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A Therapist's Reflective Analysis on Cultural Perspectives of Time, Harmony & The Rise in Anxiety

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Abstract

This paper showcases the author's work as a counsellor in Australian Aboriginal communities using a model of rhythmic music, drums and percussion linked to reflective discussions. It reflects on his learning, received through the "Two-Way" or "Two-Eyed" learning principle used widely in cross-cultural settings, referring to a respectful partnership where knowledge passes in both directions, and its influence on the author's practice. Among the many different views between the author's western cultural orientation and the Australian Aboriginal world-view, the perception of time is of particular interest, and how it significantly shapes the lives of both groups in very different ways. This paper explores the ramifications of an increasing focus on speed in modern life, and the pressures, stressors and anxieties it produces, compared to the more relaxed associations of time shared by Indigenous peoples. This accelerating pace – "the need for speed" – is reflected in musical interactions, particularly when working with individuals who struggle with emotional regulation. However, these paradigms provide opportunities for both therapists and educators to introduce exercises that challenge this tendency and raise awareness of different strategies for managing such emotional arousal and anxiety more generally.

Introduction

For over twenty years I have been working in therapeutic practice with Aboriginal people in communities across Australia, and more recently with Indigenous peoples in New Zealand, Canada and the USA. As a newly trained counsellor I spent my formative years working in the alcohol and drug sector in Western Australia and was posted to remote regions to support prevention initiatives on a regular basis. I quickly learned that my training, in traditional "talk-based" cognitive therapies, was inadequate for engaging people for whom English was often a third language and whose cultural norms meant that discussing sensitive personal issues was highly "shameful".

With the advice and support of local Aboriginal Noongar elders I started to introduce music, predominantly hand drumming, into my practice. Initially my intention was to use music to attract people to my sessions, though it wasn't long before the therapeutic potential of the music itself became apparent. Rhythm-based music, using hand drums and percussion, has provided me with convenient tools for engaging a broad range of participants, and I have combined this participatory practice with reflective conversations, utilising analogies, to connect the musical experience to relevant life issues. Not coincidentally, it is hand-drumming that has dominated indigenous healing practices in societies around the world across many thousands of years. As trauma researcher Bruce Perry notes:

"Amid the current pressure for 'evidence-based practice' parameters, we should remind ourselves that the most powerful evidence is that which comes from hundreds of separate cultures, across thousands of generations, individually converging on rhythm, touch, storytelling and reconnection to community as the core ingredients to coping and healing from trauma." (Perry, 2015).

Research into rhythm-based music has shown a link between the auditory and motor systems of the brain, enabling rhythmic musical input to impact a range of somatic and neurological functions including those that influence our response to stress (Thaut, 2014). When we look at how people manage stressful situations generally, there is often a rhythmic element within their efforts to regain control. We see this demonstrated for people with autism and other sensory perception conditions, through repetitive stimming behaviours, but it is equally apparent in the way many people control their breathing in times of emotional stress or seek regular routines to combat the unpredictability of traumatic experiences. Rhythmic music is a powerful tool for this same purpose.

Two Way Learning, 'Two-Eyed Seeing' & Cultural safety

A key focus of my work across Indigenous communities has been ensuring cultural safety, and in particular focusing on Two-Way Learning in Australia (Turner et al, 2025) and Two-Eyed-Seeing in Canada (Wienman & Malhotra, 2023), an approach that strengthens participants' sense of cultural identity and belonging, and serves to foster inter-cultural understanding and respect. Every theme that we cover in our work asks the question: what can we learn about this issue from the perspective of the Indigenous culture? The terms "Two-Way" or "Two-Eyed" represent a need for communication and knowledge to pass in two directions. Additionally, this helps to clarify language differences and meanings and provide explanatory bridges of

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understanding and awareness for both groups. This reciprocal relationship comes with responsibilities to each other, informed by Aboriginal & First Nations' ways of being, whereby "you give to me and I give back to you." This involves such things as attempting to understand each other's worldview, exerting efforts to trust each other, and making relations stable through transparent obligations and expectations.

Although drumming is not generally recognised as a traditional form of musical expression in Australian Aboriginal communities, it does have a significant history for many groups including the Koori nation across Victoria and within the tribes of the Cape region of northern Queensland. Some of the earliest recorded Aboriginal paintings, as well as first contact descriptions of corroboree gatherings, from elder William Barak, show women drumming with sticks on tightly rolled up possum skins as their "menfolk" danced (Owen, 2003).

In Indigenous communities across Canada and the USA where there is a strong ongoing tradition of drumming, it has been imperative to seek guidance on the appropriate use of the drum and permission for bringing any contemporary form of therapeutic drumming practice into these communities. My own work avoids teaching rhythms and focuses instead on improvised play. In these North American communities there are often strict protocols around drumming; who can drum, where, and how the drum is treated. However, my own experience, working first-hand with the coastal Salish, and Nuu-chah-nulth peoples in British Columbia has been that when consulted, and the intent of the program clarified, even the strictest adherents to cultural drumming protocols will make an exception for this type of therapeutic program, if there is an established level of trust.

Cultural Perspectives on Time

One of the most challenging and eye-opening differences I have had to adapt to as an Anglo-Celtic Australian working within Indigenous communities in Australia, New Zealand, the USA and Canada is the different way time is viewed and measured. Despite all the pressures of conforming to the western clock, in most Aboriginal communities I have visited few people wear a watch and the priorities of cultural and family life are still the dominant factors on how time is utilised. Delivering therapeutic sessions or training local education and health workers requires a level of flexibility and patience at odds with western scheduling. These differences have led to ongoing conflict and hardship in the quest for cultural integration, particularly in relation to education and employment (Burbank, 2006; Steel & Heritage, 2020).

There can be no greater symbol of cultural dominance and oppression than forcing one model of time on another culture whose perception is radically different.Yet this is exactly what has happened to peoples around the world since the ticking clock began to dominate society at the start of the Industrial Revolution, and people's time became money (Griffiths, 2004). In Aboriginal Australia, time is subjective and contextual. Time is evident in the daily (circadian), monthly, or yearly cycles of nature. Aboriginal peoples view time as circular with the past, ever present and an ongoing relationship between past and future. In contrast, a linear understanding of time cuts off history with the past seen as dead and gone.

From the earliest days of colonisation, Aboriginal peoples have rejected the western view of time, that can be counted, saved and spent and the way it dictates so much of life.

"With the arrival of the missionaries, they taught us to work for money. We had to work for money for needs we never had before. Clocks marked the time for work, making people the slaves of time." (Griffiths, 2004).

The resistance of many Indigenous peoples to conform to the western time system has often been viewed negatively by their varying colonisers, giving rise to racist stereotypes defining such peoples as idle or unwilling to work (Korff, 2025). Yet the alternative – being our modern obsession with speed, punctuality, and efficiency – is linked to stress, high blood pressure, ulcers, and a failing immune system (Rudd, 2019). Society rewards productivity and associates it with honour and competence, while slowing down is often connected to feelings of inadequacy and shame. It is easy to fall into behavioural patterns and thoughts where our sense of purpose and value is measured by how much we get done. At the same time, constant busyness can also be a way of evading difficult feelings and memories, with this type of avoidance often leading to physical, emotional and mental burnout (Sword et al., 2014).

Modern perceptions of time and the ideology of speed, embedded in global commerce, undermine relationships and threaten the future of humanity itself as we rush forward with little time to consider the ramifications of our actions. When we are moving fast, we are more likely to be reactive and our reactions and responses are less thoughtful and more misaligned; how often have we wished we could recall a text or email we sent without due consideration? Travelling slowly has many advantages: time to reconsider, make adjustments, gain greater perspective and insight. Negotiating compromise in relationships benefits from time, whether on a personal, family, community, or international level, where all viewpoints and outcomes are considered.

Working cross-culturally, within a respectful "2-Way Learning" approach; one that accepts and values the knowledge of each culture, offers much to be learned from an appreciation of Indigenous perspectives of time (Adams, 2019). In my experience working across different indigenous communities, there is rarely a sense of urgency to adhere to a schedule, and no one is ever late – time is subjective and contextual. The focus is almost always on the present, as all time; past present and future are perceived as current as opposed to the western linear orientation towards the future and the notion that change is progress. For Indigenous peoples progress is often tied to stability, ceremony and the importance of family relations (Adams, 2019).

The oppression enforced on Indigenous peoples through adherence to the western clock and the "progress" it entails is being increasingly recognised in light of the impacts on population health and the environment globally. In questioning and sometimes rejecting this dominant "progress" ethos; the philosophies, values and practices of Indigenous peoples, and their perspectives on time, are commonly offered as more sustainable and healthier alternatives (Gratani et al., 2016).

Modern-day society's relationship with time

There is no doubt that speed is exciting and exhilarating, often super-charged by the release of dopamine. We feel the power and exhilaration of it in the music room just as we do in other aspects of modern life – fast cars, fast service, fast internet speed, fast drugs. However, the need for speed often comes at a cost – car accidents, poor service, loss of focus, withdrawal and comedown. And this is clearly evident in the music circles I facilitate as the faster the rhythm becomes, the louder people play, and the more connection and harmony dissipates. Similarly, in my own therapeutic practice, the problematic impacts of a high-paced environment are becoming more common, with presentations of stress, anxiety, poor sleep and burnout on the rise.

The pull towards speed in everyday life and its consequences are increasingly replicated in the music I observe in my practice. As we travel faster our autonomy disappears, making it harder and harder to shift our rhythm. We become locked into this forward momentum and spontaneity reduces. We no longer have the time to adjust or incorporate change – we plough forward unrelentingly. Similarly, it becomes more difficult to play slowly and softly. More and more of my clients are caught

in life's increasingly demanding tempo, particularly those who are juggling the – often incompatible – demands of work and family, and are struggling to keep up.

In modern society slowness is commonly denigrated, associated in economic dogma with a lack of productivity, and inefficiency. Phrases like "you snooze, you lose" and FOMO (fear of missing out) are common drivers in both business and in the social lives for many in today's competitive society. People are increasingly impatient when they have to wait; wait for an outcome, attention, an answer. This impatience is another driver of stress, increasing frustration and reinforcing negative emotions that are increasingly impacting people's mental health (Al-Aria, 2023). As Shakespeare, said:

> *How sour sweet music is*
> *When time is broke, and no proportion kept!*
> *So, it is in the music of men's lives.*
> *I wasted time, and now doth time waste me;*
> *For now, has time made me his numbering clock*
> *My thoughts are minutes*
> *Richard II, Act 5*

Music as a Tool for Social and Emotional Health

Music is increasingly used as a conduit to engage people of all ages in social and emotional learning (SEL) and to directly address clinical issues impacting individual mental health. The flexibility and creative opportunities of arts-based curriculum make them one of the few subject areas compatible for many young Indigenous people who struggle with the static nature of mainstream academic learning. Many students, no matter their culture, no longer find school a safe and welcoming place due to factors like violence, bullying or simply the stifling routine of desk-based learning. As a result, more are avoiding school, acting out or staying home. In Australian Aboriginal communities, school attendance rates are significantly below mainstream average with some remote communities struggling to reach 50 per cent attendance (AIHW, 2023). At the same time, in mainstream Australia, rates of home schooling & school refusal have increased by over 100 per cent since the COVID pandemic, with similar trends found across other western countries (Jamison et al., 2023; Slater et al, 2020)

The experiential nature of various music based, therapeutic interventions, reflects the traditional learning practices of many indigenous cultures, giving them a real-world relevance and authenticity. These approaches have been shown to increase student engagement, improve learning effectiveness and enhance the development of life skills (Burch et al, 2019). The social aspects of participatory music, playing or singing in harmony with others, makes it ideal territory for assisting people struggling for social belonging and inclusion and helping develop and practice the social skills that support this connection. For individuals with neurological differences, or other differing abilities, these issues of connection and inclusion are often the central challenges of their variance. For the educator and therapist, numerous analogies exist for linking musical experiences to life and its many challenges that can help support individuals facing issues that are impacting their social and emotional health.

Music as a Panacea in the 'The Age of Anxiety'

Among the most pressing health issues being experienced by people today are the rapidly increasing levels of anxiety and other associated mental health conditions. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, anxiety levels were on the rise, and since then, they have more than doubled, with over 20 per cent of school age children in western countries managing anxiety conditions (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020-2022; Benton et al., 2021). Similarly, adult rates of anxiety and depression have also grown significantly since the pandemic (World Health Organisation, 2022). In music-based SEL programs and clinical interventions, one key focus in addressing anxiety is drawn from the connection between music and time. These initiatives explore the coercive way modern perceptions of time, punctuality, speed and competition dominate our lives, and the "hurry sickness" that results.

In my own practice, I have developed a range of analogies and accompanying exercises that link our experiences in the drumming music-circle to these types of issues in people's lives, and allow for reflection. For example, we can:

- Look at the value of slowing down a musical rhythm – and how that impacts our awareness generally and in particular that of our relationships, both within the music circle and in real life. *When we slow down, we are able to give more time and focus to our relationships with others.*
- Look at how slower tempos require less energy and allow us to relax a little more, while at the same time giving us additional room to learn and master more challenging musical rhythms. *When we slow down, we reduce the energy we expend physically, we recharge, and have more aptitude to master complex tasks or problems in our lives that cannot be solved when time is scarce.*
- Look at how leaving more space/time between the notes leaves more space for others to be heard and for relationships to be made. *When we leave space musically, we open up opportunities for dialogue and connection, just as listening closely to others helps cement healthy relationships in our lives.*
- Look at how leaving more space/time leaves more opportunity for adaptation and adjustment when things are changing around us. *Slowing down allows us to adapt to change; we can adjust our rhythm, and make better choices.*
- Look at how leaving more space/time allows room to bring in new elements, understandings, perspectives etc. *When the tempo increases, we are focused on forward momentum and keeping up. When we slow down, we have time to look back and learn from the past.*
- Practice playing more slowly and sparsely while resisting the temptation to rush in and fill the space. *As a cue to emotional regulation, we can represent emotional overload with fast and erratic play and practice cutting through the chaos and returning to a stable base.*
- Explore how we can accommodate those who struggle to keep time – "who are out of time". *We can learn to be tolerant and understanding of those who struggle to fit into societal expectations.*

This last point is a particularly sensitive one for many music educators and therapists, yet vitally important in the context of social and emotional education and health. On many music education forums members consistently pose the question: How can I help my students connect in time? While there are many strategies that can assist – auditory cues, visual cues, kinaesthetic or tactile support – few explore the importance of learning to accommodate people who struggle with timing; with the focus being on changing them. When we think about how often in life, we do not quite get our timing right and do not quite fit in; the importance of being tolerant and understanding becomes all too clear. For people who are neurodivergent and other members of our communities with differing abilities, this

concept of tolerance and understanding is vital to helping them find their place in the world. Music, through analogies such as these, offers a gateway to this awareness.

Music and Mindfulness

In addressing anxiety, one of the most common strategies is helping individuals shift their focus from the past or future to the present moment; another lesson clearly apparent in Indigenous perspectives on time. Meditation, mindfulness, journaling, grounding techniques, art therapies and music making are all recognised ways of assisting this cause (Keng et al., 2011; Kiken et al., 2017). In the driving rhythms of a percussive music circle, the relentless forward motion of chronological time can fade, replaced by an immediate awareness of the present and a state of flow. When we play music together joy often erupts from the shared exuberance of the creative experience, especially where there is freedom of expression, as in improvised music. Playing music requires a surrender to being in the moment.

In modern life we often focus on the future, unaware of experiencing and celebrating where we are in the present. Opportunities to step out of the racing current of time are critical yet increasingly rare. Time away from the linear march of "progress and accomplishment" is continually shrinking as working hours increase, holidays and festivals decline and spending time engaged in spontaneous and imaginative play becomes less common. Yet these are the critical times where community is built. Across more than twenty research studies on the impact of therapeutic drum-circles, themes of connection and belonging are ever present (Faulkner, 2021). This sense of bonding during musical play is further enhanced by the release of neurotransmitters, endorphin and oxytocin, which are also critical in mitigating the stress response (Myint et al., 2017).

In rhythmic musical play it is rare to hear the groove disappear altogether; volume may decrease, tempo slow but still the pulse continues – and before long we are in full flight again. Stepping off the rhythm train, away from the pulse, takes courage, yet it often leads to some of the most rewarding experiences in group music making. This technique is particularly useful in reflective, therapeutic group work where analogy can speak to the challenges and benefits of taking similar steps in real life. Here it is, that flexibility, fluidity and responsiveness can flourish. Percussion circles with a diverse range of instruments, especially those that resonate such as chime bars, are particularly valuable in this context, fostering the strengthening of relationship and dialogue through the deeper listening entailed.

Deeper listening is another skill being sacrificed at the altar of speed. When it comes to therapeutic practice, deep or active listening is often touted as the core skill for cementing the therapeutic relationship, building rapport, understanding the client's perspective, validating experiences and facilitating emotional processing (Bradshaw, Siddiqui, Greenfield, & Sharma, 2022). Yet the pace, distractions and scheduling restraints of modern life make this form of focused attention an extremely challenging skill to implement. Above all, the western linear notion of time posits a response as the natural reaction to another's comment, and this expectation often displaces deeper listening and contemplation. In her book Traumas Trails (2002), Professor Judith Atkinson describes deep listening as the Aboriginal gift to the nation – the Indigenous practice of inner, deep listening and quiet still awareness, that is the key to recovery from trauma.

One example from my own work for practicing deeper listening and examining these issues, as they impact our lives and relationships more generally, is to alternate between fast drumming, (symbolising the busyness of modern life), and the sequential resonance of three chime bars of different notes interspaced around the music circle. The lingering sound of each chime evokes a stillness and focused awareness missing from the drumming. This exercise I call sit with the silence is conducted in different rounds, with the time spent listening to the chimes gradually increasing each time in proportion to the time spent drumming. Discussions focus on the importance of balance between the external, busy pace of life and time for introspection, quiet, and rest. For young people who struggle with focus and attention or who are caught in hypervigilant states and anxious, this exercise is used to expose them, in graduated steps, to the uncomfortable feelings associated with stillness and improve their ability to manage these feelings.

Summary

I lower the volume with a signal from my descending hand and as the music quietens, I ask the group once more to focus on their collective tempo, hold their rhythm steady, and resist the urge to speed up.

This is not an uncommon scenario for many music educators or therapists using music in their practice, and certainly not for me in my regular work with young people and adults impacted by trauma and struggling with emotional regulation. In this instance, however, I was working with a group of professional therapists; counsellors, psychologists and social workers, who similarly were struggling to maintain a steady tempo and found themselves, time and again, playing faster, pulled along by an unconscious drive to race forward.

What is of interest to me is the connection between this increased tendency of spiralling tempo in the music we share, and the speed that increasingly dominates people's daily lives, along with the social and emotional health implications of this shift. Many people struggle with holding time steady when playing music and small inconsistencies are a natural part of human timing. Momentum itself can escalate tempo and propel even a faint increase into a gathering speed. However, it seems increasingly likely that there is also a deeper connection between the way our lives are increasingly dominated by the linear movement of time, rushing forward to the ticking of the clock, and this tendency I am increasingly witnessing in the music I facilitate.

Our relationship with time, in the name of progress, and efficiency, has left us caught on a treadmill to an unsustainable future on both an individual and global scale. Indigenous peoples across the world have rejected this push and offer insight into an alternative paradigm. Music too, offers us – and those we teach and support – an opportunity to step away from this narrow perception of time, restore some balance and gain awareness of what is being sacrificed and what may be recovered. Research has demonstrated that music with a slow steady rhythm may provide stress reduction by altering inherent body rhythms, such as heart rate and blood pressure (Sword et al, 2014). Similarly, we recognise that reducing the pace of our busy lives, and restoring balance with other aspects of time; time for self, friends, family, and with nature, may provide the antidote to the stress and anxiety so many of us live with.

Therapists and educators have at their disposal a valuable tool for supporting individuals through the challenges impacting their social and emotional health. Rhythmic music, in particular, with its long history as a healing modality, offers a useful and accessible entry point for clinicians and their clients. A focus on the differing impacts of tempo – fast versus slow – and on the quality of the music made as tempo changes, and its direct relationship to social and individual harmony generally, are just some of the many ways music can be utilised to support people through the current challenges of a busy and often anxious life.

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