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June Cotte S. Ratneshwar

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Juggling and hopping: what does it mean to work polychronically?

June Cotte

The Darla Moore School of Business, University of South Carolina, Columbia, USA, and

S. Ratneshwar

University of Connecticut, Storrs, USA

Abstract *Presents a conceptual framework for understanding the meanings of polychronic behavior for individuals. A "created" meaning perspective, arguing that cultural, social, and personality differences influence how the meaning of polychronic behavior is interpreted at the individual level is presented. These meanings through a phenomenological study of polychronic behavior in the workplace for both traditional, "mainstream" Americans and recent Latin American immigrants are explored. Implications for managers and workgroups are also explored.*

Scenario

Jane was sitting in her office responding to e-mails, talking on the phone and eating her lunch simultaneously. When she was finished with the phone, Jane began a meeting with a subordinate, only to interrupt it several times by flagging down someone who was passing her office, to ask for verbal reports on various projects. For Jane, this style of working was common and she believed her behavior either:

- A: was a source of fragmentation. Jane saw her own inability to focus on one task at a time as a character flaw that created confusion in the office and ultimately created poor quality work. She admired those who stuck to one thing at a time as efficient, effective workers; or

- B: was impressive. Jane felt that her ability to juggle several projects at once, hopping from one to another, ultimately created an efficient, well-run work group. She felt that those who had to methodically work through one task at a time were inefficient.

What does polychronic behavior mean? We know how to describe polychronicity; it is when a person does more than one activity, apparently at the same time (Kaufman *et al.*, 1991a), or even when one treats unplanned interruptions as equal to planned activities (Bluedorn *et al.*, 1992). In the

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scenario above, Jane is certainly behaving polychronically. But what does polychronicity mean to her? Does Jane think her behavior is efficient, or that it creates chaos? What influences the meaning of polychronic behavior for Jane? In order to fully understand the polychronicity concept, we need to understand the constellations of meanings that are created by the individual around the behavior. A quest for this sort of understanding follows in the spirit of "... better understanding the temporal structure rather than merely establishing its existence" (Bergadaà, 1990). We know polychronic behavior exists; this research attempts to better define the meanings of the behavior for the individual, what influences and creates these meanings, and the implication of this knowledge for managers.

In this article, we first briefly review previous research on polychronic behavior. We then touch on theoretical views on how meaning creation affects temporal perception in different ethnic groups, social and work situations, and within the individual. We then present the results of a qualitative study of the created meanings of polychronic behavior by individuals in two different ethnic groups.

The issue is an important one in the workplace for, as we argue later, the meaning created for polychronic behavior will influence the effectiveness and appropriateness of that behavior in the workplace. Understanding how this meaning is created and influenced is important, especially for multinational managers dealing with diverse workgroups in diverse cultural settings. For example, if in the opening scenario Jane feels good about her polychronic behavior, and believes that it means she is efficient and well organized, then she may try to influence her subordinates to work in a like manner. Given this positive meaning, she may also be unwilling to change her behavior. This could create conflict if Jane's manager worked in a more monochronic manner and wanted his/her subordinates to do the same.

Our objectives here are twofold. First, we seek to present a theoretical framework for examining how individuals create and interpret polychronic behavior, with a focus on the various sociocultural influences that impact the process. Second, we wish to present phenomenological insights into what polychronicity means to individuals, thus going beyond simple description of behavior toward a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

Temporal perception and polychronicity
Polychronic behavior is a form of behaving with and within time and has previously been examined within the literature on time and temporal perception. To truly attempt to understand temporally based behaviors (such as polychronicity) one must first examine how people perceive and think about time, i.e. "temporal perception". Research on temporal perception includes psychophysical research, which compares perception of time to "clock" time and phenomenological research, which views time as a mental construction having purely subjective meaning (e.g. Bergadaà, 1990). For many sociologists, (e.g. Marks, 1977; Lewis and Weigert, 1981) time is a social construction, a

convenience that cultures agree on. However, looking at time in this way does not enable the study and prediction of what actual individuals might do, their motives for thinking about time in a certain way and their related behavior (Hirschman, 1987). Most psychological, sociological, and experiential views of time share in common their focus on time as perceived by the individual, or temporal perception.

One key dimension of temporal perception that leads directly to temporal behavior is whether time is symbolized as monochronic or polychronic (Hall, 1959, 1983; Feldman and Hornik, 1981; Kaufman *et al.*, 1991a). People who perceive time monochronically look at time as linear and separable, capable of being divided into units. Treating time monochronically means emphasizing "one thing at a time" thus, these individuals typically only attempt to do one task at a time. Individuals who perceive time polychronically look at time as naturally re-occurring, and consequently behave by using time for many purposes at once (Hall, 1976, 1983; Graham, 1981; Kaufman *et al.*, 1991a). In the literature there are a variety of sociocultural influences posited to affect polychronic behavior (see, e.g. Manrai and Manrai, 1995). One important theorized influence, which we address in this study, is culture.

The monochronic versus polychronic dimension of temporal perception and behavior is theorized to vary across cultures (Hall, 1959, 1983; Graham, 1981; Jones, 1988; Levine, 1988; Manrai and Manrai, 1995; Usunier, 1991). When time is symbolized as linear-separable and capable of being split into perceptual categories, people symbolically represent time as monochronic – this is the traditional Western, Anglo cultural perception of time. In this type of culture monochronic behavior is encouraged and reinforced (common phrases in the USA would include "Now is not the time for that" or "Do one thing at a time"). When time is treated as a system where the same events reoccur in natural cycles, the representation of time is polychronic (as in many Latin American cultures) (see Graham, 1981). In these cultures polychronic behavior is common and a business person may conduct several meetings at once, elongating the time each meeting takes. In this way, culture works to influence the individual's orientation to monochronic or polychronic behavior. However, an individual within a culture may perceive the meaning of these polychronic and monochronic behaviors differently. How does what it means to be polychronic get created? What sorts of processes and influences are at work determining whether polychronic behavior is perceived as a positive or a negative behavior by an individual?

Meaning creation in temporal perception

We believe, with other researchers, that people can use creative ways to combine and adapt cultural meanings to fit their own lives (see also McCracken, 1986; Thompson and Haytko, 1997). Thus, the meaning of time and polychronic behavior will not be interpreted similarly by all individuals, but in accordance with an individual's life experience. This approach assumes that created meaning for the individual (i.e. what does polychronic behavior mean to

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me?) is a mix of interpretations, discourses, or frameworks. These discourses are used by individuals to link together the behavior, the cultural situation, the social situation, and the individual (Holt, 1997; Mick and Buhl, 1992; Scott, 1994; Thompson and Haytko, 1997). Three particularly interesting influences on the meaning of time are :

(1) culture;

(2) social and work groups; and

(3) the individual's personality.

Hall expressed the idea that there are cross-cultural differences in temporal perception and behavior (Hall, 1976, 1983; Hall and Hall, 1987). Other researchers have followed on this work, stating that cultural context can influence all aspects of temporal perception (Manrai and Manrai, 1995), and that differing perceptions of time are carried as a part of culture and affect behavior (Graham, 1981). This appears to hold for both national cultures and ethnic subcultures (see Jones, 1988; Levine, 1988). The basic understanding is that one's concept of time is always culture-based (e.g. Usunier, 1991). In this way, we can see the meaning of time is at least in part culturally determined, and that culture influences perception of time, the individual's world view, and his/her subsequent behavior (Graham, 1981). Notwithstanding this cultural influence, within cultures one can find individual differences in the meaning of time. One potential explanation for these individual differences is the meaning of the behavior in the workplace.

Interaction in the workplace is a form of social interaction; two or more individuals are able to communicate with each other in some meaningful way. Each individual has a number of "tools" at his/her disposal that assist in the transfer of meaning to co-workers. Most of these devices (e.g. language, polychronic behavior) gain their meaning from the teachings and socialization process that an individual experiences as he/she comes to be identified with a particular group, or segment of society (the family, the peer group, the work group, etc.) (McGrath and Kelly, 1986). As the individual begins working in a new group, for example, meaningful communication develops between the individual and others. If this process is successful, the individual's sense of "self" comes to be identified within that work group (Mead, 1977). In order to effectively interact with the group, the individual must either learn and accept the group-created meaning of the behavior (e.g. that polychronic behavior signifies hard work in this group), or successfully communicate his/her intended meaning of the behavior to others in the group (e.g. polychronic behavior means chaos and frustration). If either of these is not possible, then the individual also has the option of seeking out another group, where the meaning of the behavior supports his/her beliefs. This "social construction" view assumes that social (and work) life is a process; it is constantly forming and changing, based on complex interactions between individuals and the need to create meaning and communication (Blumer, 1969). This view of meaning

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creation is also consistent with ideas expressed in the literature on time, specifically, the assumption that work groups socially and collectively construe their temporal understanding and their temporal boundaries (Bluedorn and Denhardt, 1988; Clark, 1985; Kaufman and Lane, 1990; Zerubavel, 1981). In this way, we see that the meaning of time, like other major concepts, is influenced by social and work groups.

Individual personality variables also influence temporal perception and the meanings of time for an individual. This well-established idea is that "...basic features of the personality are reflected in the individual's attitude toward time" (Calabresi and Cohen, 1968, p. 431). Individuals may perceive time differently based on personal characteristics and experience (see also Bergadaà, 1990). In summary then, it would appear that cultural group, work group, and individual personality differences influence the meaning of polychronic behavior for an individual. In turn, we will argue that the created meanings of polychronic behavior will influence how polychronic behavior "works", or "doesn't work" in the workplace. The illustrative model guiding the present research is shown in Figure 1.

Study overview

The present research explores the meaning of polychronic work behavior in two ethnic groups in the USA: mainstream, "Anglo" Americans and first generation Latin American immigrants living in the USA. This study explores the meaning of polychronic behavior, as it is interpreted and given meaning by individuals within these two ethnic groups. These particular groups were chosen because in the literature on cultural perceptions of time Latin Americans are identified as mainly or mostly polychronic while Anglos are
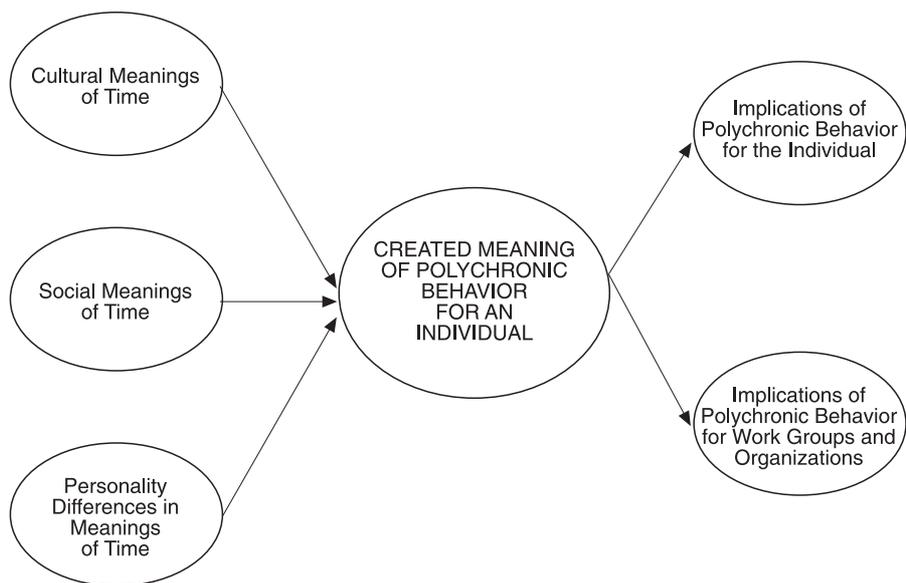

Figure 1.
Creating the meaning of polychronic behavior

depicted as mainly or mostly monochronic (see, for example, Graham, 1981; Hall, 1959; Manrai and Manrai, 1995). However, this literature also recognizes that individuals can behave differently in different settings or roles (Graham, 1981; Usunier, 1991). In addition, individuals may be more or less monochronic or polychronic in part due to differing levels of acculturation (Manrai and Manrai, 1995). Finally, cultural knowledge is not always just accepted by individuals, rather it is like a network of meanings that individuals choose from and combine together to create more personal meanings (Thompson, 1997). To summarize then, although the groups were chosen a priori to maximally differentiate between the theorized ethnic differences in perceptions of time, individuals within an ethnic group may not always share the temporal perception that is dominant in the culture.

Within each ethnic segment, two groups of people are explored for comparison and contrast: those who behave primarily polychronically themselves, and those who behave primarily monochronically. Thus, we examine the phenomenological aspects of the relationship between person and culture (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Thompson, 1997; Thompson *et al.*, 1989), assuming that ethnic background supplies an individual with common-sense beliefs and frames of reference that they combine with their own self-knowledge to create a sense of self-identity (Holt, 1997; Thompson, 1997). We investigate the issue of the meaning of polychronicity through in-depth qualitative interviews, probing informants' views of time and temporal perception. We take a phenomenological approach to the meaning of polychronicity: informants talk about the role and meaning of time and polychronic behavior in their lives, as they personally experience it (Bergadaà, 1990; Thompson *et al.*, 1989; 1990).

Specifically, this study addresses three main questions within the framework presented in Figure 1. First, what meanings do individuals create for polychronic behavior? Second, how does this individually created meaning influence the implications of this behavior for the individual and the workgroup? Finally, what role, if any, does ethnic group play in influencing the individual meanings of polychronic behavior?

Methodology

We began this research with the literature on time and temporal styles to familiarize ourselves with previous findings and methods of investigation, and to understand previous theory. In this sense prior research became part of our "pre-understanding" when approaching the data collection, analysis, and interpretation tasks (Arnold and Fisher, 1994; Thompson, 1997). We explored the data to discover the meaning of polychronicity for informants.

The data

As part of a larger ongoing research program, the first author conducted interviews with 26 women in the New England area. None of the women had children, and they ranged in age from 23-35. This group was chosen to

minimize the previously theorized relationships between age, gender, family life cycle and the main dependent variable in the larger research project: leisure time consumption (e.g. Danko and Schaninger, 1990; Freysinger, 1995; Manrai and Manrai, 1995; Robinson and Godbey, 1997). In particular, gender differences have been found on time allocation, time conflict and perceptions of work versus leisure (Duxbury and Higgins, 1991; Manrai and Manrai, 1995). Therefore, a decision to focus exclusively on women negates possible confounds due to gender. The women were drawn from two ethnic groups (Anglo and Hispanic/Latina[1]), a priori determined to maximally differ on both the cultural categories associated with time (Hall, 1983; Graham, 1981; McCracken, 1986; Applbaum and Jordt, 1996) and Hofstede's (1980) cultural value types. Women from each ethnic group (18 Anglo, eight Hispanic) were interviewed, referred to the researchers by personal contacts, or by students, and were assured of anonymity. The Hispanic/Latina women self-identified themselves; they were not chosen because the researchers believed they were Latinas, but because they voluntarily identified themselves that way. All informants, both Anglo and Hispanic, were from the Christian tradition, rather than from other religious traditions, like Judaism or Islam. The small sample is traditional and necessary in phenomenological research; the two groups were presumed to be very different on temporal perception variables. This method is akin to previous phenomenological work on temporal differences between groups (Bergadaà, 1990).

Informants were initially contacted by telephone and in most cases were then interviewed in their homes. Three respondents were interviewed at their workplace, after regular working hours, and four others were interviewed in a large public space of a major north-eastern university. The interviews were audiotaped, and then transcribed verbatim into approximately 350 pages of text. The interviews ranged from 45 minutes to one-and-a-half hours in length. Table I reports each informant's pseudonym and other idiographic information.

Analysis and interpretation
This study is phenomenological in nature and focuses on a small number of participants, studied in depth (McCracken, 1988; Mick and Buhl, 1992; Thompson, 1997; Thompson *et al.*, 1990). The methodological tenets of this approach have been described elsewhere (Arnold and Fisher, 1994; Spiggle, 1994; Thompson, 1997; Thompson *et al.*, 1989; 1990), but we outline below the major aspects of this approach to analysis and interpretation of qualitative data.

Following in the phenomenological tradition, there were no "hard and fast" questions in the interviews. However, unlike a "pure" phenomenological approach, a discussion guide was used to make sure the researcher understood the informant's experience of several previously theorized key aspects in the temporal domain; to ensure that the interview did have some focus (see Mick and Buhl, 1992). The discussion guide points very often emerged during the flow of the dialogue. The dialogue was primarily emergent, allowing the

Name and age	Ethnicity and number of years living in the USA	Marital status	Education	Occupation	Polychronic or monochronic behavior
A1, 28	Anglo, all	Married	High school	Retail management	Monochronic
A3, 28	Anglo, all	Single	High school	Nail technician	Polychronic
D1, 23	Anglo, all	Married	Bachelor's	Payroll clerk	Monochronic
E1, 23	Anglo, all	Single	Bachelor's	Physical therapist	Polychronic
E2, 34	Anglo, all	Single	Master's	Director of crisis center	Monochronic
G1, 23	Anglo, all	Single	Bachelor's	Civil engineer	Polychronic
H1, 28	Anglo, all	Married	High school	Manages fast food store	Monochronic
J1, 23	Anglo, all	Single	Bachelor's	Human resources	Polychronic
K1, 29	Anglo, all	Married	Bachelor's	Director of a group home	Monchronic
M1, 26	Anglo, all	Single	Bachelor's	Elementary school teacher	Polychronic
N1, 26	Anglo, all	Married	Master's	University administration	Polychronic
O1, 25	Anglo, all	Single	Master's	MBA student	Monochronic
R1, 23	Anglo, all	Single	Bachelor's	Office administration	Monochronic
S1, 28	Anglo, all	Married	Master's	Elementary school teacher	Monochronic
R3, 26	Anglo, all	Married	Master's	Elementary school teacher	Polychronic
S2, 27	Anglo, all	Single	Bachelor's	Secretary	Polychronic
T1, 34	Anglo, all	Single	Doctorate	Graduate student	Polychronic
V2, 23	Anglo, all	Single	Master's	MBA student	Polychronic
J3, 33	Latina-Brazil, 2	Married	Master's	Dentist (unable to work)	Monochronic
V1, 30	Latina-Brazil, 1	Married	Bachelor's	Marketer (unable to work)	Polychronic
A2, 29	Latina-Dominican Republic, 19	Single	Master's	Working on PhD	Monochronic
P1, 23	Latina-Mexico, 5	Single	Bachelor's	Part-time student	Monochronic
M2, 24	Latina-Peru, 5	Single	Bachelor's	Studies English language	Polychronic
H2, 23	Latina-Puerto Rico, 10	Co-lives	Master's	Runs educational program	Monochronic
J2, 31	Latina-Puerto Rico, 31	Married	Bachelor's	Customer service manager	Monochronic
R2, 35	Latina-Puerto Rico, 4	Divorced	High school	Retail management	Polychronic

Table I.
Summary of informants

informant to direct the flow of discussion and speak spontaneously about polychronic behavior and other temporal concepts (Mick and Buhl, 1992; Thompson *et al.*, 1989). Prompts were of the nature "can you tell me more about that?" rather than "why did you do that?" The emic terms (words used by the informants themselves) were used in the follow-up prompts and questions.

The interpretation began with the verbatim transcripts of the 26 interviews. The analysis itself was completed through the use of margin notes and emerging etic (researcher created) descriptions. In terms of interpretation, we used a "back-and-forth" process of relating a part of a text to the whole (Arnold and Fisher, 1994; Spiggle, 1994; Thompson *et al.*, 1990;). Each informant's transcripts were read (and reread) in depth to create a summary of the person, to gain a sense of the whole person (Thompson, 1997). These are called idiographic summaries. Then similarities and dissimilarities across informants are examined and patterns and differences are sought (Thompson, 1997). In addition, the researcher looks for contradictions to (or confirmation of) their own pre-understanding of the phenomenon to create a more holistic sense of the data. The final understanding of the data and the phenomenon (in this case, polychronic behavior) is achieved through a constant comparison between the transcripts, the idiographic summaries, the emerging holistic interpretation, and an ongoing reading of the literature (Mick and Buhl, 1992; Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Thompson *et al.*, 1990).

In the next few sections we describe differences in the created meaning of polychronic behavior to both relatively more monochronic and polychronic informants of both cultures. We show illustrative examples from a single informant to demonstrate our points. Brief biographical information is provided on each informant to help the reader appreciate how individual meanings are created in part by personality and biographical differences.

Polychronic behavior
To begin, we present an example of polychronic behavior in the informant's own words, called emic terms (see Spiggle, 1994):

> S1: 'Cause I come here every morning I'll have a list of things to do and it's not necessarily in any priority. Um, sometimes it's whatever I'm closest to, if I'm closest to the computer center and I have to look something up on the computer I'll do that. If I have to, you know, if I'm halfway out the door and I remember that I have to do something downstairs then I'll go down to photocopy, or whatever it is. At home, um, how is that different? I don't know, I guess if it was something, like if I have to do laundry and four other things I'd probably get the laundry started, so then I can do, fit as much into a small amount of time as possible I guess. I don't know if that answers your question . . .

> Interviewer: Sure it does. Now if you were here at work, would you do the same type . . . ?

> S1: [interrupting] Yeah, get something printing on the computer while I'm doing something else. I think I would start as many things as possible to get going.

Anglo women
What does it mean to behave polychronically? The created meanings of this type of behavior differ, and include both positive and negative created meanings. We first review the meanings created by Anglo women.

Positive meanings
For Anglo, polychronic women, the positive meanings of polychronic behavior include: polychronic behavior makes time (at work) go faster, it creates a sense

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of urgency, it is efficient, it is realistic behavior, it is a motivating force, it is a signal of the importance of the actor and it creates achievement and accomplishment. Illustrative examples of each of these meanings follow. Polychronic behavior may have a singular meaning in the minds of some informants, but for many others it appeared that multiple meanings were created for polychronicity.

Faster perception of time. V2 is an MBA student working part-time in computer support. A gifted student, she rarely finds herself challenged, and is often bored, both at work and in leisure. For her, polychronic behavior means "speeding up time":

Interviewer: From the perspective of having a number of things going at once, is that how you prefer it?

V2: Yeah, if I'm just working on someone's computer and that's the only thing going on I feel like I'm just waiting for something to be installed I can think of someone else's computer. Like today while I was doing one I was thinking okay what can I do on the other one. So I can run between floors and work on one while the other is installing and that's how I prefer it. The day flies by that way.

Interviewer: All right, you did mention that you like when a task gets done. Can you tell me what it would be like if you did work one thing at a time?

V2: Inefficiency. I would be very frustrated and really bored. My day would go really slowly and once I got stuck on something again I'd have to just wait. I'm always doing two things at once.

Sense of urgency. T1 is a former financial analyst now working on a doctoral degree. A very self-critical woman, she never feels that she works hard enough. This is related to her use of polychronic behavior to create a more urgent feeling. This urgent meaning helps her to feel she is working as hard as she should be working, that her work is pressing and she is working hard:

Interviewer: When you are doing several things at once, can you tell me a little bit about how that feels?

T1: It feels good. It's OK 'cause I've been, at some points in my career, much busier and things had to get done right away so I'm used to it. In some ways I feel like in the PhD program I've slowed down a bit. You're just not answering the phone, trying to get something else done, and listening to someone else talking in your ear, and maybe trying to answer e-mails at the same time. So maybe in some ways I'm used to that, or trying to re-create that a little bit … that sense of urgency, as you know, is not really here any more.

Efficiency. S2 is a 27 year-old legal secretary. Recently, her six-year relationship with her fiancé ended, and her life now seems empty to her. She often misses having "things to do"; after moving back in with her parents she feels that she lacks responsibility and demands on her time. Because her personal life has so few time demands (compared to her recent past), she compensates by "creating" demands at work. She likes having demands on her time, so that she can behave polychronically, because to her polychronic behavior means efficiency, and she believes herself to be an efficient person:

S2: I think that depends on where I am, and what I need to do. I mean, I don't mind being stressed at work, I kind of thrive off of it. To me, honestly, I like having a lot of things to do.

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Yeah, sometimes it's slow or quiet, and I know I can get things done, I purposely won't do them because I'd rather have a lot to do, and I don't mind being stressed out. I like working under pressure I guess. So at work you know, that's fine.

Interviewer: Okay, so ...

S2: [interrupting] I think I'm pretty efficient with my time.

Realistic. N1 is an extremely focused, goal-driven woman with a future orientation. She and her husband plan their lives and careers methodically, often using self-help and motivational books as aids in their goal setting. N1 is a woman whom one might expect to be relatively monochronic (related to her analytical planning style). However, she behaves extremely polychronically, calling herself a "hopper" at work, jumping from one task to another. Rather than see this as a character flaw, she believes that her behavior is realistic. She is quite unable to imagine the feasibility of working on one thing at a time:

Interviewer: Tell me a little about how you think you'd feel if your boss came to you and said: I notice you're a hopper, and was really encouraging you to do one thing at a time. Can you imagine what that might be like?

N1: I guess I could. The problem is I find, life just doesn't work that way, as much as we'd want it to. You can try to work on one thing at a time but inevitably, in my case at least, let's say I'm going to work on writing a report or um, doing something that requires 8 hours' worth of time. Somewhere in there either the phone is going to ring, someone's going to drop by, um, I'm going to want a snack, you know, just a sort of break. I try to then refocus back to that item but it depends, like I said, on the thing. I would give it serious effort, I just don't know if it's really realistic, to think you must only do just one thing at a time.

Motivating. For some women, like G1, polychronic behavior means motivation. G1 is a 23-year-old civil engineer. For her polychronicity means "doing it all", "reaching for the stars". She equates doing one thing at a time with boredom. Even though her polychronic behavior sometimes causes problems in her relationship, she needs to behave this way to be motivated and to keep trying harder:

Interviewer: You mentioned that you do a lot of things at once. Do you like working on a number of different things at a time or do you like working on one thing at a time?

G1: I love to be busy and I love to get doing a lot of things at once. Like at the beginning of this job there's a huge learning curve and you have to learn how they do everything and it's just so boring because I was coming from that last two years of college where I had five or six classes, I had so many projects and so many things and I was just doing everything at once and so I love to do it all. I have to do it all. And I mean it's very frustrating and [boyfriend] really hates that sometimes because it makes me upset a lot, I wouldn't say a lot, but it makes me reach for the stars but I don't always make 'em. It helps me get a little farther than I would if I was just like, OK, whatever. So I know I have to be busy.

Signal of importance. Polychronic behavior also can mean "I am important". The reasoning that informants offer is that this type of behavior signifies multiple demands, and multiple priorities. Therefore, people with this behavior style are very needed in the organization, and therefore must be more

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important. G1, the civil engineer from the previous vignette, perhaps best expresses this meaning of polychronic behavior:

> G1: I'm enjoying work a lot now because I'm responsible for a lot of different things like ten projects going at once and I have to do a lot of things and when I'm doing things people are calling so I feel a lot more responsible, I feel a lot more, um, involved I guess, needed or something, something like that.

Achievement and accomplishment. M1, an elementary school teacher, is an achievement oriented, self-described "perfectionist". She works and reworks her teaching plans and materials until they look computer-generated, even when they are done by hand. Her home even reflects this; it is also impeccably clean and ordered. A current issue for M1 is gaining respect and recognition for her work – she doesn't feel as if she is adequately rewarded for her extraordinary achievements. She feels that to get this recognition, she must never fall behind, or not finish some project she has started. For her, polychronic behavior means getting things done; it means accomplishment and meeting deadlines, critically important issues for her:

> M1: So there are times when I feel like I have a million things to do and I rush. And people know me, to run, like instead of walking through the school I move really quickly and to always be busy and so I don't know how ... I might, I don't know if I would take them on all at once but I might, I would definitely, I would organize them in a way so that I would get them all done on time. Like there would be no way that it wouldn't be done. But that's why I have stomach problems, because I'm so worried about getting things done and I worry about it.

Negative meanings

Occasionally, the Anglo women who behave polychronically create a negative meaning for their own polychronic behavior. T1, the doctoral student described above, is relentlessly self-critical. Although she uses polychronicity's "urgency" meaning to help her at work, she also feels that perhaps this is not the best way to work:

> T1: Sometimes I try to do all of them at once. And it's really, I'm sure it's much better to just do one thing. But sometimes I'll be doing one thing and think "I was supposed to call so and so". So I'll stop that and I'll do the call and then go back and start doing that again and then think, oh, I was supposed to email someone and so ... I don't think it's a great way of doing it but somehow they all get done eventually.

> Interviewer: Have you thought about changing?

> T1: Yes. I guess because eventually things get done so ... I think I could be a little better at prioritizing like what's really important.

N1, who had previously described polychronic behavior as realistic, and who could not imagine working on one thing at a time, allows later in her interview that maybe there is a better way. She just doesn't think she can work that way. For her, polychronic behavior can sometimes have a negative aspect.

> Interviewer: Do you feel okay about that while it [doing many things at once] is happening?

> N1: Most of the time I do, sometimes I get really stressed out, which leads me to think that I really should start to focus on one thing at a time. Because sometimes if I get really stressed

out it means that I'm not really clear on what I have to do at that given time so I better sit back and say, okay, what's one thing that I can do right now? That will stop me from being stressed out. It's very hard because you get into the habit of bouncing around from thing to thing.

Not quite positive or negative – but "part of me"

N1's inability to envision herself working monochronically is related to a final important aspect of the meaning creation process for polychronic behavior. For some women, this behavior style is so related to themselves as individuals that they really cannot separate this behavior from their sense of self. In this way, the meaning of polychronic behavior is, in the end, neither wholly positive or negative, but simply "who I am":

N1: I don't know if I try, I just end up doing that. It's just the way I am. There's a, there's a word for it … oh, you're a hopper. Hoppers are people that just sort of bounce around from thing to thing and that's really me. I don't know if it's just the way I've gotten used to working or if it's, I don't know, it's um, but I end up doing three or four things at a time. Especially like in the morning at work where I'll be working on something on the computer but then I'll get interrupted but then I'll remember that I wanted to go and put the letter, you know, in the mailbox downstairs, and then I'll go make a copy and then I'll go to the bathroom and then I come back and be like, where was I? I mean the more things I have to do, the more it gets sort of like that. And yet amazingly it all gets done.

Interviewer: So, back to that idea about having three or four things to do …

M1: I would probably start all of them and then get like, not a rough draft, but I might go back to them and revise, like go back to the first one and make sure it's just right …

Interviewer: And do you like working that way?

M1: Well, it's stressful. It just ends up that I work that way I think. I think I've always been this way.

Latina women

Contrary to what one would expect from reading the literature on cultural perceptions of time, the Latin American women in our sample were not mainly or mostly polychronic (see, for example, Graham, 1981; Hall, 1959; Manrai and Manrai, 1995). In fact, more than half could be said to be relatively more monochronic. This could in part be due to differing levels of acculturation, in that these women may have adapted their cultural meanings in their new country (see also Manrai and Manrai, 1995). In addition, the women were mainly polychronic when it came to leisure, but some were monochronic at work, reflecting that individuals can adopt a particular orientation in a certain task (Graham, 1981; Usunier, 1991). This apparent domain-specificity of polychronicity also parallels the finding of Hall and Hall (1987) who describe Japanese managers changing their level of polychronicity depending on who they are interacting with.

Although the sample is small, what is striking about the Latina informants' sense of polychronic behavior is that its literalness differed from that of the Anglo informants. For polychronic Latinas, their understanding of the meaning

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of that behavior was more literal than for many Anglos. Polychronic behavior is not a signal of meaning to the same extent it can be for Anglos: polychronicity is simply a more realistic way to work.

V1 is a Brazilian marketing professional who moved to the USA a year ago with her husband, so that he could pursue graduate studies. She is an outgoing woman with a very full social calendar – she will often combine attendance at several different functions in one evening. At work as well as socially, she sees polychronicity as perfectly normal, "not a problem":

> V1: Sometimes I tend to try to do things at the same time … my boss, she was completely crazy, she said how can you work the computer and talk on the phone. I don't know, but I can do it. [she would say] You cannot do two things at the same time and have the same quality but I would do this. Like I try to do many things. And it was not a problem to me. …

Similarly R2, a retail manager who moved to the USA from Puerto Rico four years ago, describes her polychronic behavior as pervading both her home and work life. She assumes that everyone behaves this way, because polychronic behavior is "easy":

> Interviewer: When you did start them, do you think you would do one thing at a time or maybe start a bit on each thing?

> R2: Yeah, I tend to do that. A hundred things at once. Oh yes. Doesn't everybody? Well, um, in the house I would try to do laundry and cook and maybe write letters at the same time. And I burn the rice! It's not a joke. You'd see me putting the rice inside a bag and taking it out to the garbage [laughing]. No, but actually though, sometimes. At work I do the same thing. Like I'll be, I'll have a huge mess of papers at the desk and I'll be going back and forth and doing stuff or moving something and coming back to the desk and all of a sudden I just drop everything and go take out the garbage! [laughs]. It's really easy to do that too much.

M2, the most recently arrived immigrant in this study, is a Peruvian woman who has been in the USA for six months, studying English. She also has a very literal meaning of her polychronic behavior. Behaving polychronically, starting a bit of all of your projects, means you will not be "completely lost". Monochronic behavior just doesn't make sense to her:

> Interviewer: Okay, now some people might actually start on a few things at once, getting a bit done of everything. Other people might go through everything one by one. How would you say you are?

> M2: Why would you start only one? … Like for example I have three different assignments of readings, I think I will try to do a little bit of them all three. Yeah, I think. Like if you only do one thing, and you don't do anything with the others, you are going to be very focused on one, but I'm going to be totally lost on the others, so I prefer like, have a little idea of everything so you are not completely lost.

Monochronic behavior
Some of the informants behave monochronically. An example of this behavior is described below:

H2: Things that I have to get done at once. Um, I just do it. I'll start with one, I'm one of these people that I have to finish one thing before I start the next, I'm really systematic in that way, like I can't start four things and then not finish them. So I basically start one, finish that, and go on like that.

Anglo women

What is the meaning of polychronic behavior when one actually behaves monochronically? Again, as we saw for polychronic individuals, created meanings differ. Monochronic women see no benefit to polychronic behavior; the resultant meanings are wholly negative. We first review the meanings created by Anglo women, who see polychronicity as a form of fragmentation, as a creator of stress, frustration, and confusion that ultimately results in poor quality work.

Fragmentation. R3 is a 28-year-old elementary school teacher. She grew up in an upper class home, with a stay-at-home mom. She is extremely monochronic. For her, even deviating slightly from a "to-do list" is a negatively charged emotional experience. For her, polychronic behavior means being fragmented, which she equates with not being able to focus, not "holding it together":

R3: I mean I think I'm one of those people who likes to finish a whole task and then the next thing as opposed to some people might chip away a little bit at all things. ... I look at my list and go, okay I'm going to do this and then this and this and this. I would probably start on a task and then complete one so I can cross it off. That's my favorite thing to do is cross things off my list. So I do one thing at a time or otherwise it would only get half an "X", which would be horrible. Some people can do that but ...

Interviewer: Tell me about "horrible" for you.

R3: Why would it be horrible? It would be like two balls in the air. I like to just get something totally done and have another whole thing left than have two half things. Do you know what I mean?

Interviewer: Can you expand on that?

R3: I don't know. 'Cause to think about even two little things ... I'd rather have one big thing to focus my attention on than to have two little things. Like for example, when I was getting my Master's. I was getting my Master's, working part time, looking for a house, and planning a wedding. So I felt really split sort of four ways and I remember thinking I can't wait to have all this over with and just have one job. 'Cause I felt like I had these sort of three different jobs going on. School, part-time job, planning the wedding. I felt like three big things that I was doing ... I would rather have one big job to focus my energy on and I guess that's the way I work best. I don't like to be fragmented.

Source of stress. For many Anglo women who behave primarily monochronically, polychronic behavior means nothing more than increasing stress. For example, D1 is a payroll clerk and a self-described "anal retentive." She likes order and organization in her life, extending that to mean her physical environment at work (her desk and work area) as well as her home and her personal appearance. She must be organized, and for her, polychronic behavior

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(which sometimes "happens to her") is a source of stress. Although she is much more monochronic in nature, the following vignette explores a situation where she was behaving polychronically, to demonstrate this "source of stress" meaning:

> Interviewer: OK, can you tell me about a time when you found yourself working on a number of things at once?
>
> D1: Well, that happened today because today was payday. So I have to collect all the time cards, and then do all this crap for the cards, bring in the cards, go pick up the checks and in the midst of all this I'm getting all the [forms] ready for the fall semester for the academic year. So I'm doing all that in the middle of everything. Also, I have to log everything I do on spreadsheets. Then I get all the student time cards and those have to be logged. There was just a lot of different things … Then you get emails during the day … you've got to respond to those so it's a little bit of everything really.
>
> Interviewer: How do you feel when that happens?
>
> D1: I get bogged down. I can get kind of like ooohhh, stressed out.

Similarly, R1, a 23-year-old office administrator, describes this created meaning of polychronicity:

> Interviewer: OK, now some people might approach that situation by starting all the projects and working on all of them sort of simultaneously. How would you feel if you did that?
>
> R1: I prefer to have one thing going at a time. I feel a little more stressed out if I have a bunch of things unfinished all at once.

Frustration and confusion. Some women believe that polychronic behavior is a source of frustration and confusion. For R3 (whom we previously discussed in relation to the meaning "fragmentation") polychronic behavior, when she has experienced it, has not been a positive experience:

> R3: Definitely I would do the most important first, I would rank them. I'm the type of person that if I'm doing something I have to finish that. I get really frustrated if I just start one and then the other. I'd rather just be done with one and then the next one and then the next one.

E2, who has a demanding job as the director of a university counseling center, must prioritize her tasks. The meaning of polychronic behavior for her is only confusion:

> E2: But then I just kind of work on it, prioritize, decide which I'm going to work on first. [later] Yeah 'cause if you don't you really get confused about what you're working on. ... So I find I just sit there in my office and I block out office time and I work on it solid.

As we explained previously, D1 believes that polychronic behavior is a source of stress. She also believes that were she to behave polychronically, she would become confused and unsure of her work:

> Interviewer: Tell me about being a one at a time person.
>
> D1: Just 'cause there's less confusion. Otherwise I'll lose track of where I was. Especially, a lot of the things I do are number related and once you get a number, you've got to hold on to where you got it from otherwise you'll come back and say where the heck did that come from? So I kind of really need to stay focused on one thing at a time.

Poor quality work. Some informants created their individual meaning of polychronic behavior not based on what it felt like for them, but on what they perceived the outcomes of polychronic behavior are, namely, poor results. A1 is a retail store manager/buyer working in very fast paced environment. To her, polychronic behavior means poor quality work, as a result of rushing:

A1: I take a really deep breath.... I don't like to do that [polychronic behavior] because I'm afraid I'll get too involved in what I am doing and forget about the other one but … I really gauge it towards which one can I get done first. And like, thoroughly and complete, not like half-assed or anything like that.

Interviewer: Can you tell me more about why you don't like doing that?

A1: I just feel that the quality of what you do, you don't dedicate the same amount of time. If I start something I really want to follow it through. Because I feel if I get into something else, I may be dedicating too much to the second thing I started, or I may try to rush one of them. And I just feel, I mean you, I just feel that I should dedicate the same amount of time to each one. If they're all of equal importance then they should all get equal time until they're finished. Now I may get one done, and well that's great. But I want to know that I really didn't rush through it and that I'm giving someone accurate information.

Latina women

As we mentioned earlier, a priori we did not expect to find many Latina women behaving monochronically. In fact, most of the Latinas we interviewed were monochronic at work (none was monochronic in leisure), and we believe that this monochronic behavior is more important in various roles, especially on the job. As was the case with the polychronic Latina women, the monochronic Latina women did not create several varying meanings for polychronic behavior. Perhaps because these women are assuming monochronic behavior at work themselves, polychronic behavior only seemed to mean one thing to them: a lack of focus on the job. This is aptly demonstrated by J3, a Brazilian dentist who has been in the USA only two years:

J3: I have to decide what is the most important and I try to put on the top the most important for me, then the second, and the third, this way. But I could not say if all the things I had to do were the same priority, I don't know, maybe I would cry [laughs]. I don't know, I try to do that, but I don't know, my priority you see.

Interviewer: Some people might start a little bit on each one, and other people might go through each one by one. Which would you say you are most like?

J3: I prefer to do one, each at a time. I don't want to … if I have to do, I have to do well. And uh, if I try to do everything at the same time or, and before finishing, for me, I can lose my focus. For me, I prefer to finish and pass to another, and pass to another. I don't know. I think that this is the best.

Discussion

We examined how personality and culture combine to influence the created meaning of polychronic behavior for "mainstream" Anglo Americans and recent Latin American immigrants. The meaning of polychronic, simultaneous behavior does depends on, among other things, the individual's own behavior

and their ethnic background. These influences combine to create unique, personalized meanings of polychronic behavior, both positive and negative.

Anglo informants saw polychronic behavior as more symbolically charged than did the Latinas; for the Anglo women this type of behavior connotes a multiplicity of meanings. In fact, one might argue that the Anglo women, both those who behave polychronically and those who did not, believe that this behavior signals deliberate meaning to others. It "says something" about the individual behaving that way. In contrast, polychronic behavior for the Latinas was seen more as "what it is", rather than "what it says", or conveys. The more literal approach to understanding polychronic behavior explicated by the Latin women may in fact reflect Latin American cultural norms. Perhaps polychronicity has many multiple meanings for Anglos because of an implicit recognition that it is not the automatic default pattern for most people, and hence requires explanation.

More generally, our research suggests that the meanings of polychronic behavior are individually negotiated within a person's social and cultural worlds. We speculate that the meanings of other temporal phenomenon, for example, planning style or temporal orientation to the past, present, or future, may also be individually created. Our work also presents some intriguing questions for further research. For example, we wonder if context may affect the meaning of polychronic behavior. That is, what role is there in the meaning creation process for tasks and situations? If context may be an issue for meaning creation, then domain might also play a role, for example, would the meaning of polychronic behavior change in a work setting versus a leisure setting? While pointing towards some future research, the findings of this research also highlight implications for workgroups and managers.

Managerial implications

Why should managers be concerned about the meaning of polychronic behavior? Imagine a situation where polychronicity becomes the work group norm for behavior due to positive meaning creation of the original members, and subsequent socialization of this meaning to new members. Polychronic behavior in a very real sense is used to "add time" to a day, allowing the group to produce more within the workday than if they had approached tasks monochronically (Kaufman *et al.*, 1991b). In effect, the work group "has more time". This is likely to influence decision quality of the group (Bluedorn and Denhardt, 1988; March and Simon, 1958). Will polychronic groups, due to either more absolute time, or at least the perception of more time, make higher quality decisions? A related managerial aspect of polychronic behavior is its impact on the importance of deadlines. As deadlines provide less time, the pace of work increases (see Bluedorn and Denhardt, 1988). But perhaps polychronic work groups, who are capable of creating more time, respond differently to deadline pressure.

American management methods, now exported throughout the world, stress a monochronic style (Usunier, 1991). The present research not only highlights

the impact that cultural differences may have, it also highlights the key role of individually created meaning. Monochronic managers need to be aware that for many workers, both in traditionally "monochronic" cultures and elsewhere, polychronic behavior can have very positive meanings. If subordinates have deeply entrenched positive attitudes toward polychronic behavior (for example, that polychronicity is an extremely efficient method of operation), these attitudes may be hard to change. Our research also offers support for Slocombe and Bluedorn's (1999) recent finding that organizational outcomes can be enhanced when there is a fit between a worker's preferred level of polychronicity and what they experience at work.

A final implication of our research for managers comes in the form of a warning. Although cultural background can certainly influence the created meaning of polychronic behavior for an individual, personality differences also play a very key role in determining whether this is a "good" or "bad" way to work. Managers should not make the mistake of treating foreign cultures (or even ethnic subcultures in their own countries) as homogeneous with respect to polychronic behavior (and perhaps other aspects of temporal perception). There is more going on – meaning creation is a dynamic and complex process that will affect not only how individuals feel about their own behavior, but also how they interact with their work group, managers, and subordinates.

Note

1. I use the term Anglo to refer to white, Christian, "mainstream" Americans. The terms Latina and Hispanic are used interchangeably to refer to informants from Mexico, Central and South America, Cuba and the Caribbean.

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