

Waiting – an often neglected social Phenomenon

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Synchronicity or rather asynchronicity are counted among the most important research topics of the sociology of time, since the successful synchronization of the diverging time spheres of individuals and systems is a precondition for an effective functioning of society. And yet, as we all know at first hand, failed processes of synchronization are a daily occurrence. One of their most prominent results is waiting, once defined by Thomas Luckmann as the correlate of “the incongruence of the various temporal dimensions”. In the same breath he deplored the vast ignorance displayed by scientific research concerning “this significant phenomenon”.

Pretty exactly 40 years after Luckmann’s statement, the scientific literature on the topic has expanded, but nevertheless waiting still presents a challenge for sociological theory. Is it to be described as action or rather as inaction? Are processes of waiting to be conceived exclusively as the outcome of unsuccessful synchronization or are they a constitutive part of the procedure of synchronization itself? Is waiting socially dysfunctional or functional?

Considering the existing literature on the phenomenon the presentation does not intend to give answers to these questions, but rather aims at unfolding the spectrum of aspects that have to be taken into account when answering is attempted. It reflects the fundamental difference between “long” and “short” waiting as well as various framing conditions of waiting.