Time perception in France, Germany and Poland

Kasia Kosiu, Cédric Troncy, Jörg Gölzhäuser

English Track, June 2003

Introduction

People’s lives depend on the time. Each feature of the culture is affected by it. Therefore if there is another time system, we may expect that the whole culture will differ. The differences between time perceptions of countries are so huge, that it is necessary to have a closer look at them. The way we look at time affects the way we live and think. It influences everyday life, doing business, attitudes to history and plans for the future. Perception of time has always been interesting and necessary for organising and for doing business. Therefore it is extremely important to understand how certain nations perceive time in order to avoid misunderstandings and cultural disagreements.

Since we come from three such different cultures, we decided to examine our attitudes to the time. First of all we decided to explain the approaches of the three possible time orientations, namely past-, present- and future orientation. This study conducts us secondly to the circle test from Mr Cottle. We realized that Cédric comes from a present-, Kasia from a past- and Jörg from a future-oriented country. As each of us is influenced by his own culture, we have therefore different views, on the one hand concerning the time perception and on the other hand the time horizon, which constitutes our third part. We finally focused on the different age groups in each of our countries to show that perception of time depends also on the age of the person.

1. Time orientation

Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck identified three types of culture: (Trompenaars, 1996)

- past-oriented
- present-oriented
- future-oriented

The cultures which represent the first way of time perception are mainly concerned with maintaining and restoring traditions in the present. People have a great awareness and understanding of their past. The history of the country, the origin of the family and companies, which they work for, are extremely important and they affect their current thoughts and behaviour. The past has an effect on everyday life in motivation to repeat former “golden age”. They feel a great respect to ancestors and older people who, in their mind, created that wonderful past for which they are so grateful. Every daily action has a straight view to tradition or history.

The present-oriented culture, on the other hand, is relatively timeless, traditionless and ignores the future. Quintus Horatius Flaccus (65-8 p.n.e.) is the most famous representative of such a point of view. His sentence “Carpe diem”, known by everybody and so often quoted, is the simplest way of explaining this theory. The current moment and the activities, which take place right now, are the most important things. Therefore, even if they have a plan, it is not highly necessary to respect it. They feel perfectly comfortable if it is not executed. People show their intensive interest in present relationships. The respect to ancestors and older people are not that important, as it is in the previously mentioned culture. They feel more independent from history and not linked to tradition. Everything is viewed in terms of its contemporary impact and style.

The third orientation envisages a more desirable future and setting out to realise it. In such cultures we may expect to hear more about prospects than current issues. People focus on future achievements and present situations they see potentials of a successful future life and business. There is a huge enthusiasm in strategizing and planning their way of life. They feel more secure with a well-planned and organised future. That is why they would spend a lot of time now to prepare the following days. In these cultures there would be given great opportunities for young people, because they are perceived as the future of the country. People tend to invest more than consume. They keep in mind past and present and exploit the
information and conclusions, which comes from them, for future improvement.

2. Circle test
The circle test is a further examination of the time orientation in different countries (Trompenaars, 1996)\(^1\). The idea is to present the past, present and future as circles which are in some relations to each other. While analysing the graphs, you should consider the size of them and how they are linked to each other. Going from the left to the right in each picture, we can find out about perception as follows: past, present and future. The size shows us the importance of each period in every country. In this paper we would like to focus only on France, Poland and Germany.

France

Cédric

The most important period is the present. Previous events and the future are connected with the present. They have the same importance.

I am personally totally present oriented and therefore it is particularly difficult to imagine myself in the future. I really like the present moment and therefore future can be sometimes embarrassing. If someone would ask me, where I expected myself in five years, I could not answer this question.

The most important period is the past. The present is connected with the past and the future. The least important period is the future.

I have no idea, in which country I would like to work. It is very strong connected to things, which are unknown yet. The past is for me not so important but it influences the way of life in the present significantly. This is the reason of the connection from the past and the present. The present is also connected with the future. My actual activities, e.g. my studies at university, construct the “building” of my future job. It is obvious, that my future job will have a big influence on my future life. As a consequence, even if my future is still an unknown area, the present is strong connected to my future.

Germany

Jörg

I could find out that my individual perception about time is totally different to the “average” of German perception of time. The present is connected with the past and in the same strength with the future, what is shown by the overlapping part. This period of time is quite important and

\(^1\) Written after “The circles Test: an investigation of perception of temporal relatedness and dominance” by Cottle, (page 58-71)
it is a little bit affected by the past. I am tending to a monochromic way of doing tasks. My present is very well organised. If I start to do a piece of work, I am used to finishing it. Events in the past have an affect on present behaviour and also to future activities, based in the connection. The past plays an important role, but not as important as the future. Events in the past seem to be a base to learn from. Do not do the same mistakes again. The future is the most important time period for me. Even in the present I think and plan my future. Effects might be able to happen in the future will affect my way of life in the present. For me it is very important and obligatory to have a well structured future. My picture about the future is very clear.

For me the most important is the past. I think that the past is the most visible part of our lives, therefore we can learn from it and use the experience in the present. My border between the present and the past is very fluent and they influence each other. Future is something which we do not know. That is why I do not try to plan it with all details because I know it does not depend only on me but on many independent factors. I do not want to be disappointed when the future becomes the present and I compare my plans with reality. Because of that I do not pay much attention to the future and it is something very unclear for me. Although it is something very interesting and I anticipate it. But when it finally comes it passes and becomes past very fast. When talking to my Polish friends about the time perception, I found out that my view on time is also more or less the Polish one, at least according to them.

It was very interesting for us to find out, that each of us has a totally different perception of time. Kasia pays more attention to the past. On the other hand Cédric is more present orientated while Jörg finds future the most important. The differences could be caused by the fact that we are in different stage of studies. Kasia is at the beginning of her studies and therefore she still thinks more about previous periods of her life (the biggest “past circle”). In Jörg’s case the past is already closed. Now he is in the middle of his studies and the future is the dominated period for him. He already knows exactly where he wants to go and in which job he wants to start working. On the other hand Cédric is nearly finished with his studies. He is “afraid” to look into the future and therefore he prefers to concentrate on present and enjoy student life. We also can not forget about the influence of our cultural background. We grew up in a certain atmosphere with different traditions. But we also have to take in consideration that traditions play now not the same role in our lives.

3. Age groups

The differences between us brought into our minds the idea that time perception might depend on which age group one belongs to. As we mentioned previously, it can also be affected by the nation. We decided to divide our nation into a few age groups and we try to consider, as objectively as it is possible for us, and evaluate their perception of time.

3.1 Age group 0 – 15

French

When you are a baby, the notion of time is still unknown. The baby is consequently not influenced by the time and just lives for the present. But children are already future oriented from 5-6 years old. It is a moment where the children choose their future job. I remember there were a lot of debates during playtime about the “future” (30 years after), “I want to be fireman” or “I want to be football player”.

Between 11 and 15 all the children are in general only present oriented in France. This period is called “the school years”. It is a period in which you enjoy your time without thinking to the future or to the past.

German

Normally at this age there is no very specific feeling about time! They are living in the present. In Germany kids are thinking not longer than one week in advance! It is important what happens right now, playing with their toys and spending a lot of time with their family! Time is not scarce.

Polish

For the children at the age 0-15 the most important is the present. They live day by day, thinking only if the weather
is good enough to go out and play a ball. They can't feel e.g. week as a period of time it's rather consisting of 7 days which are separate periods for them, that means that they feel longer periods as a sum of discrete small periods which are easier to understand or to feel for them. The time of primary school is very long (the longest period of education) it used to be 8 years, now it is 6 years, but anyway it is a long time. This one period is continuously felt as present. Of course there are some changes but not that dramatic, the same building, the same environment, colleagues etc. Of course for a child who goes to school for the first time, 8th class seems to be extremely far future. But when the time passes, he or she will not feel it.

Comparison
The life from the beginning till 15 is quiet similar in France, Poland and Germany. What we found is, that children in our cultures are present oriented. They have not that many experiences and therefore the past plays not that important role for them. Their previous events can not have a big impact on their behaviour. Children are not often responsible for making decisions, for example their parents can do it for them, so kids do not have to think about the future.

3.2 Age group 16-25

French
There are a lot of changes during this period. At 16 years the child becomes a teenager and enters into secondary school. The teenager has to choose a speciality. From this moment you have to think a little bit about the future and what you want to do. A lot of French teenagers choose a speciality without really looking to the future but just to the A-level (diploma which pupils get at the end of secondary school). During the secondary school, French teenagers forget the past in general and do not want to think about future. As a consequence they try to make the most of one's youth. In other words they enjoy present life. That is why there are a lot of career advice problems after the A-level in France. A very important question comes after the A-level: what I want to do? Many French people have unfortunately no answer, so they decide to study in one field without much conviction. Nearly all the French people are present oriented before A-level.

The secondary school pupils become next students. In general I can say:

- 10% of the French students know exactly which job they want to do and therefore follow the studies to achieve their goals
- 30% of the French students follow studies but they do not really want to work in this field.
- 60% of the French students follow studies they like but have either no idea about the job they can get or do not know the field of the specialisation they want to choose.

This data shows that a lot of French students are in a state of uncertainty about their future. There is besides a lot of reorientation each year and many students change or stop their studies because they had not thought of the future before they chose. Many French students are moreover afraid of their future because they have doubts about their choices.

German
Time is becoming more and more important! A lot of Germans are going to start working in their first jobs. I can notice a very huge difference between people, those which are starting to work directly after secondary school and those who are going to university! People starting to work at the age of 16 are thinking about their future but not in a very specific way! Especially at the beginning of their work experiences they are that much involved in organising their selves, their new way of life that they even can not think about their future in a long term distance. Very often, parents are doing everything for them connected with the future, like insurance, bank accounts, saving money for construction etc. On the other hand, people who are going to attend or even are attending university, feel much more independent from the very beginning. The time orientation is very often future-oriented but based in the present. That means, that they are organising their daily life, like going to university, preparing their stuff they have to do and taking care of them selves. But everything in normal life is focused on finding a very good job and being successful in the future!
Polish
Teenagers in high schools start to understand that the "future is coming". They will have to make a decision which will affect their whole future life. But before it comes, they still try to have fun like children and live without problems and worries. But they start to realize more from the surrounding world. That change impacts the sense of the past. Childhood seems as very far past and future is also very far but a little bit clearer than in primary school. During 4 years (an old education system) of high school they have to change from children into adults. So they start to think about future as something real. Previously the future was more like a dream or fairytale. E.g. when a small boy says "I would like to be a fireman", he thinks about being a hero, being respected and wearing red clothes and a red helmet, driving fire-engine with loud signal. Teenagers thinking about the job of a fireman consider the school which they would have to attend, entrance exams to become its student, and unfortunately they also have to find out about the salary conditions.

Present for teenagers is for sure the current time. In that period take place much more important events than in primary school, and people experience them more consciously. In the studies our future becomes clearer but still very unsecured. We found out that we should worry more about our future. We notice the relationship between present and future. Students even at the university can hear from the teachers about huge unemployment rate, and that graduating even from very good university is not enough to get a good job. Our future is not bright and wide. We have a constant feeling that the knowledge which we acquire at school might be never useful for our work. That is also the reason why we try to have as much fun as we can. We know that in the future we will have to work harder and we will have much more problems to worry about. So we try to be optimistic and not think about this cruel reality and work as hard as possible to increase probability of 'success' in the future.

You may divide all students into two groups. One consists of people who know what they want to do after university and their studies are just the means to get that. The other group, into which contribute the bigger part of all student, are the people who have no idea what job they can have after their studies and what their duties will be, or if they know it already, these are not that what they really want or dream of, but after the secondary school they were somehow forced to choose that certain university and faculty.

Comparison
In the sense of present orientation France and Poland are quiet similar. Polish young people keep the future a little bit more in mind, than the French. Polish teenagers know, that the future will not be very easy to handle. Young French people, on the other hand, do not think that much about the future so it does not have a direct effect on their present life. German view to the future is completely different from the Polish one. Young Germans are very optimistic and they see it in the bright colours. On the contrary, Poles realize disadvantages of the adult life. The reasons of that difference in the way of looking into the future we can find in the unemployment rates and the level of the unemployment benefits in our countries. These facts may have an enormous effect on our behaviour and way of thinking in each country.

3.3. Age group 26-45

French
When the students enter into the active life, we can consider the three orientations of time:

- the past because the student life was great
- the present because a new life begins with earning money, departure from the family house
- the future (< five years) with the career orientation

After this important period of change, French people concentrate their minds still on the present and on the future with the way of life (short term) but more and more on the past with the creation of a family and their children’s education. Some French people are very traditional and take care about the values they learned when they were children and consequently the people are past oriented to keep the family traditions. I think moreover that a lot of French people refer to their own experience for the education of the children because they need some reference points.

German
Nearly everybody is involved in the work life. Time management becomes the most important aspect in life. We are confronted with very high achievements in our jobs and at the same time building up a family and a home. Germans all the time are thinking in future terms. I noticed that even if they have a brilliant job, they want to have more and are looking how they can reach it! Having an
own house or flat plays a very important role in our lives. We are starting very early to save some money for construction! Even if you are doing an apprenticeship your employer is paying some money for your construction (Vermögenswirksame Leistungen). You also can see that Germany is very future oriented by the fact that after 45 it is very difficult to find a new job. Nobody wants to hire you because the regulations to fire older people are very strict. At least at 45 you should stay in the present job.

Polish
After studies people start new lives, find jobs (hopefully) and start families. We may say that they look into the future, because everything starts for them from the beginning (from this point it is a new beginning). But unfortunately it may cause many difficulties; this is why these people have to worry about the present. They solve the everyday problems hoping that one day all their problems will get solved. Of course they know that this is impossible. They try to be optimistic, because they know that these are the last years of youth and this a moment when people say: ‘You have the whole life in front of you!’ Therefore they try to look into the future and hope that the problems they are facing right now are just small current obstacles on the route to their wonderful lives. When things stabilise in one’s life, he becomes much more present-oriented. Of course there is still some planning and organising for the future, but it is a nearer future and these are more specified, detailed plans. When one has a satisfying job and has established a family, he can finally enjoy the present, I believe. When the children are young, they are the most important things in their parent’s lives, and since they grow up very fast, parents should not miss the period when they are still children. Therefore young people pay more attention to everyday life. Analysing the attitude to the past of the age group 26-45, I realised that at that age people are too busy thinking about the past, at least about their own past. Things like history, which is connected to politics, hence also present, can become more interesting. Also traditions seem to play an important role, because people want their children to grow up with respect to the culture.

Comparison
German people are still very future-oriented. A French expression says about German people: “They try to go faster than the music”. French impressions about German attitudes to the time are that they do not enjoy the present moment, like the French do. On the other hand, German people think, that French people enjoy too much the present moment to get the importance of the future. Polish people enjoy a few seconds a day, but when they think generally about the whole day, sometimes it is very depressing for them. They try to think about the future but it does not seem to be better. Both in Poland and France, when you build up a family, the traditions and values become more important, because one wants to pass it to the next generation. Especially when their children are young the parents in Poland tend not to think about the future of their children. On the other hand, in Germany and France even if their children are young, parents think very much about their children’s future. In the case of France it is a paradox, because the parents live in the present moment, but still thinking of their children’s future, e.g. saving money for their studies and retirements.

3.4. Age group 46-60

French
When you are 50 years old in France, this is often a difficult period because you realise that you have become old. For the French people this is really significant and completely psychological but they think to the past. It is in a way a battle against time. People often remember the past when they were “young” and think to their future, especially to the retirement. At this period people generally forget the present and furthermore live in the past or in the future (10 years after). After this shock people return very fast to reality and try to enjoy the present moment. They keep nevertheless in mind the future and particularly the retirement between 55 and 60 years old.

German
In this period of age we have a lot of people, thinking extremely hard about their life and especially their way of life. It can very often be described as a so-called “Midlife crises”. The common way of thinking is that they missed something in their lives and have not really lived or especially enjoyed their time. Very often you can hear that someone wasted his/her time. It is the time, where the future orientation turns a little bit more into a present-future orientation. Family and friends become very, very important. I do not want to say, that the engagement in the job decreases, but we can still recognise, that the job and going up and up in the job is no longer the most important
thing! Looking forward to retirement is getting quite important.

Polish

At the beginning of that period of one’s life children are almost adult and become independent. At first it is rather the parent’s problem, because they want to make as easy as possible their children’s start into the adult life. So they have to worry about current problems connected with this, like much bigger amount of money which children suddenly tend to need when they start to study. But on the other hand, parents need to think about their children’s future, they have to be able to advise them to choose the right direction in life if they need it. When finally parents ‘get rid of the children and stay alone at home’ they can again start thinking about their own life and also their future. They work, but are already thinking about the retirement.

Comparison

In that period of life, people in France become past-oriented while in Poland people in this age group tend to think more about the present and future, sometimes not their own, e.g. their children. No matter, in which country we are, in this period of time people tend to have a “Midlife crises”. In Germany it seems to be a very big problem. The time perception is changed dramatically at this age. In Germany people change from the future- into the present-orientation.

3.5. Age group 61 till end

French

A new life begins from retirement. French people consider those from the age of 60 and up as an old person. As a consequence it can be difficult for them to admit their age. That is why French people between 60 and 70 years old want to show they are still fit enough by practising sports. They try to be present-oriented but their long own experiences come back very fast and therefore they are more and more oriented by the past. Some people can become grandparents and I think it constitutes an important stage because people want to transmit the values they learned when they were children. People base everything on their own past experiences and therefore they are totally past-oriented. They use a lot of words connected with the past, for example “formerly…”, “in the past…”, “when I was your age” or “at that time”. These people do not understand very often the new technologies because they are overtaken by technologies.

German

Enjoying every second is the main message in this period of time. Very often they are not any longer future- or present-oriented, they are starting to be past-oriented. At the beginning retired people are travelling a lot and spending a lot of time with their friends and holding up their traditions (everyday tea at the same place and same time). People are very well informed about the daily life in Germany. They know exactly what is shown on TV, what is going on in their country (Bild-Zeitung)!

Polish

When people reach the age of 60, they slow down a rhythm of their lives. They do not have to run for something what they would like to achieve in the future. I can not say for sure whether they are past- or present-oriented. Of course when older people meet each other, they talk about ‘old times’ and most of them like to tell a story from their lives. But in everyday life they seem to think more about ‘today’. It might be said that they do not want to think about their own future because they do not have many aims left and their past seems to be lonely (they rarely keep in touch with old fellows), and therefore they try to pay more attention to the present. It might happen that they try to live rather in their children’s lives than their own ones, which is not very colourful. They tend to give many pieces of advice, which is of course very useful, but sometimes it looks like they want to control their children’s lives. I noticed that older people try to stay as busy as they can. It is well known that grandmothers are the best cooks and they take care of grandchildren better than their parents. Generally I think that people as long as they are active are present-oriented. And these after that period of life become past-oriented.

Comparison

We could find out, that older people in our countries are better informed about daily life than younger people. Maybe it is caused by the fact that they have more free time. In our countries the perception of time switches into the past. The culture differences disappear while people getting older.
4. Time horizon
What is our time horizon, we’ve asked ourselves? In addition to the circles test, which shows different cultures assign to past, present and future, we decided to use another test developed by Cottle. The test has to show, whether people share a short-term or a long-term time horizon. We wondered how our personal time horizon would look like, if we answer the same questions, which Mr. Cottle once asked the different nations. Our task was, to answer them individually and have a look at the results.

The idea was to compare the data given in the book with our own ones. The result was amazing. For the first graph, “Long- vs. short-termism: time horizon”, we took the average of each of the six scores and calculated an average score for each of us. It came out, that we nearly had the same score, than the shown average of our countries:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Average Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>4.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>4.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>4.89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With Cédric (5.00) and Kasia (4.33), we had nearly the same score.

The graph shows us, that Kasia’s time horizon (4.33) is based on the period of days. On the other hand Cédric’s one (5.00) is based on the period of weeks. That means that the Cedric’s view on time periods is wider than the Kasia’s or Jörg’s one.

Now let us have a closer look at a separate time horizon. We want to include the graph showing the past. We could find out, that also in the past the individual data compared with the average data of each nation were very similar. Kasia (5.00 to 4.81 for whole Poland), Cédric (5.50 to 5.58 for whole France) and Jörg (5.00 to 5.29 for whole Germany). This graph shows us, that the average of our past starts and ends in a time horizon from one week.
5. Impact of time perception on intercultural communication

As we mentioned previously, time perception is extremely important in communication between people from different cultures. It may cause many unnecessary misunderstandings, which may have terrible consequences. It concerns both private and business fields of life. Let us now concentrate on the second one. Nowadays companies become a part of the international business set and they have to face problems with differences between cultures since the world becomes more like a global village. So let us examine a problem which might occur if a potential shareholder from a past-oriented country was interested in a future-oriented company. If the managers of the company were not aware of such a difference, they would emphasise the plans for future while presenting the advantages of buying shares. So they would talk about their prospects, what they are going to introduce, what the expected income is, etc. Such information will not convince the past-oriented person. For him/her such data might be incomprehensible, and for him/her it will not show the reliability of the company. The lack of information about the past, the successes which have already been achieved, may mean that the company have none of them; hence it is not reasonable to buy its shares. The decision which may be made is the consequence of intercultural misunderstanding. Both sides in that case should be aware of the differences in time orientation which exists between their cultures and adjust their way of thinking and analysing to one of the cultures.

The same may consider situations of meetings, both business and private. The meaning of term ‘being on time’ is also related to the time perception. People from cultures with longer time-horizon tend to be late very often, but ‘late’ in concept of short time-horizon. That leads to plenty of conflicts. If somebody sees present in broader spectrum, he or she will consider coming for the appointment 10 minutes later than the meeting was announced to start still as ‘being on time’, because it is the same present for him/her as the exact certain hour, 10 minutes earlier. But if in the meeting the people with short time horizon take part as well, they might be disappointed, because when the meeting starts, they see ten minutes later as the future, so arrival at that time is already meant as ‘being late’.

Conclusion

In this paper we provided some information about the time orientation and time horizon, which are of course not the only facets of time perception. But the term of time is that broad that it would be impossible to fit even 115 pages with all the thoughts about it. That is why we decided to concentrate on these aspects which are the clearest way of showing the differences and similarities between our countries: France, Germany and Poland.

As for time-orientation, each one of our countries consider different period of time as the most important. But on the other hand, we realized that this dimension may be very individual and even change when a person grows up and becomes older and older. We found huge differences even in our group, even though we are almost at the same age and, as some people may think, the borders between cultures become less and less because of the globalization.
The analysis of time horizon confirmed our presumption about the differences between us and our cultures. The direct impact of them we can notice in everyday life. Maybe it is not the context, which Einstein meant, but we all definitely agree with him that ‘Everything is relative’, first and foremost time. And the differences between perceptions of time are the best proof of it.

Reference
Trompenaars, F. (1996) Riding the Waves of Culture
Nicholas Brealey Publishing, London