

PSYCHOLOGICAL TIME AND SOCIOLOGY: A RESEARCH AGENDA

H. WAYNE HOGAN
Cookeville, TN

Psychological time is presently seen as potentially being both an independent and a dependent dimension associated with such sociological and psychological phenomena as social change, environmental design, personal space, esthetics, and color considerations. Several "annotated" hypotheses are offered, with the suggestion that their testing will ultimately demonstrate that the psychological experience of time has many more sociological implications than have heretofore been recognized.

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The phenomenon of psychological time gains in significance as societies become increasingly mechanized and routinized. As Smith (1961) observes: "Time may be relatively so unimportant to a people that their sense of history does not even include knowing one's own age. On the other hand, it may dominate a people's thought to such an extent that the measurement of time becomes a preoccupation...[Particularly for the American] the 'tyranny of the clock'...is a real one, the marking off of small units of time implying the necessity of filling them up with some kind of activity... We [Americans] are forever on time or ahead of time or behind time, and we, more than most peoples, seem to time things" (p. 85).

This heightened sensitivity to time found especially typical of North American societies (cf. deGrazia, 1964; Hall, 1969) makes itself felt in several spheres, but perhaps the two in which it has a particularly influential cultural impact are those of "work/leisure" and "social class", the two sociological realities which have so much to do with the structure and function of the total society.

TIME, WORK/LEISURE, AND SOCIAL CLASS

Time and the work/leisure dimension have thus become nearly synonymous for the more industrialized cultures. Time is for filling and its filling tends generally to take on the character of work, even when it is consciously defined as non-work. Weber (1958) accordingly proposed a causal link between the neoreligious virtues of diligence and thrift in the use of time and the formation and continuance of capitalism as a dominant economic system. Murray (1938) and McClelland (1961) correspondingly demonstrated the development within the capitalism context of a "need for achievement" trait: those individuals with a high achievement need tend to view time as a rapidly decreasing quantity, as something they never have quite enough of; for those with a low achievement need, time is less apt to be as negatively experienced.

In a related vein, consistent social class differences have been found with respect to time perception, with the lower classes and higher classes, respectively,

being present- and future-oriented (cf. Cottle et al., 1969; Lamn et al., 1976; LeShan, 1952; McArthur, 1955). Present-orientation implies a more psychologically restricted, or narrowed, timeframe, while the opposite is suggested by future-orientation. Time also tends to be experienced differently according to one's placement in the class-related "power" hierarchy of age. For youth, the time spectrum is imprisoned in a present that makes tomorrow seem centuries away, a perspective which, among other ends, may serve the latent function of stimulating excessive youthful urgency for accomplishment (alternatively, what some might regard as an excess of youthful zeal may in fact provide the impetus necessary to bring about needed social change not otherwise forthcoming from those whose sense of time counsels more hesitant reflection). It is, then, those of more mature years for whom the admonition to "go slow" is most persuasive. For the older person, the past looms relatively large while both the present and future seem to be made of the fewest and most fleeting of moments (cf. Fraise, 1963; Gilliland & Humphreys, 1943; Israeli, 1932; McGrath & O'Hanlon, 1968; for more structural, macrocultural considerations of temporal orientations, see Cottle, 1976; Kluckhohn, 1949). The respective temporal orientations of youth and older age may, of course, be due as much to cultural norms and restraints as to any sort of psychophysical dynamic inherent in the individual. This point needs further study, for while the effect of the two sources of the individual's temporal orientation may indeed be the same, the means we devise for affecting the sources will almost necessarily be different.

In the Franklinian sense, time, more so than money, is, then, the very stuff of urbanized life. Thus the more that can be known about how the individual experiences time, the more that can be said about how the individual will likely order, reorder, and/or adjust to the environment so as to maximally accommodate his/her temporal needs (cf. Doob, 1971). Ultimately, just as the psychologically subjective sense of time is the product of interacting cultural, social, and psychological forces, how time is individually experienced may in turn have both direct and intervening change implications for such central social/psychological issues as social organization, social change, and personality development and functioning. The latter view of time perception as an independent variable may prove fruitful even though, as Cottle (1976) observes, phrasing the problem this way "is to go against the tradition of psychological studies of time" (p. vii).

Looking specifically at psychological time, it may be seen as subjectively shortened or lengthened according to the type and degree of social organization within which the individual functions. If, for example, the formal structuring of social organizations provides undesirably defined temporal referents (e.g., in prisons and mental hospitals), the affected individuals will likely reduce the consequent temporal ambiguity by breaking time into individually meaningful and manageable chunks (cf. Roth, 1963; Rosengren & DeVault, 1970; Calkins, 1970; Goffman, 1961; Nowotny, 1975). This adaptive response to organizational ambiguity is of course not limited to the passive, defensive case of total institutions. To the contrary, the desire to organize time, and activities through time, is the hallmark of commercial societies everywhere (cf. Jacques, 1970; Goody, 1968; Moore, 1963; Sorokin & Merton, 1937).

TIME, SOCIAL CHANGE, AND ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN

The implications of psychological time for social change should perhaps be self-evident. Yet at least one analyst has concluded that “the concept of time...is perhaps one of the most neglected subjects of change” (Edwards, 1969, p. 472). No doubt this neglect is largely due to the traditional reluctance of sociology to be associated with such “non-substantive” subjects as “time” and “time perception”.¹ Nevertheless, the larger sociological concern of social change cannot be logically or analytically separated from the phenomenon of time. Time is change and “without change, without process, we could not...know of time” (Maclver, 1962, p. 46).

Change may therefore occur either slowly or more rapidly, depending on, among other factors, the differential sociocultural emphasis given the “speeding”, “futureness” quality of time. If time is culturally perceived as “passing” too slowly, underdeveloped nations, for example, may be less tolerant of their lot vis-à-vis that of more affluent societies, and hence be more likely to precipitate national and international disruptions in response to their frustrations. On the other hand, if time “goes quickly by, minority groups within a given society, for example, may remain more tolerant of long-standing inequities vis-à-vis majority groups, and hence be less likely to precipitate domestic upheaval as a means of foreshortening the unfolding of history. In sum, whether time is experienced as undesirably “fast” or as undesirably “slow”, the energies of entire societies may thus be associated with either accelerated or decelerated efforts toward cultural innovation and experimentation, with results that may bode either “good” or “ill” for all concerned (cf. Hulett, 1944; Toffler, 1970; Wallis, 1970).

Another sociological implication of time’s psychological dimension has to do with environmental design. Whether environmental objects/events experienced in the normal course of living are satisfying may largely have to do with whether they are desirably complex, that is, whether the given phenomena provide individuals with the “appropriate” number/kind/quality of experiential units to be perceptually/cognitively processed (cf. Altman, 1975; Berlyne, 1958; Broady, 1966; Bryson & Driver, 1969; Festinger et al., 1950; Mercer, 1975; Mehrabian, 1976; Michelson, 1970; Proshansky et al., 1970). In turn, whether “competing” environmental elements provide “too much”, “too little”, or “just the right amount” of processing potential will largely determine whether the amount of time cognitively associated with one or the other element is experienced as being of shorter, longer, or equal duration relative to its comparison element (Fraisse, 1963; Frankenhaeuser, 1959; Hogan, 1975; Ornstein, 1970; Priestly, 1968).

If, for example, the urban planner expects his/her living and working spaces and facilities to be maximally used and benefited from, design considerations should thus ensure that “good time” (i.e., time which is just “fast” or “slow” enough to meet the

¹For all the apparent sociological and social psychological relevance of time as a cognitive/perceptual variable, it has traditionally received little notice by the authors of major texts in the social sciences. A recent convenience sampling, for example, of 43 American sociology and social psychology texts published between 1896 and 1972 revealed that the indexes of fully 84% (36 texts) contained no reference at all to “time” or “time”-related terms. Only five texts indexed “time” as much as once, while one volume made two and another volume made 16 references to the phenomenon of “time”. It is notable that this last text dealt with “time” solely as a calendar rather than a psychological unit of analysis.

needs of as many users as possible) is associated with the appropriate number and complexity of environmental elements. Such considerations as these appear particularly relevant to the educational system, where relatively undifferentiated efforts are made to serve individuals who differ, sometimes markedly, with respect to such time-related sociological dimensions as age, sex, race, and social class. Thus, should the student's sense of time and the time-defined qualities of the school environment be "out of sync", intellectual and/or physical flight will likely be the ultimate result. The consequences of this sort of response to the experience of time should be obvious to cultures which place a high value on having populations that are constructively involved in defining as well as implementing social policy. Equally significant considerations apply to such total institutions as prisons and hospitals, all being contexts within which the individual's sensitization to the passage of time is structurally aggravated.

SOME OUTRAGEOUS HYPOTHESES²

In addition to relationships that have already been suggested, other, perhaps less obvious, links between time perception and the individual's physical environment and social characteristics will now be expressed as "annotated" hypotheses. As these hypotheses are spelled out, the reader should preface each one with the proposition that people who experientially process sensory stimuli at a relatively rapid rate³ will feel that time passes undesirably slowly:

- (a) When social interaction takes place in a physical context which does not match the individual's personal space preferences (Ashcraft & Schefflen, 1976; Hall, 1966); the consequences of time/space incongruity can conceivably range from a generalized sense of personal discomfort to more specifically debilitating psychological stresses and fractures.
- (b) When work and leisure surroundings are "less" rather than "more" fulsomely decorated with art and other esthetic artifacts; this could conceivably affect satisfaction with both the domestic and commercial, e.g., occupational, spheres of one's life.
- (c) When the tempo and/or complexity demands of one's work are "too slow" and/or "too simple", thus adversely affecting job satisfaction and work productivity.
- (d) When the commuting distance between one's residence and work place is too great; one possible implication is the increased likelihood of automobile accidents because of driver inattentiveness and increased travel speed in response to the boredom of what the "fast time" individual experiences as temporal elongation.

²Expressing wisdom considerably beyond his era, the sociologist Robert L. Lynd (1939, p. 203) persuasively argued several years ago for the value of the "outrageous hypothesis", saying that "If social science is to be free to be science, it must have the courage to fight for its freedom from the dragging undertow of a culture preoccupied with short-run statements of long-run problems." We are similarly reminded by van den Berghe's (1975) quote by Stanislaw Andreski, the English sociologist-critic of the social sciences, that "Unfettered thought is the most essential of research methods."

³Eysenck (1970) and others use this characterization as a summary definition of the psychological dimension of extraversion. It is presently suggested that the individual's time processing style may precede rather than follow from his or her extraversive/introverted response to stimulus input. Definitely demonstrating the correctness of one or the other of these possible relationships will be difficult but surely not impossible. For the recent development of a proposed theoretical resolution of this issue, see Hogan (in press).

- (e) When reading materials are relatively lacking in pictorial, graphic illustrations; one implication of this situation relates to educational texts and journals that may be underused because of their sensory association with “slow”, boring time.
- (f) When viewing black-and-white rather than color television; two possible implications of this time/environment imbalance relate to choices of advertising strategies and tactics and to the more academic-like instructional potential of television – in both cases people tend generally to be most receptive to the persuasion power of perceptually “comfortable” messages (cf. Weiss, 1969).
- (g) When the colors of clothing are “cool”, e.g., blue or green (cf. Smets, 1969; Wilson, 1966), and their style overly conservative; time perception and environmental mismatches here can have fairly obvious implications for clothing advertising and sales efforts and may further affect the development of interpersonal relationships in that people who are associated with “slow time” clothing may socially be given rather short shrift.
- (h) When enrolled in weight-loss programs that provide the dieting individuals with too little involvement; possible consequences in this case relate both to issues of health and to self-esteem and interpersonal attractiveness, all of which are factors potentially having substantially negative effects on society as a whole (cf. Zimbardo, 1977).

However “outrageous” they may at first appear, these and any number of related hypotheses can, with interdisciplinary focus and a minimum of methodological ingenuity, be empirically tested. It is anticipated that the testing of such hypotheses will ultimately serve to cross-culturally reinforce in more specific detail the present thesis that the psychological experience of time has many more sociological implications than have heretofore been recognized. By failing to give due consideration to the psychological nature of time, the sociologist’s insights into social structure and social change – phenomena which ultimately are the *raison d’être* for the entire sociological enterprise – will necessarily be rendered invalid.

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