



Kent Academic Repository

van Emmerik, Corine, Coleman, Rebecca and Lyon, Dawn (2025) *Towards a minor sociology of futures: Shifting futures in Mass Observation accounts of the COVID-19 pandemic*. *Journal of Sociology*, 61 (1). pp. 176-192. ISSN 1440-7833.

Downloaded from

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/106181/> The University of Kent's Academic Repository KAR

The version of record is available from

<https://doi.org/10.1177/14407833241248672>

This document version

Publisher pdf

DOI for this version

Licence for this version

CC BY (Attribution)

Additional information

Versions of research works

Versions of Record

If this version is the version of record, it is the same as the published version available on the publisher's web site. Cite as the published version.

Author Accepted Manuscripts

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding. Cite as Surname, Initial. (Year) 'Title of article'. To be published in **Title of Journal**, Volume and issue numbers [peer-reviewed accepted version]. Available at: DOI or URL (Accessed: date).

Enquiries

If you have questions about this document contact ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in KAR. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our [Take Down policy](https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies) (available from <https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies>).



Towards a minor sociology of futures: Shifting futures in Mass Observation accounts of the COVID-19 pandemic

Journal of Sociology

1–17

© The Author(s) 2024



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/14407833241248672

journals.sagepub.com/home/jos



Corine van Emmerik 

Goldsmiths, University of London, UK

Rebecca Coleman

University of Bristol, UK

Dawn Lyon

University of Kent, UK

Abstract

This article argues for a ‘minor sociology of futures’, which focuses on the significance of futures in and to everyday life by attending to minor shifts in temporal rhythms and patterns that illuminate how futures are imagined and made. We draw on Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts of the major and minor, to attend to how major time is ruptured and remade and how minor temporalities can be productive of new relationships with the major and different futures. Our analysis focuses on the intricate and ambivalent relations with futures articulated in written reflections submitted during the early phase (March–November 2020) of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK to a Mass Observation directive on COVID-19 and time. Nourishing a sensitivity to the minor helps us develop a minor sociology that takes futures seriously, which we argue matters in times of uncertainty that stretch beyond the pandemic.

Keywords

time, temporality, futures, the minor, COVID-19

Corresponding author:

Corine van Emmerik, Sociology, Goldsmiths, University of London, New Cross, London SE14 6NW, UK.

Email: c.vanemmerik@gold.ac.uk

Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the intractability of the future became apparent across multiple scales. From the ordinary making of plans to the survival of the human species, uncertainty was amplified and ‘the future’ questioned. In this article, we argue for a ‘minor sociology of futures’, which focuses on the significance of futures in and to everyday life by attending to ‘minor’ shifts in temporal rhythms and patterns that illuminate how futures are imagined and made. This focus on the mundane both contributes to and contrasts with scholarship that considers changing societal level relationships between past, present and future (e.g. Jordheim, 2014; Lefebvre, 2004). We analyse reflections written by members of the public during the early phase (March–November 2020) of the pandemic in the UK and submitted to a public archive, Mass Observation (MO), based on a ‘directive’ that we co-commissioned. This directive invited volunteer writers to consider whether and how their daily routines, plans for and imaginations of the future had changed during the pandemic. Evident in the responses to our directive were intricate and ambivalent relations with futures, where people grappled with uncertainty in different ways.

Recent debate on the ‘collapse’ of the time of modernity has highlighted the ‘enduring myths’ of time as even, sequential, linear, universal and future-directed (Bastian et al., 2020; Jordheim, 2014; Rosa, 2013). We understand this version of time as major time: time that operates at the macro scale and that is, correspondingly, largely approached theoretically. Major time is not necessarily monolithic – it can involve different speeds and synchronisations – even as it functions as a dominant system. To contribute to a textured understanding of the lived experience of time (Sharma, 2012), we draw on the concept of the minor, inspired by Deleuze et al.’s (1986) ‘minor literature’, to examine how time is reclaimed and remade by MO writers amidst the temporal disorder that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. The minor always exists in relation to its counterpart, the ‘major’, which is made to morph and ‘slip’ in the creation of new, yet uncertain, possibilities and futures. A focus on the minor enables us to attend to the ruptures of major time and how minor temporalities can be productive of new relationships with the major and different futures. By nourishing a sensitivity to the minor, then, we develop a minor sociology that ‘think[s] about the future seriously’ (Andrews, 2019, p. 290).

We suggest that taking the future seriously matters in times of uncertainty as dramatised by the COVID-19 pandemic, when existing ‘temporal architectures’ (Sharma, 2012) were shattered and new modes of organising time had to be pieced together and remade. Acute catastrophes that engender temporal disorder are not confined to the singularity of an event but exceed its boundaries by producing lingering effects and unveiling unmanageable and perhaps previously unimaginable futures. The 2008 global financial crisis, for example, caused a ‘temporal collapse’ (Tellmann, 2020, p. 345) and uncertainty about social and political as well as economic futures that people are still contending with (Mirowski, 2014). Disasters such as earthquakes are processes rather than one-off happenings that have prolonged aftermaths and influence the ongoing everyday life and rhythms of local residents, where ruins and recovery exist alongside each other (Glynou Lefaki, 2022). Slower emergencies, such as the climate crisis and ongoing racial injustice, also operate temporally, including in folding the openness and

uncertainty of the future into the present (Anderson, 2017). Taking note of how these crises refashion societies and communities, the unfolding effects of the COVID-19 pandemic will likely resonate into the future as well as inform the very futures that do, and do not, take shape. Paying careful attention to subtle and muted changes and the multiplicity of futures they render available enables us to keep a finger on the (temporal) pulse and trace change as it unfolds. Indeed, it is necessary to think through time and temporalities more generally in order to draw out how futures are reimagined. In this sense, our focus here is on the dynamics between minor and major times, rather than the content of those changes and their persistence in the future.

In this article we elaborate the concept of the minor and how it can be read in relation to temporality and rhythms, and provide an overview of our methods. Our analysis is then divided into three sections, the first of which focuses on the minor ways in which MO writers reclaimed and remade time in-between the temporal disruptions of the pandemic. Second, we discuss reclamations of major time during the pandemic and how they can be considered as modes of future making. Third, we explore the minoritarian futures that reverberate from minor reclamations. We conclude with a reflection on the implications of our focus on major and minor times and futures for the wider significance of a minor sociology of futures.

Sociology, major and minor time

Deleuze & Guattari (2000) characterise the major as a structuring and organising force, relating to standards, dominance and power, as a 'constant and homogenous system' (p. 105). To develop the minor in relation to, but not in opposition to, the major, they took inspiration from Kafka's writings which utilised German as a major language in creative and lively ways. Kafka strips down the German language until its skeleton remains and enriches it with Prague German and Yiddish, reworking and inventing new usages of a major language. Deleuze et al. (1986, p. 26) describe Kafka as a 'stranger *within* his own language', who can create a 'schizophrenic *mélange* [...] in which very different functions of language and distinct centres of power are played out'. The minor is then a 'subsystem' (Deleuze & Guattari 2000, p. 105) or treatment of the major from within that is creative and full of potential.

We draw on three elements of the major/minor relationship as conceived by Deleuze and Guattari in our analysis of temporality and futures. First, we argue that the minor, characterised by movement and experimentation, lends itself to the analysis of chaotic temporalities and uncertain futures. The minor is not structured in the same sense as the major, it is rather, as Erin Manning (2016) puts it, 'out of time, untimely, rhythmically inventing its own pulse' (p. 2). The minor works creatively within the major, taking from it, de- and re-coding it, and, in doing so, restructuring it in new ways. Minor time therefore operates *within* the larger constraints of major time, and, in doing so, changes those very outlines of the major. For example, foregrounding or shifting to a circadian pace may expand or shrink what we generally consider a majoritarian workday, even if it does not displace it completely.

Deleuze et al. (1986, p. 18) also describe a second characteristic of the major/minor relationship: 'the connection of the individual to a political immediacy'. This

characteristic points to the capacity of the minor to deterritorialize and deconstruct relations of power that are implicated in major ways of doing. This characteristic should not be confused with chronopolitics, generally understood as the politics of time. A chronopolitics can draw out acceleration in modern warfare, for example, or the role of time in colonial Othering (see Klinke, 2013). Rather, the political dimension of the minor indicates the manner in which different configurations of (temporal) structures are (re)made and (re)constituted and how relationships change in the process. Through these new relational entanglements, minor time can be generated and politics understood as relational.

The relationship between major and minor time here resonates with Michelle Bastian's work on clock time. She highlights how clock time 'continues to symbolise capitalist forms of control and domination, as well as the constraining of progressive impulses more generally' (Bastian, 2017, p. 42) that almost has a universal, objective quality. Time is standardised into different time zones and fixed in place, functioning similarly to the major ways of capturing, dominating and standardising. Yet by paying close attention to the complexities of clock time, such as its intricate relations to social life, Bastian (2017, p. 52) reveals the potentialities of 'liberating' clock time. This implies not only the liberation of time but also the potential of time to be misappropriated or 'taken back'. Her attention to how subjective responses to or adjustments of time can be social and political are therefore relevant for our inquiry into the reconfigurations of time and futures during a global crisis and the ways in which MO writers were experimenting with their rhythms and senses of time. Indeed, major time can also be conceived in a similar way to Lefebvre's (2004) notion of 'linear' rhythm. Once the time of work in industrial capitalism, over the course of the 20th century he argued that the linear 'invaded' not only the sphere of leisure but everyday life itself. Although it lessened the place of cyclical rhythm in the everyday, coming to dominate the urban in particular, it could not wholly displace it. We think here about rhythm through the lens of the minor as it resurfaces and takes new forms during the pandemic.

Third, the minor is thoroughly collective and opens up new possibilities for the future. Deleuze et al. (1986) see minor literatures as 'the revolutionary conditions for every literature' (p. 18), as a 'watch that moves forward' and 'a concern of the people' (p. 84) of both the actual and virtual community in which the writer is embedded. Time is therefore produced by and productive of social interactions. More so, time might have its own 'social life', where it not only organises the social but is *of* the social as well (Bastian et al., 2020, p. 290). This social life is oriented towards the future insofar as its continuous variations and experimentations cause frictions with and slips of the major, calling forth different ways of being and doing. In the making of minor time, configurations, ways of being and uses of the future are hence made available but whether they will be actualized remains unknown. We thus draw inspiration from the concept of the minor to orient our thinking about time and futures in new ways (see Colebrook, 2002; Mazzei, 2017).

Since relationships between structuring and more creative or resistant forces are central to sociology, it is perhaps surprising that Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of the major and minor have not gained more traction. John Andrews nevertheless takes up Deleuze and Guattari's concept of minor literature to call for the development of a minor sociology through marginalised and overlooked figures and texts. He argues that '[w]hile scientific empiricism and generalisable social theory constitute sociology's

major “language”, minor sociology refers to a political epistemological program for social and cultural studies at a historical precipice characterised by accelerating change and new and worsening social problems’ (Andrews, 2019, p. 386). Andrews’ argument for an expansion of ‘what sociology is and does’ (p. 386) might be understood in terms of cultivating interdisciplinary approaches to contemporary social issues and conditions. Writing about the value of minor theory to geography, Cindi Katz (2017) notes its capacities to ‘work these connections’ (p. 599) between political, economic and social contexts and the ways in which they are lived and felt. ‘It really is no longer enough – and never was’, Katz argues, ‘to analyse the production and expropriation of value, the dialectic of accumulation by dispossession, or the flows of capital and labour. [...] [I]t is also necessary to understand the concrete nature of these abstract social relations’ (2017, p. 599; see also Katz, 1996).

Building on what Andrews and Katz identify as the capacity of the minor to explicate lived experience and its relations with social processes, in this article we focus on the minor as a means to understand everyday life during the early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK. We see our empirical research as illuminating how this period felt to people, how they dealt with uncertainty and how they re/calibrated their relations with futures (Coleman & Lyon, 2023). More specifically in this article, we see a minor sociology as contributing to a richer social science literature on time. Current research on time often theorises epochal or macro shifts (e.g. Adam & Groves, 2007; Nowotny, 1996; Rosa, 2013), including the multiplicity of temporal regimes (e.g. Jordheim, 2014; Torres, 2023), but risks overlooking ‘the complexity of lived time’ (Sharma, 2012, p. 6). In this sense, our starting point is not with ‘sociology’s major “language” as Andrews (2019, p. 391) puts it, but with our empirical research which helps us to understand the ‘improvisational and reflexive’ character of life as it is lived. We see this focus as especially important for developing a sociological understanding of futures in that it both highlights the significance of the micro, empirical ways in which futures are significant in daily life – indeed, how futures can come to provide the contours of daily life – and demonstrates what Andrews (2019, p. 384) calls ‘the kinship between the minor and the major, and its attendant dissonance around authority and authenticity, knowing and sensing, mastery and virtuosity’.

Overall, our deployment of the major/minor relationship attends to the plurality of temporalities and futures that people experienced, lived with, adapted and amended during the pandemic. Indeed, in starting with our empirical research on time, feeling and the everyday life of the pandemic, our analysis highlights how the futures made possible through the disruption of majoritarian time are not only sites of creative and political potential, but can also be frightening and unsettling. The major, then, is not something that everyone wants to be overthrown; rather, during a period of great uncertainty, it continues to exert a persuasive pull.

Tuning into minor time: MO, temporalities, everyday life

Our research was conducted in collaboration with MO, an organisation which has been ‘recording everyday life in Britain’ since the 1930s, and since the 1980s through thematic directives. Thinking sociologically with MO has a long and productive history (e.g.

Casey et al., 2014; Savage, 2007), including in relation to questions of time and futures (Adkins, 2017; Clarke & Barnett, 2023; Highmore, 2010). Although it is not a representative sample of British society, and those who write for it are self-selecting, it is seen as valuable in providing rich, textured and heterogeneous accounts of ordinary life, and ‘a weather-map of popular feeling’ (Highmore, 2010, p. 127). Our co-commissioned MO directive asked writers to reflect on their experiences of time during the pandemic, and specifically whether and how their rhythms and routines, homelife, use of media and technologies, and senses of waiting had changed. We also asked them to ‘look back on your experiences of time and Covid-19 so far, consider what it means to you for life to get “back to normal” (if it is) in the present day, and imagine what you think the future might hold’ (see: http://www.massobs.org.uk/images/Summer_Directive2020_FINAL.pdf). Their reflections were rich and, in some instances, raised some ethical and methodological issues (see van Emmerik, 2023). The directive was sent to volunteer writers in August 2020 with responses submitted by the end of November 2020. The first COVID-19 lockdown came into effect across the UK on 23 March 2020 and began to be lifted from 1 June 2020. From 14 October 2020, regional restrictions were implemented until 12 April 2021. Although MO writers were responding to the directive, there was much flux and uncertainty as the virus peaked, new variants were identified, vaccines were researched and trialled, and rules were changed. In their analysis of articulations of time and law in this MO directive, Beynon-Jones et al. (2023, p. 4) examine the ‘poly-rhythmic temporalities operating across fields of experience and action’ that emerged from ‘the contradictory or dissonant qualities’ of actual and anticipated changes in pandemic laws. What the future might be, how far one could ‘project’ (Mische, 2009) ‘into’ it – indeed, whether there is a future – became highly charged and contested questions, and it is evident that the majority of MO writers were grappling with them.

The directive was sent to 758 people, and 228 writers submitted electronic or hand-written responses to it (30% response rate). MO volunteer writers are asked to self-describe their gender, age, regional location, marital status and occupation, but not currently their race or ethnicity. MO writers tend to be older professional women drawn from the south-east of England: 46.1% of our sample are under 60 years of age, with the majority of writers in their 60s or 70s. An additional 30 diaries were provided by writers under 25. Overall, 45.6% of our writers were in paid work, 46.1% had retired and the remaining respondents were homemakers (2.2%), students (3.1%) or their occupation was unknown (3.1%). Moreover, 22.3% are in or were previously in higher managerial/professional occupational positions, 19.1% in intermediate positions and 28.6% in lower managerial/professional positions with 27.4% of respondents based in London or the south-east of England, 12.9% in the south of England, 31.8% in the Midlands and 16.4% in the north-west of England. Writers based in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland represented 10% and several were living abroad (excluded from this analysis). Of the sample, 70.6% respondents identified as women, 21.5% as men, 2 as non-binary and gender identity is unknown for 16 writers.

Although our research did not aim to generate experiences and analyses that were representative of the UK population, and we did not conduct a systematic comparison of responses across different socio-economic categories, we do acknowledge the limitations of this sample. For example, although it encompasses a majority of writers who are

deemed most vulnerable to the COVID-19 virus due to their age, it also consists of a majority of middle-class writers who, as many of their written reflections attest, were able to lock down in comfortable surroundings. Not being in paid employment, or being employed in professional positions, also cushioned most writers from ‘the front line’ of the pandemic, either because they were not obliged to work or could take advantage of digital technologies and stay at home.

The MO responses nevertheless provide us with ‘glimpses’ into the contradictions and ambivalences of everyday life as the writers themselves struggle with the extraordinary event of the pandemic. We work with ‘the minor’ not only theoretically but also methodologically, in that it enables us to explore how major time is disturbed by the pandemic, is made to slip further by MO writers and reconsolidated in different ways. As Katz (1996, pp. 490–491) explains,

[c]onstituting the minor is not about naming but about consciously working in a vocabulary in which one is not at home – where one has become ‘deterritorialised’ – but where one works that deterritorialisation to its limits, forcing it to express something different.

In particular, working with the major/minor relationship enables us to shed light on how variations and experimentations with temporality can open up different possibilities and futures. We also work with ‘the minor’ in a second way, building on Andrews’ (2019) call for a ‘theoretically and methodologically capacious’ (p. 390) minor sociology that gives priority to what is marginalised, neglected or unrecognised. In its ability to keep a finger on the temporal pulse that might otherwise be passed over, a minor sociology of futures adds to the ‘repertoire of sociological methods for futures research’ (Halford & Southerton, 2023).

Temporal disruption and minor ways of reclaiming and remaking time

Everyday rhythms were both dissolved and remade during the pandemic as new practices of living in the everyday emerged as possible. MO panellists sustained and renewed rhythms in relation to time-making devices and practices, and used objects and technologies in novel ways (Coleman & Lyon, 2023). This ranged from abandoning devices that structure time (e.g. calendars) to exploring the ‘liberatory potential’ of those same devices as flexible, material practices of time-making and synchronisation (Bastian, 2017; Pschetz & Bastian, 2018; Wajcman, 2015). Rather than thinking about clock time in unambiguous majoritarian terms, writers’ relations to temporal devices were a mode of de- and re-coding, reclaiming and remaking time. As majoritarian time was disrupted, it revealed the working of the minor.

If entrenched temporal norms and social routines ordinarily structure the day, some writers explored new, looser modes of marking and inhabiting time during the pandemic. Deciding to ‘wake up naturally’ instead of ‘setting my alarm’ (e.g. R7210, female, 16, Cardiff, high school student, single) was a common aspect of reconfiguring the intersection of the major and the minor, tuning into the body and the seasons rather than the clock, embracing openness and surrendering to the possibilities that each day presented.

As P6988 (male, 60, Cumbria, retired, married) wrote: 'time only starts when we wake up'. Even within the same household, distinct circadian rhythms were followed: 'I imagine it sounds chaotic that five people can following their own rhythms, but we do have individual routines which cross at specific moments (rather than times)' (P7032, female, 49, London, student and teacher, married).

New habits started to form – for instance, in taking exercise 'at various times, including some early mornings, but mostly it was round about midday' (A6936, female, 69, Bristol, retired, widow). A6936 recounted new patterns of making phone calls, informed by the situation and emerging from practices rather than a predetermined schedule. In the following quotation from A6936 there is a sense of both sharing time across generations, and carving out time and space in a relational way:

I ring my Mum every couple of days, after 3.00, and always did that from home for the first couple of months. When travel restrictions lifted I discovered that I could ring from outside her window, and that worked much better. So we have our own version of Skype, it works very well, and we still do it until I am allowed to visit her again as normal, when the Home fully reopens to visitors.

Reclaiming minor time did not necessitate abandoning or rejecting major time. Indeed, it was in the small rearrangements of the everyday that emerged during the pandemic that writers reflected on changes. C6574 (female, 55, West Oxfordshire, knowledge broker, married) discussed how she and her partner 'generally work 9 to 5' but she 'can flex' the temporal structure of the day according to her own preferences and her daughters' needs:

I might take time during the working day to walk into town to do something (go to the Post Office, perhaps, or pick up medicines), in which case I'm likely to have started work earlier than usual, or I'll carry on later. Or maybe I'll just do fewer hours that day, and more another.

Overall, this allowed her to consider 'how I organise my time' as something *she* could shape and plan on her own terms. For N5744 (male, 42, Sunderland, carer, single), who cared for his dependent mother, attuning to minor time meant following his own goals and 'putting my foot down and insisting that I have [to] do my own thing during the times of the day when my mother is well enough to take care of herself'. Indeed, for some, COVID-19 was an invitation to 'slow down' and live differently, 'to sit instead of walk, to listen to the birds instead of shouting over them', to take small freedoms where possible, such as no longer tidying up the house or dressing up (H6804, female, 64, London, doctor, widow).

Some writers experienced the pandemic as a turning point (Coleman & Lyon, 2023). 'Had it not been for the lockdown', A7000 (female, 61, Lancashire, solicitor) wrote, 'we would never have had that precious time together and it made us all closer.' Before the pandemic, B3227 (no information) would 'hoard my days of freedom, calculating how many I had left, working out the exact halfway point' but now experienced time differently 'when what we have is an apparently unlimited supply, due to unemployment, furlough, redundancy, retirement or a private income. I can let it run through my fingers

instead of begrudging the expenditure'. B6900 (no information) reflected on the pandemic as a critical juncture, thinking that 'for many, time is no longer something to take for granted and many people are now starting to look at the world around them and their time on earth a little differently than before'. If 'the pressure to make [the] best use of time is different [...] it is still there' (H6804). But the boundaries of major time are challenged or even refused to create space for other temporal flows and landscapes, thus making the major slip from its rather anchored position.

These minor reclamations of time are social and relational as they intersect, attune to or are repulsed by other rhythms. They are also both personal and social as writers described finding new rhythms of social interaction and securing personal space away from others. Writers realised that time is not universal clock time, but can be liberated (Bastian, 2017) and made minor on its own terms. Some described the sense of control that this gives: 'It feels like time is far more under my own control, rather than having public transport microdeadlines punctuating the day' (T5672, male, 37, Bristol, senior manager, married) whereas others found joy in moving through the day without considering the usual structures and patterns, simply gliding through looser temporal patterns of days or weeks. Thus, by making major time subtly slip and shift, the minor reconfigured its relationship to the major, rendering it less powerful than before, as the everyday is reclaimed from the imposition of the linear time (Lefebvre, 2004). Such movements both opened and foreclosed possibilities for other ways of being and living as the next section demonstrates.

Reclaiming major time as a mode of future-making

The omnipresence of uniform and progressive clock time was unsettled by the pandemic as taken for granted routines and temporal markers were either suspended or needed to be explicitly reinscribed to remake the everyday in its previous form, especially during periods of lockdown. Many MO writers emphasised clock time as 'holding' them in time and space and allowing them to keep on going. They stuck to or created new rhythms, seeking repetition and structure, appealing to the 'major' to do so. However, although the clock is called upon to shape time, it cannot completely do so. Indeed, 'the minor is so much a part of the major that its deployment completely reworks the major *from within*' (Katz, 1996, p. 491, original emphasis).

H2418 (female, 68, London, retired, single) described collective meditations set up by members of an existing group to come together online 'but from afar', each in their own lockdown homes. She introduced this as 'one of the major things that marks time for me' during the pandemic, implying it was a key temporal structuring device for the day/week. But she also explored her understanding of the temporal relations of the day that 'fluctuate' as a result of the meditation. However this patterning varied, it nevertheless gave shape to time which was no longer 'endless' as a result.

This has been a godsend in the way of stabilising time and yet has also seemed to make time shorter although time with the meditation itself has a way of altering, fluctuating, sometimes expanding, sometimes contracting. It appears to do something to the rest of the day that

makes it seem as if there is less time, as if time is not endless in the way it appeared to be when the lockdown began in March. (H2418)

M7145 (female, 64, Plymouth, retired, widow) discussed how she ‘watched the clock carefully’ during her morning exercise. Having decided ‘to try to keep to my normal routine of getting up by 7.00’, she exercised in a local wood and meadow. Initially, she worried if she was ‘setting out late’. In contrast to the experience of time as endless and lacking differentiation, she had a sense of the ‘right time’ to undertake particular activities. She reassured herself that a strict schedule turned out not to be necessary as she was living in a ‘quiet neighbourhood’ and could easily ‘avoid other people’. Although she experienced exercising for ‘the same amount of time, every day at the same time’ as a new ‘good habit’, once it was possible to go further afield and drive again, she was not able to sustain it. What this suggests is that ‘major’ time operated in a simplified form, enhanced by the conditions of the pandemic at the same time as being fundamentally disrupted by it.

There is an impulse to stay tethered to the major temporal order in the writers’ accounts that emphasised doing things as ‘normal’ and a fear of being derailed by the changes to everyday life. For B7515 (female, 56, Manchester, investigator, married), work has ‘pretty much kept going as normal, so no real change there’. However, the number of people present at work ‘keeps changing with the changing guidelines’, which clearly felt unsettling: ‘it’s not as noticeable as it might be but it’s still there’, she explained. Others, too, sought to emphasise sameness and continuity but were equally confronted by change: ‘My husband and I both still go out to work so our lives still have the same structure from that point of view’ (B7515). That said, there is ‘zero socialising (apart from with my mother, who is in our bubble)!’

Many writers explicitly discussed their attempts to retain daily routines and structures. ‘Since lockdown began, my alarm clock has been set at the same times as normal for weekday and weekend gets ups’, wrote M6815 (female, 41, Birmingham, charity worker, married). She presented the need to maintain her routine for two interconnected reasons. First, she preferred ‘to get up and get on’, which comes across as a sort of wishfulness to be carried through the day in activity and by the clock. Second, she was concerned that any let-up from this pattern would make it difficult to ‘revert to normal’. This suggests the slick and fragile hold of major time in the present and the ever-present possibility of it losing its structuring power.

Indeed, C7297 (no information) explained how the ‘loosening’ of temporal structures resulted in her feeling ‘disoriented’. She sought to address this by bringing the future into the present, to bring it into her control and make it more palpable/tangible:

I like to plan my day or at least have a pretty good idea of how it will pan out at the start so as this structure loosened, I felt more and more at sea and disorientated. I needed some goals and times to look forward to.

Although the pandemic certainly forced people to make adjustments in their everyday temporalities and rhythms, the inclination towards or grasp of the major thus has consequences for how writers conceived, imagined and enacted the future. For B6659

(female, 67, widow, East Yorkshire, retired lecturer), the daily rhythms did not change much once lockdown restrictions were relaxed, and she did not anticipate great changes in the future until vaccinations were available. M6807 (female, 42, Belfast, writer, married) considered her time during the lockdown as a ‘practice run’, similar to the usual ‘settling in and “hibernating” due to bad weather and short days’. Everyday rhythms, whether adjusted from pre-pandemic or returning to normal, thus easily merged into majoritarian futures as a consequence and reinforcement of major time. Even though writers’ rhythms might have changed, some imagined a future based on prior knowledge and experiences. N7098 (female, 48, Salisbury, writer, married) offered a pessimistic view:

I think life will go back to exactly how it was before – I don’t think any lessons have been learned as humans from out [our] time apart and where it could have been a time of great reflection and growth, we have all emerged far more selfish than before.

T7449 (female, 72, York, retired, divorced) was ‘hopeful that normal life (and not this half-life they call the “new normal”) will resume’, even though it might feel ‘further away’. P7032 (female, 49, London, student and teacher, married) also had a more positive outlook about resuming her normal routines. With her children’s return to school approaching, she suspected ‘we will be one step closer to normality’. Even though she appreciated the break, she liked to be busy. Some younger writers, such as MT2020 2481 (male, 11, Crawley, pupil), craved for ‘everything to be as it was before’, missing ‘playing football with friends and having a conversation with them about normal stuff’. R7226 (female, 72, Liverpool, retired, widow) also longed for her life to be back ‘to something resembling normal and to re-establish routines as I don’t feel that my life has real meaning to it at present’.

The pandemic created a rupture, forcing many to conjure minor variations to their normal grooves and rhythms. Yet in many instances, minor changes in rhythms bent back to major forms of organising time, foreclosing the imagination and production of futures otherwise by generating and advancing majoritarian futures that were predicated on what is already known and thus rendered it as a predictable unit of major time. Although much theoretical work on the major/minor relationship focuses on the political capacities of the minor, attending to the lived experiences of the MO writers requires us to consider the appeal of the major. Perhaps because the minor indicates change – that everyday life might be done differently – at a time of great uncertainty, the major is what is sought out and attempted to be reinstated.

Minor reclamations of time and different futures

The concept of the minor draws attention to the ways in which the seemingly constant and monolithic major can be disturbed in the present and future. It focuses attention on how futures are made, at least in part, in modest or apparently insignificant ways. That the spring 2020 lockdown gave people what M6737 (female, 47, Devon, enforcement officer, married) called ‘the time to invest in more self-care’ was something many MO writers reflected upon, as the section above on the minor indicates. C3210 (female, 40,

Hertfordshire, civil partnered with five-year-old son) wrote about the need to reclaim time for herself:

Lockdown has taught me how important it is for me to be on my own every once in a while. I am starting to claw a bit of time back (for example coming upstairs to write this today) but I think I need more. I need quiet in my mind and that's difficult with an extrovert partner and a lively five year-old boy.

Although she noted the difficulties of achieving 'quiet in my mind', C3210 also highlighted the importance of continuing to 'claw' back more time in her future. Here, learnings from lockdown provided insights into her needs and how she can shape her future around them. Her needs were not immense yet they chime with long-standing feminist work on mothering and time (see, for example, Baraitser, 2009) and signal a minor way in which the major can be made to slip and can therefore be done and felt differently. Echoing C3210, A2 (female, 78, Hersham, retired, divorced) wrote: 'I am going to make more time for myself', noting 'Before[,] I always did a lot for others'; now she would 'learn to say NO, step back from being always available to help out'.

A number of MO writers expressed their enjoyment of a new (slower) pace of life during lockdown and periods of other restrictions influencing their desired futures. H7289 (female, 59, Cambridge, writer, married), for example, wrote: 'We have agreed that, having now spent six months at a slower pace, neither of us wish to return to the way things were. We're far happier with our new way of life.' For M6737, the long duration of furlough 'provided space to take a break to think and evaluate life choices and the direction my life was going in', resulting in her joining 'professional development courses'. Many wrote about how they were actively organising their lives to change their careers and reshape their futures in other ways:

I came up with a plan for an alternative career path once life started to open up again and set the wheels in motion for that. It's a three year plan involving a reasonable amount of study and now I'm well on the way to making inroads into that plan. I also participated in some confidence building and self-development coaching to help the whole process. (H7289)

The 'evaluat[ion] of life choices' during lockdown that M6737 remarked upon were articulated by other MO writers. H6804 (female, 64, London, doctor, widow) responded to the MO directive by reflecting back on the pandemic from the position of the future:

I hope I will look back on this period as a time when we were allowed to focus on the things that make life worth living: the natural world, books and learning, and, most importantly, our relationships with family, friends and the community of which we are part.

Looking from an imagined future, H6804 expressed hope for how the present will have emphasised 'the things that may [made] life worth living'. She implied that life can be different; there are alternative futures that are possible and available, and she is writing from within one of them. However, not everyone found the future easy to imagine or articulate. Rather than locating herself in a future beyond the uncertainty

and strangeness of the present, M7452 (female, 34, London, research manager, married) saw the COVID-19 pandemic as shaping the immediate future and therefore configured her imagination of the future around it:

As it is, I'm much more realistic that we will have to live with the virus for an extended period of time, perhaps over the next coming years too. I am trying to focus on the things that I can control and the steps we can take to protect our little family and to just accept that this is our reality for the foreseeable future. I look forward to when we can go out again on our little days out, to eat out someplace and to meet up with family and friends.

For M7452, the future was neither knowable nor predictable, like a majoritarian future, but rather open and unknown. Although different relationships to futures are expressed in these two extracts by H6804 and M7452, they shared a prioritisation of the people that matter most to them: 'family, friends and the community of which we are a part'; 'our little family' and wider 'family and friends'. These helped shape a set of collective futures that Deleuze et al. (1986, p. 18) call the 'collective assemblage of enunciation'.

Although not all MO writers relished the pivot to online technologies, H1745 (female, 69, London, researcher, widow) reflected on the positive changes that Zoom and online medical appointments made to their everyday lives, and how these shaped their imaginations of and desires for the future:

Looking to the future I'm glad I have learned to use Zoom and will continue to use it once Covid-19 has died down. The main change that I'm hoping for in the future relates to my use of online technology to do medical appointments online rather than having to go to surgeries and hospital clinics, where waiting is so difficult for me!

As with C3210 and A2, the future was imagined modestly, but further-reaching implications are indicated; here, the ways in which futures are located in and materialised through concrete aspects of ordinary life demonstrate how futures-in-the-making are enabled.

What such examples highlight is the working of the minor within the major. We see how people worked within existing boundaries to find or make nooks or crevices to take back time and make it 'their own'. These minor reclamations opened up a myriad of configurations of the future that cannot be captured within one frame or presented as a monolithic or majoritarian stream of linear temporality that reaches straightforward into tomorrow. Rather, the futures described here are diverse and multiple. For some, the future might liberate time in small ways, allowing writers to follow their own pulse rather than the beat of others, with more freedom or slowness as they preferred. Some have set in motion *other, different* futures from those that are expected or predictable, such as a change in career path. They not only imagine, but also activate those alternative futures through subtle changes; a reorientation or a sense of openness and possibility. We see minor futures that are collective and woven together with and for others, with some mediated by digital technologies or located in virtual worlds. These minor reclamations of time are not fundamental restructurings of the major, but rather a pushing, unsettling and redefining its boundaries, making it slip into new relationships and pathways. In this

sense the minor is productive of both small ripples and wider future reverberations. Whether these modest changes are lasting remains unknown; this analysis nevertheless shows how the major is always being reworked, from which different futures can unfold.

Conclusion

Through our analysis of minor reclamations of time, we show how major time was restored and rhythms re-stabilized despite the ruptures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. For many MO writers, it was important to re-establish temporal relations as a way of anchoring themselves through new rhythms and routines. Yet the contours of major time changed; it was simplified and its hold on the everyday was weakened. Minor remakings and reclamations of time were evident to help MO writers get back into the groove and rhythms of old lives in the hope of anticipating and pulling towards a 'normal' future that feels familiar. For others, the disruption of plans for the future were liberating, as new possibilities were imagined and materialised. What is clear across these varied experiences is that temporal relations were unsettled and that the future should not be considered as unified. Rather, 'the future' presented itself as a multiplicity, consisting of futures with different durations, attractions and affects; time was opened up towards multiple futures (see Salazar & Pink, 2017, p. 75) rather than projecting a linear future.

In taking the fragile and plural futures of MO writers seriously, we have demonstrated how a minor sociology of futures can bring into sharp focus how people reclaim and remake their rhythms and senses of time, and re/configure social relations and engagements with futures. One of our aims in starting with our original empirical research, then, is to demonstrate how an attention to the minor requires us to examine and understand how everyday life is itself constitutive of the major. This is to take up Andrews' call for a minor sociology that expands, and perhaps re-orient, sociology's 'major language'. It is also to make the connections between macro or major processes and feelings, experience and everyday life, as Katz (1996) encourages. And it is to argue that futures and time are central aspects of the minor. In Mike Michael's (2017) terms, this is to see what he calls 'Little Futures' as '*yield[ing]*' (as opposed to *exemplify[ing]*) Big Futures' (p. 516; emphasis in original). In particular, it shows us that during the pandemic – for MO writers and sociologists – 'the future' became 'an analytic object' (Brown & Michael, 2003, p. 4) in everyday life in new ways. Given that the affects and effects of disasters have long and sometimes unanticipated reverberations, and that we are at different stages in the unfolding of various emergencies, we see our argument here as having purchase beyond a concern with the COVID-19 pandemic. That is, as uncertainty comes to characterise everyday life in liberal democracies in the global north (Anderson et al., 2020; Berlant, 2011; Nowotny, 2015), a minor sociology of futures becomes more necessary.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the British Academy (grant number SRG2021\211073).

ORCID iD

Corine van Emmerik  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0138-3918>

References

- Adam, B., & Groves, C. (2007). *Future matters: Action, knowledge, ethics*. Brill.
- Adkins, L. (2017). Sociology's archive: Mass-observation as a site of speculative research. In A. Wilkie, M. Savransky, & M. Rosengarten (Eds.), *Speculative research: The lure of possible futures* (pp. 117–129). Routledge.
- Anderson, B. (2017). Emergency futures: Exception, urgency, interval, hope. *Sociological Review*, 65(3), 463–477. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12447>
- Anderson, B., Wilson, H., Forman, P. J., Heslop, J., Ormerod, E., & Maestri, G. (2020). Brexit: Modes of uncertainty and futures in an impasse. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 45(2), 256–269. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12348>
- Andrews, J. (2019). Notes toward a minor sociology. *Cultural Studies <-> Critical Methodologies*, 19(5), 384–393. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708619830137>
- Baraitser, L. (2009). *Maternal encounters: The ethics of interruption* (1st ed.). Routledge.
- Bastian, M. (2017). Liberating clocks: Developing a critical horology to rethink the potential of clock time. *New Formations*, 92(92), 41–55. <https://doi.org/10.3898/NEWF:00.00.2017>
- Bastian, M., Baraitser, L., Flexer, M., Hom, A. R., & Salisbury, L. (2020). Introduction: The social life of time. *Time & Society*, 29(2), 289–296.
- Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel optimism*. Duke University Press.
- Beynon-Jones, S., Grabham, E., & Hendrie, N. (2023). 'The rules are all over the place': Mass observation, time, and law in the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Law and Society*, 50(3), 369.
- Brown, N., & Michael, M. (2003). A sociology of expectations: Retrospective prospects and prospecting retrospectives. *Technology Analysis and Strategic Management*, 15(1), 3–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0953732032000046024>
- Casey, E., Courage, F., & Hubble, N. (2014). Special section introduction: Mass Observation as method. *Sociological Research Online*, 19(3), 22. <https://www.socresonline.org.uk/19/3/22.html> (accessed 6 February 2023)
- Clarke, N., & Barnett, C. (2023). Archiving the COVID-19 pandemic in Mass Observation and Middletown. *History of the Human Sciences*, 36(2), 3–25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09526951231152139>
- Colebrook, C. (2002). *Gilles Deleuze*. Routledge.
- Coleman, R., & Lyon, D. (2023). Recalibrating everyday futures during the COVID-19 pandemic: Futures fissured, on standby and reset in mass observation responses. *Sociology*, 57(2), 421–437.
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (2000). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. Continuum.
- Deleuze, G., Guattari, F., & Polan, D. (1986). *Kafka: Toward a minor literature*. University of Minnesota Press.

- Glynou Lefaki, E. (2022). Recovering from a disaster: A rhythmalytic approach to everyday life in L'Aquila, Italy. In D. Lyon (Ed.), *Rhythmalysis: Place, mobility, disruption and performance*, Research in Urban Sociology (Vol. 17, pp. 153–170). Emerald Publishing.
- Halford, S., & Southerton, D. (2023). What future for the sociology of futures? Visions, concepts and methods. *Sociology*, 57(2), 263–278. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00380385231157586>
- Highmore, B. (2010). *Ordinary lives*. Routledge.
- Jordheim, H. (2014). Introduction: Multiple times and the work of synchronisation. *History and Theory*, 53, 498–518. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hith.10728>
- Katz, C. (1996). Towards minor theory. *Environment and Planning D*, 14, 487–499. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d140487>
- Katz, C. (2017). Revisiting minor theory. *Environment and Planning D*, 35(4), 596–599. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775817718012>
- Klinke, I. (2013). Chronopolitics. *Progress in Human Geography*, 37(5), 673–690. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132512472094>
- Lefebvre, H. (2004). *Rhythmalysis*. Bloomsbury Continuum UK.
- Manning, E. (2016). *The minor gesture*. Duke University Press.
- Mazzei, L. A. (2017). Following the contour of concepts toward a minor inquiry. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 23(9), 675–685. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800417725356>
- Michael, M. (2017). Enacting big futures, little futures: Toward an ecology of futures. *Sociological Review*, 65(3), 509–524. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12444>
- Mirowski, P. (2014). *Never let a serious crisis go to waste: How neoliberalism survived the financial meltdown*. Verso.
- Mische, A. (2009). Projects and possibilities: Researching futures in action. *Sociological Forum*, 24(3), 694–704. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1573-7861.2009.01127.x>
- Nowotny, H. (1996). *Time: The modern and postmodern experience*. Polity.
- Nowotny, H. (2015). *The cunning of uncertainty*. Cambridge University Press.
- Pschetz, L., & Bastian, M. (2018). Temporal design: Rethinking time in design. *Design Studies*, 56, 169–184. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.destud.2017.10.007>
- Rosa, H. (2013). *Social acceleration, a new theory of modernity*. Columbia University Press.
- Salazar, J. F., & Pink, S. (2017). *Anthropologies and futures: Researching emerging and uncertain worlds*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Savage, M. (2007). Changing social class identities in post-war Britain: Perspectives from mass-observation. *Sociological Research Online*, 12(3), 6. <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/12/3/6.html> (accessed 6 February 2023). <https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.1459>
- Sharma, S. (2012). *In the meantime: Temporality and cultural politics*. Duke University Press.
- Tellmann, U. (2020). Beyond performativity: Material futures of finance. *Economy and Society*, 49(3), 345–363. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03085147.2020.1736837>
- Torres, F. (2023). *Temporal regimes: Materiality, politics, technology*. Routledge.
- van Emmerik, C. (2023). Ethical reflexivity, care, and slippery data: Lessons from working with the mass observation project. *Sociological Research Online*, 0(0) [preprint].
- Wajcman, J. (2015). *Pressed for time: The acceleration of life in digital capitalism*. University of Chicago Press.

Author biographies

Rebecca Coleman is professor in the Bristol Digital Futures Institute (BDFI) and School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies (SPAIS), University of Bristol, UK, where she researches and teaches on digital media and culture, futures, everyday life and interdisciplinary methodologies.

Dawn Lyon is professor of sociology in the School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research at the University of Kent, UK. She is a sociologist of work, time and everyday life with a keen interest in rhythm and creative, audio-visual, sensory and temporal methods.

Corine van Emmerik is a PhD researcher and associate lecturer in the Department of Sociology at Goldsmiths, University of London. She is interested in minor practices, everyday life, speculative thought and pragmatism, as well as potentialities and futures.