

# Future & Past Orientation

by Sophia Tutorial



## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss time as another element that's helpful to understand when gaining insight into different cultures' worldviews. In particular, we'll focus on:

1. Future Orientation vs. Past Orientation
2. Time Orientations in Conflict

## 1. Future Orientation vs. Past Orientation

In terms of a culture's worldview on time, **future orientation** refers to a culture's willingness to make changes that perhaps don't fit with past norms or traditions.

In other words, future orientation is the ability to move into the future without having to take the past into account.

**Past orientation**, on the other hand, reflects the degree of attachment that a culture has to its past or to existing traditions and norms. Changes in the future need to fit with the past, so there is a continuity from past to future.

Cultures differ in their worldview positions on this concept of time. Some cultures might be willing to break with history, while others have a precedent that when making a change for the future, that change must account for the past.

Of course, not everyone in a particular culture will ascribe to that culture's worldview in exactly the same way, but these are the broad tendencies that cultures can reflect.

Throughout different cultures, there are various ways in which these two time orientations can be expressed.

### IN CONTEXT

A culture that has a past orientation would have a reverence for elders or ancestors. This culture might also have a great sense of history; people in this culture may consider how things that happened in the past weigh in on the present.

For example, the Iroquois, a Native American tribe, believed that any action you took had to be considered in terms of seven generations. This shows a clear awareness of the effect of the present

on the future and how past actions will reverberate; it reflects long term thinking.

In a past-oriented culture, anything you do needs to be thought out in terms of lasting results, whereas a culture that is more future-oriented will perhaps focus more on short-term gains because there's not that strong sense of ties to the past or of how actions might reverberate into the future. These future-oriented cultures tend to strongly value youth as opposed to venerating elders; they may celebrate taking risks and cultivating new ideas.}}



## TERMS TO KNOW

### Future Orientation

A culture's degree of willingness to make changes that do not "fit" with past events, traditions, or norms.

### Past Orientation

A culture's degree of attachment to past or existing events, traditions, or norms, making future changes contingent upon fitting with past.

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## 2. Time Orientations in Conflict

When it comes to making changes, different cultures can take different points of view.

### IN CONTEXT

You're in a managerial or business situation in which you want to work on a project, and you have plans or a proposal. If you're working with a culture with a past orientation, you need to take into account how any actions might relate to the future, whether the actions break with the past, and whether there are any historical imperatives.

You may have to listen to discussions of history, something that a person with a future orientation may not be accustomed to doing. You may need to spend more time taking a look at how everything will hold together. There may also be a careful scrutiny of any kind of proposal that would require change going forward.

In a conflict situation, you may also find that before the parties can move forward toward any resolution in the future, there may need to be apologies or restitution for past wrongs.

Because that focus on the past can come into play when resolving a conflict, it's important to be aware of how the strong relationship between the past, present, and future is involved in the tangible issues that present themselves within the conflict discussion.



## SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that different cultures take different worldview positions on how they perceive time. While some cultures are more **future-oriented**, focusing on moving forward with new ideas, other cultures are more **past-oriented**, focusing on the long term effects of actions, and how they fit with past traditions. You now understand that **time orientation can be present in conflict**

**situations** between people with different views. A party's cultural worldview can affect how willing they are to move forward with a certain action, particularly if it involves any type of break with history. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson.



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