

CHAPTER VII.5

CULTURE AND MANAGEMENT IN AUSTRALIA: “G’DAY, MATE”

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Abstract. Australia is the world’s sixth-largest nation, with a stable, democratic society, a strong economy and an informal, friendly culture. In the last few years, this country has become a popular destination for business, which creates the need for greater awareness and understanding of Australian culture and values – in particular, how these values influence and shape management practices and organizational dynamics. This chapter explores these themes, providing knowledge that will enhance the reader’s ability to act and interact effectively within the Australian context. In doing so, it highlights the complexity of Australian culture, produced by various colonial and post-colonial events, myths and processes. The approach I have used for this work draws on an interdisciplinary examination of social history, economics, anthropology, sociology and cultural studies, and also on my own experience and observations as a “diasporic Brazilian” who has lived and worked in Australia since 1974.

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INTRODUCTION

With a population of more than 21 million people, Australia is a part of Oceania, located between the Indian Ocean and the South Pacific Ocean. It is the world's sixth-largest nation, with a stable, democratic society, a strong economy and an easygoing, informal culture. In the last few years, Australia has become a popular destination for business, which creates the need for greater awareness and understanding of Australian culture and values – in particular, how these values influence and shape management practices and organizational dynamics. This chapter explores these themes, endeavouring to provide knowledge that will contribute to enhancing the reader's ability to act and interact effectively within the Australian context. The complexity of Australian culture is highlighted in this chapter, a complexity that is coloured by an array of colonial and post-colonial myths (Tranter and Donoghue, 2007) that emerged from the very specific conditions of Australian social history.

In order to address the complexities of Australian society, an interdisciplinary approach was adopted, drawing on social and economic history, anthropology, sociology and cultural studies. My own experience and observations as a “diasporic Brazilian” (Duarte, 2005) living and working in Australia since 1974 have also been taken into account. The result is a set of different story lines which interweave to produce a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973, pp. 5-6) of the complex fabric of Australian society and culture. The chapter begins with a discussion of the key theoretical concepts of this analysis, followed by a snapshot of contemporary Australian society, a condensed socioeconomic history of the country, and a discussion of different constructions of national identity. It concludes with an analysis of the influence of Australian cultural values and archetypes on management styles, practices and organisational dynamics.

DEFINING KEY CONCEPTS

A discussion of the *culture* and *values* of a given society cannot be adequately accomplished without a good grasp of these abstract and rather ambiguous concepts. For the purpose of this chapter, I borrow the influential definition of culture by Geertz as:

an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which [individuals] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and toward life. (Geertz, 1973, p. 89)

It is important to bear in mind that culture is not an immutable *essence*, “hard-wired” into our brains. It is a fluid and changeable phenomenon that responds to transformations taking place in the broader socioeconomic environment in which we live. Culture is multi-dimensional, constituted by different levels of reality and shaped by different histories, discourses, practices and institutions.

West and Murphy (2007, pp. 11-14) offer a useful conceptual framework to grasp the complexities of Australian culture. They propose five dimensions to characterize it: the first is *Western culture* which refers to beliefs and behaviours that emerged from the Enlightenment and European colonization; the second is *Anglo culture* which relates to the features which Australia shares with other English-speaking cultures; the third is *national cultures* which refer to the different cultural constructs that constitute the Australian context (including Aboriginal peoples); the fourth is *subcultures* which are constituted by groups of people whose beliefs and behaviours differ from those of the dominant culture (e.g., Muslims; Jews; gays and lesbians; rural versus urban Australians, and others), and the fifth is *organizational culture* which refers to the “unique blend of Australian national culture, subcultures and workplace-specific norms and values”. While these five dimensions do not exist in isolation from each other, this chapter is particularly concerned with the *organizational culture* of Australia, in particular how it is influenced by the core values of this society.

For the purpose of this analysis, *values* are defined as principles or standards, more or less shared among the members of a given culture, which operate as “guiding principles for thought, feeling and action in specific cultural contexts” (West and Murphy, p. 22). In guiding our behaviour, values generate what are perceived as “proper” ways of behaving or engaging with the world around us. This prompts reflection on whether we have acted appropriately or inappropriately in different social situations.

Like cultures, values are not static. As commented by Feather (1986, p. 700) while values “reflect to some extent the distillation of the past, they are also a response to societal transformations and to current conditions”. From its colonial beginnings in rural settings, Australia has evolved into a complex, technologically advanced, pluralistic, predominantly urban and globally competitive society. This means that some values of the past are no longer relevant, and new value orientations have emerged (for example, individualism is a strong value orientation of contemporary Australia, in contrast with more collectivist orientations in the past).

If values are not static, perspectives that conceptualize “culture as mental programming” (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005, pp. 2-5) are inadequate to explain intercultural communication, as they assume that countries are culturally homogeneous – displaying *either* “high uncertainty avoidance” *or* “low uncertainty avoidance” traits. As commented by Jacob (2005, p. 515), “we need to take into account the complex interplay between culture and management in terms of a constantly evolving dynamic, because both are evolving.” This does not mean, however, that the rich cultural tapestry of the world is under threat by increased globalisation. Cultures do retain their uniqueness, and this is the main object of inquiry in this chapter.

Australia has two core values that are cherished by its citizens, and which to a significant extent shape the cultural specificity of that country: *egalitarianism* and *fairness*. These values are learned from socialization agents such as family, the church, school, peers and the mass media, which generate a “uniquely Australian experience” for people who live in this country and for outsiders alike. The two following excerpts from electronic sources discussing Australian culture are illustrative. The first one is from a website entitled “Australian culture, lifestyle and assumptions”:

We Australians understand the mainstream cultures of Britain and the USA, because our television is flooded with culturally-soaked material. But aside from lowest-common-denominator stuff, like soapies, few foreigners realise that *we have our own culture, our own cultural references, and our own assumptions*. (Macinnis, 2006; italics added)

The second excerpt, from a website entitled Newcomers, relates more specifically to the Australian business culture:

If you ask [Australians] whether or not they think that there is a ‘business culture’ in Australia, they will probably tell you ‘no.’ Sure, we do not have the ‘handing over a business card protocol’ of the Japanese or the formal nature of ‘Yes Sir’ of America, but *Australia does have some interesting idiosyncrasies* that for a newcomer, can be quite strange! (Newcomers Network, 2004; italics added)

Whether in the broad sense or in the organizational sense the “interesting idiosyncrasies” of Australian culture are often linked with the core values of egalitarianism and fairness. These values figure prominently in the mythologies of Australian identity and continue to inform discourse and practice in different spheres of contemporary society. But before further exploring these themes, a useful exercise would be to start imagining what Australian society looks like. To this end, a snapshot of the main features of Australian culture is provided below. The snapshot can be supplemented with information provided in Box VII.5.1.

Box VII.5.1

AUSTRALIA AT A GLANCE

Location and size: Between the Indian and Pacific oceans; approximately 4,000 km from east to west and 3,200 km from north to south, with a coastline 36,735 km long

Climate: Generally arid to semi-arid; temperate in the south and east; tropical in the north

Temperate weather in most regions for most of the year

Population: Approx. 21 million (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2007)

Proportion born overseas: Approx. 22 percent (Department of Immigration and Citizenship [DIC], 2007)

Main cultural groups: United Kingdom, New Zealand, Italy, China, Vietnam, Greece (ABS, 2007)

Official Language: English

Capital: Canberra

Government type: Federal Parliamentary Democracy, but since 1952 its Chief of State is Queen of Australia Elizabeth II, currently represented by Governor General Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Michael Jeffery (since 2003)

Head of Government: Prime Minister Kevin Rudd (elected on 26th November 2007)

Cabinet: Nominated by Prime Minister from among members of Parliament, candidates. They are subsequently sworn in by the Governor General to serve as Ministers.

Legal system: Westminster system of government and law inherited from the British who originally colonised the country. There are two main political parties (Liberal and Labour) and a number of minor parties, which constitute the Commonwealth Parliament. Each state and territory also has its own government.

Currency: Australian dollar A\$1 = US\$ 0.8295 (Aug 2007)

Main Religions: Catholic 26.4%, Anglican 20.5%, other Christian 20.5%, Buddhist 1.9%, Muslim 1.5%, other 1.2%, unspecified 12.7%, none 15.3% (source: 2001 ABS Census)

Main industries: mining, industrial and transportation equipment, food processing, chemicals, steel

Main mineral resources: bauxite, coal, iron ore, copper, tin, gold, silver, uranium, nickel, tungsten, mineral sands, lead, zinc, diamonds, natural gas, petroleum

Agricultural products: wheat, barley, sugar cane, fruits, cattle, sheep, poultry

Economy: Robust; GNP per capita US\$ 42,553 (2007); Unemployment rate 4.9%.; Inflation rate (consumer prices) 3.8% (2006 est.)

Environmental issues: Soil erosion from overgrazing, industrial development, urbanization, and poor farming practices. Soil salinity is on the rise due to poor water quality. Increased desertification from clearing for agricultural purposes threatens the natural habitat of many unique animal and plant species. The Great Barrier Reef off the northeast coast – considered the largest coral reef in the world – is threatened by the tourism industry.

Major Australian merchandise exports in 2006: Coal, crude petroleum, iron ore, passenger motor vehicles, non-monetary gold, refined petroleum, crude petroleum, computers, aluminium ores (incl. alumina), telecommunications equipment

Main Trading Partners: Japan, China, United States, Singapore, United Kingdom, Republic of Korea [DIC], 2007)

Source : Unless otherwise specified, the above information was obtained from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade website (DFAT, 2007), accessed 26th August 2007.

A SNAPSHOT OF CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIA

Australia is a highly urbanized nation, with most of its people living in the major cities of the southern and eastern coastal region that extends from Adelaide to Cairns.² There is only a small demographic concentration around Perth on the western coast. The plentiful physical resources of this country have facilitated a relatively high standard of living with significant investment in social infrastructure, including education, training, health and transport.

As already pointed out, Australia enjoys a positive international reputation, reflected in a general tendency to perceive it as an egalitarian, informal, easygoing and friendly society. The excerpts below, from two websites, are illustrative:

[Australia] is a country of kind-hearted, helpful people from all corners of the world living together in peace and harmony. (Come2Au, 2007)

Australians are among the friendliest of peoples with a strongly grounded sense of fair play, enshrined in the Australian language's phrase *fair go*. Hence, *Fair go, mate*, or *Give him a fair go*. (About.com, 2007)

2. Most of the information provided in this section was taken from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs (DFAT) website at http://www.australia.gov.au/Our_Country and http://www.dfat.gov.au/facts/aust_today.html.

Australians, too, like to see themselves as friendly and egalitarian, a perception which, as will be seen later, is based on deeply cherished values rooted in the nation's history and culture. This is clearly at odds with this country's long record of discriminatory practices against its indigenous peoples and other practices which contradict its egalitarian principles. However, cultures are complex entities, riddled with contradictions and paradoxes, and Australia is no exception.

Australians have a reputation for non-conformity, disregard for authority, irreverence, and a self-deprecating, often sarcastic, sense of humour – traits associated with an ambiguous cultural archetype known as the *larrikin* (to be discussed in further detail later in this chapter). The quote below from a website called *Convict Creations* clearly captures the essence of the larrikin-based sense of humour characteristic of Australian culture:

Australian humour is often upside down. The joke almost seems to be that the label is the opposite to what it should be. For instance, Australians take delight in dubbing a tall man «Shorty», a silent one «Rowdy» a bald man «Curly», and a redhead is «Blue». A bastard may mean a good bloke. Likewise, larrikin, wog, and mongrel may all be used as terms of endearment. (Convict Creations, 2007)

The quiriness of the “Aussie sense of humour” is also reflected in what Dale (2007, p. 39) describes as the propensity of Australians to “laconic understatement”. This is reflected in statements such as “Not too bad” when one actually means “Excellent”, or “That’ll do” meaning “Job well done”, or “You’re not wrong” meaning “I wholeheartedly agree with you”. In the same vein, a report by Worldbiz, a web-based cross-cultural communication agency, notes that “Aussies tend to employ understatement, and their dry humour often features irony and sardonic wit” Worldbiz.com, 2007, p. 3)

Consistent with the Australia-as-a-friendly-nation theme is the perception that Australians are leisure-oriented, fun-loving people who are fond of sporting events, drinking in pubs, and “the great outdoors”. Indeed, in recent times Australians have been able to celebrate some remarkable sporting achievements. For example, in the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens, Australia ranked fourth overall in the medal tally behind the United States, China and Russia, and in the 2006 Football World Cup, Australia was among the final 16. And it is not only at elite levels that Australians enjoy sports. According to the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIC), a recent national survey indicated that “more than 11 million Australians aged 15 years and over participated at least once a week in physical activity for exercise, recreation and sport – a participation rate of almost 70 percent.”

It was found that Australians enjoy walking, aerobics/fitness, swimming, cycling, tennis, golf, running, bushwalking, soccer and netball. They also like playing cricket, tennis, hockey, rugby league, rugby union and “Australian Rules”, a uniquely Australian game with roots traceable to early forms of rugby and Gaelic football.

“Going to the pub for a beer after work” is another activity much valued by the “hedonistic Aussie”. As noted on a website for prospective foreign students in Australia:

Australians ... love their pubs and bars - you'll usually find one or the other wherever you are in the country. Australia has long had a strong pub culture, which extends from the big cities to 'the bush'. (Study in Australia, 2007)

Australian pubs are often crowded with patrons drinking beer, wine and spirits, and savouring cheap “counter meals” based on traditional Australian cooking (e.g., roast pork or lamb with “three veggies”). The less gregarious spend large amounts of their pub-time playing the poker machines – or the “pokies” in Aussie idiom – while the more sociable play pool with their mates, to the sound of loud rock or country music. Although women do frequent pubs, these places tend to be a predominantly male domain, particularly in rural areas.

Like the pub, the beach is another prominent and iconic site in Australian society which is frequently mentioned in cross-culturally oriented resources. As commented by White (2003, p. 12):

Every summer, between Christmas and the end of January, hundreds of thousands of Australians go to the beach for their holidays. They spend time swimming, walking, fishing, playing games on the beach or just lying around. However, beaches are popular at any time during the year.

For Australians the beach is the antithesis of work. According to McGregor (1995, p. 53): “Even in bad times the beach remains a potent image of what Australians think life should be about: pleasure instead of work, leisure instead of routine, a life to enjoy rather than a life of achievement.” Nevertheless, the demands of contemporary workplaces in the face of increased competition and staff shortage often entail longer than average working hours, calling into question the cultural stereotype of the “laid-back Aussie”. Quoting a recent report by *Relationships Forum Australia*, Mackay (2007, p. 80) points out that 22 percent of Australian employees work 50 or more hours per week, and 30 percent regularly work on the weekends.

Australia is a multicultural nation with a long history of immigration. Immigrants from many different ethnic backgrounds – in particular people

from the UK, Vietnam, China and Greece – have played a critically important role in the building of this nation. In more than 50 years of planned post-war migration, almost six million immigrants have arrived in Australia from over 200 countries. Currently, more than 4.1 million people living in Australia speak a language other than English. It can therefore be suggested that cultural diversity is one of the markers of Australia's national identity, as migrants have had a considerable influence on many aspects of Australian life. This is reflected in different cuisines, lifestyle and cultural practices which create a vibrant and dynamic cultural environment. As commented by Jock et al (1995, p. 3), "The Greek fish shop, Italian greengrocer, Chinese restaurant and Vietnamese hot bread shop have become such institutions in the cities and country towns around Australia that everyone has stories about ethnic small business to tell."

At odds with old cultural stereotypes of protectionism and isolationism, Australia has currently one of the world's most open and innovative economies, which has shifted considerably from the primary sector (agriculture and mining). A recent OECD study indicates that Australia is ranked as one of the six fastest-growing new economy traders. This means that its performance is above average in areas such as information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure, innovation systems, business environment and human resource development. Australia has a resilient Western-style capitalist economy with a per capita GDP comparable to that of the top world economies. As optimistically commented by John Edwards, Chief Economist of HSBC Bank for Australia:

The Australian economy is now in its sixteenth year of uninterrupted expansion, the longest boom in its history. In the last fifteen years wealth has more than doubled; output has increased by nearly two thirds, the capitalist stock by more than half, labour productivity by a little under half, and the number of jobs by a quarter. The growth of income per person has been faster in Australia over the period than in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom or New Zealand. (Invest Australia, 2006-07, p. 7)

Nevertheless, the optimism characteristic of the dominant discourse is not widely shared, as there are two sides to the Australian coin. The flip side tells a sad story of poverty, hardship and exclusion. This is reflected, for example, in a recent paper entitled "Towards Inclusion", where the CEO of the St Vincent de Paul Society National Council of Australia, Dr. John Falzon (2007, p. 3) states:

At present... in financial terms, we are a highly unequal society. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has released figures that show a widening gap in

income levels especially over the last three years. The wealthiest 20% of households in Australia account for 61% of total household net worth while the poorest 20% of households account for 1%. The gap is growing, not just in our bank balances, our access to housing or to education and health. There is a growing gap in our desires. The gap can best be summed up as being between the structures that lock people out and the strategies that welcome people in. In other words: the clash between structures of exclusion and strategies for genuine inclusion.

The discrepancy between these two Australias is a typical feature of the paradoxical nature of this society. Despite public awareness of serious social disparity and inequities, the myth of egalitarianism – the idea that we all have the same opportunities regardless of race, ethnicity, age or gender – continues to be an “important element in Australia’s cultural, economic, social and political histories” (Thompson, 1994, p. viii).

Having provided a snapshot of contemporary Australian society, a “thicker description” can now be developed through an examination of the main socioeconomic events and processes that have contributed to the cultural specificity of contemporary Australia.

A CONDENSED SOCIOECONOMIC HISTORY OF AUSTRALIA

Australia’s first settlers were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people who are believed to have arrived on the continent between 40,000 and 60,000 years ago (DIC, 2007). However, the “official” history, which marks what Smith (1996, p. 137) has called the first “golden age” of Australia, begins in 1770 when Captain James Cook took possession of the land in the name of Great Britain. In January 1788 the First British Fleet arrived in Australia with 11 ships carrying approximately 1,000 people, including 750-odd convicts³ (Clark, 1993, p. 45). As Britain was no longer able to transport convicts to North America, following the American Revolution, the alternative was to send them to Australia. By 1820, 30,000 convicts and 4,500 free settlers had arrived, bringing with them different dialects, traditions and values. This period saw the genesis of the core “foundation myths” of Australian identity which, as will be seen later, created an Australian mythscape – or “the temporally and spatially extended discursive realm in which the myths of the nation are forged, transmitted, negotiated and reconstructed” (Bell, 2003, p. 63)⁴.

3. From 1788 until penal transportation ended in 1868, approximately 160,000 men and women were brought to Australia as convicts (DIC, 2007).

4. In his analysis of nationalism, Bell (2003) rejects the notion of “collective memory”, instead proposing the notion of mythscape as a more dynamic alternative which takes into account the role of social agency.

From the 1830s to the 1890s, the image of Australia promoted in Europe was that of “a land of opportunity for all comers”, encouraged by colonial employers seeking labour for their ventures (White, 1981, p. 29). Many people responded to the invitation to come and work in Australia, giving continuity to Australia’s history of mass migration. Migratory flows were enhanced by the development of the wool industry and the discovery of gold in New South Wales and Victoria in 1851. Historical records indicate that Australia’s total population trebled from 430,000 in 1851 to 1.7 million in 1871 (DIC, 2007). While most immigrants were of British background, there were also people from France, Italy, Germany, Poland, Hungary and the Americas. About 40,000 Chinese also came to Australia in search of gold, constituting the single largest group after the British.

Australia continued to prosper until the drought and depression of the 1890s which, in the words of Clark (1993, p. 391), “cast a dark shadow aslant the Australian dream”. During that period, borrowings from London for both public and private purposes decreased significantly, halting public works and private buildings. Unemployment in the building trades rose dramatically and as a result, skilled and unskilled workers who had been attracted to the cities by high wages were now faced with “a grim struggle for survival.”

Australians were nevertheless able to enjoy a better outlook after 1901, the year in which the six colonies created by the early settlers federated to become the Commonwealth of Australia. The newly formed nation was able to take advantage of its abundant natural resources to develop productive agricultural and manufacturing industrial sectors which for a long period of time constituted Australia’s economic strength. The Act of Federation introduced a period of optimism and confidence in the capabilities of the people of Australia which was to persist until the outbreak of the First World War in 1914.

Until the late 19th century, the prevailing economic model of British colonial governments was predominantly Free Trade, with unrestricted immigration (Cope and Kalantzis, 1995, pp. 163-4). This trend was, nevertheless, reversed in the first half of the 20th century, when a robust Australian nationalist program of protectionism was introduced, with high tariff barriers to protect domestic products from foreign competition. That period also saw the emergence of certain elements of the inequality paradox described earlier, with the first manifestations of institutionalized racism. The Government introduced an exclusionary White Australia Policy aimed at protecting Australian workers from competition by the Chinese, Afghans,

Pacific Island Labourers and any other non-Caucasians who were seen to pose a threat to the “Australian dream”. As commented by Cope and Kalantzis (1995, pp. 164), the work ideal of that era was based “on the imagery of the self-employed white male artisan, the skilled workingman and the yeoman farmer” – an image which, as will be seen later, still influences constructions of Australian identity.

The period between the two World Wars (1919–1939) was characterized by widespread social and economic instability which created unprecedented hardship for the Australian people. Many Australian financial institutions collapsed, and a severe financial crisis was unleashed by significant declines in the prices of wool and wheat (then Australia’s main exports), the withdrawal of English capital and a steep decline in other export prices. During this period, there was also a dramatic increase in unemployment. By 1933 nearly one third of the workforce was out of a job, leading to a sharp decline in the national income.

However, following the end of the Second World War, the nation began to prosper again, leading to nearly 30 years of sustained economic growth (Aitkin, 2005, p. 45). This entailed yet another wave of immigration, with hundreds of thousands of refugees and immigrants arriving in Australia to address a persistent shortage of workers in the nation’s manufacturing sectors. During the 1950s, under a Keynesian regime which emphasized aggregate demand for goods as the driving force of the economy, Australia prospered markedly with almost full employment. This led to the rise of a vibrant consumer culture with increased demand for commodities such as housing, automobiles, consumer durables and clothes. These items became markers of the “Australian way of life”, characterized by a sharp increase in the rate of home ownership from 40 percent in 1947 to more than 70 percent by the 1960s. Keynesian economics proved to be a great success, enabling the Commonwealth Government’s revenues to exceed its planned expenditures and generating an unbudgeted surplus (Aitkin, 2005, p. 45). The “Australian way of life” was further enhanced in 1956 with the arrival of television, which brought images of American-style prosperity to Australian households, fuelling further aspirations for affluence and conspicuous consumption. The economy boomed.

This affluent lifestyle was severely threatened by the oil crisis in 1973. At that time, the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) raised oil prices by 70 percent, and given the dependency of industrialized nations such as Australia on crude oil, and the dominant role of OPEC as a global supplier, these price increases led to dramatic inflation in the

economies of the targeted countries. This in turn led to considerably lower levels of economic activity. The Keynesian era had come to an abrupt end in Australia, with unemployment rising from 2.1 percent in 1973 to 9 percent at the end of the decade (Aitkin, 2005, p. 48).

Following the severe economic downturn of the 1970s, Australia began to recover with the election of the Hawke Labour Government in 1983. Globalisation was gaining momentum at that time, and before the end of its first year in power, the Government had begun to deregulate the financial system and to “float” the Australian dollar (Aitkin, 2005, p. 51). The idea was that Australian industries and the financial system were to become globally competitive. However, in 1990 the economy faced yet another downturn as the result of a recession attributed to the financial excesses of the 1980s. The relentless economic expansion of the 1980s caused the Australian economy to become overstretched in a number of ways. For example, by 1989 the GDP had risen by over five percent and domestic demand by eight percent. Imports – the strongest components of spending – rose by 29 percent, and commercial construction, by 22 percent. Meanwhile, inflation reached more than seven percent. Although the Australian corporate sector was “heavily geared”, its borrowing was still rising at 17 percent per annum, despite low interest rates. Prices for commercial, industrial, retail and residential properties soared. As noted by MacFarlane (2006, p. 3), this unprecedented growth made the country “extremely vulnerable” to any shocks to the economy.

As in previous times however, Australia managed to recover well from the recession, and by the mid-1990s it had become a “sophisticated, technologically advanced, modernizing society: the new/young 21st century nation; the nation at one with a global future” (Carter, 1995, p. 11). Australians had survived into the 21st century with an economy which, in the words of Aitkin (2005, p. 57), “is performing much better than most... the Australian economy and Australian society have proved to be more resilient than might have been expected.”

This section has provided a condensed socioeconomic history of Australian society, highlighting the main events and processes that have shaped the contemporary context. The next section will add another layer to this narrative – a more culturally oriented account – which will explore the origins of the core values of Australian society. This will prepare the reader for a better grasp of the interface between culture and management in Australia, examined in the last part of this chapter.

THE RICH “MYTHSCAPE” OF AUSTRALIAN IDENTITY

Discussions of culture inevitably raise the issue of national identity, another ambiguous notion which Gallie (1962) would most certainly categorise as an “essentially contested concept”⁵. National identity is not – to borrow from Hall (1994, p. 394) – “some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark”. It is more productive to think in terms of national “*identities*” which are social constructs, invented within specific socio-historical contexts, and which change over time.

Indeed, an examination of some influential texts of Australian social history reveals that different historical eras in Australia have emphasized different constructs of nationality. White (1981, pp. 85-109) notes, for example, that in the late 19th century, when the first signs of nationalism began to emerge, a new generation of writers and artists urged their fellow Australians to respond emotionally to the image of the “bushman” as a sign of patriotism. Associated with this primordial cultural archetype was a cluster of essentially Australian symbols and values such as “sunlight, wattle, the bush, the future, freedom, mateship and egalitarianism” (White, 1981, p. 98).

The social construction of the bushman archetype as a brave, intrepid, virile expression of Australianness is clearly reflected in the work of Australian historian Manning Clark. Referring to the influential collection of ballads about the Australian bush published by “Banjo” Paterson in 1895, Clark (1993, p. 399; italics added) writes:

Paterson used... the Australian bush as his setting and Australians as his characters. Here was a portrait of Australian *men*, of the *men* who knew and loved the bushland, the *men* who were not curs or cowards, the *men* who knew how to endure to the end without whining or indulging in self-pity or reaching for a crutch, the *men* worthy to recite the bushman’s creed about kindness in another’s trouble and courage in their own.

In the above excerpt, the word “men” refers literally to people of the masculine gender. Women have been largely excluded from historically based constructions of Australian identity which is evident in the subsequent archetypes of Australianness discussed below.

5. Essentially contested concepts, according to Gallie’s (1962) seminal article, are concepts that “inevitably involve endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users”.

As the manufacturing industry gained momentum between the late 19th century and mid-20th century, the archetype of the bushman was replaced by the more urbanized archetype of the *larrikin*⁶. As was mentioned previously, this archetype has had significant influence on how Australians perceive themselves. “There is in the Australian character, a lurking larrikin”, writes Murray (1973, p. 9) in his comprehensive analysis of larrikinism in Australia. He goes on to explain how “regular larrikins” became the embodiment of the world famous easygoing, laid-back “Australian spirit”:

cutting someone down to size, chafing and watching the world go by with a sardonic smile. The sun shone on them and encouraged an insatiable thirst, while the mild nights encouraged many kinds of foray. And in them was the apathy which would later grow into a philosophy: ‘I’m all right Jack.’

Constructions of larrikinism are riddled with ambiguities, and therefore there have been different perspectives on it. In the work of historian Manning Clark (1993, p. 356), for example, the larrikin of the late 1880s is constructed in essentially negative terms, as an undesirable social misfit. This is evident in the excerpt below, in which Clark (1993, p. 356) describes the rise of the urban larrikin in Australia:

While the metropolises of the Old World in Europe and the New World were besieged by terrorists, secret societies and revolutionaries who spoke of cleansing fires, uprooting and baptisms in blood, the one bad festering sore in the social body of Melbourne and Sydney was the larrikin. The one ambition of the Australian larrikin was to ‘play buttress to a public house wall’, and ‘spit moral and material filth’ at every respectable person who passed by him.

For Clark (1993, p. 435), the larrikin was a “city barbarian” who replaced the “bush barbarian” in the Australian mythscape. In his perspective, larrikins had no redeeming features. They were highly anti-social characters, often found in a “half-intoxicated condition” leaning against the wall of a public house and “smoking dirty black pipes, expectorating over the footpaths and insulting every respectable person who sought to walk in the public’s pleasure ground” (1993, p. 356). From Clark’s perspective, larrikins consistently made nuisances of themselves, molesting passengers in the late ferry boats in Sydney; invading churches and drinking the communion wine and affixing mirrors on their shoes “to observe those parts of women normally obscured by the full skirts of the day”.

6. Murray (1973) points out that while the origins of the word *larrikin* are obscure, some story tellers contend that when seamen “rowdying up the street or shouting coarse songs” in Sydney were asked what they were doing, they would typically reply: “Just *larkin’* around”. The word *larking* was associated with a game seamen played called “sky-larking”, in which they would fling themselves “from the topmost yard down a rope to the deck of the ship”.

Despite the widespread assumption that “there were no *good* larrikins” (Murray, 1973, p. 9; original italics), Horne’s (1987, p. 26) construction of the Australian larrikin is far more benign than Clark’s. He portrays larrikins as “happy-go-lucky, hard-drinking, hard-gambling, matey, and thumbing their noses at the sissies and snobs in the suburbs.” In his portrait, they are characterized by strong disrespect for authority, disregard for social rules, irreverent behaviour, and have a unique, self-deprecating humour. The essence of benign larrikinism is captured in Horne’s (1987, p. 27) comments below:

Larrikins were part of a non-possessive, shiftless society of rented rooms or houses and sparse furniture. They were companionable, reckless and concerned with expressions of toughness. The picture of the Australian as larrikin reflected some of the primitive virtues of man, man as the hunter and warrior: a man did not tolerate injury, he rebelled against authority and sometimes he might take harsh revenge... Larrikins constituted a self-centred male aristocracy following its way of life at the expense of others.

Horne’s portrayal is closer to the archetype that still influences contemporary discourses of Australian identity, based on the association of larrikinism with egalitarianism, mateship and disregard for authority.

The “essence” of the Australian larrikin lived on in cultural identity narratives that emerged during the First World War, embodied in the digger⁷ archetype. As commented by White (White, 1981, p. 130), “the diggers returned to Australia as the upholders of what it meant to be Australian”, embodying a set of attributes that created something akin to a cult of the hero. It was through the diggers, White further notes, that “the Australian identity could be given a heroic, legendary core, and they offered themselves, and were used, as the custodians of nationhood”. The Hall of Memory in the Sydney War Memorial (built in 1939) endows the Australian soldier with the following attributes: “Coolness, Control, Audacity, Endurance, Decision, Comradeship, Ancestry, Patriotism, Chivalry, Loyalty, Resource, Candour, Devotion, Curiosity, Independence” (cited in White, 1981, p. 136). The attribute of comradeship is synonymous with the notion of mateship which, as described by Mackay (2007, p. 157) is “a perennial favourite among back-slapping blokes, though not so immediately appealing to women.” As will be seen later, the notion of mateship poses a paradox – the fact that, notwithstanding its connection with the value of egalitarianism, it remains an essentially masculine concept.

7. While there is much uncertainty regarding the origins of the word digger, the term is generally used to refer to soldiers from Australia and New Zealand.

Acknowledging the significant influence of the larrikin archetype on constructions of Australianness, White (1981, p. 136) describes the digger as having a “self-mocking humour, as an unkempt larrikin”, with a “populist disrespect for pomposity, authority and red tape. This is confirmed by Clark (1993, p. 453) who recounts that when the 16th Battalion of the Fourth Australian Infantry brigade “waded ashore” in Gallipoli, under the command of Colonel Monash, the diggers whistled, sang, cracked jokes, and “indulged in all sorts of Australian horseplay and fun”.

The Australian mythscape was further enriched by the discovery of the pleasures of the beach lifestyle in the 1930s, and within this narrative the archetype of the lifesaver was born. The key attributes of this “Australian type” were essentially masculine, reinforcing once more the gender bias characteristic of constructions of Australian identity. As noted by White (1981, p. 155), lifesavers symbolised “the sun-bronzed physique, the masculinity, the cult of mateship, the military associations, the hedonism and wholesomeness of the beach”. While most of these features were present in the bushman and the digger types, the lifesaver is in essence an urban archetype, particularly identified with Sydney’s world-famous Bondi Beach.

During the 1940s – perhaps due to the sinister connotations that imbued the notion of “national identity” as a result of the war – the basis of the Australian identity shifted from archetypes to lifestyle – more specifically to “The Australian way of life” (White, 1981, pp. 157-8). While lacking a precise definition, this notion evoked images of a highly urbanised, sophisticated, affluent consumer society which suited the needs of the booming Australian manufacturing sector. The comments below, from an influential 1950s text by Caiger (1969, p. 15; italics added), clearly capture the optimistic mood of the time which no doubt would have contributed to further disseminate the myth of egalitarianism:

The Australian people have tamed into production an arid continent, old and unpromising, and have done so with such skill that they have a high national income per head and a high standard of living. The current philosophy insists that this wealth shall be shared. *Australia is a classless community. There is no one section with the traditional right to govern.* There is little respect for the man of wealth, but little envy of his riches.

As Australia began to resemble any other developed nation in the 1970s and 1980s – and perhaps as a result of the challenging of gendered stereotypes by the feminist movement – the notion of an “Australian identity”

began to fade. However, the core values of egalitarianism and fairness continued to be seen as integral elements of Australian culture, influencing discourse, attitudes and practices.

AUSTRALIAN VALUES AND MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

So far, we have explored the notions of culture and values, provided a snapshot of contemporary Australian society, examined its socioeconomic history, and recounted its various narratives of national identity. This gives us sufficient background information to proceed to the main part of this chapter, namely, an examination of the extent to which the core values of Australian society influence or shape management styles and organizational dynamics.

It is evident from the previous sections that Australia is not a monolithic, culturally homogeneous society with a broadly shared set of values and beliefs. Rather, it is a complex, multicultural place, reflected in its multi-layered narratives of national identity, different cultural archetypes, and the paradoxes arising from conflicting story lines. This complexity does not mean, however, that there are no easily recognizable values that influence behaviour, practices and discourses in this culture. The aforementioned core values of Australian society are egalitarianism and equity which are deeply embedded in its mythscape and different narratives. Collectively, Australians like to see themselves, and are generally perceived as being egalitarian, fair, friendly, informal, “laid-back”, irreverent, humorous, self-mocking and hedonistic. The following sections explore these themes, following an examination of the meaning of the notion of egalitarianism for a better grasp of how it is enacted in Australian daily life, and how it generates other value orientations and concepts. As this section deals essentially with perceptions and self-perceptions of Australianness, the points will be illustrated with excerpts from academic and non-academic cross-cultural management texts and from a document on Australian values recently published by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, entitled *Life in Australia*. My own experience and observation of Australian culture will also be taken into account.

Egalitarianism, “fair go” and mateship

Egalitarianism is a trend of thought in political philosophy which expresses the idea that “all human persons are equal in fundamental worth or moral status” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2002). From this perspective, people should be always treated as equals, regardless of race,

ethnicity, gender, age and religious creed. Taking into account the complexity and the contradictions implicit in the notion of egalitarianism, it will be conceptualised for the purpose of this analysis, not strictly as a political philosophy, but as “a set of *claims* about how society actually is and how it ought to be” (Thompson, 1994, p. ix; italics added).

Like national identity, egalitarianism can be seen as an “essentially contested concept” (Gallie 1962), as it does not have a unified, widely agreed upon definition, and involves endless disputes about its meaning and proper usage. Recognizing the complexity of egalitarianism as it applies to the Australian context, Thompson (1994, p. viii) describes it as a “hotchpotch” full of conflicting and inconsistent beliefs. In the same vein, Lewis (2006, p. 209) characterizes egalitarianism as a myth. As he puts it:

While not entirely true, egalitarianism is a cherished myth and the foreigner must always be very careful not to threaten this notion when talking to an Australian from any background. This egalitarianism is based on the notion of a classless society in which everyone is treated equally – regardless of wealth, education or background.

Australians, most certainly, do not have monopoly over the value of egalitarianism. This value is cherished and aspired to in other cultures. However, there seems to be something “uniquely Australian” about the way in which egalitarianism is constructed in this society. It has been so deeply embedded in its mythscape that even in the face of obvious instances of blatant inequality that taints the history of this country – in particular, the persistent discrimination against its indigenous peoples – Australians continue to believe that they live in an essentially egalitarian society. As surmised by White (2003, p. 8), “The belief that everybody is equal ... is ...an important part of Australians’ self-image”. Egalitarianism can be regarded as a hermeneutic key to make sense of how Australians see themselves and relate to each other, and also how they are perceived from the outside.

The high valuation of egalitarianism and associated concepts in the Australian context is clearly articulated in the *Life in Australia* report, written specifically for people applying for a visa to live in Australia⁸. According to this publication:

Australian values include respect for the equal worth, dignity and freedom of the individual, freedom of speech, freedom of religion and secular government,

8. Published by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIC), this report is part of a Government campaign to encourage commitment of immigrants to “Australian values”. It has been suggested that this may be a reaction to violent riots between Muslim and non-Muslim youth that took place at a Sydney beach in 2005. This incident reveals that the much cherished values of egalitarianism and fairness are more ideals than reality.

freedom of association, support for parliamentary democracy and the rule of law, equality under the law, equality of men and women, equality of opportunity and peacefulness. They also include *a spirit of egalitarianism that embraces fair play, mutual respect, tolerance, compassion for those in need and pursuit of the public good.* (DIC, 2007, p. 1; italics added)

While in reality these noble values are often overlooked, it is possible to see their influence in the daily routines of Australian society. The excerpt below illustrates this point:

A good example of Australian egalitarianism is provided by seating etiquette in taxis. As is the case in Denmark, male passengers traveling alone are expected to sit next to the (male) driver as a sign that they do not regard themselves as above the taxi driver in social status. (Worldbiz.com, 2007, p. 4)

At this point, the question that arises is *why* is egalitarianism considered a core value of Australian culture? The answer to this question may be found in the socio-economic narrative of Australian society. Though it is not possible to pinpoint exactly when egalitarianism began to be regarded as an “Australian value”, it is contended in *Life in Australia* that this phenomenon is associated with the tough battle for survival which Australia’s early settlers engaged in, struggling against an unfamiliar, harsh and often hostile environment. Under these circumstances, survival would have depended on collaboration, mutual support and respect among the people in the community. Hierarchies would have been seen as disruptive of good social relations. The value of egalitarianism would have been further reinforced by later generations of men and women in the Australian bush who had to rely on and support each other through floods, fire and drought. (DIC, 2007, p. 30)

So important is the value of egalitarianism for Australians that it has shaped the very definition of justice in this society, reflected in the influential notion of “fair go”. Dale (2007, p. 39) flippantly defines “fair go” as:

what everyone is entitled to, but particularly the little Aussie battler [i.e., the ordinary Australian who works hard and earnestly]. We don’t believe there is a class structure. There should be no such things as inherited privilege in this country – unless it’s my kids.

In more serious terms, *fair go* is defined in *Life in Australia* as a notion based on the assumption that “what someone achieves in life should be a product of their talents, work and effort rather than as a result of their birth or favouritism” (DIC, 2007, p. 32). To give someone a “fair go” also means to give them a chance to do something they really want to do. Australians

like to believe that nothing should prevent people from achieving their goals (White, 2003, p. 8). Everyone should be able to receive a good education, to have a job, and to own their own home. These rights are to some extent enshrined in government policy, reflected in the fact that primary education is largely subsidized by the government, and that financial assistance is provided to first-time homeowners.

The values of egalitarianism and “fair go” underpin a practice described in Australia as “standing up for the underdog”, which means helping the powerless, the disadvantaged, and those facing hardship. According to *Life in Australia*, this notion is reflected in the strong tradition of community service and volunteering in Australia:

More than six million Australians over the age of 18 years are active volunteers, helping out in a wide range of areas including emergency services, welfare, environment and conservation, fundraising, management, teaching and administration”. (DIC, 2007, p. 30)

It is further noted in the above report that according to one survey conducted in Australia, “47 percent of people who undertook volunteer work gave their reason for doing so as wanting to be of service to the community. The other 43 percent did so because it gave them personal satisfaction.”

Discussions of Australian-style egalitarianism are not complete without reference to the notion of mateship, which as suggested earlier, is rooted in a fundamental paradox. Despite its common link in the literature with egalitarianism (Clark 1993; Thompson 1994; West and Murphy 2007; White 2003), it is recognised that this concept is inherently contradictory, as it excludes women. Mateship is seen by social historians such as Clark (1993, p. 434) and Ward (1996, p. 99) as associated with the loneliness and hardships of life in outback Australia endured by male settlers. These conditions, Feather (1986, p. 699) points out, “were assumed to reinforce a social, collectivist outlook involving loyalty’s to one’s mates, a willingness to share activities and reciprocate favours, and conformity to group norms within the outwardly masculine culture”⁹. In the same vein, Ward (1966, p. 90) notes that mateship is “the tradition that a man should have his own special ‘mate’ with whom he shared money, goods, and even secret aspirations, and for whom, even in the wrong, he was prepared to make almost any sacrifice”. As seen earlier, the notion of mateship is particularly prevalent in the ANZAC narratives focusing on the experiences of the diggers in the

9. Carroll (1982, pp. 147-8) traces “egalitarian-mateship attitudes” (e.g., men gathered in pubs or watching sports) to the British working class, noting that they were reinforced in Australia by a similar working class experience.

First World War, which entailed close, supportive relationships among the soldiers. Their friendships were cemented by their common predicament and, no doubt, by the intensity of their experiences in the trenches.

The “egalitarian mate with touches of larrikinism” (Thompson, 1994, p. 3) remains a potent symbol in contemporary Australian society, though it is not without controversy. As commented by Looker (1995, p. 207), the notion of mateship represents a form of “tacit collusion” among men, who know that there are “proscribed ways of behaving in order not to be alienated from the brotherhood of ‘real men’.” This is not to say, nevertheless, that every man in Australia reacts in the same way to traditional constructions of masculinity, but a more or less shared view remains of what constitutes appropriate male behaviour. One does not need to carry out research to conclude that “going to the footy” with their mates, or watching live broadcasts of cricket matches on big television screens at the pub are predominantly male pursuits. Australian males also enjoy “having a few schooners” (425 ml glasses of beer) with their mates after work. Indeed, after five o’clock in the afternoon Australian pubs roar with the sound of masculine voices and laughter. In the self-deprecatory manner characteristic of the Australian larrikin, chatting to one’s mates at the pub is also something Australians themselves tend to mock¹⁰.

Australian values in organizational settings

Although it would not be accurate to generalize that Australian workplaces are egalitarian, many of them are seen to be influenced by beliefs in the importance of egalitarianism as a core value. As stated by West and Murphy (2007, p. 26):

Workplaces in Australia are expected to be free of language and behaviours that denigrate or degrade any individual or group, and there are even laws to protect people from this kind of thing.

The notion of equality is enshrined in the Australian Federal Discrimination Law, which declares unlawful discrimination on the grounds of “race, colour, descent or national or ethnic origin; sex; marital status; pregnancy or potential pregnancy; family responsibilities; disability; people with disabilities in possession of palliative or therapeutic devices or auxiliary aids; people with disabilities accompanied by an interpreter, reader, assistant or carer; a person with a disability accompanied by a guide dog or an ‘assistance animal’; and age” (HREOC, 2007, Chapter 1, p. 5). Equal Employment

10. The self-deprecatory – at times vulgar – sense of humour characteristic of Australians is illustrated by Dale (2006, p. 41) with the following joke: “Q: Why do Aussie men come so quickly? A: So they can get to the pub and tell their mates about it.”

Opportunity laws are also in place to ensure that in workplaces career opportunities, advancement and training are based on worker's merit, skills and experience, and not on preferential treatment or discrimination.

The value of egalitarianism also informs behaviours and practices more specifically related to the business organizations. As acknowledged in the statement from a web-based cross-cultural advice agency called Communicaid: "Egalitarianism infiltrates all aspects of Australian life and is particularly prominent in the business sphere" (Communicaid, 2007). It is further noted on this website that "The authority to make decisions is not always left in the hands of the high level executives" and that in Australia "lower level employees often have a considerable amount of power and authority within the company" (Communicaid, 2007). While no evidence is provided to support this claim, it clearly reveals the influence of Australian values on perceptions of business sphere practices in this society.

The centrality of egalitarianism in Australian business settings is also acknowledged in the Worldbiz Report (2007, pp. 8-9; italics added), which favourably compares Australian organizations to those in American society:

Americans rather respect authority and look for authority. Australians on the other hand *are more non-conformists*. In other words, they really don't care whether the person is the president of the company or he is a department manager. Each person gets the same respect in Australia.

The above excerpt also acknowledges the tendency to non-conformity which is believed to be a typically Australian cultural trait, associated with the larrikin archetype.

The notion of egalitarianism-as-mateship also influences attitudes and behaviours in Australian organizational settings – though not always in the most favourable way. As seen earlier, mateship is a concept that is more commonly associated with men. This may create the impression that Australia is a chauvinistic society, a perception which is reflected in the excerpt below from the Worldbiz Report (2007, p. 4):

In contrast to Scandinavia, Australian egalitarianism does not necessarily extend to women in business. Female visitors should be prepared for behaviour which they may perceive as chauvinistic or patronizing.

While no further elaboration is provided in the above statement, it seems to refer to behaviours more closely associated with traditional constructions of masculinity that are prevalent in Australian society, which privilege a certain type of relationship among males in work settings. At this point, I am able to contribute to this discussion with an example

derived from my own personal experience. Referring to what she perceived as her experience of the “glass-ceiling” syndrome in an Australian business company, an aspiring female executive I am acquainted with stated: “I don’t think I can go any further in that place; the guys won’t let me in! The most important decisions are made at the urinals.” It would nevertheless be inaccurate to categorize Australia as a chauvinistic society. As I write this text, a woman, Julia Gillard, is the country’s acting Prime Minister, while Prime Minister Kevin Rudd is in Bali at the 2007 United Nations Climate Change Conference. A chauvinistic society would not provide women with such a valuable opportunity for leadership.

Nevertheless, despite the gendered connotation in the notion of mateship, its meaning can be broadened to include everyone in a given social context. For example, in work settings mateship can mean loyalty to people one works with, reflected particularly in the principle that “you never dob your mate” (to dob means to inform against one’s workmates). Dopping your mates, warns Lewis (2006, p. 207), is a “deadly sin”. In the same vein, Dale (2007, p. 40) draws attention to the fact that:

Reporting someone to the authorities, even when you know they are committing a serious crime, has been a no-no since convict days because, after all, *whose side are you on?* (italics added)

Dale’s comments reflect the previously discussed notion of “standing up for the underdog” which prescribes that one should always be on the side of the powerless rather than the powerful.

Another behavioural pattern in Australia associated with the value of egalitarianism is a tendency towards informality which is reflected in organizational settings. As noted by Communicaid (2007): “Australians tend to initiate a first name basis with their fellow business associates quickly. This is an indication of mutual respect and equality.”

Confirming the link between informality and egalitarianism, West and Murphy (2007, 2007, p. 32) note that informality “is seen as a way of levelling out differences in age, status and position.” This pattern is illustrated in the excerpt below from an electronic article by Beatty (2000), which recounts a notorious encounter between a famous Australian cricketer and the Queen of England:

In comparison to other English speakers, Australians tend to be far more informal; readily using the same language when dealing with a boss, an elderly person, friend or scallywag. In a famous example, when cricketer Denis Lillee (sic) met the Queen, he greeted her with a handshake and a friendly: “g’day, how ya go’in”.

Extending the link between informality and egalitarianism to business settings, the Worldbiz Report speculates about perceptions by Australians in relation to their American counterparts:

[Australia] may be the only culture in the world where business people interact even more informally than in Denmark, the midwestern United States or western Canada. For example, Australians perceive Americans as overly concerned with status distinctions based on academic degrees, wealth and position in the corporate hierarchy. (Worldbiz.com, 2007, p. 4)

The tendency towards informality in work-related contexts is also acknowledged in the *Life in Australia* report – though in this text the reader is warned not to attempt any physical contact other than a handshake when meeting someone in Australia for the first time:

most Australians tend to be relatively informal in their relationships with acquaintances and work colleagues. In the workplace and among friends, most Australians tend to call each other by their first names. However, this informality does not extend to physical contact. When meeting someone for the first time, it is usual to shake the person's right hand with your right hand. People who do not know each other generally do not kiss or hug when meeting. (DIC, 2007, p. 28)

In cross-cultural communication texts the theme of informality is often accompanied by allusions to the jocularity and self-deprecating sense of humour of Australians, which, as seen earlier, are attributes of an imagined Australian identity associated with the larrikin archetype. This pattern is illustrated in the excerpt below, from the Worldbiz Report (2007, p. 2) which suggests the use of humour as a strategy to connect with people:

Australians are known for their informality in both business and social environments. Try to reciprocate with friendliness and openness. Australians love jokes and tend to make fun of themselves. Appreciate their humour and offer some of your own.

West and Murphy (2007, p. 32) contend that being informal with others “is a sign of welcome, friendliness and inclusion”, which resonates with constructions of Australia as a friendly, “easygoing” society. As commented by Lewis (2006, p. 209), Australians are “very positive human beings. Few can match their friendliness and even fewer their spontaneous generosity.” This reveals yet another link relevant to the current analysis – that between informality and personalism, which refers to the degree of importance attributed to personal relationships.

In Australian work settings, personal connections are highly valued. This is recognized by West and Murphy (2007, p. 37) who draw attention to the importance of “personalising... relationships with colleagues and others, and on making the workplace a pleasant, personal environment.” To further illustrate this point, they cite the findings of an analysis by Hull and Read (2003), from the University of Sydney’s Workplace Research Centre, who conclude that “quality working relationships represent the central pivot on which excellent workplaces are founded.”

The importance of personal relationships in Australian society is also acknowledged at the Communicaid website and the Worldbiz Report, which encourage newcomers to establish personal links in their workplaces:

In Australia it is essential to establish personal relationships with those you are conducting business with. It is important to make connections with established representatives who are able to help build those relationships. (Communicaid, 2007)

Do everything possible to let your counterparts know you are interested in a long-term relationship. If your attitude is perceived as wanting only to transact business, your success will be limited. A good relationship is achieved by socializing with your counterparts. Have a beer with them and adapt to their informal approach to business. If you are standoffish, they may become suspicious. (Worldbiz.com, 2007, p. 2)

At this point it is relevant to draw attention to another paradox that emerges from the analysis of Australian culture. While personal relations and networks are important in Australia, individualism is also a value which is cherished by Australians. As pointed out by West and Murphy (2007, p. 46), “Australians are not accustomed to linking their own or others’ destinies with their family, or an organization or other group.” In other words, obtaining employment and contracts or favours through family connections is frowned upon in this cultural context – even though it may happen behind the scenes.

The significance of individualism in Australian society is acknowledged by Communicaid (2007), which from a different angle emphasizes the issue of privacy:

[Individualism] is prominent in the behaviour of many Australians and in the way they interact with other members of society. A common feature of individualism, which must be taken into consideration, is the importance of personal privacy and the segregation of the public and private life of individuals.

As mentioned earlier, Australians have a reputation of having a relaxed attitude to life. This reflects an attitude translated in Aussie jargon as “she’ll be right”. Dale (2007, p. 41) describes this attitude as “a laid-back approach to work and relationships, signifying calm optimism or complacent fatalism.”¹¹ The perception of Australians as more laid-back than people from other cultures is illustrated in the excerpt below from the Worldbiz Report (2007, p. 4-5):

While definitely more monochronic than South and Southeast Asians, most Australians are a bit less obsessed with time and schedules than the Germans, Swiss, Americans and Japanese. This somewhat relaxed attitude towards time is especially noticeable outside of Sydney. Visitors are expected to be roughly on time for meetings, but few Aussies will get upset if you are a few minutes late. The work pace in this part of the world is slower than that of New York, Hong Kong, Tokyo or Singapore. Local business people are likely to resent foreigners who try to hurry things along.

The alleged laid-back attitude of Australians to business was the object of criticism in a television documentary suggestively entitled *She’ll be right, boss* (Viswalingam, 2004). According to the producer of the series, Pria Viswalingam, Australian business remains beleaguered by a “fearful, no-risk” style of management which hampers innovation. Explaining the perspective adopted in the documentary, he writes:

What we are saying with this program is that... we are being undersold by very conservative, very conventional management that is very much a product of a resource rich economy... When in doubt, we dig big holes, or shear more sheep, grow more wheat. We still don’t value add... and for decades we’ve heard stories about successful Australian business people having to go overseas to sell their ideas because we just don’t invest in them. (Viswalingam, 2004).

Whether or not the above views are accurate – and I am inclined to believe they are not, as there is ample evidence indicating that Australians are not “lagging behind” in the world economy – I have included it in this discussion to illustrate the influence of cultural stereotypes in perceptions related to the business sphere; in this particular case, how cultural stereotypes can be misused to over-simplify complex phenomena.

Perceptions of Australians as sport-loving people are also taken into account in cross-cultural communication texts, which promote sport as a suitable topic of conversation. For example, the Worldbiz report notes that

11. This alleged “laid-back” attitude of Australians underlies other common expressions in the Australian lexicon such as “No worries”; “Don’t get your knickers in a knot”; “Settle down”; “Get real”; “Give it a rest”.

“Talking about sports is usually a good opening conversation [in Australia]” (Worldbiz.com, 2007, p. 2); Lewis (2006, p. 207) regards sport as a “safe” topic to discuss at the office. The problem with these assumptions is that they overlook the fact that not everyone “at the office” may be interested in sport. No doubt this topic is of greater interest, in general, to men than to women.

The tall poppy syndrome and Australian leadership styles

Australian egalitarianism produces an idiosyncratic phenomenon known as the “tall poppy syndrome”, which must be considered in analyses of cultural values and organizational practices. This metaphor refers to the fate of a poppy that grows taller than the others in the field, and is “cut to size” – in the same way that a person who attempts to appear “better than the rest” is (most often gently) mocked. In more formal terms, Peeters (2004, p. 5) notes that a “tall poppy typically refers to individuals who, on the basis of unwarranted self-adulation, itself a consequence of success, amassed fortune or fame, have become a target for criticism.” Hence, one must bear in mind that describing someone as a tall poppy is not flattering in Australian society. Reflecting the disregard for authority characteristic of this culture, people in positions of power are often “victims of the tall poppy syndrome.” (Peeters, 2004, p. 12) Australians’ dislike of *tall poppies* can be further illustrated with Lewis’s (2006, p. 208) remarks that “It is a source of great pride to Australians that the prime minister is frequently booed at public appearances and that quite a few Australians do not know the words of the national anthem.”

While one may argue that a dislike of braggarts is simply part of the human condition, and not necessarily a unique feature of Australian society, the fact that there is a metaphorical descriptor for this phenomenon in Australia highlights its importance within this cultural context. The four excerpts below from cross-cultural communication texts attest to the significance of the tall poppy metaphor for Australians, advising newcomers not to draw too much attention to themselves:

Visiting negotiators should avoid trying to impress Aussies with their titles and accomplishments. Anything smacking of boastfulness or showing off gives a very negative impression. While Americans are taught, “Blow your own horn” and “Don’t hide your light under a bushel,” Australians instead learn that “the tall poppy gets cut down.” People who boast or flaunt their success are considered highly obnoxious. (Worldbiz.com, 2007, p. 4).

Australia has a very egalitarian culture where differences in status need no particular deference. Often referred to as the ‘tall poppy syndrome’ (sic), this creates a society that avoids differentiation between individuals, or being a ‘tall poppy’ by standing out from the crowd. Instead, modesty, parity and mutual respect are preferred... Australians generally avoid drawing too much attention to their academic qualifications, personal achievements or business success, since this may be perceived as arrogance. Its influence can also be seen in the more down-to-earth approach to business that Australians adopt. (Communicaid, 2007)

Australians are totally cynical of people in power or with too much wealth; they respect the little person, the “battler”, rather than the winner. If you keep this in mind and don’t oversell yourself or undersell your Australian hosts, success, friendship and good times will be yours Down Under. (Lewis, 2006, p. 208).

The Australians expect one’s work to speak for itself, so they are not impressed with your position, title, or status. Don’t arrive in town wearing the latest status symbol to announce how important *you think you are*. (Taylor, 2007).

Having established the importance of the tall poppy metaphor, it is important to stress that this does not mean that Australians dislike success. The tall poppy syndrome refers to situations in which success is linked to arrogance and implications of superiority (Ashkanasy and Falkus, 1998, p. 28). This leads to the next point which considers the link between the tall poppy syndrome and leadership styles. Here, the question to ask is: Does the tall poppy syndrome affect or shape leadership styles?

Academic research has indeed established connections between perceptions of tall poppy attitudes and leadership styles in Australia. For example, in an article based on GLOBE Project¹² findings, Ashkanasy (2007, p. 330) found that Australian leaders strive to “balance the competing demands of egalitarianism and achievement”, which means that they should avoid acting as tall poppies. In a survey study of 22 Australian CEOs and their subordinates, Meng *et al.* (2003) discovered that “tall poppy attitudes” have an effect on the application of American-based leadership theory in Australia. The study found that interpersonal skills are more highly valued in Australian higher-level managers than their status position. Similarly, Trevor-Roberts *et al.* (2003, p. 523) found “an important component based on egalitarian principles” in Australian and New Zealand leadership styles.

12. The acronym GLOBE stands for Global Leadership and Organizational Behaviour Effectiveness, a large-scale research project carried out in the late 1990s involving approximately 17,300 middle-managers from 950 organizations in 62 countries.

These findings strongly suggest that cultural values do impact upon perceived effectiveness of leaders, and indeed on leadership styles. They also relate to what Ashkanasy (2007, p. 329) refers to as “the Australian Enigma”, a notion that highlights the contradictions and paradoxes of Australian society. In his own words:

Australians are proud of their egalitarian culture, but at the same time value rewards for high achievers. Its leaders are expected to inspire high levels of performance, but must do so without giving the impression of self-sacrifice or not being anything more than “one of the boys”.

Summing up, this section explored two central values of Australian society –egalitarianism and fairness – which play a pivotal role in creating its cultural specificity. As seen above, not only do these values influence how Australians perceive themselves, but they also influence how others perceive Australians. The discussions in this section and the textual fragments used to illustrate them strongly suggest that cultural values do bear upon organizational practices and dynamics, and therefore on the type of advice provided in cross-cultural communication sources.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This chapter explored the relationship between cultural values and organizational practices by providing three different story lines: the first contextualized the analyses to be developed by providing a snapshot of contemporary Australian society; the second deepened this contextualization by examining the highlights of Australian socioeconomic history, and the third explored different narratives of national identity which have shaped the mythscape of Australian society. It can be said that these story lines interweave to construct a rich, multidimensional narrative of Australian society highlighting the two pivotal values of egalitarianism and fairness.

As seen in the discussions developed in the chapter, these values are rooted in the socioeconomic history of Australian society, which begins with British settlement in the late 18th Century. The rise of egalitarianism as a core Australian value has been linked with the experience of the early settlers who, in their struggle for survival in an unfamiliar and harsh environment, often depended on collaboration with their fellows to achieve outcomes. Hence, mutual support and respect among the people in the community would have prevailed over hierarchies that could disrupt good social relations. Colonial times also produced a version of egalitarianism known as mateship which was more specifically linked with the experience of male settlers. It has been argued that the isolation and hardship of the

outback reinforced a collectivist outlook based on strong loyalty to one's mates. This was reflected in the practice, among men, to share activities and reciprocate favours, which in turn gave rise something of a masculine sub-culture in Australian society. In the Australian mythscape, mateship is an integral feature of archetypes such as the bush ranger, the larrikin, the digger and the lifesaver, revealing the gendered orientation of this notion. As was previously pointed out, mateship survives in contemporary times in the form of masculine bonding activities such as "having a beer" at the pub with one's mates, or "going to the footy" with the guys.

The value of egalitarianism also generated the Australian version of justice and fairness in the notion of "fair go", based on the assumption that achievements should be a product of people's talents, work and effort, not a result of their birth or favouritism. To give someone a "fair go" also means to give them a chance to do something they really want to do.

It was noted that core Australian values influence how Australians perceive themselves, and also how people from other cultures perceive Australians. Australians like to see themselves, and are often perceived as egalitarian, fair, informal, friendly, personalistic, relaxed, irreverent, humorous, self-mocking and hedonistic. Constructions of Australia coming from other part of the world often highlight these attributes, showing Australia in a very positive light.

Finally, it was shown that cultural values do influence leadership styles and organizational practices and dynamics. The values of egalitarianism and fairness are reflected, for example, in the tendency towards informality observed in Australian workplaces, and on the emphasis placed on personal relationships and networks in work settings. Most importantly, research has indicated that these core values influence leadership styles, which create significant challenges for Australian leaders: they often have to struggle to reach a balance between the conflicting notions of egalitarianism and achievement.

The arguments and evidence presented in this chapter lend further support to the claim that management practices and styles do not conform to a single, uniform and universal performance model, but are influenced and, at times shaped, by local values. Therefore, the ability to act and interact effectively within a given intercultural context is highly dependent on one's understanding of core cultural values, and of how they shape and influence social practices and discourse.

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