Music & mortality:
a Pasifika conversation

Stephen Fox, PhD

In this episode…

- **Psychology & music**
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  - **Responses to music**
  - **Adaptation & acculturation**
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- **Liminality**
- **Terror Management Theory**
- **Ultimate transition**
- **What might we do together?**

Introduction

Long ago, I was a psych major, then a musician, a shop clerk, a builder, then a music major who stumbled into cultural psychology.

On the way, I got a BA in Music,

MA in community & cultural psych,

PhD in cross-cultural psych,

Master of Social Work (MSW)

I've played rock, folk, classical, gamelan, Okinawan kotan, West African fusion, composed 25 film scores, & published 2 books.

I currently teach for 3 UH campuses

This book is an invaluable resource for understanding the profound connections between culture, healthcare, and mortality. In a world where healthcare professionals – doctors, nurses, clients, patients, and staff – are increasingly engaging in cross-cultural interactions, this text equips readers with essential insights to navigate diverse beliefs and expectations surrounding health and treatment, particularly in moments of stress and vulnerability. While healthcare is often grounded in Euro-American belief systems, this book broadens the reader's perspective, offering essential tools to enhance intercultural understanding during health crises and end-of-life care. It empowers both patients and practitioners to adapt and collaborate, fostering better treatment outcomes by bridging cultural divides. Gaining this multicultural lens is not only crucial for healthcare and cross-cultural psychology but also for confronting the universal experience of mortality – our own and that of our loved ones.

STEPHEN FOX is a distinguished interdisciplinary academic, artist, and educator, whose work spans writing, music composition, and teaching. Residing in Hawaii for most of his life, Fox draws deeply from the region's rich cultural tapestry. His expertise, backed by degrees in Cultural Psychology, Music, and Social Work, uniquely positions him at the intersection of art, culture, and mental health. In addition to his scholarly and artistic pursuits, Fox is a sought-after consultant for cultural programs dedicated to preserving traditional arts. His multifaceted contributions make him a visionary in both the academic and creative communities.

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Fox FACING DEATH ACROSS CULTURES

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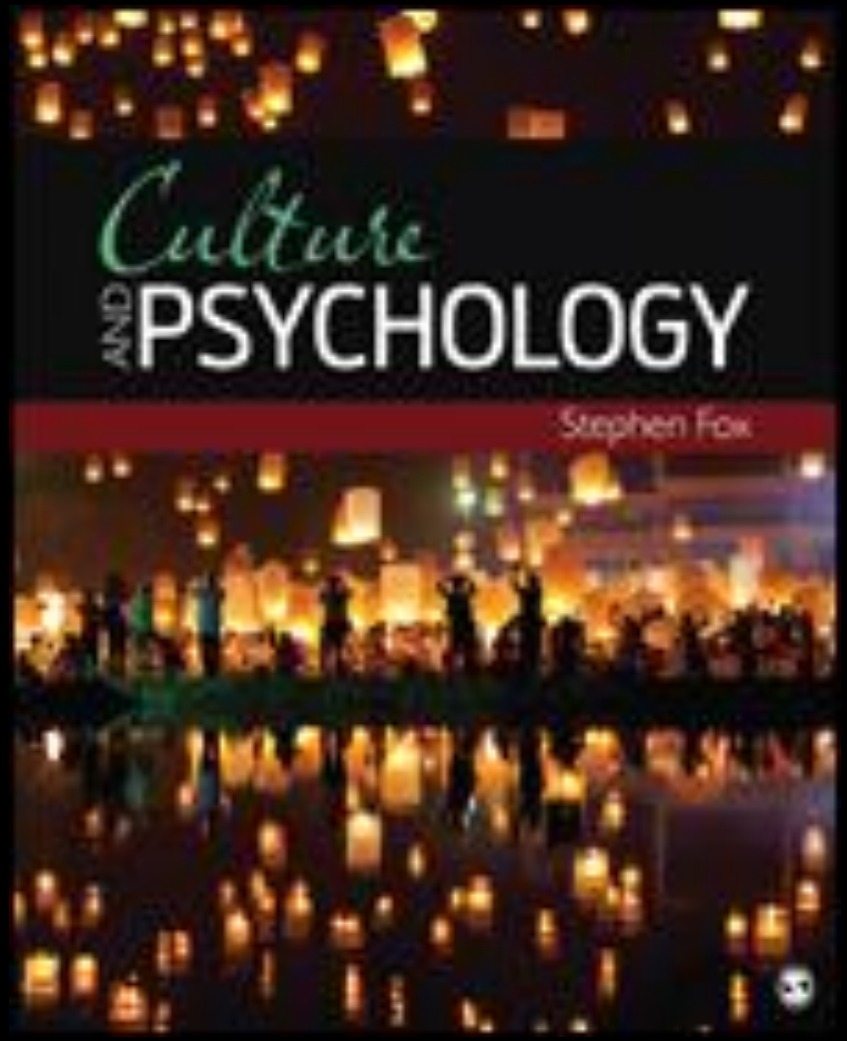
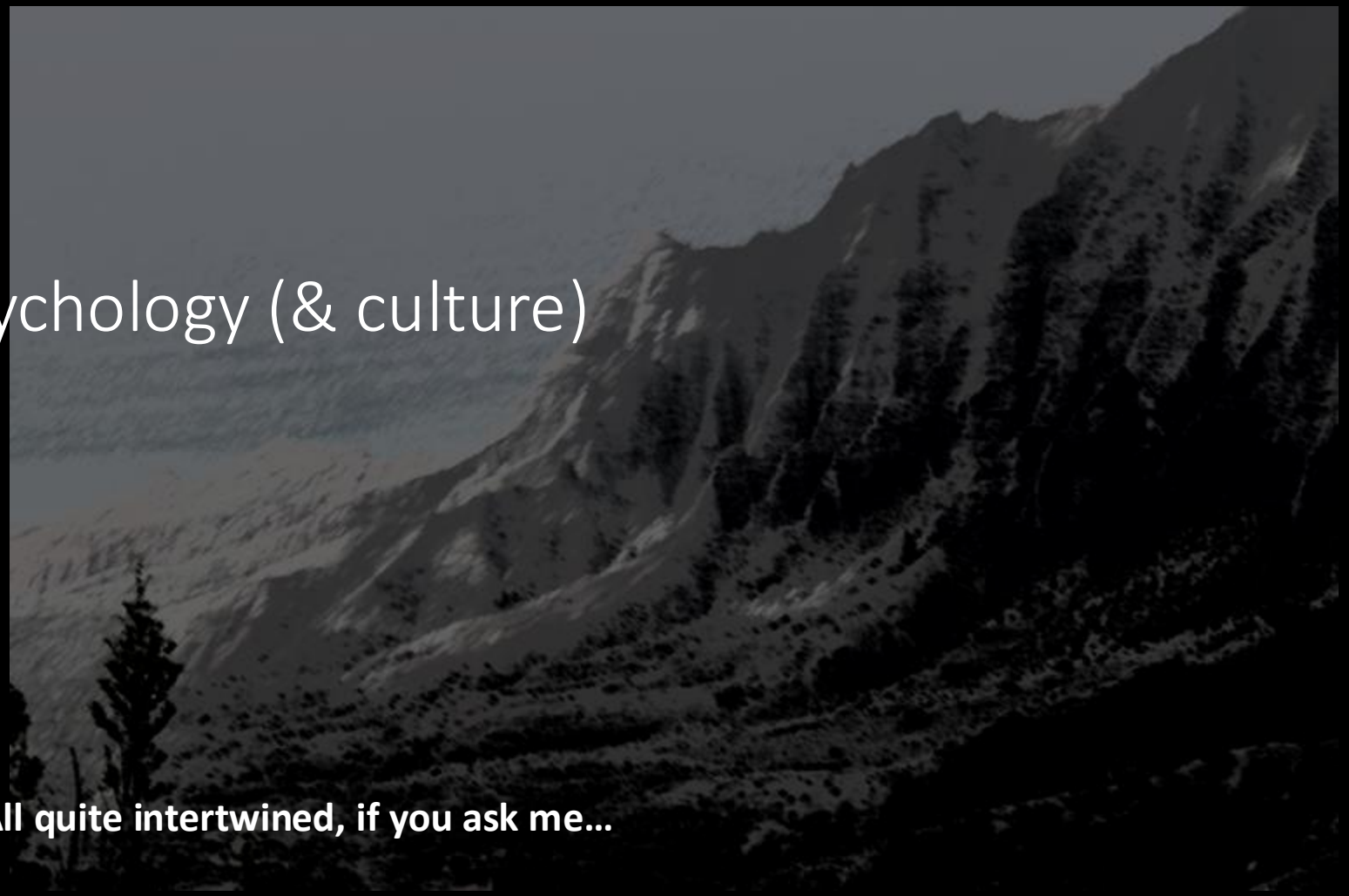
Stephen Henry Fox

FACING DEATH ACROSS CULTURES

Health and Mortality in a Diverse World



Music & Psychology (& culture)



My specialties… All quite intertwined, if you ask me…

Psychological study of music

That's "psychoethnomusicologist,"

not "psycho" ethnomusicologist,

please

Psychological study of music

Cognitive

Emotional

Teaching & Learning

Physiological

Identity

Coping

Memory

Temporal

Brain plasticity

Language

Therapy

Cultural adaptation

Social psych

- Group cohesion
- Reinforcement of bonds
- Collective self-esteem
- Intercultural relations
- Particularly “Individualism-Collectivism”

Cognitive processing

- **Linguistic messages**
- **Shared meanings**
- **Gestalt organizing principles:**
  - **Proximity**
  - **Similarity**
  - **Common fate**
  - **Good continuation**
  - **Figure-ground**

- **Auditory grouping processes**
  a) Organize acoustic events into musical events
     - Notes, chords
  b) Connect musical events into musical streams
     - Melodies, phrases
  c) Connect event streams into musical units
     - Songs or movements

- **Tones may be perceived as a group or stream if they are adjacent in time and pitch**

Physiological responses

Physiological responses
- Heart/pulse rate
- Skin conductivity
- Blood pressure
- Respiration
- Entrains

Biochemical responses
- Hormonal & neurochemical
  - e.g. **dopamine & oxytocin**
- Good chems in Alzheimers
- Muscular tension
  - tension/release in music

Emotional responses
- Characteristics of emotions
  - Cognitive appraisal
  - Subjective feeling
  - Physiological response
  - Action tendency
  - Regulation

How music induces emotion (Juslin & Vastfjall, 2012)
- Brainstem
- Emotional conditioning
- Emotional contagion
- Visual imagery
- Episodic memory
- Musical expectancy

Emotional contagion
- Listener hears an emotion, which is then mimicked internally
- fMRI studies show some evidence it may work

Episodic memory
- Music evokes a personal memory
- “Honey, they’re playing our song!”

Adaptation & acculturation

Migration and colonization

Intercultural contact has predictable psychological effects and consequences

These processes are (obviously) happening across Pasifika cultures.
For instance, more Niueans live in Auckland than on Niue and more Hawaiians are on the mainland

Adaptation & acculturation

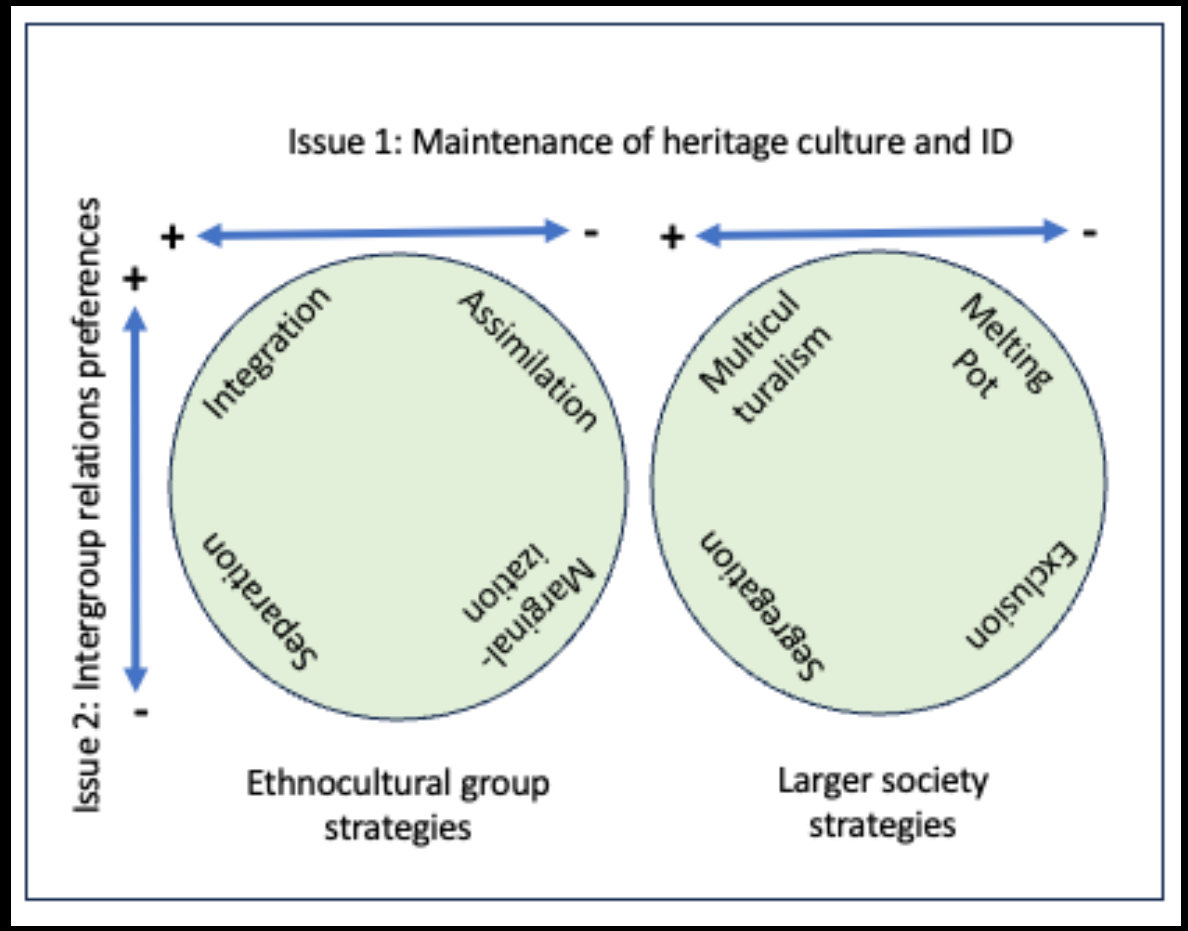
Portrait of a Young Woman in a Turban
Jacques Louis David (1748-1825)

Different cultures came into increasing contact, exchanging ideas and goods across continents and oceans and changing all of the cultures involved.

This is generally called *transculturation*

Acculturation describes the individual or societal changes from continuous direct contact

Adaptation & acculturation



Adapted from John Berry‘s dimensions of psychological acculturation

Balancing culture of origin with dominant culture.
Generally, “Integration” is considered healthiest option.
Personally, I am accepting my marginality ☺

Adaptation & acculturation

How do you maintain strength of origin culture? (Intergeneration drift as youths acculturate)

If healthiest coping includes origin-culture participation, it needs support

And music just generally provides health-promoting opportunities

Taonga tuku iho

Māori concept of cultural treasures and how they are passed across generations (Mahalo to Ross Hemera)

The taonga include the products and processes of toi (arts) and, in fact, include everything from paintings to pāua

Memes/semiotes

These elements and processes resemble what we now call memes (Dawkins, 1976) or semiotes (de Saussure, 1920). These transmit meaning within cultures

Funerary rituals of Africa maintained in Americas

African secret societies of the Yoruba, Dahome and other cultures survived the Middle Passage, providing mutual economic and emotional support in the Americas (Turner, 2009).

Rituals -- embody journeys of transformation, incorporating features of African religions, their deities, and their ancestral spirits

Second Line processions of New Orleans funerals and weddings:
The First Line comprises the mourners (or couple & family) leading the procession,
Musicians provide accompaniment = the Second Line.

Health, Coping, & resilience

What constitutes health and well-being?

Table 5.3: Whare Tapa Whā, the Four-Walled House of the Healthy Self (Durie, 1999)				
Concept	**Taha Wairua**	**Taha Hinengaro**	**Taha Tinana**	**Taha Whānau**
Connect to	Spirit world	Mental world	Physical world	Social world
Key aspects	Faith and metaphysical	Think and feel, communication	Physical development	Belongingness, share, and care
Themes	Unseen energies	Mind and body	Healthy body	Social systems

Health, Coping, & resilience

- Note the inclusion of social connection, now showing up in health research as connectedness/belongingness.
- Under Taha Tinana, Hawaiian music includes many references to physical locations
- How can we cope with the knowledge or our mortality

Benefits of traditional arts

- Well-being
- Resilience
- Life satisfaction
- Self esteem
- Connectedness
- Positive identity

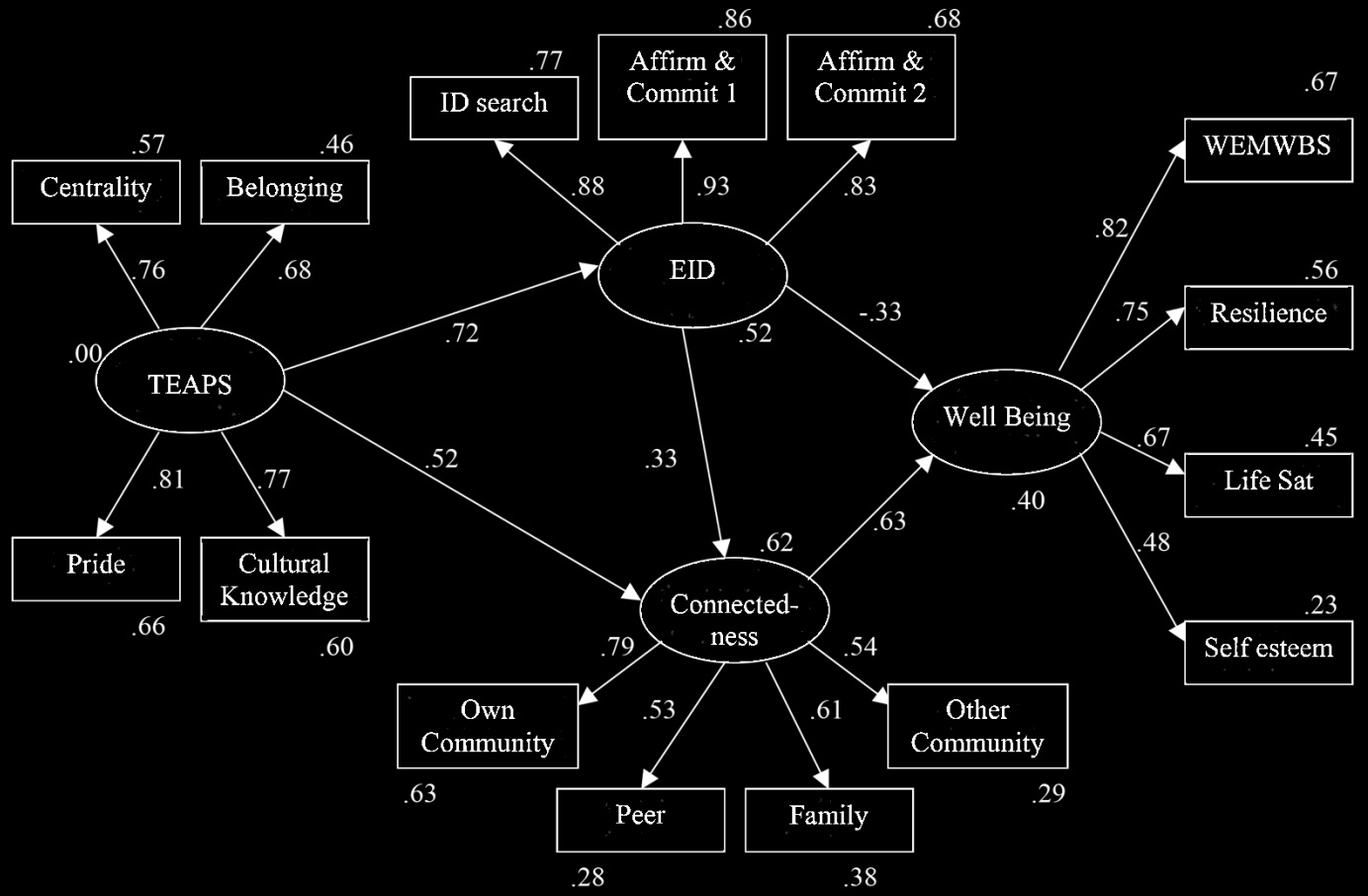


Figure 4.5. Best resulting structural equation model of TEAP (N = 336)

Health, Coping, & resilience

Factor analysis

Health, Coping, & resilience

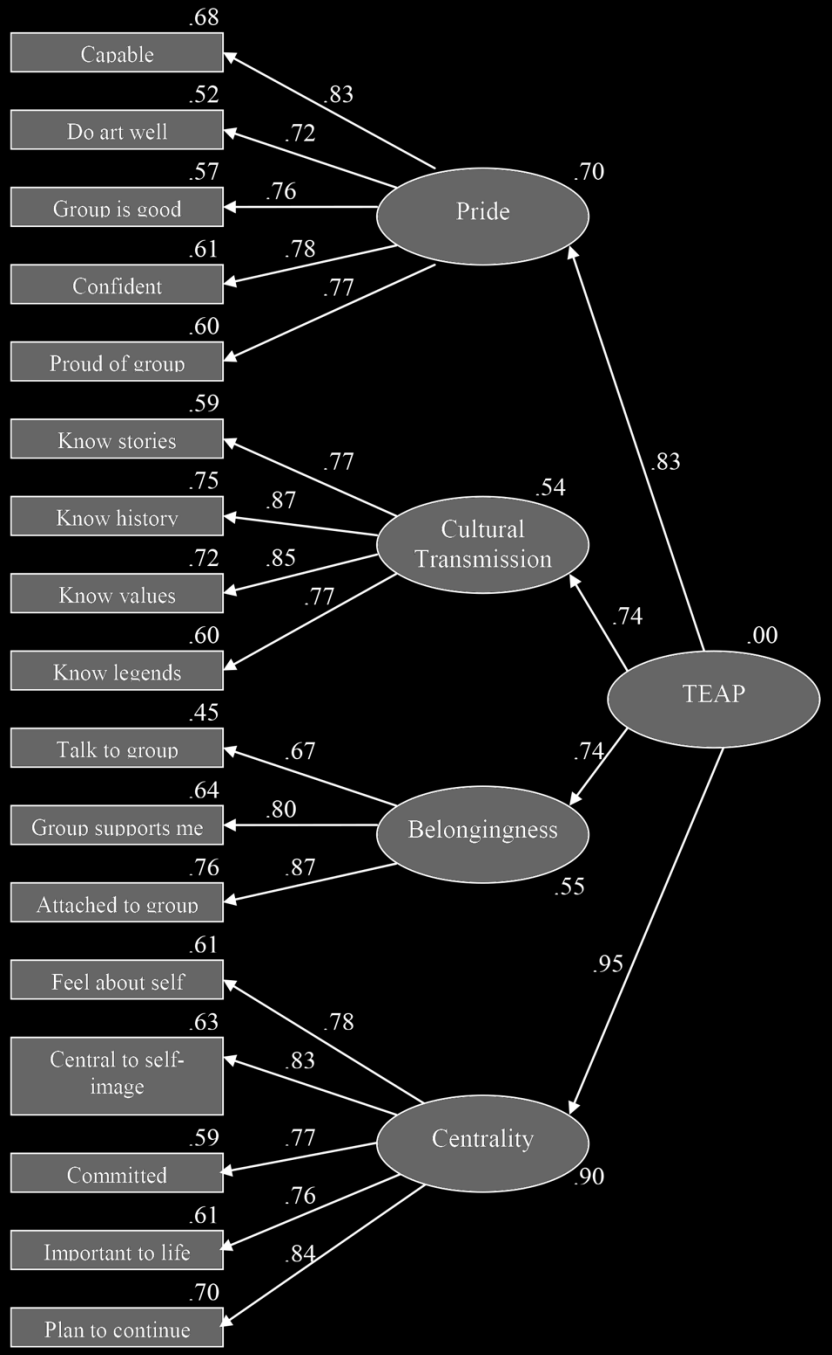


Figure 4.3. Confirmatory Factor Analysis of the TEAPS scale (N = 118)

Factor structure of the TEAPS instrument (values below .30 deleted) (N=239)

Scale item	Factor			
	Pride	Cultural Transmission	Belongingness	Centrality
I am a capable member of my arts group	**.83**			
I do my art very well	**.82**			
My arts group is very good at what we do	**.75**			
My arts group is considered by others to be very good	**.74**		.30	
I feel confident when performing or showing my art	**.66**			
I am proud of my arts group when we perform or do a show	**.64**			
Practicing this art helps me learn the stories of my people		**.89**		
Doing this art connects me to the history of my ethnic group		**.85**		
By learning this art, I learn the values of my people		**.84**		
By learning this art, I understand the meanings of our myths and legends		**.75**		
My arts group friends are who I talk to when I have troubles			**.85**	
My arts group friends provide me with support in my life			**.83**	
I feel a strong sense of attachment to the members of my arts group	.30		**.65**	
My arts practice forms a big part of how I feel about myself				**-.81**
My arts practice forms a central part of my self-image				**-.72**
I am very committed to the practice of my art				**-.70**
I plan to continue to practice my art				**-.62**
My cultural art group is a very important part of my life				**-.61**

Benefits of traditional arts

- Allows prediction of quantifiable outcomes for arts programs
- I'd very much like to update my sample!

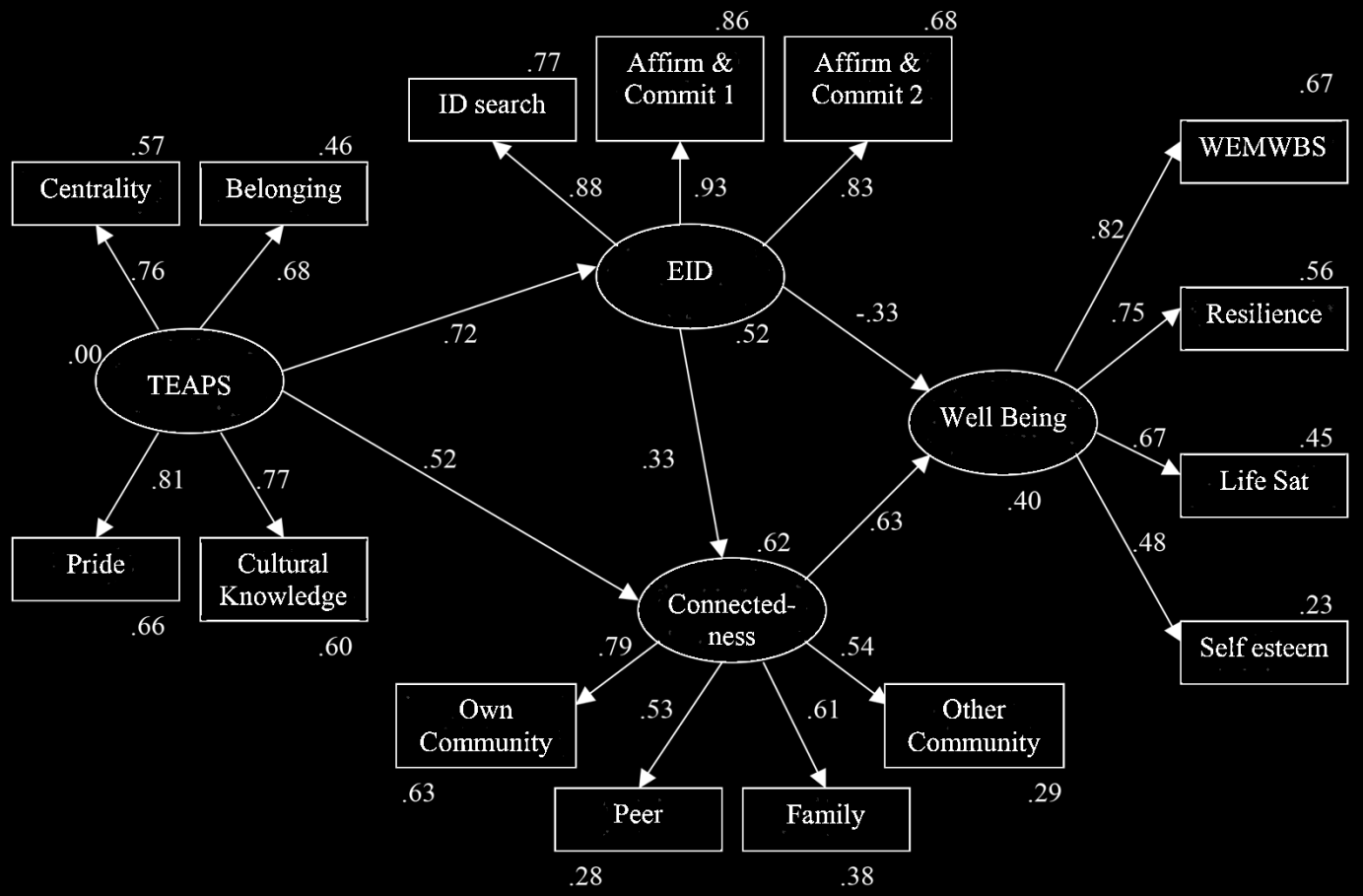


Figure 4.5. Best resulting structural equation model of TEAP (N = 336)

Health, Coping, & resilience

Liminality

- Limin is the in-between, the proposed line between consciousness and what lies beneath, the moment between the before and the after where one is neither.
- Cultures provide the tools to navigate these liminal passages
- In life, limina are the moments of transitions, pregnancy to birth, childhood to adulthood, unmarried to married, living to dead.

Health, Coping, & resilience

- All of these require coping, as we deal with the stress of adapting to new identities, responsibilities, statuses, etc.
- Liminality and emotion coexist, tears falling like rain at weddings, bar mitzvahs, christenings, *quinceañeras*, and of course, funerals.

Terror Management Theory

TMT proposes that our awareness of mortality has led humans to:

- Identify as part of an ongoing culture that outlives us
  - Procreation preserves our genetics, but this is even more
- Distract ourselves with things like music and departments of motor vehicles
- Cling to our culture more tightly when under threat
  - This explains nationalism and racism
- Honor our dead

Terror Management Theory

TMT processes active in music:

- Identification with traditional/culture-based music
- Intergenerational transmission & mutual participation
- Provides soothing mental activity
- Familiar musics connect us to our culture
- Music for funerals/mourning/remembrance are widespread

Terror Management Theory

- These gentlemen’s ancestors played these same instruments 60,000 years ago.
  - Their songs, dances, and practices connect them to an unparalleled degree.

Terror Management Theory

Ancestral veneration is one TMT process

- **Obon festival**
- **Dia de los muertas**
- **Ties the living to the dead**
- **Connects children to their progenitors**
- **Provides an expectation that we will also be remembered by descendants**

(Photo from Lāhainā obon festival 2014)

Terror Management Theory

Music as a TM tool of connectedness

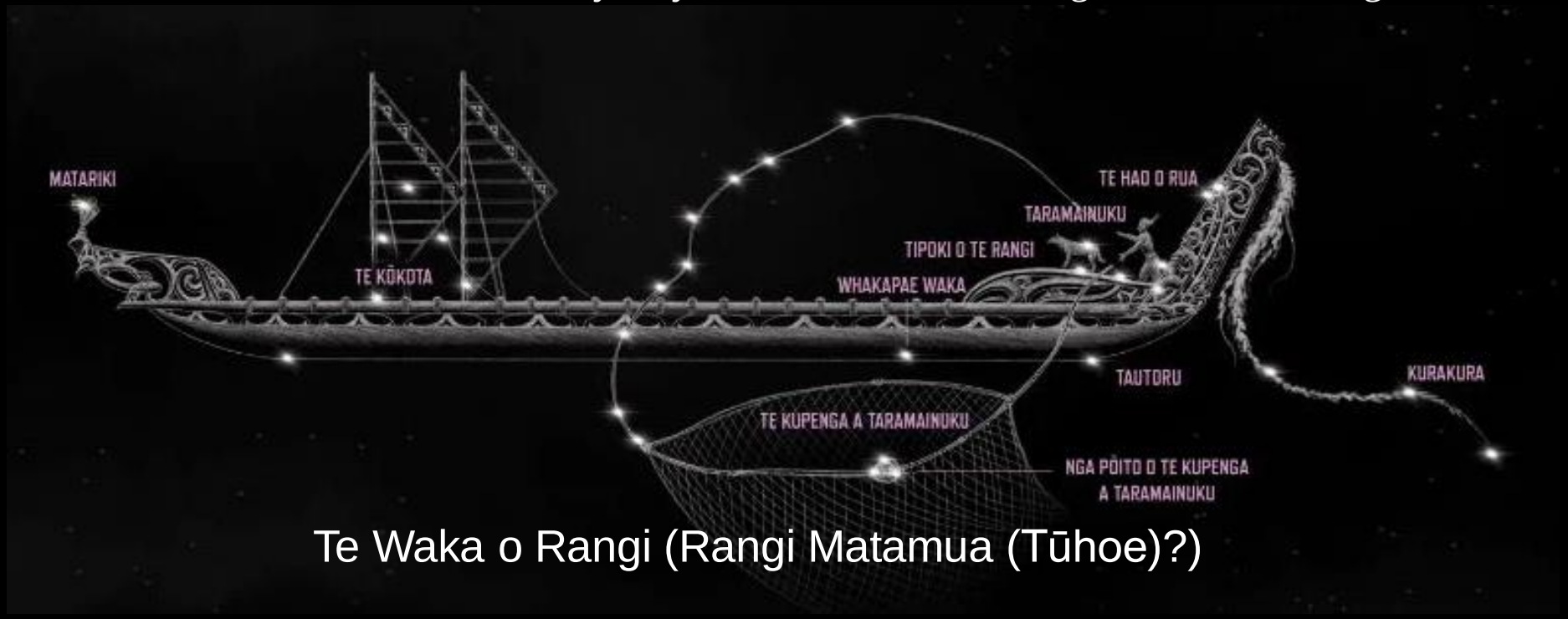
- Brown (personal communication, 5/29/2023) *It’s like nursing people through these processes in these ancient ways that simultaneously connect the past generations and the present and the future. That's where I suppose the liminal happens, in the sense that there's an opportunity to bring them together in this ceremony ground as the songs and dances are performed. It's like people quite literally call upon the deceased spirits and the ancestral spirits to join in the performance. These ceremonies nurture people through a process together of them letting go as well as moving on.*

Terror Management Theory

Psychological adaptation & coping

- Cultures of course include practices that aid coping
- Taramainuku rides at the back of the canoe, casting his net to gather the day's earthly souls as the ship of stars passes. -- A few weeks later, in the antipodal midwinter, Matariki appears again, heralding the Māori New Year. Taramainuku then releases the souls he has collected so they may become stars decorating the chest of Ranginui… (Fox, 2025)

And in the ultimate transition



Te Waka o Rangi (Rangi Matamua (Tūhoe)?)

During the passage

Debashish Bhattacharya, (Hindustani musician, personal communication, 1/10/23).

- "[My father] was full and totally an artist covering the area of theater, poetry, singing, actor, writer -- he wrote so many stories for the theaters. And so when he taught me music, he told me that the music is your refuge" *We used to practice music in front of him in his room or the next room so he could hear the music. And he forgot everything*

He was in pre-Alzheimer before he passed away. He forgot my mom's name but he remembered all my music. So at the last days when no medicine, nothing was working, music was working on him."

Health, Coping, & resilience

Music operates in multiple memory systems less affected by Alzheimer's. The family connects to their father and to their traditions, bringing more peaceful emotions in an otherwise difficult time.

During the passage

Marie F. (Irish, personal communication, 11/9/2023)*: Dad had always loved songs so we had a lot of singsongs with him. It brought him a lot of joy. He sang along with us, even from his bed, until he couldn't anymore. Then we sang for him. In those last few days, when he was no longer conscious but in more of a deep sleep that was leading to death, friends and family still came to visit and talked to him, said prayers with him and sang to him.*

We sang him all his favorite songs, including songs that he had taught us that his family used to sing to him when he was a little boy.

Health, Coping, & resilience

The family experiences connection to their father/grandfather, to each other, and to their culture.

After they're gone

Tim Murray did field research in Ulukhaktok, an Inuit community in the Canadian Arctic. One night at a community gathering with games and dance, word came of the death of a tribal member:

Drummers begin dragging folding chairs to the middle of the room, sit, and commence tapping on the rims of their drums with long, wand-like beaters as young women assemble behind them. When the lead drummer begins chanting in a loud, shout-like tenor, a large group of female dancers immediately materializes in front as young and old community members come to the floor to participate.

Each song becomes a timed explosion of sound as drummers repeat each soft verse with a much louder one, moving from soft taps on the wooden rims of their drums to driving sforzando accents. When the evening's drum dancing subsides, I look over at Ellen, who now appears as if her sorrowful outburst never happened. Another game is announced and the festivities resume (Murray, 2023, p. 7).

Health, Coping, & resilience

After they’re gone

Emotions and emotional display rules

- Jessie Vallejo has played the same mariachi repertoire at social events with dancing and at the dozens of funerals she played during COVID. She relates, “*A lot of the songs are upbeat so like we'll play them at parties and people like to sing along to them and then you have this like overlap of, was it somebody's favorite song? Was it something they sang a lot at the party? And then you're singing that to them at their grave or to their family.*

Health, Coping, & resilience

“I think it allows more people to cry or face their feelings than you would if there wasn't music. There's always the women who will scream and be the llorona chillonas *and make a big scene and collapse in front of the casket. There's one in every family.*

After they're gone

Emotions and emotional display rules

Reuben B in Gunbalanya *"Some daluk [women] held rocks above their heads, threatening to strike themselves in a gesture of their uncontrollable grief, before bininj [men] intervened & restrained them. As the sounds of grief grew to a crescendo, I reflected how the emotion was at once real and well-rehearsed, the actions both spontaneous & semi-staged."*

In each of these examples, emotions are expressed in ways specific to the culture, helping the living to adjust and move forward.

Health, Coping, & resilience

After they’re gone

Coping with the absence

- In contemporary Māori culture, a headstone may be carved and placed at the grave some time in that first year, but there will be an unveiling of the stone, *hura kōhatu*, usually at the one-year mark. The unveiling will include ceremonies at the grave and the marae, *karanga* (calling) heralding the start, *karakia* (prayers and chants) requesting blessings. Those assembled will lift their voices in *waiata* (songs) and *hīmene* (hymns).

Health, Coping, & resilience

- *Donna P.: When the person dies, it's the time for the dead. A year later it's a time for the living and to celebrate -- you celebrate the dead but you celebrate the living by coming back together and celebrating life.*

What's the point?

- Psych provides additional insight that might be useful for understanding "why" & "how."
- It's time we do more than lip-service to interdisciplinary research.
- Our shared insights might help us all heal and move forward.

What's the point?

- In the current political environment, public discourse *internationally* casts arts as an unnecessary extravagance.
- We need to be clear on the value of arts.
- Quantifying both financial and psychosocial effects is crucial to maintaining funding.
- Knowing and explaining benefits like social connectedness, psychological well-being, and lowered cardiovascular risk can help the public appreciate their value.
- All tools and all hands on deck!

What's the point?

- Cooperation is key
  - Interdisciplinary, intercultural
- Rather than zero-sum competition, we need to be supportive of each other.
- Sharing language and research helps.
- Allport's contact theory says exposure in equal-status situations reduces prejudice.
- Network to publicize events; loss of local & alternative newspapers reduces coverage

The next coping & mortality project

- These are divisive and stressful times.
- Music, musiking, and music events can reduce our physiological stress responses.
- Liminal spaces for connection & transformation
- I'll be gathering research and interviews for a book on intercultural ways of coping, focusing on music.

Your thoughts?

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