Time and Culture

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There are profound cultural differences in how people think about, measure, and use their time. This module describes some major dimensions of time that are most prone to cultural variation.

Learning Objectives

- Understand how cultures differ in the views of time and the importance of these differences for social behavior.

- Explore major components of social time.

- Use these concepts to better understand the hidden dimensions of culture.

Introduction

It is said that "time is money" in industrialized economies. Workers are paid by the hour, lawyers charge by the minute, and advertising is sold by the second (US$3.3 million for a 30-second commercial, or a little over $110,000 per second, for the 2012 Super Bowl). Remarkably, the civilized mind has reduced time—the most obscure and abstract of all intangibles—to the most objective of all quantities: money. With time and things on the same value scale, we can establish how many of our working hours equal the price of a product in a store.

This way of thinking about time is not universal, however. Beliefs about time remain profoundly

different from culture to culture. Research shows that cultural differences in time can be as vast as those between languages. In one particularly telling study of the roots of culture shock, Spradley and Phillips asked a group of returning Peace Corps volunteers to rank 33 items concerning the amount of cultural adjustment each had required of them. The list included a wide range of items familiar to fearful travelers, such as "the type of food eaten," the "personal cleanliness of most people," "the number of people of your own race," and "the general standard of living." But aside from mastering the foreign language, the two greatest difficulties for the Peace Corps volunteers were concerned with social time: "the general pace of life," followed by one of its most significant components, "how punctual most people are" (Spradley & Phillips, 1972).

Half a century ago anthropologist Edward Hall described cultural rules of social time as the "silent language" (Hall, 1983). These informal patterns of time "are seldom, if ever, made explicit. They exist in the air around us. They are either familiar and comfortable or unfamiliar and wrong." The world over, children simply pick up their society's conceptions of early and late, of waiting and rushing, of the past, the present, and the future, as they mature. No dictionary clearly defines these rules of time for them or for strangers who stumble over the maddening incongruities between the time sense they bring with them and the one they face in a new land.

The idea that "time is money" may be good for business but is it good for society in general? What other ways do people around the world conceptualize and experience time? [Image: CC0 Public Domain, https://goo.gl/m25gce]

Cultures may differ on many aspects of social time—its value, meaning, how it should be divided, allocated, and measured. The following dimensions are particularly prone to different cultural, as well as individual, interpretations:

Work Versus Leisure

There are cultural differences in the value placed on work, on leisure, and upon the balance between the two. Although some balance is universal, the preferred formulas differ both across cultures and between individuals in each culture. The differences are marked even within highly industrialized countries, The United States and Japan are famous for long work

hours, as exemplified by the terms "workaholic" and "*karoshi*" ("death by overwork") (Levine, 1997). European nations tend to also emphasize work, with many differences among countries, but generally put greater emphasis on preserving nonwork time than do people in the United States and Japan (Levine, 2012).

Time spent within the workplace also varies across cultures. People tend to spend more of their work time on-task in some cultures and more of that time socializing—informal chatting, having tea or coffee with others, etc.—in other cultures. Studies have found wide cultural variation in answers to the question: "In the companies for which you have worked, what percent of time do people typically spend on tasks that are part of their job description." For example, people working in companies in large cities in the United States tend to report in the range of "80 percent task time, 20 percent social time." On the other hand, people working in companies in India, Nepal, Indonesia, Malaysia, and some Latin American countries tend to give answers closer to "50 percent task time, 50 percent social time" (Brislin and Kim, 2003).

Sequence

Each culture sets rules concerning the appropriate sequence of tasks and activities. Is it work before play, or vice versa? Do people take all of their sleep at night, or is there a siesta in the midafternoon? Is one expected to have coffee or tea and socialize, and for how long, before getting down to serious business? There are also customs about sequences over the long run. For example, how long is the socially accepted period of childhood, if it exists at all, and when is it time to assume the responsibilities of an adult?

Clock and Event Time

The most fundamental difference in timekeeping throughout history has been between people operating by the clock and those who measure time by social events (Lauer, 1981). This profound difference in thinking about time continues to divide cultures today. Under clock time, the hour on the timepiece governs the beginning and ending of activities. Under event time, scheduling is determined by the flow of the activity. Events begin and end when, by mutual consensus, participants "feel" the time is right (Levine, 1997).

In event-time societies, modes of time-reckoning tend to express social experience. Sometimes activities occur in finely coordinated sequences, but without observing the clock. For example, anthropologists have described how participants at an Indian wake move from gathering time to prayer time, singing time, intermission, and mealtime. They move by consensual feeling—when "the time feels right"—but with no apparent concern for the time

on the clock.

Many countries exhort event time as a philosophy of life. In East Africa, there is a popular adage that "Even the time takes its time." In Trinidad, it is commonly said that "Any time is Trinidad time" (Birth, 1999). In the United States and much of Europe, by contrast, the right way to measure time is assumed to be by the clock. This is especially true when it comes to work hours. Time is money, and any time not focused on-task is seen as wasted time.

Even the language of time may be more or less event-oriented. The Kachin people of North Burma, for example, have no single word equivalent of "time." They use the word *ahkying* to refer to the "time" of the clock, *na* to a long "time," *tawng* to a short "time," *ta* to springtime, and *asak* to the "time" of a person's life. Whereas, clock time cultures treat time as an objective entity—it is a noun in English —the Kachin words for time are treated more like adverbs (Levine, 1997).

Cultures differ greatly in their adherence to "clock time". While some cultures pride themselves on managing time down to the second (the trains run on time!), others have a more flexible view of when is the right time for an event to begin or end. [Image: John Tenniel, CC0 Public Domain, https://goo.gl/m25gce]

These different ways of time-keeping can often lead to cultural misunderstandings. Individuals operating on clock time are careful to be punctual and expect the same of others. Those on event time are more spontaneous in beginning and ending events and, as a result, tend to be less punctual and more understanding when others are less punctual.

There are also differences within cultures—on both the individual and situational levels. To take just one example, some workers may prosper under clearly defined schedules while others may prefer to complete their work on their own schedules. Similarly, some jobs (for example, financial traders) demand clock-time precision while others (for example, some creative arts) thrive on the spontaneity of event-time scheduling. Levine (2012) argues for fluency in both approaches and to recognize when either is more beneficial.

Calendars

Many cultures use social activities to define their calendars rather than the other way around. The calendars of the Nuer people from the Upper Nile in the Sudan, for example, are based on the seasonal changes in their environment. They know that the month of *kur* is occurring *because* they are building their fishing dams and cattle camps. When they break camp and return to their villages, they know it must now be the month of *dwat.*

Most societies have some type of week, but it is not always seven days long. The Muysca of Columbia had a three-day week. The Incas of Peru had a 10-day week. Often the length of the week reflects cycles of activities, rather than the other way around. For many, the market is the main activity requiring group coordination. The Khasi people hold their markets every eighth day. Consequently, they have made their week eight days long and named the days of the week after the places where the main markets occur (Levine, 2005).

Polychronic and Monochronic Time

Industrial/organizational psychologists emphasize the significance of monochronic versus polychronic work patterns (Bluedorn, 2002). People and organizations in clock-time cultures are more likely to emphasize monochronic (M-time) approaches, meaning they like to focus on one activity at a time. People in event time cultures, on the other hand, tend to emphasize polychronic (P-time) approaches, meaning they prefer to do several things at once. These labels were originally developed by Hall (1983). M-time people like to work from start to finish in linear sequence: The first task is begun and completed before turning to another, which is then begun and completed. In polychronic time, however, one project goes on until there is an inclination or inspiration to turn to another, which may lead to an idea for another, then back to first, with intermittent and unpredictable pauses and reassumptions of one task or another. Progress on P-time occurs a little at a time on each task.

What should dictate the conclusion of a good conversation, other time commitments or the flow of the conversation itself? P-time cultures prefer the latter. [Image: mikecogh, https://goo. gl/AjWjkE, CC BY-SA 2.0, https://goo.gl/osSgSv]

P-time cultures are characterized by a strong involvement with people. They emphasize the completion of human transactions rather than keeping to schedules. For example, two P-time

individuals who are deep in conversation will typically choose to arrive late for their next appointment rather than cut into the flow of their discussion. Both would be insulted, in fact, if their partner were to abruptly terminate the conversation before it came to a spontaneous conclusion.

Levine (2012) argues for the value of shifting between each approach depending on the characteristics of the individuals and the situations involved. In a corporation, for example, some positions may require tight scheduling of time (e.g., accountants during tax time). On the other hand, employees in research and development may be most productive when less tightly controlled.

Silence and "Doing Nothing"

In some cultures, notably the United States and Western Europe, silence makes people uncomfortable. It may denote nothing is happening or that something is going wrong. The usual response is to say something, to fill the silence or to keep the meeting or conversation going. People in other cultures, including many Asian and Pacific Island nations, are quite comfortable with silence. It is seen as an opportunity to focus inward and gather one's thoughts before you speak. The Japanese emphasize "ma," which roughly translates as the "space" between things, or the "pause." It implies that what happens between things, or what doesn't seem to be happening, is as or more important than what is visibly happening. As an extreme example, consider a question people in Brunei often begin their day by asking: "What isn't going to happen today?"

Brislin (2000) has described how cultural misunderstandings and counterproductive decisions often arise from these differences. For example, "Americans will sometimes misinterpret long periods of silence as a signal that they should make a concession. Their negotiating counterparts in Asia know this and will sometimes prolong their silence in the expectation that a concession will be made."

A related temporal difference concerns what people perceive as "wasted time." People, cultures, and economies that emphasize the rule that "time is money" may see any time not devoted to tangible production as wasted time. People in other cultures, however, believe that overemphasis on this rule is a waste of one's time in a larger sense, that it is a wasteful way to spend one's life. If something more worthy of one's attention—be it social- or work-related—challenges a planned schedule, it is seen as wasteful to not deviate from the planned schedule. In fact, the term "wasted time" may make little sense. A typical comment may be, "There is no such thing as wasted time. If you are not doing one thing, you are doing something

else" (Levine, 1997).

Norms Concerning Waiting

Cultures differ in their norms for waiting, not only how long it is appropriate to keep a person waiting but how the rules change depending on the situation and the people involved. Levine (1997) describes a number of "rules" to waiting and how these rules differ in various cultures. Some useful questions: Are the rules based on the principle that time is money? Who is expected to wait for whom, under what circumstances, and for how long? Are some individuals —by virtue of their status, power, and/or wealth—exempt from waiting? What is the protocol for waiting in line? Is it an orderly procedure, as in the United Kingdom, or do people just nudge their way through the crowd, pushing the people ahead of them, until they somehow make their way to the front, as in India? Is there a procedure for buying oneself a place in front, or off the line completely? What social message is being sent when the accepted rules are broken?

Temporal Orientation

There are individual and cultural differences in people's orientation toward the past, present, and future. Zimbardo and Boyd (2008) have developed a scale that distinguishes between six types of temporal frames:

1. Past negative—a pessimistic, negative, or aversive orientation toward the past.
2. Past positive—a warm, sentimental, nostalgic, and positive construction of the past.
3. Present hedonistic—hedonistic orientation attitude toward time and life.
4. Present fatalistic—a fatalistic, helpless, and hopeless attitude toward the future and life.
5. Future—planning for, and achievement of, future goals, characterizing a general future orientation.
6. Future transcendental—an orientation to the future beyond one's own death.

Zimbardo and Boyd have found large individual and cultural differences on both the individual subscales and the patterns of the subscales taken together. They describe a wide range of consequences of these differences. Time perspective affects political, economic, personal, social, environmental, and other domains of life and society. One of the paradoxes, they report, is that each particular temporal perspective is associated with numerous personal and social benefits but that, in excess, they are associated with even greater costs. There are both positive

Reflecting on our own lives, we often shift between various temporal orientations. Consider your usual perspective. Do you find yourself with a particular emphasis on the past, present, or future? [Image: Christian, https://goo.gl/QZzRLB, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0, https://goo.gl/Toc0ZF]

and negative processes associated with each perspective. Individuals who focus on the past, for example, are often described with terms such as happy, grateful, patriotic, high self-esteem, and having strong personal values; on the other hand, past time perspective can be associated with terms such as depressed, guilty, angry and revengeful, and resistant to change. Similarly, a focus on the present may be associated with strong social affiliations, joy, sensuality, sexuality, energy, and improvisation; but it may also be associated with violence, anger, over-fatalism, risk-taking, and addictive behavior. A focus on the future may be associated with achievement, self-efficacy, healthy behaviors, and hope for change; but also with anxiety, social isolation, competitiveness, and unhealthy physical consequences ranging from coronary artery disease to sexual impotence. The authors argue for the importance of a healthy balance in one's temporal orientation.

The Pace of Life

There are profound differences in the **pace of life** on many levels—individual temperament, cultural norms, between places, at different times, during different activities. Levine and Norenzayan (1999) conducted a series of field experiments measuring walking speed, work speed, and concern with clock time in countries around the world. They found that the characteristic pace of life of a place has consequences—both positive and negative—for the physical, social, economic, and psychological well-being of people who live there. The optimal pace, they argue, requires flexibility and sensitivity to matching individual preferences to the requirements of the situation.

Conclusion

Understanding the values and assumptions a culture places on these temporal dimensions is essential to creating policies that enhance the quality of peoples' lives. The historian Lewis Mumford once observed how "each culture believes that every other space and time is an

approximation to or perversion of the real space and time in which it lives." The truth, however, is there is no single correct way to think about time. There are different ways of thinking, each with their pluses and minuses, and all may be of value in given situations.

Outside Resources

Video: Dealing with Time
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fSvC3i4Sqp4

Video: RSA Animate—The Secret Powers of Time
www.youtube.com/watch?v=A3oIiH7BLmg&feature=related

Discussion Questions

1. Can you give an example of Edward Hall's notion of time as a "silent language"?

2. Can you give an example of clock time in your own life? Can you give an example of event time?

3. Are there activities where you might benefit from another culture's approach to time rather than your usual approach? Give an example.

4. What do you think are the consequences, both positive and negative, of a faster pace of life?

5. Is it fair to conclude that some cultural time practices are more advanced than others? That some are healthier than others? Explain.

Vocabulary

Clock time
Scheduling activities according to the time on the clock.

Ma
Japanese way of thinking that emphasizes attention to the spaces between things rather than the things themselves.

Monochronic (M-time)
Monochronic thinking focuses on doing one activity, from beginning to completion, at a time.

Pace of life
The frequency of events per unit of time; also referred to as speed or tempo.

Polychronic (P-time)
Polychronic thinking switches back and forth among multiple activities as the situation demands.

Silent language
Cultural norms of time and time use as they pertain to social communication and interaction.

Social time
Scheduling by the flow of the activity. Events begin and end when, by mutual consensus, participants "feel" the time is right.

Temporal perspective
The extent to which we are oriented toward the past, present, and future.

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The Diener Education Fund is co-founded by Drs. Ed and Carol Diener. Ed is the Joseph Smiley Distinguished Professor of Psychology (Emeritus) at the University of Illinois. Carol Diener is the former director of the Mental Health Worker and the Juvenile Justice Programs at the University of Illinois. Both Ed and Carol are award- winning university teachers.

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