




# Time, ties, transactions: temporality and relational work in economic exchange

Adam S. Hayes<sup>1</sup> 

Accepted: 6 April 2024  
© The Author(s) 2024

## Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of time and relational economic sociology. Building on Viviana Zelizer's relational framework, I argue that analyzing the temporal dimensions of exchange provides insight into how social ties gain meaning through economic practices. The paper shows time's dual role as both an organizing structure bounding action, and a dynamic element that actors leverage to shape transactional contexts. As structure, time offers culturally-available templates like schedules and rhythms that facilitate coordination and signify predictable social meanings befitting particular relational categories. Yet time also constitutes relational work itself; strategic timing, duration, pacing, and sequencing of interactions signal context, manage expectations, and sustain bonds amidst entanglements. Synchronization through temporal agency prevents mismatches between transactions and social contexts that could strain ties. This agency in time ranges from passive adherence to dominant structures to active assertions of power resistance, enabling both domination and defiance across economic contexts. Analyzing shared temporal infrastructure within circuits of commerce further illuminates how actors distinguish those spheres of exchange at various scale from the impersonal market. Ultimately, incorporating temporality strengthens relational economic sociology by identifying a key mechanism through which practices of exchange become relationally meaningful.

**Keywords** Relational work · Temporality · Economic sociology

Time is inherent to all economic activity. To be sure, every transaction and negotiation unfolds within certain temporal boundaries and horizons—whether it be the

---

✉ Adam S. Hayes  
adam.hayes@mail.huji.ac.il

<sup>1</sup> Department of Sociology and Anthropology, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Mt. Scopus Campus, Jerusalem 91905, Israel

fleeting click of an online purchase to recurring payroll deposits or the enduring reciprocity of a business partnership—all forms of exchange take place along the axis of time. Scholars have analyzed and theorized time's essential role in shaping formal economic institutions (Miyazaki, 2003; Hirschman, 2021; Polanyi, 2002), labor markets (Adam, 2003), and patterns of production (Hassard, 2017) and consumption (Shove, 2020). However, time's influence on the more micro-level dynamics that interest economic sociology, particularly in the context of informal exchange among personal relationships, has yet to be systematically explored (see: Bandelj, 2020: 306, Zelizer, 2012).

The importance of intersubjective time is increasingly recognized within organizational studies, where temporal structures—such as deadlines, schedules, and fiscal cycles—influence organizational behavior, corporate decision-making, and ultimately, the efficacy and efficiency of operations (Ancona et al., 2001; Lee & Liebenau, 2000; Orlikowski & Yates, 2002). While linear conceptions of time marching inexorably forward can fix project deadlines and promote a sense of urgency (Landy et al., 1991), more recent thinking among organizations scholars emphasizes time's malleable and socially-constructed aspects (Bansal et al., 2022). This growing body of work underscores the need to coordinate and align goals, highlighting the role of agency in facilitating the synchronization necessary for collective endeavors (Reinecke et al., 2021; Shipp & Jansen, 2021). This echoes the work of earlier industrial sociologists like Burawoy (1982) and Perlow (1999) who showed how the negotiation of time within the workplace not only structures daily routines but also embodies power dynamics and forms of resistance, affecting worker productivity and autonomy.

At the scale of value chains, global finance, and the gears of capitalism itself, time's regimenting capacity across macro-structures has also received attention: interest rates set the tempo of investment and debt (Rosa 2011), business cycles ebb and flow (Lounsbury & Hirsch, 2010), electronic trading renders global markets sensitive to temporal disjunctures (Borch et al., 2015; see also: Hassan, 2003), and innovations like 'just-in-time' manufacturing or on-demand platform labor accelerate commercial pace through new extremes of schedule compression and surveillance (Jenkins, 1994; Sewell & Wilkinson, 2019). Even money's own value in exchange hinges on a belief that others will accept its purchasing power in the future. Money works through binding others across time (Weber, 1981: 166; see also: Simmel, [1900]/2011).

Despite broad interest, the influence of time on more informal economic relationships and interpersonal exchanges remains under-examined, notably against the backdrop of Zelizer's seminal work in relational economic sociology (Bandelj, 2020: 263; Zelizer, 2012). This gap is worth exploring given that the timing, duration, pacing, and sequencing of transactions can profoundly influence the social meanings attached to them, the trust established between ties, and the overall viability of an exchange.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I use the terms "exchange," "transactions," and "economic activity" interchangeably to refer broadly to the full range of financial transfers, negotiations, and obligations (etc.) that occur within both formal institutional contexts and informal social relationships.

Zelizer (2005, 2012) shows how people create, maintain, and transform meaningful social ties through economic practices, such as earmarking money, exchanging gifts, or sharing expenses. In her view, economic action is not driven by rational calculation, norm following, or institutional constraints alone, but by the ongoing process of negotiating and expressing the value and quality of social relations. Zelizer's (2012) concept of the *relational package*—comprising the distinctive social ties between actors, the media of exchange, the terms of the transaction, and the negotiated meaning held about the transaction—allows us to see how different types of economic transactions affect and are affected by the social contexts in which they occur (Zelizer, 2012). When these four elements of the package are coherent, they create a viable match that “gets the economic work done” in a relationship.

The matching process takes coordinated effort and creativity—“relational work”—that orients the economic exchange within a mutually-recognized framework of social meaning and moral weightiness (Bandelj & Gibson, 2019). Such alignment not only facilitates smoother transactions but also reinforces the ties that underpin them, allowing economic activity to proceed in an otherwise ambiguous and emotionally-risky space. This is key to Zelizer's (2012) *connected lives* thesis, which argues against notions of the “economic” as either detached from the social world or else an unavoidably corrupting force. Instead, she shows that economic practices serve as essential mechanisms through which individuals negotiate their relationships, identities, and social positions to form viable matches.

But when the elements of the relational package are misaligned—when, for instance, the terms of a transaction contradict the expectations of the relationship, or when the media of exchange carry meanings that clash with the understanding conveyed by the transaction—the result can be confusion or even conflict. As Bandelj (2020) explains, “mismatches between relations, transactions, and media often elicit powerful emotions such as betrayal, shame, outrage, or disappointment.” Misalignments challenge the stability of the ties involved, requiring actors to engage in additional relational work to re-align or re-negotiate the terms of their relationship vis-à-vis the exchange (Bandelj, 2020; Garcia, 2014). Importantly, such efforts are not broad attempts at sociality or likability; rather, as Bandelj (2012) points out, relational work has clear economic intent.

Zelizer's framework, therefore, reveals the inherently social dimensions of economic exchange—but does not explicitly foreground the temporal structures or dynamics that accompany them. By bringing temporality into the analysis, we can deepen our understanding of how economic transactions unfold and come to hold meaning between people. To do so, I draw from work in the sociology and anthropology of time that offer insights into how time is socially constructed, perceived, and experienced; drawing attention to its fundamental role in the organization of social life and, by extension, economic interactions.

Gell (1992), for instance, argues that our experience of time is a wholly cultural product, rather than a physical and universal constant. This underscores how temporal norms and expectations can shape the nature of economic exchanges. Lefebvre's (2013) analysis of cyclical and linear rhythms, likewise, provides a lens through which to situate the temporal structures of economic activities within broader social and power dynamics (see also: Snyder, 2016). And Flaherty's (1999) emphasis on the

subjective experience of time, and its variability according to social context and individual agency, speaks directly to the processes of negotiation and meaning-making central to Zelizer's relational focus.

A common thread among these and other thinkers (e.g., Hassard, 2016; Šubrt, 2021; Tavory, 2018; Wagner-Pacifi, 2019; Zerubavel, 1987; see also: Giddens, 2004) is how time appears as both a container for action (schedules, calendars, maturity terms, project deadlines, etc.) and as the stuff of action itself (pacing, timing, turn-taking, coordination, disruption, anticipation, etc.). In traditional economic models, time appears only as a fixed and neutral quantity, simply ticking away in the background; a variable plugged into an equation. But when viewed through a sociological and anthropological lens, time emerges as a powerful force that shapes and is shaped by social structures and interactions.<sup>2</sup>

In this context, time does more than just measure the length of transactions—it imparts a range of meanings and possibilities. This resonates with Zelizer's (2012) relational approach, where money, like time, is seen not as a neutral medium but one complicated by social valence. Just as Zelizer demonstrates how individuals differentiate money to fit within various relational contexts, so too can time become relationally reflexive, deployed to suit particular purposes and people. An exchange's time and timing must, therefore, also be made to align with the social ties, medium of exchange, transaction terms, and negotiated meaning to be a good match.

Given time's unique dual nature as both structure and process, attending to temporality in exchange also allows a dual focus—on both the coordinating frameworks that enable economic action, as well as the dynamic ways that people manipulate timing to signal or modify interpersonal context.

On the first order, time scaffolds economic activity by providing readily-available temporal templates for coordination. Culturally-resonant structures in the form of schedules, timelines, cycles, and calendars, help facilitate transactions by establishing easily understood constraints and affordances. Yet different temporal formatting also holds symbolic meaning, serving as relational signals that encode normative expectations about appropriate timeframes for certain ties. Hence particular templates feel intrinsically more “fitting” with particular relationships. Rigid scheduling aligns with hierarchical workplace roles. Immediate settlement suits transactional ties, while personalized gift calendars map onto close friends and family. Typifications like these render informal exchanges more sensible (see: Schutz, 1962; Schutz & Luckmann, 1973). In this way, time offers predictable structuring that makes economic coordination smoother and more meaningful, contextualizing activities toward a relational match. Thus, time is a container that fixes relational boundaries and gives form to economic exchange.

On the second order, time serves as a key element of relational work, providing a means through which interpersonal dynamics in exchange are expressed, maintained,

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the sociological and anthropological study of time encompasses a broad range of phenomena across various timescales and levels of analysis (Hirschman, 2021; Levine, 2008; Šubrt, 2021). Other thinkers have productively studied macro-level temporal patterns, such as long-wave historical cycles, generational time periods, or civilizational development and progress (e.g., Abbott, 2001; Cohen, 2000; Mannheim, 1953). My analysis focuses more narrowly on everyday temporal structures and rhythms that contextualize face-to-face interactions.

changed, and potentially confused. By accelerating, delaying, or reordering exchange terms, parties signal shifting intentions that can strain, strengthen, or re-define ties. Individuals thus leverage temporality to shape the qualitative meaning underlying an exchange (e.g., as hierarchical versus egalitarian, transactional versus intimate, etc.). Transactional ties can become more intimate with frequency, while friendships may sour if the expected cadence of turn-taking is thrown out of sync. Offering money too frequently or at the wrong occasions could erode dignity or signal improper intentions rather than care. Small gestures also matter—like the timing of buying a bouquet of flowers. Done spontaneously, it might bring delight; but if it's too close to a disagreement, it could be seen as a calculated move to mend fences. If a mismatch in timing emerges, it can disrupt both the exchange the relationship.

Adaptability and agency in economic temporality enables alignment and facilitates the creative resolution of conflicts. Parties may renegotiate payment schedules, alter the pace of reciprocation, or resynchronize shared coordination in order to preserve relational harmony. In response to a temporal mismatch, parties can exercise agency in choosing to either realign transaction timing to preserve social ties, recalibrate to alternate contexts, or adapt timing to fit emerging needs and new meanings (see: O'Brien, et al., 2022).

Importantly, timing can be leveraged to exercise, contest, and renegotiate power and autonomy within relationships through economic exchange. The ability to dictate the timing or duration of a transaction can place one party in a position of power over another (Flaherty, 1999). While synchronizing to temporal norms enables cooperation, command over temporality can be a source of exclusion or extraction. Attending to when alignment or adaption versus intentional mismatching of temporal frameworks occurs promises to enrich explanations of both integration and conflict in relational work.

## Time as an economic structure

We all know the adage, “time is money.” It captures the undeniable connection between time and the economy at large (Adam, 2003). Yet we may rarely stop to consider how time structures our everyday economic existence. Whether it's our hourly pay, the interest rate on a loan, or when the rent is due, time sets the rules of the game. It's an invisible framework that underpins everything from the daily nine-to-five grind to Wall Street's grand investment strategies. From the fleeting micro-seconds of high-frequency stock trades to the long arc of retirement planning, time is the essential backdrop for all economic activity, establishing customary rhythms, boundaries, and horizons.

Importantly, time does more than provide a clock for economic activity to follow—time itself shapes the very meaning and context of exchange. The sociology of time provides a useful lens to see how economic activities are not just responses to immediate needs or incentives, but are often planned and executed to reflect individuals' and groups' temporal orientations and expectations (Bourdieu, 2005; Hassard, 2016). How individuals and societies perceive and value the past, present, and future filter into economic practices, as groups construct different norms around investment,

consumption, production, and distribution (Beckert, 2016; Miyazaki, 2003). Some temporal frameworks promote more fleeting transactions; others encourage patience and care. In the West, for example shareholder capitalism focused on quarterly profits can pressure companies to cut costs in ways that are harmful to society's long-term health (e.g., by causing environmental damage). But, in some Muslim-majority cultures, prohibitions against charging interest also curb short-term speculation (Dodd, 2016).

Culturally-resonant temporal structures like schedules, calendars, life stage expectations, and notions of history, comprise embedded institutions that allow actors to coordinate activities in meaningful rather than chaotic ways (see: Giddens, 2004; Schutz, 1962). The “structural properties” of time contextualize transactions based on shared understandings of what is considered typical or appropriate and what is not. For instance, gift-giving practices vary widely across cultures in terms of when gifts are given and to whom—along with the timing of eventual reciprocation—each with different implications for the social bonds involved (Mauss, [1954]/2000). Alternatively, norms about the timing of promotions or retirement vary by occupation, industry, and society, signaling expectations for proper pacing through an institutionalized life course (Kohli & Meyer, 1986). Time embeds exchange within a broader social continuity.

Through processes of cultural reinforcement, certain temporal structures instinctively feel bound up more with particular social relations in exchange (e.g. between friends vs. lovers vs. bosses, etc.). As transactions are negotiated and completed, parties come to develop mutual understandings what feels “right” versus out of tune based on cues like intimacy, status, role obligations, and life stage. Temporal structures, in this way, are subtly encoded into cultural knowledge as the natural or proper way of organizing economic activity among different ties (see: Schutz & Luckmann, 1973).<sup>3</sup> Quick, one-time settlements might co-evolve with impersonal market relations where social reproduction is not much at stake; whereas installment plans or the extension of credit allow care to be cultivated across prolonged dealings among neighbors or kin. Thus, over time, the temporal contours that enable various pairings to function well become sedimented into relational norms that actors reference when coordinating new exchanges. Exchanges among relational categories like parents, friends, or romantic partners come loaded with their own meaningful “clocks” and “calendars,” so to speak.

<sup>3</sup> We can draw parallels with Schutz's (1962) concept of “typifications,” which play a crucial role in understanding the intersection of time and social interaction. Typifications, as Schutz posits, are preconceived notions or templates that individuals use to make sense of the social world around them (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973). These cognitive constructs allow for the simplification of complex social realities by providing a framework through which experiences and interactions can be categorized and understood. In the context of temporal coordination in economic transactions, these typifications manifest as culturally resonant templates—schedules, timelines, cycles, sequences—that individuals and organizations employ to facilitate and regulate interactions. The symbolic meanings embedded within different temporal formats act as relational signals, encoding normative expectations about the appropriate timeframes and patterns for engagement among various social ties (see Šubr, 2021: 103–112, for a further discussion on “typifications” and temporalities). Through this lens, we see that temporal templates do more than organize actions; they imbue economic transactions with social significance, reinforcing the relational sensibilities that govern the appropriateness of timing and tempo in social exchanges.

Relational categories also play prominently in Zelizer's (2000, 2012) economic sociology, where money and transactions gain meaning based on the social relations involved (see also: Stoltz, 2018). When people engage in exchange they establish boundaries between "us" and "them," to distinguish internal vs. external relations and create meaningful categories for individuals and activities on different sides of those boundaries (Tilly, 2015). Zelizer and Tilly (2006: 2) write of this, "To be sure, general cognitive processes affect perception and use of those categories. But the categories themselves emerge from social interaction, and their contents depend on social interaction." Relational categories, moreover, derive their meanings from broader and historically variable cultural, institutional, and legal frames (Bandelj, 2020: 253).

Within each category, distinct economic rituals, governance rules, media of exchange, and forms of accounting arise that mark certain transactions as appropriate and others not. It feels right to compensate a cousin with a gift card for tutoring your child, but cash seems more appropriate if it's a professional tutor doing the same work (see: Bandelj, 2020: 257). You may be comfortable lending money to a good friend, but not to your boss. It is quite normal to maintain a joint bank account with a spouse, but not so much with an ex-spouse. In this way, the meanings associated with economic action depends on its contextualization within proper social relations.

Relational categories encode both transactional scripts and temporal frameworks. Indeed, scholars describe numerous everyday transaction that operate according to different rhythms and within various temporal frames—those that demand immediate return vs. indefinite deferral, those characterized by rhythmic recurrences, or those linked to planned or anticipated events (see: Tavory, 2018; Wagner-Pacifici, 2019; Wherry, 2016). The attractiveness of an exchange, therefore, is not just about its price or cost-effectiveness, but also about its appropriateness in time.

Patrick (2018) provides a good example of how time structures exchange that convey different social meanings. Through ethnographic observation, she notes that pan-handlers often supplement their requests for money with offers of services in order to generate additional income. However, willingness to engage in this form of exchange varies significantly with the nature of the interaction. In brief, one-off encounters, pedestrians will give spare change but the service offers are typically declined, as they are viewed as impersonal and transactional dealings between strangers. However, pedestrians with regular and repeated engagements become more receptive to the offers, perceiving them instead as part of an ongoing exchange between regular counterparts—something more akin to service relationships with returning clients. The two temporal framings afford different meanings around what constitutes an appropriate transaction, even when the actual goods or services offered remain the same—the contrast reveals how the economic gains expressive potential through temporal configuration.

Similarly, patterns that establish turn-taking to pay for meals out with friends or lending household items to neighbors signal equal footing and mutual trust. Unlike one-time or recurring transactions, turn-taking is characterized by a reciprocal rhythm of give-and-take that helps affirm friendship through a subtext of equal standing and eventual balancing. But taking turns could be viewed as inappropriate among (e.g.) spouses or in parent-child relationships, where sharing and unconditional support

are expected, not balancing out. The (in)appropriateness of turn-taking in exchange corresponds to the scripts and expectations contextualized by particular social ties.

I suggest a few other stylized examples to help illustrate some underlying templates that people intuitively draw on in their economic interactions with social relations, and which contribute to a coherent relational package. Though neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive, the examples depict basic outlines that organize appropriate economic action across variable social ties in time. So while any particular relationship may bend or blend elements of these examples, they still offer some analytic insight into the temporal foundations for economic transactions:

- **Strangers, “Arms-Length” Encounters:** Immediate, one-time cash transfers eliminate the need for establishing trust, highlighting the transient nature of these interactions. They do not create any true obligation or expectation of return, but may express a sense of connection and goodwill.
- **Business Partners, Best Friends, or Kin:** Extensions of credit or open-ended loans signify deep trust and a commitment to the relationship over the long term, recognizing that some obligations cannot and need not be settled immediately. Delayed or deferred transactions involve a temporal gap between the initiation and the completion of the exchange that bridges the present and the future—it projects how the relationship will endure over time.
- **Colleagues or Team Members:** Within the structure of a working day or project deadline, coordinated activities and transactions ensure efficiency and reliability. Submitting work on time and respecting agreed-upon schedules are fundamental to fostering a professional and respectful environment.
- **Friends:** Alternating payments or turn-taking using payment apps reflects equality-matching, ensuring that no single party bears an undue burden which could strain the relationship. The time between turns can hold symbolic meaning in and of itself. A shorter interval between turns (e.g. monthly) could signal closeness, while a longer duration (e.g. twice a year) could signal greater distance.
- **Neighbors or Intermediate Ties:** Asynchronous favors underscore a community spirit, where accounts of borrowed tools, pet sitting, or shoveling sidewalks are not strictly tallied but contribute to a broader economy of long-term goodwill. The open-ended time frames for repayment can give these exchanges an informal, to-be-determined character.
- **Intimate Partners (e.g., Spouses):** Joint bank accounts and shared credit cards create a complex web of shared financial life across an indefinite time horizon, deeply rooted in the enduring and interdependent nature of the relationship.

## Temporal elements of relational work

Time structures exchange by providing legible schematic frameworks. The established cycles, patterns, timeframes, and horizons of these modes make economic transactions with corresponding social relationships more amenable and meaningful. However, some degree of agency still exists. Deadlines can be negotiated, meetings



postponed, cycles accelerated or slowed. Within reason, actors can leverage time for its relational weight—whether through the punctual or delayed fulfillment of commitments, or by modulating the pace and tempo of interactions. The strategic manipulation of time in social and economic interactions to achieve desired outcomes is a crucial element of relational work. Time, therefore, while erecting certain structural constraints and boundaries, also provides a vector through which actors impart social meaning to economic activity.

The term “temporal work” was recently introduced in the context of organizational behavior (Bansal et al., 2022: 6), where it is defined as, “any individual, collective, or organizational effort to influence, sustain, or redirect the temporal assumptions and patterns that shape strategic action.” These scholars draw from institutional theory to explain how actors work to align or adapt their behaviors to prevailing temporal norms and expectations within their organizational field (e.g., perceptions of the “right timing” to complete a task, or to create a sense of urgency [see: Granqvist & Gustafsson, 2016]).

Drawing parallels with this work, there exists an intriguing intersection between temporal work as described by the organizations literature and Zelizer’s concept of relational work in economic sociology. For Zelizer (2012), relational work is about matching economic and relational sense, so that the exchange of goods and services is compatible with the type and quality of social tie involved. Paying a good friend for a small favor may be seen as inappropriate or offensive, while giving a gift to a stranger may be seen as suspicious or intrusive. To avoid mismatches, people negotiate different combinations of social ties, economic transactions, media of exchange, and underlying meanings (Bandelj, 2020; Zelizer, 2012)—i.e., to craft a more coherent relational package. So, a better match would be to pay a stranger for their work and give the gift to your friend. Relational work connects social relationships with economic activity in a way that is acceptable and meaningful for the parties involved.

Just as members adjust their behavior to align with organizational expectations regarding time, there is also a need for temporal adjustment in the timing and pace of social and economic exchanges to conform to established relational norms and templates. When we manage the flux of time in our exchange relations, we are performing a type of relational work that extends to the temporal dimension. When we choose to engage (*timing*), how long we participate (*duration*), in what order (*sequencing*), what tempo we set (*pacing*)—these efforts, too, are calibrated to the social and economic expectations of specific relations. The timing and rhythm of interactions within a professional networking group will surely differ from those within a circle of close friends, which will also differ from romantic partners. The “work” here isn’t just a matter of logistics; it entails strategic alignment of the “economic sense” of timeliness with the “relational sense” inherent to a specific social context.

Time and timing, to be sure, are but one element of relational work. What is considered acceptable between (e.g.) friends versus family hinges on broader cultural models steering those relationships. Time can be part of that appropriateness, but it is not always the dominant factor. Indeed, relational work involves several aspects that are not inherently tied to time (see: Bandelj, 2012, 2020; Zelizer, 2012). For instance, earmarking money for particular social ties bears weight through whom

it was received rather than when. Similarly, negotiating the appropriate media of exchange between parties, whether cash, credit, or gift card, constitutes core relational judgments apart from timing. Determining suitable objects to transact and their price relies more on assessments of fairness, reciprocity, and emotional significance. Furthermore, ethical judgments around a transaction's moral suitability, fairness, or exploitative potential are guided by norms of exchange and personal values (see e.g., Almeling, 2007). Ultimately, while timing, duration, sequencing, and pacing are key elements that perform relational work, constructing coherent relational packages for meaningful social bonds relies equally on complex, culturally-shaped judgments beyond just temporality. Timing intersects with rather than dictates the signals that sustain relationships amid economic entanglements.

## Timing

Timing is everything, so the saying goes. As Wherry (2016) emphasizes, the significance of “relational accounting” relies heavily on the construction of meaningful time, where people arrange particular economic transactions to coincide with emotionally salient life-stage rituals or milestones. This correspondence, he argues, is not a passive or mechanical response to the calendar. Rather, individuals actively engage in crafting moments that weave the economic into the fabric of personal narratives and shared histories. Something as mundane as a recurring deposit into a child's college savings fund gains relational significance when synchronized to the milestone of higher education, which comes already-imbued with intersubjectively-held resonance. Wherry (2016) argues this is a form of deliberate, expressive relational work that affirms our connections to others: The deposit, in this case, is transformed from material aid to parental care (see also: Hayes & O'Brien, 2021; Zaloom, 2019).

Timing also matters on smaller timescales. Strategically paying a vendor ahead of an agreed upon deadline could signal loyalty, establish trust, and potentially secure preferential treatment or terms in future transactions. The promptness instrumentally and symbolically communicates goodwill even in a transactional context. Delays risk being interpreted as forgetful, unreliable, or as of subordinate status in the exchange. Among close ties, giving a friend their birthday gift on the wrong day can mean the relationship was not prioritized as expected. The missed timing awkwardly signals deficiencies in the mutual care or understanding assumed between close ties—or worse, a passive-aggressive way to communicate the friendship is now of a lower importance. The purposeful timing of economic actions invokes specific social meanings.

## Duration

Participants to an exchange can also exert influence over its length or duration. Take an informal loan between friends. The duration of the loan itself constitutes relational work. Short due dates convey expediency. Extended repayment terms allow accommodation and suggest some knowledge of the counterparty's capacities and constraints. Open-ended loans represent a great deal of interpersonal flexibility and trust, as often found in kin networks. Duration thus lends support to a range of social

meanings. In each variant, the same objective amount exchanged has its character and implications shaped by a chosen duration keyed to norms for closeness.

In gift-giving, the lag before reciprocation also does relational work. If a reciprocated too early, the exchange feels transactional and impersonal (Bourdieu, 1977; Mauss, [1954]/2000). The short duration could be viewed as an insincere attempt to close the social debt created by the original gift prematurely. A lag that endures for too long, however, risks being interpreted as neglect or disrespect.

Relational work can extend to altering and adjusting durations, not just in setting them. Extending the repayment term or offering grace periods during financial hardship demonstrates empathy and flexibility. Conversely, insisting on rigid adherence to the original maturity despite knowing the borrower's difficulties could strain or even damage the relationship. In some cases, shortening the duration can signal frustration with a borrower's attitude or behavior, or a pressing need on the lender's part. This act, while potentially justifiable from a financial standpoint, necessitates careful consideration of its impact on the relational dynamics.

Duration defines the terms of investment and engagement in professional contexts too. In project management, the timeline for completing a collaborative endeavor inherently conveys priorities. Lengthening deadlines to account for member hardships can relate care for employees over output. Shortening expected milestones to seize opportunities signals ambition but risks overburdening colleagues. In corporate strategy, a company's decision to engage in long-term contracts with suppliers or clients asserts a commitment to stability and reliability in those business relationships over arms-length transactionalism (cf. Granovetter, 1985).

## Sequencing

The ordering and sequencing of events and interactions can be used to perform relational work as well. Rossman's (2014) exploration of obfuscation in morally-disreputable or stigmatized exchange, such as sex work or political favors shows how the re-ordering of transactions via delayed reciprocity or indirect use of mediators lends moral cover. In one example, Rossman discusses high-end nightclubs that obfuscate the exchange of money for female intimacy or flirtation, which could be viewed as a disreputable commodification of sexuality (Taddeo, 2010). Instead of explicit exchanges, interactions are sequenced across three distinct phases with different actors: Initially, clients purchase bottle service and a "VIP" table at inflated prices, which benefits the club. Club hosts then facilitate connections with female guests, inviting them to join the tables under the guise of enjoying free drinks, subtly brokering potential relationships without overt involvement (see also: Mears, 2015). Ultimately, the expectation forms that clients will lavish gifts onto these women on subsequent dates, embedding the economic transaction within traditional courtship rituals and delaying direct reciprocation. Rossman (2014: 51) writes, "The relational work of structuring the exchange so it appears to follow courtship rituals allows the customer to maintain the understanding that flirtation with the women is a sacred-sacred circuit of charm being exchanged in kind, and his profane interaction of \$2,500

plus tip for a couple bottles of vodka is orthogonal.” A key part of this structuring involves a strategic ordering that morally disentangles money from sex.<sup>4</sup>

Sequencing is used deliberately in several other situations that go beyond obfuscation. In rotating savings & credit associations (ROSCAs), for one, members (often from migrant and immigrant communities) contribute funds regularly to a communal pot over a defined period of time. The cumulative pool of group savings is then allocated over time as lump sum payouts to each contributing member in turn. This sequencing of contributions and withdrawals allows individuals who may not have access to traditional banking services to save and borrow, while also connecting members through reciprocal exchange. Participants maintain continued contributions relying on faith that they will receive their fair payout in turn (see: Zelizer, 2023).

We can think of sequencing economic activity as a form of planning that incorporates social understanding and coordination. Whether obfuscating exchanges or establishing ROSCAs, the intentional ordering of events relies on and mobilizes anticipated relationships and meanings. All such planning involves imagined collaborative futures that play out across an extended sequence of events that actors believe will produce desired ends, cascading from initial choices and requiring adjustment when invalidated (Besbris & Fine, 2023). So too, for economic practices like rolling out software updates, the selection of fashion collections by designers, the phased opening of new locations by retail chains, or the monthly turn-taking of friendly lunch dates, sequence shapes the overarching meanings of economic interactions around a desired narrative.

## Pacing

Pacing—or, the relative speed or frequency at which exchanges unfold—is also used to regulate the flow and intensity of interactions within economic and social relationships. The tempo of an exchange can be sped up or slowed down depending on the needs, capabilities, and strategic objectives of the parties involved. Techniques that vary response latencies in negotiations can signal either a willingness or reluctance to compromise and adapt. Similarly, the response time in customer service contexts can signal the value a company places on its customer relationships. The pacing of service in a restaurant—from being seated and receiving menus to the delivery of food and processing payment—can impact the size of a tip (Whaley et al., 2019).

Pacing can also be used to motivate others to accept a deal or offer. The regularity of subscription renewals or frequency of reminders can affect subscriber retention (Wang et al., 2022). The appearance of flash sales or limited-time offers can drive immediate consumer demand (Lamis et al., 2022). Or, high-pressure brokers or

<sup>4</sup> Rossman (2014) touches on other examples of sequencing in obfuscation. For instance, he relates how lobbyist Jack Abramoff orchestrated a complex sequence to obscure direct financial ties between gambling interests of the Choctaw nation, and Ralph Reed, a prominent figure among religious-right movements (Rossman, 2014: 49–50). This was necessary as direct financial ties between “moral crusaders” and gambling enterprises risked damaging Reed’s ethical credibility. So exchanges were sequenced across multiple phases and entities. The tribe first Abramoff’s funded think tanks, which later paid Reed for speeches months afterwards, allowing Reed to maintain a public stance against gambling while financially benefiting from these very interests.

salespeople may pace discussions to limit customer review time and create a sense of urgency (Besbris, 2020). Even brief accelerations or postponements against expected rhythms make statements within relationships. A last-minute request outside working hours implies urgency and importance, although it may frustrate.

## Synchronization

Much relational work involves efforts to maintain or stabilize the coherence of the relational package in order to promote a viable match between economic exchange and social meaning. Aligning exchanges along multiple temporal dimensions allows for complex *synchronization* that carries out this coherence-building through the alignment of two or more of the temporal elements discussed. In other words, synchronization involves harmonizing across the timing, duration, sequencing, and pacing of transactions.

In a loan between friends, for example, the terms, including its duration and repayment sequence, are often explicitly negotiated to prevent misunderstandings that could harm the relationship; the timing of the loan request itself often coinciding with financial need or hardship. Expediency in repayment is typically valued, as it reassures both parties of the loan's temporary nature and the borrower's reliability. The sequence of repayments may adopt monthly installments to ensure the lender is made whole over time. The pacing of loan requests is also crucial; too frequent appeals for financial assistance can suggest instability and irresponsibility, potentially undermining the friendship.

A similar transfer instead from a parent to a child, however, would carry a different set of temporal expectations and meanings. Money may be given whether to help with hardship or just as a loving gift or goodwill. The loan's duration may be extended or open-ended, symbolizing the parents' understanding of their child's evolving circumstances and a commitment to their long-term well-being. The sequence of financial repayment may also be quite flexible (pay when you can), part of a broader narrative of parental care and investment in their future. The pacing of requests becomes less concerning as dependence is seen as natural between parent and child.

Synchronizing various elements of time plays helps ensure that transactions resonate meaningfully within specific social contexts, effectively separating them from broader, impersonal economic activities. Just as wrapping a gift transforms a commercial product into a personal gesture, the thoughtful organization of time around financial exchanges wraps them in layers of symbolic importance (Table 1).

## Temporal mismatch and strategies to resolve them

A temporal mismatch occurs when the temporal elements of an exchange falls out of sync with other elements of the relational package. It is a mis-alignment from expected temporal structures. As with all relational mismatches, these can lead to misunderstandings or feelings of inappropriateness that may thwart exchange altogether or damage relationships (Bandelj, 2020).

Consider a married couple who share a joint bank account for ongoing household expenses, typical of their intimate spousal relationship and mutual financial

**Table 1** Key temporal elements of relational work in economic exchanges

Temporal element	Role in exchange	Social impact	Example
Timing	When a transaction or exchange is initiated	Signals regard, priorities, status	Giving a birthday gift on the actual birthday vs. a month later
Duration	The lifespan of an economic relationship or transaction	Conveys commitment, trust, imposition; longer durations often imply a deeper commitment	A short-term loan vs. a long-term business partnership
Pacing	The speed or frequency of transactions	Sets expectations, intensity, urgency	Immediate payment for services vs. installment payments over time
Sequencing	The order of actions or transactions	Structures reciprocity, ritual, obfuscation	Sequential phases in a crowdfunding campaign; Turn-taking buying meals out between friends
Synchronization	The alignment of economic activities through the use of two or more of these elements, in line with the participants' temporal expectations and social rhythms	Crucial for relational harmony and coherence of relational package, mismatches can lead to failed exchange, dissatisfaction, or conflict	Coordinating a project timeline with a team's workload and deadlines

responsibilities. This perpetual temporality, marked by an indefinite duration, fluid sequencing, and casual pacing, reinforces their union's sense of identification, trust, and commitment. Now imagine that one spouse alters this temporal framing by suggesting they alternate paying for meals and trade off covering monthly domestic costs using their personal debit cards. Introducing this turn-based sequence ruptures the established financial temporality. The bills are still paid by both partners but now in a more rigid, alternating order and from separate accounts. The other partner may interpret such a shift as an attempt to transfer joint responsibility into individual domains, diminishing the central trust and interdependence binding their marriage. Where once financial coordination flowed seamlessly, now payments are tracked and discussing exceptions imposes an accounting lens that strains intimacy. If unaddressed, this temporal mismatch in sequencing may erode the partnership by dislocating once synchronous domains.

Such an example illustrates how changes to established rhythms of exchange can create discomfort, tensions, or perceived threats to the coherence of a relationship. When temporal mismatches occur, parties face a choice in how to respond in order to reconcile or resolve them: *Realignment* preserves meaning through cooperation; *recalibration* transitions meaning contingently to new contexts; *adaptation* allows new meanings to emerge by acquiescing to new social realities; and *dissolution* judges new meaning as intolerable.

While this paper is concerned with the dimension of time, these four responses to mismatch could also apply more generally to other aspects of relational work. Still, temporal changes often act as catalysts that reconfigure relationships amidst economic dealings, warranting action. Once media of exchange are chosen, objects of transaction determined, or the nature of social ties defined, these things tend to

remain stable or fixed without external disruption. It is thus the temporal discrepancies or transitions in timing, pace, sequence, and duration that frequently prompt new attempts at relational work.

One strategy is to work to *re-align* timing norms and expectations so they map back on to the pre-existing meaning of the relationship as it was. In the example with the spouses, this could involve open communication to reframe the change in sequence as an accommodation to circumstances rather than a redefinition of their marriage's intimacy and trust. If reconciled cooperatively through efforts of synchronization—such as re-establishing open-ended use of shared accounts—the mismatch can be reconciled without undermining the relationship's original meaning. However, such realignment requires effort from both parties. If one partner resists attempts to renegotiate temporal elements, the mismatch can persist and lead to further strain. Realignment is thus pursued if the mismatch is considered minor and situational, with a priority on preserving the existing relationship through mutual adjustments.

Occasionally, however, a mismatch arises due to a natural shift in the social context, which requires *re-calibration*. For instance, when coworkers transition to friendship outside work, they must actively renegotiate temporal boundaries appropriate for this new peer dynamic. In the office, exchanges revolve around organizational time like scheduled paydays, strict reimbursement policies, and tracking hours for compensation. A coworker's role might be to remind another to record overtime or submit expense reports. One may reluctantly cover the tab at a group lunch with expectation the favor returns. These transactions happen per company rules and norms. But after hours as peers, for the relationship to feel coherent new temporal norms must emerge fitting the new social context. Taking turns buying each other meals, spontaneous gifting, a fuzzier memory of who owes whom what money—these temporal adjustments signal a shift from professional to personal grounds, where the recalibration of time helps the parties reorient themselves to the new context. Recalibration is the path taken when there's a transition in context, and both parties are willing to engage with new temporal dynamics.

In some cases, rather than realignment or recalibration, responding to temporal mismatches may require more profound *adaptation* in which one party accepts a new temporality that redefines the social meaning of the relationship itself. For instance, one friend may repeatedly cover bills or meals despite past norms of reciprocity. Initially, a lack of turn-taking could breed resentment or confusion. However, over time accepting this adaptation allows an emerging meaning to crystallize that redefines the relational categories involved—perhaps signifying a transition from peer friendship into patronage or mentorship.<sup>5</sup> The ability to let revised timing norms take on new significance allows relationships to evolve into newly understood roles, but also risks widening asymmetries. Adaptation emerges when imbalanced dynamics prevent effective renegotiation, requiring one party to adjust to the new social reality in order to maintain the relationship.

---

<sup>5</sup> To help clarify between recalibration and adaptation, in the former the colleague-friend definition is dictated by the social context (inside vs. outside the workplace). The same person simultaneously holds both potential relational categories, each with its own temporal expectations in exchange. In the latter, however, the character of the relationship fundamentally shifts in a somewhat irreversible manner (friend → patron).

Finally, parties may judge a temporal mismatch so fundamentally disruptive of previously assumed rules of the relationship that its essential character becomes threatened at a core level, leading to *dissolution*. Neither adaptation nor realignment suffice when parties interpret mismatches as revelations of terminal fragility rather than surface conflicts. When temporal dissonance reveals irreconcilable differences in relationship's vision or priorities, an unwillingness to abandon unworkable ties results in the termination of the relationship. Dissolution is the outcome when core understandings are violated to the extent that maintaining the relationship is no longer viable.

The strategies people employ to reconcile or resolve mismatches reveal efforts to synchronize temporal behaviors with the culturally-given patterns that feel appropriate for the relationship, even as that relationship may change (Table 2).

## Power and agency in time

While much relational work aims to repair or reconcile mismatches, the ability to unilaterally alter temporal rhythms can also be an expression of power, authority, or control. To be sure, scholars have noted relational work's potential to reconfigure relations of power, especially in situations of unequal exchange (Bandelj, 2012; Block, 2012), however this area remains underdeveloped (Bandelj, 2020; Bandelj & Gibson, 2019). The temporal dimensions of relational work can help illuminate how actors exert influence over others. Imposing one's preferred schedule against another's wishes, intentionally disrupting accustomed timing to gain advantage, or coercing quicker exchanges through manufactured urgency are all ways time can be leveraged as an instrument of power or domination (see: Elias, 1998).

This insight opens up an examination of temporal agency in social dynamics. At the passive end of temporal agency, individuals often adhere by default to cultural norms that dictate timing and pacing in relationships, whether with strangers, friends, family, or partners. Such norms are not only cognitively economical, minimizing the need for constant negotiation and deliberation, but also deeply ingrained, guiding our interactions almost unconsciously. Other times, actors become aware of their temporal position due to the onset of a mismatch. When mismatches arise, the shift towards a more reactive stance becomes evident. Individuals suddenly confronted with temporal discordance may feel compelled to actively engage in reconciliation strategies to repair or resolve the rupture. Yet, there's a more active side to temporal agency. Some individuals or groups may manipulate time to assert dominance or foster dependency, using delays, restructuring sequences, overlooking time constraints, or demanding immediate action. This conscious control over temporal elements allows for the strategic reshaping of relationships, turning what could be mere coordination failures into deliberate exercises of power.

Consider the impact of 'just-in-time' manufacturing systems, which place stringent temporal demands on suppliers who have to respond to abrupt changes in production schedules; or in global supply chains, where a lead firm may unilaterally change delivery schedules to suit their needs without input from subcontractors. In financial markets, the high-frequency traders who can act most quickly (on the order



**Table 2** Strategies for managing temporal mismatches in economic exchanges

Strategy	Definition	Implementation	Resulting adjustment	Possible risks	Example
Realignment	Renegotiate to original terms	Through negotiation and mutual agreement to modify timing, duration, or pacing.	Restores the original harmony and meaning of the relationship.	Relationship strain	A freelancer and client agree to extend a project deadline to accommodate unexpected delays, maintaining trust.
Recalibration	Fluidly adjust to suit immediate context	Shift interaction norms based on the specific situation at hand, while maintaining the underlying relationship structure	Ensures the relationship remains resilient and adaptable across a variety of contexts	Role ambiguity	In a buyer-supplier scenario, Company A and Company B stick to strict delivery schedules. When entering a joint venture for a new project, they shift to flexible milestones, adapting to innovation needs and market feedback, showcasing dynamic recalibration of their exchange's timing and sequencing
Adaptation	Acquiesce to new temporal dynamics	Embracing significant changes in timing, pacing, or sequencing without seeking to revert to previous states.	Leads to a redefined relationship with new roles and expectations.	Dependence, inequality	Neighbors initially exchange services informally (gardening for babysitting) on an ad-hoc basis. As one neighbor's gardening skills become professional, they adapt the arrangement: the gardener now provides scheduled services for a fee
Dissolution	Judge mismatch as irreparable	Recognizing and accepting that the temporal misalignment is too significant to overcome.	Ends the economic exchange; potentially ends the relationship as well.	No resolution path	A business partnership dissolves when one party insists on immediate financial returns, conflicting with the other's long-term growth strategy.

of fractions of milliseconds) essentially “own” the micro-temporal landscape of the market, squeezing out slower players who can’t compete at those timescales (see: MacKenzie, 2018). At all scales, temporal control has become a critical issue in economic sociology as it adds a new layer of understanding to how economic advantage is gained, not just through traditional forms of capital but through control over time (see: Eisenberg, 2011).

Situations of power asymmetry create opportunities for temporal domination, where the preferences and convenience of one overrides the other. In employer-employee relationships, for instance, managers often control workers’ time, enforcing schedules and deadlines that suit organizational priorities (Hassard, 2016; Snyder, 2016). Impatient clients may pressure service providers to accelerate work beyond reasonable timelines. In the gig economy, platforms like Uber or TaskRabbit commodify time in a way that prioritizes consumer convenience over worker autonomy, setting rates and schedules at the expense of the individual laborer (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). Across these contexts, temporal power allows entities from managers to algorithms impose strict temporal demands, sometimes against norms of fairness or balance.

Making others wait, as explored by Schwartz (1974), further exemplifies the power inherent in controlling time. Schwartz argues that waiting is not merely a passive experience but a reflection of underlying social hierarchies and power dynamics. In social and professional settings, the ability to make others wait—and the willingness of people to do so—constitutes a form of temporal capital that intersects with financial and social capital. Those controlling access to valuable economic resources and services can leverage time as an asset and impose waiting as a necessity for those seeking access. Even delays imposed with no purpose other than restricting access can enhance perceptions of the owner’s status and the scarcity of the object of exchange. Across transactions, negotiations, contracting, and other economic relationships, imposed waiting reflects underlying dependency and signals power differentials. And across society, aggregated waiting time lost is itself a form of exploitation by the powerful, as time wasted in queues cannot be spent productively. In essence, the capacity to dictate others’ experience of duration becomes a mode of asserting advantage—one that subtly reinforces status and hierarchy across economic and social realms.

In addition to imposing time, actors can interfere with time and timing for their own advantage. Tavory and Fine (2020) argue that the ability to disrupt interactional expectations is itself a form of power that follows status hierarchies. Just as managers can enforce schedules on employees, entities with more leverage in economic ties can disrupt norms around timing, pace, and reciprocity to assert control. Consider an employer who consistently pays workers late while still demanding timely output from them. This interferes with established sequences and rhythms in a way that maximizes advantage for those with more structural power. Similarly, a wealthy investor may abruptly withdraw or change the terms of a deal at the last minute, undermining the schedules and expectations of smaller partners who lack equivalent freedom.

In informal financial exchanges between friends, calling in debts faster than expected conventions can establish dominance and re-assert financial hierarchy

within the relationship. Or repeatedly covering expenses while denying offers to take turns accrues asymmetric social capital, subtly emphasizing one's generosity at the expense of the other's indebtedness. In essence, interfering with normal tempos of exchange creates subtle but effective forms of economic control that advantages one party over another.

Who submits in these situations often comes down to who has the lesser capacity to resist temporal impositions or disruptions, or the fewest resources to negotiate more favorable terms. The service provider with fewer clients may have little choice but to adhere to an unreasonable timeline, just as a new employee might find it difficult to push back against a demanding schedule. Temporal imbalances, moreover, are often rooted in broader institutional structures and cultural practices. They tend to reflect existing social inequities, such as class, gender, and race, and can even serve to reproduce them. For example, the phenomenon of "time poverty" mainly affects lower-income and minority families who more frequently juggle multiple jobs, rendering them less able to participate in social or civic activities that might improve their socioeconomic status (Harvey & Mukhopadhyay, 2007).

Yet, the disadvantaged party isn't entirely powerless. They, too, can use temporal work to try and renegotiate terms of exchange or employ delaying or disrupting tactics themselves as a form of resistance. In some situations, parties with less temporal power can employ strategies to regain control. Labor unions, for instance, have historically fought for shorter work hours and better scheduling practices. They can also disrupt. In E.P. Thompson's (1967) classic study of the English working class, he showed how workers resisted the imposition of factory time by engaging in various forms of temporal sabotage, such as breaking clocks, slowing down work, or "stealing time" by taking unauthorized breaks or sick days (Clawson, 1980; see also: Bura-woy, 1982). Similarly, organizations have their own set of tactics to level the playing field if they find themselves in a subordinated position. If a smaller vendor feels that the terms of trade are not equitable or if they are being squeezed by the larger firm's purchasing power, they might use delaying tactics to obstruct delivery as a form of protest or to force a renegotiation of terms (Cox et al., 2004)

Collectively, social movements also challenge temporal dominance around economic activity that disadvantage vulnerable groups. In consumer activism, movements like "slow food" advocate for a revaluation of time as a form of resistance against the speed and depersonalization of mass production (Chrzan, 2004). Similarly, "patient capital" is an increasing demand from investors and stakeholders that challenges the short-termism prevalent in contemporary financial capitalism (Deeg and Hardie, 2016).

At the individual level as well, subtle forms of resistance emerge. An informal borrower can try to resist creditor control by refusing to conform to imposed repayment schedules. Even minor delays contest power by highlighting the lender's ongoing dependency and need for cooperation in repayment despite a structurally weaker position. More broadly, individual behaviors like procrastination, tardiness, or intentional slowdowns question external temporal control and dominant time cultures, although they do risk backlash. As possible "weapons of the weak," resistance via time can reveal agency. The timescape becomes a terrain for both economic domination and defiance.

## Scaling things up

While the interpersonal dynamics of exchange relations reveal much about time's role in social coordination and power, translating these micro-level insights to macro contexts raises additional questions. How might ideas around temporal mismatch & alignment, disruption, and control apply to collective entities like organizations, institutions, or even nation-states? Do non-individual actors likewise engage in temporal work as they structure economic activities?

Evidence suggests they do. As the organizations literature shows, as do several of the examples introduced throughout the paper, groups utilize time to facilitate coordinated effort, be they factory rhythms harnessing labor time or financial cycles channeling investment (e.g., Ancona et al., 2001; Bansal et al., 2022; Orlikowski & Yates, 2002; Reinecke et al., 2021; Snyder, 2016; Whitford, 2012). Bureaucratic delays slow and obstruct, much as interpersonal waiting asserts relational hierarchy (Schwartz, 1974).

The key difference, and what the more micro-level analysis in the paper underwrites, is that temporal work now coordinates multitudes through shared time infrastructures. Zelizer's (2000, 2005) concept of "circuits of commerce" helps clarify this jump in scale. Circuits of commerce establish distinct spheres of economic life marked by particular media of exchange, social ties, and cultural meanings that establish perceptible boundaries separating internal transfers from external ones. This allows intimately personalized exchanges to coexist alongside impersonal, formal ones (Collins, 2004; Zelizer, 2005). As complementary concepts, the relational package explains what makes an individual transaction resonant within a dyadic tie, while circuits of commerce examine how broader domains of economic life come to distinguish themselves with self-reproducing cultural logics. Within families, caregiving gets organized into distinctive circuits with their own reciprocal expectations, governance norms, and symbolism that distinguish this from formal wage labor. Community currencies create alternative circuits using localized media and restricted commodities to reinforce solidarity. Remittances move through transnational circuits embedding cultural meanings about obligation.

The same individuals can participate in multiple circuits simultaneously—personal and impersonal, intimate and formal. Rather than existing as disconnected spheres, circuits intersect and interact. But by participating in circuits, people engage in relational work to differentiate types of ties and transfers. Each circuit exists to prevent contamination.

The following examples illustrate how adding temporal dynamics of exchange to specific circuits can enrich our understanding of how they function and evolve at various levels of analysis.

### Farmers' markets

The farmers' market circuit is built on relationships that extend beyond economic transactions to embody values of community support, sustainability, and trust (Hinrichs, 2000). Traditional analysis shows that producers and consumers engage in relational work that goes beyond just buying vegetables, by sharing stories about

the produce, discussing farming practices, and expressing mutual appreciation. This work reinforces a sense of belonging and community identity, distinguishing these exchanges from impersonal retail settings like supermarkets (Garner, 2015).

Adding in temporality, we enrich this understanding. Seasonality and the rhythm of agricultural life shape when and how these markets operate, with markets appearing at specific times of the year or days of the week. The temporal markers of these markets—whether they signal the arrival of spring with fresh greens or the abundance of autumn with harvest produce—imbue the goods being exchanged with additional layers of significance. This cyclical temporality supports the creation of enduring ties and traditions anchored to those moments. Both vendors and customers orient and plan their schedules and activities around market days, with setup, sales, and community gatherings bundled into the ongoing narrative of community life.

### **Transnational remittances**

Remittance circuits involve relational work that reinforce familial ties across large distances, with migrants and their families back home negotiating the meanings and expectations surrounding each cash transfer (Serra-Mingot & Mazzucato, 2019). Beyond the mere act of sending money, remittances involve a nuanced negotiation of familial roles, responsibilities, and expectations, with migrants often prioritizing sending home remittances over their immediate needs in their host country. This relational work is grounded in a shared understanding of mutual support, sacrifice, and collective well-being, reinforcing the migrant's role within the family despite physical absence (Carling, 2014).

Remittances are often timed to coincide with significant family events—birthdays, weddings, festivals—or to respond to emergencies, such as medical crises or natural disasters (Amuedo-Dorantes & Pozo, 2006). This temporal coordination requires migrants and their families to engage in ongoing communication, adjusting their expectations in light of changing circumstances and opportunities. Delays in sending remittances, whether due to financial constraints, logistical challenges, or changes in the migrant's situation, necessitate delicate negotiations to manage potential disappointments or hardships (Lindley, 2009). These negotiations are not just about financial matters but also about reaffirming trust, understanding, and mutual support within kinship networks. The act of remitting, therefore, becomes a temporal bridge that reflects an ongoing commitment to familial support that transcends physical distance.

### **Crowdfunding campaigns**

Crowdfunding platforms facilitate decentralized financing, allowing individual funders to directly support artists, causes, or entrepreneurs—in contrast to formal fundraising routes. Backers contribute small sums of money or (increasingly) cryptocurrency through apps or websites, often in exchange for future products or rewards if the project comes to fruition. At the heart of crowdfunding's success lies relational work. These platforms allow creators to tell their stories, share their visions, and connect with potential backers on a personal level. For backers, the act of funding

a project is often intertwined with identity expression and community belonging, as selecting projects to support reflects personal values and interests (Hair, 2021). This separates crowdfunding from the often impersonal realm of financial investment.

But, campaign launch timing and rhythms of updates become essential to managing engagement over a project's duration. The imposed structure of setting a fundraising deadline and target amount introduces external temporal scoping that focuses supporter awareness. Pacing communications and updates maintains ongoing collective involvement rather than isolated moments of exchange. As closing deadlines near, creators can tempt hesitant backers through manufactured urgency. Analyzing these temporal strategies reveals additional layers of meaning-making and coordination in crowdfunding's reliance on direct reciprocal exchange between creators and users rather than a one-sided appeal for funds.

### **Gig economy**

In the gig economy, platforms like Upwork, Uber, or Door-Dash serve as intermediaries that not only connect freelance workers with potential clients but also shape the nature of their interactions. The algorithms that power these platforms play a critical role in matching supply with demand, influencing who gets work and under what conditions (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). Despite the impersonal nature of algorithmic mediation via mobile apps, relational work remains central to the gig economy (Alacovska et al., 2024). Freelancers must navigate client expectations, cultivate reputations, and build informal networks to secure ongoing work opportunities. The feedback and rating systems further embed relational dynamics into the platform, affecting workers' visibility and access to future gigs. Gig workers often go beyond the impersonal nature of platform-mediated interactions, investing time and energy into understanding clients' needs, personalizing their pitches, and sometimes engaging in unpaid labor to build rapport and trust.

Platforms commodify worker time into discrete tasks with imposed schedules that structure pay rates and earning capacity. In response, gig workers adapt availability rhythms to balance personal routines with income needs. They strategically manage their schedules to align with peak demand periods or to capitalize on times when client engagement is highest, often sacrificing personal time to enhance their visibility and accessibility on these platforms (Wolf, 2021). Moreover, temporal norms within these platforms dictate expectations around responsiveness, with clients often demanding prompt pick-up or quick replies to inquiries and progress updates. Temporal agility allows gig workers to maintain client relationships, manage their online reputation, and secure future gigs, despite the precarious nature of platform-based employment.

### **Industrial manufacturing**

This circuit is characterized by a network of original equipment manufacturers (OEMs), suppliers, distributors, and end-users, each playing their role in the creation, distribution, and consumption of manufactured goods. Whitford's (2012) analysis of the metal manufacturing industry highlights the critical role of organizations' rela-

tional work seen between OEMs and suppliers. His study emphasizes the significance of relationships in the manufacturing economy, highlighting how the nature of these relationships influence companies' competitive prospects. The shift towards more collaborative, embedded relationships, juxtaposed with persistent market-mode contracting, illustrates the balance firms navigate between trust-based collaborations and competitive bargaining (see also: Uzzi, 1997).

Time's place in this industrial circuit becomes evident as firms adjust to shortening product cycles, outsourcing dynamics, and fluctuating demand. Temporal strategies involve synchronizing product development and production processes across firms, managing the timing of innovation flows, and negotiating deadlines and delivery schedules that accommodate the complex interdependencies of modern manufacturing. It also involves forecasting the future. As Whitford (2012: 262) details, "when suppliers are working for OEMs with seasonal fluctuations in their businesses, suppliers may be asked to reserve capacity or to hold inventory in order to meet the demands of today's 'just-in-time/build-to-demand' strategies, but their customers are expected to provide accurate forecasts and compensate them if those forecasts are wildly out of line."

## Conclusions

This paper has explored the intersection of time and relational work in economic sociology. Building primarily on Viviana Zelizer's relational framework and connected lives thesis, I have argued that attending to the temporal dimensions of economic exchange provides additional insight into how social ties gain meaning and stability through economic practices.

The paper makes several interrelated contributions by demonstrating time's role in economic exchanges as not merely instrumental but constitutive of the social relations involved. It emphasizes time's dual nature as both an organizing structure that bounds economic action, as well as a dynamic process that actors leverage in creative ways to shape the context and meanings of transactions. As a structure, time offers readily-available templates like schedules, cycles, rhythms, and horizons that facilitate coordination and imbue exchange with predictable social significance befitting various relational categories. Yet time also constitutes a key element of relational work itself, as the strategic timing, pacing, duration, and sequencing of interactions signal context, manage expectations, and sustain interpersonal bonds amidst economic entanglements. Economic coordination becomes more than just a matter of logistics, but of efforts to align behaviors with the tempo and rhythms considered fitting for specific social ties in order to sustain them. Synchronizing timing elements prevents mismatches between economic transactions and social contexts that could otherwise strain relationships. Adaptability in adjusting to emergent needs also allows ties to evolve without severing them. Temporal agency, accordingly, exists along a spectrum from passive adherence to dominant temporal structures to reactive postures against temporal mismatch to active measures of (or resistance against) imposed timings, enabling both domination and defiance across variable power dynamics.

Incorporating temporality strengthens the relational economic sociology agenda by identifying another key mechanism through which economic practices are relationally meaningful. Time structures connections, signifies contexts, and enables strategic efforts to craft resonance. Attention to time also enriches meso- and macro-analyses of circuits of commerce—from farmers markets to remittances, gig labor to manufacturing—where shared temporal infrastructure channels economic coordination and meaning-making that distinguish those circuits from the impersonal lure of the market. Ultimately, time pervades the cultural frameworks orienting economic behavior at multiple scales (see: Hirschman, 2021).

This paper only begins to unpack the myriad connections between temporality and economic life. Further research might inquire more deeply: How do temporal expectations co-evolve with definitions of social categories and roles themselves? What other expressive capacities exist in economic time? How else is time symbolically leveraged to instead signal arms-length market relations? What temporal factors play into judgments of economic fairness or morality? Do digital payments carry different norms regarding time and timing compared to physical cash or informal credit? The answers to these and other related questions can extend economic sociology in new directions.

Indeed, by foregrounding when and how transactions matter for social reproduction, economic sociology more fully captures exchange as creative social action anchored in time's flow. The relational package, in this light, comes wrapped in thicker layers of temporal tissue linking economic gestures to the rhythms of interpersonal life.

**Acknowledgements** I would like to thank my undergraduate research assistant, Avshalom Matalon, for his patience and curiosity in helping me develop this paper.

**Funding** This study was funded by the Israel Science Foundation (Grant No. 1836/22). Open access funding provided by Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The author(s) declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



## References

- Abbott, A. (2001). *Time matters: On theory and method*. University of Chicago Press.
- Adam, B. (2003). When time is money: Contested rationalities of time in the theory and practice of work. *Theoria*, 50(102), 94–125.
- Alacovska, A., Bucher, E., & Fieseler, C. (2024). A relational work perspective on the gig economy: Doing creative work on digital labour platforms. *Work Employment and Society*, 38(1), 161–179.
- Almeling, R. (2007). Selling genes, selling gender: Egg agencies, sperm banks, and the medical market in genetic material. *American Sociological Review*, 72(3), 319–340.
- Amuedo-Dorantes, C., & Pozo, S. (2006). The time pattern of remittances: Evidence from Mexican migrants. *Well-being and Social Policy*, 2(2), 49–66.
- Ancona, D. G., Goodman, P. S., Lawrence, B. S., & Tushman, M. L. (2001). Time: A new research lens. *Academy of Management Review*, 26(4), 645–663.
- Bandelj, N. (2012). Relational work and economic sociology. *Politics & Society*, 40(2), 175–201.
- Bandelj, N. (2020). Relational work in the economy. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 46, 251–272.
- Bandelj, N., & Gibson, C. W. (2019). Relational work and consumption. in *The Oxford handbook of consumption*, 151.
- Beckert, J. (2016). *Imagined futures: Fictional expectations and capitalist dynamics*. Harvard University Press.
- Besbris, M. (2020). *Upsold: Real estate agents, prices, and neighborhood inequality*. University of Chicago Press.
- Besbris, M., & Fine, G. A. (2023). Planning as social practice: The formation and blockage of competitive futures in tournament chess, homebuying, and political organizing. *Theory and Society*, 1–24.
- Block, F. (2012). Relational work in market economies: Introduction. *Politics & Society*, 40(2), 135–144.
- Borch, C., Hansen, K. B., & Lange, A. C. (2015). Markets, bodies, and rhythms: A rhythmanalysis of financial markets from open-outcry trading to high-frequency trading. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 33(6), 1080–1097.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice* (Vol. 16No.). Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (2005). *The social structures of the economy*. Polity.
- Burawoy, M. (1982). *Manufacturing consent: Changes in the labor process under monopoly capitalism*. University of Chicago Press.
- Carling, J. (2014). Scripting remittances: Making sense of money transfers in transnational relationships. *International Migration Review*, 48, S218–S262.
- Chrzan, J. (2004). Slow food: What, why, and to where? *Food Culture & Society*, 7(2), 117–132.
- Clawson, D. (1980). *Bureaucracy and the labor process: The transformation of US industry, 1860–1920*. NYU.
- Cohen, G. A. (2000). *Karl Marx's theory of history: a defence*. Clarendon.
- Collins, R. (2004). *Interaction ritual chains*. New York and Oxford.
- Cox, A., Watson, G., Lonsdale, C., & Sanderson, J. (2004). Managing appropriately in power regimes: Relationship and performance management in 12 supply chain cases. *Supply Chain Management: Int J*, 9(5), 357–371.
- Deeg, R., & Hardie, I. (2016). What is patient capital and who supplies it? *Socio-Economic Review*, 14(4), 627–645.
- Dodd, N. (2016). *The social life of money*. Princeton University Press.
- Eisenberg, C. (2011). Embedding markets in temporal structures: A challenge to economic sociology and history. *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung*, 55–78.
- Elias, N. (1998). Time and timing. In *On civilization, power, and knowledge*, 253–268.
- Flaherty, M. G. (1999). *A watched pot: How we experience time*. NYU.
- García, A. (2014). Relational work in economic sociology: A review and extension. *Sociology Compass*, 8(6), 639–647.
- Garner, B. (2015). Communication at farmers' markets: Commodifying relationships, community and morality. *Journal of Creative Communications*, 10(2), 186–198.
- Gell, A. (1992). *The anthropology of time: Cultural constructions of temporal maps and images*. Routledge.
- Giddens, A. (2004). The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration: Elements of the theory of structuration. *Practicing history* (pp. 121–142). Routledge.
- Granovetter, M. (1985). Economic Action and Social structure: The Problem of Embeddedness. *American Journal of Sociology*, 481–510.

- Granqvist, N., & Gustafsson, R. (2016). Temporal institutional work. *Academy of Management Journal*, 59(3), 1009–1035.
- Hair, L. (2021). Friends, not ATMs: Parasocial relational work and the construction of intimacy by artists on Patreon. *Sociological Spectrum*, 41(2), 196–212.
- Harvey, A. S., & Mukhopadhyay, A. K. (2007). When twenty-four hours is not enough: Time poverty of working parents. *Social Indicators Research*, 82, 57–77.
- Hassan, R. (2003). Network time and the new knowledge epoch. *Time & Society*, 12(2–3), 226–241.
- Hassard, J. (Ed.). (2016). *The sociology of time*. Springer.
- Hassard, J. (2017). Time and industrial sociology. *Time, work and organization* (pp. 13–34). Routledge.
- Hayes, A., & O'Brien, R. (2021). Earmarking risk: Relational investing and portfolio choice. *Social Forces*, 99(3), 1086–1112.
- Hinrichs, C. C. (2000). Embeddedness and local food systems: Notes on two types of direct agricultural market. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 16(3), 295–303.
- Hirschman, D. (2021). *Transitional Temporality Sociological Theory*, 39(1), 48–58.
- Jenkins, A. (1994). Just-in-Time. *Regimes 'and Reductionism Sociology*, 28(1), 21–30.
- Kohli, M., & Meyer, J. W. (1986). Social structure and social construction of life stages. *Human Development*, 29(3), 145–149.
- Lamis, S. F., Handayani, P. W., & Fitriani, W. R. (2022). Impulse buying during flash sales in the online marketplace. *Cogent Business & Management*, 9(1), 2068402.
- Landy, F. J., Rastegary, H., Thayer, J., & Colvin, C. (1991). Time urgency: The construct and its measurement. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 76(5), 644.
- Lee, H., & Liebenau, J. (2000). Temporal effects of information systems on business processes: Focusing on the dimensions of temporality. *Accounting Management and Information Technologies*, 10(3), 157–185.
- Lefebvre, H. (2013). *Rhythmanalysis: Space, time and everyday life*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Levine, R. N. (2008). *A geography of time: On tempo, culture, and the pace of life*. Basic Books.
- Lindley, A. (2009). The early-morning phonecall: Remittances from a refugee diaspora perspective. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 35(8), 1315–1334.
- Lounsbury, M., & Hirsch, P. M. (Eds.). (2010). *Markets on trial: The economic sociology of the US financial crisis*. Emerald Group Publishing.
- MacKenzie, D. (2018). Material signals: A historical sociology of high-frequency trading. *American Journal of Sociology*, 123(6), 1635–1683.
- Mannheim, K. (1953). Essays on the sociology of knowledge. *Philosophy*, 28(106).
- Mauss, M., & [1954] (2000). *The gift: The form and reason for exchange in archaic societies*. WW Norton & Company.
- Mears, A. (2015). Working for Free in the VIP: Relational work and the production of Consent. *American Sociological Review*, 80(6), 1099–1122.
- Miyazaki, H. (2003). The temporalities of the market. *American Anthropologist*, 105(2), 255–265.
- O'Brien, R., Hayes, A., & Kiviat, B. (2022). Deciding between domains: How borrowers weigh market and interpersonal options. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 85(4), 327–350.
- Orlikowski, W. J., & Yates, J. (2002). It's about time: Temporal structuring in organizations. *Organization Science*, 13(6), 684–700.
- Patrick, M. (2018). Gift exchange or quid pro quo? Temporality, ambiguity, and stigma in interactions between pedestrians and service-providing panhandlers. *Theory and Society*, 47, 487–509.
- Perlow, L. A. (1999). The time famine: Toward a sociology of work time. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44(1), 57–81.
- Polanyi, K. (2002). The great transformation. *Readings in Economic Sociology*, 38–62.
- Reinecke, J., Suddaby, R., Tsoukas, H., & Langley, A. (Eds.). (2021). *Time, temporality, and history in process organization studies*. Oxford University Press.
- Rosa, H. (2013). *Social acceleration: A new theory of modernity*. Columbia University.
- Rosenblat, A., & Stark, L. (2016). Algorithmic labor and information asymmetries: A case study of Uber's drivers. *International Journal of Communication*, 10, 27.
- Rossman, G. (2014). Obfuscatory relational work and disreputable exchange. *Sociological Theory*, 32(1), 43–63.
- Schutz, A. (1962). *Collected papers, vol. I: The problem of social reality*. Martinus Nijhoff.
- Schutz, A., & Luckmann, T. (1973). *The structures of the life-world (vol. I)*. Northwestern University.
- Schwartz, B. (1974). Waiting, exchange, and power: The distribution of time in social systems. *American Journal of Sociology*, 79(4), 841–870.

- Serra-Mingot, E., & Mazzucato, V. (2019). Moving for a 'better welfare'? The case of transnational Sudanese families. *Global Networks*, 19(2), 139–157.
- Sewell, G., & Wilkinson, B. (2019). Someone to Watch over Me': surveillance, discipline and the Just-in-Time labour process. *Postmodern Management Theory* (pp. 151–169). Routledge.
- Shipp, A. J., & Jansen, K. J. (2021). The other time: A review of the subjective experience of time in organizations. *Academy of Management Annals*, 15(1), 299–334.
- Shove, E. (2020). Everyday practice and the production and consumption of time. *Time, consumption and everyday life* (pp. 17–33). Routledge.
- Simmel, G. [1900](2011). *The philosophy of money*. Routledge.
- Snyder, B. H. (2016). *The disrupted workplace: Time and the moral order of flexible capitalism*. Oxford University Press.
- Stoltz, D. S. (2018). Relations and relationships: Clarifying the terms of the 'new' relational economic sociology. *The American Sociologist*, 49, 64–79.
- Šubr, J. (2021). *The sociology of Time*. Springer International Publishing.
- Taddeo, L. (2010). Rachel Uchitel Is Not a Madam. *New York Magazine*, April 4, 2010. Retrieved February 25, 2024. (-).
- Tavory, I. (2018). Between situations: Anticipation, rhythms, and the theory of interaction. *Sociological Theory*, 36(2), 117–133.
- Tavory, I., & Fine, G. A. (2020). Disruption and the theory of the interaction order. *Theory and Society*, 49(3), 365–385.
- Thompson, E. P. (1967). Time, Work-Discipline, and industrial capitalism. *Past & Present*, 38(1), 56–97.
- Tilly, C. (2015). *Identities, boundaries and social ties*. Routledge.
- Uzzi, B. (1997). Social structure and competition in Interfirm networks: The Paradox of Embeddedness. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 42(1), 35.
- Wagner-Pacifici, R. (2019). *What is an event?* University of Chicago Press.
- Wang, Y., Lu, L. X., & Shi, P. (2022). Does customer email Engagement improve profitability? Evidence from a field experiment in subscription service retailing. *Manufacturing & Service Operations Management*, 24(5), 2703–2721.
- Weber, M. (1981). Some categories of interpretive sociology. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 22(2), 151–180.
- Whaley, J. E., Kim, S. H., & Kim, Y. K. (2019). Drivers and impact of restaurant tipping behavior. *Journal of Foodservice Business Research*, 22(2), 117–131.
- Wherry, F. F. (2016). Relational accounting: A cultural approach. *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, 4, 131–156.
- Whitford, J. (2012). Waltzing, relational work, and the construction (or not) of collaboration in manufacturing industries. *Politics & Society*, 40(2), 249–272.
- Wolf, A. B. (2021). Who's the Boss? Digitally Mediated Employment's Impacts on Labor Markets and the Nature of Work. *The Platform Economy and the City: Urban Peril and Promise in the New Digital Economy*, 50–79.
- Zaloom, C. (2019). *Indebted: How families make college work at any cost*. Princeton University Press.
- Zelizer, V. A. (2000). Fine tuning the Zelizer view. *Economy and Society*, 29(3), 383–389.
- Zelizer, V. A. (2012). How I became a relational economic sociologist and what does that mean? *Politics & Society*, 40(2), 145–174.
- Zelizer, V. A. (2023). Why and how do Social relations Matter for Economic lives? *Living better together: Social Relations and Economic Governance in the work of Ostrom and Zelizer* (pp. 11–28). Springer International Publishing.
- Zelizer, V. A., & Tilly, C. (2006). Relations and categories. *Psychology of Learning and Motivation*, 47, 1–31.
- Zerubavel, E. (1987). The language of time: Toward a semiotics of temporality. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 28(3), 343–356.
- Zelizer, V. (2005). Circuits within capitalism. *The economic sociology of capitalism*, 289–322. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691217932-015>.
- Rosa, C. (2011). The high-frequency response of exchange rates to monetary policy actions and statements. *Journal of Banking & Finance*, 35(2), 478–489. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbankfin.2010.09.008>
- Bansal, P., Reinecke, J., Suddaby, R., & Langley, A. (2022). Temporal work: The strategic organization of time. *Strategic Organization*, 20(1), 6–19. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbankfin.2010.09.008>