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Does time extend asymmetrically towards the past and the future? A cross-cultural study

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Abstract

Is the human representation of time symmetrical or asymmetrical toward the past and the future? Some studies suggest that we perceive the future as being closer, more attended and more valued than the past (indicating a future asymmetry). By contrast, asymmetries toward the past have been found in past-focused cultures. Yet, available evidence is still limited and mixed. In the present work we searched for asymmetry in several temporal tasks (temporal distance, time discounting, temporal depth, and self-continuity) in a set of cultures that vary widely in their temporal focus (American, Spanish, Turkish, Chinese, Moroccan, Serbian, Bosniak and Croatian; total N=1075). The results supported an overall asymmetry toward the future in all tasks, although it failed to be significant in most cultures when considered on their own. However, only self-continuity showed variations that can be explained by the contrast between past-focused versus future-focused cultures.