

Not everyone can live in the moment: Variations in time perspective



RESEARCH

‘The passage of time: Variations in subjective perceptions of time’

by Anna Sircova, Fons J. R. van de Vijver, Evgeny Osin, Dr. Taciano L. Milfont (2014)

Published in *SAGE Open*, 1-12.

Background

Across cultures, people have major differences in their sense of time.

Westerners typically like to do one thing at a time, relying on schedules and punctuality to organise their time.

Latin Americans and Mediterraneans tend to do several tasks at once, focusing on the completion of tasks rather than sticking to a schedule.

Most Western countries value rewards that come with perseverance and thrift, while East Asians tend to value tradition and fulfilment of social obligations.

Professor Taciano Milfont, from the Centre for Applied Cross-cultural Research, part of Victoria University of Wellington, and collaborators from around the world measured people’s view of time in 24 countries to see how the perspectives might differ across cultures.

Main research findings

Five ways of thinking about time were consistently found across cultures:

1. Time as positive past experiences: Focus on sentimental and nostalgic memories of the past.
2. Time as negative past experiences: Focus on experiences of trauma, stress, or regret.
3. Time as living in the moment: Focus on enjoying high intensity activities with little concern for behaviour.
4. Time as positive future: Focus on goal setting and working toward these goals at the expense of present enjoyment.
5. Time as negative future: Focus on an attitude of hopelessness and helplessness about the future.

Time perspective can be influenced by other factors like economic development, happiness, or social issues. For example, during times of economic crises, people tend to shift from a positive future focus, e.g. saving and investing, toward a more pragmatic routine, living each day as it comes.

Relevance of findings to New Zealand

Creating political campaigns, environmental conservation agendas, or marketing advertisements that appeal to all five time orientations may positively impact the success of a given project.

Financial and psychological counsellors should understand the variations in time perspectives to better serve their clients.

Businessmen with international contacts should understand that cultures may be distinct in their management and expectations of time, but that individuals within these cultures may vary on their perspective of time. Understanding the time perspective of international colleagues may be vital for successfully completing negotiations.