

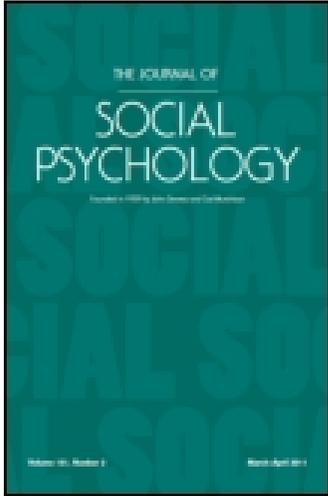
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## A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF PUNCTUALITY\*

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GEORGE J. DUDYCHA

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That promptness is essential in industry, business, and the school is rather generally accepted; but this acceptance gives no assurance that the majority of people are punctual in these situations or that their behavior is consistent with their attitudes toward punctuality. It is this problem of consistency—the essential harmony between attitudes and behavior—which has been called into question by certain critics of socio-psychological studies. They query: Do attitudes reveal behavior? Are beliefs a true index to action? Can we rely on the subjective estimates which observers make of their own behavior? Because of these doubts in the minds of some investigators there has been a definite trend in the direction of objectivity in social research. This is most fortunate. The need for such objectivity in social research cannot be over-emphasized. Certainly the most reliable data are obtained when observations are made in actual life-situations on individuals who are not aware of being observed. Quite naturally, such methods are far more time-consuming, and much more difficult to administer than the much simpler pencil-and-paper procedures, but we are rapidly coming to appreciate that the objective methods are much more rewarding.

Coincident with this trend toward objectivity, and somewhat supplementary to it, there is emphasis, particularly in certain quarters, on *qualitative* data, e.g., subjective and more or less spontaneous utterances, comments, or descriptions, which are made by subjects to general situations suggested by rather broad questions. This spontaneity and freedom of association is thought to be particularly valuable for indicating the general attitudes of the subjects, the relationships they emphasize, the values they assign to various experiences, and the general content of their thought processes. The value of this method over the questionnaire is thought to rest in the spontaneity of the responses, and its freedom from control and suggestion. The results obtained by this method are personal, individual, intro-

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spective, and have human interest—they supplement the objective and quantitative measures.

Although few in number, both quantitative and qualitative reports on punctuality have been published. None of the investigators, however, used both approaches. In reports published earlier, the author has presented (1-3) quantitative data on the punctuality of college students; in the present report the earlier data are supplemented by an analysis of protocols written by the same students. More specifically, I shall try to make clear what students think of punctuality; how they evaluate it; what place it occupies in their behavior, according to their own judgment, and what factors they believe are important in determining punctuality. We shall also note briefly how these self-estimates compare with their actual punctuality.

#### THE QUANTITATIVE PROCEDURE

In his first report on punctuality (1), the author presented quantitative data based on the behavior of 307 college students—210 men and 97 women. These students were observed in one or more of six different types of situations selected for study: (a) eight o'clock classes, (b) college commons, (c) appointments, (d) extra-curricular activities, (e) vesper services, and (f) entertainments. Stop-watch records were kept of the time of arrival of each student. These were later converted into *T*-scores (here called *sigma scores*) in order that the two variables, *degree* and *frequency* of earliness and lateness would be given proper weighting. Each student's average sigma score indicated the degree of his average earliness or lateness in the particular situation in which he was observed. A second objective measure obtained for each student was the *amount score*, based on the frequency of earliness, or the ratio of the times-early to the times-present. Since these scores were based on observation of student behavior in real life-situations, and were made without their knowledge, we may conclude that they are quite representative of the behavior of these students.

#### THE QUALITATIVE PROCEDURE

Since we *know the degree* of each student's punctuality in the various situations, we can determine whether there is any correspondence between his actual behavior and his estimates of his behavior—whether his behavior reflects his professed attitudes.

A total of 118 college students (73 men and 45 women) wrote protocols on punctuality after all of the objective data had been collected. The instructions given were: *Write one or more paragraphs covering the following questions: (a) Are you interested in being punctual? (b) What is your attitude toward punctuality? (c) What factors determine whether or not you are punctual?*

#### INTEREST IN PUNCTUALITY

According to the protocols, the majority of these college students expressed an interest in punctuality, and only a few expressed indifference. More specifically, about two-thirds of them stated that they are "interested" in punctuality; approximately another one-fourth claimed to be "greatly interested," and only about one-twelfth of them admitted disinterestedness. When we compare the sexes as to expressed interest in punctuality, we find that 66 men and 70 women in each 100 said they are interested; 8 men and 9 women in each 100 expressed definite indifference, and 26 men and 21 women in each 100 indicated pronounced interest. These figures certainly do not indicate a marked sex difference in interest in punctuality.

Since in the earlier report on punctuality these students were divided into three groups—early, on-time, and late—according to the degree of their earliness or lateness, it is possible to ascertain whether there is any correspondence between their expressed attitude and their behavior. Of the 28 students who indicated a *marked interest* in punctuality, 7 were in the early group (6 men, 1 woman), 20 were in the on-time group (13 men, 7 women), and one (a woman) in the late group. On first thought one might have expected to find more of these students in the early group. This is not the case, for degree of interest and degree of earliness do not vary concomitantly. A student may be very zealous about his promptness and yet feel no need for coming unusually early.

Some of the typical comments made by the students in this group follow. One student's protocol reads: "I certainly am interested in being punctual. Like Rube Goldberg (4), I believe in going somewhere on time. It may be fashionable to come late, but punctuality is much more important to me than fashion." Another says, "I am interested in being punctual because I am interested in gaining a reputation for dependability which I believe will be invaluable in later life after college." "I am very much interested in being punctual because if I am on time to my classes I have a few

minutes in which to adjust myself to the surroundings before the class starts." Even the one girl who was in the late group says, "Although all signs may be to the contrary, I am very much interested in being punctual."

A large number of students, 78 in all (48 men, 30 women), indicated *interest* in punctuality but not the great degree shown by our first group. Again we find about the same amount of difference between the sexes as in the above mentioned group. Of the 48 men, 31 per cent were classed as early, 48 per cent as on-time, and 21 per cent as late; of the 30 women, 20 per cent were in the early group, 60 per cent in the on-time group, and 20 per cent in the late group. From these data we may conclude that expressed interest in punctuality gives no assurance of punctual behavior in one-fifth of the men and women. Or in other words, only four out of every five students who claim to be interested in punctuality are actually punctual. Also we may observe that interest in promptness appears to lead to earliness more often among men than among women.

Only 10 students (6 men, 4 women) indicated *indifference* toward punctuality. Two men were in each of the three groups—early, on-time, and late. One of the disinterested women was in the early group and the other three were in the on-time group. Accordingly, we must again observe that expressed attitude is not a reliable index to behavior. One of the men who was actually sufficiently early to be placed in the early group says: "I am never punctual, never attempt to be, and never will." Another who was on-time says: "I am not the least bit concerned if I am punctual or not—if I am, okay, if not, okay. It's nothing to worry about." A girl writes: "As far as extreme punctuality goes, I am not interested." Another fellow says that he is interested no more than necessary, and that when he is punctual it is only because of "fear of punishment." One of the habitually late men writes as follows: "I am afraid my attitude toward punctuality is one of more or less indifference . . . I cannot say that I am especially interested in being punctual. I do not know the reason for such an attitude of indifference. However, in cases of importance I do make a special effort to arrive on time. In my daily routine, however, it does not make much difference whether I arrive at class, chapel, meals, etc., on time or not." As indicated in this last quotation, even the indifferent students do not disclaim all interest in punctuality, but admit that at least occasionally they are interested in being prompt.

## ATTITUDE TOWARD PUNCTUALITY

In reply to the second question asked, *What is your attitude toward punctuality?*, quite a number of different answers were given, some of which appeared in many of the papers.

*Consideration for others.* One of the strongest urges to be punctual is social—consideration for others. Of the 118 students, 51 (43 per cent) stated that they strive to be prompt because they dislike inconveniencing others, and that likewise they are annoyed when kept waiting by someone who is inconsiderate of them. One student who had strong feelings on the matter said: "Nothing disgusts me more than to have to wait for a date!" Another student put it more mildly when she wrote, "I believe everyone should try his best to be punctual at all times to everything, not only for his own benefit but for that of others." One of the chronically late women stated: "Punctuality, it seems to me, is only a common courtesy—a consideration for others—that certainly should be respected and observed. It is certainly annoying for one to have to sit about waiting for some person who should have been ready long before the time. It is not only annoying, but it causes discord. . . . Of course I'm interested in being punctual. I get no especial pleasure out of keeping friends waiting, but sometimes I find myself most unpunctual." Apparently her very desire to be considerate and social also causes her to be late, for she continued, "However, in one respect, I am very guilty of not being punctual, this is for 'dates'. I find that talking to friends and squandering the time I should be using to dress causes the minutes to fly quite rapidly, and before I realize the time, I usually find I am late." A girl who is in the on-time group wrote: "I am interested in being punctual because I think everyone should be considerate of other people's time. Appointments, social affairs, business or school work all involve the time of other people. People who keep others waiting are not only very inconsiderate, but their selfishness may sometimes cause a real calamity. If there is a real reason which prevents a person from reaching his destination promptly the delay seems excusable, but thoughtlessness does not."

The punctual students expressed a desire to be considerate of others much more often than late students. Forty-one early and on-time students expressed consideration, whereas only six of the late students did so. Also there is a noteworthy sex difference. Twice as many women (62 per cent) as men (31 per cent) men-

tioned consideration for others as important, in spite of the fact that men tend to be more punctual than women (2).

*Essential for success.* It is interesting to note that nearly one-third of the students stressed the importance of punctuality for success in life, and that nearly twice as many men (38 per cent) as women (22 per cent) believe in its indispensability. As one would expect, late students are less likely to affirm the importance of punctuality as a factor in success than are early or on-time students. A few typical comments follow: "In my estimation," said one student, "punctuality is one of the important keys to success." Another writes, "Punctuality is undoubtedly an important factor for success in business."

*Emotions commonly experienced.* Embarrassment, annoyance, or a general feeling of uncomfortableness was mentioned by 20 students as a characteristic experience when they arrive late for a social function which begins at a definite time. A typical statement, made by a fellow who was in the early group, reads: "I believe it is very embarrassing to arrive anywhere late. When I arrive late at a church service or other public meeting, I am tempted to go home again rather than enter the meeting place." One girl, on the other hand, who is habitually late to everything, was equally emphatic about her dread of coming early. "I think that it is a fine thing to be punctual, and in my opinion a person cannot be successful unless he is always on time. However, I myself, for some reason or other, cannot bear to be early, and I suppose that in order to avoid it, I go to the opposite extreme and am usually late."

Another early girl says that too much emphasis on punctuality irritates her. "I believe," she says, "punctuality is a very commendable trait, but I do not believe in sacrificing everything just to be punctual. People who are always punctual and who would endanger their lives, leave a concert before it is over, etc., just to be punctual, irritate me."

Three students claimed to receive considerable enjoyment from coming late. One girl, although she was in the early group, says: "When I am rushed I sometimes like to be considerably late because I have a legitimate excuse; and perhaps I also have a little egotism about such things, for a late arrival can make a very effective entrance." Another student, who was generally quite early states: "There is only one class—economics—to which I like to arrive late, the reason being that I like to see Professor ——— erase in his small book."

Several students mentioned the fact that they are punctual at certain functions, particularly classes, because of the fear of missing something when they are late. Only one person stated that she comes early to classes because it gives her an opportunity to become adjusted and composed before the class begins.

*Correlation of character traits.* A striking fact is the frequency with which the idea of the correlation of character traits was mentioned. Twenty-four protocols pointed out the correlation between punctuality and "other good habits." That people are labeled or have a reputation for punctuality, or the lack of it, was stressed by 32 students. That earliness and general dependability and lateness and undependability go hand in hand was emphasized in 27 of the protocols. A few sample statements will illustrate these attitudes. "Being prompt" says one student, "creates a good impression and pays large dividends in the end." Another student believes that if one knows whether or not a person is punctual he can "determine the type of individual that he is, and to some extent tell what kind of character he has." "Whether or not a person is punctual often leads me to draw a firm conclusion as to the type of person he is." Other students commented as follows: "As long as people judge us a great deal on our punctuality, I suppose we must accept it and always be on time." "It shows that a person is shiftless and not dependable if he is never punctual. . . . If people aren't particular about being on time they surely will not be particular about other things." "A person who is always late and slow does not seem to be a very ambitious person, whereas those who are punctual seem to be enthusiastic and ready for work. You can depend on people that come at the time they are asked to come." Another girl writes, "A man that keeps his word, and keeps his appointments is a person that is dependable, and one who is trustworthy." In another protocol, we read, "I have found that when a person is known as being punctual, he is usually also neat, exacting, and considerate of others. . . . A punctual person can most always be depended on for other things besides being on time." Another student says much the same thing negatively, "Lateness shows one to be untidy and unorganized." "I feel that anyone who is careless in keeping appointments is careless in everything else." And finally, one fellow writes that there is something about a punctual person that he admires and wishes that he could emulate for the punctual person seems "so quiet and business-like."

## FACTORS WHICH DETERMINE PUNCTUALITY

That there are many factors which determine an individual's earliness or lateness in particular situations is evident; nevertheless there are certain factors which our subjects mentioned far more often than others. These we shall examine individually.

*Interest in, and importance of the engagement.* As we have observed above, the majority of students claim to be interested in punctuality and only a handful maintain an indifferent or disinterested attitude. We should remember, however, that students may be interested, in a general way, in the rather abstract principle of punctuality, but whether they are early or late at a given place often depends on how compelling an interest they have in the particular occasion. In 40 protocols, interest, or the lack of it, in specific events was given as one of the important factors determining punctuality. Thirty-seven of the students stressed the importance of the engagement as a factor. Naturally their estimate of the importance of an engagement and the need for coming early rests partly on their interest in it. Only five people gave the "desire to be punctual," that is, interest in punctuality itself, as a factor.

*Time factor.* The time factor was almost always given as a cause for lateness, seldom as a factor in earliness. Faulty estimation of time or incorrect budgeting of time was cited in 36 of the protocols. From the statements made it is impossible to infer whether the error in estimation is primarily due to faulty judgment, or to a lack of careful and conscious planning. Without a doubt, much lateness could be eliminated if people would establish the habit of deliberately budgeting their time rather than making vague time-estimates or just trusting that somehow all that must be done by a certain time will be accomplished. Approximately 20 students attributed their lateness to incorrectly set clocks or watches. Two said that the definiteness of the time set for a meeting is a factor. Only three students stated that usually they are ready very early for appointments or meetings, and another observed that he always allows enough time to get to a place on time. Two gave the shortage of time, probably due to faulty estimation, as a factor.

*Social factor.* That some lateness is due to the tardiness of others is self-evident, and in many instances inevitable. If each person came to a meeting, social function or appointment alone, the importance of the social factor would be greatly reduced but not com-

pletely eliminated. As long as we live in a society our behavior will continue to be determined in part by the behavior of others, and hence punctuality is always a more or less socially determined trait. The author frequently observed that when two or more students came together to a social function or an eight o'clock class sometimes an early, and particularly a late student determined the punctuality of the whole group. Occasionally the group's punctuality seemed to be somewhat of a compromise. That this social factor is significant is indicated by the fact that 19 students mentioned it specifically. In addition to these 19 who attributed their punctuality to the behavior of others, only six observed that their punctuality is a factor in determining the behavior of other students.

*Early training.* Although punctuality is usually emphasized in the school, only a single student mentioned such training as leaving its stamp on her behavior. The home, on the other hand, was associated by 15 students with specific instruction and frequent admonition to be punctual. A few typical statements follow: "I am interested in being punctual because ever since I can remember my parents have stressed punctuality. Also in the school it has been stressed, especially in the commercial department where one learns what the employer expects of a stenographer or typist." Another writes, "I have been taught to be on time from early childhood and the teaching has evidently become a strong habit." According to this final protocol there is evidently very little transfer. "I can never remember being tardy in grade school or high school—probably due to my family more than myself. I have been trained to be punctual and have just accepted it as one of the things an individual must learn to do. . . . I am always punctual in certain situations . . . in others I am never punctual. The things I was taught to be punctual in at home, I'm punctual in now, but new situations that I encountered in college—well, I have a grand time being late most of the time."

That the early home-training sticks, seems to be borne out by the fact that each of these 15 students, except one, was in the early or on-time group. Only one was in the late group.

*Miscellaneous factors.* Several authors who have studied the causes of student and employee lateness have found that unforeseen events, such as unexpected flat tires, or delays at railway crossings, and other interruptions over which a person has no control, cause lateness. The students also gave this as a reason for lateness in 23 of the protocols. "Usually I am late," says one girl, "because of

unforeseen happenings or setbacks that appear at the last minute. For instance, someone has borrowed my tennis racket or umbrella and I have to dash over the whole house looking for it; or I pull out a drawer and spill powder all over the floor; or at the last minute someone wants me to hook her dress, or I may fall down and miss the bus and there isn't another one for seven minutes."

Twelve students said that lateness may be due to physical condition, as illness; seven ascribed it to laziness, and two others to the lack of drive. Seven students observed that weather conditions, particularly inclement weather, cause lateness. Eleven concluded that punctuality is a matter of learning—due to good or poor habits. Other factors causing earliness, mentioned by only one or two students, were: the personal satisfaction derived from coming early; the feeling of dependability and responsibility which accompanies promptness; giving one's word to be at a certain place at a specified time, and even the disadvantages and consequences of lateness promote promptness. As one girl significantly observes: "For instance, it is one thing to be late to church when you have to climb over four people in the second row in order to get a seat, and a more trifling thing to be late when you can just walk in and sit in the back row." Later she says, "I don't believe that getting to classes on time, ordinarily, is worth missing half your breakfast and running four blocks and up three flights of stairs for. I believe in being punctual if it isn't too inconvenient."

#### CONCLUSIONS AND SUMMARY

We have found that the majority of the students responding indicated an interest in punctuality, and that the sex difference is negligible. Also, we observed that the stronger the expressed interest of a student the less likely is he to be in the late group, and on the other hand, that students indicating marked indifference may be in the early or on-time groups as well as in the late category. Attitudes commonly expressed by the subjects were that one should be considerate of one's friends and colleagues and therefore punctual; that punctuality is essential for success, and that it correlates high with other desirable character traits. And finally, the factors most commonly given by students as causes of earliness or lateness are: the extent to which one is interested in the engagement which demands one's presence; the importance of the event, the accuracy

of time estimates and budgets; the punctuality of friends and acquaintances, and home training.

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