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The Experience of Time in the Very Young

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Dimensions of Time

We seem to have reached a point (in time) where we live not only clocktime, but some of us talk as though we were clocks, says Troutner (1974). For the most part, all of us in our culture, whether we buy it or sell it, save it or waste it, spend, bide or kill it, seem to assume that time is an objective, measurable flow of “befores” and “afters” interspersed with the transient “now.” For the most part we have forgotten the meaning of authentic existential time.

One dimension of time, then, is its objectivity. To introduce the concept of authentic time introduces another dimension of time; that of subjectivity. This concept was explored by Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time*. It was his perception that humans are temporal creatures who in effect exist as time, within time. For Heidegger, time in the “authentic mode” is experiential time; that is, a process of living within a pure present. This, in effect, is living simultaneously the three temporal moments of past, present, and future. In this conjoint relationship of time spaces, the past is construed not as simply the “past,” nor is the future simply “not yet,” but in essence both come together and are integrated in the time present. To live in the dimension of subjective time a man can choose “to become himself by appropriation of his own future in the process of having been.” (Troutner, 1974, p. 168).

The Child’s Subjective Time

Try to explain to the four- or five-year-old a “tomorrow,” or a “yesterday,” or even to wait until “later.” For the child time is “now.” Time is not repeating itself for the child who skips joyfully up and down the stairs ten or twenty times. It is a pleasure that perseveres in a present. For the grownup this same stairway is a constructural contrivance connecting downstairs to upstairs. The adult ascends for the purpose of having something to do elsewhere. For the adult even to consider the prospect of running up and down a flight of stairs would be childish. As adults, we seem to reach a time when we no longer need the

stairway. But the child sent upstairs to fetch some object may still dally on the steps after a quarter of an hour, taken up with the wonder of an imaginary mountain climb, or sliding down a bumpity-bump slide. And the original intention for ascending the stairs becomes yet another “present” that must wait to happen, but in its own time. The time on the stairway for an adult is taken for granted; the time on the stairway for the child is subjectively used. The child will not allow a transient minute; all minutes are used.

There is a fundamental difference in my own time experience compared to that of my five-year-old daughter. It is a classic contrast in time experience; that of objective versus subjective time. The morning ritual of getting her to daycare consists of exhorting her to rush, to hurry, to get dressed (right now), to get breakfast done with, to get into the van, and to get to the playschool. In other words, I force her to act in a behavior oriented toward a future time space-my time space insofar as I won't be late for work. She is learning to live the logistics of my life: I am certainly not attuned to her natural ability to live in a primordial present-a present that does not know of a future or a past. What does she “know” as a young and fresh human being but to dawdle in the snow, greet the alley cat, pick up a twig, contemplate the possibilities of a discarded gum wrapper, or make a wish upon a morning star.

Time in Learning

In the beginning very young children are people knowing nothing but their own experience. The young pre-schooler who comes into possession of a chunk of oozy, sticky clay cares not that the teacher has some preplanned educational objective in mind. For the teacher the clay exercise could represent a time measured experience that is only part of a grand design to educate today's child toward competent adulthood. The child, however, always seems bent on frustrating these well-intentioned goals and is probably soon lost in the momentary, tactile pleasure of soft clay oozing and slithering between the fingers. The chances are overwhelmingly in the child's favor-that should any final shape ever emerge it will resemble nothing of the teacher's preconceived objectives. For the child the clay experience is subjective time well spent. For the teacher it could be objectively structured time gone awry.

The child soon gets assimilated into an objective time environment which will shortcircuit the opportunity to continue to dwell in the subjective world. Intimate, direct interaction is superseded by “outside” authorities and extended, further still, to indirectly related outside authorities. In the educational mode, we socialize the child-to-become-adult to live an abbreviated life. Within educational institutions, the child is propelled forward willy-nilly, taught to organize what must be done now for tomorrow. This tomorrow is not a tomorrow in the sense of an extended time “in-synch” with a life that is to be lived, but rather a tomorrow that will show what was done the day before. Reciting time. Discussion time. Music time. Show and tell. Write a story. Make a speech. Read a chapter. Solve the equation. Time in school is a daily flow of temporal demands, a rehearsal of the workingworld of the adult. Punch in at eight; punch out at three. Is the pace of life synchronized with the pace of learning? There is a failure in our objective time culture to recognize the temporal reality of the young. A young child's experience of time differs from that of an adult. To the young child, time does not flow. He stands, as it were, outside it, remaining at the same tender age seemingly forever.

Child's Time is Now

To the child, then, all time seems significant. A distinction between wasted time or no time holds no real meaning. Unlike the March Hare of Alice's Underground, the young have no compulsion to hurl themselves into uncertain futures. They live with now. And it is a now manifested in a very positive way. Children are "educated" to a sense of timewasting. They are educated to the language and linguistics of time, and then either implicitly or explicitly they begin to sense the adult's world of standard times.

In talking with preschoolers attending daycare, I attempted to slip into subjective time and view the children's interpretations of what is good or bad time, early or late time, wasting time, enough time, or no time. What became most evident was that the very young experience time in a qualitative way. They are immersed in fluid time and appear to have no real sense of the quantitative demarcations of time. For example, a measure of "no time" for little Geoffrey is somewhat incomprehensible. For him "no time" means "I have to go to work. I wouldn't have to listen to her anymore." If, on the other hand, Geoffrey was given "all the time" that he wanted, what would he do? "I would stay here for a little longer... but I have to go." And so he does, but not with some time objective in mind—he simply wanders away soon to become immersed in some other timeless activity in the busy, subjective world of play.

Some of the children do, however, have some sense of quantitative time, but in a detached way. For Cara, being late is something that adults are afflicted with. Cara has a sense of late "because my mommy doesn't get up that quick" and for some incomprehensible reason she is made to "eat fast!" For Brea, late is a father bent on accelerating time: "My daddy makes me hurry all the time... hurry Brea... hurry Brea." And when I reflect upon the comments of this last child, who is my very own, and sense her frustration with my time, I find myself wondering about the processes involved in nurturing a child's becoming in time, of pushing them beyond now, and I question the wisdom of the efforts to try and draw the young child into adult objective time. It's as if there is a real disorder in my adult, time objectified environment which involves the child. Living in the same environment, the child is subjected to that disorder.

Child's Time in Motion: Time has Tempo and Speed

Time for children is activity-time to run, to jump, to play, and to explore. For the child, motion in time is seemingly a succession of extemporaneous events that just happen. There are no boundaries.

Often, when in the midst of my measured time space, I find myself being prodded into unintentional directions by my five-year-old. Exuberant suggestions are made to go swimming, to take a walk to the park, or to play chase-about-the-house. And once a decision is made (perhaps an excursion to the pool), I find myself ordering time to pack, to get things together, and finally determining how long we will be gone so as not to miss "supper-time." To my daughter the prospect of going swimming becomes an event suspended somewhere out there in time, to be preceded by a multitude of experiential occurrences which seem to unfold in a succession of significant moments. While getting a swim suit, there is the discovery of an old dress that "now" must be tried on. A reminder to get moving may get her as far as a doll suddenly discovered in the hall and which "now" needs to be put to bed. Often, exasperated, I choose to wait in the car leaving her mother to assemble, organize, and direct the child out the door—only to find myself after five minutes (of waiting and wasting time) having to search out the yard to find a very busy

child poking, prodding, examining the wonders of a fallen pine cone. The prospect of going swimming still exists, but in time. My daughter and I each march to very different drummers!

I find it hard to delineate time “tempo” as the four- or five-year-old might sense it. As adults we experience time tempo in the cadence of living which for us can become fast or slow. Any one minute can become accelerated or stand suspended, depending upon the necessity of that minute. The very young child is oblivious of a changing pace of minutes. The frustrated adult creates, as Barsch puts it, the molasses child surrounded by impatience, the dawdling child preoccupied with trivia, the dallying child six paces behind life, with no sense of urgency to catch up.

Children test time in their very personal, intimate way, expressing their own subjective tempo. The child flows through successions of activities none of which are measured by any minutes. How can a child sense the adult’s time tempo when for them there is only a “now” unrelated to any contingencies of a before or an after? How does a child learn “fast” or “slow?” Is time only a matter of the big and little hands of a clock? What is the difference between telling time and knowing time? How does a child come to understand that time is in him and he is in time?

Time Has Duration

Another aspect of our time measured lives is time duration. Events, or happenings, have a beginning and an end. In our structured world, school “time tables” dictate that learning is carved out in measured blocks. We have an hour for social studies and another for science, lunch will be one hour plus ten more minutes, and the duration of registration should be five minutes. In the adult world all of us are conscious of “how long” no matter what the event. We have become so ingrained with this sense of time duration that to exceed time limits may place us in stressful conflict. For example, what is the duration of a handshake—three seconds, maybe four? In the adult world the duration of this social grace is tacitly agreed upon by those in greeting. To go beyond limits may lead to feelings of embarrassment. A young child, however, may choose to make a game of the handshake, caring little for the social significance; instead, carrying on for an unlimited time depending upon the joy and pleasure derived from the activity. The child operates within this activity without our pre-determined beginnings and ends; without our socially structured basis of thought. Consequently, since there is no time limit, there is no real time duration in the world of the very young child.

There is one aspect of duration and time with which the child is confronted. This, of course, is Nature’s own day-night and seasonal cycle. They are faced with time lengths or durations bracketed by sleep. Sleep is sometimes resented, sometimes even dreaded, by children. There is a finality about it, and the required sleep duration is made even more exasperating by the fact that it is beyond their control and comprehension. For Cory, even though he is tired, night-time is the worst part of his day because he sleeps. Another child dreads naptime because “you have to sleep, and it’s long. I hate sleeping.” This same child, when asked if there was anyone not required to sleep, replied, “Teacher.” One little person, asked how he knew it was time to sleep, replied, “By just turning off the lights.” However, after a moment’s reflection he thought perhaps that dimming the lights meant it was time to blow out the candles on a birthday cake! Perhaps for the very young, time has no real duration—life is infinite, only

inconvenienced by sleep.

Responsibility and Time

What an enviable state of being it is, that apparent minute to minute existence of a small child who lives in a space of seeming timelessness, void of responsibilities for any past or future. Without a structured basis of thought, there can be no “time” for a child. What “is” must be in a timeless state, or almost timeless. What is the growing awareness of time like for the older infant? Time for this child, says Langeveld, is “being hungry,” “Isn’t daddy home yet?” becoming impatient. These matters get at what time is like in the world of the child. But a child not always remaining as such is required to move beyond this seeming timelessness. Without some objectivity of time, we cannot think, plan, organize, or solve problems. For thought is the product of many timetables-chronological and psychological. There is an essence of being that is time measured. An integral part of the process of becoming is to assume some responsibility for time. In other words, the child is obliged to become accustomed to regularities. Indeed, the child learns to divide up his time, to be able to plan for activities. He should be able to make an appointment, because the child must also learn to become dependable. Dependability is a mark of one’s trustworthiness. Time, therefore, in the sense of the clock-clocktime-makes social relations or social arrangements with others possible. Such aspects as continuity, contemporaneity, future, past time, are all functional, as opposed to incidental, dimensions of the lifeworld. Consequently, in such an orientation the child must be taught to read the clock-yet not just to be able to read the clock but to live with it as well. The child must confront the experience of human lifeworlds in the technological structures of a world which says: “Yes, but you should try not to become a slave of the clock.” This means children should learn a piece of lifeworld freedom, which they can take with them when entering the world of work and technology. And they should then be able to retort: “That is all fine and dandy but if I don’t catch my ten-to-eight bus then I’ll be late at school or at work. So I have to be able to count on it that the bus-driver gets to work in time as well.” And in this way, we have involved the children directly in the question of social structures. There is then a responsibility to socialize the young to grow into a world of such a time reality, hopefully without dulling the subjective sense of time inherent within the young.

Within the transition from the very “now” oriented child to a very time-synchronized adult, the sense of subjectivity within time-authentic time-is altered. In the early years of school, children begin to permit time to pass somewhat unattended. They begin to anticipate a “later” at the expense of “now.” Time slowly becomes non-authentic in that children begin to measure their experiences with clocks and calendars rather than remaining outside of time. And, thus, they grow conscious of living within time. Monday becomes a Monday, and not just some undelineated experience of subjective events. Mark Twain depicts this non-authentic time sense in his portrayal of Tom Sawyer in the classic *Adventures of Tom Sawyer*: “Monday morning found Tom Sawyer miserable. Monday morning always found him so because it began another week’s slow suffering in school. He generally began that day wishing he had had no intervening holiday, it made going into captivity and fetters again so much more odious.” (Twain, p. 42).

The essence of school time is such that children become conditioned to the point where their existence is difficult to dissociate from the objectified time elements of Monday through Friday. Time within this measured space is to be tolerated. For myself, in reflecting back upon my public school years, I seem to conjure up only the illusions of relatively carefree days filled with good friends and experiences.

However, these illusions soon dissipated when I talked with some grade three children about their “time.” The children of this age group seem to sense time much as I do now. For example, little Carrie is “down” on Mondays because “it’s a long time to come back to Saturday and Sunday. It’s the beginning.” Symptoms of the Monday blues? It appears also that the little grade threes and I are of one mind on a short day, being Friday, “because the next day is Saturday.” They, I, and everyone, can do as we subjectively well please-but only until Sunday night!

By the time children reach early adolescence they have become assimilated into objective time tables. For the grade sixes with whom I spoke, school time was a routine. “Well, when you’re in school, and... when you haven’t got your subject done or something, and you’re just sitting there and (teacher) is looking at you and... you wish you could hurry the time up... when in gym or something then the time goes faster. I guess it’s because we’re not paying attention to the time... you know.”

Children soon become taken up (educated) in the non-authentic time mode. They are conscious of the minutes and the hours passing by. They use the measures of objective time, just as we adults do, to gauge the nearness of anticipated events. And yet, when the anticipated event arrives, there is the added sense of uneasiness that it will soon end, to be replaced once again by routine.

The pace of our work-a-day world is accelerating to the point of blurring subjective realities. Each succeeding generation is being pushed through life with an ever-increasing sense of urgency. Our socializing system appears to be trying to accommodate this transformation by making education more interesting, more subjective. It is difficult to say how curricula might best suit children’s time sense, assuming that this is even considered a basic problem. Then again, maybe it is not so much to develop curricula in terms of subjective time, but rather a question of encouraging the educator to experience the phenomenological world of children. Imagine the possibilities of both teacher and pupil, together in time and of time, working through the process of becoming.

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