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The Perseverance of Aboriginal Australian Time Philosophy and its Impact on Integration Into the Mainstream Labor Force

Kelly Adams
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**The perseverance of Aboriginal Australian time philosophy and its
impact on integration into the mainstream labor force**

Kelly Adams

Submitted to:
World Learning, SIT Study Abroad, Cairns
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Academic Director: Tony Cummings
Home institution: Johns Hopkins University

Abstract

This study demonstrates that Aboriginal Australian time philosophy has survived the impact of European colonization through applying anthropological inquiry into time perception to functional attitudes towards work ethic. By doing so I highlight time perception as one of the “root causes” of Aboriginal socio-economic disadvantage in the barrier it poses to Aboriginal labor force participation. The Native Title Act put pressure on the mining industry to set high targets for Indigenous employment and in the process has given Aboriginal communities the opportunity to become “active initiators” of their relationship to time by forcing industrial compromise through resistance to adopt the “capitalist temporal order” within which industry operates. This is reflected in the demands of Aboriginal employment strategy and the adaptations to industrial culture which are beneficial to promoting Aboriginal recruitment, retention, and progression through the workforce.

Data collection consisted of a series of intensive interviews and two surveys intended to put quantitative values behind trends observed throughout the intensive interviews. Interview subjects were chosen on the basis of their personal experience with Aboriginal employment or in order to provide insight into contemporary employment issues, the traditional time perceptions of Aboriginal Australians, and the historical interplay of the two cultures within the labor force. I drew parallels between subjective time, flexible work schedules and work-readiness programs, notions of time as circular and the under-representation of Aboriginal Australians in managerial positions, and time bound to obligation with job retention. If fundamental cultural differences are recognized as a barrier to Aboriginal integration into the workforce it can help to dispel misconceptions about work ethic and promote policy which allows Aboriginal employees to maintain an attachment to traditional culture in coexistence with a steady job.

Key words: time perception, Aboriginal Australians, Aboriginal employment strategy

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Statement of Problem:

Nguyen argues that all notions of time other than the “capitalist temporal order” exist “only in anthropological inquiry (Nguyen, 1992)” I wish to challenge this view and suggest that Aboriginal Australian time philosophy has been resistant to destruction by interaction with capitalist colonialism. It is common, though ethnocentric, to believe that the time frame under which Western society operates is in some way a fundamental, universal truth (McCready, 2001). These ideas fail to recognize the benefits of other time systems which have evolved specifically within different historical contexts to dictate the way a culture interacts with their social, physical, and biological environment (Harris, 1978). This creates a situation which can falsely support judgmental ideas as the value systems associated with different relationships to time are held in comparison to the “yardstick” of our own “sense of progression (McCready, 2001)”

Through analyzing the presence of Aboriginal Australian perceptions of time in the demands of Aboriginal employment strategy I wish to challenge the idea that these notions are dead. This research is done in attempt to raise sensitivity towards the Aboriginal world view and to discourage the enforcement of Western capitalist notions of success and progress onto the expectations of the Aboriginal population. If employment policy can be approached in a way that is sensitive to time management beliefs as a central component of culture, it can help protect the longevity of the Aboriginal population by allowing compromise between traditional values and industrial culture.

1.2 Justification for Study:

Extensive research has been dedicated to the Aboriginal Australian socio-economic disadvantage (Anon, 2007). Aboriginal Australians, in relation to the broader Australian population, hold a disproportional weight of virtually every social ill (Warren, 2009); High unemployment rates, lack of education, low rates of home ownership, poor health, poverty and the associated social impacts of these issues on daily life (Anon., 2007). Education, housing, and employment are all intricately linked by a complex matrix of an “interrelated set of factors” that includes cultural differences, communication issues, social and geographic isolation, and family relationships (Gawler and Croker, 2005). These factors are so intricately woven that it is difficult to isolate a particular issue and therefore the most successful policies result from a holistic “whole of community” approach (Warren, 2009).

I have extracted time perception from this “complex set of factors” as a specific cultural barrier to analyze in relation to employment, in full recognition of the limitations of this analysis. Isolating time perception and the way it translates into individual orientation towards daily working life will highlight the way in which this particular cultural difference influences the demands of Aboriginal employment strategy in promoting Aboriginal integration into the mainstream economy. I will not be able to provide any generalizations about the all-encompassing source of, or solutions to, the employment issues considered. There are aspects of time perception (and therefore time-management) which are intimately tied to the other cultural factors including family relationships and ceremonial obligations (Broome, 1994).

Aboriginal Australians constitute a disproportional percentage of unemployed Australians, are more likely to be employed in part-time than full-time positions, less commonly found in managerial roles, and tend to have statistically shorter periods of job retention than non-Aboriginal Australians (Anon., 2007). The past two decades have shown a dramatic increase in government, public, and private sector initiatives to increase Aboriginal employment (Warren, 2009). The level of Aboriginal employment can be regarded as a key social indicator of the health of individuals and communities, and plays a significant role in promoting Aboriginal “economic participation, independence, health and social outcomes.” (Anon., 2007) Practical reconciliation recognizes the need for “practical policy-making” that is culturally appropriate in order to secure a successful future for Aboriginal employment (Anon., 2007). The mining industry is at the forefront of Indigenous employment strategy, and has high targets set for Indigenous employment. The Government recommends that the ‘best practice models’ of the mining industry be understood and applied on a broader scale in order to increase overall Aboriginal participation in workforce (Anon, 2007). In order to understand the mechanisms by which to improve Indigenous employment the most “progressive mining companies” are devoting research to the “root causes of Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage (Gawler and Croker, 2005)”

This paper explores time philosophy as one of these root causes which is relevant and significant to Aboriginal employment success. It has been suggested that the social position of Aboriginal Australians today is a reflection of the way in which they have “incorporated into the capitalist system (May, 1994)” The demands on temporality which characterize capitalist society are a central element of the cultural drama which

exists between traditional Aboriginal Australian culture and that of the industrial workplace. Capitalism has been described as a source of the “globalization of time” and supports a notion of time as a “mathematical account of duration as discrete and equal temporal segments (Nguyen, 1992).” Some argue that under the influence of colonialism “all other temporal regimes in the world” are “ended (Nguyen, 1992)” I wish to suggest that because the relationship to time of Aboriginal Australians is the “antithesis” of that of the European industrial culture the Aboriginal Australians have been able to resist ‘irreversible destruction’ of their time values (Nguyen, 1992). I support the idea that Aboriginal Australian time philosophy, as central to the “people’s understanding of life, their values, and attitudes towards daily life (Janca, 2009)” continues to this day and is reflected in Aboriginal employment strategy.

1.3 Aims of Study

The aims of this study are to identify the central notions of Aboriginal time perception in the context of their contrast with modern industrial practices, particularly within the mining industry, one of the largest Indigenous employers in Australia. By doing so I wish to challenge the view that Aboriginal Australians were “passive receptors” of “capitalist temporal orders (Nguyen, 1992).” I will explore Aboriginal employment strategy alongside time perception in an attempt to draw parallels between the two, in order to support the hypothesis that sensitivity towards Aboriginal time perception is a necessary component of achieving successful employment. By establishing parallels between employment strategy and time perception I wish to demonstrate that Aboriginal Australian time philosophy has survived the impact of European colonization. I will make inferences into how this “root cause” of Aboriginal

socio-economic disadvantage factors into labor force participation in the hope that it can dispel misconceptions and stereotypes about Aboriginal work ethic and influence future policy.

1.4 Background:

Captain Cook himself expressed curiosity into how a people within “a dreamtime philosophy that stresses continuity over change” would “respond to European invaders in 1788 who brought with them an exaggerated faith in change and development (Cited in: Broome, 1994)” Before the arrival of Europeans, the Aboriginal Australians had “markedly different attitudes on utilizing time (Arthur, 1999)” An intimate knowledge of the land made it possible to secure a day’s food resources within 3-4 hours of working each day, as opposed to the 10-12 hours demanded for the same profit under European working conditions (Harris, 1978) It is thus not surprising that the Aboriginal Australians “almost uniformly despised the temporal inflexibility and spatial rigidity of the settler's life (Donaldson, 1996).” The Aboriginal Australians were opposed to seeing time as the “dictator of life” and saw the “individualistic work ethic” of the European settlers as irrelevant to a people who placed more value on family relationships than individual ambition and the accumulation of personal wealth (Donaldson, 1996).

When the Europeans put up fences around their individually allocated land; it cut the Aborigines off from their traditional food supplies and forced them to the fringes of white settlement (Fuller, Myers and Buultjens, 2005). Without a means to acquire food, Aboriginal people were put into a situation where they could be taken advantage of as a source of cheap labor and thus began a history of exploitation which is still alive today as Aboriginal people throughout Australia await decades worth of Stolen Wages return to

them. Time was inseparable from the land itself and played a central role in numerous areas of cultural life as a source of personal identity, a calendar of seasonal movements, a basis of social interaction, and guide to religious ceremony (Broome, 1994). Unwilling to give up their traditional relationship to time, Aboriginal workers were known to disappear from work spontaneously, when ceremony or seasonal movements demanded it, “I go because I must” (Cited in: Donaldson, 1996). The settlers called this ‘walkabout’ and from the very beginning it became associated with stereotypes and misinterpretations of Aboriginal culture and work ethic that stemmed back to a general misunderstanding of cultural values (Cited in: Donaldson, 1996).

Today, the mining industry is one of the largest Indigenous employers in Australia. The Mabo Decision and the subsequent passing of the Native Title Act in 1993 was a turning point in the relationship between the mining industry and Aboriginal communities, as it falsified “terra nullius” and brought recognition to the rights that traditional land owners have to what happens on their land (Discussion paper, 1993). The Native Title Act demands that mining companies establish agreements with traditional owners before mining on their land, which are usually resolved in a mutually beneficial exchange of land for the mining companies and benefits such as employment opportunities for the Indigenous population (Discussion paper, 1993). This gives Aboriginal people the opportunity to have the workplace adapted to their cultural demands.

Rio Tinto Ltd. has mines throughout Australia and is renowned for their commitment to high targets for Indigenous Employment (Rio Tinto, 2003). A majority of the wealth of research that exists on the barriers to Aboriginal employment have been

born out of mining industry efforts to increase Aboriginal recruitment and retention (Tiplady and Barclay, 2005). Rio Tinto has identified many of the challenges in indigenous employment as stemming back to a two-way misunderstanding of cultural values: both the employers having limited knowledge of the complex cultural obligations of the Indigenous individuals seeking employment and a general lack of experience within the industrial setting on the part of the Indigenous people. (Gawler and Croker, 2005). These challenges are confronted by the mining industry by taking measures to cross-culturally train, as well as to make adaptations and compromises to the industrial culture itself in order to accommodate the cultural obligations of Indigenous people (Tiplady and Barclay, 2005).

The majority of research associated with time perception has been related to the global impact of capitalist temporality. Mike Donaldson of the University of Wollongong challenges the view of Dan Thu Nguyen, that all other temporal orders are dead under the impact of colonialism, in “The End of Time,” through demonstrating the survival of Aboriginal Australian temporality. Professor Aleksandar Janca of the University of Western Australia conducted research on the implications of Aboriginal time perception in delivering psychiatric assessment. Professor Janca identified various mechanisms of adaptation to service delivery which are required when dealing with Aboriginal people: Two of which include emphasizing “benefits of any current behavioral change aimed to improve future health status” and a flexibility in dealing with absence from scheduled meeting times, which should “not be taken as an indicator of non-compliance, resistance or improvement (Janca and Bullen, 2003)” I have extended the arguments of both Donaldson and Janca in order to display how compromises required within Aboriginal

employment strategy relate back to differences in time perception and inferring that the perseverance of these differences is testament to the survival of Aboriginal temporality.

1.5 Assumptions:

- By Aboriginal Australian I am referring to anyone who considers themselves to be an Aboriginal Australian and is recognized by the Aboriginal community as such. It is important to note that while Aboriginal Australian culture is unique, their perception of time is not unique, and it is shared by many Indigenous cultures throughout the world (Janca, 2009).
- The European/Euro-American/White Australian (used interchangeably) time referenced in this paper is not static and is susceptible to the impacts of evolving social conditions. I want to draw attention to the fact that this sense of time has undoubtedly changed over the last 200 years since European colonization: Particularly in our relationship to speed. Numerous figures since this time have drawn attention to the “speeding up of the future” as a product of the industrial and technological revolutions (Marinetti, 1909).
- There have undoubtedly been sacrifices within Indigenous culture over the past 200 years, and elements of traditional culture have been impacted in varying degrees across regions of Australia. “While some of the remote areas people still live traditional lifestyle, many Aboriginal people are now concentrated in cities. This does create an issue with attachment to traditional life, particularly if people have to travel to cities to find work and leave their traditional home (O’Brien, 2009).” Census data from Cairns, August 2001 identifies the population of

75,274 following a branch of Christianity, while of 17 identifying their religion as Aboriginal Traditional (Cairns Census, 2001).

- It cannot be emphasized enough that the socio-economic disadvantage is a highly complex issue and I recognize that this paper is limited in its applicability to make generalizations on the range of social issues facing the Aboriginal community.

2.0 Methods

Research was conducted over 5 weeks in April-May, 2009 based out of Cairns, Queensland. A combination of intensive interviews and surveys were utilized in order to gain exposure to a range of perspectives on both Aboriginal employment strategy and time perception. In order to make parallels between time perception and industry I made contact with experts in both areas and used the surveys to confirm trends that I discovered within the intensive interviews. I then drew my own inferences out of my results between mechanisms of adaptation to industrial culture through Aboriginal employment strategy and their relevance to the differences in the way each culture experiences time.

2.1 Intensive Interviews:

Seven intensive interviews were conducted, a combination of phone interviews and face-to-face interviews. I made sure to be clear of my intentions for the use of the information collected in the interviews.

2.1.1 Labor Interviews – Four interviews revolved around the issue of Aboriginal labor force participation and the strategies and efforts being implemented by all sectors, particularly within the mining industry, as one of the largest Indigenous

employers, to increase Aboriginal recruitment, retention, and progression through the workforce.

- **Mary Barclay-** Phone interview on April 6, 2009. Mary Barclay is a research associate at the Center for Social Responsibility in Mining (CSRМ).
- **Jason O'Brien** – Face-to-face interview on April 7, 2009 in Cairns. Jason O'Brien is a member of Australia's Labour Party and is the Minister for Cook, with the largest concentration of Indigenous people of any electorate in Queensland.
- **Geraldine McGuire-** Phone interview on April 8, 2009. Dr. McGuire has worked with Rio Tinto in the past.
- **Andy Warren-** Face-to-face interview on April 22, 2009. Andy Warren works with Mission Australia.

2.1.2 Time Interviews: Three interviews were done in relation to Aboriginal perceptions of time, one of which was with an Aboriginal business owner in order to get a first-hand perspective of the difficulties of balancing working and traditional lifestyle.

- **Mary Graham-** Phone Interview on April 20, 2009.
- **Aleksandar Janca-** Phone Interview on April 21, 2009. Aleksandar Janca is a professor at the University of Western Australia who has done research in the past on the implications of Aboriginal time perception on the administration of psychiatric assessment.

- **Yaram Arts-** Face-to-face Interview on April 13, 2009. Anonymous Indigenous member of the Yirrganydji group. He is the owner of a 100% Owned and Operated Aboriginal Business, Yaram Arts, in the Orchid Plaza, Cairns.

2.2 Surveys:

Two surveys were used in an attempt to incorporate quantitative information as confirmation of trends discovered within intensive interviews.

Watch survey:

The watch survey was done over the course of April 12-18, 2009 in Cairns, QLD in order to explore whether there is a discrepancy between the proportions of Aboriginal Australians which wear watches in comparison to non-Aboriginal Australians.

1. I approached individuals and asked them whether or not they would mind giving me information for a research project, and assured them that answers would remain anonymous.
2. I asked each individual what their dominant ethnicity is. In order to keep from being rude, I collected answers from everyone, though only recorded the responses of people who identified themselves as either Aboriginal or (non-Aboriginal) Australian.
3. I then asked people whether or not they wear a watch, and how often they wear a watch.
4. Once I had collected data from 30 Aboriginal individuals and 30 non-Aboriginal Australians, I organized the data in an excel sheet and made a graph with which to illustrate the results.

While the purpose of this survey was to illustrate a difference in the level of dependence of two cultures on objective time as it is measured on a clock, I recognize that there are other cultural factors beyond time perception which relate to the behavior of wearing a watch. These include, though are not limited to, socio-economic position, the cultural norms which may encourage non-Aboriginal Australians to wear watches in higher frequency than Aboriginal Australians in which watches would not traditionally have been an article of personal fashion, and the way in which a culture relates to displays of personal wealth and material accumulation.

Employment services survey:

The employment services survey was delivered via email to a range of general employment services throughout Queensland. I targeted employment services that offer assistance in general employment so that the responses would not be biased by specialized programs. The survey (see Appendix 1) consisted of two questions in which responses were ranked on a scale of 1-10.

1. Rank the job characteristics that generally seem to be the most important to an Aboriginal individual seeking employment in order to gain a better understanding of what aspects of the workplace seem to assist in Aboriginal employee recruitment.
2. Rank the most frequently cited reason for Aboriginal Australians to leave the workplace in order get a sense of what job characteristics are standing in the way of employee retention.

3.0 Results 1: Subjective time, Work-readiness programs, Flexible work schedules

Aboriginal Australian time philosophy views time as subjective and this is one of the root causes of the need for flexible work schedules and work-readiness programs which teach punctuality and attendance.

3.1 Trend 1: Aboriginal time is subjective

Over the course of my interviews it became clear that one of the critical differences in time perception between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians is that Aboriginal Australians perceive time as a subjective quality. While non-Aboriginal Australian, capitalistic, time follows a notion that has reduced time into discrete entities that can be counted, saved, or spent, Aboriginal Australian time is “contextual to what is being measured (Janca, 2009)” Mary Graham draws attention to this difference by stating in our interview, that for Aboriginal people, “Nine o’clock is not specifically nine o’clock, it is about nine o’clock. It doesn’t exist objectively.”

Professor Aleksandar Janca demonstrates this clash in time through personal anecdote:

“My colleagues and I went to a remote Aboriginal community in the Kimberly region and we were to meet with local elders. Now, it is a very small place so of course everyone saw us coming and so on and so forth. They were supposed to meet with us, discuss with us at 11 o’clock. 11 o’clock came and nothing, we were sitting under a tree and waiting. It was only around 1 o’clock or so that they came one by one. I was quite naïve at the time, so I asked them, ‘Listen, we have been sitting here for two hours, why didn’t you come immediately, why did you let us sit and wait?’ I got no answer, but one of the elders said ‘Listen, in this community it is not important *when* things happen it is important *that* they happen (Janca, 2009)”

This illustrates the differential way in which two cultures confront a scheduled meeting time. An 11 o’clock meeting time is irrelevant to people who determine when things happen based on a number of subjective factors, including in this case, the time it

takes them to become accustomed to the fact that there are people visiting their community.

Aboriginal Australians believe in doing things when they want to do them and are therefore hesitant to make social commitments in the first place (King-Boydes, 1977). This sense of time is a stark contrast to the time under which the “broader Australian population” operates. Professor Janca points out the irrelevance of the “imposed time constraints, like working hours, working days, and holidays.” These time constraints would not exist for the Aboriginal population because time is inseparable from action, and therefore working hours are hours when an individual is working, ceremonial time is time that is being devoted to ceremony, etc (Myers, 1986). The Judeo-Christian year, “the whole concept of an annual schedule that the broader Australian population follows, starting with New Year and going up to Christmas, does not really apply to the Aboriginal population (Janca, 2009)”

3.2 Watch Survey Results:

I attempted to explore and quantify the value placed upon objective time with the watch survey. There was a dramatic demographic difference in the proportion of the surveyed population which regularly wore a watch, with a much larger percentage of the non-Aboriginal Australian responding that they do wear a watch than the Aboriginal population. A watch is a common mechanism by which to measure objective time, and therefore wearing a watch suggests that the objective time it measures is of some importance to the individual. Of the thirty Aboriginal Australians surveyed in Cairns, only 5 individuals (16.7%) said that they wear a watch, while 25 (83.3%) said that they

do not wear a watch. These responses were further divided into more specific frequency responses, to which two of these individuals said that they “Always” wear a watch, 3 replied that they “Often” wear a watch, 5 replied “Sometimes” and the overwhelming majority, 20 individuals, “Never” wear a watch. The responses of the non-Aboriginal Australian population surveyed were almost completely the inverse, with 24 individuals (80.0%) responding that they *do* wear a watch, and 6 (20.0%) replying that they do *not* wear a watch. Of these, only 2 people said they “Never” wear a watch, 4 “Sometimes, 8 “Often,” and in complete opposition to the Aboriginal results, the majority, 16 people, “Always” wear a watch (See Table 1: Appendix).

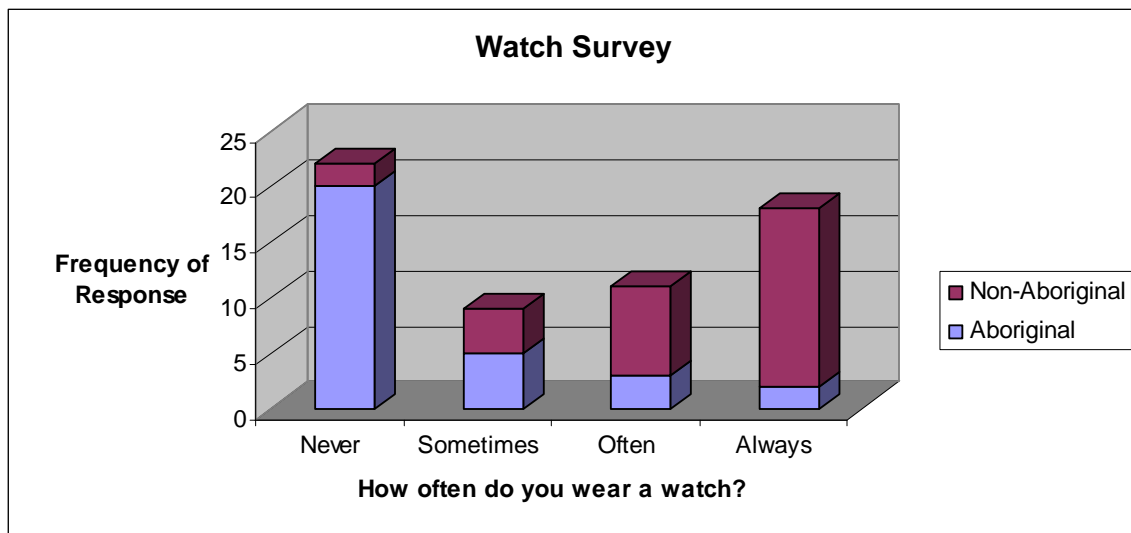


Figure 1: (Also refer to Table 1: Appendix)

The results of a survey conducted in Cairns which sampled 30 Aboriginal Australian and 30 non-Aboriginal Australian as to whether or not they wear a watch, a mechanism by which to measure objective time. While it is difficult to generalize, the results seem to show that non-Aboriginal Australians, with a distinctly higher proportion who responded to wearing a watch, place a higher value upon the objective time that a watch measures.

3.3: Trend 2: Work-readiness programs and flexible work schedules

As part of a successful approach to Aboriginal recruitment and retention into the workforce, specifically within the “best practice models” of Rio Tinto Ltd, it is necessary to incorporate punctuality and attendance training through work-readiness programs and flexible work schedules.

Rio Tinto has identified work-readiness programs as a critical component of recruitment strategies and flexible work schedules as vital to Aboriginal employee retention (Mary Barclay, 2009; Gawler and Croker, 2005). In order to tackle this issue of Aboriginal recruitment and retention, it is necessary to get “local people in tune with industrial practices (Barclay, 2009)” Work-readiness programs assist with introducing local Aboriginal communities to the demands of the industrial workforce through teaching “the basics; turning up to work each day, actively following instructions, and doing what you are told to do when you are told to do it (Barclay, 2009)”

Attendance

“Flexibility and responsiveness are key aspects of successful Indigenous employment”
(Cited in: Anon., 2007)

The Rio Tinto Argyle Diamond Mine in the East Kimberly Region was brought up repetitively in the interview process. This mine is located on what was an Aboriginal women sacred site and has dedicated itself to Indigenous employment (McGuire, 2009), with targets set for 40% Aboriginal employment by 2010 (Anon., 2007). Unfortunately, beyond the successes that have been achieved by this mine, there are still issues with Aboriginal attendance to work, and thus flexibility has been incorporated into retention strategy. Andy Warren of Mission Australia relates this issue back to time perception:

“There is also the time perception issue. We are engrained with this work ethic from the moment we are young, we don’t even realize we are learning it, in a world dominated by the clock. For Aboriginal people,

they look at their clock and see “It is 12, why should I be here?” I have seen that. Argyle Diamond mine is located on a sacred site and has high targets for Aboriginal employment, but they will employ them for a week or so and then they will not show up, or disappear for a while. Argyle would start driving out to these communities and picking people up to bring them to work, but sometimes this just isn’t enough (Warren, 2009)”

Flexible work schedules involve mechanisms such as cultural leave, rostered days off, job sharing, variable working hours, and “recycling” of workers (Barclay, 2009; McGuire, 2009; Tiplady and Barclay, 2005) “‘Recycling’ of workers allow employees to go walkabout for a while, if they can find someone else to fill their role when they are gone, and then they will be allowed to come back to the job when they are ready.” This assists in keeping Aboriginal individuals employed even if they are not willing to meet the full demands of a steady work schedule (Barclay, 2009). A report done by the Center for Social Responsibility in Mining, identified “opportunities to implement more flexible working arrangements” as one of the key “implications for improving retention rates (Barclay, 2009)”

Punctuality:

The cultural contrast is particularly evident in the time-management practices which are demanded of the mining industry culture. In addition to being a significant part of the work-ethic expected in the capitalist “time is money (Aldrich, 2005)” labor market, individual punctuality is of vital importance to the productivity and safety of the entire mining group (Barclay, 2009). It is therefore not only a matter of convenience and personal discipline to arrive to work on time; it is essential. It therefore makes sense that part of the introduction to “industrial culture” includes lessons in punctuality.

“The critical thing in time management is that the mining industry is really time-driven, there are incredibly rigorous schedules. It isn’t just time-management, it is super time-management. Unlike a desk job where you can arrive twenty minutes late, if you arrive late to a mining job you are holding all of the other workers up and it becomes a health and safety regulation issue. So I imagine if you come from a more laissez-faire world view than this would be an intense cultural shift (Barclay, 2009)”

3.4 Employment services survey results:

It is perhaps not surprising that flexibility in work schedules is a significant concern of employees in an industry which is “time driven” to the extent of the mining industry. In order to eliminate the bias that such as extreme contrast may have presented, I conducted a survey of general recruitment services throughout Australia in order to get a sense of what they perceive the most significant job characteristics to be for an Aboriginal person seeking general employment. Of the 50 general recruitment services to which I distributed surveys, only 11 replied; a return rate of 22%. An average of their numerical responses designated flexible work schedules as the most important job characteristic of Aboriginal people seeking employment, with an average ranking of 9.7 out of 10. A high salary was the lowest ranking job characteristic, perceived to be of the least importance to recruiting Aboriginal individuals. This demonstrates that flexible work schedules are a key component of recruiting Indigenous employees throughout a range of jobs within general employment.

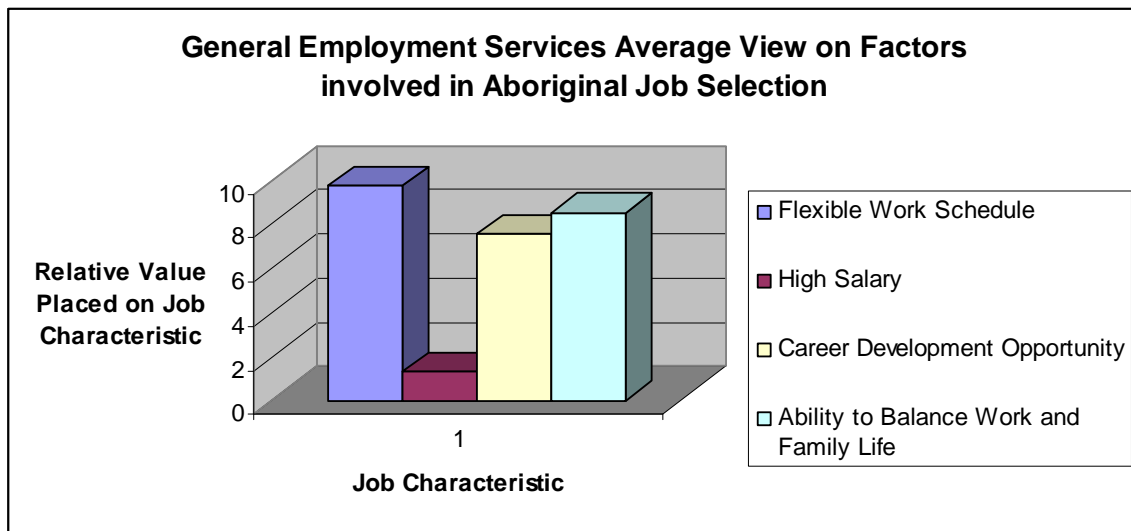


Figure 2: (See Table 2: Appendix)

The results of a survey distributed to 50 general employment services (22% return rate) which reflects flexible work schedules as the most important job characteristic to the Aboriginal population in search of employment.

3.5: Discussion of Results 1

While it is doubtless that there are numerous factors that contribute to the need for work-readiness programs which teach punctuality and attendance and flexible working schedules, there seems to be a clear connection between a society which orients itself around subjective time and which rejects “obedience to the clock (Donaldson, 1996)” and the difficulties in meeting the expectations of the time-driven industry. If a society exists within a timeframe that is measured according to context rather than an objective numerical measurement, it is reasonable to assume that this society will have difficulty maintaining a work schedule in which punctuality and attendance are important. The shift from unemployment to employment for the Aboriginal Australian is thus, not only a lifestyle shift in terms of the demands of the workforce, but also requires that they be trained in shifting their orientation towards time away from the subtle, subjective understanding and towards the objective time that industrial culture operates under: A shift that certain individuals may be unwilling to make.

Even in an urban center such as Cairns, where traditional life is less of a feasible reality, there still seems to be a demographic difference between dependence upon objective time, as demonstrated by the watch survey. I believe that this is correlated to the conclusion that Professor Janca discovered in his research, that it is important that health services recognize that Aboriginal “no shows” cannot be understood as failure to comply. Just as Professor Janca warned about misinterpreting “no shows” to scheduled meetings within health care delivery, it is important that industry recognizes the failure of Aboriginal people to make it to work on time or with perfect attendance as cultural rather

than disobedient. The evidence suggests that time-management affects punctuality and attendance transcending the employment industry and also affects attendance to health appointments: The fact that this is a common thread suggests that this sense of time is still a fundamental component of Aboriginal daily life and thus one of the root causes of socio-economic disadvantage.

The notions of the working week is something which is “engrained” in individuals from the moment they are young, and thus it is easy to take it for granted as the only logical way in which to divide and distinguish time (Janca, 2009). A glimpse into the origins of the working week, however, illustrates how arbitrary this orientation really is and makes it easier to visualize how the Aboriginal people may have been hesitant to adopt this sense of time. The Western working week within the annual sequential calendar of years is based in myriad of traditions which have been accumulated over the course of Western history: A seven day week is an innovation of the Roman calendar which reflected Greek and Mesopotamian planetary astronomy, the days are divided into twenty four hours because of the way the Ancient Egyptians divided the night, and sixty minutes per hour and seconds per minute reflect the base-sixty arithmetic of Mesopotamia (McCready, 2001).

It is significant to recognize punctuality and attendance to work as related to cultural differences because it can help eliminate the cultural ignorance which stands in the way of Aboriginal integration into the workforce. The adoption of incentives such as the “recycling of workers” shows a shift in industrial relationship to Aboriginal ‘walkabout’ culture by recognizing the need to incorporate the demands of traditional culture into the workforce and dispel misconceptions of laziness and “non-compliance.”

It is ethnocentric to judge the work ethic of a population based upon our own notions of work and time relationships and through identifying the root causes of the employment issues we can work towards assisting Aboriginal employees in meeting compromise.

I think the need for flexible work schedules within the mining industry, and when seeking employment for Aboriginal individuals in general, is testament to this attachment that the Aboriginal Australians keep to their time as subjective. This should be supported in order to promote cultural sustainability, rather than being used as a justification for racist judgment and subjugation.

4.0 Results 2: Circular time and career progression

Linear time perception is intimately tied to the “linear career path” followed by managers, while the circular notions of time under which Aboriginal philosophy operates are more in accordance with transitory careers. This could potentially explain the under representation of Aboriginal Australians in managerial positions, and a concentration in un-skilled and semi-skilled positions.

4.1 Trend 1: Aboriginal Australians perceive time as circular

“Generally most (Aboriginal) people do not see time like an arrow...that you are heading somewhere, on your way up. There is no notion like that in Aboriginal psychology and thinking. This immediately separates it from Western time in which you **orient towards some end.**” – (Graham, 2009 *my emphasis*)

Aboriginal Australians perceive time as circular, in contrast to the linear “arrow” which Western notions use to visualize the passing of time. The linear perception of time that is used by Europeans is reflected in the sequential nature of the Gregorian calendar and dependence upon chronology. This visualization of time probably has something to do with the perception of biological time and the ontological changes that a person goes through throughout life (Janca, 2009).

Written history solidifies the past as a chronological account of time demarcated by human activity: Wars, political leaders, great thinkers. The Aboriginal sense of time, in contrast, “denies creative significance to human events (Myers, 1977).” The oral histories of the Aboriginals are adaptable and can evolve to changing conditions throughout time. This circular notion of time encourages an attachment to the past, as it is continually relived in the present. This responsibility to the past is related to the emphasis Aboriginal Australians place upon tradition and stability in contrast to the change and development.

Future reward vs. Immediate Benefit

Visualizing time as an arrow creates a sense of history as divisible into distinct entities; past, present, and future. The Aboriginal Australian perception of time, however, dissolves the distinction between past and present as into the “everywhen” and regards the future as inconsequential (Stanner, 1969). The past is “not only a memory of the past, it is also the reality of the present and the creator of the future (Pattell-Grey, 1991).” The past is recreated through ritual and ceremony and is a guide to daily behavior (Myers, 1977). This is in stark contrast to Western society in which it is common to orient daily activity around the prospect of future reward.

This contrast is mirrored in religious ideas: A Christian religion which encourages people to live a wholesome life in an imperfect world on the promise of future salvation versus a Dreamtime philosophy which dictates that a perfect world was created in the distant past and that it will remain that way as long as it is recreated through ritual and ceremony (Graham, 2009). This has implications for the way people carry out daily life

because one philosophy applies lessons from the past while the other bases moral behavior on the prospect of future judgment.

The Western capitalist philosophy views change as a positive indicator of progress towards some inevitable, ideal future state. The time perception of Aboriginal Australians is quite the opposite; in a world view where the past is the most important indicator of present and future perfection, the emphasis is instead on stability, sustainability and continuity and the future holds less value (Janca, 2009). Daily life focuses upon the immediate, as all time; past, present, and future, are alive in the present moment.

“They live for today, the future is of no relevance because you don’t know where you will be tomorrow, whether you will be alive and so on and so forth, so they live for today (Janca, 2009).”

Future oriented time and the notion of progress

Orienting towards a future end is tied to the notion of progress and change. When the axis of life is positioned in the future, there is a drive towards this future and there becomes an obsession with change. The circular notions of time that the Aboriginal Australians follow and the subsequent attachment to the past is in stark contrast to the progress as Western notions of time define it. The progress that Aboriginal Australians believe in is not related to temporality, it is intimately tied to personal relationships and this relates to the importance of family and ceremony in recreating the past and maintaining positive interpersonal connections (Myers, 1977; Graham, 2009). In a sense this progress is really stability, as it lies in maintaining an attachment to the past.

The idea is in a sense, the opposite of progress. No notions of progress at all, if you do retain the idea of progress, it would be progress is establishing good relationships with one another. The idea of looking after one another, its not an idealistic view it comes from the notion of looking after land. Minding the land, making sure it is not damaged, and seeing that it has a spiritual entity and is good in itself, so we are obliged to keep looking after it. That notion is like a template that is put on society. You are really there to manage in a good, ethical way the land and

society itself. The idea isn't to progress, as in improving things all the time. The way the world was, is the way the world was supposed to be (Graham, 2009)."

4.2 Trend 2: Aboriginal Concentration in "job ghettos"

Aboriginal Australians are under represented in managerial positions within the mining industry and there is a concentration of Aboriginal Australians in unskilled/semi-skilled positions

There is a concentration of Aboriginal employees in unskilled and semi-skilled positions, what John Kirwan referred to as "job ghettos (Cited in: Anon., 2007)" and they are thus "more vulnerable to losing jobs (Barclay, 2009)" Assuming that an Aboriginal person has gotten a job they are "almost always concentrated in unskilled/semi-skilled positions and it is hard for them to break free of these roles (Barclay, 2009)" There seems to be disagreement as to what causes this (Barclay, 2009), but it is important to gain insight into the root cause of the distribution of Aboriginal Australians throughout status positions in order to provide the population the opportunity to have access to more secure, long-term jobs.

"I don't think that Aboriginal people are given the opportunity. But they are definitely under represented. There is this racism that is also an issue, employers make assumptions, 'They are going to go walkabout, they are going to be unreliable, they will be here a week and never come back or have some sort of family issues that keep them from working.' They get typified into these roles and it is not fair (Warren, 2009)."

4.3 Discussion of Results 2

In a world view that operates towards an end, it is reasonable to live one's daily life on the prospect of future reward. If the future is viewed as inconsequential and the emphasis is more on the immediate, it will affect aspects of career planning which require present sacrifices.

A career has been defined as the "evolving sequence of a person's work experience, suggesting a pathway or a staged course." There are numerous different forms this pathway can take, the two of which are relevant to this study are "linear

careers” and “transitory careers.” A “linear career” is the path followed by managers in which “a person selects a career early in life and then progresses from a lower to a higher status position.” In contrast, semi-skilled workers follow a more “transitory career” path in which movement from job to job is sporadic and unrelated (Fuller, Howard and Buultjens, 2005).

Linear time perception is intimately tied to managerial career paths and the circular notions of time under which Aboriginal philosophy operates are more consistent with transitory careers. I wish to suggest that for a people who operate under a sense of time in which the future is irrelevant, it is difficult for them to justify working along a linear career path in which daily working life is directed towards some future goal, such as attaining a managerial position. This could potentially explain the under representation of Aboriginal Australians in managerial positions, and a concentration in un-skilled and semi-skilled positions.

Professor Janca stressed the importance of “immediacy” in administering psychiatric treatment to Aboriginal patients, “If there is no immediate reward the idea of future reward is not very important (Janca and Bullen, 2003)” For the purposes of psychiatric assessment, this different relationship to time required emphasizing the importance of taking daily medication for the purposes of long-term benefit. I think the same issue exists within the labor force: If planning a career path into the future is not considered an important component of employment, it will be difficult to “break free” of the transitory, semi-skilled positions associated with immediate benefit. Employers have drawn attention to this barrier since as early as 1923, in which an account from Yarrabah

Mission declares “The savage, who forgets so easily and sees only the present need, must learn to think ahead.” (Cited in: Donaldson, 1996)

There are mechanisms of employment strategy which assist in career planning. The Family Wellbeing and Empowerment program addressed the personal issues of youth Indigenous workers by giving non-Indigenous and Indigenous workers the opportunity to share their perspectives with one another, and provided lessons in career planning. The success of this cultural exchange is captured in the remark of an Indigenous boy who completed the program:

“Just over the years I’ve operated on winging it all of the time and just when you plan it, it seems to run a bit more fluently and probably I don’t have to deal with crisis as much when it is planned” The importance of cross-cultural training lies in an exchange between two perspectives rather than the assumption that Aboriginal people will be willing to submit an unreciprocated compromise (Cited in: Whiteside, 2006).

Progress is intimately tied to change and has been used as a driver of both ethnocentric and anthropocentric ideas. The word ‘primitive’ is used repetitively in regards to that which is old or unchanged (Aldrich, 2005). This sense of progress is linear in that it assumes that there is always something more ideal lying in the future, it is not applicable to a society in which change is frowned upon, and thus it is not relevant to apply Western notions of progress onto the career expectations of the Aboriginal population. The concentration of Aboriginal employees in transitory careers suggests that the Aboriginal population has retained their attachment to circular time perception and emphasis on the past. This is a necessary component of culture because “scheduling or planning would destroy the necessary elusiveness of (Aboriginal) subtle sense of timing, and would kill stone dead the exquisite sense that time is alive (Griffiths, 2005)”

The presence of this barrier in the realm of health assessment as well as employment

supports the hypothesis that differences in time perception are a root cause of socio-economic disadvantage.

5.0 Results 3: Obligation oriented time and job retention

The scheduled life demanded of a job makes it difficult for Aboriginal people to maintain an attachment to ceremonial and family obligations. This is an issue with time because Aboriginal society is a society in which obligation is intimately tied, not only to time-management, but to the psychological understanding of time itself.

5.1 Trend 1: Aboriginal time philosophy is tied to obligation

The Aboriginal community perceives time as intimately connected to the importance of events. Events that are considered to be more important are visualized as “closer in time (Janca, 2009)” There are elements of this sense of time is Western notions, such as when an individual remembers events “as if they happened yesterday” even if they happened years ago, because they were important to the individual. The difference is the approach to obligation and the extent to which “anything personal” would take priority over working engagements (Janca, 2009).

“Aboriginal people use or treat time, according to the importance of events. In other words, if they have to go to work at 8 AM and something more important happens, they will do more important things and forget about work.” Of course, we can relate to this a bit...”If a child is sick, the parent may stay home from work. But maybe the importance of events in cultural life is relevant, so that anything personal would take priority (Janca, 2009)”

Funerals:

“Funerals shut down towns” (O’Brien, 2009)

Funerals were repetitively mentioned throughout the interview process as a critical obligation which members of the Aboriginal community are expected to uphold. Funerals are of vital ceremonial importance and it is frowned upon within the community to miss the funeral of any member of the extensive family unit. “There are funerals that you are obliged to go to quite often, and this means missing work (Graham, 2009)” It is

difficult to maintain a work schedule when the cultural expectations of the community require the individual to be able to immediately abandon their daily routine in order to attend ceremonial events.

Indigenous small business owner of Yaram Arts communicates the difficulty in our interview:

“I come from a working line, so I followed that line. The hardest thing is funerals. If you don’t make it to an 18th birthday, you are in trouble, if you don’t make it to a wedding, you are in trouble, but if you don’t make it to a funeral you are in big trouble and you will hear about it. It’s hard when you work a 9-5 business job to make it to all funerals; you are forced to miss some. It is a trade-off. (Yirrganydji, 2009)

The value system of the Aboriginal community differs from those of the Western community in the expectations placed on working. “The key points to our (Aboriginal) culture are completely different than those of working. To walk the cultural line is not to be here (Yirrganydji, 2009)” It is difficult for the Aboriginal individual to maintain an attachment to their traditional culture, which places a high temporal demand on socializing, family, and ceremony in the midst of integrating into a broader society which values working as a central dictator of daily activity. “You are more obliged towards your family than your employer (Janca, 2009)”. Work is not seen as a priority for social well-being the way it is within capitalist Western society, and it is often not supported by the older members of the community if it requires sacrifice of traditional values.

There is a drive within the older population, particularly within the rural areas, to hold onto the traditional aspects of daily living and this creates a situation for the younger generation in which they feel as if they are continually pulled back to their traditional life every time they make an attempt to succumb to capitalist work ethic. “The pull of culture, the pull of family (Barclay, 2009)” is a commonly cited reason for Aboriginal

Australians to feel they need to leave the labor force. This is illustrated in the following story from a Saltwater Aboriginal elder:

“Two guys went down to the river to go crabbing, an Aboriginal man and a white man. They each had caught a couple crabs and put them into their buckets, when they decided to take a break under a tree and drink a beer. When they went back to their buckets, the white man’s bucket was empty, but the Aboriginal man still had all of his crabs. The white man asked why all of his crabs were gone, and the Aboriginal replied, “It is just like your people, every time someone wants to get out, everyone else will stand under and support them. When one of my people want to get out the rest of ‘em keeping dragging them back down (Warren, 2009).”

It is a balancing act between alienation from traditional community due to the inability to maintain commitment to ceremonial obligations, and alienation from the mainstream economy and thus extreme socio-economic disadvantage.

“These people are forced to exist within two cultures, and to embrace both. Some don’t even recognize that they are stuck being pulled one way and then the other. The old people want the younger generation to do things the old way, but they need to embrace the new way as well (Warren, 2009)”

5.2 Trend 2: Aboriginal commitment to work and job retention

“Aboriginal people have been for some time people that are not overly committed to employers, they like jobs to be interesting, they like to be able to move around if they need to, but there is a lack of attachment to work (McGuire, 2009).”

Aboriginal employees do not seem to have the same attachment to their work that would be expected within the culture of the mining industry. This makes it difficult for Aboriginal people to keep jobs because it is difficult to devote time to an industry when cultural obligations are more important. This strains relationships with employment authority figures because it is misinterpreted as disobedience.

“There is traditionally a huge drop-out rate. The main reasons for leaving the job are not getting along well with managers and not being able to tolerate being away from family for extensive periods (Barclay, 2009).”

5.3 Employment Services Survey Results:

Personal and social issues tend to have a greater impact on employee retention than economic factors

The general employment services were asked to rank the most common reason cited for an Aboriginal person leaving the workforce on a scale of 1 (not common) to 10 (very common). The most frequently cited reason for leaving the workforce was “Unwilling to Maintain Work Schedule,” with an average ranking of 8.9. The second most frequently cited reason was “Inability to Meet Family/Ceremonial Obligations” with an average ranking of 8.2. Both of these issues relate to the ability of the Aboriginal individual to have time to maintain personal and social relationships as are expected of traditional culture. In contrast, the least most commonly cited reason is “Pay too Low,” a job characteristic which is associated with interest in economic gain. These results seem to suggest that Aboriginal individuals place a higher value on personal and social issues than they do on economics.

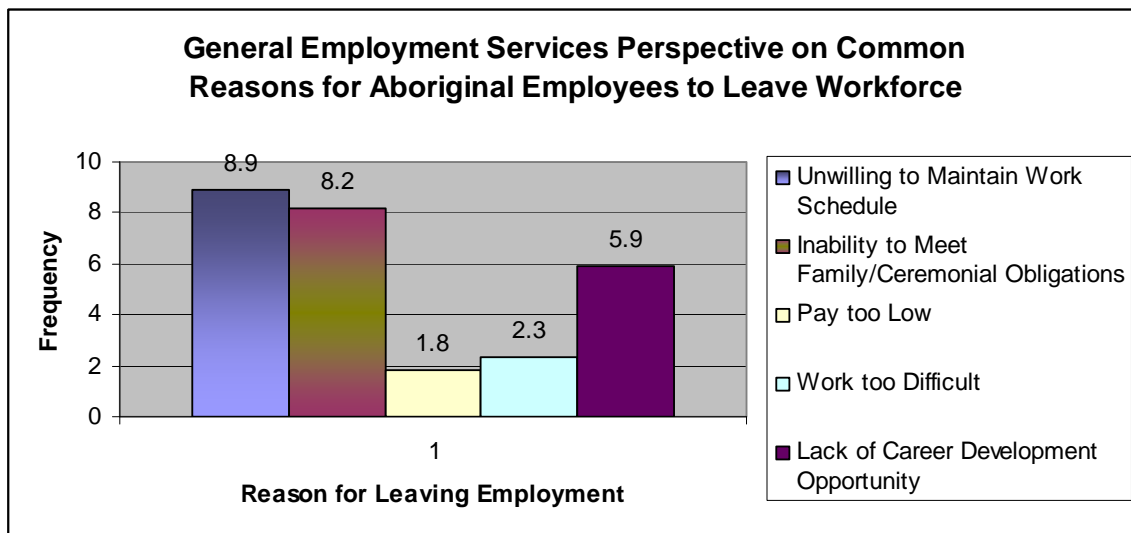


Figure 3: (See also: Table 3: Appendix)
 Results of Question 2, Employment Services Survey
 Personal and social issues are ranked as more frequently cited reasons for leaving the workforce.

5.4: Discussion of Results 3

Personal issues are a greater dictator as to how the Aboriginal individual tends to spend their time than the “imposed time constraints” associated with working. This illustrates that there is still an attachment to the values of traditional culture.

Traditionally time would have been spent in socializing and maintaining an attachment to family. There seems to still be resistance to adopting the “individualist work ethic” of capitalism, which would place a higher value on monetary benefit than family and ceremony.

The research of Professor Janca demonstrated the “uneasy truce” between the “social and cultural obligations” of an Aboriginal person which “exist outside of conventional time.” The scheduled work week creates a barrier in the ability of Aboriginal individuals to meet the needs of family and ceremony that are expected within traditional culture, and this is reflected in the difficulty maintaining a work schedule has on the retention of Aboriginal employees (Janca and Bullen, 2003).

6.0 Conclusions:

Aboriginal Australian notions of time survive to this day and they are reflected in the demands of employment strategy. Key aspects of Aboriginal time perception; time as subjective, time as a circular quality, daily time prioritized in past, tradition, and stability, and time as dependent upon obligation are all reflected in barriers to Aboriginal recruitment, retention, and progression through the workforce. It is important to recognize the difficulties in Aboriginal employment as the result of differences in fundamental cultural beliefs rather than as shortcomings of a population in adapting to

the Western capitalist set of standards. It is not as much the inability of a people to work within the industrial conditions, but an unwillingness to abandon the belief systems that are central to their culture in order to be incorporated within a system that promotes ideas they do not necessarily value.

Native Title has given Aboriginal Australians a voice in the terms of industrial culture and their cultural resistance is becoming apparent as they are active initiators of their temporal order by refusing to succumb to the time demands of industry. It is unfortunate that holding on to these cultural values has resulted in socio-economic disadvantage but the compromises which are developing within industry, for example flexible work schedules, are a positive start to a more successful coexistence of the two cultures. There are benefits which can be taken from sensitivity towards Aboriginal sense of time. The values that are encouraged by Aboriginal time: sustainability, family, and community, should be respected and can foster a greater appreciation for the present in daily living for the broader Australian community generally. A plaque outside of the Cairns library highlights this point:

“The people up here aren’t lazy. They know the proper way to live. Our characteristics are bound up with the climate, of course. I don’t say there mayn’t be times for rushing, but taking ordinary life all round, where does rushing get you? (Devanny, 1994)”

6.1 Implications for Policy:

Policy should approach Aboriginal employment with sensitivity to traditional values. The expectations of time allocated to working should be viewed within the framework of family and social obligations and the subjectivity of the division of daily time.

- **Family tax file number** – If industry were to adopt a system in which working obligations could be shared among members of a family, perhaps over time the work would be viewed as an addition to the obligation each member of the family has towards one another. It would then transfer the object of working from the individual to the community and be more in touch with the values of Aboriginal traditional culture.
- **Link working hours to daily life activities-** Professor Janca noted that for people who do not operate under linear time, it does not make sense to link working hours to morning, afternoon, and evening, or to the objective time measured on a clock. He recommends in health service delivery that medication use be linked to already existing daily life activities rather than the time constraints familiar to Western capitalist society. If upon recruitment, an Aboriginal individual was asked to give a general outline of how they expect to spend their days, perhaps working hours could be incorporated into this existing framework so as to provide less conflict and more flexibility.
- **Task oriented** – If more employment for Aboriginal people gave the option of task oriented work rather than time oriented work, it may provide the flexibility necessary to encourage the Aboriginal community to remain in employment. There are areas in which this seems to be happening naturally: In a town called Ernabella in the Musgrave Ranges, a town council constructed a large clock in order to educate the local Aboriginal community on time, though they resisted adaptation. In 1984, a council member noted:

“Nobody looks at [the clock]. The clock has not been working for months. No one knew that it was not working.... European staff use time and watches to regulate their activities but often they also work until the job is completed or it is too hot or cold or dark to continue. This local adaptation to time is still going on. (Butcher et al.1989:In: Donaldson, 1996)

Perhaps if this sense of time could be extended onto a broader scale through product, outcome oriented work, it would be easier to provide the Aboriginal population with long-term employment.

6.2 Suggestions for further research:

The similarities between the findings of this study and that of Professor Janca suggests that time perception is a common root cause of disadvantage across the arenas of employment and health care delivery. In order to further legitimize this claim it would be helpful if someone would study the impacts of time perception on education: particularly school attendance, and the school-to-work transition.

It would also be interesting to explore the impact that traditional passing down of jobs through family affects the job selection of Aboriginal children today. In the Yaram Arts interview, he mentioned that he comes “from a working line, so he followed that line.” Perhaps this value on tradition has an impact on recruitment into employment when, for many of the younger generation seeking employment today, they are the first generation of their family to be seeking jobs within the mainstream workforce.

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8.0 Appendix:

Table 1: Watch Survey Results

Demographic	“Never”	“Sometimes”	“Often”	“Always”
Non-Aboriginal Australian	2	3	8	17
Aboriginal Australian	20	5	4	2

Table 2: Employment Services Survey Results

Survey: Ranked on a scale of 1-10 (1=Least Common, 10=Most Common)

What is the most commonly cited reason for Aboriginal employees to leave the workforce?

Employment Service	Unwilling to maintain work schedule	Inability to meet family/ceremonial obligations	Pay too low	Work too difficult	Lack of career development opportunity
1	8	7	2	3	5
2	8	8	1	2	7
3	9	8	2	1	7
4	10	9	2	4	6
5	9	7	3	3	5
6	8	10	1	1	5
7	8	9	2	2	7
8	10	8	1	1	6
9	9	7	3	3	7
10	10	9	1	4	5
11	9	8	2	1	5
Average:	8.9	8.2	1.8	2.3	5.9

Survey: Ranked on a scale of 1-10 (1=Not Important, 10=Very Important)

What are the job characteristics most important to an Aboriginal individual seeking employment?

Employment Service	Flexible Work Schedule	High Salary	Career Development Opportunity	Ability to Balance Work and Family Life
1	10	1	8	9

2	10	2	8	8
3	10	1	7	9
4	10	1	8	9
5	9	1	7	8
6	10	2	7	9
7	9	1	8	8
8	10	2	7	7
9	10	1	7	9
10	10	1	7	10
11	9	1	8	7
Average:	9.7	1.3	7.5	8.5

Employment Survey questions:

Rank the importance of the following job characteristics for Aboriginal people seeking jobs on a scale of 1-10 (1= Not important, 10= Very important) and brief explanation

(1) Flexible work schedule

(2) High-paying

(3) Promotion opportunity

Comments:

Common reason for Aboriginal Australian to leave job: Rank on a scale of (1=not common, 10=very common) with brief explanation

(1) Unwilling to maintain work schedule

(2) Inability to meet family/community/ceremonial obligations

(3) Pay too low

(4) Work too difficult

(5) Racism in workforce

Other/Comments: