

PERCEPTION OF TIME AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS AND RESIDENTS OF A METROPOLITAN COMMUNITY

FREDRICK KOENIG
Tulane University

A sample of college undergraduates and a sample of residents in the city in which the college is located were asked to draw 3 circles representing the past, present, and future. Among the college students, 52% indicated future dominance by drawing the future circle largest, while only 44% of the residents of the city did so. Relatedness was indicated by 54% of the students who drew circles that were touching, overlapping, or concentric, while only 11% of the city residents did so. Of the metropolitan sample, 14% did not respond to the test at all, but all of the college students did.

Keywords: perception of time, college students, residents, metropolitan community.

This study is concerned with the manner in which people from two different social psychological contexts perceive time in relation to their lives. Previous research on time perception has been limited to special populations such as children, college students, or patients. We know very little about time perception among adult members of the community. (One study which is an exception is the survey done on apocalyptical and serial time orientations by Back and Gergen, 1963.) This current study is based on a projective measurement of spatial conception of time called the Circles Test, which was developed by Cottle (1967).

Cottle's respondents were Navy personnel undergoing a special training program. Koenig (1972, 1978) also used the Circles Test in several surveys done on college populations. Both populations had similar characteristics in that they were working toward some future goal, e.g., attending classes, studying to maintain some level of acceptable performances in their courses, needing to prove themselves individually in successive steps of tests of achievement along the way. The college environment would seem to demand a different basis for perceiving time than that normally found in the community as a whole. Bergson (1910) says that, when we anticipate the future, time stops being a stated phenomenon and becomes a process. Fraisse (1963), calling on the Gestalt view of perception, argues that, once we fix our attention, "organization comes into evidence", and stimuli achieve a unity and a continuity. McClelland (1951, p. 486) writes similarly that expression of need for achievement is accompanied by increase of future references in the projections and that "...it is as if the need has served to relate present achievement experiences to future ones, to promote understanding of the pres-

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Correspondence and reprint requests should be addressed to: Fredrick Koenig, Professor of Sociology, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA 70118, USA.

ent in terms of a wider context". The educational process is made up of a series of future goals and subgoals. (It is a form something like I $a^1b^1c^1$, II $a^2b^2c^2$, III $a^3b^3c^3$, and so on.) Time is made up of various markers which indicate change and passing from one to another. In the everyday world these kinds of experiences are less frequent, and the average person is involved in what Kolaja (1969) calls RB or recurrent behavior. This context of cycles of behavior and recurrent events does not provide markers to indicate change, direction, or continuity. In fact the mechanical aspect of recurrence and homogeneity can place them outside of oneself, having an autonomous inertia. A detached attitude toward time often leads to an atomistic, discontinuous, "tomorrow is another day" perception of it.

In comparing the college population with the metropolitan community, it is hypothesized that the response to the Circles Test will indicate: (1) greater future dominance among the college students compared with the residents of the metropolitan community; and (2) greater continuity of time zones among college students than the residents of the metropolitan community.

The hypotheses were tested on the basis of the results of two surveys. One of them was a survey of a random sample of 200 people from the city in which the university is located. Respondents in both groups were given the following instructions: "Think of the past, present, and future as being in the shape of circles. Now arrange these circles in any way you want, that best shows how you feel about the relationship of the past, the present, and the future. You may use circles of different size. When you have finished, label each circle to show which one is the past, which one the present, and which one the future" (Cottle, 1967). The circles were classified on the basis of two criteria. Drawings in which the future circle was larger than the other two circles, present and past, established future dominance. All other drawings were labeled non-future dominant. If any two of the circles touched, overlapped or were contained within another circle, these drawings were classified as continuous. All other drawings were regarded as non-continuous or discrete. Of college respondents, 52% indicated future dominance as compared to 44% of the respondents from the metropolitan community. This difference supports the hypothesis, but not at an acceptable level of significance. Temporal relatedness differed more. Of the students, 54% indicated relatedness, but the number of related responses in the community was only 11% (significant at $p < 0.01$). There was an additional, though unexpected, finding. This investigator has administered the Circles Test to hundreds of college students in classroom demonstrations, experiments, and surveys, and has never failed to get some kind of response. However, in the survey of the general community, 14% of the respondents could not conceptualize time as circles and could not respond to the Circles Test. Some could not make projections in terms of the future because "it is unknown". Most could not explain why they could not respond. While time is an ever-present phenomenon to people such as college students, apparently it may be ignored or repressed by a segment of the general population.

There appears to be a significant contrast in styles of perceiving time between these two groups. Thinking about the future and about the impact of the past and the present on the future seems to be more common to students than to people not in college. This may be a matter of selection, in that persons seeing time as continuous and/or the

future as important will tend to prepare for the future by having goals and subgoals. College attendance, rightly or wrongly, has often been presented as an appropriate activity for people looking to the future. There is also the possibility that the response to time in the college community could be a matter of learning. A student may acquire a special perspective on time from exposure to disciplines such as history, philosophy, geology, or psychology. The relative importance of selection, as opposed to learning, might best be evaluated by studying a cohort or panel during the undergraduate years. Also, researchers need to look for pertinent social-psychological factors in the general population to explain temporal dominance, relatedness, and the ability to respond to the test at all.

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