

VOLITION, PERFORMANCE OF A BORING TASK AND TIME ESTIMATION

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Summary.—Subjective intervals were obtained from 40 subjects (20 males, 20 females) who were assigned to a group with or without volition in which choice regarding task involvement was varied. Orthogonal to volition, half the subjects engaged in a boring task, half in an interesting task. Subjects assigned to the group with no volition displayed typical temporal behavior (an interesting task was judged as significantly shorter), while subjects in the group with volition showed no difference in protensity as a function of task quality, yielding the predicted interaction.

"Time flies when you are having fun!" This truism has been verified by numerous investigators who demonstrated that a time interval is judged as more brief when the judge is interested in rather than bored by a task (1). However, the perceived interesting/boring quality of the task is not always a direct function of the task. Pallak and Pittman (2) reported that a dull task is judged less boring when subjects are offered a wide choice in selection of a task than when they are offered no choice; these investigators attributed the enhancement of the dull task when apparent choice is high to reduction of dissonance. The purpose of the present study was to determine whether high subjective volition could mitigate the increased protensity that ordinarily results from engaging in a dull task.

Forty students in introductory psychology (half were male and half female) were randomly assigned to one of the four cells of a 2 (interesting or boring task) by 2 (volition present or no volition) factorial design. All subjects first listened to a brief audiotape of learning material and answered questions about it. Then subjects in the condition for volition present were asked if they would stay to listen to a second tape due to a "shortage of data" but were assured that they had fulfilled all requirements and could leave immediately if they wished. All indicated a desire to hear the second tape. Those in the condition without volition were simply informed that they would listen to a second tape. For half the subjects in each condition the second tape was a tedious and technical passage from a text on ethics (boring task) while the other subjects heard an absorbing vignette from classical mythology (interesting task). From a bank of possible candidates, selection of the two stimulus tapes was based on questionnaire evaluations by similar subjects obtained in a pilot study. The mythology tape received the highest rating of interest, the ethics tape the lowest. Tapes were matched for text length, number of ideas introduced, and number of novel passages.

All subjects were told they were assigned to a "distributed practice" group; each subject was instructed to turn the tape recorder off and take a break in the listening after he thought a 5-min. session elapsed and that after the break he would resume listening to the tape for another distributed session. The subjects' beginning of the break period, the estimated 5 min., was taken as the dependent variable. Finally, subjects rated the tapes and were fully informed about the purpose of the study.

According to prediction, subjects with no choice listening to the boring tape ($M = 429$ sec., $SD = 5.5$) waited longer ($p < .05$ by Scheffé) before indicating that they

thought the listening period had elapsed than did those hearing the interesting tape ($M = 321$ sec., $SD = 6.1$). However, subjects with a choice did not reliably differ as a function of tape interest level ($M = 366$ sec., $SD = 5.2$, for boring, and $M = 360$ sec., $SD = 4.9$, for interesting). Using a 2 by 2 factorial analysis of variance, this pattern of results produced a significant interaction ($F_{1,38} = 78.29$, $p < .001$). As expected from the "time flies . . ." notion, the same analysis showed the subjective interval to be reliably ($F_{1,38} = 116.26$, $p < .001$) longer for those listening to the boring tape ($M = 397$ sec., $SD = 5.3$) than for those hearing the more interesting tape ($M = 340$, $SD = 5.0$). There were no reliable sex differences. Unlike the temporal responses, the volition manipulation had no reliable effect on the rated dullness of the tasks and no significant interactions were obtained from the ratings.

It was concluded that having a choice regarding task involvement can reduce the amount of time persons judge themselves to be engaged in a boring task. This effect was observed in the absence of subjective enhancement of a boring task when a choice was offered. Possibly, reduced judgment of the time and subjective enhancement of favorable qualities are alternative and mutually independent modes of reducing the dissonance induced by perceived volition.

REFERENCES

1. ORNSTEIN, R. E. *On the experience of time*. Baltimore: Penguin, 1969.
2. PALLAK, M. S., & PITTMAN, T. S. General motivational effects of dissonance arousal. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1972, 21, 349-358.

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