Future-Time Perspective in Adolescence: The Present of Things Future Revisited

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Several theorists have suggested that the observed changes in adolescent future-time perspective are due to the emergence of formal-operations reasoning [e.g., T. J. Cottle and S. Klineberg (1974), The Present of Things Future, Free Press—Macmillan, New York; P. Fraisse (1963), The Psychology of Time, Harper & Row, New York; H. Hartmann (1958), Ego Psychology and the Problem of Adaptation, International Universities Press, New York; J. Piaget (1968), Six Psychological Studies, Vintage Book, New York]. Using a cross-sectional sample of 60 Caucasian adolescents, the present study was designed to examine this hypostatized interrelation. Data obtained through individual interviews provide only limited support for a cognitive hypothesis. As predicted, older students showed greater future extension and the more cognitively advanced students proved better able to project a set of events into the distant future. However, neither the older, nor the more cognitively advanced, students projected a greater number or a more consistent set of future events than did their respective counterparts. Moreover, analysis of the types of events projected obtained significance only for grade level. The findings are discussed from a contextualist perspective, within which consideration is given to the influence of experiential and life-span status factors.

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INTRODUCTION

Researchers have frequently observed an increased consciousness of time and temporal phenomena during adolescence (e.g., Butler, 1968; Eson and Greenfield, 1962; Lewin, 1946; Neugarten, 1968; Wallace, 1956). Most typically, this change in temporal perspective is characterized by an orientational shift from the immediacy of the present, and the lure of the past, to greater concern for future roles and experience (Cottle, 1976; Cottle and Klineberg, 1974; Moerk, 1974; Moerk and Becker, 1971; Montemayer and Eisen, 1977). Douvan and Adelson (1966), for example, found that with increasing age, adolescents (e.g., 14–18 years) produced more specific description of their futures. Monks (1968) observed significant age differences in a sample of Dutch adolescents 14–21 years old: Older adolescents showed greater complexity and differentiation of temporal perspective than did the younger ones. Similar patterns have been observed in the vocational development literature as well (e.g., Ginzberg, 1972; Havinghurst, 1964; Lehman and Witty, 1931; Lessing, 1968).

The pattern and direction of observed sex differences in future-time perspective, however, is more variable. Several authors report greater differentiation and extension for males than for females (Cottle and Klineberg, 1974; Cottle and Pleck, 1969; Moerk and Becker, 1971; Slater, 1970), while others report greater extension and realism (i.e., planfulness) for females than for males (e.g., Moerk, 1974; Verstraaten, 1980), and still others report no significant sex differences in any dimension of temporal perspective (Gorman and Wessman, 1977).

Taken together, these findings suggest that adolescents, as compared to younger children: (1) demonstrate greater depth and extension of temporal perspective (Kastenbaum, 1961, 1966; Verstraaten, 1980, Wallace, 1956); (2) project a more complex, differentiated set of future expectations (Bortner & Hultsch, 1972; Douvan and Adelson, 1966; Moerk and Becker, 1971) and; (3) describe future aspirations with greater planfulness, organization, and realism (Lens and Gailly, 1980; Moerk, 1974; Verstraaten, 1980). And each of these aspects of adolescent temporal perspective appears to be mutable, although not predictably so, by exogenous (SES, academic performance) as well as endogenous (sex, ethnicity, psychopathology) factors (Barndt and Johnson, 1955; Cottle, 1974; Cottle and Howard, 1969; Davids, 1969; Douvan and Adelson, 1966; Farnham-Diggory, 1966; Khoury and Thurmond, 1978; LeShan, 1952; Lessing, 1968; Mehta et al., 1972; Shannon, 1975).

Repeated observation of these age-related shifts has generated much theoretical speculation concerning the genesis of adolescent time perspective (Erikson, 1957, 1964; Freud, 1958; Hartmann, 1958; Inhelder and Piaget, 1958). Erikson (1964, 1968), for example, suggested that such changes are