

It's About Time

May 28, 2016

From reminiscing about the past, to scurrying to work to be on time, to planning for retirement, time affects our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors on a variety of levels. In a cross-cutting theme program, “The Meaning of Time,” at the 2016 APS Annual Convention in Chicago, psychological scientists shared research on the ways humans think about the past, present, and future.

APS Fellow Laura L. Carstensen, founding director of the Stanford Center on Longevity, presented findings emanating from her socioemotional selectivity theory, which maintains that as time horizons shrink as we age, we become increasingly selective about our social networks and our experiences. We invest our time in emotionally meaningful goals and activities and rewarding relationships.

APS Fellow Daniel L. Schacter of Harvard University drew from his research on memory to discuss episodic simulation, which refers to the development of detailed mental representation of a hypothetical event. Episodic simulation, Schacter said, can be used to imagine possible future events and generate alternative or even counterfactual versions of past events. His talk covered cognitive and neuroimaging studies that show both similarities and differences between simulations of future and past events.

APS Fellow Yaacov Trope discussed how adaptive functioning requires the ability to both contract one’s temporal scope (focusing on the present) and expand one’s temporal scope (moving beyond current experiences.) A key investigative path in Trope’s lab at New York University is examining the variation in people’s ability to imagine themselves in the future and in hypothetical situations as well as their ability to see themselves through others’ eyes.

APS Fellow Dan P. McAdams discussed his extensive research on autobiographic memory. He discussed how adults make sense of their lives through stories and how identity is a life story people build by reconstructing their past, their experienced present, and their imagined future.

Susan Mohammed, a Pennsylvania State University industrial–organizational researcher who studies group decision-making, discussed how differences in the ways each member of a team values time can significantly influence team performance. The impact of team members’ variable pacing styles, sense of urgency, and multitasking abilities has been overlooked in research on group performance, she said.

Look for more detailed coverage of this symposium in the Convention issue of the *Observer*, coming this summer.