

Article Reviewed: “Monochronic and Polychronic Time,” by Edward T. Hall, 1983,
Intercultural Communication Reader

Hall’s article explains much about Kipling’s poetic claim that East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet: East and West are on different schedules!

Hall’s discussion of polychronic time (P-time) and monochronic time (M-time) are enlightening. His descriptions of P-time and M-time help us understand some of the differences between, for example, Arab culture and Western culture. A case in point is the *majlis* held by the Saudi king and Arab sheiks, where a large chamber is set aside on particular days of the week for everybody to meet with and talk to the leader and to various other officials. Typically there are multiple conversations going on simultaneously. The sheik will greet person A warmly and talk with person A intently for a few minutes, then person B will stride up to the sheik and the sheik will greet person B warmly and shift his attention to person B for awhile then back to person A, carrying on two threads of conversation at the same time. The effect is one of vertical layers of concurrent time rather than the Western view of time as sequential.

P-time also explains why P-time cultures seem so careless about business appointments. Arabs typically are difficult if not impossible to pin down when asked for an appointment or when asked for a time commitment. When working for an Arab manager in Jeddah, I simply could not get him to focus on a production schedule necessary for developing some proposals. His attitude was that what needs to get done will get done. Scheduling what needs to get done would not help much since plans can change depending on what might or might not happen tomorrow.

Hall’s discussion of time concepts certainly goes a long way toward explaining culture shock, and his discussion also leads me to wonder if the two antithetical time concepts contribute to jet lag. If the geographic East and the geographic West follow two antithetical time concepts, then perhaps the respective time zones, which are certainly geographic, might influence the concepts. Depending on an alarm clock to awaken you in the morning in a New York hotel, arranging your day according to dining room hours, airport shuttle schedules, airplane boarding deadlines, and airplane flight times is antithetical to the seeming laissez-faire attitude that greets the New York-originated flier upon arrival in Arabia. In M-time New York, people strive to control events; in P-time Arabia, people just let events happen.

Though M-time as a factor in jet lag might be a flimsy conceit, P-time as a contributor to Islamic fatalism is not. A willingness to let events determine one’s daily activities, which Hall implies is characteristic of P-time cultures, is quite compatible with the Islamic concept that events happen according to God’s will. Because the schedules of people can be pre-empted at any time by the whims of Allah, why put much importance on schedules, or on organization for that matter?

Hall’s conclusion that P-time is somehow in the natural order of things does not hold water. In reality, time IS a ribbon, in that the rhythm of nature is sequential. There would be no such thing as history if time were not sequential. The sun does not rise and set simultaneously (except possibly for an astronaut orbiting the Earth at a certain height and angle); morning always precedes afternoon; your visitor must arrive before she can leave; your body must ingest before it can excrete; and so on. On the other hand, the P-time concept overlaid on metaphysics—or on

relativity?—makes it much easier to believe there might be such phenomena as parallel universes or time moving at different rates in different places simultaneously.

Hall opines that the M-time concept must be learned whereas the P-time concept is inherent. But if we admit that time is in fact monochronic, isn't polychronic time the concept that needs to be learned? In fact, *both* time concepts are culture-specific and culture is by definition learned. Or do we take the reactionary stance and admit that cultural behavior is in fact determined by our race? Would Hall deny that a European infant (M-time culture) raised in Arabia by Arabs (P-time culture) would learn the polychronic time concept?

In a cultural comparison between Eastern philosophy and Western philosophy, does P-time have any connection with the Buddhist concept of cyclic history? That is, reality happens in cycles, and what was once will be again. If time and events repeat themselves, why give so much importance—as M-time cultures do—to making a specific activity occur at a specific time?

Hall emphasizes that he is not making a value judgment, and it is not my intention to promote one time concept over another, but it does seem to me that a P-time culture would make it difficult for its members to form deep and lasting personal relationships. After all, if individuals in P-time cultures are subject to interruptions by other people as the norm, if they are being separated then reunited at random by events because they make no effort to control events, how can those individuals ever form bonds or develop a relationship?

It also seems to me that P-time cultures make it harder for individuals to focus their attention on any given task or subject of study. So perhaps students in P-time cultures find it harder to learn their lessons and do their homework.

Or are these just the (impatient) ruminations of a thoroughly and unrepentant M-time individual?