

Promising Futures: Mediating the Early Childhood Experience of Time

MARC BRIOD

For an analysis of the experience of time, one can point neither to an organ of perception, like the eye, nor to a physical continuum, like the length of light... There is no immediate point of departure for a scientific analysis of time. (Ornstein, 1969, p. 17)

We speak of a person's "sense of time." But what is that sense? If there is no immediate point of departure for a scientific analysis, how can the experience be grasped at all? Because of its relative imperviousness to scientific scrutiny, temporal experience has long been the subject of philosophical investigation. For example, the writings of French philosopher, Henri Bergson (1960), became fashionable because of his romantic view that time reflects our creative participation in the evolution of the cosmos. He called the thrust of this evolution "l'elan vitale" (the vital impetus), and he considered it a metaphysical force that can be intuited through the undifferentiated awareness of temporal duration.

Empirical research on temporal thinking in children was later attempted by Jean Piaget (1969), who argued against Bergson's view of time as the intuited flow of inner duration. His investigation rested largely upon the use of a single laboratory apparatus for eliciting children's verbal responses to the sequence and duration of a controlled and staged physical occurrence (flowing water). He focussed mainly upon the chil-

dren's conceptions of seriation and elapsed time, and was especially keen on the children's ways of describing and analyzing their own concepts. Piaget's study was important because it purported to demonstrate that children do not intuit time, as Bergson had believed, or sense it in the manner of Kant's forms of sensibility (Kant, 1929). Rather, he argued, children construct time through increasingly formal mental operations that result in schemas of thought about the sequence and durations of objective events.

Reuven Feuerstein, a student of Piaget and Israeli psychologist, developed a series of "mediating instruments" for teaching slow learners during early adolescence how to strengthen their capacities for disciplined thinking. One such instrument, on temporal relations, is designed to help students form time concepts with greater clarity. This instrument emphasizes the Piagetian notions of sequence, duration, and simultaneity. Feuerstein, like Piaget, proceeded from a rational structuralist assumption that the experience of time is reduceable to homogeneous, interchangeable, and quantifiable sequences and durations (Feuerstein, 1980). Sociologist Georges Gurvitch was also influenced by Piaget, but concluded that Piaget "did not achieve an adequate grasp of the multiple manifestations of time" (Gurvitch, 1964, p. 19). His own study, while not about children, revealed time as a shared social phenomenon. He provided a broader conceptual framework for exploring the personal and social aspects of temporal experience. For Gurvitch, the social experience of time is discontinuous, erratic, cyclical, delayed, or enduring, not the homogeneous or quantifiable experience implied by the presence of clocks and calendars.

European phenomenologists, among them Husserl (1964), Minkowski (1970), Merleau-

Ponty (1962), and Heidegger (1962), formulated suggestive accounts of "lived time," but rarely focussed upon children's experience. Their approach differed from that of Bergson and Kant, since they relied on descriptive and interpretive accounts rather than metaphysical or transcendental principles. They also differed from Piaget, because they did not confine their investigations to the study of mental operations. They shared with psychoanalytic researchers an interest in how the condition of the whole person shapes an awareness of time that is constitutive of fantasies, expectations, dreams, memories, and other "subjective" experiences.

Piaget has sometimes been criticized for his dismissal of certain types of responses by the children he interviewed (Mathews, 1980). But his disarmingly simple method of talking with them about their own thoughts and experiences has held up well with his critics. About ten years ago I began inviting my university students (mostly parents or teachers) to keep written accounts of their daily conversations with children. The accumulation of their reported anecdotes has become a rich empirical source for reflecting upon ways that adults can mediate children's temporal experience.

BECOMING AT HOME IN THE WORLD

In the course of our daily living we lend form and structure to time. During childhood we began to learn ways to manage our days by means of clocks and calendars. Though it was somewhat free running at birth, our childhood time gradually became synchronized with the schedules of others, so that as adults we can act in concert with many different people under a publically evolved system of minutes, weeks, and years. This acquired capacity is perhaps the most fundamental sign that our time has become fully domesticated. Whereas we were born temporally "free," now we are party to the collective arrangements through which we work and sustain ourselves. We have compromised our infantile impulse to act from moment to moment, and joined our lives to a clock-driven social order. We have domesticated our time through time-management "skills," so that our impulses yield to social purposes and plans that are regulated and coordinated by the instrumentality of the

clock.

But there is also a "subjective" ground of our temporality. Our very being is constitutive of time, which moves in and through us. We entered the world as bundles of pulsating energy. As adults we remain rooted in our bodily senses, existing as raptured presences to the world. Our sensorium is transfixed by its own play of attention, expectation, and memory. And all is in temporal flux: our attentiveness, the bodily ground of our attentiveness, and the world itself, whose meanings emerge through our bodily attunement to its horizons.

How do young children learn to make sense of their time? What draws them into reflection and interplay with the temporal experiences of others? The child's emerging awareness of time is a primordial way of becoming at home in the world. (Vandenberg, 1971) Children develop rich and subtle sensibilities about time from their immediate life-worlds, taking their proximal cues from parents, siblings, friends, and others with whom they interact. It is through these social engagements that they become aware of being relaxed or hurried, late or early, of waiting, preparing, remembering, anticipating, promising, and so forth.

TEMPORAL INTERPLAY

Children sometimes "play" with the temporal qualities of their own social encounters. Under relaxed conditions they may generate rhythmic interplay with trusted others. If they are fortunate enough to inhabit a home that supports their efforts to become autonomous and to attempt new initiatives, they may begin to try out variations in the timing of their social interactions. The mother of a four-year-old boy reports that her son is a tease:

Rick and I were playing this afternoon, bouncing from legos to GI Joe to puzzles. "I'm going to do something, Mom." I didn't answer, thinking that he'd fill me in on any necessary details. After about thirty seconds, he directed me, "Mom, you're supposed to say 'What are you going to do, Ricky!'" "Oh," I mumbled incompetently, "what are you going to do?" "You'll see."

Rick is offering his mother a tantalizing non-glimpse into their immediate shared future. With just two words he impishly startles his mother out of her half-attentiveness, into a delighted anticipation of what the next unpredictable moment may or may not bring.

When children go away to school, their separation from home is temporal as well as spatial. More so than in the home, schools operate according to a publically regulated system of clock-time about which the young child understands little. Even the most dependable parent may be unable to shield a child from exposure to new and unsettling uncertainties that surround each

school day. Four-year-old Geoffrey is the last child to be picked up at school every day:

On the Monday after the Sunday that daylight savings time ended and standard time returned, darkness arrived by six, instead of seven. When darkness arrived and his mother didn't, Geoff panicked. No explanation would console him and, as Marnie (his teacher) held and rocked him, he cried over and over, "She won't come. She's forgotten me!"

Geoff's straightforward reliance on natural

Dana Spurlock, pen and ink, 1992



cues of light and darkness results in a false reading of his mother's nonappearance. Away from the comforts of routine home life, he finds himself in a disorienting school environment with temporal vagaries for which he is quite unprepared. Teachers and parents have an obligation to avoid this level of crisis with young children by preparing them for anticipated changes in the temporal environment. Reassurances in advance of such changes can help to ward off the unexpected flood of terror that Geoff simply had to endure. Learning to navigate in a world of clocks and calendars is definitely a form of "affective education."

SEEKING OWNERSHIP OF TIME

Children are victims of this sort of adult inattention to temporal changes more often than parents and teachers care to admit. So it is not surprising that they may seize upon adult promises as pointers to a future they can count on, commitments to a time over which they can claim ownership and control:

Anne's father promised to take her to the park tomorrow. As soon as he came home the next afternoon she asked, "Is this tomorrow?" He had forgotten about the park promise, and he jokingly replied, "No, this is today." But Anne became upset and reminded him that he had said they could go to the park tomorrow.

Anne's father, half in jest, is relying on one of the many paradoxes in our language about time ("today" cannot be "tomorrow") to get himself off the hook of having to take his daughter to the park. But she is not fooled and stands her ground. Having been through numerous similar encounters, many other parents of preschoolers learn to be cautious about tossing off carelessly made promises.

Mark has taught me to make promises only when I intend to keep them. I rarely "give in" with an okay on some activity that is to take place "later," or "tomorrow." This promise is confusing

and may pacify the moment, but truly compounds the negative reaction when the promise is not kept.

Under the watchful eye of her son, this mother has apparently undergone some vivid lessons about promise-making as a commitment to his immediate future. Preschool teachers, as well, often find themselves under the continual scrutiny of their youngsters:

Kenny walks over to me and says, "Miss Williams, will you play this (memory) game with me?" I answer, "Sure." As we sit down together, I hear crying and tell Kenny that I have to go see about Gerald. "Will you come back?" "Yes. You get the cards ready and I'll be back." When I return a few minutes later, Kenny has all the cards lying face down on the table. He says, "You can be first." I lift a card and he points to another one, saying, "Here, try this card." I turn it over and it's a match. Then he turns over a card and matches it. He says, "Now it's your turn." I pick up a card and again he says, "Try this card." I turn it and it doesn't match. He laughs and claps. "I tricked you! I tricked you."

One might point here to Kevin's ability to take turns, demonstrating his capacity to wait while others ponder their moves. Or one might call attention to his way of lulling his teacher into wrong moves, thereby introducing novelty and surprise into a routine game. But this teacher notices, instead, that Kevin attempts to bind her to her own promise to play with him.

Kenny seemed anxious that I might not follow through on my promise to play with him. And, indeed, my mind kept wandering from the game as I continued to scan the kindergarten room to watch the play of the other children. His solution to my weak commitment was to tell me the answers. After it was evident I would play, he relaxed and enjoyed the game.

By playfully binding his teacher to her casual

promise, Kenny is able to gain some share of control over their way of being together.

RECIPROCAL PROMISES

Making a promise can be a way of constituting intersubjective meaning. Lived horizons merge under reciprocal commitments to the same shared future. In the examples given, it may seem that the promises are not reciprocal, that the adults do all the serious promising. But this is often not the case. If an adult offers a tentative or conditional promise, that offer becomes a commitment only when the child enters into common resolve with the adult.

A whining child who begs his mother for a candybar at the supermarket suddenly turns quiet when she offers to provide ice cream for dessert later on at home. The youngster's change from querulousness to complicity signals his acceptance of mother's offer. Only at that point can it be said that a promise has been consummated between them. The child's part of the promise is fulfilled when he turns obedient in response to his mother's offer. He has, in effect, agreed to be a "good boy" now in exchange for the promised dessert later, whereas mother's obligation to the promise remains to be fulfilled at a more distant time. If later she forgets about the dessert, then he will likely remind her in exasperated and righteous tones. And if he resumes his begging for candy in the supermarket, mother will no doubt be quick to point out that their promise is in jeopardy.

Any promise made can also be broken. After settling down, the child in the supermarket may reverse himself and decide that he wants candy now rather than ice cream later. Then the fuss will resume. Or mother, for her part, may decide for health or financial reasons not to follow through on the ice cream offer, preferring instead to steel herself against the righteous indignation of her child. But the various ways of enacting or dismissing promises are just so many intersubjective posturings towards the lived future. Every promise that is made and kept, or made and broken, becomes a lived opportunity for deepening one's intersubjective experience of the future.

LITTLE PROMISES

It is only the "little" promises that seem to interest the young child. Children probably cannot become party to a "big" adult promise in any meaningful sense. With each promise reciprocated, the child merges his or her own awareness with the intent of a promising adult, taking stock of the future, joining immediate self-interest with someone else, and thereby entering into a form of simple resolve that joins remembered promises to expected results. The child's past and future become clarified horizons of a truly intersubjective sense of time. And time itself becomes a field of presence that widens in proportion to the temporal scope of the promise made. The child's past (a previously made promise) becomes linked to his or her own future (a yet-to-be-fulfilled promise) in a way that fleshes out the early experience of social time. But none of this is possible without the mediation of a thoughtful adult who is attentive to the child's every overture and response, and is willing to reflect upon the implications of each little reciprocal promise made.

A LEARNED SENSE OF TIME

I have tried to show that the young child's learned awareness of time and the future is not so much a cognitive or mental "conception" (as Piaget puts it) as it is a "sense" that grows out of vital intersubjective experiences such as reciprocal promise-making and other forms of social interaction. Piaget's early study of the child's conception of time (Piaget, 1969) was based upon his theoretical notion that children's thinking about time develops along the same lines as their thinking about other experiences. But Bergson, Gurvitch, Kant, Husserl, and other philosophers have disputed his assumption that the experience of time is like other experiences, or that thinking about temporal experience is our only way of understanding time.

If the child's sense of time emerges from intersubjective experiences with adults, then adults who mediate and extend those early experiences can influence children's developing awareness of the lived future, their feeling of ownership about that future, and ultimately, their way of becoming at home in a temporal

world. Learning about time and the future is far more than a cognitive exercise in learning how to tell time, read clocks, or decipher calendars. Clock-time would be useless to children if we adults did not use it as a means to synchronize our live with each other. Only because adults seem to make "promises" to clocks and calendars (by committing themselves to act a appointed times) do children discover the significance and utility of clock-time for their lived membership in the human community.

REFERENCES

- Bergson, H. (1960). *Time and free will*. New York: Harper and Brothers.
- Feuerstein, R. (1980). *Instrumental enrichment: An intervention program for cognitive modifiability*. Baltimore: University Park Press.
- Gurvitch, G. (1964). *The spectrum of social time*. Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel.
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time*. London: SCM Press.
- Husserl, E. (1964). *The phenomenology of internal time-consciousness*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Kant, I. (1929). *Critique of pure reason*. London: Macmillan.
- Mathews, G. (1980). *Philosophy and the young child*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1964). The child's relations with others. In *The primacy of perception*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Minkowski, E. (1970). *Lived Time*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Ornstein, R. (1969). *On the experience of time*. New York: Penguin.
- Piaget, J. (1969). *The child's conception of time*. New York: Ballantine.
- Vandenberg, D. (1971). *Being and education*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Marc Briod, Ph.D., teaches in the School of Education and Human Services, Oakland University, Rochester, Michigan.