

Cultural Translation/Comparison Assignment
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Polychronic/Monochronic time in Latin America and the United States

I. Introduction and background

There are a variety of dimensions to cultures that one can study in an attempt to understand the causes of conflict and misunderstanding that can occur between countries. These possible dimensions of study include (see Hofstede, Hall, and Ziegahn):

- **Monochronic vs. polychronic time**
- Uncertainty vs. avoidance
- Power vs. distance
- Individualism vs. collectivism
- Masculinity vs. femininity
- High vs. low context (field dependent vs. field independent)
- Egalitarianism vs. hierarchy
- Action vs. "being" orientation
- Change vs. tradition
- Relational vs. analytical

For the purposes of this study we will be focusing on the first listed dimension of polychronic versus monochronic time. The regions we will be comparing are the United States and Latin America, specifically the countries of Chile and Mexico.

Polychronic time is presumed to be used not only in Latin America but also in the Mediterranean, France, parts of Africa, Middle East, South Asia and parts of SE Asia. The word itself means "many" (poly) "time" (chronos). Based on a review of literature in this area (see reference list), more useful definition descriptors are listed below.

Polychronic Definition Descriptors (P-time):

- Agrarian society origins
- Rubber time; Chilean time, Land of Mañana referring to Mexico (not now; an indefinite future time, or tomorrow, Webster's, 1996), Malaysian time
- Relaxed sense of time, cyclical, spiral
- Put off till later what you can
- Do many things at once
- Time savored not "used"
- Highly distractible and subject to interruptions
- Consider time commitments an objective to be achieved if possible
- High context culture—already have information
- Committed to people and human relationships first
- Change plans often and easily
- Are more concerned with those closely related than with privacy
- Borrow and lend things often and easily
- Have strong tendency to build lifetime relationships
- Involve many people when completing a task
- More focused on process vs. product
- Public vs. private meetings
- Sense of self that incorporates other people
- Essay writing style indirect and circuitous
- Networks of personal contacts; don't like doing business with strangers (need 3rd party introduction)
- Meetings last longer—prefer face-to-face meetings to email and phone.

Monochronic time, which is presumed to be used in the United States, Western and Northern Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and perhaps Japan, is quite different. The word itself means "one" (mono) "time" (chronos). More useful definition descriptors are listed below.

Monochronic Definition Descriptors (M-time):

- Began in England with the industrial revolution; serves capitalism
- Time is something tangible that we spend or save
- Time is linear and segmented not fluid; take turns, sequential
- Time like a ribbon or road leading from past to future
- Dislike interruptions; focus on one thing at a time
- The completion of a task/deals comes first and relationships second
- Keeping to set plans and directions is more important than the process
- More aggressive in movements and faster lifestyle
- Take deadlines seriously
- Low context and need information

- Follow rules of privacy and don't like to disturb others
- Accustomed to short term relationships
- Life is compartmentalized
- Clock as sacred
- Follow agendas over spontaneity
- Direct and blunt
- Prefers written contracts over verbal agreements; reliance on written testing
- Schedule changes are upsetting
- Speed valued and linked to intelligence

One of our primary concerns in doing this study/paper besides comparing these two countries with the United States was to determine what if any differences might exist between Chile and Mexico in their use of polychronic time. While Chile has had much European settlement and intermarriage in its history, Mexico has not. So it is our hypothesis that Mexico uses polychronic time more often or in a deeper manner than Chile. Mexico has often been referred to as the land of "Mañana." Although Mañana technically translates as "tomorrow" in actual practice in Mexico it usually means "not today." "Mexican society operates within its own time frame. It leaves time for socializing and attending to personal affairs. It gives priority to living rather than to working." (Lenchek) Time in the United States however is valued as discrete, linear, and tangible. It is something that can be spent or saved. It is not something to be "savored" and people are constantly keeping track of it, nervous that they may have wasted it.

II. Methodology:

The method we used to explore these cultural differences in the use of time was to interview two individuals from Chile and two from Mexico. The Chilean subjects were middle-aged teachers visiting the United States for a summer English course. The

Mexicans included one dual Mexican/U.S, citizen who moved here 20 years ago and another still living there. The master list of questions from which questions were chosen by interviewers is listed below. Each Interviewer picked approximately 10 questions from the list below to use as a guide in encouraging discussion.

Interview questions for Chilean and Mexican subjects:

Social Situations

1. If meeting a friend for lunch how long will you wait for them if they are late? What about your boss, parent, student? Does your level of respect for someone effect how long you wait for him or her? Will they apologize for being late? Would you expect them to?
2. How do you feel if when talking to a clerk at a store or bank in your home country if they are also doing something else? What about interruptions?

Personal Style

3. Do you manage many things at once or one thing at a time? Give examples
4. Do you prefer to thoroughly read directions or get directions before doing something or just figure things out as you go? Give examples.
5. Do you always stick to your plans? If you planned to finish a work assignment but relatives popped in would you keep working or visit with them? Would you do both at the same time? Give examples.

Family Situations

6. Do you borrow or lend things often at home? Does it matter if it is from family vs. neighbors? How long do you keep it? Give examples.
7. Is it more important to go to your child's concert/soccer game/program or complete a work assignment on time? Give examples.
8. Do you prefer living alone or with other family? How often do you see/talk with your family members? Give examples.
9. Are your friendships life long or temporary? How do you maintain them? Give examples.

Work

10. In work situations do people prefer written communication or verbal?
11. If an office door at work is closed do you knock or come back later? What about visiting a house—do you knock or come back later?
12. Do you do most work with a group of people or alone? Which do you prefer?
13. Do you prefer to meet with peers or students or supervisors privately or in groups? Give examples.
14. Do people who live in cities use time more precisely and formally than in the countryside? Give examples.

Culture, religion, festivals

15. What are weddings like? How long do they last? Do invitations state starting and ending times?

16. What about funerals?
17. How do people celebrate Christmas and Easter? How much time is spent?
18. How long are church services? What about special services like baptisms?
How does time affect religious events?

Education

19. In classrooms do students work alone or in groups? Do teachers work alone?
20. Is there mass testing in your country? How is it done? What kind of time is given?

III. Results of Interview Process

In general moderate differences were found between Chile and Mexico but substantial differences between both of these countries and the United States in terms of time culture. We found that the term "Land of Mañana" to be accurate in describing Mexicans time experience and the phrase "Chilean time" (meaning flexible, informal, not precise) to be used by Chileans as compared to "English time" (precise, on time, formal). Both countries also exhibited differences in time culture between their countryside and city locations.

Chilean Interviews:

A. Social Situations (work, family, religious events, holidays)

As expected, the interviews with the Chilean subjects were informal, not especially orderly and succinct, took much longer than expected, and were rich with information. In general social terms they indicated that lateness in Chilean culture was

expected but with different time allowances depending on status. In city culture for example, if meeting a friend for lunch you would think nothing of their being 30 minutes late or visa versa. If meeting your boss however for lunch or for a meeting the general rule would be to not be more than 5 minutes late. Also the more formal the situation, the more promptness would be expected such as a Baptism or wedding. Parties were the one big difference in that it is typical for people to come 1 hour later than the suggested time. In the countryside culture time and lateness is even more relaxed. Because transportation may not usually exist people must walk to meet others. Therefore appointments are made "for the morning" or for the afternoon or for the evening. It is acceptable for you to show up anytime within those given parameters. In all of these situations the lateness would not be judged harshly but rather with an air of generosity of time. One concrete example of this relaxed attitude toward time is that city buses are never one time (airplanes and trains are however.) The Chilean subjects were absolutely amazed when visiting the U.S. that the buses were actually on time.

In U.S. culture the above is generally not so true depending on the situation. People are very concerned about what time it is and whether or not they or someone else is late.

In terms of personal style, Chileans also have a more fluid use of time. While they do consider it impolite to not have a clerk focus only on them when doing business, they consider it normal in social situations of many people for everyone to talk at once in different conversations. They also tend to work on many projects at

work at the same time without feeling overwhelmed or stressed unlike many people in the U.S. who prefer to work on one thing at a time. In fact there really is no good Spanish translation for “stick to your plans” in regards to perhaps being interrupted from working on a single item.

Generally speaking this value or norm of putting relationships with people first over the “sanctity” of the clock generates other kinds of behaviors as well. Process is very important in Chile—it is better to not finish a project than to offend co-workers or miss a child’s concert as a result. Chileans have very close family relationships and are very close and physically affectionate with co-workers and friends. One subject told how when working at home he would instantly drop whatever he was working on when someone showed up at his door unexpectedly. Surprise visits are considered the norm and in fact there is no good equivalent in Spanish for “pop over” or to pop in” on someone. Once again, time is fluid and not used but rather “lived.” In most U.S. households to not phone before coming over would be considered rude. On the same theme family members in Chile visit much more than their U.S. counterparts. Even busy professional families have dinner with their parents, children, and siblings at least once a week; time is not considered an issue. In many U.S. families it is often once a year. Children also do not usually move out of the house until 26, 27, or 28 and women typically not until they’re married. Most Chileans also prefer living with other people as opposed to alone in their own apartment as well as living near other relatives.

Another situation that illustrates the use of a polychronic time culture in Chile would be the use of borrowing and lending items without time limits. When asked

about this in the interview the Chilean subjects were very animated with laughter. This tendency to borrow and lend everything in sight is a bit of a joke in Chile. Family and friends and co-workers lend clothes, watches, wallets, fanny packs, household items, etc. Frequently things won't be returned for months at a time. It is not rude to ask for things back though but it is very hard I'm told because the individual asking for it back feels guilty. In the U.S. this is not usually the case because of our emphasis on privacy if nothing else. Borrowing someone else's personal possession seems either poor or rude.

Work behavior in Chile especially in cities where there is more European or "western" influence is similar to the U.S. As mentioned earlier, workers are expected to be if not on time, no more than 5 minutes late. In meeting with students however, a teacher usually would meet with a group of them and a colleague alone.

Perhaps due to its rich Roman Catholic past, religious festivals and holidays are frequent and "large" in Chile. Again, time is not a focus. Weddings for example will have a begin time on an invitation but no end time. Also, different than in the U.S. they will not begin until 9 p.m. and usually not end until 5 or 6 in the morning, with people leaving at all sorts of times. Seats are not assigned and there is food and dancing all night without any particular time clock to follow. Another difference would be that in Chile if a couple is poor, they will frequently have a group wedding at the church, which is much shorter (30 minutes) with no mass. More affluent couples have the church to themselves and the service goes for an hour and a half with a mass. It is rare for U.S. weddings to take this long regardless of class and status. It is also rare for "receptions"

to take as long and not have an official end time. Most rented Halls are only for a certain period of time and most caterers also like to serve food at specific times as well.

Funerals are another big event in Chile. They are generally preceded by a vigil (wake) for 2 days and 2 nights. The family is expected to prepare all the food and is considered an insult to bring food to them. Family members come from all over Chile for the event and generally stay up all night. On the actual burial day family and friends then go with the dead to the cemetery either on foot or by car. Like the above wedding description, these events are relevant to our study in that they suggest and “abundance of time.”

Other festivals that use abundant amounts of time are Christmas and Easter. Easter especially finds Chileans taking weeks off to observe the holiday with their families. In the U.S. these holidays are celebrated but only as a shadow of their celebration in Chile. Businesses do not want to give that much time off to workers as it is seen as time “wasted.”

B. Educational Situations

Traditionally Chile followed an authoritarian style of education where teachers lectured and students took notes and memorized them. Discussion, group work, and challenging the teacher was not the norm. Since 1996 however, there has been a reform movement, which has been encouraging more group work among students. Students in Chile take 2 main tests that have as a goal not to measure/rate their ability but rather to assess “how” they are learning. The first test is given 3 times in elementary/secondary school: in 4th grade, 8th grade, and 10th grade. The second test

is given before University admission and is a test of selection to indicate which college you should be placed in.

Mexican Interviews:

A. Social Situations

After speaking to Ramiro Cazares, a Mexican-American who currently lives in the U.S., but has dual citizenship with Mexico, we discovered some similarities as well as differences between the Mexican and Chilean cultures, as far as time is concerned.

In regards to social situations, it seems that Mexicans definitely ascribe to polychronic time. For example, it's not uncommon for most Mexicans, when waiting for a friend or family member who was supposed to meet them for lunch and hasn't yet arrived, to continue to wait for a considerable amount of time (a half hour to an hour). If the person is late, the Mexican figures there must be some good reason and finds something to do to occupy his time meanwhile, such as "chit-chatting" with other people, who might even be strangers. If it's his boss that he is supposed to meet and hasn't shown up, he'll wait for about 30 minutes and then call him to see if he's o.k. or if he has had some kind of a problem. Most Mexicans aren't in a hurry anyway, so they don't expect for others to be either. Ramiro said that his brother's family has always been known to be especially late to family functions. If thanksgiving dinner started at noon, his brother and his family would arrive at the dinner just after two o'clock. Though they currently live in the U.S., they've definitely always been on "Mexican time".

Another example of a social situation in which Mexicans are on their own time is the secretary or store clerk who is either filing her nails or on a personal phone call instead of attending to the customers. Mexicans are often times easily distracted, especially because they put more importance on socializing than on the task at hand. Most U.S. citizens find this to be rude and inconsiderate; however, it's part of the natural order of things in most of Mexico, with the occasional exception of some parts of big cities. People in Mexico City use time more precisely and formally than people who live in most of Mexico, which is rural. Inhabitants of Mexico City walk talk and live a faster-paced life than Mexicans from most other parts of Mexico.

Personal Style

As far as personal style is concerned, Mexicans are, for the most part, multi-taskers. It isn't hard for them to manage more than one thing at a time. That's why you'll visit a Mexican family and be in shock, for the first time, to hear that everyone is talking at once, carrying on multiple conversations, and still able to understand those they are talking to. For example, when my husband, Josh, first visited my family (in a town on the border of Mexico), he experienced a form of culture shock as he listened to my mom, six of my aunts, my cousin and me all talking at once, while having dinner. We were carrying on more than one conversation, and not getting a headache, like he was.

When asked if he is one who likes to thoroughly read directions, get directions before doing something, or figure out things along the way, Ramiro said that, in most situations, he'd rather "just do it" and figure it out along the way. He said that they

used to take family vacations, when his children were younger, during the summer time. Some-times they had a plan, but usually they didn't. They would just pack up, take off and see where the road led them. Sometimes they'd stop at K.O.A. campgrounds or hotels, if whoever was driving got sleepy enough, but they never really had a set plan or reservation when traveling.

Family

It's common for Mexicans to visit each other without any advance notice. If someone is at home, working on some kind of a project and someone "drops in" to visit, they'll more than likely just drop what they're doing, pull up some chairs and fix some- thing to drink and eat for their guests. If they had been working on something they know would not be boring to the visitor, they'll just keep working and even let the visitor help out or just "hang out" and talk to them. Sometimes the visitor will pitch in and help with the project.

When asked if he'd prefer to live alone or with family, either immediate or extended, Ramiro said he'd rather live with family. It's very common, in Mexico, for households to consist of a father, mother, the sons, daughters, sons- or daughters- in-law, grandchildren, one or more grandparents, an aunt or uncle, one or more cousins and even friends. The elderly almost always live with their children or grandchildren. There aren't any nursing homes in Mexico. Mexicans feel that it's their privilege to take care of their parents in their old age. It's also common for people who are related, and want to have their own houses, to live on the same street or around the corner from each other. Ramiro says he knows many people who grew up, got married and rented

or bought a house right next door or a couple of doors down the block from their parents and other family members.

Most Latin people form friendships that last a lifetime. Some of their best friends might also be cousins or other relatives. In weddings, the best man or maid of honor, or both, are oftentimes brothers, sisters and cousins. In fact, most Mexicans consider their friends to be so close that they regard them as a brother or sister (as family) and esteem them as such.

As stated before, Latin people love to get together to socialize. This often involves eating, playing music, dancing and playing games, just as family get-togethers and not necessarily for any particular reason. Some would say that Mexicans don't need an excuse, yet would use just about any excuse, to get together. It's very common for Mexican families to see each other once or twice a week. Some even see each other on a daily basis, since they take care of each other or each other's children. For example, Ramiro's mother took care of, some would say, even raised, two of her grandchildren for over seven years, until she passed away. A lot of Mexicans provide free or inexpensive day care to their relatives.

Work

In respect to work, Mexicans prefer verbal communication over written. This is also true if you were in an office setting and were to approach a person's office door, for example. It's the norm to walk up and knock on the door, sometimes while entering the office (this is acceptable if you know the person really well) and other times, it's more acceptable to wait for an o.k. to enter.

Most people would rather work in a group or with other people around them. Again, this is probably attributed to the fact that Mexicans are very sociable. However, it must be stated, that "getting the job done" isn't always top priority. There are sometimes interruptions that cause some to put work aside for a while, thus prolonging the completion of the task at hand.

Culture, Religion and Holidays

Wedding celebrations in Mexico last a lot longer than they do in the U.S. It's interesting to note that the invitations that are sent out to people usually don't have an ending time on them. They'll state the time of the wedding ceremony, which could be any time during the day, and then they'll state the time of the reception, which is almost always around 7:00 p.m., yet there won't be an ending time. The reason for that is because weddings last a long time. The bride and groom will leave the reception (which involves a dinner and a dance with a live band) to go on their honeymoon, and the family and friends will remain and "party" until 2:00 a.m. or 3:00 a.m. Then some family and friends stay even later into the morning to help clean up the reception hall. Some wedding receptions in certain parts of Mexico can last up to a whole week.

Funerals are also huge family gatherings. When a person dies, the relatives and friends visit the family's house and offer some kind of food. There will be enough food given to the family to last days and feed hundreds of people, since there will often be that many people that come and go during the next two weeks following the funeral. If the food runs out, someone in the extended family will go out and buy more or go home and make more. Sometimes, in Mexico, the body of the deceased person will be

kept in the house for a funeral. Not all people use funeral homes. To people of other cultures it may seem rude, but often times, after a funeral, you'll find family members (usually extended family) and friends joking around and laughing instead of being solemn or quiet. They'll either be reminiscing about the deceased person or they'll be talking about someone else entirely. They will either be situated outside the house or somewhere inside -- away from the mourning spouse or children or parents. Most of the immediate family of the deceased may all be congregated in the master bedroom or the bedroom of the deceased for a major part of the night of the funeral, crying together and comforting each other. In some parts of Mexico, it's a natural occurrence for younger men, 25-35 year olds, to be outside drinking to the point of getting drunk until all hours of the morning.

Some religious ceremonies in Mexico last a long time. There are also a lot of traditions that people have that are time consuming. Since most Mexicans still consider themselves Catholic, they follow traditions that the church teaches, some of which are reciting long prayers, such as the rosary, especially when someone dies. The rosary necklace is a beaded necklace that is used to say 7 different prayers a total of 150 times.

There are more Protestant churches in Mexico than there used to be and their church services sometimes last for hours at a time. Many Protestant or full gospel churches in Mexico don't put a limit on how long church services last, because they follow the leading of the Holy Spirit, the third person in the Trinity.

Holidays are special times in Mexico. There are quite a bit of them celebrated, such as Christmas, which is celebrated on December 25th, but also on January 6th, when Mexicans exchange presents. Many families take weeks off to travel and celebrate Christmas with their extended families. Holy week is the week that ends the 40-day Lent period and is celebrated in April. It includes Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Even though the holiday lasts for a week, most Mexican families take 2 weeks off from work to celebrate it. Because so many people do this, bosses have become accustomed to it and have learned to deal with it. There are so many other Mexican holidays, at least 25 major ones, that it seems like there is always something to celebrate "south of the (U.S.) border".

B. Educational Situations

Time is also a factor in the classrooms in Mexico. Either students will be late to school because they had chores to finish up at home or they missed the bus and had to walk, or they will just not go to school at all. Some students tend to miss a lot of school in many parts of Mexico, as well as while they are students in the U.S. There are various reasons for this. For one, there are times when many students of all ages, need to stay home to help their mothers with chores around the house. It's expected of them. Family and daily life is sometimes regarded as more important than education. Another reason students may miss school is because they have to stay home and take care of their younger siblings, because their mother needs additional help or has to work at a part-time or seasonal job outside of the house and the father is working at a job, outside of the house, as well. This is not to say that Mexicans don't

value education. They do value it. In fact, most Mexican parents want their children to have a better and easier life than they had and they know that getting an education is the way to that better life. Some of these families just can't afford to ignore what needs to be done at home to keep the family life running smoothly, so they are forced to keep their children home some days. However, since parents do value education, they also hold their children's teachers in high regard. When their children are at school, they are expected to be prompt, respectful and eager to learn. A parent would be embarrassed to find out his or her child was disrespectful toward the teacher.

IV. Implications

After exploring Latin cultures and polychronic time vs. monochronic time, we offer the following implications:

1. Because Latin students are considered unequal to their teachers, students are required to be prompt to show respect. This attitude may transfer to the new culture and the students may be prompt, however, because they value "involvement of people and completion of transactions rather than present schedules" (Zieghan, pg. 3), they may come to class late or miss days of school for reasons that would be considered unacceptable in US culture.
2. Students who come from a polychronic culture may need to dedicate more time to explore ideas rather than focusing on the goal. They "may learn better with informal education [approaches] linked to community life rather than" (Zieghan, pg. 4) the more rigid methods typical of US schools.

3. Because students in Mexico and Chile tend to be considered unequal to their teachers, don't be surprised, as a teacher, if students are unusually quiet. In traditional Latin cultures, students are taught to wait for permission from their teacher before they speak. Since the reforms of 1996 took hold however, students are becoming more used to group work and discussion.
4. In many countries, teachers are considered very important, next to family, including the Latin countries. It would not be uncommon to have a Mexican or Chilean family invite you to their home. This kind of invitation is simply meant as a friendly gesture. It would actually be considered rude to not accept.
5. As a teacher teaching in Mexico, it would be important to know that the city bus system is also on polychronic time. The buses tend to be late, therefore, the students riding to school from the city will generally be late. The children who live in the country going to school are more on time. In Chilean cultures, the buses also tend to run late, however, even though they may run late, the students are expected to be there on time. It is expected that the students to catch an earlier ride to ensure promptness.
6. As mentioned earlier, children from Latin cultures are generally taught to wait for permission before speaking. However, in a social situation, it is not uncommon to have many students speak out of turn. It is also not uncommon to have students be involved in more than one conversation at a time.

7. When outside of the school environment, be prepared to wait. For example, when meeting a friend for lunch at 2:00 p.m., they might arrive at 2:30 p.m. Depending on the relationship, most individuals from Latin cultures typically run late. They do not consider it rude to run late and keep people waiting nor do they consider it rude to be kept waiting.

In conclusion, the most important thing to keep in mind is that we, as educators, are cultural beings. As such, we need to be aware that our values are based on our culture and these values have influences on our teachings. Our teachings can help or *hinder* students' behaviors and responses. With this in mind, it is very important that we don't let our cultural differences influence our attitudes towards other cultures through our teachings.

To become better teachers, we need to be aware of, and sensitive to, cultural differences. We need to redesign our lesson plans to express our awareness and sensitivity. Educators can also explore other cultures to find similarities to help form student/student and educator/student relationships.

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