The Time Paradox

By Philip Zimbardo

Philip Zimbardo is a professor of Psychology at Stanford University and has written a number of books which have popularised some key psychological concepts. In his book ‘The Time Paradox,’ Zimbardo identifies that our perception of time can greatly effect:

- our physical and psychological well being
- our ability to socialise
- our ability to achieve/contribute
- our ability to be happy

As Zimbardo sees it, our perceptions of time can be divided into the following categories:

**The Past:**

- Past-negative
- Past-positive

**The Present:**

- Present-fatalism
- Present-hedonism

**The Future:**

- Future
- Transcendentalist

**The Past:**

The past does not exist anywhere as an objective factual experience. It only exists as subjective experience inside our minds. Police will tell you that you could have 1 accident, 4 witnesses and 5 different stories. What is important is how we remember the past. What people believe happened in their past influences their present thoughts, feelings and behaviour more than when it actually happened.

**Past-negative:**

When we think things like ‘I wished I’d said …’ or ‘If only I’d …’ we are replaying painful past experiences over in our mind. These negative attitudes might be due to actual negative events or to a current negative reconstruction of the event.

Zimbardo shows a correlation between people who score high in the Past-negative index and the following attributes:

- Increased aggression and anxiety
- Reduced conscientiousness
- Less likely to exercise
- Exhibit lower self control
- Less mental stability and less energy

Obviously the lower you score on the Past-negative the better.
Past-positive:
Past-positive people identified strongly with statements like ‘It gives me pleasure to think about my past’ and ‘I get nostalgic about my childhood.’ We often associate Past-positive with older relatives who reminisce about how things were better back in the days when …

Zimbardo shows a correlation between people who score high in the Past-positive index and the following attributes:

- Reduced aggression and anxiety
- Increased conscientiousness
- More likely to exercise
- Exhibit greater self control
- More mental stability and more energy

Scoring high on the Past-positive index is largely a good thing as long as it is tempered with other perspectives. Having a high score on Past-positive and Present-fatalist can lead to problems.

The Present:
Zimbardo notes …

‘A baby is a little present-oriented hedonist who wants nothing more than to gain pleasure and avoid pain. Our lives start with a natural focus on the present, but some people continue to focus on present biological stimulation into adulthood, responding only to events happening in their immediate physical and social environment.’

Present-fatalism:
The Present-fatalist believes that their life is controlled by forces greater than them and they have no control over their life’s path, nothing they can do can change their current situation. Luck and fate play a larger role than effort and forethought.

Zimbardo shows a correlation between people who score high in the Present-fatalism index and the following attributes:

- Increased aggression, anxiety and depression
- Reduced conscientiousness
- Lower energy
- Lower self esteem
- Exhibit lower self control

Obviously the lower you score on the Present-fatalism the better … for this life perhaps …
**Present-hedonistic:**
Present-hedonistic people avoid all things that cause pain and seek all things that create pleasure. There is a focus on immediate self gratification as reflected in statements like ‘I try to live my life as fully as possible, one day at a time’ and ‘Ideally, I would live each day as if it were my last.’ While these might seem like romantic sentiments in a future orientated corporate world there are some drawbacks associated with scoring an unbalanced high score in this index.

Zimbardo shows a correlation between people who score high in the Past-positive index and the following attributes:
- Increased aggression, anxiety and depression
- More happy
- Less emotionally stable
- Higher energy
- Exhibit greater self control

**Present-holistic:**
Zimbardo has not developed a measure for this in his inventory. To be fair it would be difficult. Perhaps the people who would score highest in a Present-holistic index would be people who have mastered the art of meditation or who find themselves in a ‘flow’ state on regular occasions.

When we meditate, when we are in flow, we lose track of time and self and learn to be in the moment without regret or hope, without memories of the past and without thoughts of the future. This takes practice and is hard to quantify. For more information try reading ‘Flow – The Psychology of Optimal Human Experience by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.

**The Future:**
While Present orientated people find it easy to become distracted by sex, drugs and rock-n-roll, future orientated people consider work a source of pleasure. Delayed gratification means a larger reward tomorrow. Future orientated people find them selves thinking about what they have yet to do and their goals. These thoughts stimulate the activities and decisions of today. The western business world is a future orientated world.

Zimbardo shows a correlation between people who score high in the Future index and the following attributes:
- Reduced aggression and depression
- Increased energy and conscientiousness
- Increased impulsiveness
- Increased self control
- Higher dependence on rewards

Scoring too high on this index or having an unbalanced score on the Future index can lead to poor relationships, increased stress and a less time in life for the important things!
The Transcendental:
The Transcendental-future starts when the body dies and continues to infinity. People who score high in this index spend time thinking about divine judgement, reunion with loved ones, eternal life, achieving oneness with nature, reincarnation and the end of pain and suffering. According to the authors there are benefits and drawbacks to an unbalanced high score in the Transcendental index.

Tactics to Increase Your Score:

Below are some tactics to increase the more desirable aspects of your ZPTI profile.

Increasing you Past-positive index:
- At the end of each day spend 5 minutes thinking about 3 things that you were proud of, grateful for or happy with in the day
- Surround yourself at home and at work with photos of past happy times
- Think of someone who is important to you who is still alive. Write a 300 word testimonial about them and then read it out to them
- Organise and get involved in family traditions. Christmas get togethers, birthday get togethers, family holiday spots, Mothers/Fathers Day
- Tape an oral history of your family. Ask you family members to prepare their favourite family stories and record them telling it
- Call and old friend out of the blue
- Take a trip down memory lane. Visit your old school, listen to music you loved when you were younger, play a sport you haven’t played in years, eat something you once loved but haven’t had for a while
- Start a diary and re-read it occasionally. Even look though your old work diary

Becoming more Present orientated:
- Take a mystery flight
- Practice meditation, yoga, a musical instrument, sport skill
- Go see a comedian or improvisation show
- Practice telling jokes
- Schedule in time to do whatever comes up on the day
- Take your watch off
- Enjoy alcohol responsibly
- Buy a pet
- Get a massage
- Go to a spa
- Go to an amusement park
- Listen to live music
- Play with a child
- Learn something new
- Hang around with hedonistic friends
- Fly a kite, blow bubbles, climb a tree
- Dance like no ones watching, sing like no ones listening and love like you never going to get hurt
Becoming more Future orientated:

- Set some goals for tomorrow, next week, next year and chart your progress
- Wear a watch
- Write an important future date on the back of your hand
- Practice mental rehearsal or visualisation
- Imagine it is your funeral and write down what you would most like people to say about you and what you will leave as a legacy
- Say no to alcohol because it’s a ‘school night’
- Say no to other temptations
- Get a diary and use it
- Get a diary for home
- Make commitments to do things for people and then write those commitments into your diary.

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