

CONCEPT OF “TIME”: CROSS-CULTURAL APPROACH

ANGELA PIRLOG

PhD, Assoc. Prof.

Modern Languages Department
Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova
Chisinau, Republic of Moldova
Email: angela.pirlog@ase.md
ORCID ID: 0000-0003-1137-1555

“Time is the scarcest resource and unless it is managed nothing else can be managed”

Peter F. Drucker

Abstract: The present paper aims to describe the importance of time notion in today’s globalized world. Understanding over the time orientation and also time perception within of a specific culture is critical to the successful handling of social, diplomatic and business situations. Misunderstandings of chronemics (science about the time, its perception and attitude) can lead to a failure to understand intentions, especially in social business communication. Knowing the temporal profile of the representative of a specific culture will help to solve time-related issues and avoid problems. Time orientation: past, present and future and time perception: sequential/monochronic versus synchronic polychronic are dimensions that influence the specific behavior describing the cultural temporal profile that can predict the inclination of a specific society that focuses on how people structure time, ranging from single task to multitask approach. In order to describe the elements of the temporal profile we used different cultural models: Hofstede, Trompenaars, Hall, *Zimbardo*.

Keywords: time, temporal profile, time perception, time orientation, monochronic time, polychronic time, short-time orientation, long-time orientation, culture, cross-cultural approach.

JEL Classification: Z13

Introduction

All major successes in personal life, but also in professional or business take time. Time is a limited resource and everyone needs to know how to manage it effectively. From the lowest to the highest position within the company, managing everyone personal time influences the quality of life. In professional and private life, achieving desired and planned goals is the priority of every individual, while time spent on the way to goals is the most valuable resource each of us has. It's not just about managing time in business, it's also about managing your own life.

Beliefs concerning the time are profoundly different from culture to culture. Cultural differences about the time can be as many as those between languages. 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.”

Chronemics, briefly and generally, is the field of study about the use of time, and the way that time is perceived and valued by individuals and cultures. These time perceptions include things like punctuality, willingness to wait, approaches to face-to-face interactions, and reactions to time pressure.

More specifically, “chronemics involves the study of both subjective and objective human tempos as they influence and are interdependent with human behavior. Further, chronemics involves the study of human communication as it relates to interdependent and integrated levels of time-experiencing” (Samovar *et al*, 2011).

According to Ashley Fulmer and Brandon Crosby, "as intercultural interactions increasingly become the norm rather than the exception, the ability of individuals, groups, and organizations to manage time effectively in cross-cultural settings is critical to the success of these interactions" (Fulmer *et al*, 2014).

TEMPORAL PROFILE AND ITS ELEMENTS

There are critically cultural differences about how people perceive, measure and use their time. The cultural temporal profile describes some major dimensions of time that are “most prone to cultural variation”. Levine, R. V. (2023).

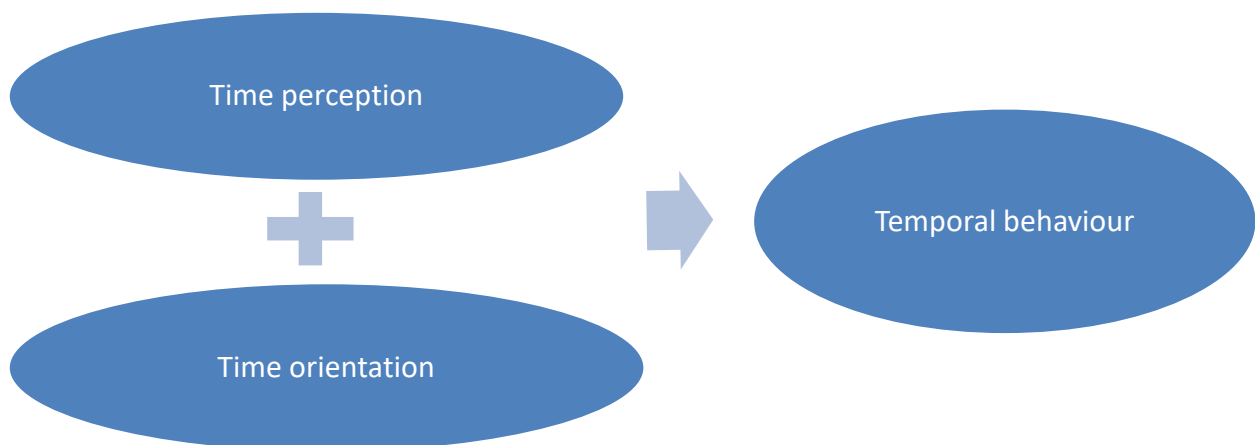


Figure 1 Key elements of the Temporal Profile

Source: author own study

Time Perception

The dimensions that describe the perception of time in different cultures focuses on how people in various countries structure time, ranging from a sequential (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 2020) or monochronic (Hall, 1983) having single task approach to a synchronic (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 2020) or polychronic (Hall, 1983) exercising multi-tasking approach. In business, how people prioritize time, its importance in planning, strategize and co-ordinate business activities with colleagues, partners, subordinates or managers.

Polychronicity or synchronous perception of time is a term that describes people who prefer to work on multiple activities at the same time, whether it be cooking while watching TV, texting while driving, etc.

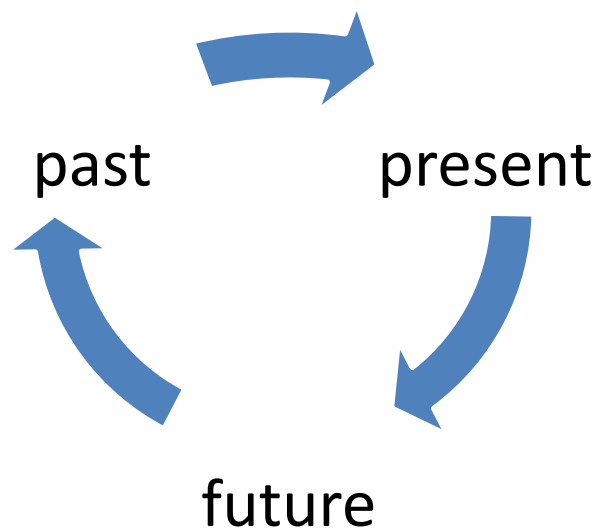


Figure 2 Polychronic/Synchronous perception of time

Source: author own study based on Trompenaars, Hampden-Turner (2020)

In the perception of a polychronic person the time, at least to some extent, as a circle (fig. 2), a spiral line or a number of intersecting curves, representing past, present and future rather than as linear ones, and they respond to non-standard order of arranging tasks represented by multi-tasking.

Monochronicity or sequential perception of time, on the other hand, describes cultures with a much more linear (fig.3), clock- and schedule-focused approach to time. People who structure time and the activities sequentially view time as a series of passing events. They tend to do one thing at a time, tasks are preferred to be planned at each stage and keep to plans once they have been made. Time commitments are important and staying on schedule is a must.

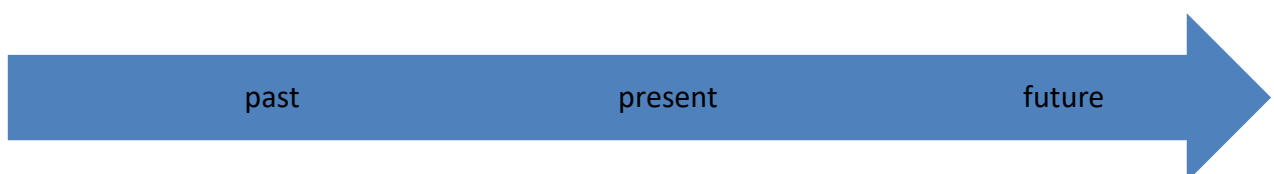


Figure 3 Monochronic/Sequential perception of time

Source: Source: author own study based on Trompenaars, Hampden-Turner (2020)

Time is a consumable commodity, which is why expressions such as “wasting time” or “saving time” exist. This is true in business as well as in daily life.

Table 1 Polychronic/Synchronous vs Monochronic/Sequential perception of time

Polychronic/Synchronous perception of time	Monochronic/Sequential perception of time
• past, present, and future are seen as interwoven periods	• events happen in order
• people often work on several projects at once	• high value on punctuality, planning (sticking to plans)
• plans and commitments are viewed as flexible	• Respect and stay on schedule
• interruptions are acceptable and managed easily	• "Time is money" principle
• aim to build long-term relationships	• concentrate on the task at hand
• build life-long relationships	• build short-term relationships
• relations focused	• job and plan focused

Source: author own study based on Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2020), Hall (1983)

As mentioned before, synchronically oriented people view past, present, and future as being interrelated. They usually have a multi-tasking approach and do several things at once. For them, time is flexible and intangible. They are not concerned about punctuality. Time commitments are desirable rather than absolute, plans are easily changed as the value is placed on the satisfactory relation with others (table 1).

We cannot say that deadline-oriented cultures aren't concerned about doing a job well or nurturing relationships, but getting the job done on time is the primary driver of being “the first to the market”. It can often impact negatively relationships. Time often literally means money, in terms of costs, profit margins, and fighting the competitors for market share.

The differing cultural approaches to time often lead to conflicts between cultures because our values are at stake. In polychronic cultures, it's usually not a big deal if you interrupt someone who is busy, or turn up late to a meeting. In monochronic cultures, both would be seen as disrespectful and poor behavior.

In polychronic cultures it's usually important not to skip straight to business without first establishing relationships. In a monochronic work context, great value may be placed upon adherence to deadlines, such as finishing a meeting on time. In a polychronic culture, this may be seen as less critical and interpersonal interaction is valued above schedules and deadlines.

But the modern world isn't divided into either extreme (Pirlog, 2021). Cultures tend to exist along a spectrum (fig. 1, 2). When it comes to their attitude to time, for example, in Japan while it's considered important to stick to schedules (a monochronic characteristic), the culture also values relationships and prefers to discuss matters in depth (these are both polychronic traits).

Time orientation

Modern societies have to maintain some links with their own past while dealing with the challenges of the present and the future. They prioritize these existential goals differently.

Societies that have low score on this dimension, prefer to maintain time honoured traditions and norms while viewing societal change with suspicion.

The cultures, which demonstrate high scores, on the other hand, have a more pragmatic approach: they encourage preference and efforts in modern education as a method to prepare for the future.

Geert Hofstede developed the concepts of short-term and long-term time orientation.

The dimension of long-term orientation and short-term orientation deals with

the different ways cultures view time and the importance of the past, present and the future (table 2).

Long-term orientation is when people are focused on the future. "Long Term Orientation stands for the fostering of virtues oriented towards future rewards, in particular, perseverance and thrift. Its opposite pole Short Term Orientation, stands for the fostering of virtues related to the past and present, in particular, respect for tradition, preservation of 'face,' and fulfilling social obligations" (Hofstede *et al*, 2010).

Short-term orientation is when a person is focused on the present or past and considers them more important than the future.

In the business context, the dimension analyzed by Hofstede is referred to as “short-term/normative versus long-term/pragmatic”.

Table 2. Characteristics of Long and Short Oriented Cultures

Long-time oriented cultures	Short-term oriented cultures
• prefer thrift, effort to obligations	• have strong convictions and emphasize rights and values
• ask more “What” and/or “How”	• ask more “Why”
• have inclination to compromise	• are less willing to compromise, as it may be seen as a sign of weakness
• tend toward modesty	• tend to over appreciate themselves and their skills/abilities
• emphasis on persistence	• emphasis on quick results
• personal adaptability is important	• personal steadfastness and stability important
• relationships are managed by status	• status is not a major issue in relationships
• leisure time is not very important	• leisure time is important
• good or evil depends on the circumstances	• belief in absolutes concerning good or evil

Source: Author own work based on Hofstede *et al*. (2010)

Cultures demonstrating short-term orientation will be more concerned about the past and present and will concentrate their efforts and beliefs on matters related to the short-term. People value tradition,

the current social hierarchy and fulfilling the social obligations, they care more about immediate gratification than long-term fulfillment.

Cultures demonstrating a long-term time orientation are more concerned about the future and focus their efforts on future-orientated projects and goals, they are ready to delay short-term material or social success or even emotional gratification in order to prepare for the future. If they have this cultural perspective, they value persistence, saving and being able to adapt, perseverance.

Trompenaars theory on time dimension, also reflects the relative importance given to past, present and future.

In case a culture is predominantly oriented towards the past, the future is often seen as a repetition of past experiences. In a culture predominantly oriented towards the present, day-by-day experiences tend to direct people's lives. In a future-oriented culture, most human activities are directed toward future prospects. In this case, the past is not considered to be vitally significant to the future.

In business, this may manifest:

- for past oriented cultures as emphasis on projects successfully completed as evidence of capability;
- for present societies as a "come and see what we are doing now" approach;
- for future oriented cultures through emphasis on research and innovation.

According to Zimbardo and Boyd (2008), people look differently at time based on cultural and individual values:

- ✓ Past-oriented (negative or positive): people remember all the good old times, successes, happy birthdays while other people focus only on regrets, failure and all the things that went wrong.
- ✓ Present-focused (hedonists and fatalists) the hedonists live for pleasure and avoid pain. The fatalists are present oriented because they say, "It doesn't pay to plan" My life is fated by my religion – fated by my poverty – fated by the conditions that I'm living under."
- ✓ Focused on the future depending on religion life begins after the death of the mortal body.
- ✓ Sense of duration: Time duration is totally a function of whether you're bored, in pain, excited or not.
- ✓ Pace of life: for some people time is money and think it has to be spent wisely and are multi-tasking oriented, while for others, time is unlimited and they focus more on people and building relationships than being on time for any appointment

Conclusions

- Nowadays, increasing workloads, new information constantly being received, overlapped obligations of the globalized routine lead to stress that can endanger physical and mental health. For this reason, one of the secrets of success is knowledge of temporal profile of people to interact and its efficient and rational use.
- Attitudes towards time (punctuality, responsibility to obligations, compromise) is culturally determined and understanding the values and assumptions of a culture places on the temporal profile the role to facilitate policies that enhance the quality of peoples' lives.
- It's helpful to have a level of self-awareness when dealing with a culture from the opposing end of the spectrum described in the paper. Recognizing approach should help to communicate more effectively and understand that your values are not necessarily shared by your partners. It's important to find a way to work together in cross-cultural situations and negotiate towards a mutually-agreed approach.
- When these differing priorities (task/time versus relationship) are unclear or not taken into account (ex. monochronists may view polychronists as undisciplined, lazy, irresponsible and

untrustworthy, while polychronists may consider monochronists to be obsessed with rules and formalities, and emotionally cold), the result is misunderstandings among individuals from different cultures that can lead to frustration, loss of trust between teams, missed targets and goals, and even financial penalties.

- Time management techniques and tools (planning, negotiations, meeting deadlines) depend on the temporal profile of people. Recognizing whether you are dealing with a polychronic or monochronic culture with a specific temporal orientation (present, past, future) and understanding the differences in how time and relationships are valued is crucial to being able to deal effectively across cultures.

REFERENCES:

- Fulmer, A. C.; Crosby, B. 2014. Cross-cultural Perspectives on Time, *Time and Work, Volume 2*. Routledge. pp. 63–85, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/273382690_Cross-cultural_Perspectives_on_Time (accessed 11 september 2023)
- Levine, R. V., 2023. Time and culture. In R. Biswas-Diener & E. Diener (Eds), *Noba textbook series: Psychology*. Champaign, IL: DEF publishers. Retrieved from <http://noba.to/g6hu2axd> (accessed 10 september 2023)
- Hall, E. T., 1983. *The dance of life: The other dimension of time*. Garden City: Anchor Press
- Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G. J., Minkov, M., 2010. *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. 3rd Edition. USA: McGraw-Hill.
- Pirlog, A., 2021. Intercultural profile of managers in the republic of Moldova in the context of the Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner theory of cultural dimensions. *Economy and Sociology*, nr. 2, pp. 70-84. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36004/nier.es.2021.2-06> (accessed 1 september 2023)
- Samovar L. A., Porter R. E., McDaniel E. R., 2011. *Intercultural communication: A reader*. pp. 280–286. Cengage Learning, ISBN 0495898317.
- Stolarski, M., Fieulaine, N., and van Beek, W., 2015. *Time perspective theory; Review, research and application: Essays in honor of Philip G. Zimbardo*. Springer International Publishing/Springer Nature. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-07368-2> (accessed 20 september 2023)
- Trompenaars, F., Hampden-Turner, Ch., 2020. *Riding the Waves of Culture, Fourth Edition: Understanding Diversity in Global Business*. 4th Edition, McGraw Hill
- Zimbardo, P., & Boyd, J., 2008. *The time paradox*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.