Symposium on Early Career International Law Academia: An Indigenous Concept of Time and Its Impact on Time Management: A Personal Reflection in an Early Academic Career (Part 1)

By:

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April 11, 2022

It is 8.00 am. You open your email inbox and after having answered multiple emails, you take the books from your bookcase, chug the remainder of your cup of coffee, and lock the office door behind you. Working groups start at 9.00 am. You make the five-minute walk to the building and welcome your students upon arrival. The rest of the day includes more teaching, doing research and more administration (mostly an-swering emails again).

Welcome to academic life. Now, not every day looks like this, but this somewhat sums up a regular working day for me as a newcomer in academia. I love it and I get so much energy from what I do, but I know that it can take its toll too and, with that in mind, time management is of utmost importance. But how can we effectively man-age time? My research focuses on the rights of Indigenous peoples and in my re-search, miraculously, I came across Indigenous perceptions of time. I could not resist reflecting upon this because how we perceive time heavily influences how we manage time – something that is very valuable in academic life.

In this two-part blog post series, I will discuss Indigenous understandings of time and reflect on personal experiences in an early academic career in international law. Part 1 of this blog post series will be devoted to a discussion on a circular perspective of time, which Indigenous peoples use. Subsequently, Part 2 will illustrate how valuable such approach is by reflecting upon personal experiences in an early academic career in international law.

Linear Time vs Circular Time

The concept of time is often understood linearly. That is to say, time is going in one direction from the past to the present to the future. For example, I can say that I gave feedback on an LLM thesis this morning and currently I am writing this blog post. In a few hours, I will be teaching a working group on international law and tomorrow I will have multiple meetings with my students. Activities unfold in a logical and chronological order on a linear time scale and these activities are mostly driven by an external driver, like a clock or an agenda. In Western culture, this linear perspective is the dominant understanding of time and is considered as a universal truth. How-ever, it fails to comprehend the value of other time systems that have developed within different historical contexts around the world.

A completely different perspective is one that describes time as having a ‘circular’ form. Many Indigenous Peoples do not understand time linearly. Instead, they per-ceive time in a circular manner where past, present and future are all ‘one’. Due to their special relationship to their ancestral lands, these communities have been able to create complex methods that are connected to features of the earth and the envi-ronment in which they live. For

instance, the traditional way of life of the Sámi is closely linked to the cycle of nature – in particular the yearly cycle of reindeer. Due to this close link to nature, concepts like time have been influenced by environmental states of affairs affecting their activities, making their perception of time a circular one.

For the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Australia, time is also perceived as something more complex than only clocks and calendars. For instance, past, present and future are all connected in the concept 'everywhen' in the Aboriginal way of life. In that way, time is not rigid but flexible; it shifts according to one's needs and what happens in the environment in which one lives. Fish traps are simply not set each day at the very same moment. Catching fish, after all, relies a lot on the tides, which do not come in at the very same moment every day. Knowing exact minutes and hours is not as important as knowing when nature allows you to catch fish.

A similar perception of time can be found in Māori culture, which is based on survival from the natural environment. Māori language, remarkably, also evidences a circu-lar perception of time. The Māori word for past (mua) also means 'in front', making the Māori concept of time opposite to a linear perspective of time. This conceptualisation of time is inherently connected to the cultural value system of the Māori, which is mainly socio-centric: collective values are more important than individual ones. Therefore, social relations and collective values dictate the duration of daily activities, and things happen as they are meant to happen.

Time Connected to the Importance of Events or Activities

Indigenous Peoples view circularity as an essential component to their understanding of the world and its operation. By paying attention to their environment and allowing reality to inform their beliefs, Indigenous Peoples have been able to develop a circu-lar way of life, which is holistic and dynamic in nature. Time, in that way, is also ex-perienced as 'circular' and 'dynamic', rather than 'linear' and 'rigid'. What is im-portant is that such an understanding of time is multidimensional. A good way to ex-plain such perspective is to think of ourselves in a body of water. Imagine time as a pond we can swim through. However, we cannot pull it apart or separate it. Time works similarly as it is around us every moment, operating in a dynamic way. Adopt-ing such view, we

are surrounded by ‘concentric time circles’. That is to say, one cir-cle of time surrounds us and another circle surrounds that circle, followed by another circle and so on. Events or activities are then placed in time along and across these circles. See figure 1.

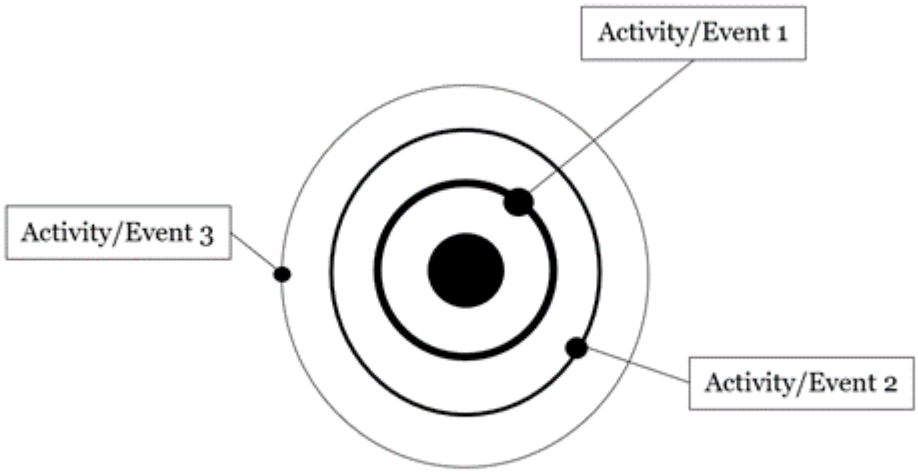


Figure 1. A model of a circular conception of time

This notion of time is inherently connected to the importance of events or activities, and time is treated in accordance with the importance of such events or activities. Those events or activities that are believed to be more important are considered closer in time, and those that are less important are further away in time. Such perspective is completely the opposite of a linear understanding of time, as shown by Kelly Adams who demonstrates this with an anecdote of professor Aleksandar Janca:

> 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 com-ing 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 im-portant that they happen.

Ultimately, we only scratched the surface of Indigenous perspectives of time in this blog post and, honestly, I do not have the tools to unlock these paradigms in their entirety. The idea of perceiving time as being circular, nevertheless, is interesting and can be very useful. In Part 2 of this blog post series, I will explain in what way Indigenous perspectives of time can be useful for us in academia.

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