



CHAPTER 15

On Time, Happiness, and Ecological Footprints

TIM KASSER AND KIRK WARREN BROWN

Common sense ought to make clear that our rush, rush lifestyle leads us to use throwaway products, recycle less, and, in general, pay less attention to the impacts of our consumer practices on the environment. Nonetheless, data confirming this is hard to come by. Considering the importance of these issues, remarkably few studies explore the connections between time pressure and overwork with environmental behaviors. Psychologists Tim Kasser and Kirk Warren Brown recently conducted one such study and their findings are outlined in this chapter. Although preliminary, their data tend to confirm what we already suspect. Both our environment and our far-too-frantic lives call out for more studies like this one and for a national commitment to act on the information they provide. It's my hope that Take Back Your Time Day can be the catalyst for far more research on the social and ecological impacts of our American obsession with work and consumption. —JdG

As suggested elsewhere in this book, Americans today are working and consuming more than ever. Are they doing so to the detriment of their health, their happiness, society's cohesion, and the sustainability of our ecology? We hope to contribute to the answer to that question by presenting new scientific evidence, which demonstrates that the amount of time people work does indeed

have important associations with both their personal well-being and their impact on the Earth's natural resources.

For the last three years we have been surveying individuals from across the United States about their lifestyles, levels of personal happiness, and environmentally relevant behavior.¹ We also asked these individuals how many hours per week they typically work at their job(s) and how much they are paid (i.e., their income). These data allow us to test two questions important to the themes of Take Back Your Time Day.

First, is it the case that working less really could make people happier? In other words, is the number of hours one works associated with one's psychological well-being?

Second, is there evidence that working fewer hours might help people live a less ecologically damaging lifestyle? In other words, does working many hours decrease the likelihood that people will spend the time it takes to act in ecologically sustainable ways?

We also examined how people's income relates to their personal well-being and their ecologically relevant behavior. People usually work long hours in order to make more money, and so income is an important factor to examine. But does trading "material affluence" for "time affluence" really improve our personal and collective quality of life?

Our Sample

To explore these questions, we recruited a sample of 308 people from 48 U.S. states. They included men and women who worked anywhere from 0 to 95 hours per week and who had personal incomes ranging between \$0 and \$250,000 per year. Participants in the study had expressed an interest in completing our survey (having read about it in the media) or were contacted directly through mailings to their homes.

To measure people's personal well-being, we assessed participants' satisfaction with their lives. Everyone in the study completed a well-validated survey that asks how much they agree with statements like "I would change nothing about my current life" and "The current conditions of my life are excellent."²

To measure people's ecological behavior, we used two different questionnaires. First, participants were presented with a list of 40 environmentally beneficial activities and were asked how often they performed each of them. For example, participants reported how often they "buy certified organic food when I shop,"

1. This research was supported by generous grants from the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, and from the Simplicity Forum.

2. Pavot, W., E. Diener, and E. Suh. "The Temporal Satisfaction with Life Scale." *Journal of Personality Assessment* 70 (1998): 340-354.

“rent things I need rather than buying them,” “turn off lights when not in use,” and “recycle nondeposit aluminum cans.”

Second, we assessed the “ecological footprints” of our participants by asking questions such as “How often do you eat animal-based products?” “How many miles per gallon does your car get?” and “How big is your home?”³

Based on answers to these and other questions, we were able to estimate the number of acres of natural resources necessary to sustain each participant’s lifestyle. A person who eats a lot of meat, lives in a big house, and drives many miles in a large car, for example, has a bigger ecological impact, or footprint, than a vegetarian who lives in a small, energy-efficient house, and who regularly uses public (or foot-powered) transportation. According to studies done by Mathis Wackernagel of Redefining Progress, and other environmental scientists, to be ecologically sustainable, our personal ecological footprint should be less than five acres. Instead, the average American footprint is about 24 acres.

The Overwork Blues

We began our statistical analyses by examining the relation between work hours and personal well-being. The data revealed a significant association between the number of hours that people work and their satisfaction with life: *People who worked fewer hours reported being more satisfied than those who worked many hours.*

As can be seen in Figure 1, as people’s weekly work hours increased, their life satisfaction decreased. Not surprisingly, we found that people who worked more hours also made more money, but personal income was unrelated to life satisfaction;⁴ that is, how satisfied one was with life did not depend on one’s wealth.

These results suggest that being time affluent (i.e., working fewer hours) seems to support happiness, whereas being materially affluent (i.e., having a higher income) does not, at least among citizens of the U.S. The old adage that “money does not buy happiness” has been widely supported by other research, including ours, but these data are among the first to show that working fewer hours might reap benefits in terms of one’s satisfaction with life.⁵

3. The environmental behaviors measure was adapted from the following source: Green-Demers, I., L.G. Pelletier, and S. Menard. “The impact of behavioural difficulty on the saliency of the association between self-determined motivation and environmental behaviours.” *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science* 29 (1997): 157–166. The ecological footprint measure comes from the following source: Dholakia, R., and M. Wackernagel. *The Ecological Footprint Questionnaire*. San Francisco: Redefining Progress, 1999.

4. Life satisfaction correlated $r = -.14$ ($p < .05$) with work hours and $r = .04$ ($p > .50$) with income.

5. Diener, E., and R. Biswas-Diener. “Will money increase subjective well-being?” *Social Indicators Research* 57 (2002): 119–169.

Smaller Footprints

We next explored how material and time affluence relate to ecologically relevant behaviors. The results showed that people who spent fewer hours at work reported behaving in more ecologically sustainable ways, as indexed by both their smaller ecological footprints *and* their higher levels of environmentally sustainable behavior.⁶ People with higher personal incomes, however, were less likely to behave in environmentally beneficial ways; they also had bigger ecological footprints.⁷

Figures 2 and 3 graphically represent the results for the ecological footprint measure; as can be seen there, *the number of acres necessary to support one's lifestyle increases as the number of work hours increases* and as level of income increases. In sum, whereas material wealth appears to work against ecological sustainability, working fewer hours can support the well-being of the Earth, upon which, of course, our quality of life ultimately depends.

Although these data support the idea that working fewer hours can reap both personal and ecological benefits, we must remind readers of the maxim that "correlation does not imply causation." In other words, just because we have found statistically significant associations between fewer work hours, on the one hand, and both happiness and ecological well-being, on the other hand, we cannot conclude that working fewer hours actually *produces* these benefits.

For example, we do not know if working fewer hours really makes people happier, or if unhappy people work more to escape their personal difficulties. Similarly, we do not know if working fewer hours provides people the opportunity to live a more ecologically sustainable lifestyle, or if the environment is so important to them that they work fewer hours so they have time to behave in an environmentally friendly fashion.

More research is necessary to better understand the processes through which material and time affluence relate to differences in personal happiness and eco-

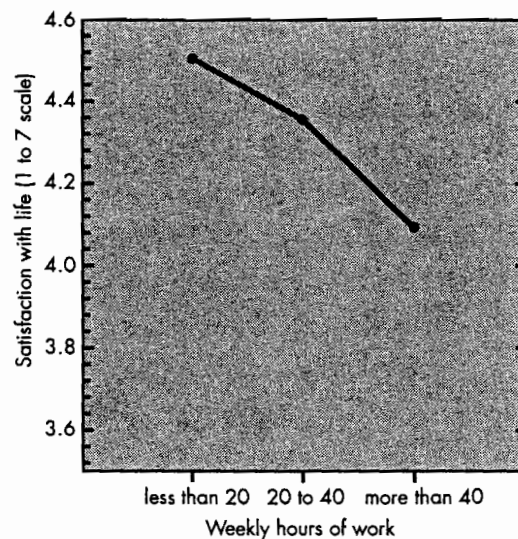


Figure 1. Life satisfaction according to weekly hours of employment.

6. Work hours correlated $r = -.20$ ($p < .001$) with environmental behaviors and $r = .23$ ($p < .001$) with ecological footprint.

7. Income correlated $r = -.25$ ($p < .0001$) with environmental behaviors and $r = .32$ ($p < .0001$) with ecological footprint.

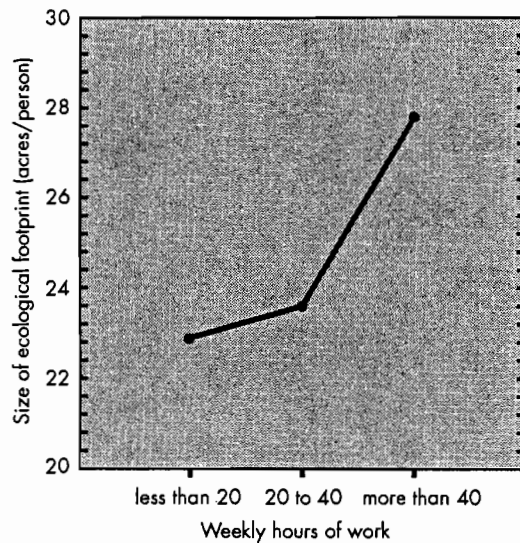


Figure 2. Ecological footprint size according to weekly hours of employment.

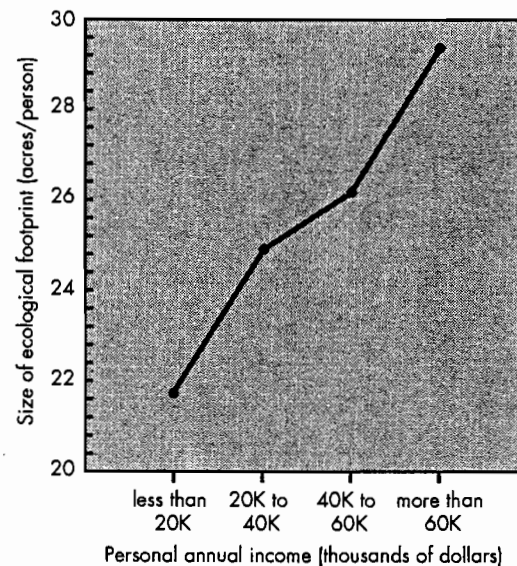


Figure 3. Ecological footprint size according to yearly personal income.

logically relevant behavior. For now, all we can say is that the results presented here are preliminary and suggestive. But what they suggest is quite provocative.

Off Course

One conclusion that can be drawn is that our culture is clearly on the wrong path towards happiness and sustainability. The trend over the last few decades in the United States (and Great Britain) has been towards increased time at work.⁸ One result has been unprecedented increases in economic wealth. But as demonstrated by past research and current data, such increases in wealth, at least in more economically developed nations, have generally done nothing to improve citizens' quality of life or feelings of life satisfaction, even though we have more "toys" and luxury.⁹

In fact, we pay a high price for "buying into" the materialistic values and goals propounded by consumer culture. Individuals with such an orientation to life report lower personal happiness and life satisfaction; more anxiety, depression, and physical health symptoms; poorer quality interpersonal relationships; decreased contributions to one's community; and more damaging ecological behavior.¹⁰

8. Schor, J., *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure*. New York: Basic Books, 1992.

9. Myers, D.G., *The American Paradox: Spiritual hunger in an age of plenty*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000.

10. Kasser, T., *The High Price of Materialism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002.

Our materially rich, but time-poor lifestyle is destroying many of the best things in life.

Towards Time Affluence

We could feel locked into this pattern, but there is a way out, and Take Back Your Time Day points to one of the best solutions: choosing time affluence over material affluence. As these research results suggest, if we chose to give up some income to have more free time, we could well be happier. We could disengage from the vicious cycle of “work→earn→consume→work more” and instead have the time to pursue the kinds of activities that research has shown truly bring satisfaction, including nourishing our personal development and relationships, and contributing to our communities.¹¹

Further, we would have more time to pursue ecologically sustainable practices instead of the quick, “throwaway” lifestyle habits that often accompany being too busy.

Enjoying the benefits of time affluence may thus lead both to a greater sense of satisfaction with our lives and to a greater likelihood that we will create a healthier planetary home for ourselves, our children, and generations to come.

11. Kasser, T., *The High Price of Materialism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002.



Take Back Your Time

FIGHTING OVERWORK AND TIME POVERTY IN AMERICA

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Posters designed by graphic design students
at the University of Minnesota, Duluth



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BERRETT-KOEHLER PUBLISHERS, INC.
San Francisco