

# The Drive to Work

Femi Oyebode looks at why people are so unhappy at work in modern society.

I am very pleased to be speaking at this year's conference. 'Work' lies at the very core of human life and I was pleased to be forced, to be encouraged to think about this most important subject. My title is *The Drive to Work*, but my talk will range over a large territory. My aim is to introduce some notions. These are time-energy budgets, work as toil, play, idleness, the adverse effects of lack of work, but my real aim is to talk, albeit briefly, about the potential causes of why people at work are so unhappy in modern society.

I will not attempt to define work. I will simply say that, for my purposes, any conscious utilisation of energy for a purpose such as gathering food, mate selection, sex, affiliation, establishing dominance hierarchies etc, amounts to work. This approach allows me to examine the working life of animals and also to hint that work is what all animals do, us included. It also allows me expand the boundaries of what is normally regarded as work – paid work – to include activities that we would usually ignore in discussions about work. I want now to say something about time-energy budgets, a notion that derives from the work of socio-biologists.

## Time-Energy Budgets

Time-energy budgets are the amount of time an animal devotes to feeding, anti-predation and sexual reproduction. The energy expended on these activities differs markedly between animals. For example, honey-bees and harvester insects devote roughly one third of their time to various forms of work, one third to resting, and one third to patrolling through the nest. Male orang-utans spend about 55% of their time feeding, 35% resting, and 10% moving from one position on the canopy to another. Humming-birds devote 76-88% of their time to sitting, 5-21% foraging for nectar, 0.5-1.8% to fly-catching, 0.3-6.4% to chasing other humming-birds from their



Honey bees devote one third of their time to work.

territories. The variation is determined by the species of tree occupied. The principles underlying this time-energy budget can be classified into:

1. the principle of stringency;
2. the principle of allocation.

Stringency attempts to explain why animals in the midst of plenty appear to do nothing, that is they idle. Lions resting next to a herd of zebras, barracudas hovering idly in front of passing schools of minnows, and birds perching for hours near fruit-laden bushes. The answer to this seeming paradox is that animals and birds do not always live in the midst of plenty. Their time-energy budgets have evolved to see them through periods of food shortage. Maximum consumers, animals committed to the most rapid growth and reproduction, will do well during periods of resource surplus and will suffer severe setbacks, even extinction, during hard times.

The more stable the environment, the less mobile the individual animals, the more prudent must be the investment in growth and reproduction, and hence the more idle the animals will seem at any randomly selected moment.

But periodic food shortages are not the only determinants favouring the evolution of idleness. Much of the worker population of social insects such as termites is to be found resting throughout the day and night, a reserve pool available for major emergencies. The size of this pool is determined by the most severe requirements periodically imposed on the colony. If only the NHS had the same approach to bed management: rather than reducing bed numbers to what is required at the lowest demand period, keeping the number at what is needed at the extreme highest demand.

The principle of allocation attempts to explain how the time-energy budget is constructed for

different animals, given the currency of genetic fitness. As a rule, the requirements in order of importance are food, anti-predation, and reproduction. To the extent that one requirement is fulfilled, more time and energy are devoted to the activities of the other priorities. So, whales and elephants for example are food limited, hence a substantial proportion of their day is devoted to securing food. Much of the aggressive behaviour is territorial and connected to the maintenance of a dependable food source. But elephant seals, for example, face no serious food shortage and the islands on which they breed are also free of predators; hence male elephant seals concentrate almost wholly on reproduction.

As for animals so for us. Animals also have an economic life, supported by instinctual reward systems that require no monetary rewards, no external tokens. They are unlike us humans who only regard work to be whatever requires external, artificial monetary rewards, unsupported by instinctive drives and the innate pleasure principle.

## Play

What is play? There is no settled definition and, for our purpose, we need have only an idea of what might be regarded as play. We all recognise play when we see it in our own children, or indeed in dogs or cats. At its simplest, it is mimicry of adult behaviour by children, a preparation and practice for adult skills. At its most serious, it is the activities of juveniles carried on into adult life for pay – that is work that is play – for example, professional footballers or actors.

Play must be serious business, given the risks it entails. It is a useless expenditure of energy, accompanied by increased vulnerability to predators, and the risk of injury in children from dangerous play episodes with adults. Nonetheless, it must confer increased genetic fitness at later life-stages by the enhancement of skills and by the experience and the improved status that play confers. The same can be said about sleep, but alas, that is not our topic today. Play appears to be limited to higher vertebrates. Playful behaviour is probably related to invention and cultural transmission of novel methods of exploiting the environment.

My reason for introducing 'play' as a subject is that people wish to argue that work would be

much better if it were more like play, that work which is distinct from toil is more like play and that hunter-gatherers have this disposition to work. Peter Gray is an exponent of this view and he argues that work in many different hunter-gatherer cultures is play, for four main reasons:

1. It is varied and requires much skill and intelligence;
2. There is not too much of it;
3. It is done in a social context, with friends;
4. It is (most significantly), for any given person at any given time, optional.

I do not accept his arguments. The idea that an individual with all the advantages of modern American life can come to set up hunter-gatherer life as exemplary seems to me false, even dishonest. Modern hunter gatherers live short lives, suffer diseases, have a hard existence that is at subsistence level and severely constrained; there does not seem to be to be much choice here.

In most non-human mammals, play occurs almost entirely among the young of the species and seems clearly to serve the function of skill-learning and practice. Peter Gray argues that young mammals, in play, practise the very skills that they must develop in order to make it into adulthood and to thrive and reproduce. Predators practise predation, as when tiger cubs stalk and pounce on bugs, wind-blown leaves, and each other. Prey animals practise getting away from predators, as when zebra colts dodge and dart in their playful frolicking and endless games of tag. Young males of many species practise fighting, taking turns pinning one another in their species-specific ways, and getting out of pinned positions. Young females of at least some species practise nurturance, in playful care of young.

I agree with Peter Gray that the functions of play include a means of suppressing aggression and promoting cooperation; a basis for art, music, literature, theoretical science, religion, and all that we call 'higher culture'; and a basis for productive work. To summarise, play is structured activity that is:

1. self-chosen;
2. self-directed;
3. imaginative, or creative;
4. intrinsically motivated;
5. produced in an active, alert, but not distressed frame of mind.

To the degree that any activity has these characteristics, we experience it as play. Work, at its best, can have all of these characteristics to a high degree. Here Peter Gray wants to argue that if only work was more like play, it would be better all round for us all. I will come back to this matter of work being more like play at the end.

## Idleness

I want now to talk about 'idleness' in order to pose 'idleness', rather than play, as the polar opposite of work. The word carries a negative connotation; we say the devil finds work for idle hands. This is to say that idleness ought to be combated. It is dangerous ground for sinful acts to flourish.

In his book *In Praise of Idleness* Bertrand Russell argues from a different perspective. His case is not that work, toil, ought to be more like play, but that work is over-valued, and that given technological advances, more time ought to be allocated to idleness, because leisure, idleness, is the source of what is most valuable in human life: literature, music and other creative outputs. For Russell, idleness is not laziness or sinful, rather it is rest with the potential for rejuvenation:

The idea that the poor should have leisure has always been shocking to the rich. In England, in the early nineteenth century, fifteen hours was the ordinary day's work for a man; children sometimes did as much, and very commonly did twelve hours a day. When meddling busy-bodies suggested that perhaps these hours were rather long, they were told that work kept adults from drink and children from mischief. When I was a child, shortly after urban working men had acquired the vote, certain public holidays were established by law, to the great indignation of the upper classes. I remember hearing an old Duchess say: 'What do the poor want with holidays? They ought to work.' People nowadays are less frank, but the sentiment persists, and is the source of much of our economic confusion.

Russell concludes:

When I suggest that working hours should be reduced to four, I am not meaning to imply that all the remaining time should necessarily be spent in pure frivolity. I mean that four hours' work a day should entitle a man to the necessities and elementary comforts of life, and that the rest of his time should be his to use as

he might see fit. It is an essential part of

any such social system that education should be carried further than it usually is at present, and should aim, in part, at providing tastes which would enable a man to use leisure intelligently. I am not thinking mainly of the sort of things that would be considered 'highbrow'. Peasant dances have died out except in remote rural areas, but the impulses which caused them to be cultivated must still exist in human nature. The pleasures of urban populations have become mainly passive: seeing cinemas, watching football matches, listening to the radio, and so on. This results from the fact that their active energies are fully taken up with work; if they had more leisure, they would

again enjoy pleasures in which they took an active part.



John Keats: 'delicious diligent idleness'

## Work and Well Being

To summarise, the drive to work is common to all animals including us. Play and idleness too seem to have animal derivatives. It is therefore not surprising that those without work, as Harriet Bradley put it in her talk, lose status, self-esteem, the congregation of others, and hence exhibit clinically recognisable psychiatric disorders such as depression and elevated levels of suicide.

Unemployment is significantly associated with psychiatric disorders. The reported association does not mean that there is a causal relationship between unemployment and psychiatric disorders, for the causal direction could equally be in the opposite direction, that is, that psychiatric disorders cause unemployment. Poverty and unemployment increase the duration of episodes of common mental disorders but not the likelihood of their occurrence.

Transitions from paid employment either to unemployment or to long term sick leave are associated with increased psychological distress for both men and women. Starting maternity leave or staying home to look after the family are also associated with psychological distress for women. Transitions from these roles to formal employment result in an improvement in mental health. There is some evidence that the effects are felt most strongly within six months of the transition.

### Poor psychological well-being in workers

Workforce data on 30,000 staff working across 17 NHS trusts shows stress and associated psychiatric problems accounted for as much as 15% of all days lost due to sickness absence in 2008. This compares with 4% of days lost in the same year due to stress among 40,000 staff, working across a range of other occupations – in both the public and private sector – including education, manufacturing, retail and local government.



‘Trust is at the heart of play and so it should be of work.’

Recognised causes of stress at work are listed below:

1. Erosion of autonomy/lack of control over work;
2. Work/Life balance;
3. Rigidity of the hierarchy;
4. Doing tasks below grade;
5. Lack of the right tools/broken tools to do the job;
6. Increase in patients’ expectations;
7. Increase in administrative duties;
8. Organisational confusion/ ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ channels;
9. Isolation from other team members;
10. Colleagues not understanding each others’ roles and competencies;
11. Lack of management support.

So there we have the main reasons given for unhappiness in the workplace despite many advantages that are associated with being at work. An underlying shift that explains some of the reasons given, such as loss of autonomy, lack of control over work, rigidity of the hierarchy lies in the changes that have come to dominate public services in the past 30 years. There has been an erosion of trust in the workplace by a

combination of undue monitoring – what Michael Power calls the audit society – target setting, and the de-professionalisation of medicine, for example. Onora O’Neil in the Reith lectures (2002) said:

Perhaps the culture of accountability that we are relentlessly building for ourselves actually damages trust rather than supporting it.

Furthermore, quoting Samuel Johnson, she said: ‘It is better to be cheated than not to trust’. And:

The new accountability takes the form of detailed control. An unending stream of new legislation and regulation, memoranda and instructions, guidance and advice floods into public sector institutions. For example, a look into the vast database of documents on the Department of Health website arouses a mixture of despair and disbelief...

I think that many public sector professionals find that the new demands damage their real work. Teachers aim to teach their pupils; nurses to care

for their patients. Each profession has its proper aim, and this aim is not reducible to meeting set targets following prescribed procedures and requirements.

Much of the mistrust and criticism now directed at professionals and public institutions complain about their diligence in responding to incentives to which they have been required to respond rather than pursuing the intrinsic requirements of being good nurses and teachers, good doctors and police officers. In *The Audit Society* Michael Power talks about 'rituals of verification' and argues that institutionalised pressures exist for audit and inspection systems to produce comfort and reassurance, rather than for critique, and that 'accounts should only become objects of explicit checking in situations of doubt, conflict, mistrust and danger'. Hence he argues for trust: 'Trust releases us from the need for checking.' He concludes:

The more one thinks about it, the more apparent it is that the imperative 'never trust, always check' could not be a universalisable principle of social order... The audit society is a society that endangers itself because it invests too heavily in shallow rituals of verification at the expense of other forms of organisational intelligence.

We work much like animals do, except that we get paid for doing some particular kinds of work, from which we derive status, satisfaction, and

often pleasure. Low trust and regulatory overkill are in the process of killing a lot of what we value. Francis Fukuyama said:

Trust is the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest, and co-operative behaviour, based on commonly shared norms... That is, we trust a doctor not to do us deliberate injury, because we expect him or her to live by the Hippocratic oath and the standards of the medical profession.

And he quotes Kenneth Arrow:

Now trust has a very important pragmatic value, if nothing else. Trust is an important lubricant of a social system. It is extremely efficient; it saves a lot of trouble to have a fair degree of reliance on other people's word. Unfortunately this is not a commodity which can be bought very easily.

Since we humans are not mere animals, work is not simply a matter of time-energy budgets. It involves values, self identity, self esteem, self development. The drive to work ought to include aspects of play, initiative, communality, pleasure, and autonomy. Trust is at the heart of play and so it should be of work.

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## Two Poems by John Rety

### Know This

It is the job of each and everyone  
To be able to stand on their own feet  
And not on any account on  
Somebody else's feet

### Understanding

The most we can hope for  
Is that we might be understood by others  
With different understandings to ourselves.

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These poems are published in *Notebook in Hand. New and Selected Poems* by John Rety (Stonewood Press, Oundle 2012). John Rety was born in Hungary in 1930, arrived in London in 1947, where he died in 2010. Together with his partner Susan Johns, he founded the famous Torriano Meeting House poetry venue in Kentish Town in 1982. To accompany it, they also set up the Hearing Eye press. His book is reviewed by Peter Phillips on page 26.