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## **Systematic Avocating**

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### **Abstract**

Feeling obliged to undertake complex research tasks outside core working hours is a common occurrence in academia. Detailed and timely research projects are expected; the creation and defence of sufficient intervals within a crowded working schedule is one concern explored in this short version paper. Merely working longer hours fails to provide a satisfactory solution for individuals experiencing concerns of this nature. Personal effort and drive are utilised and requires the application of mental mustering and systematic procedures. The attitude to research work is treating the task as a hobby conceptualised as avocating. Whilst this provides a personal solution through immersion in the task, this approach should raise concerns for employers. The flexibility of grounded theory is evident and the freedom to draw on various bodies of knowledge provides fresh insight into a problem that occurs in organizations in many sectors experiencing multiple priorities. The application of the core category, systematic avocating, may prove beneficial.

**Keywords:** avocating, flow, personal drive, time management, support mechanisms.

### **Introduction**

Sources of motivation, individual engagement and work/life balance strategies within the workplace are topics that have been subject to extensive scrutiny by researchers since Maslow's work in the 1940s. In contrast, limited attention has been given to behaviours of highly engaged and motivated individuals who are accomplished performers and strive to complete complex, time-consuming tasks in addition to a busy core role. Personal development and achieving career aspirations are the most frequently cited individual rationales for undertaking additional tasks within the work place.

Evidence of working on supplementary tasks in business departments of academic institutions is widespread where there is an expectation to undertake research and publish the results within specific timeframes. This work contributes towards the Research Excellence Framework ([www.ref.ac.uk](http://www.ref.ac.uk)) in the UK, the system for assessing research, which determines public funding and affect the reputation of universities. The scope and focus of this discussion paper is limited to this specific example. However the theory generated is readily transferable to other sectors and roles where research and undertaking additional projects are requirements, as the concerns and their resolution are of a similar nature and indicate the theory is modifiable to fit other circumstances.

The theoretical proposition is that the accomplished performer draws on less visible and less documented support mechanisms and interpretations of work when undertaking additional tasks having close links with the way in which hobbies are addressed. How support is sourced and utilised may be complex, intermittent and

varied. The aim of this study is to reveal the behaviours that contribute towards a solution, for individuals striving to fulfil additional strata of work and, is based on a general problem area (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

It is anticipated that the grounded theory will provide additional insight into this issue for academics and practitioners to support not only their own future endeavours but also those of colleagues and managers requesting extra effort and task completion from staff. "In the absence of clear-cut procedures and definitions," (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p.1) which effectively address the issues of work-place fatigue and complex endeavours, there is a clear research gap that warrants attention to provide a useable theory with practitioner understanding.

Data were gathered from a sample of research active academics employed in business and management departments to ensure potential respondents have first-hand experience of the specific problem. The format of the data collection consisted initially of "open-ended conversations during which the respondents are allowed to talk with no imposed limitations" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 75) to establish a story, as related by nine respondents. The introductory question was as follows: In what ways do you address the requirements of the research excellence framework to produce the required level of output? As categories emerged, subsequent data collection included additional questions requiring three further conversations. The purpose of these conversations was to ask about research activity as a hobby, thus providing additional incidents of relevance to previously established categories thereby achieving saturation.

### **The Study**

The study is presented as a grounded theory, based on the empirical data provided, coding processes, de-limiting to achieve theoretical saturation and the memos written during these processes consistent with classic grounded theory methodology. As the format is restricted to a discussion paper a review of grounded theory techniques is omitted.

Issues emerging from the data were diverse and revealed several courses of action, which, in some cases, were relied on or practised so extensively that they were deserving of inclusion into the core category as systematic practices. The systems were visible and frequently documented; the mental techniques however, were personal and practised in an avocating manner, which addresses other behaviours and provides complete coverage of the data and contributed to the generation of the central core category of systematic avocating.

In considering the incidents and actions taken to resolve the problem in academia of completing research projects it is clearly evident that a systematic approach is taking place. Repeatedly ensuring that task allocation occurs demonstrates methodical behaviours mentally to barricade out other pressing requirements. The range of activities related to manage time constraints effectively are properties that contribute to the sub-category of defensive corralling. The additional effort and personal drive to undertake the research, which is not usually visible, is clearly depicted in the data as a mental muster. This is only possible through regular participation in the mental balancing processes of recovery, which requires minimal effort and is personally restorative.

Personal efforts ensuring research activities progress in a timely manner and to a necessary standard are conceptualised as avocating. Avocating is defined as an activity a person does in addition to a principal occupation ([www.dictionary.cambridge.org](http://www.dictionary.cambridge.org)). Saturation occurs at this point in the data collection process. Avocating is at the core of the data incidents because all the behaviours are additional to the core role, carried out with vigour drawn from mental mustering and protection from corraling. The term avocating only partially explains the overall concept as the strong links with planning and progressing are personally incorporated into role management and activity. Linking the two concern-resolving behaviours provides the core category of systematic avocating, an integrated behaviour that provides the innermost and central response, from a conceptual perspective, to the problem under consideration.

### **Corraling**

The properties of corraling require a systematic approach to the given task and consist of defensive time-management, delegating, elongating, juggling, prioritising and defending.

Whilst the theory is not linear in nature, the issue of time is clear and is referred to as a concern. There is widespread evidence of excellent time management techniques. Diaries were examined during data collection to demonstrate the extent to which working hours are taken up with routine tasks. Incidents included staring at diary pages or electronic calendars on a range of devices in order to allocate a slot to carry out the research-related tasks. To achieve this objective, there was no alternative other than giving up another task; various examples were provided that may have implications outside the workplace. The majority of examples related to social and domestic responsibilities and expectations, which subsequently create additional time pressures and an expectation to set-aside a chunk of time at a later stage as a form of payback.

Other allocating solutions revolve around delegating tasks. As the majority of the participants are not employed in traditional management positions, the first call was to colleagues who (a) hosted a tutorial class, (b) assisted in a literature search and (c) undertook proofreading. These practices are largely acceptable within academia, as extensive mutuality exists. There is a widespread culture of favours asked and favours returned.

Juggling and prioritising are in-vivo properties contributing to time management; in addition, there is a clear appreciation that time is not being created; but used in an alternative manner. The final solution, though not be the preferred choice, was to have (a) earlier starting times, (b) a later end to the working day, or (c) weekend work. Being mindful of spill over from other tasks into allocated research-related time slots also occurs. Preference is to manage time in chunks of sufficient length to enable satisfactory progress to be made during each session, to reduce the detrimental effect of switching tasks and to avoid having an over-reliance of polyphasic thinking, whilst always remaining aware of imminent deadlines.

Despite the pressures and difficulties related, the data indicate a fierce determination and desire to undertake the research and be vigilant in guarding the time required. In order to achieve this outcome time defending strategies practised to resolve the concerns of participants in this substantive area is conceptualised as the sub-

category of corralling. The concept of corralling is far stronger than the descriptive term of time management as it depicts a space, which is difficult to exit; corralling is selective and not available to everyone. In the data, it is a solitary space dedicated to research activities.

### **Mental Mustering**

Having engineered time and moved into the corral, participants demonstrated the ability to operate at the required standard during the time; such available behaviour was referred to as aiming for Olympic standards without undertaking sufficient training to perform at that level. This behaviour required mental mustering in order to strive and produce work this level.

Mental mustering encompasses the properties of internal driving, immersing, commencing, reviving, pondering and supportive cajoling. Engaging in these properties is the outcome of the resolutions for the time issue which results in research-related activities taking place when recurring day-to-day job priorities are attended to initially. Tiredness and low energy levels are the result; repeated reference is made to feelings of fatigue impacting the rate and standard of work being produced. If the hard-fought time slot is not effectively utilised participants become frustrated when progress slows down.

In order to overcome the problems linked to physical issues, data exist that demonstrate participants draw on their personal and internal drive, and mental determination. It is clear that the urge to research enables individuals to use personal volition and calls on their resources because a pressing mental urge exists to work that, in turn, creates unsettled feelings and agitation. Becoming immersed in the research task through self-persuasion solves these feelings. A coded data extract is mental muster requiring a personal effort; there are indications of personal questioning the primary motive behind the research task at this stage in the theory. Commencing a relevant activity enables the researcher to become absorbed in the task and drains away most of the emotional issues. This desired outcome brings focus to the task and a personally satisfying sense of direction.

Practising mental mustering is largely a cognitive exercise with limited visual evidence. However, frequent short-term revival techniques are undertaken as simple rituals. A saturated example is a task connected with making either a drink or a snack; the example is identified as thinking calories. This daytime interlude provides sufficient time to shift the focus of thought from routine matters to the direction of the research task. Pondering also assists in the mustering process. Reflection and projection occur in order to establish the correct starting point for the session.

Disturbances are largely avoided. One exception is of colleagues who were described as possessing empathy and were sensitive to the nature of research work. These people only intervene with refreshments, a time check, or in order to cajole and encourage.

Immersion in the research task greatly reduces the awareness of time. On occasion, researchers realised they were experiencing a state of flow when tasks became semi-automatic and almost effortless. Most instances of flow occurred unexpectedly and could not be encouraged or cajoled. The period of flow also varies with each situation;

sudden departure from the state may also take place, signalling the decline of mental muster.

Whilst actions are taken to drive the research forward in the early stages of the corralled slot it is clear that knowing when to stop is relevant to the problem. When concentration wavers, continuity is difficult to maintain, and the occurrence of errors rises; these experiences are described as fog in the brain. Experience teaches the researcher that attempting to strive at this stage is offset by the reduction in quality; ceasing to work is the best solution. Recovery practices take the form of physical activity, change of scenery, relaxation, and socialisation. From the data, the emphasis is the levels of frequency; recovery needs to be corralled into a routine in order to regenerate the mental energy depleted during research sessions.

### **Avocating**

Categorisation of research work as a hobby reoccurred throughout the data collection; the tone is emphatic: research *has* to be a hobby. However the use of the word hobby did not fit or match how the respondents felt about undertaking research, despite its repeated use by participants, and this led to a dilemma. To address the dilemma, delimited conversations were carried out with four members of the initial sample to collect additional data and ensure inductive development was occurring. Additional insights and reflections, collected from the participants in the second conversation, provided additional insights to more recognisable pastimes categorised as hobbies. The term labour of love was used and acknowledgements of similar efforts were a requirement when arranging free time in order to participate in a hobby.

Comparing participants' feelings of becoming absorbed in research and participating in hobbies is met with incredulity because the two activities are not usually compared. However the participants reinforced the hobby-like tendencies that are practised; saturation occurred and no other properties emerged. This conclusion demonstrates a clear contribution to knowledge.

Hobby-related incidents include commentary on making progress. The progress is compared to a project-based activity such as dressmaking, which has a clear start, finish, and structure per item; therefore, it has some similarities to research that complies with specified word counts structures. Mastery is also a recurring property where drive and repetition are required in order to improve a level of ability. An example cited is learning to swim using the crawl stroke as opposed to the breaststroke. This task proved to be particularly challenging due to the need for total absorption during practise, and mental muster in order to practice the asymmetrical movements so as to become competent.

In summary, the grounded theory of systematic avocating consists of two sub-categories: corraling to clear and defend research time and mental mustering. Mental mustering is the largely invisible element of the theory that enables the person to assemble resources and organize his or her effort in order to undertake the research activity. People engage in these practises to undertake and achieve a research outcome; such outcome requires a person to participate beyond core work-activities and use systems effectively to ensure that satisfactory progress and quality occur; these behaviours pattern out to a core category of systematic avocating.

## **Literature**

As stated in the introduction this is a discussion paper and this section is limited to a brief sample of literature, which has relevance to the study. Nevertheless, the sample effectively demonstrates how grounded theory contributes a slice of theory seamlessly crossing recognised bodies of knowledge through the synthesis of subject-matter emerging from the empirical data linked to the research question and effectively contributes to knowledge. This approach enables useful existing concepts to contribute to the theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Time management is defined as "behaviours that aim at achieving an effective use of time while performing certain goal-directed activities" (Claessens, van Eerdi, Rutter & Roe 2007, p. 262). However, the authors added that time cannot be managed; it is an inaccessible factor and self-management is a more appropriate term. In their review of the literature, Claessens, et al. (2007) mentioned that the main factors that contribute to effective time management practise are the ability to have short and longer-range priorities. Other aspects that support a good use of time include a sense of purpose, structured routines, effective organization, persistence, and present orientation. Training in the techniques reduces worry and procrastination.

Nicholls (2001) proposed two techniques to improve time management. The first is breaking away from fake, urgent labels to reduce time spent on trivial tasks. Achieving break away requires resisting demands and delegating, whenever possible. The second is becoming focused and allocating a set task for the week requiring mental effort and uninterrupted concentration; in many cases this task can be achieved by getting away from the usual work setting. Goofing-off periodically was also recommended by Nicholls (2001) to introduce an element of light-heartedness and to develop the ability to recover.

By making notes, recommended by Jones and Hood (2010) a person can get things out of his or her head as fast as possible. Because of data deluge from contemporary organizations, multitasking leads to inefficient time chopping, which results in reduced sustained thought. Mind clearing, such as going for a walk, is essential during below base line activities, which require minimal demand by the individual (Green, 2012) and are relatively passive.

Jansink, Kwakman and Streumer (2005) referred to the positive relationship between knowledge development and internal personal drive. The forerunners of a commitment to research projects are identified in this study as (a) the centralisation of fragmented activities, (b) bonding, which is supported by a favourable social context, and (c) the determination of priorities to develop a strategic plan. In addition, knowledge output is identified as being dependent on personal effort resulting from individual drives.

Drive is a disturbing internal presence, which creates a need to undertake activity (Green, 2012); it has direction and resides in the individual. This presence is tied to a sense of obligation, which subsequently generates personal effort (Kuhn, 2006). The utilisation of drive supports the activities being attempted in the study in that it requires resilience to provide the personal drive and has a continued presence when faced with obstacles (Quigley & Tymon, 2006) but is perceived as being worth the time and energy required as the outcome is viewed as a real accomplishment. Elements of job crafting as

the research output contribute to self-image and require the alteration of the relational boundaries of a job (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).

Conditions contributing to flow were identified by Rana, Arcichvilli and Tkachenko (2014) as being vigor, dedication, and absorption. The ability to manage stressors as burnout avoiders emerges from psychological resilience; a norm of reciprocity in co-worker relationships is also supportive for a dedicated work approach. Possessing an autotelic personality to inject flow into work tasks is a longer-term factor in effort maintenance linked to work tasks. Krausz (2002) identified setting time aside as a key factor in achieving transformation to a flow state.

Studies on personal goals and their role in the work context are sparse (Salmela-Aro & Nurmi, 2004); this sparseness is unexpected according to Kuchinke, Ardichvili, Borchert and Rozanski (2009), given the popularity of the topic in business media. The dimensions covered in their study provide an insight into the supporting rationale when performing beyond the core job role. Suggestions from the data indicate that undertaking something that is interesting is (a) satisfying, (b) serving society, (c) causing prestige and status gain, and/or (d) creating a sense of self, group membership and/or personal expression rank high. Of low importance is the company or organization where the respondents work.

The acceptance of research as a hobby is provided by the notion of a serious leisure perspective, which Stebbins (2001) referred to as an activity carried out in free time where the central focus is acquiring specialised experiences, knowledge and skills. The pleasure principle is linked to learning activities (Fulton, 2009); the outcomes of this principle are empowerment, control, confidence, and pleasure. Using poetry Islam and Zyphur (2006) provided an interesting perspective on work, regulated by society and placed in conditions outside those chose by working individuals. The relevance for a grounded theory study lies in the inference that poetry does not tell, but indicates. Where work encapsulates both pleasure and necessity, providing a unified perspective on life, the goal in Frost's poem, cited by Island and Zyphur (2006), *Two Tramps in Mud Time* is achieved: "My object in living is to unite my avocation and my vocation."

The literature provides some evidence of theoretical sensitivity for the study and also suggests a dearth of studies to support the notion of drawing on avocating as a key motivator in undertaking additional activities, which, in this study, is research.

## **Discussion**

Undertaking research to solve a problem using classic grounded theory removes many of the constraints associated with other methods. In this particular study, a hypothesis would be limiting and may have restricted the range of data provided and the emergent theory. Respondents were not asked to comment on the sources of their efforts; instead, they were asked what actions they took to in order to create an opportunity to engage in academic research practices. This approach provided an opportunity to present data with a positive perspective.

Data outcomes go beyond the confines of well-documented motivation theory and encompass planning and time management (Claessens, et al. 2007) Actions to protect and defend the research time are more difficult to categorise as they are individual



behaviours and the sub-category of mental mustering draws on personal energy, drive and recovery practices.

Of particular relevance to employers, is the fact that when participants spoke of people support the references are to colleagues; no commentary existed regarding line managers and teamwork. Further research would be beneficial to address this identified gap.

Personal pleasure and the hoped-for, rather than expected, recognition from the completed research is the rationale for the work. Pleasure originates from experiencing flow, seeing progress and completing the given task. Recognition is external to the organization and is provided by the academic community in the majority of incidents.

What appears to be overlooked by academic institutions is the energetic and creative resource that is needed to complete research work. In a minority of forward-looking private sector organizations each employee has an allocation of time in order to work on a project of their choice. The project may be charitable, sustainable, local community or a work-related idea. A number of reasons exist for the rationale of such a project; corporate social responsibility, reputation, community standing, and a source of creativity and idea development; these reasons may counter the findings of Kuchinke et al. (2009) that the organization is of limited importance.

The provision of dedicated, mainstreamed, timetabled, research time may result in an increase in research output—a priority for higher education institutions, which rely heavily on the goodwill of staff. Unannounced withdrawal of the goodwill could have detrimental ramifications to the institution. Mental mustering practices reveal a further gap in the effective and well-managed organization requiring additional attention.

### **Implications for Practice**

Where an occupation has multiple layers of tasks with complex priorities, employer acknowledgement of systematic avocating practises is recommended to ensure the process and effort are acknowledged. Whether this acknowledgement occurs in the form of regular or periodic feedback, or more formal integration into an appraisal process is dependent on the degree to which systematic avocating outcomes contribute to the core organizational performance measures and standing. In an academic sector these factors are both extensive and significant. The formal recognition—the core category of this study—warrants attention by senior management. It is a tenuous strategy relying on systematic avocating as a means of attending to the academic research agenda. This aspect is also referred to in extant literature however the organization is given scant consideration; in such situations, it is the employees who take priority and this practice is clearly a potential concern for employers.

Issues emerging from the data impacting the rate or frequency and quality of the resultant work should be of concern to practitioners and employers. It is clear that individuals are undertaking complex tasks when they feel the need to practice mental mustering due to mental and physical fatigue. As the resulting work outcomes are showcased externally, they should receive far greater priority. Therefore, central corraling in order is recommended to allocate specific times when employees could conduct research-related activities in a dedicated manner. A central strategic approach

involving departments would reduce the sporadic and ad-hoc practices that the theory indicates are currently in place. By adopting a central approach it would also provide widespread clarity to other departments, functions, and people, and emphasise that research is a priority activity.

Systematic avocating is modifiable to encompass a very broad range of sectors, particularly where project work is being undertaken as an additional, extended task. As the use of technology encroaches even further into working practices, the ability to extend working hours is easily achieved and practised. The key issue is the level at which people are working clearly does not correlate with higher quality and is the link between the grounded theory of systematic avocating and the practise implications identified.

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