

Intercultural Competencies: Understanding Monochronic and Polychronic Cultures¹

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Introduction

This fourth publication in the Intercultural Competencies series provides valuable insights and recommendations on engaging various clientele by understanding and applying concepts related to monochronic vs. polychronic cultures.

Members of multinational teams likely have different perspectives on various factors stemming from their different cultural backgrounds (Arman & Adair, 2012). Florida is increasingly identified as one of the nation's most culturally varied states (Sadeh, 2020). Various communities represent distinctive expressions of their collective memory, histories, languages, beliefs, and values (Lartey, 2024). Recognizing the differences in time perception is crucial because time perception significantly influences cultural behaviors (Haynes et al., 1990). Understanding these differences is essential for managing resources and grasping how cultures structure their activities and approach development (Brislin & Kim, 2003).

Extension educators must enhance their readiness to serve various clientele by developing strategies that address clients' needs and fostering practical intercultural competencies (Diaz et al., 2022; Diaz et al., 2019; Suarez et al., 2020). This article focuses on an important aspect of intercultural competence: understanding monochronic and polychronic cultures. It also offers strategies for adapting behaviors to effectively connect with audiences from various cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, the article provides actionable recommendations for Extension professionals, including district and county directors, on integrating this material into their professional development plans and program designs.

Importance of Understanding Time Orientation

Time perception and use of time are deeply ingrained cultural values that vary across societies and can significantly influence group dynamics and the effectiveness of teams in multinational settings (Fulmer et al., 2014). Time-related differences among cultures affect

essential concepts such as time orientation, punctuality, and pace of life (Arman & Adair, 2012). How an individual perceives time is shaped by their culture's overall perception of time and background (Shipp et al., 2021). As a result, varying time perceptions can present challenges in international communication, particularly when individuals from different cultural contexts interact (Liu et al., 2023).

One useful framework for understanding these differences is Edward Hall's concept of monochronic and polychronic time (Hall, 1990; Hall, 1997). This framework remains highly relevant for the public and Extension agents because it helps explain how individuals from different cultural backgrounds approach time (Tomaselli, 2022; Urse & Ciortescu, 2021). For instance, an Extension professional from a monochronic culture who values punctuality and task-focused time management may view a colleague from a polychronic culture — where time is more fluid, and relationships take precedence — as disorganized or disrespectful of their time. On the other hand, the Extension professional from the polychronic culture might perceive the monochronic individual as overly rigid or impersonal, prioritizing tasks over relationship building and flexibility. Understanding these differing time orientations can help Extension agents navigate cultural differences, fostering better communication and collaboration in distinct communities.

These differing perceptions of time can create misunderstandings and impact the success of intercultural interactions (Fulmer et al., 2014). As Ting-Toomey and Chung (2012) suggest, these differences can influence power dynamics within intercultural exchanges, further complicating communication. Additionally, a culture's "pace of life," which reflects its temporal norms and the ways in which its members experience time (Levine & Bartlett, 1984), plays a critical role in shaping interaction styles. This includes factors such as the speed of conversation, tolerance for pauses, and ways people approach time management.

Given these complexities, understanding time-related cultural nuances is crucial for fostering positive and

productive interactions across cultures (Hall, 1976). Recognizing these differences can lead to more effective communication, stronger relationships, and improved outcomes in international business and collaborative settings (Fulmer et al., 2014).

Definition of Time Orientations: Monochronic and Polychronic Cultures

Hall (1989) proposed the concepts of monochronic and polychronic to explain the differences in task switching and time usage. Hall argues that people with monochronic time orientation tend to prefer to do one thing at a time and rely on schedules and segmentation. On the other hand, people with polychronic time orientation tend to do several things at once, stressing the completion of transactions rather than adherence to preset schedules.

Hall (1989) asserts that individuals from North America and Europe are likely monochronic, whereas individuals from Latin America and Mediterranean countries tend to have a more polychronic orientation. Hall's concept of time orientation has also attracted the attention of cross-cultural scholars. For example, Brislin and Kim (2003) suggested a closely related dichotomy between clock and event time. Clock-time cultures, such as in the United States, adhere to schedules and punctuality, whereas event-time cultures, such as in Latin America, go more with the natural flow of social events. Although perhaps still prevalent, these distinctions may blur with globalization and the advance of technology and multitasking in all developed countries.

Components of Monochronic and Polychronic Time Orientations

Cultures vary in how they understand and use time. Monochronic cultures value schedules and efficiency with a rigid approach to time, while polychronic cultures prioritize relationships and multitasking (Hall, 1989).

1. Time Perception

Monochronic

In monochronic cultures, time is viewed as linear and structured, focusing on one task at a time and placing a high value on punctuality and schedules.

How to Identify

- Preference for finishing tasks sequentially.
- Discomfort with schedule disruptions.
- Frequent use of "time is money."
- Meetings and events start on time.
- Strong emphasis on planning for efficiency.

Example: Large-Scale Citrus Production in Florida

Florida's citrus industry is dominated by large-scale operations that rely on precise irrigation, pest control, and harvesting schedules. Growers operate on strict timelines to maximize efficiency and productivity. These farmers expect Extension programming to be well-organized, starting and ending on time, and offering actionable insights that align with their busy schedules. Extension agents should provide structured training sessions, use appointment-based consultations, and avoid last-minute changes that could disrupt the workflow.

Polychronic

In polychronic cultures, time is perceived as more fluid and flexible.

How to Identify

- Openness to interruptions and multitasking.
- Tendency to adjust schedules for social obligations.
- Less rigid approach to deadlines.
- Meetings start and end flexibly.
- Greater importance placed on personal commitments over strict timing.

Example: Migrant Farmworker Communities in Florida

Migrant farmworkers often work in unpredictable conditions, adjusting their schedules based on crop availability and family responsibilities. Many workers value face-to-face interactions and may prioritize social obligations over strict adherence to meeting times. Extension agents should work through trusted community leaders to ensure that outreach efforts are effective. Providing flexible training opportunities, such as evening or weekend workshops and informal discussions at work sites, can improve participation and engagement.

2. Task Management

Monochronic

Tasks are completed one at a time, and interruptions reduce productivity.

How to Identify

- Strong preference for detailed schedules.
- Frustration with last-minute changes.
- Predictability and order in work processes.
- Work assignments are clearly defined with minimal overlap.
- Performance is evaluated based on timely task completion.

Example: Precision Dairy Farming in Florida

Dairy farms operate on a rigid feeding and milking schedule, often relying on automated systems for efficiency. Farmers in this sector prefer meetings that provide concise, data-driven information and align with their daily routines. Extension agents should schedule training sessions at convenient times, offer structured

agendas, and focus on clear takeaways that fit within the farmers' scheduled breaks.

Polychronic

Task management is fluid and adaptable, allowing multiple tasks to be managed simultaneously.

How to Identify

- Willingness to switch between tasks.
- Acceptance of interruptions.
- Less emphasis on strict deadlines.
- Success is measured by adaptability rather than efficiency.
- Meetings often evolve into broader discussions.

Example: Small-Scale Organic Farming in Florida

Organic farmers often have a dynamic daily routine, adjusting their tasks based on weather conditions, customer demand, and labor availability. They may prefer discussions that evolve naturally rather than rigid presentations. Extension agents should facilitate open-ended conversations, be prepared to discuss multiple topics within a single session, and adjust their approach to meet farmers' immediate needs and interests.

3. Approach to Time

Monochronic

Time is treated as a fixed resource, and deadlines are strictly followed.

How to Identify

- Strong adherence to deadlines.
- Changes viewed as inefficiencies.
- Meetings follow set agendas.
- Time is segmented into structured blocks.
- Punctuality is considered a sign of professionalism.

Example: Commercial Vegetable Production in Florida

Commercial vegetable growers follow detailed planting, irrigation, and harvesting schedules to meet market demands. These growers expect Extension services to provide timely and efficient assistance with training sessions that respect their schedules. Agents should communicate through emails or scheduled meetings, ensuring that information is delivered concisely and without unnecessary delays.

Polychronic

Time is flexible and situational, with schedules serving as guidelines rather than as fixed constraints.

How to Identify

- Plans adjust based on relationships and events.
- Delays are common and not seen as negative.
- External factors such as seasons or social events influence scheduling.

- Meetings may shift focus based on participant interests.
- Social interactions frequently influence work timelines.

Example: Indigenous Agroforestry in Florida

Many Indigenous farmers practice agroforestry based on natural rhythms and seasonal changes rather than strict timelines. Community discussions and ecological factors influence decision making. Extension agents should focus on relationship building, incorporating traditional knowledge into discussions, and remaining flexible with scheduling to accommodate the community's approach to time.

4. Agenda and Scheduling

Monochronic

Planning and scheduling are structured, with fixed agendas governing meetings.

How to Identify

- Meetings follow strict schedules.
- Agendas confirmed well in advance.
- Participants expect clear time allocations for topics.
- Changes to meeting structure are uncommon.
- Efficiency is prioritized over discussion.

Example: Florida Agricultural Policy Meetings

Government agencies and industry stakeholders require structured meetings with predefined agendas. Extension agents engaging in these settings should prepare well, ensuring that discussions remain on track and time constraints are respected. Clear action points and follow-up plans should be established.

Polychronic

Scheduling is adaptable, allowing room for adjustments based on participant needs.

How to Identify

- Discussions extend beyond planned topics.
- Relationship building influences scheduling.
- Agendas serve as loose guidelines rather than as strict plans.
- Meetings often start with social interaction before business.
- Event timing can shift based on community needs.

Example: Community-Based Extension Workshops

Workshops in rural communities often extend beyond their planned duration based on participant engagement. Attendees may arrive late or bring up additional discussion topics. Extension agents should allocate extra time for interaction, encourage informal networking, and be patient with flexible scheduling to accommodate the community's engagement style.

5. Relationship vs. Task Orientation

Monochronic

Task completion is prioritized, and business discussions are focused on efficiency.

How to Identify

- Business discussions are direct.
- Socializing is minimal in professional settings.
- Emphasis on professionalism and efficiency.
- Success is measured by task completion and measurable results.
- Decisions are typically made quickly with minimal negotiation.

Example: Agribusiness Transactions in Florida

Large agribusinesses, such as commodity traders and distributors, prioritize fast, data-driven decision making. Efficiency is key, and interactions are often transactional rather than based on relationships. Extension agents should use concise presentations, provide factual information, and avoid unnecessary socializing in professional settings.

Polychronic

Relationships influence business interactions, and trust building plays a crucial role.

How to Identify

- Business discussions begin with an informal conversation.
- Personal relationships influence decisions.
- Negotiations may take longer due to trust-building processes.
- Success is often defined by long-term partnerships rather than immediate outcomes.
- Work and social relationships are deeply intertwined.

Example: Small-Scale Cooperative Farming in Florida

Farmers in cooperative networks place high value on trust and long-term partnerships. Business discussions often start with informal conversations, and decisions take time as relationships develop. Extension agents should invest in relationship-building efforts, attend social events, and engage in ongoing dialogue before introducing new technologies or business models.

6. Workplace and Communication Style

Monochronic

Workplace interactions are structured, and communication is clear and direct.

How to Identify

- Preference for direct communication.
- Clear distinction between work and personal matters.
- Meetings follow strict agendas.
- Written documentation is often preferred over verbal agreements.

- Feedback is typically given in a structured manner.

Example: Florida's Agricultural Research Institutions

Researchers and policymakers expect formal communication with well-documented evidence. Meetings follow strict agendas, and decisions are based on data. Extension agents should present findings in a structured format, using reports, data visualizations, and direct communication methods.

Polychronic

Workplace interactions are dynamic, and communication is contextual and relational.

How to Identify

- Indirect, relationship-based communication.
- Work discussions often include social elements.
- Verbal agreements hold significant weight over written contracts.
- Context and nonverbal cues influence communication.
- Feedback is often delivered through storytelling or indirect messaging.

Example: Farmers' Markets and Local Food Networks

Farmers' markets are social and economic spaces where vendors casually converse with customers and peers. Business negotiations may be informal, relying on trust rather than contracts. Extension agents should be prepared for dynamic, relationship-driven discussions, using storytelling and informal dialogue to convey information effectively.

Preventing Challenges in Monochronic and Polychronic Encounters

Cultures differ significantly in their perception and use of time. Understanding these differences, particularly between monochronic and polychronic time orientations, is crucial for successful cross-cultural interactions. Below are a few potential challenges you may encounter when interacting with people who have different perceptions of time.

Communication Styles

Monochronic with Polychronic

If you are from a monochronic culture, where time is viewed as a resource to be managed strictly, and you are interacting with a colleague from a polychronic culture, where relationships and flexibility take precedence, you may need to allocate extra time for relationship building. Be prepared for deviations from the agenda during community meetings or training sessions. Understand that the focus may shift from the task at hand to addressing relationship dynamics or community needs.

Polychronic with Monochronic

If you are from a polychronic culture and you are working with someone from a monochronic culture, demonstrate respect for their schedules and deadlines by arriving on time and being prepared for a more focused, task-oriented discussion. Be mindful of keeping the session structured, respecting time limits, and ensuring that goals are accomplished as planned.

Balancing Flexibility with Program Goals and Deadlines

Monochronic with Polychronic

If you are an Extension professional from a monochronic culture working with a colleague from a polychronic culture, establish clear objectives early in your collaboration, but allow flexibility in how those objectives are met. For example, during the planning phase of a new agricultural Extension program, be patient with changes in timelines, as community members may prioritize relationship building and group consensus over adhering to a strict schedule. Regular check-ins can help ensure progress despite these shifts.

Polychronic with Monochronic

If you are an Extension professional from a polychronic culture and are working with someone from a monochronic culture, demonstrate your commitment to deadlines by adhering to the structured timelines and completing tasks as planned. While you may prefer flexibility, prioritize the alignment of goals and deadlines to ensure that the program progresses smoothly. For example, ensure that training materials are ready on time and that appointments with farmers or community leaders are kept.

Addressing Misunderstandings without Compromising Program Integrity

Monochronic with Polychronic

If you are an Extension professional from a monochronic culture and you encounter a misunderstanding with a colleague from a polychronic culture, approach it with neutrality. Focus on the facts of the situation rather than rigidly adhering to rules or processes. For example, if an agricultural training session starts late due to an unexpected community event, calmly discuss how to adjust the schedule without compromising the quality of the session. Encourage open dialogue to clarify intentions and realign expectations.

Polychronic with Monochronic

If you are an Extension professional from a polychronic culture and are working with someone from a monochronic culture, recognize that they may expect structured and rule-based solutions when resolving conflicts. When addressing misunderstandings, communicate clearly and actively listen to their concerns.

Acknowledge the importance of timelines and be open to compromise. For example, if a community engagement session runs over time, work with the monochronic professional to develop solutions that address community concerns while also respecting the need for time management.

Avoiding Enabling Counterproductive Behaviors

Monochronic with Polychronic

If you are from a monochronic culture and are interacting with someone from a polychronic culture, set clear expectations for program activities early and reinforce them consistently. For example, if you are leading a youth agriculture program, be clear about when tasks need to be completed, but also acknowledge the flexible nature of relationships that may arise. Offer constructive feedback about how adhering to deadlines can lead to more successful program outcomes while respecting cultural differences.

Polychronic with Monochronic

If you are from a polychronic culture and are working with someone from a monochronic culture, respect the established boundaries and expectations regarding deadlines and schedules. Adapt where necessary, but recognize that maintaining structure is often essential for ensuring program success. For example, if you are coordinating a cross-cultural agriculture workshop, respect your monochronic colleague's desire for time-focused agendas and also gently remind your polychronic participants, whether they are fellow facilitators or workshop attendees, about the importance of staying on schedule to ensure all topics are covered.

Practical Recommendations for Extension Agents

Understand different work styles: Recognize that individuals from different cultures approach schedules, tasks, and relationships differently. Be aware of variations in punctuality and emphasis on workplace relationships, and avoid making assumptions about a team's culture and values. Assumptions can lead to misunderstandings.

Ask questions and actively listen: Proactively inquire about cultural norms and individual preferences related to time. Ask questions to identify and address needs effectively and maintain a productive environment.

Build relationships: Invest time in getting to know individuals from cultural backgrounds other than your own. Focusing on building trust and rapport is crucial for effective collaboration, especially in polychronic contexts.

Be flexible and open to change: Be willing to adjust your time styles depending on the specific situation. Be open to

change and demonstrate respect for cultural differences to create a more comprehensive work environment.

Apply knowledge to program design: Use your understanding of cultural time orientations when designing and implementing cross-cultural programs. Be sensitive to these nuances to ensure your programs are culturally relevant, respectful, and impactful.

Do not stereotype: Learn from generalities about other cultures, but do not use those generalities to stereotype. Relying on stereotypes may cause you to misread people. Referring to stereotypes or letting them influence our behavior and understanding can significantly and negatively impact our relationships with others.

Conclusion

By understanding monochronic and polychronic time orientations, Extension professionals can better anticipate how cultural perceptions of time shape communication, decision making, and engagement behaviors. Applying this knowledge allows Extension agents to analyze and predict how individuals from different cultural backgrounds approach schedules, tasks, and relationships.

Recognizing the potential impact of these time orientations on intercultural interactions enables stakeholders to adapt their communication styles and expectations, fostering more positive and productive relationships.

Applying this understanding of cultural time orientations is crucial for designing and implementing effective cross-cultural programs. Agents can ensure that their programs are culturally relevant, respectful, and impactful by being sensitive to these nuances.

Summary of Key Takeaways

Cultures exhibit varied perceptions and uses of time, notably through monochronic (linear, task-focused) and polychronic (flexible, relationship-focused) orientations, significantly influencing intercultural interactions. These differences can lead to misunderstandings; thus, there is a crucial need to understand these cultural nuances to foster positive and productive relationships.

Future research could explore the nuances of time perception within specific cultural subgroups, the impact of globalization and technology on time orientations, and the development of more comprehensive training models for enhancing intercultural competence in time-related contexts. This knowledge can be applied to develop resources and strategies that can support Extension agents' effective navigation of cross-cultural situations.

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Tables

Table 1. Components of monochronic and polychronic time orientations (time perception, task management, approach to time, agenda and scheduling, relationship vs. task orientation, and workplace and communication style), along with Extension recommendations.

Aspect	Monochronic Example	Polychronic Example	Extension Recommendations
Time perception	The citrus industry's strict schedules	Migrant farmworkers' flexible timing	Offer structured training for large-scale farms; provide flexible outreach for farmworkers.
Task management	Precision dairy farming's rigid routines	Small-scale organic farming's adaptability	Provide concise, scheduled sessions for dairy farmers; allow open-ended discussions for organic farmers.
Approach to time	Commercial vegetable growers' fixed deadlines	Indigenous agroforestry's seasonal approach	Ensure punctuality for vegetable producers; integrate traditional knowledge for Indigenous communities.
Agenda and scheduling	Policy meetings with predefined agendas	Community workshops with flexible timing	Stick to formal schedules for policy settings; allow extra discussion time for community workshops.
Relationship vs. task orientation	Agribusiness transactions emphasizing efficiency	Cooperative farming emphasizing trust	Keep communication direct in agribusiness; invest in relationship building with cooperatives.
Workplace and communication style	Research institutions' structured reports	Farmers' markets' informal discussions	Use data-driven communication in research; engage in storytelling for local food networks.

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