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The Psychology of COVID Time

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“We inhabit time as fish live in a river”

~

CARLO ROVELLI

THE TIME ILLUSION

The assumptions we make about time do not stand up to scrutiny. The theoretical physicist Carlo Rovelli in his book “*The Order Of Time*” puts it like this:

“Reality is often very different than it seems. The Earth appears to be flat but is in fact spherical. The sun seems to revolve in the sky when it is really we who are spinning...We conventionally think of time as something simple and fundamental that flows uniformly, independently from everything else, from the past to the future measured by clocks and watches. In the course of time, the events of the universe succeed each other in an orderly way: pasts, presents, futures. The past is fixed, the future open... and yet all of this has turned out to be false ¹”.

In his theory of general relativity, Einstein proposed that time is not constant but is in fact relative and flexible and capable of being bent! As he put it “For us convinced physicists, the distinction between past, present and future is an illusion, although a persistent one”. Notwithstanding this, however, we can gain some useful practical insights into the nature and use of time if we differentiate between “clock time” and “psychological time”.

Clock time and psychological time

In the moment of our talking, envious time has ebb'd away.
Seize the present; trust tomorrow e'en as little as you may².

~

Horace

The ancient Greeks had terms for two distinct time paradigms. Chronos time was the term for linear, chronological, sequential “clock” time. As we have seen above, this type of quantitative time is much more complex than it appears. Living life on the basis of Chronos time means that the nature and rhythm of our lives are dictated by the clock.

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For many in modern society, this is their norm and the stressful consequences have spawned a thriving time management industry much of which is focused on “saving” time and using it efficiently. Interestingly, the 7th most watched talk on TED, with over 40 million views, to date, is Tim Urban’s “*Inside the Mind of a Procrastinator*”³.

Kairos time, on the other hand, is a different paradigm that is qualitative in nature and refers to “quality time” or ‘appropriate time’. This type of time is something to be experienced and can be exponential. The essence of Kairos time is how much value you get out of it rather than how much Chronos time you put into it. Horace’s term “*Carpe Diem*” or “seize the day” partly captures the difference by advising us to focus on living our lives today as fully as possible.

In her book “*Ten Thoughts About Time*” the Swedish physicist, Bodil Jonsson, also distinguishes between clock time, now measured by atomic periodicity, and lived time or personal time. According to Jonsson:

“We tend to want our personal time to last but we keep chasing clock-time and try to use it effectively. We chop it into tiny bits to get flexibility. Then we buy gadgets to help us save time. Most of these gadgets are counter-productive if it is plenty of lived time we are really looking for”⁴.

COVID time

“It’s a strange thing, but when you are dreading something, and would give anything to slow down time, it has disoblging habit of speeding up”.

~

J.K. Rowling

Many people feel that their perception of time has changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. There seems to be less demarcation between a day and a week, and weekdays and weekends seem the same. The days seem to blend together; estimating elapsed time is proving difficult; some people feel that they are caught in a time warp. A UK research, survey published this month, suggests that social and physical distancing measures put in place during the pandemic significantly impacted people’s perception of how quickly or slowly time passed compared to their pre-lockdown perceptions⁵. More than 80% percent of participants experienced distortions in the passage of time during lockdown compared to pre-lockdown, with about half experiencing time passing more quickly and half more slowly. Those who were older and those less satisfied with their current levels of social interaction were more likely to experience slower passage of time over the course of a day or week.

Slower passage of time over the course of a day also occurred with higher stress and a lower subjective workload.

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The Variable Nature of Psychological Time

“How time flies when one has fun”

~

Samuel Beckett

Time moves slowly, but passes quickly.

~

Alice Walker

It is not surprising that the changed nature of our world during the pandemic is associated with changing perceptions of time. It is well established that psychological time is influenced by our activities and by our emotions. Research has established that our perception of time is affected by emotion, cognitive capacity, workload, drugs and alcohol and mental illness. Laboratory studies have shown that when people are presented with various images and asked to estimate how many seconds have passed, frightening stimuli are rated as lasting longer than neutral stimuli even though the clock time is the same.

The distortions seen in COVID time may be understood, at least partially as a conflict between what are known as retrospective and prospective time perceptions⁶. Retrospective time perception involves the recollection of past events and an estimation of how long they lasted. Prospective time involves judging the duration of an event at the present moment. A person can experience both modes on different occasions. If one spends the day checking the clock, time seems to move at a slower and more boring pace. According to research by psychologist Dan Zakat, this happens because of prospective time processing. The more attention one pays to thinking about the passage of time the longer it seems. With retrospective time, the more events one remembers happening during a certain period, the longer that interval feels⁷. One explanation for time appearing to have moved faster during lockdown for some people is that the absence of memorable events that differentiate one day from the next makes it feel as if time has flown by.

Your Time Perspectives

“No man ever steps in the same river twice,
For it's not the same river and he is not the same man”

~

Heraclitus

Given the idiosyncratic distortions in time perception that are occurring during the pandemic, it is worth reflecting on, and understanding how, you habitually process time – your “time perspectives”. Developed by the psychologist Philip Zimbardo, time perspectives are an individual's often unconscious ways of relating to the psychological concepts of past, present and future^{8 9}. Your time perspective reflects your attitudes,

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beliefs and values related to time. For example, do you spend more time thinking about the past, present or the future? When you think about the past, the present or the future, are your thoughts positive or negative, happy or sad, hopeful or fearful?

Zimbardo identified six time perspectives, and whereas we can use all of them, we are likely to have unconscious preferences and to habitually use some more than others, https://www.ted.com/talks/philip_zimbardo_the_psychology_of_time.

You can determine your habitual use of five of the six time perspectives by taking the Zimbardo Time Perspective Inventory (ZTPI) which is available free here:

<https://www.thetimeparadox.com/surveys/>.

The five time perspectives (TP) measured by the ZTPI are as follows:

1. **Present Hedonistic:** The individual's behaviour is determined largely by their current physical needs and emotions, by strong stimuli in the environment and by social interaction. There is little concern for the consequences of actions. The motto is "If it feels good, do it". While this TP is associated with pleasure and enjoyment, its overuse can also result in risky behaviour, giving in to temptations, accidents, addictions and academic and career failure.
2. **Present Fatalistic:** This is characterised by feelings apathy, hopelessness and helplessness and the belief that one has little control over events. The motto here is: "It doesn't matter what I do, since whatever will be, will be".
3. **Past Positive:** This captures positive attitudes towards the past characterised by warm, pleasurable, sentimental and often nostalgic feelings. The past may actually have been positive but it may also have been difficult. This TP describes the current attitude and feelings about the past. The mottos here are: "It gives me pleasure to think about my past" or "What doesn't kill me makes me stronger".
4. **Past negative:** This TP again addresses current attitudes to and feelings about events that occurred in your past, but here the attitudes are negative. This can be due to real past negative experiences or current negative constructions of past experiences. The motto here is: "I often think about what I should have done differently in my life" or "Painful past experiences keep replaying in my mind".
5. **Future:** This is an orientation to the future and in particular to future rewards. Immediate gratification is often forgone because the rewards in the future will be greater. The motto here is: "When I want to achieve something, I set goals and consider specific means for achieving those goals". While this TP has been found to be associated with success and well-being its overuse may prevent an individual enjoying life in the present and benefiting from past positive attributions.

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Time paradoxes

Zimbardo lists three important “time paradoxes” in relation to the time perspectives:

Paradox 1

Time is one of the most powerful influences on our thoughts, feelings, and actions, yet we are usually totally unaware of the effect of time in our lives.

Paradox 2

Each specific attitude toward time—or time perspective—is associated with numerous benefits, yet in excess each is associated with even greater costs.

Paradox 3

Individual attitudes toward time are learned through personal experience, yet collectively attitudes toward time influence national destinies.

What does this mean for you?

Once you have completed the ZPTI, you will be more aware of your TP profile and you can reflect on the relative impact of each time perspective and your overall profile on you. TP has been found to be related to educational achievement, health, sleep and dreaming patterns and the choice of romantic partners. It influences food choices, health choices, marital harmony, desire for social contact, and perceived time pressure. It also predicts a range of behaviours including risky driving, delinquency, gambling and sexual behaviours and substance use and misuse.

According to Zimbardo¹⁰, it is important to understand that we can change the balance of our time perspectives. The optimal combination is:

- ~ Always low on Past Negative TP
- ~ Always low on Present Fatalism TP
- ~ High on Past Positive TP to give you roots; to be connected to your roots and family and to be grounded
- ~ Moderate on Present Hedonistic TP to give you energy to explore spaces, self and sensuality
- ~ Moderately High on Future TP to give you wings to soar to new destinations and challenges

Knowing and using your TP profile can assist you, not only in understanding others and living a fruitful and meaningful life, but in navigating your way through a pandemic.

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