

# The cultural axes of punctuality and waiting in line

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Even ten minutes after my conference talk was scheduled to begin, people were still wandering into the hall. My host explained that in Portugal, nothing starts on time. (This Web site goes so far as to say that arriving a half hour to 45 minutes late is customary.) I asked whether the Portuguese form orderly lines when waiting for things. The answer: No. They just form a crowd. One would expect that punctuality and waiting in orderly lines would be correlated traits in a culture, since they both reflect a degree of attention to detail and order, but there are exceptions. In Taiwan, people form very orderly lines. For example, lanes are painted on subway platforms for people to stand in, and everybody waits their turn in line to get on. On the other hand, punctuality is not a Taiwanese trademark.

In the United States, waiting in line is taken for granted, but that doesn't always align with punctuality. It is important to be on time for business meetings, but the rules for social gatherings are more complex.

- If invited to meet someone at a neutral location, you are expected to be there on time, and if you are more than five or ten minutes late, you should call the other party to let them know; otherwise they may abandon waiting for you.
- If you are invited to dinner at someone's house, then up to about ten minutes tardiness is excusable, but under no conditions should you arrive early.
- If invited to a party, you should arrive ten to fifteen minutes after the announced start time. The term for this is *fashionably late*. Again, under no circumstances should you arrive early.

Is there a correlation between punctuality and waiting in line in your country?

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