

A LINE ON LIFE

10/30/94

Past, Present or Future? *

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

Everyone has asked themselves, "Who am I?" "Where am I?" and "Where am I going?" Each of these questions has a different **time perspective**. Even though we live in the present, we might be oriented toward any time frame – past, present or future. This time orientation can greatly influence our lives.

Orientation to the **past** provides us with an autobiographical sense of self – who we are. Memories of those who spawned us give us a sense of tradition, commitment, responsibility and even guilt.

Future orientation enables us to plan, to set goals and achieve them, and to have anxiety about these goals being thwarted.

The **present** is dichotomous – "*things either are or they are not.*" The present is where we play, fear, and savor the joys of living. At birth, we know only the present. As we grow, our society can train us to emphasize any time perspective.

Individualistic cultures – like ours with its Protestant ethic – tends to emphasize future orientation, while **collectivist** cultures are more likely to stress a past or present orientation. For example, Japan combines its traditional focus on the past with an obsession for the future. This gives it a very prosperous economy, but Japanese workers have the least amount of vacation time of any country in the world.

As a contrast, the youth of the Woodstock Era emphasized an **expanded present**. The present situation is king, and one's sense of tradition, standards and morality is irrelevant. More recently, both American and Japanese youth are being influenced by the present-oriented video games and MTV messages of "**Just do it!**", causing a conflict between generations. Because they have different time orientations, the adults in both cultures have a hard time understanding the younger generations.

Philip G. Zimbardo of Stanford University hypnotized some students to produce either future orientation or an expanded present orientation. In contrast to their future-oriented peers, college students in the expanded present become more *child-like*. They are more emotional and more impulsive. They think less and react more, and they are less efficient in meeting deadlines for tasks.

Zimbardo found more differences among other students in both high school and college, whose time orientations were determined by administering the "*Stanford Time Perspective Inventory*."

- **Time obligation.** Present-oriented students are more likely to be late or not show up for appointments and have "*incomplete*" for course grades. Future oriented students started their assignments about seven days sooner than those did in the expanded present. They maintained that difference throughout the semester. As expected, present-oriented students tended to complete their projects at the last possible moment.
- **Romantic relationships.** Future-oriented students prefer more predictable mates, rather than looking for an intense passionate relationship. Present-oriented people tend to look for more passionate, physical and spontaneous relationships, even those with many conflicts – with little thought about commitment.
- **Risk-taking and health.** Present-oriented students take all sorts of risks. They are more likely to be addicted to beer, hard liquor, marijuana, tobacco other drugs, anything – except work. They tend to eat in binges and fast to lose weight. They seek thrills – reckless driving, racing, drunken

driving and getting into fights. If they don't have cars, they will take risks on bikes or skateboards. They are more likely to watch MTV and "XXX-rated" movies or videos. They tend to engage in sexual activities of all kinds – with little effort to protect against pregnancy or STDs. The opposite is true for their future-oriented peers.

**In developing a time perspective,
the key idea seems to be "*balance*."**

People who hold more extreme time-oriented views are more intolerant of those who have contrasting time orientations. A healthy alternative is to develop a **balance** between past, present and future orientations. We can cherish the past, plan for the future and still enjoy the present.

* Adapted from Philip G. Zimbardo's talk, "Whose Time Is It? I Think I Know: Research on Time Perspectives," presented at the American Psychological Association Convention in Los Angeles, August 13, 1994.