

PRACTICAL PERCEPTION

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Does "Time Fly" Because Memory Lags?

I have noticed for the past several years that the time between going to bed one evening and going to bed the next has been getting shorter and shorter. I see no evidence that my bedtimes are systematically changing, so perhaps my observation reflects the changes in time perception often associated with aging. (That is, the expression "time flies" seems to become more and more true as we age.)

As I write this entry, I am 69 years old, and have been retired from my former position as a university faculty member and administrator for almost three years. Even prior to retirement, my subjective days were steadily shortening, but that effect has without question increased. Instead of long days in which many different activities demanded attention and much could be accomplished, it now feels as if I have far too many activities. No matter my efforts, I can no longer fit everything I wish into my admittedly (physically) *less*-cluttered time.

I readily recall how my experience with time was the exact opposite when I was a child and an adolescent. Time often used to drag (and drag and drag....). Each day seemed endless. Why such a dramatic change? And why has this change become even clearer since retirement?

One theory of how we estimate or experience time is tied to the cognitive processing of the events of our lives. According to research on this topic, we evaluate that a specific duration is longer if the interval has been filled with stimuli, even simple stimuli such as short beeps or other brief markers. This is supposedly because we somehow incorporate the processing of such markers into our estimates of duration. The greater the number of events processed, the longer the apparent duration. Empty time – and/or less processing – seems like a shorter interval.

It occurs to me that perhaps the "time flies faster as we age" phenomenon can be related in part to the bases for perceiving time throughout our lives. In particular, I have many fewer day-to-day responsibilities since retirement. And, those activities that do occupy my days tend to be more similar to activities I've done before. Essentially, less cognitive demand may result in less overall processing. Less processing might lead to the perception that a shorter interval has passed. The time from bedtime-to-bedtime is thus experienced as a shorter duration than when one was younger – when everything was new and/or there was so much new to learn. My current "tasks" too may involve fewer "new" demands. Reading books, solving puzzles, playing bridge (and even working on this web site) employ skills that have already had a lot of use.

We could carry this notion further. Although I hope that I am not myself yet affected, consider the situation of an elderly adult with some form of dementia. Less of each surrounding event gets full processing. Less of that processing is stored. (Even without a dramatic change in cognitive

functioning, processed details that were formerly retained may be more quickly lost.) Could such a model of time perception explain why I used to be bothered when I allowed a few extra days between calls to my stepmother, but she seldom seemed to notice. Perhaps it was merely politeness, but she often responded to my apologies with a spontaneous: "You don't have to call me *everyday!*").

Of course, one shortcoming in this model would be the need to account for the apparently opposite change – if indeed it is a *change*. What is the basis for many a parent's forlorn complaint: "You never call; you never write; you never visit anymore." Are other mechanisms for time perception involved or are such remarks more reflective of long-term personality differences?

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