecturer, who had to give up his plot due to upheaval at work, says losing the allotment was a sad time and is a frequent conversation point between him and his partner. He comments, ‘I loved being out in the sun. I spent a lot of time breathing fresh air there and speaking to nice people.’ While this sadness points toward resignation to the structural constraints imposed by work, it also underscores the persistent loyalty felt towards the self that unfolds within the garden.

For those who have managed to keep hold of their plots, the allotment has served as a barrier against the encroachment of work that, simultaneously, cultivates an embrace of slower rhythms and a growing sense of obligation to the garden. Motivated by a desire to throw herself more wholeheartedly into gardening, Theresa has taken advantage of an early retirement package from her nursing career and is now self-sufficient in vegetables for much of the year. Management consultant Sam finds his visits to the garden are becoming more frequent during the working week and he feels less guilty about them as he
watches the garden get established and understands more what the garden does for his inner ‘scruff’. Dan expresses how the allotment has made a difference in his work-life negotiation – having felt that his job in the housing sector was starting to be ‘whenever, wherever’ has agreed with his boss not to work Wednesday afternoons but work commitments still come up that he feels pressure to attend:

‘If I haven't got anything specific to do instead then that it’s more likely I'll end up working anyway as there is nothing I've committed to do in that space but then if its a day when I am going to the allotment then it is something that has to happen, has to be weeded, then I am much less likely to weaken in that respect…so it acts as a buffer against the potential for work to start to take up time that I don't want it to.’

Sensitive to not wanting to be completely defined by the job that he does, Dan deeply values his gardening identity: ‘I am an allotment gardener: it's something I want to protect.’

Discussion: Obligatory leisure and the potential self

This study shows that allotments help busy professionals to spend time away from the world of appointments and rapid-fire communications that characterize their working day. It illustrates that they appeal to those who are experiencing job intensification and pressure to work longer than they desire because, in part, plots demand attention and push back against the encroachment of work into previously uncolonised areas of daily life. In pulling people away from their work and caregiving responsibilities, even for snatched periods, the garden offers an experience of time that is distinct and valued. Within this context the allotment is, simultaneously, a
space aligned to ‘constant busyness’ that rounds out professional identity and enables job-related mental labour and an unfolding of self into a time and space that exerts its own pull and is disconnected from rationalised efficiency. It is a complex interplay, an irreducible dance between the timeless expanse of the wild blue yonder and the structured intensity of work. The latter dynamic, this study argues, needs to be more fully integrated into WLB theory.

The plotholders in this study often remarked on the enjoyable and stimulating nature of their jobs but simultaneously voiced concern over the negative effects of intensification and the encroachment of paid work into non-work time, expressing a need for more time spent outside of the rhythms of contemporary work. Shoehorned between economic and family constraints and driven by a normative structure that urges plotholders to maintain cultivation standards, the allotment creates competing time demands but, in doing so, provides a respite – and discovery of a slower self – that can contrast satisfyingly with intense work and childcare responsibilities. 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.

This boundary is also blurred, 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.
Yet, the allotment’s desultory rhythms also present an opportunity to contemplate and experience an existence that is less centred on paid employment. The garden thus simultaneously suggests an alternate way of spending time that subtly militates against overwork. Having made time for the garden, plotolders 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 thus provokes 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.

In keeping with Ford and Collinson’s (2011) characterization of worker narratives as a kaleidoscopic collision and intermingling of interests, family commitments and work responsibilities, this study reveals a nuanced movement between accommodation and resistance to the demands of paid employment. Within this process, the swell in demand for allotments among busy professionals can be characterized as a leisure’s increasing obligation to work: part of an anxiety-ridden process of creating the consummate work identity (Ford and Collinson, 2011: 257), or in resonance with Land and Taylor (2010) a site where knowledge work gets done while turning over the soil. These perspectives draw our attention to the extension of internalized control into the recreational sphere, drawing critical attention to the manner in which an allotment respite is functional for capitalism.

Within the context of an intensified labour process, for those who are juggling multiple responsibilities and feeling time-pressured, the allotment can indeed seem a sort of embattled 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, *al fresco* 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. Amidst the pressure of juggling work demands and caregiving responsibilities, garden time is often sacrificed, and plots are given up or downsized, accompanied by a sense of personal loss or even failure.

However, inhabiting garden time is also immersion in a social and creative realm which, simultaneously, pressures gardeners to keep on top of the weeds, and ruptures the all-encompassing work ethic that undergirds job intensification and extension. Although, relative to paid employment, we can speak of gardening as an intrinsically motivated pastime that takes place in non-obligated time (Lewis, 2003; Ransome, 2007), this study highlights how deeply infused this leisure practice is with a sense of social responsibility that makes plotholders make the time for tending their plot and reconnects them with Mumford’s (1934) ‘nymphs and goddesses’.

The desire of busy professionals for an allotment thus reflects more than the aspirational ideal of the perfectly balanced person engaging in productive leisure (Ford and Collinson, 2011; Hochschild, 2008; Land and Taylor, 2010). Having a plot also urges towards a bantering, flower-smelling, soil-tickling existence that can lead to re-evaluation of current work rhythms and a questioning attitude towards the centrality of paid work in our lives. In keeping with Ransome’s (2007: 378) notion that recreational labour is ‘not insubstantial, nor trivial but creative and purposeful’ we uphold that this vital realm warrants further scrutiny in order to unpack the dynamics of control and resistance that unfold within it. Further research that examines the dynamics of combining childcare with allotment activity, for example, or explores the rich meanings that attach to self-produced food (and the ecological implications of this practice) would provide useful insights in this
area. The analogues of allotment gardening – recreational activities such as
being in a music band that simultaneously exert social pressure and poetically
rupture monotheist time – also warrant further exploration.

While acknowledging the ways in which the allotment is functional for
intensified wage labour, we also note how it tends toward practices and ways of being
that align with a post-work imaginary, **potentially informing the debate about how we might question and transform a society defined by constant busyness**. As
Weeks (2011: 174) argues, this orientation to building a life outside of paid work and
caregiving creates time and space ‘in which to constitute new subjectivities, new work
and non-work ethics, and new practices of care and sociality’. This article thus also
helps question the privileging of paid employment in the sociology of work and
redirects our attention toward social processes in the realm of leisure that enable such
reflection. Having explored the allotment as a site where busy professionals make that
time, this article therefore urges sociologists of work to revisit leisure as a realm of
emancipation as well as control, to exploring more expansively the lived possibilities
that workers – even in the grip of job intensification and encroachment – strive to
realise.

**Endnote:**

1 An allotment is an area of land, rented for the primary purpose of growing fruit and
vegetables. Allotment sites in urban areas are typically owned by the local authority
and comprise a number of plots (a full plot is 250 square metres or 10 poles in size)
that are allocated on a waiting-list basis for a nominal yearly sum.

**References:**


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