

Quality Time in the Aftermath of COVID-19

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Introduction

Before I start, I'll note that my feeling about this paper has changed a lot since I submitted the abstract in March. The abstract, I think, contained a note of hopefulness about what might have been learned during the pandemic and what it might teach us about access and supporting each other. I don't know how much that hope is warranted, and was unprepared by the fierceness of the insistence on getting back to "normal". I just want to signal that the title –

which previously was meant as a kind of optimism for a world we might build together – might be taken more ironically. But maybe it could also be a rallying cry?

Anyway, here goes.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly during the period where many were in some form of lockdown, it has been common to remark on a changed experience of time. Research articles and popular media pieces have analyzed and documented this time distortion, and “what even is time?” has been a really common refrain.

The idea for this paper was in part sparked by a tweet in May 2020, from Helen Rosner, a food writer and editor:

“Today in therapy we talked about how (for those of us currently healthy and taking isolation seriously) right now we live in an infinite present. No future plans, no anticipation of travel or shows or events or celebrations. It’s an endless today, never tomorrow.” (@hels; May 12, 2020)

This got a lot of responses! There were lots of responses that echoed her sentiments, but also lots that said, essentially, “welcome to my world,” from people who have been dealing with non-normative relations to time prior to the pandemic; responses to Rosner’s tweet included people being on military deployment or being a military spouse, dealing with chronic illness or disability

(particularly where access or pain restricts someone to their home), and the time distortion involved in ADHD.ⁱ

I'm interested in thinking about different relations to and experiences of time, and what the insights of those with longer histories of time distortion might have to contribute or teach. For this paper I'll focus on crip time and ADHD time.

The plan is this. First I'll talk a bit about the kinds of time distortions associated with the pandemic, and studied by people who study these things. Second – a special issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly* on “Crip Temporalities” came out in April 2021, with a brilliant introduction by Ellen Samuels and Elizabeth Freeman, discussing the impact of the pandemic from the perspective of crip time. I'll talk a

bit about that, and the idea of the pandemic offering an opportunity for non-disabled people to have a glimpse of “crip time.” (Quick note: ‘crip’ is a reclaimed term used by some disabled activists and theorists; I will use it when quoting people or discussing specific concepts). Third, I turn to ADHD time, or the often medicalized (and pathologized) way that ADHDers relate to time. One of the ways of dealing with ADHD time is body doubling, or setting time to work in someone else’s company. Picking this up from the lens of feminist philosophical work on relational autonomy, this points to the role of relationality and relational support in navigating time. I will close by asking: so what should we do? What kinds of solidarity can we practice, what kind of supports can we enable, around heterogeneous experiences of time?

(So, 'quality time' in the title refers to time that we feel was, if not *good-good*, at least had some goodness in it; I don't mean it in the sense of Important Family Time).

Part 1: Time Distortion in COVID

So first – you weren't alone if you thought time was weird at various points in the pandemic – researchers looked into this in several countries. Ruth Ogden in the UK studied experiences of time in lockdown in 2020 and 2021. While she notes that researchers in France and Italy found a slowing down of time in lockdown, she found about 40% experiencing speeding up of time vs. 40% slowing down (Ogden 2021, 2).ⁱⁱ She found that if you are dissatisfied with the amount of social interaction you were getting, and

also not having much to do, then time felt slower. In her conclusion, she states “This suggests that fundamental changes to the structure of daily life can distort the passage of time” (Ogden 2021, 13). Who knew?

Meanwhile, Sylvie Droit-Volet and team in France looked four factors: boredom, happiness, sleep quality, and life rhythm, finding them to be connected – “the more difficult people found it to sleep, the less energy they reported they had, and the more bored and the less happy they were” (Droit-Volet et al 2021, 2). They found that after a few weeks, the new, confined life acquires some stability (12) as people adapt, but that happiness stays low. Of course, this assumes that the confined life is *new* – I’ll be returning to this point later.ⁱⁱⁱ

The final study I'll mention is one by Simon Grondin and a team from Laval, who looked at cognitive mechanisms in the feeling of time distortion, such as how anxiety can increase arousal, accelerating our internal pacemaker (3). They note that many things about time didn't change—we didn't go back in time; we continued to be able to use proper grammatical tenses for past, present, future, and (I like this) “musicians kept being able to play with the correct rhythm and tempo” (Grondin et al 2020, 2). They point out the distinction between judgments about the passage of time (i.e., how quickly/slowly time seems to pass) vs. duration judgments (trying to guess how long a minute is), and pointed out that the former seemed most affected. Often our sense of time in memory comes from *comparing* the duration of events, as well as from landmarks; they note that difficulty in doing this during

lockdown “might come from the fact that people are experiencing a situation for the first time” (2) & there is also no sense of how long it would last (3).

All the researchers mentioned make a comparison to depression; but they also all comment on the situation as novel.

Part 2: Crip Time

While much of the worldwide COVID pandemic was a novel situation, experiences of time being unreliable, of not knowing how long a situation will last, and of confinement, are not. With regard to confinement: I’ll quote at length from an essay, “The Disability Pandemic,” written by El Gibbs, a writer and disability activist in Australia:

“When the pandemic hit, much of what was about to happen was already happening to me. Already I didn’t leave the flat much, worked from home and spent too much time on Twitter. The pandemic meant that so much suddenly became available to me, all while my fragile support arrangements collapsed. At work I was in meetings where everyone was on video, not just me stuck on someone’s phone in the corner, hearing every third word. I could go to arts events, join conversations and give evidence at a royal commission. At home I was dying of loneliness, not seeing a single person for months, disability supports not available, gym and physio out of reach, my arthritis

weaving its tendrils of pain around more and more bones.

[...]iv

Non-disabled people talked about how hard being in lockdown was, how much they missed seeing people, how difficult they were finding being on screen all day. This was my life they were talking about, my exact life. I wavered between anger at their thoughtlessness and ignorance of disabled people's lives, but also a sinking realisation that yes, my life is hard. (El Gibbs, "The Disability Pandemic," Autumn 2022v)

As Samuels and Freeman describe in their introduction to the “Crip Temporalities” special issue, there was a kind of convergence in a shared experience of crip time:

“With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, suddenly US academics and other white-collar workers who had previously resided in the sheltered space of the norm were thrust into the time-consuming, often frustrating space of crip time. They found themselves grappling with Zoom and other video chat technologies, struggling to balance exigencies of groceries and childcare with expectations of professional performance, running out of hours in the day and energy in their bodyminds to keep up. They remarked on social media that it was taking

much longer to get anything accomplished, that they could not focus, that unstructured days indoors were strangely tiring, that instructional technologies themselves produced strange effects on their energy and motivation. In the time of COVID-19, those who had lived previously with the privilege of normative ability began to learn what sick and disabled people have known forever: that crip time isn't easy, it isn't fair, it cannot be reasoned with." (Samuels and Freeman 2021, 247)

So, what is crip time? The expression goes back awhile, at least to the 1980s; Alison Kafer points to Irving Zola's use of it in 1988 and Carol Gill's in 1995, in which both of *them* commented that it was an already commonly understood

part of disability culture (Kafer 2013, 26). Kafer herself describes it as a “reorientation to time” which

“requires reimagining our notions of what can and should happen in time, or recognizing how expectations of ‘how long things take’ are based on very particular minds and bodies... Rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds” (Kafer 2013, 26-7).

This is not an easy process, and involves relinquishing mastery of time and of bodies. As Ellen Samuels writes in her 2017 DSQ piece “Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time” (which I name in full in order to recommend if you haven’t read it yet):

“For *crip time is broken time*. It requires us to break in our bodies and minds to new rhythms, new patterns of thinking and feeling and moving through the world. It forces us to take breaks, even when we don’t want to, even when we want to keep going, to move ahead. It insists that we listen to our bodyminds so closely, so attentively, in a culture that tells us to divide the two and push the body away from us while also pushing it beyond its limits. Crip time means listening to the broken languages of our bodies, translating them, honoring their words”

(Samuels 2017).

Disability culture includes an understanding of different orientations to time, and creative responses to what is and isn't possible. For instance, the rest of El Gibbs's essay talks about disabled people sharing expertise and building mutual aid networks. An appreciation of crip time – not as something that solely mattered for two years and can be forgotten about in the rush to re-impose normalcy, but as something that disabled people have worked with for decades and developed wisdom and expertise around – seems vital as we shift into the next stage of the pandemic, in which the push to forget and deny it is all around, even as more and more people encounter phenomena such as long COVID. Long COVID, which is unpredictable in duration and which has key symptoms of fatigue and brain fog, is something that challenges the efforts to impose time limits and schedules.

Elizabeth Freeman uses the term “chrononormativity” to describe “the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity,” including expectations of people’s lives unfolding in a particular way, such as expectations around when people get mortgages, have children, and so forth – the expectation that people need to be at specific phases at specific ages in order to develop productively (Freeman 2010, 3). Both pandemic time and crip time pose challenges to chrononormativity, and could lead to developing shared wisdom in building in tolerances, wiggle room, breaks, acceptance of messiness. We do not, in fact, master time.

So what do we do with this, if we can’t just master time and power through it? It is maybe tempting to just hide in

bed and play Animal Crossing and/or Stardew Valley?

Alas, sometimes there are things that really do need to be done – that, given our values, goals, and commitments, are worth crawling out of our blanket fort to do, if we can.

And, of course, care-taking and showing up for those around us who need us.

I don't want to turn the rest of this paper into "life hacks" for "greater productivity." But I do want to pick up one way of navigating time, which I think is interesting in its own right, and also for what it highlights about what might be involved in creating quality time.

ADHD Time

Here I shift to an experience of time about which our attitudes are heavily shaped by chrononormativity – ADHD time. ADHD is a form of neurodivergence that affects attention and focus. The primary conception of ADHD in mainstream discourse is a heavily medicalized one; many ADHDers have had to push so hard to have it recognized and accommodated at all by friends, schools, and workplaces that this is understandable.^{vi}

Within the context of that medicalized conception of ADHD, Russell Barkley is a major figure; he is a clinical psychologist who has researched ADHD for most of his career – his work has helped shape the definition of ADHD as well as its treatment. He posits a disrupted relationship to time as a key feature of ADHD, calling it “time blindness.” (Note - the term ‘time blindness’ isn’t ideal,

using one disability as a metaphor for another; the alternative 'time agnosia' has been suggested but hasn't really taken hold.^{vii)} In a 1997 article, Barkley notes that ADHD disrupts the processes involved in self-regulation "and returns control of behavior to the temporal now. A blindness to past, future, and time more generally, as well as an inability to direct behavior toward the future and to sustain it are among many of the deficits predicted by this model for persons with ADHD" (Barkley 1997). A decade later, in a talk delivered in Toronto in 2009 to the Centre for ADHD Awareness, Canada Conference (available on YouTube), Barkley says that people with ADHD have time blindness, or "nearsightedness to the future." For people with ADHD, it is always "now." They experience "a disruption in the fabric of time."

This is a lot, and very totalizing!^{viii} A slightly less totalizing picture of time agnosia comes from ADHDers themselves. For example, Pina Varnel's ADHD Alien comics are helpful (and many find them relatable). She notes that she can read clocks and is not *actually* unaware of time. But the passage of time feels blurry, and she finds herself focused on the now. She mostly expresses frustration at this, and notes that medication helped, "as if the cogs in my clock got a grip / instead of turning aimlessly."^{ix}

On the other hand, writer Jesse Meadows pushes back against the conception of 'time blindness'/agnosia, considering it more a kind of 'time optimism,' and has explored it in podcasts and newsletters. Meadows invites a different framing of ADHD time, writing:

“Do I still forget everything all the time? Yes! Do I take forever to start projects and then abandon them? Constantly. Do I get sucked into random rabbit holes of interest and lose entire days of my life? All the time. But I refuse to feel bad about these things or call them disordered. The problem is society’s rigid, narrow rules for what is an acceptable way to be a person, not the fact that I fall outside of them” (Meadows 2021).^x

Meadows draws on medical anthropologist Mikka Nielsen’s work to argue that ADHD is “a relational phenomenon in reference to time” and “a *desynchronization* between the individual and their surroundings” (Meadows 2021).^{xi} Nielsen also recognizes

time work, the labour that goes into trying to keep to time (Nielsen 2020).^{xii}

The question of the appropriateness of medicalizing and/or using a medical model to understand ADHD is far beyond the scope of this paper! (As someone who's only had a diagnosis for a year I'm still trying to untangle that one for myself). Either way, though, there seems to be a common experience, expressed in Nielsen's anthropological research as well as through memes, on social media, and conversation, of time being wonky.

Part 4: Body doubling and relational autonomy

One of the things that everyone seems to point to, regardless of their position on the ontological and medical

status of ADHD, is the usefulness of something called ‘body doubling’, that also pops up in such simple forms as ‘having a writing group/writing partner’; ‘having company while I work’, or even just being on the phone or Facetime while doing dishes or chores. (Jesse Meadows also discusses having a ‘stuck buddy’ to reach out to when you’re, you know, stuck.^{xiii})

ADHD influencers invoke it as a strategy for productivity, but it doesn’t have to be taken in that way; it’s enough that sometimes ADHDers might want to *do* things *with* their time, but might need some sort of support.

In an article in which Diana Meyers explores different aspects of the self and how they relate to autonomy, she includes the “interpersonally bonded” or relational self, and

gives an example of needing to be on a particular diet and to avoid certain foods. When friends know about her diet, even just *knowing that they know*, without them saying anything or taking any specific actions (like avoiding those foods), she is better able to exercise self-control (Meyers 2004, 54-55).

This kind of relational support is, I think, at play with body doubling. Something about being together – in person, on Zoom, on Discord – my students have told me that there are people who even do this on TikTok – that helps support the will to do the things. It is not perfect. It doesn't create time *mastery*. But it helps. The presence of another person lends me agency, accountability, focus. It doesn't force or coerce me, but gives my will a little boost.

As “advice” goes, finding a buddy is really not new. But in the context of the isolation engendered by the COVID-19 pandemic, where even if we’re not in lockdown anymore, it’s still hard (and risky) to get together, it’s important to realize its importance, and to be creative about what we think it might look like. And for philosophers who might be interested in autonomy, particularly relational autonomy, I think that the experiences and experiments of the pandemic are significant.

Part 5: Aftermath of COVID-19

I’m running out of time, but here’s the thing. Without trying to collapse them together, there are similarities between these differing non-normative time relations in which a common thread involves isolation making it hard to keep

time, but working together helps us achieve, not time-mastery, but better time, quality time. What could be learned from this, in terms of ongoing solidarity and a willingness to challenge chrononormativity?

I don't know. The continued presence of the COVID-19 virus and its assorted variants, but with minimal public health protection, means that vulnerable, chronically ill, disabled & immunocompromised people are even more excluded from public life – for safety from the virus itself, and also because of societal inaccessibility that had been temporarily mediated by use of video technologies, flexible arrangements, and other pandemic-era supports. In an article published earlier this month on Truthout, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha calls out leftist spaces for forgetting about the pandemic in the rush to 'move on'.^{xiv}

I'm out of time in writing, and out of time in presenting.

That's what I've got. I look forward to discussion.

**Bonus for folks reading on website: here are the ways
I thought about ending this paper**

It tells us we need each other, support each other

This is also a lesson of crip time

This is going to connect to ethical imperative to not leave people behind in the rush to normalcy.

This will include people with long COVID.

- As COVID time diverges, can we remember the compassion we showed to ourselves & each other with our jokes about “what is time?”
- Samuels & Freeman: what if we detach from chrononormativity and its assumptions of productivity

& recognize “myriad realities of bodyminds along a spectrum of abilities”?

- Can we take seriously the heterogeneity of experiences of time? Can we listen to the insights of folks with different relations to time?
- Can we have meaningful (and shared) projects without considering all our time through the lens of productive work time? Re. time discipline: Can we have coordination without standardization? (Is regularity our friend?)
- Can we keep time in question?^{xv}
 - Is it an *aftermath* though?
 - What do we do about the widening experiences?
 - When I submitted abstract in mid-March 2022, I don't know if I really grasped the wholesale

abandonment of public health responses to the pandemic

- My province lifted *all* restrictions, including isolation, just a couple of days before I submitted abstract (March 14, 2022), but I naively thought that they would bring back at least masking & *some* isolation if positive once cases went up.
- It feels very strange to assert that we should support each other, in the face of the utter failure to do so.

So desperate plea: *listen* to crip wisdom / long COVID wisdom and slow down; cease the insistence on mastery.

ⁱ I didn't see this amongst the Twitter responses to Rosner, but it can also be characteristic of the experience of incarceration, as Lisa Guenther talks about in one of the chapters of her book *Solitary Confinement*.

ⁱⁱ If you are reading this from my website and wish there were full references, just send me an email to ask about any you're curious about; I of course struggled with time in preparing this document. jdryden@mta.ca.

ⁱⁱⁱ One thing that they found that seems interesting: time was still distorted even for folks who were less compliant with lockdown rules as pandemic went on, and also even as lockdowns in France became less demanding.

^{iv} Cut for time, but leaving here: "I lived in two worlds during COVID. One that suddenly got more open and inclusive, where I was asked to talk at events, on television, to Senate committees. I pasted lipstick on, and calmed my frizzy hair, adjusting a badly fitted shirt, so I could tell the world that disabled people needed

help. Then I would scrub it all off, limp to the kitchen and face the anxiety swam about there being no food.”

^v The essay came out in March 2022.

^{vi} (side note: I have another project in which I want to explore this dynamic within the ADHD community, particularly in contrast with autistic self-advocacy, but that is a whole separate strand that I will leave off for now).

^{vii} For a discussion of whether “time-blindness” is an ableist term, see the comment thread here: <https://adhdhomestead.net/is-time-blindness-an-ableist-term/>

^{viii} We can remember the comment by Grondin et al about COVID time not causing musicians to have difficulty with tempo; there is a 2009 study involving ADHDers and metronomes, which sort of found a difference between ADHDers and non-ADHDers in terms of being able to keep time at very slow rhythms, but it is more that the slowness at which it becomes difficult kicks in earlier for ADHDers than non-ADHDers – at normal-ish speeds, and at *very*

slow speeds, the capacity seemed to be the same (Gilden and Marusich 2009). Yay ADHD musicians!

^{ix} <http://adhd-alien.com/2019/07/16/time/>

^x <https://sluggish.substack.com/p/adhd-as-identity-vs-adhd-as-disorder>

^{xi} <https://sluggish.substack.com/p/rhythmanalyzing-adhd>

^{xii} There is another world where I had the time to develop this point about labour for this paper, but of course, in this one, I ran out of time.

^{xiii} <https://sluggish.substack.com/p/get-yourself-a-stuck-buddy>

^{xiv} <https://truthout.org/articles/abled-bodied-leftists-cannot-abandon-disabled-solidarity-to-move-on-from-covid/>

^{xv} [Note on access – just having Zoom isn't enough. Alex Haagaard talks about temporal inaccessibility, & how for folks with chronic pain and fatigue, even Zoom (even with screen off!) can be hard. They advocate recording sessions & having things available asynchronously.]