Time is not up: Temporal complexity of older Americans’ lives

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Abstract. The clock-dominated American discourse of time contributes to creating an image of the elderly as useless people who sit idly and wait to die. This article challenges such negative views of old age and illustrates the temporal complexity of older Americans’ lives. It discusses various ways they cope with the tyranny of the clock and the dialectic relationships among the past, the present, and the future, as well as their meanings in old age. My examination reveals three major points. First, clock time is not as objective as is generally assumed but is imbued with tensions and contradictions. Second, the dominance of clock time does not eliminate other forms of time (e.g., cyclical, pendular, static), and older Americans live in multiple temporalities. Third, the elderly are active players with time, not only shaped by time, but also shaping time. The ethnographic data for this article derive from my long-term fieldwork at a senior center from 1987 to the present.

Keywords: American culture, Memories, Negative stereotypes, Old Age, Time

Introduction

The concept of time shapes human experience and influences our perception of reality. The clock-dominated discourse of time, for instance, has a major impact on the American view of old age. With its uni-directional, irreversible flow, clock time affirms future-orientedness, but it bestows little future on older Americans whose time is running out and gives little credit to their past achievements that may entitle the elderly elsewhere to prestige and privileges. Being measured with exactness, clock time transforms time into a commodity and strips older people of their worth, because their time is no longer salable. In addition, the linear conception of time generates the idea of life as “the progression . . . from birth to death” (Pollock, 1971, p. 441) and of the elderly as people who are near its end, death. Such views of the elderly as useless people in the limbo between life and death (e.g., Hazan, 1980; Skord, 1989, p. 131) are widespread in American society. For instance, after an octogenarian friend of mine visited my college, one of my roommates uttered, “He has outlived his usefulness. He would be happier dead.” The other roommate added, “I would rather die before I became like him.” Even a 5-year-old boy is tainted by the prevailing view of old age. While playing together at a family picnic, a great grandson of one of my informants asked, “Great Grandma, are you dying?”
This article challenges the simple causal links between clock time and negative views of old age and demonstrates the temporal complexity of older Americans’ lives. Starting with how they keep busy, it shows that older Americans are not passive observers of the flow of time, but active players with time, being shaped by time and shaping time at the same time. The article also reveals (1) contradictions in the clock-based model of time; (2) the dialectic relationships among the past, the present, and the future; (3) various meanings of the past, the present, and the future in old age; and (4) the fact that despite the dominance of clock time older Americans live in the world of multiple temporalities (e.g., linear, cyclical, pendular, static). Ethnographic data for this article come from my fieldwork at a senior center in a small town in upstate New York. I conducted an initial 18-month-long participant-observation research in 1987–1988 and have continued occasional follow-up studies up to the present.¹

Keeping busy

Even though negative stereotypes may not accurately depict older Americans’ lives, the clock-dominated American discourse of time has strong possibilities to marginalize the elderly. How do older Americans cope with this problem? One commonly assumed strategy is to live in the past. It is believed that lacking both present and future potential, older people escape to a private haven of the past and love reminiscence.

Living one day at a time provides another strategy. Its focus on the present contributes not only to making the elderly’s current problems more manageable by limiting their temporal scope, but also to sheltering them from a future that is shadowed by illness and death. Many Senior Center participants are adherents of this strategy.² Among them is Florence, aged 97. When one of her friends congratulated her on her good health to say, “In three years, you will be a centenarian and receive a birthday card from the President of the United States,” she replied, “I don’t think that far ahead. I take one day at a time.”

Though older Americans’ past may be unacknowledged and their future may be bleak, as I will discuss later, both past and future play a vital role in making their lives meaningful as well as functional. Hence, living in the past is not merely an escape from present predicaments. Likewise, taking one day at a time is not simply to avoid current problems and uncertainties of the future. Besides these two, keeping busy provides older Americans with the utmost strategy to cope with the temporal dilemma in their lives.

Many Americans think retirement promises a “sudden surfeit of time” (Savishinsky, 2000, p. 116) and finally frees them from the tight grip of the