

The Implications of Cultural Values in Workplace Cultures: Australian Indigenous Employees Within Mainstream Australian Organisations

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on aspects of cultural values, which may influence the employment and retention of Australian Indigenous people in mainstream organisations. Initially the paper explores the concepts of culture, mainstream Australian culture and Indigenous Australian culture. Comparisons and distinctions are then made between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian cultures and society.

Finally a discussion is centered primarily on the Indigenous cultural values created in The Dreaming and underpinned by the classificatory Kinship System. Utilising the literature on workplace values and cultural dimensions, the incongruence between mainstream organisational values and those held by many Indigenous Australian employees, raises some of the likely problems Indigenous Australians may face when confronted with mainstream work practices.

KEYWORDS

Culture, Australian culture, Indigenous culture, Hofstede, Workplace practice, Indigenous employment issues.

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous Australians make up 2.4% of the Australian population (ABS, 2004) but a disproportionate number are without regular employment (ABS 2004). This paper focuses on cultural issues that may impede employment of Indigenous people. Although there is no single Australian Indigenous culture (Broome, 2001; Reynolds 1972) it is recognised that Indigenous Australians differ from mainstream Australians in their cultural and social values. The majority of Indigenous Australians now usually work in organisations dominated by people with an Anglo or European cultural heritage. Although over 200 years of European domination has resulted in many Indigenous Australians seeing themselves as 'in between' culturally, accepting parts of each culture (Christie 1985; Muecke 2004), differences in cultures may result in difficulties for Indigenous people trying to fit within work organisations.

This paper is part of the initial development of a study of Indigenous cultural issues in mainstream business operations. It reports on aspects of Australian Indigenous culture and their likely impact on

workplace attitudes and behaviours that could in turn influence employment. Firstly it describes culture and findings on Australian (Anglo) culture. It then outlines some of the substantial differences between Indigenous and mainstream culture and discusses where misunderstandings and issues are likely to arise when Indigenous and non-Indigenous people work in Australian business settings.

Although there is extensive literature on minority ethnic groups and some literature on employment of other Indigenous peoples, the situation of Indigenous people in Australia differs from that in many other countries. Australian Indigenous people are a much smaller proportion of the population than for example the Maories in New Zealand, the Hawaiian people in the US, or the First Nations people in Canada (Redpath & Nielsen 1997). Moreover, while their rights have increasingly been recognised in the courts, they do not have the treaty rights that were extended to the native people of New Zealand and Canada (Broome 2001; Ashkanasy, Trevor-Roberts & Earnshaw 2002). As a result, there is possibly less knowledge of their culture in the Anglo-dominated workplace. They may also have a culture that is less compatible with Western culture than for example, the Hawaiian culture with its favourable view of workplace success (Foley 2005). Nevertheless, Australia's Indigenous people must compete for employment in an Anglo dominated business world. To be successful requires a better understanding of how culture may impact on their employment.

CULTURE

According to Triandis (1972, p.4) "Culture is defined as an individual's characteristic way of perceiving the man-made part of one's environment". People have both real and symbolic objects, such as tools, weapons, other physical objects, language, music, art, material resources, technologies and systems (Hofstede 1980; Holt 1998). In terms of cultural groups among organisations and societies, which are the main interest of our study, Thompson (2001) adopts an anthropological stance and posits that culture relates to a shared system of beliefs, attitudes, possessions, attributes, customs and values that define group behaviour.

Many people understand culture in terms of geography. Culture however, does not only relate to nations and countries. Rather, culture is the unique characteristic of a social group whereby the values and norms shared by its members set it apart from other social groups (Lytle, Brett & Sharpiro 1999; Hofstede 2001). This concept of the social group was reinforced by Hofstede (1980, p.25) who states: “the essence of culture is the *collective* programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group, society, category or nation from another”. Members of a social system “share particular symbols, meanings, images, rule structure, habits, values and information procession and transformational patterns” (Ruben 1983, p.139). As such, social transformation can take place when collective members, through experiences, become ‘mentally programmed’ to interpret new experiences in a certain way (Hofstede 1983; 2001).

Culture functions in a number of ways. For example, Keesing (1974) argues that culture provides its members with an implicit theory about how to behave in different situations and how to interpret others’ behaviour in these situations. It allows different individuals with their unique experiences to share a common set of values learned from the culture(s) to which they are exposed, yet also exhibit individual differences as a result of unique experiences (Hofstede 1997). Therefore “the future can be shared by collective individuals who know their own culture(s)’ broad design and deeper principles but every individual may not share the same theory of cultural code” (Keesing 1974, p.89). It is common that members belonging to different culture(s) learn their explicit theories or common set of values when they go through the socialisation process (Gudykunst, Matsumoto, Ting-Toomey, Kim & Heyman 1996; Morris, Davis & Allen 1994). The national culture of Australia therefore reflects the values, characteristics and behaviours of mainstream Australians.

THE MAINSTREAM AUSTRALIAN CULTURE

Although there are many approaches to measure national culture, Hofstede’s (1980) work-related approach, is relatively the most popular and stable approach to describe national culture. Hofstede’s

(1991, 1997) studies identified cultural characteristics, which are operationalised in terms of five independent dimensions of national culture, which broadly characterise cultures in terms of “average patterns of beliefs and values” (Hofstede 1983, p.78). Hofstede (1991, 1997) found Australian culture to be highly individualistic, ties between individuals are loose where everyone is expected to look after him/herself and his/her immediate family. It is also masculine, suggesting a preference for achievement, heroism, assertiveness and material success (Ng & Burke 2004). Uncertainty avoidance is moderately low, so Australians tolerate uncertainty and ambiguity. Power distance is also relatively low, and the Confucian dynamism score suggests that Australian people value personal steadiness, stability and respect for tradition, as opposed to thrift and perseverance (Hofstede` 1991, 1997).

A follow up study, the GLOBE Project, reported on cultural practices and values in 62 countries, with Australia placed in the ‘Anglo Cluster’ (Ashkanasy et al 2002). In terms of societal practices, this cluster scores high on power distance and low on gender egalitarianism. In societal values, high scores are achieved in performance orientation, humane orientation, family collectivism and future orientation, and low in power distance (Ashkanasy et al 2002). The culture is individualistic, but there is a desire for more family interdependence. Although there is gender inequality, those in the cluster believe there should be more equality. How then does Australian Indigenous culture sit within the mainstream Australian culture?

INDIGENOUS CULTURE

‘Indigenous’ is a collective term interchangeably used with ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders’ in Australia to identify those people who occupied the lands, islands and waters prior to British invasion (Chur-Hansen, Caruso, Sumpowthong & Turnbull 2006). Throughout this paper, the term ‘Indigenous’ will refer to Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people. Australia’s Indigenous people have had a long and complex association with Australia, as Muecke (2004 p.166) confirms: “Indigenous knowledge of country, which has been built up through 60,000 years of occupation, is extensive, rich and

elaborate”. It is estimated that there were 500 different language groups and many sub-cultural groups (Broome 2001). Although some languages have been lost, many still exist in contemporary Indigenous society, which today, consists of urban, rural and traditional people. Within the scope of this paper, it is not our intention to try to capture the diversity in heritage, values and beliefs of generally agreed quite ‘heterogeneous’ Indigenous cultures (Chur-Hansen et al 2006). Rather, our aim is to provide general characteristics of Indigenous culture, facilitating a better understanding of certain individual and organisational behaviours in modern Australian society.

To gain an understanding of the present, it is important to explore the past. According to Hume (2002), the central feature of Indigenous cosmology and epistemology that is continually recounted throughout Australian history, despite regional variations, is ‘The Dreaming’. The Dreaming is regarded as the mythological times when the Ancestral Beings moved about, forming the landscape. The Ancestral Beings also created the plants, animals and peoples of the known world and established religious ceremonies, marriage rules, food taboos and other laws of human society (Sutton 1989). Lawlor (1991 pp.45-46) asserts that every culture has a version of the beginning as a creative epoch:

Every culture possesses creation myths, and all creation myths from the Aboriginal Dreamtime to the story of Genesis to the Big Bang theory postulate an energetic phase prior to the appearance of matter and life. In essence all the stories are similar... The major difference is that our cosmology acknowledges only physical forces and the Aborigines attribute consciousness to the creative forces and everything in creation.

The Dreaming, according to Rose (1992) underlies every aspect of the universe in Indigenous peoples’ minds. It defines the framework of human action and links people and place. Indigenous people believe that a person’s spirit comes from his/her Dreaming place and the person is an incarnation of the spiritual ancestors who made that place. The Dreaming provides the basic source of his/her identity (Rose 1992).

Rose (1992) states that Indigenous ownership is based on the knowledge of The Dreaming songs and stories. This in turn, holds the knowledge of a site or estate to the land around it and to other Dreaming

trails. The ritual performance and repetition of the ceremonies, according to Chew and Greer (1997), serve also as an effective mnemonic for groups and individual memory. Chew and Greer (1997) argue that the continuation of The Dreaming necessitates the conduct of rituals and ceremonies, which re-enact The Dreaming's events at particular sites. As individuals progress in age through the processes of initiation, older and fully initiated people reveal more knowledge to them (Hume 2002). Different groups and individuals own the knowledge of the ceremonies and sites, and it is their responsibility to persevere and care for The Dreaming, whereby they must 'hold onto' The Dreaming and pass it on to the future (Sutton 1989).

It is important to understand that The Dreaming to Indigenous people is also 'The Law'. By making The Dreaming the law, the norms or precedents established in The Dreaming are emphasised, embodying the sense of moral imperative (Myers 1991). Sutton (1989) stresses the importance of the laws originating from The Dreaming. These laws affect Indigenous social and cultural life including everyday interaction of people with their environment.

Normally it is the elders or fully initiated individuals who help preserve The Dreaming by revealing knowledge as the person progresses in age (Hume 2002). According to Chew and Greer (1997), the authority of individuals in communities can be established based on the amount of one's ritual knowledge, expertise, their rights in the land and seniority. Indigenous people have been able to continue to maintain their beliefs, customs and traditions above all else (Chew & Greer 1997). Anthropologists, such as Sharp (1958), Hiatt (1965), Maddock (1965), Elkin (1979) and Myers (1986) agree that Indigenous culture is egalitarian and without clearly defined political authority, where elders and initiated men and women are held in high esteem. Intimately connected to and underpinning The Dreaming in Indigenous culture is the kinship network, which defines relationships and behaviours. The system still operates among traditional and non-traditional Indigenous people of Australia today.

Indigenous kinship systems are complex compared to Western kinship systems that are based on individualism and emphasise linear relationships. In contrast, Indigenous communities are collectivist entities and their form of kinship systems is classificatory (Chew & Greer 1997; Lawlor, 1991). The classificatory system uses the term kinship to apply primarily to linear and collateral relatives (Elkin 1979). That is, relationships are grouped as classes and a relationship term is applied to each of these classes, such as father, mother, uncle, aunty, brother and sister (Elkin, 1979). As such, a mother's sisters' children are classed as brothers and sisters because they are all children of women who are called 'mother' and moreover, it is the same process for a father's brothers and their children (Chew & Greer 1997). According to Broome (2001), the relationships are exact rules governing the kinship classification of Indigenous people.

Each kin relationship contains specific rights, duties and forms of respect predetermined in The Dreaming Law (Lawlor 1991). It provides, as suggested by Broome (2001), a mental map of social relationships and behaviours, as specific codes of behaviour are demanded for every kinship relationship. Elkin (1979) states kin relationships extend well beyond familial blood ties and are the basis of all social relationships, indicating the range of behaviours expected. Therefore, everyone in Indigenous society must be identified as part of a kin relationship so that the persons concerned will know what their behaviour to one another should be (Elkin 1979).

According to Elkin (1979), kinship rules prescribe both what must be done and also what must not be done. Positive rules affected such matters as marriage arrangements, food gathering and sharing, certain trading relationships with people in other communities and also educational roles, which involved not only parents but also other kin (Elkin 1979). In addition, basic to the Indigenous economy is reciprocity, a mutual sharing with and obligation to kin. According to Berndt & Berndt (1992 p.122) reciprocity is a "...network of duties and debts, rights and credits, all adults have commitments of one kind or another...everything must be repaid, in kind or in equivalent, within a certain period." In Indigenous

societies, the power of tradition and kinship rules are supported by the authority of the elders to maintain order, acting like a legal system in the Western sense (Broome 2001). Such a society denotes egalitarian diffusion of power amongst elders and operates on the basis of consultation and consensus by way of a complex organisation with many rituals (Cole 1979).

It is clear that Indigenous culture while diverse in many aspects, generally adopts a fundamental cosmology, which emulates The Dreaming and kinship classificatory system. The Dreaming handed down by Ancestral Spirit Beings determines the creation of the land and people, while kinship laws and responsibilities bind the Indigenous community together. The following discussion raises questions and issues related to the transference of these beliefs and values into the mainstream business arena.

DISCUSSION

In Indigenous societies, leadership was sometimes a hereditary position, not necessarily based on gender and more often leaders were chosen for their knowledge, skills and values (Broome, 2001). Decision-making tended to be consensual, which reflects an egalitarian power-distance relationship (Trevor-Roberts, Ashkanasy & Kennedy 2003). Decisions often were not made until consensus could be reached (Cole 1979). Although many management theorists prescribe that leaders should adopt a more consensual approach focused on coaching and facilitating group problem solving, Australian leadership tends to operate in a more controlling directing manner (Trevor-Roberts et al 2003). For Indigenous workers, this would require some adjustment to understand the more authoritative decision-making found in many workplaces, as well as the need to make decisions without consultation and consensus, and in a timely manner.

Kinship is a major influence on Indigenous behaviour in the workplace (Greer & Patel 2000). Kinship determines an individual's position in society and how they relate to others. It also dictates responsibilities and duties towards others. Indigenous people live in a society in which roles are clearly

defined and prescribed so there is little uncertainty regarding how one should behave in relating to another person (Broome 2001). Traditionally Indigenous culture recognised no distinction between work and living (Greer & Patel 2000). On entering the workplace, Indigenous Australians may bring with them the need to prioritise relationships, because authority structures and relationships in Australian workplaces are very flexible and very uncertain when compared with Indigenous relationships. Moreover, the focus on traditional cultures is around participation rather than productivity (Harris 1990), which might be interpreted in Australian workplaces as a reluctance to compete (Redpath & Nielsen 1997). The capitalist economy therefore, requires different authority structures and relationships, as well as the placement of different priorities on outcomes.

Another major influence of kinship is on the need for reciprocity which is a core element in Indigenous society. Reciprocity is the obligation associated with kinship position where “the value is in the quality of the personal interaction, not in the objects exchanged or in contractual processes” (Lawlor 1991, p.252). Reciprocity can be viewed as an unwritten etiquette. For example, a man may take classificatory brothers hunting as helpers. In return, the helpers will automatically receive part of the catch (Berndt & Berndt 1992). In terms of the modern workplace then, payment for labour constitutes wages or salaries. Indigenous kin however, may expect payment from the wage or salary earner in the form of personal contribution to the community, which may intrude upon working hours or result in absenteeism.

Traditional Indigenous society is focused on the survival of small related groups rather than the individual, so is focused on the collective good. They would therefore be regarded as collectivist, which contrasts sharply with the highly individualistic Australian society. In collectivist societies there are tight social frameworks and a tendency to treat the employer-employee relationships like a family relationship in which the norm is for people to look after each other and loyalty is a given (Hofstede 1983). In Indigenous societies teamwork and group-based incentives are favoured and there is more prestige in being recognised by the group, than as an individual achiever (Redpath & Nielsen 1997). These ideas

may not conflict with current trends in management, but they are at odds with mainstream Australian workplace practices, although it is conceded that there is a belief that Australian workplaces should be more family oriented (Ashkanasy et al 2002). This aspect of Indigenous culture would be expected to result in a reluctance to be competitive or to set oneself up to be singled out for praise.

One area where there is some congruence between mainstream Australian culture and Indigenous culture is in the 'tall poppy syndrome'. The tall poppy syndrome is where Australian society has the inclination to disparage high achievers in society (Trevor-Roberts et al 2003). According to Nielsen (1993, p.128) "there is a strong levelling or humbling tendency evident in Indigenous cultures". Indigenous Australian Jackie Huggins (*Koori Mail*, 29 June 2005 p.31) confirms that the 'tall poppy syndrome' undermines confidence and the ability to succeed. "People in our communities are very suspicious of those who stand out from the crowd or big-note themselves. There is a real danger that you can be seen as a tall poppy, and there is much jealousy and envy in our community". This value could result in the perception that a person is unwilling to be a high achiever, or is not sufficiently focused on the required performance outputs. The difference perhaps between the cultures is that individual achievements are highly valued in Australian workplaces, whereas more collective outcomes are valued in Indigenous society, although both are suspicious of those who big-note themselves. Indigenous people who do not strive to achieve would be unlikely to be considered valued employees.

The values of sharing and helping are directly correlated with collectivism in Indigenous cultures. However, Hofstede (1980) also places modesty, sympathy for the weak and a preference for compromise instead of conflict as characteristics of femininity. Conversely, masculine cultures prioritise work over personal life, are assertive or aggressive and focus on professional career development (Hofstede 1991). In Indigenous cultures, sharing and helping are expected of men and women in both social and organisational settings because there is duality of gender roles. Centrality of work is another factor distinguishing feminine from masculine cultures. In this respect also, Indigenous cultures can be

described as being feminine rather than masculine. According to Redpath and Nielsen (1997), the development of professional skills and attitudes are important, but maintaining legitimacy with Indigenous communities should be given equal priority. These characteristics in the mainstream workplace may impede professional development, in that the Indigenous employee would be less likely to aspire towards career opportunities and to compete for promotions. Assertive behaviour is valued in the workplace, therefore the Indigenous employee may become disempowered by a reluctance to challenge authority and to speak out. As a result, the employee may also be a target for workplace bullying.

Dumont (1993) perceives Indigenous cultures as holistic in their interconnectedness and their relationship to the whole. This suggests group harmony and commitment to the community, although there is a lack of acceptance of new ideas and change. This is indicative of Indigenous culture which is steeped in tradition, where there is structure and formality. Hofstede (1983) notes that there may be a positive relationship between low uncertainty avoidance and the potential for innovation. In the modern workplace innovation is expected, in fact the capacity for innovation may be crucial to the organisation's survival. In an era of globalisation, deregulation, increasing competition, new technologies and e-commerce, Cottam, Ensor and Band (2001) argue organisations are finding it harder to compete. In an ever changing environment, one way to create growth and to sustain performance is through innovation (Higgins 1996; Kay 1993). Furthermore, it is contended that innovation is essential for an organisation to maintain its leading edge in its market niche (Doyle 1988).

The Confucian Dynamism and/or long-term /short-term dimension is difficult to apply. Findings are somewhat contradictory by Australian society, which has been described as both low in Confucian Dynamism (Hofstede 1991) and having a long-term orientation (Ashkanasy et al 2002). It has been claimed that the Confucian Dynamism dimension has fatal flaws and its usefulness is doubted (Fang 2003) and that it is more suitable for comparing Western and Eastern cultures rather than Western and Indigenous cultures (Redpath & Nielsen 1997). Dumont (1993) contends Indigenous society has a

cyclical approach to time whereby traditions of the past and obligations to the future generations are strongly reinforced. The past, present and future are all intertwined in the form whereby traditions of the past are respected, the present is lived in, and the future is administrated (Redpath & Nielsen 1997). This emphasises the role of the elders as they will not only pass down their wisdom, but are custodians of the future. Jules (1988 p.11) argues, they are “the keepers of the world for the unborn”. Accordingly, Hofstede’s framework can describe Indigenous culture as both present and future orientated (Hofstede 2001). How this will impact on working life, needs to be further explored.

In Australian organisations, a traditional decision-making model is utilised. This model is highly individualistic, rational and systematic, although Cohen, March and Olsen (1972) argue in reality, decisions are rarely made in this way. This process assumes that the right answer can be discovered through a systematic analysis of the facts, whereby informed consideration of alternatives is made for the best possible outcome. Indigenous culture’s decision-making process emerges as a result of consultation and discussion and is considered to be a lengthy exercise where outcomes are reached and mutually agreed upon. This facet of Indigenous culture can be an impediment in the workplace where timely decisions need to be made. This decision-making approach, according to Greer and Patel (2000) would almost certainly hinder the strategic planning and operations of the business. This would also suggest that Indigenous employees might not be flexible to change and to facilitate the change process in the most effective and timely manner.

CONCLUSION

This paper has outlined some of the substantial differences between Indigenous Australian and mainstream Australian culture. Focus has been limited to aspects of cultural values, which may influence

or impact upon employment and retention. Discussion has advanced where issues and misunderstandings are likely to arise when Indigenous and non-Indigenous people work together in Australian business settings. The majority of Indigenous Australians now usually work in organisations dominated by Anglo or European cultural heritage. Australian culture is placed in the Anglo Cluster, which is highly individualistic and masculine. The capitalist Australian economy requires different authority structures and relationships, as well as the placement of different priorities on outcomes. For example, in the Australian workplace, innovation is expected and decision-making is expected to be rational and systematic. Conversely, Indigenous culture is egalitarian and collectivist, with values linked back to The Dreaming and classificatory kinship system. For example, there are tight social frameworks and there is a tendency to treat employer-employee relationships like family relationships, where people look after each other and loyalty exists. There is a reluctance to be competitive or to set oneself up for praise. Participation rather than productivity is highly valued.

Many mainstream workplace values, policies and practices are therefore at odds with the values Indigenous Australians may bring to this setting. The initial discussion which has taken place within this paper, has highlighted only some of the obvious value incongruence and possible associated difficulties. Effective Human Resource Management requires a better understanding of cultural values and the differences in attitudes, beliefs and behaviours, which are influenced by how these values may impact on workplace culture. This suggests therefore, that there is ample scope for further in depth research into how Indigenous people negotiate their way into and navigate their way within mainstream organisations. Possible research questions could explore Human Resource Management policies, practices and cultural training needs. This could have implications for recruitment and selection processes. Consequently, this in turn may facilitate development and benchmarking across areas such as Indigenous Employment Strategies and related desired organisational outcomes. Finally, it must be acknowledged that this review has emphasised Hofstede's dimension of culture, although updated measures of Australian mainstream culture are available (Ashkanasy et al 2002). This is because much of the management literature on

Indigenous Australians in the workplace to date utilises Hofstede's dimensions. In future research, the findings of the GLOBE study (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman & Gupta 2004) will provide a basis for comparison between Indigenous and mainstream Australian culture.

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