Editorial

Boundaries

Some Thoughts on Space...

Boundaries are much on my mind these days—from travel restrictions and lockdowns between countries, state border checks, local shelter in place orders, and all the way down to maintaining 6 feet of distance between individuals. Space is playing a heightened role, whether it is political or physical. Our only locus of control seems to be within the four walls that we inhabit, and that is even debatable.

After all, the boundaries we had set in place for our work life balance are now gone—the location of a physical workspace is no longer providing a separation between work and home. (There is no "leaving work" anymore.) The media and professional experts offer endless advice on how to wrangle this new reality. Technology is being used for both work and recreation, but I have discovered—for me, at least—that time and even just a little separation of space provides a huge relief in the struggle to find a work-life balance and peace of mind. With two high school students and two adults working or studying at home (for hours a day), each family member has a separate workspace. I usually work at the kitchen table so I'm available to my daughters to help with their schoolwork and other projects while I also do some of my own work that requires less concentration. (When I need more headspace, I have a small desk in the bedroom which gets me away from Psych reruns or BTS on YouTube). This separation signals to me and to (my family members), that I am "at work" now.

As some institutions are now in the planning stages of how to physically "get back to work," space planning has taken on a whole new meaning. While the rest of campus is trying to figure out how to have in-person classes and maintain safe social distance (making sure to accommodate at-risk students and faculty), libraries are prioritizing core services like information delivery, document scanning, and online instruction (both synchronous and asynchronous), and identifying who needs to be back on site to support them. It appears—for institutions in Texas at least—that the face-to-face component of public service will come later—once crucial factors are known. Until then, we hold our breaths—waiting to see if COVID cases spike and what (if any) sort of scientific breakthroughs may come. (Of course, most of us realize that holding our breaths for a vaccine is a losing prospect at this point since anything resembling a vaccine is months, if not years, away.) So, we wait some more.

...and Time

Place is not the only boundary gone from our work; time is also a huge factor. Providing some temporal boundaries in which to work is useful—my job has never exactly been 8 to 5—but, now more than ever, I find that setting work time (around critical meetings, online consults, etc.) is helping me feel less stressed about it and allows me some much-needed free time and recreation.

Somewhat conversely, while I am making extra effort to have structure in my daily life, I am working very hard to "live in the now," particularly because of the uncertainly of the future and lack of control. My daughter (who just got back from foreign exchange in Thailand) noted that the Thai people seemed to have a much more laid-back perception of time—something that initially drove her crazy. In Thailand, my daughter was initially very focused on getting to school on time and on the precise details related to upcoming plans. While she was there, we were simultaneously hosting exchange students ourselves—first a young woman from Switzerland, then one from Brazil. It was interesting (and I will not say that our family is either typical or representative, nor necessarily were they), but both exchange students were also much more laid-back about time (that is, they weren't concerned about getting to school on time or scheduling plans). About partway through my daughter's exchange, she adopted the prevailing "whatever" attitude. Since the last part of her exchange was amid the COVID-19 outbreak, her more flexible, less controlled attitude served her well. It is an attitude that I have tried to emulate in this time where we have neither control of what is happening, nor knowledge of what the future may bring.

This experience with foreign exchange has prompted a renewed interest in cultural identity, particularly around perceptions of time and related concepts. Of course, similar to how studies of generational identity need to be tempered, so too do studies on cultural identity. That said, it would be interesting to learn if the insights of the researchers on cultural identity hold up with experience—particularly with factors related to time. Granted, even when these studies started out as social science research, they seemed to have been mostly distilled down into models aimed at organizational development and corporate strategy. There are numerous studies on the perception of time which explore various facets and perspectives of time and, in some cases, provide indexes or measures:

- Time as linear vs. multi-dimensional
- Orientation to the past or future
- Time as measurable (or controllable)
- Time as finite (and a commodity)
- Long-term vs. short-term perspective

And many more.[1]

One of the earliest researchers on cultural identity, Edward T. Hall examined different cultural relationships with time from the perspective of monochronicity—time as linear or finite—or polychronicity—time as more of an external construct that does not dictate life or interactions and events may happen concurrently.[2] He also addressed other aspects of time related to culture and experience. Incidentally, Hall further examined the cultural concept of place—referring to it as proxemics—and addressed territoriality and people's relationship with physical dimensions.

Following Hall, Fons Trompenaars created a model of Cultural Dimensions, which also included a similar perspective on time—sequential vs. synchronous. Sequential correlates an understanding of time as linear while synchronous is less focused on time as a single stream. He also looked at short-term vs. long-term country orientations. In looking at how Trompenaars and others classify countries by their orientation to time, I used the small sample of countries from my admittedly limited experience with foreign exchange, to see if they might provide any insight:

	Average Time Horizon (Past/Future)	**Long vs. Short-termism**
United States	4.69/4.93	4.30
Thailand	NA	4.40
Switzerland	5.33/5.17	4.88
Brazil	NA	3.85

Trompenaars explains the time horizon as being oriented to short- vs. long-term view (working primarily within a business context), with a higher score being focused more on the long-term. So, within the 4 countries, Switzerland tends to take a longer view while Brazil is more than a full point below (indicating a more short-term orientation). The metrics on the perceived significance of the past and future were not available for all countries, but, perhaps not surprisingly, the US favored the future over the past and Switzerland was the opposite.

Hofstede's model also looks at differences between countries, but the factors most informed by time were future orientation and uncertainty avoidance. He defines "uncertainty avoidance dimension expresses the degree to which the members of a society feel uncomfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity"[3] which might be equated with tolerance to change. Long-term vs. short-term orientation is not as straightforward as one would think. He explains:

> Societies who score low on this dimension, for example, prefer to maintain time-honoured traditions and norms while viewing societal change with suspicion. Those with a culture which scores high, on the other hand, take a more pragmatic approach: they encourage thrift and efforts in modern education as a way to prepare for the future.[4]

The study and country metrics are available via the web with the following metrics:

	Long-term Orientation	**Uncertainty Avoidance**
United States	26	46
Thailand	32	64
Switzerland	74	58
Brazil	44	76

Switzerland has the highest long-term orientation and the US has the least, which is not what I would have initially intuited but does demonstrate that this definition is not at all consistent with Hall's concept of long-termism. How this dimension correlated with uncertainly avoidance is intriguing. For uncertainly avoidance, the lowest scoring (or most tolerant of uncertainty and perhaps more open to change) is the US while the highest (or least tolerant of uncertainty) is Brazil. I am curious how this result speaks to the situation in which we all find ourselves in today (the tolerance—or lack thereof—or a changing future).

Similarly, the GLOBE Study by House, et al. does not look specifically at time orientation. Instead it examines different countries' perceptions of uncertainty avoidance—similarly defined as Hofstede's—and on future orientation, which focuses on planning (also aimed at an organizational or business context). The Globe Study, too, is ongoing and has a web site that reports updated activity and offers metrics by country:

	Future Orientation (Practice/Value)	Uncertainty Avoidance (Practice/Value)
United States	4.15/5.31	4.15/4.0
Thailand	3.43/6.2	3.93/5.61
Switzerland	4.27/4.8	4.98/3.83
Brazil	3.81/5.69	3.6/4.99

From the GLOBE data, there are two measures for each factor: the practice score, which is "as it is" and the value score or the aspirational importance. Accordingly, the future orientation in practice for all 4 countries is less than what is desired, with Thailand having the lowest in practice and Switzerland the highest. The uncertainty avoidance index (wherein a higher score indicates less tolerance for uncertainty and more formality and planning), is highest in Switzerland and lowest in Brazil, with the countries with the two highest practice scores, seeking to be lower and those with lower practice scores seeking to be higher—significantly higher in Thailand's case (my daughter said in response "I believe it!).

So what does this mean? It must be acknowledged that some of these studies are dated and some prioritize the business context in addition to the fact that it may distill diverse cultures and perspectives within nations into a single majority—which can perpetuate bias. In terms of my own limited experience with the exchange students, I will the results of these studies are interesting but I would draw no definitive conclusions about other cultures nor would they largely inform my interactions with individuals. However, I also have to admit that I am probably more time-oriented than the average person in the United States (don't judge me… it's a self-defense mechanism for busy people!).

While I will admit that it may be easier to look at cultural identity in an academic context (referring to experts rather than experiences), the translation of those models to real-world interactions can be problematic.

… and a Last Thought on Boundaries

Boundaries have also come into play in terms of people and community. It is heartening to see so many cases of people reaching out to help. But it is also showing us how certain boundaries like "the us vs. them" mentality can become so insidious (particularly when politics enter the scene). The president's reference to COVID-19 as the "China virus"[5] seems to have given permission for all sorts of xenophobic behavior. A colleague told me about an incident in early March (prior to the shelter in place orders) when two Chinese American children went to church with their parents (in perfect health and maintaining social distance) and they were berated by another parishioner who said that they had sneezed on her the week before (when they had not actually attended church that day) and that they were going to give her COVID-19. Thankfully, the children and their parents were supported by other members or the church and their friends. However, it does illustrate the harm that drawing conclusions based on (mis)perceptions of cultural identity can do.

Even hearing about this occurrence secondhand, the injustice and intolerance of it inflames me. I bring it up here for a specific purpose: librarians have long been advocates for equity and social justice and ACRL has made equity, diversity, and inclusion a priority for a number of years. Likewise, this journal makes efforts to model these values. In this climate, with COVID-19 and the fear and the loss that it has wrought, I encourage you to think about

what more we can do to break down boundaries, particularly between people at a time when we should be finding ways to come together, even while we remain apart.

Notes

1. C. Ashley Fulmer and Brandon Crosby. "Cross-cultural perspectives on time" in *Time and Work, Volume 2 How Time Impacts Groups, Organizations and Methodological Choices*, edited by Abbie J. Shipp and Yitzhak Fried. New York: Routledge, 2014, 63-85.

2. Edward T. Hall. *The Dance of Life: The Other Dimension of Time*. (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1983).

3. "National culture." *Hofstede Insights*. Accessed May 22, 2020, https://hi.hofstede-insights.com/national-culture.

4. "National culture." *Hofstede Insights*. Accessed May 22, 2020, https://hi.hofstede-insights.com/national-culture.

5. Allyson Chiu. "Trump has no qualms about calling coronavirus the 'Chinese Virus.' That's a dangerous attitude, experts say." *The Washington Post*, March 20, 2020. Accessed on May 22, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/03/20/coronavirus-trump-chinese-virus/.