

Childhood today explored through notions of being and time

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Abstract

This research paper reports on an investigation of a perception of time in relation to our being and way of living. It describes a personal journey of discovery about the value of time as part of existence. My work in the early childhood field has alerted me to the state of parents and children who may be caught up in the frenetic pace of daily living, caught up in a hurried lifestyle. I examine the impact that adult views of time may have on children and childhood. Using phenomenological research I look at notions of time in the everyday lives of two families. Heidegger's (1927) notion of one's being or existence in relation to time provides a framework for exploring how an adult's perception or use of time impacts on young children. The lived experiences of children observed in this study reveal that young children's understanding of time differs to that of adults. Interpretations of time based on the work of Winnicott (1997) and Bachelard (1960), are also integrated into the analysis.

Introduction

Time is an abstract concept that can hold a variety of meanings for different people. Time is a vital part of our everyday living in Western society, but is often accepted unquestioningly. While we frequently talk about wasting time and making good use of time, we rarely stop to analyse the full impact of our perceptions of time on our everyday lives. How do we perceive time? Time can go fast or it can go slow depending on the circumstances. When we consider occasions that we enjoy, the time in these situations tends to go fast. But if perhaps we are waiting in a dentist's surgery or waiting to catch a plane, time appears to go very slowly, and drags on. Time persists as the consequence of the events taking place within that period. Our perception of time changes as a result of the events taking place. Time speeds up when we enjoy ourselves and slows down when we are bored. It is only our perception of time that makes it important.

One of the first questions I grappled with when I began this study was what is time? When someone asks us – 'what is time?' we find it difficult to describe. Defining time has been a controversial issue for many scholars.

- Firstly we can view time as a concrete measuring system that counts the ongoing passage of time such as hours, minutes, seconds or milliseconds (Hochschild & Elias 2008). Generally we use clocks or watches to measure time but in times past devices such as sundials using shadows or hourglasses were used. Some of the earliest civilisations used the sun and moon to formulate calendars. Throughout human existence we have measured time in some form or another. The daily cycle is the rhythm of life in all communities; the alternation between day and night is a pattern of everyday living.
- Another way of looking at time is from a scientific perspective that of Newtonian time, based on the concepts of physics derived from Isaac Newton (Hochschild & Elias 2008). Time is linked to space in terms of quantities like velocity and the measurement of speed and light.
- A different view of time is presented by the philosopher Martin Heidegger (1927/1962), where time is neither an event nor a thing and therefore it is not measurable. Heidegger takes an existentialist focus on time that humans are born into an existence and people define their own meaning in life. Time is considered fundamental to the question of being. Heidegger is looking at time in terms of our existence and how we live rather than a physical entity or something that can be measured.

Heidegger's philosophical questioning of time provides the theoretical framework for this study and several of his ideas are briefly examined. Heidegger (1924/1992:3E) discusses time through the phenomenon of our everydayness – 'Time is that within which events take place'. In his writing he gives a descriptive account of how time is and what it is like in our everyday world. Heidegger believes that the understanding of what it means to 'be' is misunderstood and claims that previous investigations into our being centre on our being as an entity or a substance with properties rather than asking about being itself. We are not simply a physical property but we exist with others in our active engagement with the world. Taking this perspective does not view one's being in terms of physics, chemistry or biology but rather through our everyday dealings with the world. This is what Heidegger would call ontic knowledge or knowledge pertaining to the distinctive nature of particular types of entity. A description of ontic knowledge is provided in more detail by van Manen (1990:183) who states: 'ontological enquiry is concerned with what it means to be, with the being of things or entities. Heidegger calls ontology the phenomenology of being'. This means understanding that an experience is situated in a world and in ways of being. One's being or existence in the German translation is *Dasein*, which Heidegger constantly refers to in his writing. *Dasein* means our being is thrown into the world amidst other things and beings. *Dasein* is responsible for our existence and our potential possibilities.

Heidegger (1927/1962) argues that our existence is temporal and that *Dasein* because it exists within the world, is also temporal. Our sense of being relates to time and time according to Heidegger is temporal. In this way of interpreting the concept, time itself is nothing and exists only as a means of how we live in it. According to Heidegger (1927/1962:372), we can live authentically or inauthentically. Authentic living is where we choose to do things because they are meaningful which maintains the constancy of the self. Living inauthentically is when our values do not determine our behaviours and as such we may get caught up in humdrum routines and the busyness of life in a means-to-an-end existence. An example of my own life is that I enjoy going for a run on a regular basis. However, if it is a rainy miserable day I may choose not to go out for a run. This is an example of authentic living, doing something that is meaningful. If I felt that I have to go for the sake of making up my quota of so many runs in a week then that is inauthentic living or doing a task because it is expected rather than because I really want to. Temporality cannot be identified with clock time, as our existence, which comprises of our past, present and future is a movement through a world as a space of possibilities. As beings, or *Dasein* as Heidegger would say, we define our own meaning in life.

Hurrying as a Way of Life

When examining time from my own perspective I felt that I was hurrying through every aspect of my life without even realising it. As I encountered each experience I was already looking to the next without even taking the time to enjoy the pleasures of the moment. Almost everyday of my existence was hurried. When I think about my life I constantly question this in relation to time. Is it because I fear the prospect of losing time? What is time that it can be lost? Time for me is continually watching the clock and anticipating what I can do before my next item on the day's agenda. Can I squeeze in something else before hand? What concerns me is that I do not have enough time to do all the things I would like to. Therefore time becomes of the utmost importance in my life. Time can regulate our lives. This poem by Joe Lloyd (2005:online) signifies how I often feel:

Time To Spare

What is life? A single life
Has flashed its single spark,
In half a cup of time, short measured, rare.
A thousand things remain to do before the day is dark.
Oh, HURRY! Run beside me,
For we have no time to spare.

Time is an essential part of life and my being. It would be difficult for me to divorce living from time, as one holds no significance without the other.

The research process has been for me like a journey, following a route of my own discovery in relation to the concept of time and being. I began with the realisation that my life is so busy and rushed and that I did not have time for anything in particular. I was concerned as a parent how this might impact on the lives of my children. Was I hurrying them through every part of the day and not allowing them to enjoy the presence of their being? As an early childhood educator this then became a question of how hurrying might affect the lives of young children. I spoke with many families who experienced a similar feeling about life in general. Many parents were like me, caught up in the frenetic pace of living. For my children in the mornings it was: 'Quick hurry up and get out of bed you have to get ready for school. Quick get dressed. Hurry eat your breakfast you have to catch the bus soon'. When school was out it was the same: 'Hurry we have to get to soccer practice and then off to take your sister to piano lessons'.



This illustration from the story *The Wind in The Willows* (Grahame 1963) encapsulates the essence of what it was like. We live out of town and have a driveway just like this one. Can you imagine as we tear off down the road to the next event of the day with sports gear and bits and pieces. My concern was that perhaps I was hurrying my children by leading such a frenetic life myself. David Elkind (1993:73) enforced this point of view in saying that 'children are hurried because we are hurried'. Elkind first proposed the term 'hurried children' back in the 1970's and argued that hurrying is the accepted and valued way of life. While Elkind planted the seed for examining time, his work did not satisfactorily answer my questions. I wanted to investigate time from a child's perspective and to see if hurrying has an impact on their lives.

Methodology

The purpose of this research was to examine a child's perspective of time and to gain meaning through the eyes of the participants. An interpretive paradigm is best suited to this purpose to 'understand the subjective world of human experience' (Cohen, Manion

& Morrison 2007:21). In order to link to Heidegger's philosophical interpretations, phenomenology became my preferred mode of inquiry to enable this study of the lived experiences of children as they existed in their world. I wanted to find out how children perceived time through their lens and not just from the viewpoint of adults. I took on board van Manen's (1990:101) view, which states:

Our lived experience and the structures of meanings (themes) in terms of which these lived experiences can be described and interpreted constitute the immense complexity of the lifeworld. And, of course, we can even speak of the multiple and different lifeworlds that belong to different human existences and realities. And so we know that the lifeworld of the child has different experiential qualities from the lifeworld of the adult.

Therefore, the style of educational research to fit this study centred on a naturalistic approach from which a multifaceted view of human behaviour could be explained. Based on life experiences I used interpretive phenomenological research, which included narrative descriptions of my own children and personal anecdotes of me as a parent and as a teacher working in preschools and child care services. I observed and talked with two contrasting families from a rural New South Wales township where I was part of the community. One of these families had two girls aged four and seven years and they led a particularly busy lifestyle. They owned and managed a restaurant where both parents worked and, the mother worked part time as a nurse. In the second family neither parents had regular work. The father chose to stay at home to care for the three children, which consisted of two girls, four and seven years of age and a one year old boy. The mother studied and worked part time. The families were observed in their natural settings at home to gain a meaningful perspective of everyday living. Understanding the context of these families is necessary when relating to their behaviour, which Morse and Richards (2002:45) describe:

People are considered to be tied to their worlds – embodied -and are understandable only in their contexts. Existence in this sense is meaningful (being in the world), and the focus is on the lived experience. Human behaviour occurs in the context of relationships to things, people, events, and situations.

A Phenomenological approach allowed me to make sense of the human experiences I was observing, in particular the everyday events, which are often obscured or taken-for-granted. Regular visits took place over a period of four months and as a result more questions arose as the inquiry proceeded. Observation notes were taken at each visit with this raw data being written up immediately when I returned home so that they were fresh in my mind.

These observations of the everyday events were written in a narrative way and then recontextualized. In interpretive inquiry, theory emerges from the meanings of human experience and follows the research, as it is interpreted and compared in different times and places (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2007:22). Interpretation of my existing preconceptions makes sense of the data in a forward arc. Through recursive writing using a backward arc the information is then evaluated offering different understandings to raise other possibilities. I would reflect, write and read literature about the observations to get an essence of the material and then set up an argument against other views. To explain the data gathering and analysis process Morse and Richards (2002:47) claim that 'during analysis, phenomenologists also reflect on personal experiences, observations, and the experiences of others'. Throughout the process I was writing, reading and revisiting the experiences in a backward and forward journey using theoretical perspectives from Heidegger (1927), Levinas (1974), Foucault (1977), Bachelard (1960) and van Manen (1990). Through recursive narrative writing everyday experiences come to life and new knowledge emerges from interpretations of these texts of life (van Manen 1990:4). Articulating interpretations in this way is referred to as hermeneutic phenomenology as it is both descriptive and interpretive of the meaningful lived experience (van Manen 1990:180). Using these hermeneutic principles, findings were uncovered which changed the direction of my initial enquiry.

Themes Emerging

Many themes have emerged during the research journey which include:

- a young child's understanding of time differs to that of an adult;
- parents, teachers and adults find it difficult to respond to a child's rhythm of time within the busy and hectic schedules of daily living;
- through processes of normalisation and regulation a child's use of time can be restricted and controlled from the power relations that are embedded in our culture;
- western society's image of the child as a future adult conveys an expectation and pressure to achieve resulting in overscheduled, planned and supervised experiences that limit time for spontaneous events and play to occur;
- considering time from a child's point of view can be fostered through ethical relationships: being responsive to alterity and the welfare of others.

Discussion arising from these topics forms the basis of a major body of work and I will briefly examine the first of these themes.

Young children's understanding of time differs to adults

The past, present and future make up a person's temporal existence (Heidegger 1927/1962:376). Many adults tend to be looking ahead at what is coming next, making preparation for what happens after this. I wonder how many of you have been considering what you will eat for lunch or what you have to do later on? What will I cook for dinner tonight? Too often our minds are focused on what's next rather than taking time for the present. The close observation of young children has revealed that they are not so concerned with future events as adults are but preoccupied with the present or being in the moment. I would like to share with you an example of being in the moment from one of the children in the study:

Kristy, seven years of age, went off to explore at the playground. She had a turn on the monkey bars, swings and balance beam. It appeared that she was unaware of the passing of time. Kristy was busy taking off her shoes ready to go on the trampoline when her father walked across the yard to remind her it was time to go inside. Kristy just kept undoing her shoes. Her father coughed 'u-hum'. She then began jumping on the trampoline. Her father said 'Come on now, thank-you'. Kristy kept jumping for a few more minutes. Her father persuaded her again. Kristy then climbed off and put her shoes back on. Her father praised her for doing what she was told. Why didn't Kristy acknowledge her father's request right away? Was she trying to squeeze in more time to play? Perhaps time has a different meaning for Kristy. She appeared to be absorbed in the now, or present moment.

Kristy appeared to be absorbed in the now, or present moment. 'The continuity of time is seen within the horizon of something which is dissolubly present-at-hand' (Heidegger 1927/1962:476). When we look at public time and its datability we sometimes forget its temporal nature. Heidegger (1927/1962:474) states, 'in the ordinary interpretations of time as a sequence of "nows", both datability and significance are missing'. Kristy, when playing on the playground equipment, enjoyed a sequence of nows. Our public interpretation of time covers these up. When these nows pass away we call it the past. This is then manifest in the stretching of time, where we become as a being in lived space and time. Sometimes when I am fully absorbed in what I am doing, time tends to slow down and take forever. It is as if I am in a state of slow motion. I liken it to reading a great novel and you cannot put it down because it has you captivated in another place and time. Whatever happens around you is almost surreal, as you surrender to the pages of the book completely immersed and almost entranced. Grudin (1982:4) explains this further: 'to appreciate the full dimensions of space or time, we cannot merely sample them, but must voyage into them, lose ourselves in them, expand within their vastness'.

Inner world

Another aspect that I want to emphasise about children being in the moment is that of the inner world. Children, particularly when absorbed in play enter a special zone, an inner world. Metcalfe and Game (in press) refer to an inside and an outside space of a human being. The outside space is the external reality or shared space with others. However the inner space is one's being or existence.

In this space, people experience a wholeness that cannot be described in terms of dichotomy between inside and outside; in this time, they experience a sense of potential that holds within it past, present and future. (Metcalfe & Game in press)

When experiencing this wholeness time stands still. Young children do this in a seemingly natural way when they are lost in the moment. They take on this wholeness through being enveloped into the threefold horizon of time where the past, present and future are united in one (Heidegger 1929/1995:145).

Intermediate area

Winnicott (1997) also refers to this inner and outer reality and proposes a third area called an 'intermediate area' of experiencing where both the inner and the outer contribute. This third area is neither the inner or the outer but both. When in the intermediate area children are totally absorbed, relaxed and satisfied. Nothing else matters to them. Children often experience this state of being when in play. If we look at the story *The Wind In The Willows* (Grahame 1963) we find that one of the recurring ideas is that of being in the moment and enjoying the present. The river is a place for leisure and enjoyment and good living for the animals in the story. In our busy worlds where we are constantly shifting back and forwards from work to recreation we can forget about the value of spontaneous play. When we look at life from a child's perspective there is a different focal point.



Here Mole and Ratty are out on the river 'messaging about in boats' (Grahame 1963:17). The story of *The Wind in the Willows* is a piece of literature that serves as an illustration of a different way of perceiving time. The following is an extract from the story that exemplifies being in the moment:

The mole never heard a word he was saying. Absorbed in the new life he was entering upon, intoxicated with the sparkle, the ripple, the scents and the sounds and the sunlight, he trailed a paw in the water and dreamed long waking dreams. The Water Rat, like the good fellow he was, sculled steadily on and forebore to disturb him (Grahame 1963:17).

Mole was absorbed with being in the moment and the Water Rat respected this special time. In fact, the story goes on to say, that the Rat did not interrupt Mole for a half an hour.

Reveries

Being in the moment is not restricted to children: adults also can access this special zone of being. Bachelard (1960:20) believed that childhood lasts all through life, it lies within us and returns to adult life through reverie. Reverie is known as dreamy thoughts or dreamy thinking. Bachelard (1960:101) refers to this as the beauty within us which is an 'attractive event from our inner life' and it is in reverie that we are free beings. Children connect very readily to this inner life while they enjoy the liberty of their play. Laevers (2005) suggests that when children are fully engaged and immersed in play, this involvement leads to a higher level of learning.

Conclusion

This research has taken a philosophical approach in re-examining time from a child's perspective. How a child views of time is different to that of an adult. Being absorbed in the now or present moment, children enter a state of being; that of the inner world, an intermediate area of total involvement and satisfaction. There are many more questions arising from this topic of time in the lives of children. This study has been a journey for me and a self-revelation. My reflections on the lives of children and the value of being in the present, living life for the now, have forced me to reconsider my own lifestyle. Being busy is an active choice and equally I have the choice to slow down and enjoy the everydayness or the simple pleasures of life instead of running ahead and always thinking about tomorrow before I have even lived today.

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