

TUTORIAL
4.12

The concept of time

This tutorial introduces another of the fundamentals of culture: the concept of time. The two poles of this dimension - *time-oriented* and *event/people oriented* - are defined and explored.

Introduction

Imagine that you are wanting to buy a coffee, and you are walking toward the counter in a small café. But it is busy, and there are four other people converging on the counter at the same time. What would be the right way for you to arrange yourselves in order to get served?

In my culture, we would all try to think about precisely who was first, and in what order the other people came into the shop and approached the counter. Often without any verbal communication, we would make sure that we were all in the correct chronological order and then we would queue up at the counter to be served in that order. If someone obviously skipped ahead in the queue, we would consider that to be “pushing in” and we would feel irritated with the offender - we might even say something about it. Once we are at the counter we would expect the undivided attention of the server until our order was completed.

But on what basis do people in my culture queue for coffee? Queuing or not queuing is a culturally determined behaviour based on cultural values. It has quite a bit to do with the value placed on time. Where time is highly valued, a chronological, orderly approach to being served in any setting is the norm. Queuing is an expression of the high value placed on time. Because everyone’s time is valuable, whoever arrived first should be served first, and those who arrived later should be served later.

In other cultures the more important factors to consider - other than who arrived first - are things such as who has seniority or who deserves more respect, and maintaining a relationship with all the customers. These cultures place a higher priority on events or people, rather than on time.

Concepts of Time

Cultures differ greatly in how people conceive of and handle time, and how their concept of time affects their interactions with each other. The two poles of this dimension - *time-oriented* and *event/people oriented* are described below:

Time-oriented

Time is the 'given' - the most important factor - and people are the variable. The needs of people are adjusted to suit the demands of time - schedules, deadlines, etc. Time is quantifiable, and a limited amount of it is available. People do one thing at a time and finish it before starting something else, regardless of circumstances.

Below are some behaviours or characteristics that are *more likely* to apply to a culture where time is the priority:

- 'Time is money'. Time is given a high value in time-focused cultures.
- To be late is rude. Being 'on time' is important in time-oriented cultures.
- Schedules are sacred, because time depends on schedules.
- The focus is on the task, getting the job done. A time-focus thinks less about people, more about goals.
- Plans are fixed, once agreed upon. Changes in plans upset time-focused people who live by their plans.
- Placing a priority on time is consistent with an individualist viewpoint, because it takes other people into account less than people-focused cultures.
- Having to wait is an insult, because being late is rude in a time-focused culture.
- Interruptions are bad because they upset the schedule.
- People stand in line. Being waited on one at a time is time-focused behavior.

Event/People-oriented

Time is the servant and tool of people. Time is adjusted to suit the needs of people. More time is always available, and you are never too busy. People often have to do several things simultaneously, as required by circumstances. It's not necessary to finish one thing before starting another, nor to finish your business with one person before starting in with another.

Below are some behaviours or characteristics that are *more likely* to apply to a culture where events and people are more important than time:

- Being made to wait is normal and waiting isn't bad in cultures where being on time is less important.

- Interruptions are part of life. Upsetting schedules doesn't matter where schedules aren't that important anyway.
- The focus is on the person and establishing a relationship because people have more value than time.
- Placing a priority on the person is consistent with a collectivist viewpoint, because collectivists are more attuned to the needs of others.
- Deadlines are an approximation because being on time (adhering to deadlines) is not as crucial in a people-focused world.
- To be late is to be late - it doesn't have any other meaning. Being late matters less where time matters less.
- Plans are always changing. When time isn't the priority, plans can change more easily because schedules are not the determining factor.
- People are never too busy to spend time with other people, there is always enough time in a people-focused world.

Below is a diagram of *general tendencies* in regard to time for various cultures, of course generalisations really can't be made, but these are cultural tendencies.



How about you?

The exercise below can help you to discover whether your own behaviour tends to be more time-focused or people-focused. It is important to consider where your cultural tendencies lie in regard to this area, particularly if you are considering working with people of another culture, or living in a community that has a different value of time. Being aware that there are widely differing views on the value of time, and what your particular view is, can help you to avoid misunderstandings and frustration. Knowing your own point of view and seeing it from the other person's point of view is a big step to becoming a part of your new community.

After reading the paired statements below (a. and b.), choose the one that best describes the action you would take or the way you feel about the particular topic.

- 1a. People should stand in line so they can be waited on one at a time.
- 1b. There's no need to stand in line - people will be waited on when they are ready.

2a. Interruptions should be avoided wherever possible.

2b. Interruptions usually cannot be avoided and are often quite beneficial.

3a. It's more efficient if you do one thing at a time.

3b. I can get as much done if I work on two or three things at the same time.

4a. It's more important to stick to the schedule.

4b. It's more important to complete the task, transaction, or conversation.

5a. Unanticipated events are hard to accommodate and should be avoided where possible.

5b. Unexpected things happen all the time; that's life.

6a. You shouldn't take a telephone call or acknowledge a visitor when you are meeting with another person.

6b. It would be rude not to take a phone call if I'm in, or to ignore a visitor who drops by.

7a. Deadlines are like a promise; many other things depend on them, so they should not be treated lightly.

7b. You shouldn't take deadlines too seriously; anything can happen. What's a deadline between friends?

8a. It's important, in a meeting or a conversation, not to become distracted or digress. You should stick to the agenda.

8b. Digressions, distractions are inevitable. An agenda is just a piece of paper.

9a. I tend to be task-oriented.

9b. I tend to be people-oriented.

10a. Personal talk should be saved for after hours or during lunch.

10b. Personal talk is part of the job.

Now that you have made your selections, calculate whether you came out more on the time- or event/people-oriented side. The behaviours listed under 'a' tend to be more characteristic of time-focused people. The behaviours listed under 'b' tend to be more characteristic of event/people-focused people. Keep in mind that there is nothing scientific about this exercise, that it doesn't prove anything about you. But it might give you some idea of your own

tendencies and some food for thought as to how you might relate in another cultural context.



DISCUSSION POINTS

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1. Some analysts today say that younger people - those under 40 - in Western cultures are tending toward being less rigid with time. They say this is because older generations were not exposed to the mass media of today where multi-tasking and moving from one thing to another is commonplace. Do you agree with this, and if so what evidence or examples can you give?
2. What specific challenges in the area of time do you think would face someone from Germany moving to the Arab world to do business?



ACTIVITIES

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1. Try to find as many examples as you can in the real world of time-focused or event/people-focused behaviours, as you go about your life this week. List the behaviours you noted and describe how they illustrate the underlying value of time.
2. When living in a cross-cultural community, it is often necessary for people to change their schedule to fit in to their new community and to be able to spend more time with local people. Choose two of your normal activities and for one week, change the time that you do them, for example:
 - have your evening meal an hour earlier or an hour later than normal,
 - take a walk around your community when your favourite TV show is on,
 - wash your laundry at a laundromat rather than at home,
 - buy meat, vegetables and bread from small stores rather than at the supermarket,

- visit a neighbour or friend, or go out for a meal with them, at a time when you would normally be at home.