# THE WINDOW, THE RIVER, AND THE NOVEL: EXAMINING ADOLESCENTS' CONCEPTIONS OF THE PAST, THE PRESENT, AND THE FUTURE

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ABSTRACT

Time perspective refers to thoughts and attitudes toward the past, the present, and the future and may underlie adolescents' decisions and behaviors about school and work. To develop a greater understanding of the topic we used focus group methodology to examine how adolescents conceptualized the past, the present, and the future. Nineteen adolescents aged 13 to 17 participated in six focus groups. Results from qualitative analyses suggested several patterns in adolescents' conceptualizations of the past, the present, and the future including absolute and fluid definitions, relations among temporal dimensions, and affective qualities. Further, responses were similar between genders, and included unsolicited mention of the relationship between socioeconomic status and time perspective. Findings are discussed in light of extant literature and directions are proposed for research on adolescent time perspective.

Time perspective is a cognitive-motivational concept that refers to thoughts and attitudes toward the past, the present, and the future. Time perspective has been discussed as a factor that may foster positive developmental outcomes such as educational attainment (Phalet, Andriessen, & Lens, 2004) and may function as a powerful explanatory

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aspect of positive and negative behaviors such as studying and risky driving in college students (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). Even though early discussion of time perspective included the mention of distinct temporal dimensions, such as the past, the present, and the future (Lewin, 1939, 1942) and more recent research has described its multidimensional qualities (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999), extant research has focused primarily on the future temporal dimension (Nurmi, 1991).

Studies have shown that positive attitudes about the future predict academic outcomes in low-income children (Wyman, Cowen, Work, & Kerley, 1993), as well as academic achievement in general adolescent populations (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Mello, in press), and more recently in academically talented adolescents (Mello & Worrell, 2006). Even further, recent research has shown that females report more positive attitudes about the future than do males (Mello, 2008). Although time perspective has been identified as a useful topic for investigation in adolescence, there are still serious limitations in our knowledge base on this construct. Thus, we used focus group methodology (Morgan, 1997) to solicit adolescents' thoughts and attitudes toward the past, the present, and the future.

*Time Perspective*

*Conceptualization.* Time perspective has been defined in terms of an orientation, intensity, and attitude toward temporal dimensions, such as the past, the present, and the future. Lewin (1939, 1942) proposed that time perspective was an important element of human behavior and suggested that the way people thought about each temporal dimension contributed to their behavior. More recently, Zimbardo and colleagues (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999; Zimbardo, Keough, & Boyd, 1997) have discussed how individual variation in time perspective is a powerful predictor of positive and negative behaviors. Particularly, future orientation has been linked to hours studying for school, whereas present orientation has predicted risky driving. The research conducted by Zimbardo and colleagues has expanded our knowledge of this topic, but has focused exclusively on college-aged individuals.

*Adolescence.* Adolescence is a particularly relevant developmental period to investigate time perspective given developmental-psychological phenomena. The acquisition of advanced cognitive abilities is a trademark of this stage and is thought to include abstract thinking such as considering the hypothetical (Keating, 1990). In discussing the development of cognitive abilities, Piaget (1955) remarked that the conceptualization of time was an indicator of cognitive capacity. Further, Erikson's (1968) notion of identity formation, another hallmark

of adolescence, included temporal qualities with the process of forming an identity involving the integration of past, present, and future selves.

Research provides some support for the study of time perspective in adolescence. In an early study of 9th grade, 10th grade, and college sophomores, variation in future ideas was observed by grade level, with older participants reporting more existential events such as the anticipation of change in their personality in the future compared to younger participants (Greene, 1986). Seginer (1992) reported that 9th and 12th graders indicated a similar number of expressed hopes and fears regarding the future. Most recently, in a study with academically talented adolescents aged 11 to 18, Mello and Worrell (2006) observed that older adolescents reported more hedonism, a focus on pleasure and living in the moment, than their younger counterparts.

*Gender.* Gender differences in time perspective pervade the literature; however, the pattern of variation in time perspective between females and males has been mixed. Greene and Wheatley (1992) examined how far into the future college-aged students anticipated major life events, such as marriage and entry into the work force, to occur. Results indicated that females and males gave similar responses, although the timing of reported events varied, with females anticipating events to occur at closer distances from one another than males. In a study of college students, Zimbardo et al. (1997) showed that males were more present-oriented than females. Last, drawing from a study with academically talented adolescents (Mello & Worrell, 2006), females reported less negative attitudes toward the future than males.

*Assessment.* The great preponderance of extant research has used quantitative methodology including single- and multiple-item questions on self-reported surveys to assess time perspective in adolescent populations (Nurmi, Seginer, & Poole, 1990; Worrell & Mello, 2006; Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). In this study, we employed focus group methodology, which is a particularly useful strategy for generating new understandings (Morgan, 1997). Morgan defines focus groups as group interviews. Focus groups are fitting for the present study because the method enables researchers to provide new meaning of topics to discern the level of agreement or consensus regarding the meaning of a particular topic by participants (Morgan, 1997). Further, adolescents have been discussed as an age-appropriate population for research with focus group methodology (Horner, 2000).

### *The Present Study*

In an effort to understand how adolescents conceptualize time, we posed three research questions. First, how do adolescents conceptualize the past, the present, and the future? We expected that adolescents

would report relatively similar conceptualizations due to their age and corresponding cognitive abilities (Piaget, 1955). Given available research (Nurmi, 1991) we also expected that adolescents would anchor their responses in domains such as work, school, and family. Second, what themes emerge in adolescents' conceptualizations? We did not put forward specific hypotheses because the literature does not provide much guidance in this area. Third, we expected that observed gender patterns would be consistent with recent quantitative literature, with females reporting more positive time-related attitudes than males (e.g., Mello, 2008).

## METHOD

### *Participants*

Participants included 19 students attending a six-week summer program for academically talented youth held at a major research university in a western state. Students are admitted to the program based on traditional indicators, such as test scores and grades, and on nontraditional indicators including teacher recommendations and a writing product. Program rosters were used to recruit participants and were organized into the following self-reported racial/ethnic groups: (a) Asian American, (b) Black/African American, (c) Chicano/Latino, and (d) White/Caucasian American. The Asian-American group included Asian American, Chinese, East Indian, Korean, Pacific Islander, and Thai. Students who returned a consent form and attended a focus group constituted the sample. A total of six focus groups were conducted, with the number of participants varying from one to six participants per group.

Participants completed a demographic form that requested self-reported gender, age, academic achievement, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and household information. Participants included 12 females and 7 males, aged 13-17 ($M$ = 15, $SD$ = 1.2) in Grades 9-12. All but two students had grade point averages (GPA) above 3.5 ($M$ = 3.66, $SD$ = 0.26). The largest racial/ethnic groups were Asian ($n$ = 6), Chicano/Latino ($n$ = 5), and White/Caucasian American ($n$ = 4). The remaining groups included Black ($n$ = 2), Middle Eastern ($n$ = 1), and multiple ($n$ = 1). Participants identified their family's SES. None of the participants identified their families as Poor or Wealthy. More than half ($n$ = 10) reported a SES between Working Class and Middle Class, and nearly half ($n$ = 8) identified as Upper Middle Class.

*Procedure*

Focus groups occurred during the last week of the summer academic program. A trained researcher served as the moderator. In three of the focus groups, a research assistant was present to distribute materials and manage equipment. A set script was used that began with an introduction to the study. Participants were told that the purpose was to find out how people their age think about time. Participants were informed that the focus group would last one hour and the following ground rules were articulated: (a) everyone should participate, (b) all ideas and opinions are equally important, (c) each person's views should be heard and respected, and (d) responses should not be discussed outside of the focus group. A seating plan was completed with the location of the participants, the moderator, and the research assistant, if present. After the seating plan was completed, video- and audio-recording equipment were activated.

The moderator led a discussion eliciting definitions of the past, then the present, and finally the future. Participants were provided with a piece of paper divided into three sections with the words *past, present,* and *future* written at the top of each section and were asked to write how they defined these words. The moderator then posed the following three questions: "How do you define the past? How do you define the present? How do you define the future?" Questions were posed sequentially such that a question was posed then a conversation ensued before the next question was discussed. As suggested by researchers discussing focus group methodology (Krueger, 1994; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999a; Morgan, 1997), the moderator ensured that all participants responded to each question, verbally remarked on similarities and differences in responses both between individuals and within individuals, and sometimes repeated responses for clarity. Data for the present study included the short-answer responses and transcripts of the focus groups. Short-answer responses to defining the past, the present, and the future were entered into a document and organized by the temporal dimension. Focus group video- and audio-recordings were transcribed by two trained research assistants. Transcription involved recording spoken words verbatim. Transcripts were also reviewed by two trained research assistants for accuracy.

## RESULTS

*Analytic Strategy*

The analytic strategy for this study was informed by the Grounded Theory approach to qualitative data analysis proposed by Strauss and

Corbin (1990). This strategy includes systematic examination of data to generate new meaning or understanding of a particular topic with an emphasis on discovery rather than replication (Ambert, Adler, Adler, & Detzner, 1995; Krueger, 1994; Strauss & Corbin). We sought to identify emergent themes by systematically examining the qualitative data for patterns. Drawing from discussion raised by LeCompte and Schensul (1999a), patterns were identified by examining data for words, terms, or statements that appeared (a) frequently, (b) similarly, different, in conjunction, or in sequence with other words, terms or statements co-occurrences, or (c) were expected to appear but were absent.

As suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990), emergent themes were described with regard to parameters and were given meaningful titles. We considered if and under what circumstances individuals' ideas varied in the focus group, as it is possible that upon hearing others' responses, participants may alter their response (Krueger, 1994). Emergent themes were generated through data examination, discussion, and summary. The research team met on a weekly basis to discuss emergent themes. After each meeting, emergent themes were summarized and presented to the research group to ensure that the summary was consistent with each researcher's understanding of the theme. It is worth noting that variation was not observed between the short-answer and focus group transcript data. The quotes used are taken from the focus group transcripts and were edited only for clarity.

*Adolescents' Definitions of the Past, the Present, and the Future*

Adolescents' definitions of the past, the present, and the future varied tremendously from one another. Some participants used analogies to describe their conceptions of time. Themes emerged that were specific to one temporal dimension such as *historical* for the past, *moment* and *fleeting* for the present, and *mysterious* for the future.

*Analogies.* Adolescents used analogies to define time generally. For example, an adolescent stated, "If you imagine the present like a window, on like a timeline, then anything . . . where the window . . . has already past, can be the past . . . anything viewed from the window I consider the present. Like anything happening right now" (15-year-old Asian American female). Another adolescent stated, "Yeah, like I think that . . . time is . . . a running *river*" (17-year-old Middle Eastern female). The following quotes illustrate how a 14-year-old (Multi-Ethnic female) used an analogy to describe the past, the present, and the future:

> The past to me is like a sonnet that like goes on into like a *novel* . . . the past is like how we saw things at first and then as it keeps on going to . . . the present and future we see how it like grows bigger and . . . everything gets like more up to date and stuff. That's why from a sonnet it gets into a novel, so it goes on and on and on, until it's like this big old book that you can read and just look at and that's life [participant laughs].

*Definitions of the past.* Definitions of the past yielded personal, familial, and large-scale historical themes. The *personal* included reference to a particular point in time involving the individual participant or self such as ". . . the past to me is kind of like when I was younger [when I was] relying on my parents to do much of my things for me" (14 year-old African American female). In contrast, the *familial* referred to definitions of the past that referenced the family, such as "Well not my past but for example I think about my family's past, how they've had bad experiences . . ." (15-year-old Latino). The *large scale* involved descriptions of the past on a much grander scale. For example, "the past to me is what already happened in our history . . . in general, like mankind" (16-year-old Latino), and "[the past] could be like thousands of years ago or it could be just an hour ago" (16-year-old European American female).

*Definitions of the present.* Emergent themes specific to the present included a *focus on the moment* and *uncertainty* in how to define the present. Nearly all participants used the words, "moment" or "now" to describe the present temporal dimension. Some participants referred to the present moment in time as the present, such as, "the present is right now, it is up to date, the present is what you are doing in this instant" (14-year-old Latino), or "I would define the present as like the exact moment to, I don't know the millisecond" (14-year-old Asian American male). The notion of fleeting or a very short period of time in the present was related to the theme, moment. Thus, the present was described as ephemeral. For example, a 16-year-old European American female said, "I think that if you look at it [the present] very closely, there is no present, because it's either something that's happened beforehand or something that's going to happen." Similarly, a 15-year-old Latino noted, "When you're in the present and then you say something or do something and you stop doing it, like, it's already in the past." Another example came from a 17-year-old European American female: "I see the present as something that's always changing, always moving, because when I started speaking just now, I was in the present, but now that's in the past. When I am speaking right now like at this moment, [it] is the present."

Participants' definitions of the present also reflected an inability to clearly define this temporal dimension. This lack of clarity was not

observed when participants defined the past and the future. The ambiguity in defining the present is indicated by the following responses: "I don't know, I can't explain it like, throughout this day is still the present what I do . . . but what I can control right now is also part of the future" (17-year-old Latino), and "for me it's [the present] just a line between the future and the past like it's just that moment that eventually will just pass and not really be thought about anymore (15-year-old Latino)."

> It's kind of like the present is what's happening around you now and so everything that's going on. When I think of the present I automatically like just think of just today but then I have to think well the present is like all around me not just today it will be like tomorrow or yesterday (15-year-old African American female).

*Definitions of the future.* Adolescents' definitions of the future included *what has not happened* and *mysterious* as emergent themes. For example, many participants defined the future as "time . . . that hasn't happened yet" (15-year-old Latino), "something you haven't experienced" (16-year-old Latino), and "things that will happen' (17-year-old European American female). The second theme to emerge in defining the future involved the degree of mystery or uncertainty, as illustrated in the following statement: "Like, it's very scary, just to know or not to know what's gonna happen in your future" (14-year-old multiethnic group female).

*Domains.* Only a few participants referenced domains such as school and family in their responses. Some participants used schooling to define the future such as "for me the future is what's beyond high school, what's beyond college" (15-year-old Asian American male). Interestingly, only high-SES participants mentioned school in their conceptualizations of the future. For example, a 15-year-old African American female from a high-SES family commented. "When I think about the future, I think about . . . what I'm going to do after high school and college, how my life's gonna turn out."

### *Emergent Themes Across Definitions of the Past, the Present, and the Future*

Adolescents' conceptions of the past, the present, and the future contained themes that were identified in more than one temporal dimension including absolute versus fluid structures of time, relationships among temporal dimensions, and affective responses to time. The structure of time as an absolute or fluid entity emerged across the past, the present, and the future temporal dimensions. Similarly, the

notion that temporal dimensions may have relationships with one another was expressed with reference to all three temporal dimensions. The affective theme referred to the emotions expressed toward specific temporal dimensions. Participants described the affect associated with the future temporal dimension in both positive and negative ways.

*Absolute versus fluid.* Adolescents varied in how they structured time, with descriptions including absolute or fluid terms. Absolute definitions included reference to only one specific point in time and had definitive criteria. Examples include, "Well I think that my past ends right when I end speaking" (17-year-old European American female). In contrast, another participant said, "No, I think fluid is good, it's just like around us" (15-year-old African American female). other conceptualizations of time were dynamic and included multiple time periods. For example, a 15-year-old Asian American male reported that "the present is the only time when you're actually like living as opposed to reflecting or dreaming about the future or something." This malleable view of the present was echoed by a 13-year-old European American female, who contended that "it's [the present] today but then I guess if you're talking about certain topics it can be like this year and the last week" (13-year-old European American female). A similarly broad view of the past was expressed by a 15-year-old Asian American female, who stated: "The present is any moment that can be reflected on or regretted."

*Relation.* Another primary theme to emerge across temporal dimensions was the degree that temporal dimensions were related to one another. Comments included the following: "The past influences the future cuz most people don't make the same mistake over and over so they kind of learn from the past" said a 13-year-old European American female. Another participant commented that "for the past to influence the future you'd have to go through the present" (14-year-old Asian American female). Similarly, another participant stated, "Well, I think it's kind of like steps, the past can influence the future, but you have to think about the past in the present to influence the future" (13-year-old European American female). Even still another way to consider relation is the notion that the past or the present may have consequences for the future, as illustrated in the following response to a question posed by the moderator: "Do you think the future is changeable?"

> It's like, say, you come to a crossroad and you make a choice, and then that choice affects which way that you go, left or right, and then it could either go to a dead end. You choose to wear red and then you end up getting shot or you go pink and you keep on going until you end up at another decision or junction (15-year-old Asian American female).

The notion of control emerged as an important element in the relationship among the past, the present, and the future: "What I can control right now is part of the present but what I can control right now is also part of the future" (17-year-old Middle Eastern male). The past was defined as a temporal dimension that could not be controlled, because the past contains "things that already happened that like you can't change" (15-year-old Latino). In contrast, the present and the future could be controlled: "People also have some control over the future, they can change things in the present to make a better future" a 17-year-old European American female remarked. This idea is also captured in the following statement by a 17-year-old Latino, "You can't really change the past, but in the present you have like the ability to change the future, what's gonna happen . . . what I do now is going to affect what I do later" (17-year-old Latino).

*Affect.* Conceptions of the past, the present, and the future included references to feelings such as fear and excitement. Consider the following statement by a 14-year-old Latina: "I mean you don't know what's gonna happen, but the present I don't think it's that scary . . . compared to the past and the future." Almost all participants had positive attitudes about the future, as illustrated by the following statement: "I don't know what is going to happen [in the future], but I have a good idea of what I'd like to happen, so it's kinda like striving toward that in the future and that's something to look forward to" (15-year-old African American female). When asked directly by the moderator, "Do you think positively or negatively about the future?" an adolescent responded, "In general, positively, cuz I think I can change part of some of the future" (17-year-old European American female). A similarly positive view of the future was expressed by two other participants, even though one thought that she knew what was going to happen and the other saw the future as unknown: "Well, for me, it's like definitely positive, because I . . . sort of know what's going to happen. Summer's gonna end, I'm gonna go back to school. I want to do that so I think of it as positively" (14-year-old Asian American female).

> I mean in a sense it's [the future] exciting to think about it, cuz I like not knowing what's gonna happen. I view it as like a challenge and like to make tomorrow better than today all the time. So to me, the future is actually a good thing (17-year-old Latino).

Although many participants reported positive attitudes toward the future, many also expressed negative feelings or a sense of concern about the future. Thus, adolescents reported mixed feelings toward the future—excitement about its potential and worry because of the uncertainty and the potential for negative events to occur. For exam-

ple, consider the following two responses to the moderator's question about why the future would be scary: "Because you don't know what's gonna happen. You don't know if it's a good thing that's gonna happen or a bad thing. And you're happy here, right now, and then you go back home and something sad happens. . . . So scary" (14-year-old Latina).

> You have to . . . leave space for the unknown . . and for the stuff that's going to happen that you don't know and can't predict. So you have to leave space for that, and it makes it difficult to say that I'm 100% sure everything's going to be great (15-year-old African American female).

*Demographic Group Variation in Time Perspective Definitions*

*Gender.* Adolescent females and males offered very similar conceptions of the past, the present, and the future. Both genders described the past in absolute terms, as stated by a female participant: ". . . in the past it already happened and you can't really do anything about it" (17-year-old European American). Males also made similar statements about the past as absolute or unchangeable. For example: "I define the past as things that are locked in your memory that you can never get out no matter how hard you try" (14-year-old Latino) or as a specific defined period of time, "When I think about the past I usually just think about what I did the day before. . . ." (16-year-old Asian American male). Themes of control also emerged in discussions for both genders. Females described control as "the past, you can't really change the past, but in the present you have the ability to change the future, what's gonna happen" (14-year-old, Latina) and "you'll have knowledge from the past events and with that knowledge you'll be able to do better in the future" (15-year-old, Asian American male).

*Socioeconomic status (SES).* SES emerged spontaneously as an important element both in the responses of adolescents and in examining variations between participants of high- and low-SES. Participants mentioned SES and how it might affect a person's experience of time, as in the following statements: "Well, if a family was in poverty maybe they would be busier because they might have to work or on the other hand if someone had a lot of money . . . they wouldn't have to work" (16-year-old Asian American male).

> I think that the . . . social economic standings would have a big impact on the future just cuz I think people who are in poverty would be thinking more in terms of like years, like they hope to have wealth when they're adults. But I don't know a person who's raised in like a wealthy environment, they're probably not gonna be thinking too hard about you know, what's going to happen ten years from now; they're just thinking what they're going to do tomorrow; they're gonna kind of assume that the world is always going to be the way it is (15-year-old Asian American male).

Conceptualizations of time perspective varied across SES groups with more low-SES participants reporting that the future was uncertain or unpredictable. For example, low-SES participants stated: "Things in the future, like you don't know what's going to happen and when it does happen, it'll be the good or bad" (15-year-old Latino) and "it [the future] is somewhat unpredictable, people also have some control over the future, they can change things in the present to make a better future" and later on in the same focus group the participant stated: "depends on how you think about it [the future] cuz it's kind of unpredictable" (17-year-old European American female).

## DISCUSSION

Time perspective has emerged as a cognitive-motivational concept that is important for our understanding of adolescents (Phalet et al., 2004; Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). In this study, we employed Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to examine adolescents' thoughts and attitudes toward the past, the present, and the future, with the goal of identifying emergent themes that may be used for further research in this area. Analyses of the data yielded several findings. Themes were identified across adolescents' conceptualizations of the past, the present, and the future, including (a) absolute versus fluid structures of time, (b) relationships among temporal dimensions, and (c) affective responses toward the past, the present, and the future.

### *Adolescents' Conceptualization of the Past, the Present, and the Future*

This study shows that adolescents are capable of describing time generally, and the past, the present, and the future, more specifically, and highlighted that these adolescents can much more easily conceptualize the past and the future than the present. Adolescents' conceptualizations varied. Some used analogies to describe their views on time. For example, one adolescent suggested that a window accurately described the juncture between the past and the present, and others felt that a novel or a river represented the relationship among the past, the present, and the future. Contrary to our expectations, the majority of adolescents did not use domains such as school, work, or family when reporting on their conceptualizations.

We identified several themes in adolescents' conceptualizations: Adolescents' described the past in terms of the personal, familial, or historical. This variation in how adolescents' conceive of the past has implications for our understanding of how similar concepts such as

regret function in adolescence. Wrosch and Heckhuasen (2002) have discussed how regret is experienced differently across the lifespan with variation observed among individuals in adolescent, middle-, and late-aged groups. In their study of individuals aged 20 to 87, they showed how younger participants reported lower levels of regret if linked to a high level of individual control. Thus, young adults expressed little regret if they believed such regret was associated with themselves. Taken together, the findings of this study and the research on regret suggest that how adolescents view the past may meaningfully shape their attitudes toward the present, and in turn, their present or future behaviors. The past temporal dimension is a worthwhile topic of further investigation.

In contrast to the past, adolescents had some difficulty conceptualizing the present. The ambiguity in describing the present seems to be in contrast to research by Shmotkin (1991), who reported that the present temporal dimension is more salient than the future and the past. However, Shmotkin's study involved individuals aged 18 to 71 (i.e., emerging adults and adults rather than adolescents). Moreover, we did not examine salience in this study, per se. It is conceivable that the difficulty in capturing the present is due to heightened salience, but this will need to be examined in future research.

The difficulties experienced in describing the present may have important implications for our understanding of adolescent decision-making, especially since studies of college students (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999; Zimbardo et al., 1997) have shown that an orientation toward the present is related to involvement in risky behaviors. It is possible that adolescents' ability to conceptualize the present may be predictive of their engagement in positive and negative behaviors, such as studying and engaging in substance use, and may be an important area to explore in future studies. Indeed, this notion is partly supported with research that has shown how adolescents who do not think about the future are more likely to engage in risky behavior, such as weapon use and selling drugs (Harris, Duncan, & Boisjoly, 2002). However, future studies are needed to examine how the absence of a future and or present orientation is indicative of adolescent decision-making and behaviors.

The majority of adolescents expressed positive attitudes toward the future. They reported clear and optimistic ideas about their future temporal dimension. This finding is consistent with discussions by Arnett (2000, 2007) about the optimism reported by emerging adults, and with recent analyses of national data with individuals aged 14 to 26 that showed positive and high expectations for future schooling and

work (Mello, in press). The extent to which adolescents consider the future has been the focus of much research (e.g., for a review see Nurmi, 1991) and continues to be a salient topic for researchers of adolescents. A useful direction could compare future attitudes across domains, especially given that the future was also the only temporal dimension in which the educational domain was mentioned.

*Emergent Themes in Adolescents' Conceptualizations of Time*

Examination of adolescents' responses yielded three themes including absolute versus fluid structures of time, relational qualities among the past, present, and future, and affect expressed toward temporal dimensions. Adolescents described time as both absolute and fluid. Absolute responses referred to those containing concrete parameters of a particular temporal dimension, such as what is or is not the past, whereas fluid responses were more dynamic and less defined. For example, some adolescents referred to the past "as an hour ago" (*absolute*), whereas others described the past as "when they were younger" (*fluid*). The absolute-fluid theme is akin to Seginer's (1988) notion of specificity that refers to the degree of concreteness and detail associated with life domains. A meaningful area of research could include examination of specificity in the past, present, and future.

The second theme involved the extent to which the past, present, and future were related to one another. Some adolescents described clear connections between temporal dimensions, such as how one must consider the past in order for it to be related to the present or future, whereas others saw them as merely sequential. Others referred to the ability to control the present and future, but not the past. Researchers have discussed the importance of utility in motivating youth (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002), with the central notion being that individuals are motivated to complete a task if they are aware of its utility in achieving a future goal. Time-related concepts are inherently motivational and thus, they have implications for such perspectives. Research may be directed at investigating adolescents' perceptions of temporal sequence and beliefs about shaping outcomes.

The final theme to emerge encompassed the emotions adolescents expressed toward the past, present, and future. Adolescents described the future in terms of both positive and negative qualities with some reporting how it was exciting to think about, and others thinking the future was scary. The affective qualities reported by adolescents are reminiscent of the hoped- and feared-for selves discussed by Markus and Nurius (1986). The idea of possible selves has been examined in Latino adolescents who reported more hoped-for than feared-for selves

(Yowell, 2000). Although a large body of work has highlighted the role of optimism in shaping the human experience (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), and that there is evidence of positive affect toward the future, predicts academic outcomes among low-SES adolescents (Wyman et al., 1993), it is important to note that both anticipation and worry were reported in this study.

*Gender Variation in Definitions of Time Perspective*

Contrary to quantitative studies showing some variation in how females and males conceptualize time perspective generally (Mello & Worrell, 2006) and the future, specifically (Greene, 1986; Greene & Wheatley, 1992), we found that females and males reported relatively similar ideas about the past, present, and future. This finding is in keeping with recent analyses of national data showing that, in educational domains, females and males report relatively similar expectations about completed schooling (Mello, 2008). Likewise, in a study of 7th and 10th grade students, females reported more positive attitudes about school than did males, and more females expected to graduate from high school and go on to college than did males (Lupert, Cannon, & Telfer, 2004). Results concerning gender illustrate how employing multiple methodologies to the same topic can illuminate nuances.

*SES Variation in Definitions of Time Perspective*

In this study, SES emerged in the content of participants' responses and was also implicated among participants of high- and low-SES. Some adolescents discussed how SES might shape an individual's experience of the present and the future in regard to the demands resulting from membership in a particular SES. Specifically, adolescents noted how low-SES families might be busier and thus have a different way of viewing the present or the future as compared to their high-SES counterparts. Others suggested that wealth may result in a shorter time horizon as wealthy individuals already have the means to achieve their longer-term goals. Both of these views suggest that low-SES individuals may have a different way of viewing the present and the future than their higher-SES counterparts. The relationship between SES and time perspective was discussed in the seminal ethnographic study by Willis (1977), who identified variations in the experience of time between low- and high-SES groups of adolescents. In Willis' study, the low-SES individuals were those with a shorter time horizon, seemingly less interested in the future. This finding is in keeping with the fact that only higher SES adolescents in this study discussed the future in terms of tertiary education.

*Limitations and Future Directions*

This study has some limitations. First, the composition of the focus groups may have contributed to the findings. In this study, focus groups varied in the number of participants and in the distribution of gender, race/ethnicity, and SES. Focus groups specifically organized by gender, racial/ethnic, or SES might have yielded different results. Future research could address this issue by systematically configuring the focus group composition to reflect particular demographic groups. Second, specific questions on gender and SES were not included in the research design. Further, participants were asked about the past, the present, and the future in the same order for all focus groups. It is possible that the sequence may have contributed to the information reported, such that participants may have described the future differently, if asked about it before the present or the past, for example.

These limitations notwithstanding, in this study, themes were identified that are useful for our understanding of time perspective, and that provide guidance for future research on this construct. Our understanding of time perspective would benefit from studies that utilize interview methods to solicit the opinions of adolescents using an alternate method. In sum, the study provides support for time perspective as a useful topic with potential implications for many areas of study of adolescent populations, including (a) decision-making regarding school, work, or family, (b) engagement in positive and negative behaviors including academic achievement and substance use, and (c) resilience in at-risk populations.

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