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The Misrepresented American?

Sophia Zervas

Sophia Zervas is a freshman double majoring in piano and vocal performance. When she's not practicing, you'll find her running or hiking in her home state of Colorado, spending time with family and friends, or curled up with a book by her favorite author, C.S. Lewis.

In the excerpt from her book *The Overworked American*, economist Juliet Schor notes the consistent increase in Americans' hours of labor over the past two decades. Attributing this trend to the concurrent increase in productivity, she argues that prosperity and leisure are inversely related. Later in the article, she examines the effects of overwork on American society and traces the inflammation of social issues to the "stress" phenomenon. Schor's purpose is two-fold: first, she analyzes why Americans have lost their leisure time and second, she cautions against a continuation of the current trend. On the surface, Schor's arguments are authoritative, logical and convincing. A closer examination, however, reveals a lack of focus and several lines of faulty reasoning that undermine her impressive credentials.

Two implicit subdivisions outline Schor's general purpose. The opening paragraphs introduce the rise in work time and analyze why American prosperity has contributed to the sharp decline in leisure. The centrality of words such as "market," "productivity" and "consumer" highlights the economic focus of her initial argument. She approaches her topic from a mainly logical standpoint and adopts an objective tone. Approximately halfway through the article, the focus shifts from economics to social issues and their relation to overwork. Schor digresses from logical argumentation to emotional persuasion, evidenced by the consistent repetition of the word "stress." Other word choices, including "squeeze," "casualty" and "plaguing," evoke fear in and effectively warn readers against the danger of overwork. Overall, the paper aims to persuade through analysis and a warning.

Specifically, Schor argues that increased prosperity in America has precipitated a lack of leisure time. She explicitly states her claim in the form of a question: “Why has leisure been such a conspicuous casualty of prosperity?” A lengthy introduction provides context by noting increased labor hours in America, which by implication have risen above a healthy level. In fact, the entire claim is based on the assumption that Americans are overworked. To back her warrant, Schor highlights the dramatic rise of working hours in the past twenty years. Additionally, she contrasts Americans’ labor hours and those of their European counterparts. Schor proves her claim by stating that, when productivity increases, employees aren’t offered a choice between more pay and more leisure time. Instead, employers automatically increase pay. She offers a second piece of data based on the American definition of “satisfaction.” According to Schor, Americans define “satisfaction” based on what they own in relation to others. Pay raises that accompany increased productivity fuel “shopping sprees” intended to outdo others. To keep up with the outflow of money and the increased demand to keep up with their neighbors, people work more, thus perpetuating the cycle of “work-and-spend.” These two arguments constitute the core of Schor’s data. The rest of the article argues the warrant instead of the claim. To validate her warrant, Schor argues that overwork, by causing high stress levels and detracting from needed family time, exacerbates social ills such as child neglect and marital problems.

Ethos, logos and pathos all appear to some degree in Schor’s article. Although Schor doesn’t explicitly assert her authority, her credentials suggest that she is an expert in the field. Graduating from the prestigious Wesleyan University, she pursued her Ph.D. in economics at the University of Massachusetts. Previous to holding her current position as Professor of Sociology at Boston College, Schor taught at Harvard for 17 years. In addition, she has written several best-selling books on economics, work and spending. Because of Schor’s impressive teaching positions and publishing accomplishments, readers are likely to trust her as an authority on the subject. Her overall tone also enhances her credibility. In an engaging but professional manner, Schor methodically addresses the subject at hand.

Pathos surfaces in the latter half of the article, where Schor argues that lack of leisure time results in stress-induced diseases, inadequate sleep, marriage issues and child neglect. To highlight the strain imposed by lack of time, she quotes and references average Americans who her readers would likely relate with. The anecdotes she relays evoke sympathy in readers and convince them that Americans are indeed overworked.

Schor's approach to her topic seems logical. Her article is full of statistical backing and she frequently quotes experts in the field. The plenitude of cause-and-effect relationships also gives an appearance of a logical progression. Several fallacies, however, undermine the credibility of her logic. By tossing out names such as "Berkley sociologist Arlie Hochschild" and "economist Victor Fuchs," she effectively vies for readers' respect; in reality, though, she rarely cites her sources. For example, she states that "Americans...have only sixteen and a half hours of leisure time a week." According to what survey? Again, "Americans...spend a higher fraction of the money they earn." Was this a reliable source? From the quote, readers can't discern whether the "higher fraction" is even a significant amount. Occasionally, Schor doesn't even back up her claim with a statistic. One glaring example occurs when she rebuts a counter-argument: "Contrary to the views of some researchers, the rise of work is not confined to a few, selective groups, but has affected the great majority of working class Americans." She denies her opponents' assertion but doesn't refute it. Does she expect readers to simply take her word for it? In this case, her lack of evidence severely weakens her rebuttal.

Likewise, logical fallacies abound in her cause-and-effect relationships. The assertion that the "productivity dividend" provides only two options—"more free time or more money"—presents a false dilemma. While these are two viable options, they are not exclusive. Also, she automatically assumes that leisure time decreased due to overwork. Equating "time poverty" with overwork, she ignores other time drainers unique to the late 20th century, such as social media and video games. In essence, she confuses cause and effect by assuming that correlation means causation. Later, Schor discusses how spouses in double-income homes struggle to maintain a balance between work and family life. The inherent assumption is that both parents are working to fulfill the so-called "American

definition of satisfaction.” This may hold true for some families. In other cases, though, both spouses work out of necessity, not because they’re enslaved to Schor’s hypothetical definition of success and contentedness.

When Schor evaluates the American definition of satisfaction, she introduces an appeal to spite. Instead of countering her opponents logically, she colors readers’ opinions by stating, “Now anyone with just a little bit of psychological sophistication (to go with this little bit of common sense) can spot the flaw in the economist’s argument.” Readers will likely concede with her position simply to avoid the accusation of lacking psychological sophistication and common sense.

Logical fallacies pepper her pathos as well. For example, she portrays herself as sympathetic and attuned the plight of Americans when she says, “while academics have missed the decline of leisure time, ordinary Americans have not.” Ironically, she, an academic herself, blames the “academics” for “missing the decline of leisure time.” In this way, she aligns herself with the American people—a “plain folks” fallacy.

Schor qualifies her warrant by admitting that “there’s more going on here than lack of time.” The insubstantial qualifier, however, is overshadowed by her appeal to fear. To persuade readers to adopt her warrant, she attributes rising stress levels to overwork. If the plethora of negative effects that she lists are the result of overwork, then her audience will naturally agree that Americans need more leisure time. Again, readers must scrutinize the validity of the cause-and-effect relationship. Does less work guarantee reduced stress? Perhaps her argument is valid to some degree, but is she amplifying her emotional appeal to persuade readers?

The substantial space that she dedicates to prove her warrant distracts from the initial argument, effectually introducing a red herring. Directing her readers away from the main thrust, she argues that Americans need of more leisure time by pointing out social ills supposedly exacerbated by overwork. Another instance of a red herring occurs on a smaller scale. In context, Schor is arguing that overwork places strain on marriages. To prove her point, she quotes a legal secretary from California as saying that her husband “does no cooking, no washing, no anything else...If our marriage ends, it will be on this issue.” She introduces the red herring when

discussing the cause of the marital strain. According to the wife, her husband's laziness and lack of contribution to household chores is producing marital issues. There is absolutely no indication that overwork is causing strain in the marriage.

Schor's analysis of the correlation between increased prosperity and declining leisure time is superficially persuasive, due to her impressive credentials and seemingly logical approach. A closer reading of the text, however, reveals an underlying lack of focus: she switches midway through the article from arguing her original claim to defending her warrant. Additionally, logical fallacies undermine her arguments and rebuttals. Although she projects a cool, logical tone, the proof of her warrant is based largely on an emotional appeal. While she does consider several viable causes and effects, she fails to sufficiently account for other factors that play significant roles. When performing experiments, scientists are careful to alter only one variable between their various tests and control demonstration so as to isolate a cause without confusing it with another. In all fairness, Schor, as an economic scientist, cannot completely isolate different variables in evaluating the economy. At the same time, her only acknowledgment of other factors in her study is brief and thus misleading. Therefore, readers should carefully weigh her assertions before accepting their validity.