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Issues, Problems, and Solutions

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Solving a Work Problem

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What is a work problem? Despite being absolutely sure that I have one, and despite being able to give examples, I am unsure I can give a good definition. But, I will make the attempt, distinguishing in the process between *work* and *job*, and using an even less well-defined concept, *true self*, in making the work/job distinction. After defining a work problem, I present a program I have developed to solve it.

My definition of a work problem is divided into two parts. Part one is the problem: an inability to work as productively, effectively, and unambivalently as one wants. Part two is the source: a significant amount of the inability is due to one's psychology rather than external circumstances.

To apply the definition I separate my work from my job. I define as my work coming up with, developing, and testing hypotheses in various areas of psychology, often with the ultimate aim of developing an explanatory theory. Problems can arise anywhere along the line. Two that particularly interest me are these: difficulty in sitting down and doing the work (forgetting about quality), and difficulty in making progress on a problem even if I am faithfully and consistently sitting down and working. Although both problems are most acute for me during the writing stage, I do not think I have a writing problem. Rather, I have a work problem that happens to be most apparent in writing.

When I teach I sometimes underprepare for class. I consider that a problem, too (and one I want to solve), but not a work problem. I would call it a job problem. If I thought of teaching as my work, as many people do, I would have a work problem plus a job problem. Similarly, I am occasionally underprepared for meetings. For me this

is not a problem at all, let alone a work problem, because I think I can figure things out sufficiently well on the spot. Were I head of a department, however, a higher level of performance would be necessary and lack of preparation would constitute a job problem. Were I to consider administration my work I would have a work problem as well. An activity, like teaching or administration, can be part of my job without being part of my work, and vice versa. The separation I am proposing between work and job implies that the two are logically independent.

How do people determine if they have work? If they have work, how do they decide if they have a work problem? Here the notion of "true self" comes into play. People have a conception, however implicit and unarticulated, of who they "really" are, which I am calling true self and which others may call identity. In my view, work fulfills the true self, whereas a job does not. Thus many people do not have what I call work. A work problem is a problem in doing labor that would fulfill the true self. It occurs when one's behavior is at odds with one's self-concept. (In quite a different sphere, love also fulfills the true self and is prone to similar problems.)

For example, I know a man with a severe work problem; he is an academic who has published almost nothing for the last fifteen years. In high school and college he was extremely energetic: he was an actor/director and very scholarly. He felt then and feels now that he was most himself during that period. He was being true to his nature by being so active and ebullient in both areas. His long-standing problem is a work problem because it is discordant with his felt true nature. He has not mindlessly accepted the values of those around him with respect to publishing; rather, he perceives an inconsistency between his actual day-by-day behavior and the behavior that would reflect who he feels he really is. In this man's case he has past behavior to buttress his feeling that he is really a different sort of person than his current behavior would suggest.

Some people, however, cannot point to a period in their lives in which they were able to act in accord with their true selves. Such people may thus have particular difficulty in trusting their perceptions of their true selves. They impugn their motivation, for example, by thinking, "if it's so hard for me I must not want to do it." Instead of having a work problem—which in comparison is a concrete difficulty that they could do something about—they have an amorphous and pervasive identity problem that they can do nothing about. They feel forced to distrust their perceptions of who they are, because they have no behavioral evidence to back up their perceptions. They feel

confronted by the frightening possibility that they are wrong about their own nature and therefore may be wrong about *anything*. Other people's reactions ("maybe you just aren't cut out to be an X") often exacerbate the problem.

My claim is that people are not wrong about their true selves. A related claim is that to encourage someone to doubt his or her true self is to do them the gravest psychological disservice. Unfortunately, it is not easy to extrapolate from someone's appearances—their words and actions—to their underlying true selves. Until my psychoanalysis began at age 22, for example, no one had ever confirmed my perception of my true self. I saw myself as someone who could potentially think originally and deeply about psychological issues. Being me meant trying to understand mental functioning. But no one else saw me that way. My teachers and friends interpreted my symptoms, such as not going to classes and not studying, incorrectly. They questioned all the components of my self-concept: my motivation, my commitment, my choice of subject matter, and my ability. So did I. How could I have done otherwise? With no alternative hypotheses of how to interpret my behavior, I unwillingly made the same inferences they did, contradicting my self-knowledge.

Only my analyst supported my true self. Only my analyst said, "Your self-knowledge is veridical. You are who you think you are; you want what you think you want." (Naturally, being an analyst, he did not explicitly say this.)

BACKGROUND OF PROGRAM II

In a previous article (Valian, 1977), I have discussed the problems I had in writing my Ph.D. thesis and the techniques I developed to cope successfully with those problems (Program I). I finished my thesis and became first a postdoctoral fellow in Cambridge for two years and then an assistant professor in New York. I began new research and slowly wrote some papers. At the same time I taught courses, supervised many graduate students' research, worked hard on curriculum revision, submitted papers to professional meetings, started discussion groups, wrote grant proposals, reviewed papers for journals. In short, I was very active professionally.

I was so active that I fooled myself. I had cloudy worries, but I did not fully realize that I was not writing enough to guarantee keeping my job or getting another one, that I was starting many

more projects than I was finishing, that I was spending too much time on student supervision. In another economic climate, or at a different school, I would have had the time (though, of course, not necessarily the will) to sort everything out. I was discovering who I was intellectually and professionally, learning how to teach and how to supervise.

But I didn't have the time. I came up for tenure in the spring of my fourth year of teaching and did not get it. Elsewhere I analyze the effects of not getting tenure and its effects on failure in general; here, however, I want to concentrate on the effects of my work problem. I swam in an ocean of self-blame that, although subjectively punishing and objectively uncalled for since I did in fact deserve tenure, had the eventual benefit of pushing me to reevaluate my post-Ph.D. performance. The short-term effect, reinforced by the rejection of two papers, was total paralysis.

I spent the summer immediately following the negative decision (which in the fall and winter would be ratified by successively higher levels of hierarchy) visiting at the university in Cambridge where I had done postdoctoral work, sitting with one of my rejected papers in front of me, unable to begin further data analysis and unable to begin revision. I could not do fifteen minutes a day of work, a technique I had used with my thesis. I could not do even one minute of work. I was immobilized.

There were several differences between the pre-thesis situation and the post-tenure denial situation. With my thesis I had been sure I would succeed: I knew I would get a Ph.D. if I finished the thesis. In the present case I felt sure I would fail: my papers would be rejected. With my thesis I had been able to put thoughts about the end product—how much rewriting it would need, whether it would be published, how it would be received—out of my mind and to concentrate on the intrinsic satisfaction of working. In the present case my work was more intrinsically satisfying than ever, but I could not realistically ignore the end product. I had to find a way of taking the end product and its consequences into account. Program I, as I now refer to it, had been appropriate for a particular set of circumstances. A new set of circumstances required a new program.

Since I believe in solutions as much as I believe in problems, I started a work discussion group that summer with four other academic women. One woman in the group, M, and I started intensively discussing the problems we had in common. With just a few weeks left of the summer, at the end of which I would return to New York, we began a joint work program. At a general level M and I wanted

more control over our lives, especially our work lives. We particularly wanted to finish the many semicompleted projects we had. Some had been dragging on for years.

Five important features characterized Program II in its final form, arrived at after much experimentation and modification: (1) the ally system of having weekly conferences about the previous week's work and the upcoming week; (2) keeping a work log; (3) having a master schedule and weekly schedule; (4) working two hours a day except on unusually heavy days; (5) working on one project at a time. It is important that I emphasize at the outset that we took an experimental approach. M and I tailored the details to fit us. They will thus not necessarily fit everyone else.

Discussing Work with an Ally

M and I suspected that sitting down to work was only part of our problem. In addition, we felt that we accomplished too little during a work session. We had the impression that we sabotaged our work as we were doing it. One obvious example was doing more data analyses than our data justified; another was getting sidetracked by a minor issue.

We decided to spend a week working in the same room at the same time, each on her own project. We each outlined our current project, what had been done, and what needed to be done. Each of us could understand the other's work. Every day we worked for four 25-minute sessions. At the start of each day we told each other what we wanted to get done that day and where we would start in Session 1. After Session 1 we briefly told each other exactly what we had done and commented on each other's use of time. Then we briefly discussed what we would do in Session 2. After Session 4 we had a longer discussion concerning both what we had accomplished that day and what we had learned about how we worked.

What to count as work was seldom a problem. We usually knew whether we considered what we were doing to be work. Work was generally nonmechanical and was generally done alone. Because they were mechanical activities, testing experimental subjects or punching data into a computer did not count as work. Having discussions with collaborators also did not count as work, though sometimes the work I did alone within the context of a collaboration did count as work. Writing or preparing to write was the most frequent work, but

designing an experiment or analyzing data or reading relevant articles also counted as work. If I felt a great deal of conflict about a project, I counted writing about the problems I saw with the project as work.

The second week we worked four sessions a day at the same time, but each in her own study or office. We then spent at least another hour together discussing both the content of the work and our work habits. The third week I went back to New York. M and I now talked once a week on the phone.

Having a work ally served several functions beyond the valuable one of discussing the content of my work with a thoughtful, intelligent, and helpful critic:

1. It forced me to be aware of what I was doing while I was working. I became conscious of my self-sabotaging maneuvers. Sometimes it was not until I got M's comments that realization dawned, sometimes it was as soon as I finished reporting, and sometimes it was while I was in the act.

2. I discovered I was very good at spotting M's ineffective strategies and she mine. We each knew more about how to work than our actual work performance demonstrated. I could see, then, that my difficulties had specific limits. The difficulties were not a formless mass for which there was no available technique.

3. I was not alone. I had an ally. M wanted me to succeed. I was ambivalent about whether I deserved to be successful, but M was unambivalent on my behalf. If I made a mistake, I viewed it as evidence that I should never try to publish a paper, should not have gotten tenure, should not get another job, and should have my Ph.D. revoked. M merely thought I had made a mistake and could fix it.

I use the word *ally* deliberately. I do feel embattled (the world is often hostile and destructive, even if impersonal), and until my attitude toward my mistakes changes I will not be able to engage successfully in the battle alone. Having an ally is both a good strategy to use until my attitude changes and a useful technique to help my attitude change. Seeing that someone else, fully as rational and in possession of as much information as I, does not conclude that I should have my Ph.D. revoked because I have not understood the standard error of estimate helps me question my own, quite different, conclusion, and helps me become willing and able to learn about the standard error of estimate. M and I embarked on Program II together without considering whether we would be effective allies

for each other. As it turned out, we were. The important characteristics of our collaboration were (1) that we both needed help and therefore neither of us was handing out charity, (2) that we did not feel negatively competitive with each other but genuinely wanted each other to succeed and therefore did not wonder about hidden motives in criticism, and (3) that we understood each other's work.

Our meta-collaboration was unique, but I think there are many other arrangements in academia that serve similar functions—for example, the male academic club; the empire of students, research assistants, and equipment that some academics construct; and long-term collaboration. In all three cases there is a structure to support ongoing work. All three serve to keep conflict and ambivalence at bay.

Keeping a Work Log

Every day I wrote down when I began and finished my four sessions. Usually I wrote more than that. The work log was a substitute ally. I wrote my thoughts about the project as a whole and about the phase I was currently working on. If I wrote about the content of the project, I counted the time as work. If I wrote about my feelings, I did not count the time as work.

I never used writing in the work log to evade working. Often it seemed a necessary preliminary to working: I could write about how anxious I was, how depressed I was, how fearful of rejection I was, and then go on to work. Writing about my problems helped to contain them, perhaps by giving them an overt form. I simultaneously acknowledged that part of me indeed felt certain ways—there it was, down on paper, that I utterly hated the article I was writing—and that another part of me wanted to and would write the article. I paid tribute to the part that was in agony without letting it dominate the part that wanted to work.

The log was like a layered photograph of my process of working. In reviewing my entries I discovered that I felt great resistance at transition points and that I hated uncertainty. I explicitly realized that I wrote easily. I found out that some tasks took much less time than I had anticipated and that some took much more. Most important, the log revealed the measurable progress I made every week. The log documented effort and achievement and the cause-effect relation between them. The cumulative record of the log was worthy of pride.

Making a Schedule

M and I realized, while I was still in Cambridge, that it would be difficult to work for two hours a day once classes started. We spent about three hours on each of us, going over what our usual week had to include and what we wanted it to include. We wanted to construct a master weekly schedule that would allow us to do our work and our job, to fulfill household obligations, to spend time with those we loved and liked, and to have purely frivolous time as well. Later we found that we needed to construct a separate weekly schedule for each upcoming week every weekend in order to take into account the particulars of the next week. We also found that we had to revise our schedules to make them more realistic and livable.

The schedule and schedule planning were instructive and fun. We learned, for example, that we had never taken advantage of the control we had over class scheduling to promote a stable work time. When asked when we could attend meetings, we did not exclude our work time. In brief, we learned that we viewed our work time as interruptable and preemptable. We did not design our job and our obligations around our work; we fit our work into leftover spaces. As a result, our first semester's schedule was very awkward.

Our goal was to schedule two hours per day on weekdays and weekends, but we each made reductions—in my case, to one hour per day on weekends. Our responsibilities and other activities permitted us to follow such a schedule but not one with more work. In planning each weekly schedule we considered *everything* we wanted to do or had to do. Our principle was: make friends with reality. M, for example, initially scheduled two hours of work on a day when she taught in the late morning and attended a colloquium in the late afternoon. She then reduced the two hours to one, and finally decided to schedule no work at all for that day. Once she included time for seeing students after class, lunch, and, sometimes, a discussion with the colloquium speaker, she could not reliably sandwich her work in. She decided instead to schedule other job-related activities for that indefinite in-between time period.

There was no point in constructing a schedule we could not live with. There was no point in creating a schedule for someone whose work attitudes were conflict-free, because we, the people for whom the schedule was intended, were not conflict-free. We might wish,

for example, that we were people who never wasted time, but we were people who did sometimes waste time, so we explicitly designed our schedules with that in mind. We could not will away who we were. If we could, we would not have needed a work program. Most time-management formulas presuppose that the problem is managing time, whereas that problem has fairly mechanical solutions. The real problem is figuring out what one can and will do. By treating ourselves as experimental subjects, M and I gradually discovered what kind of schedule we could happily adopt.

An intangible aspect of Program II, embodied in the schedule and ally system, was the vow: my work comes first; my work is *the* important event of the day. The schedule implicitly declared it and the ally explicitly declared it. Scheduled work time could not be missed. I did not allow outside events—unless they were genuine emergencies—to intrude on it. During that time I took no phone calls, saw no one, agreed to no administrative or faculty or student meetings. Inside events—extreme psychological resistance or depression or anxiety—were less controllable. I might oversleep, or fritter away time, or discover I was lacking the materials I needed. In those instances, I would cancel some other activity I had planned so that I could get my two hours of work in.

The most important insight that living the schedule gave me was that I did not feel *entitled* to put my work first, to make my scheduled work time uninterruptable and unpreemptable. I often felt, it's not as if what I will accomplish in these two hours is so important that I can't postpone or cancel my time to accommodate so-and-so. Who do I think I am, the Queen of Sheba, the Cleopatra of psychology? "I'm sorry, Mme. Curie cannot be interrupted at this delicate moment in the history of science." The simple responsibility of consistently considering my work to be valuable and worth two hours per day was an almost intolerable burden.

Two Hours per Day

Where did this magic figure come from? It was not the result of long, reasoned deliberation. I knew I could work two hours but not more on a steady basis; I also knew from my past experience with the fifteen-minute work period that I could accomplish a great deal in two hours. After M and I constructed our schedules, it was obvious

that there was room for no more than two hours and sometimes not even that much.

I can occasionally work more than two hours per day on a single project (usually if there is an external deadline). I can also, for hefty stretches at a time, work a total of four hours per day if I am spending two hours on one project and two hours on another quite different from the first, either in subject matter or in task at hand (e.g., writing versus data analysis).

My own experience with my work is that I need almost daily contact with it. I need it both emotionally and intellectually. Working daily confirms my identity as a systematic thinker and worker. I need tangible evidence. I need a background of daily work from which to reassure myself that I will continue to work, and against which a missed day need not seem like the beginning of the end. Binge working is for me like binge exercising or binge dieting: it inevitably leads to its own destruction and to feeling out of control.

I need almost daily contact intellectually as well: to provide implicit and indirect thinking about the project between work sessions, to allow me to keep the various segments of the project coherently in mind, to encourage my discussion of the project with others, and to give me perspective on the project without losing touch.

My experience is that almost daily contact is more important than time spent per session. I would rather work a half hour per day every day than three and a half hours once a week. I find continuity crucial to finishing a project.

One Project at a Time

To some extent this heading is misleading. I have never worked, in the wider sense of "work," on just one project at a time. M's and my work program did, however, require that our official two hours per day be restricted to one project at a time. We arrived at that decision reluctantly, but the form of our reluctance was a clue. We felt glamorous by having a lot of concurrent projects, and we felt protected and safe by our lack of constant commitment to any one of them. We were women with several lovers.

We constructed a list of all our projects and how far along each one had come. We ordered them, taking into account such considerations as the importance of the project, how quickly it could be completed, how easy it would be to publish the resulting paper, and

whether there was an external deadline. We then began working on the first project. Periodically one project would be interrupted by another, but we tried to arrange the interruptions so that they would occur at natural intermediate stopping points. For example, I might write a first draft of a paper from Project A and send it to colleagues for comment. Then I would begin work on Project B, which might be a revision of a paper, involving new data analyses. In the meantime the paper from A would come back. I would try to get Project B to a natural stopping point, such as finishing the data analyses and noting their consequences, before shifting back to Project A. Generally there was no problem. Interruptions that could not be delayed were usually time limited. For example, I might have to go over a copyedited manuscript, which could not take more than a few days' work, even if I decided to make revisions.

Other people claim that they like having more than one project because they can shift from one to another when they have a stumbling block. Otherwise I lose track and make insufficient progress on both projects. My technique is to shift to another part of the same project. I find interruptions to be costly unless they come at natural stopping points or unless they take no more than a day or two to resolve.

Thanks both to Program II and to my backlog I accomplished a great deal in the first year of the new program. I wrote or revised, sometimes alone and sometimes in collaboration, about eight papers (not all of which were published). I also presented, sometimes alone and sometimes in collaboration, about six talks. Subsequent years were less impressive. First, and most important, I no longer had a backlog. Second, I no longer had a stable university job and hence lost many material and psychological advantages. Third, I began a number of new projects, many of which did not work out. Program II was most effective under a particular set of circumstances. It was not a lifetime solution, any more than Program I had been.

When I realized the limits of Program II, I was at first depressed and discouraged. But I have since relinquished my desire for a lifetime solution, seeing the desire as both unrealistic and unnecessary. The desire is unrealistic because programs must be specific if they are going to work, and their very specificity limits them. The desire is unnecessary because I have *me*. Programs I and II did not drop from the sky. I developed them. The person who developed I and II can develop III.

I have come, then, to two inductive conclusions. First, I will probably always have a work problem, and it will require different solutions

at different points in my life. Second, I will be able to construct those solutions as I need them.

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