Effective consultation in remote communities: a new perspective on the language we use

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Abstract

Asked if a woman might be elected to council in the forthcoming poll, the traditional Aboriginal woman replies 'I don't want to be on the Council'. Why would she answer a generalised question by personalising it? Margaret Bain's recently republished research helps to explain. It is because of differences in the use of abstraction – a radically new insight. Bain discusses this difference between traditional Aboriginal and Western cultures, and highlights vital dissimilarities in world views, social structure and functioning, the languages that express them, and the ramifications for contemporary Australia of these differences. Where traditional Aboriginal culture relates more closely to the concretely real, Western culture delights in the more abstract. This means that Western-acculturated professionals who try to consult in a traditional community about issues such as the need for housing in the next five years, aspirations for development, or violence, alcoholism and training needs can elicit very different responses to a similar discussion in a Western community. In fact the Aboriginal community discussion is likely to be unhelpful, not because the community people are in any way unable to communicate in English but because questions generalised rather than grounded in the specific are misunderstood. Frustration and anger that arise from these communications that-do-not-communicate have led many Aboriginal people to claim 'White men are liars' (the title of Bain's book). Bain's research provides new insights into how carefully-crafted interactions can produce positive inter-cultural communication. Achieving this can deliver social justice in a way not understood before – a just-in-time contribution to the Indigenous rights agenda.

Introduction

Meetings, personal interviews, group discussions, surveys and other forms of consultation are everyday activities for professionals in the human services industry. Their success depends upon the accuracy of the communication, which is itself more than just dialogue:

> Communication – the interchange of messages between people – is the fundamental building block of social experience. … When it comes to figuring out what goes wrong in life, 'communication failure' is by far the most common explanation of all. (Thomas and Inkson, 2003: 101)

Inter-cultural communication failure is the subject of Margret Bain's research into traditional Aboriginal and Western cultures. Bain's findings extend to an understanding of how some profound and complex differences have impeded the attainment of Aboriginal goals for self-management, civil rights and justice in contemporary Australia. These differences derive from the philosophical foundations of the two cultures. Although complete in themselves, when the two cultures meet they clash if the differences have not been fully exposed and dealt with. For the purpose of explication Bain uses the term 'Westerners' rather than 'Whites', as does Peterson (Peterson 2004:11). By changing the orientation from individuals to cultures, the discussion about communication failure and consequential mistrust, or worse, changes. It shifts the focus from skin colour to the features of cultural difference that are still problematic in inter-cultural interactions, and offers greater opportunities for new perceptions to arise.

Culture

Culture as defined by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2004: 22) provides a helpful framework for exploring Bain's ideas:

> Culture is the pattern by which a group habitually mediates between value difference, such as rules and exceptions, technology and people, conflict, consensus, etc. Cultures can learn to reconcile such values at ever-higher levels of attainment, so that better rules are created from the study of numerous exceptions. From such reconciliation come health, wealth, and wisdom. But cultures in which one value polarity dominates and militates against another will be stressful and stagnate.

There is little argument that Western culture dominates Aboriginal culture in this country. However, with careful and well-informed management of the differences, domination does not have to lead to disempowerment of the other group.

Inter-cultural dealings can be straightforward or difficult, productive or destructive, depending on the cultures' compatibility. As Bain discusses in her booklet *'White Men are Liars' – another look at Aboriginal-Western interactions* (Bain 2006), there is little that is compatible but the differences, when their implications are discovered, can be bridged. Her process of unearthing the hidden elements of Western and Aboriginal cultures that are significantly different matches that of Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars, who write:

> We believe we have made a significant discovery after eighteen years of cross-cultural research. Or perhaps, in a spirit of greater humility, we have at last noticed what has for years been staring us in the face.
> As Alfred North Whitehead put it
>
> 'Everything was seen before by someone who did not discover it'.
>
> We finally noticed that foreign cultures are not arbitrarily or randomly different from one another. They are instead *mirror images* of one another's values, reversals of the order and sequence of looking and learning.
> (Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars 2000: 1)

Improving the ability to work with those from another culture requires learning about the culture, and to enable this Peterson categorises parts of cultures that can be seen, and those that are hidden (Peterson 2004). He selects 'values' as the category that is the most powerful:

> Cultural values are principles or qualities that a group of people will tend to see as good or right or worthwhile. (Peterson (2004: 22)

Cultural values were recognised by international cultural researchers Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner as central to communication. Their work to enable cross-cultural synergy was grounded in a discovery by an anthropologist:

> But it was Ruth Benedict in *Patterns of Culture* who provided what is, for us, a momentous insight. She had been asked to explain why three Native American tribes were close to cultural breakdown – alcoholic, despairing, apathetic, crime-ridden, etc., and why two were relatively well-adjusted and benign. She discovered, to her dismay, that no single variable could be distinguished consistently between the two groups. Had her whole academic life been wasted? She then saw that she had been looking for answers in the wrong place. It was not the presence or absence of key values that made the difference. ... It was the pattern by which … [differences] were joined. Benedict called this transcendence of value dichotomies 'synergy' … . Cultures are therefore more or less synergistic depending on the extent to which contrasting values work with each other.
> (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 2004: 21)

Following Bain's research, it can now be posited that traditional Aboriginal and Western cultures are less synergistic, but that this is not a fixed situation. Rather, it is within the power of all inter-cultural communicators to transcend the differences. This discussion aims to expose the central differences 'discovered' (Alfred North Whitehead) by Bain and propose some strategies to create synergy.

Key differences

Bain identifies primary differences between traditional Aboriginal and Western cultures: world view, social structure and functioning, and the languages that express them. As I try to isolate those parts of culture to which Bain refers, I have to an extent stereotyped them. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner forgive me for this. They maintain that:

> The point is not to avoid stereotypes; these are everywhere. The point is to go beyond superficial impressions to see what lies deeper and half –submerged. (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 2004: 24)

The following analysis attempts to go beyond shallow impressions in a way that may be useful to inter-cultural workers, consultants and Aboriginal communities in remote

areas. It is in these exchanges, and education and employment structures, that the secrets of Western culture are most destructive for Aboriginal people. Having myself been a part of these interactions, both positive and negative, I shall bring my experiences under Bain's microscope to see whether 'another look' (Bain 2006) can produce a more productive interpretation.

When we don't 'get it'

I have deeply reflected on the confused communications and interactions between Whites and Aboriginals in which I was either an observer or a participant. Fifteen years' work with traditional Aboriginal communities in remote areas gave me the experiences, but not enlightenment. My analytical tools were drawn from community development theory and directed me to examine relationships in terms of power, politics and purpose. This focus led to a distinction between community development work in communities that were in large part self-funded and those that were government-funded or the recipients of grants from NGOs. Such a distinction was produced by the consequences of accountability.

When communities were accountable to themselves, they had freedom to create and manage the social and economic structures that would sustain them in their political context and that met the requirements of their culture. When they were accountable to an outside funding agency that was a product of an alien culture, they had to bend and twist their own social structures. The following examples illustrate these different ways of responding to an alien world. The first is about self-funded systems; the second, about externally-funded systems.

The impact of financial accountability

Self-funded communities

Between 1975 and 1980 my husband Stan Davey and I responded to the developmental plans of four tribal groups in the Kimberley (Richardson 1993, 1998). They all wanted their own store, to manage it themselves and to be their own boss. Their aspirations to be self-sufficient were in contradiction to their capacities, as their immediate background was the pastoral industry, which required practical rather than managerial skills. However considerable strengths lay in their cultural roots: they spoke their mother-tongue, they were living on their land, and their tribal integrity was intact. We supported these groups in their fledgling attempts to create a modern community, and they assigned to us roles that required literacy and numeracy.

One community decided to build a store that looked like the store in town. They made bricks and built a single room complete with shelves and cash register. When the goods were in place, they allocated jobs to some of their school kids who, under the supervision of the elders, sold the individual items according to that economic model. If there was not enough money to buy more stock, the elders simply told the community and the balance was contributed – this method was called "chuck-in".

Another community positioned their store under a tree that was guarded by an elder who placed his swag alongside the goods and slept there. The goods were taken as needed by any community member and some money exchanged - an arrangement that

mirrored traditional trading systems. Again, if there was insufficient cash to buy the next lot of goods, the families increased the chuck-in.

A third community simply asked us how much a trailer load of watermelons would cost, gathered that amount from the community and distributed the fruit to whoever wanted it.

The economic models represented by these three ways of functioning worked because the laws governing them were deeply based in the community's culture and accountability was to their lore. Their social relationships were protected and inter-cultural communications were clear. However, Bain's theory illuminates an aspect that I now see as a more complete theory. Their arrangements were tangible, control was direct, and management was personal – real people doing real things.

Externally-funded communities

Business institutions that were funded by government or NGO grant demanded accountability to the funding agencies, and that distorted cultural adaptation. For example, one community store was initially funded by government. Under local management it became insolvent when stock was given away instead of being sold, despite the funding provider's promise that the store would make money for the community. In this case the solution was to employ a White manager. The financial solution created great resentment in the community. It was an affront to their dignity and a step backward from their aspiration for self-management.

Bain's theory applied to this situation would highlight not 'failure to run a store' but a deficit in a store training process that focuses on skills and equal opportunity and fails to take account of the different cultural values held by the trainees. Both the Western training process and the industry are loaded with cultural values of the industrialised West. Many of these values are diametrically opposed to Aboriginal culture, but as will be shown, their imposition has been obscured in the rush generate equality and prosperity in Aboriginal communities. Furthermore, the mischief they have generated is left to aggravate the chronic dilemma of Aboriginal disadvantage.

Presence of Whites in communities

The presence of Whites in communities has long been resented because they are seen to take local jobs, move into the top jobs, and exert a dominating influence. Their presence broadcasts that even when community members are trained and credentialed, they cannot run their own affairs. Aboriginal people can only assume that Whites doing the training keep some secrets from their people; that Whites are liars when they protest that they are serious about Aboriginal empowerment or that they intend to do themselves out of a job. Bain's analysis leads to an explanation that takes not the colour of a person's skin, but their acculturation as the seminal issue in why these beliefs arise.

Highly revered Western concepts such 'individual rights' and 'professionalism' can be shown to conflict with Aboriginal culture and require re-interpretation to fit the situation. Where these values are not made explicit and dealt with, synergy can not be achieved, 'Whites' will remain a pejorative term, and conflict can be interpreted

through the ideology of racism. Until these cultural clashes are better understood, 'Whites' will remain as the enemy and Aboriginal communities will continue to be excluded from Western prosperity. Avoiding a repeat of past failures may be a noble but fruitless quest; with the analytical tools provided by Bain, it can become a reality

Bain's insights

Margaret Bain discovered something about Aboriginal and Western cultures that is simple yet profound.

> The primary finding … is that for cultural reasons, Aboriginals and Westerners use significantly different abstractions (Bain 2006: vii)

At first sight, using abstractions differently hardly seems to be a momentous discovery! However, further exploration uncovers some fascinating characteristics of the two cultures relevant to inter-cultural communication:

- Aboriginal culture retains a direct link to the concretely real and
- Western culture breaks that link.

The two cultures use abstractions differently, that is, Aboriginal culture is tied to the concrete but Western culture can be concrete or imaginary. If you deal with reality, things that are tangible, there is only so far you can go in fantasies about 'what if…' or 'maybe this or that'. The ramifications of this fundamental difference will slowly unfold.

Abstraction

'Abstraction' is a noun in English that describes a generalised idea or theory. Its use is an essential characteristic of Western culture, allowing planning for the future and choice between alternatives and possibilities. It is well-known that Whites and their institutions in this country have a Western culture, but less acknowledged that this use of abstraction causes such a problem for traditional Aboriginal people. At one level, much about Aboriginal culture is identified and enjoyed by Westerners, recognised in the more obvious forms of painting, corroboree and kinship. However the use of abstraction permeates both the English language and Western institutions, and it is less understood that some clash is caused by cultural systems. For example, they may not be recognised in the following scenario:

Asked if women might be elected to the community council in the forthcoming poll:

> … the traditional Aboriginal woman replies 'I work in the garden. I have a job. I don't want to be on the Council. (Bain 2006: 8)

How would the Western inquirer hear that response? It would be easy to assume there was a superficial misunderstanding that could be surmounted through better language-learning. Or maybe both participants in this conversation would simply give up the attempt to understand each other.

Many Whites try to overcome cultural difference by creating compatibility and integration into Aboriginal society. They may learn the language and accept a kinship classification. Often these actions are helpful but they can also disguise the fact that Aborigines are right when they believe that there is a mystery about White society to which they are not privy. Demystifying this secret is easy – it is about levels of abstraction. To deconstruct the Aboriginal woman's answer to the Westerner's question is to see that the question was generalised and the answer was personalised. Both parties were talking over the other's head. Both parties were using a different level of abstraction; the question was framed in a way that was not real, using words such as 'women', 'elect', and 'might' and the responder answered concretely, talking about herself (not women) and what she was doing at that time (not in the future). As will be seen in the section on World View, the problem created in the question by referring to elections was not even addressed in the answer. Levels of abstraction take on a new magnitude when they can be used to unravel the mysteries of communications-that-do-not-communicate. Bain stresses that:

> It is *difference* that is significant for communication loss, not any assessment of higher or lower. (Bain 2006:1)

Bain posits theory that has three parts. The first part argues that traditional Aboriginal culture as shown in language has

> a preference for the concrete, a general trend towards the tangible and experiential and away from the more abstract (Bain 2006: 4).

To better understand this seemingly simple yet complex statement, Bain gives an example, centred on the notion of 'mother'. In both cultures the concept of 'mother' is an abstraction. It is 'head knowledge' (Bain 2006: 4), something you cannot see, and so the woman has to be identified. At the same time, while it is an abstraction, it is one that remains directly linked to a real person. Both cultures use this term with the same meaning, but Westerners take it further to talk about 'motherhood'. Bain found that traditional Aboriginal culture does not accommodate a concept of motherhood, which does not refer to anyone in particular, and in the same way does not allow other concepts such as 'fatherhood' or 'parenting'. Instead traditional culture relates everything to real people doing real things. In a mirror image, Western culture breaks the link to the real.

Some examples can show how the theory applies. In a meeting about 'poverty', the Westerner using this abstract noun is likely to be heard by the traditional Aboriginal communicator as talking about a particular person who is poor or has a deficit. They may try to identify the person, maybe it is even themselves, and this perception can be very offensive. Reactions from both cultures can then skew the results of the meeting. Take another example, that of 'child abuse'. Recently some Westerners trying to conduct a discussion with traditional Aboriginal people couched the topic as carefully as they could, in phrases such as 'someone might be touching your kids inappropriately'. To their horror, what was intended as a general policy statement was taken as personal accusation. It had been grounded in the real; the listeners had taken a generalised idea and attached to it actual people, themselves, doing something real. On another occasion some government officers went to a Pitjantjatjara-speaking community in preparation for the forthcoming budget. Aboriginal input was required.

The question was, 'If funds are available, what do you want?' In response, effectively, community members put in their orders for houses. Pitjantjatjara language has no equivalent word for 'if', and translating that sentence into the language is truly challenging. The possibilities implied by "if" were lost, and the question interpreted as a promise. Later, when the orders were not filled the accusation that 'White men are liars' makes sense.

It is easy to see how participants in community discussions about issues such as poverty or alcohol abuse or school absenteeism or unemployment or community plans for housing can be talking at cross purposes. What is really damaging is that participants think they have understood but may have reached an entirely erroneous conclusion about the outcomes of the discussion/meeting. Even translation from English into the local language has to navigate this cultural use of spoken communication systems. A linguist told me about the difficulty he had in learning pronouns. He could ask his informants how to say 'I am going to Darwin', but when he extended the questioning to 'he/she is going to Darwin', his informants immediately stopped the lesson and demanded to know who was going to Darwin. The hypothetical question was heard as real. This leads to an understanding about why the traditional Aboriginal woman replied 'I don't want to be on the Council' when the intended question was about possible support for women in the forthcoming election. Both the question and the answer are embedded in the cultural framework of the would-be communicators, that is, in their different world views. Unless this is understood by all participants in the conversation, then the verbal exchange that is supposed to accurately reflect the intent of the sender and receiver can be seriously distorted.

Aboriginal and Western cultural frameworks again are mirror images in many respects, some of which can be detected through examination of their world views.

World view

World view is intangible but nonetheless a force to be reckoned with. It may operate at an unconscious level, but a person's culture influences how they interpret the natural and social worlds and this in turn affects how they interact in them. Although both operate at a level of abstraction, all pervasive is the characteristic that Westerners break the tie with the concrete and Aboriginals retain a direct link with real things. The kinship system can be drawn on to explain difference.

In Aboriginal culture, a template drawn from the family, that is, from the known relationships of known people such as mother, father, daughter, brother-in-law, grandmother, is applied to the whole of society and identifies known relatedness of known people such as mother, father, daughter, brother-in-law, grandmother. Consequently an individual is related to everyone in society as a mother, a father, mother's sister, sister, etc. There may be no actual or traceable relationship, but the scheme is the basis of what is termed the 'kinship system'. Furthermore, according to Aboriginal understanding, people are grouped with elements of the non-human world; consequently the kinship pattern is imposed also on nature. What underlies this grouping is not altogether clear but it appears to be on the basis of a conceived, shared abstracted totemic property, for example the property of kangaroo, of goanna, of wild fig and so on, that is, kangarooness, goannaness, etc. Three points can be made about these abstracted totemic properties:

1   They are totemic in nature and important in understanding how the world
        works.
2   Since they follow the pattern of kinship, they relate to each other as do kin,
        that is, 1:1. They are not subject to number.
3   There is specificity throughout: that man, that woman, and that totem, that
        sacred site, etc.

This understanding of the world retains a direct link with real things but the Western
world view breaks the link with reality. In understanding the natural world and how it
works, Westerners abstract physical properties of matter, things like weight and
volume. These properties are subject to number, are common to all physical matter,
and their relationships expressed through complex mathematical formulae. The
resultant break with the real is echoed in the Western social world, for instance, in
activities such as elections, which require the use of numbers. It affects also the
concept of representation, the mode and content of teaching, and enables the creation
of bureaucracy.

Mathematics
Bain makes the general statement that for Aboriginals:

    '… in understanding the world and how it works, mathematical calculation is
    not needed.' (Bain 2006:22).

Although the above was written of the natural world, it is relevant also to the social
world. For instance, lack of numerical considerations impacts communication and the
ease with which Aboriginal people can effortlessly work in Western society. At the
same time, it must be stressed; the absence of number is not due to a gap in world
view but occurs because Aborigines have a different understanding of the world and
its operation. One of the impacts for communication is that the notion of
representation (when the representative is chosen by a count of heads) is alien. This
has implications for understanding voting processes in which one person represents
many others and its introduction to Aboriginal social functioning is destructive. For
example, the concept of representation is unacceptable to Aboriginals, and yet
representation is the basis of political elections. More significant than lack of number
is the impossibility for an Aboriginal to represent country other than their own. By
contrast, were arithmetical considerations removed from Western society and culture,
it could not function.

Weight and Volume
Weight and volume are abstractions of the Western world view. They can be
measured, and their relationships to one another established through arithmetical
equations. By contrast, they are not included in the Aboriginal world view, which
abstracts totemic properties that relate to each other as 1:1. As a result, while
arithmetical calculation is needed by Westerners, it is not needed by Aboriginals.

Space
Space is a concept that is significantly different. Pitjantjatjara has no generic word for
'space' but

Westerners treat space almost as a 'thing', something that can be measured, its size expressed in numbers and its characteristics studied (Bain 2006:23).

Time
Time differs because the Aboriginal world view has no chronological time, and Pitjantjatjara has no generic word for 'time'. Westerners measure time and are interested in which day something happened, but Aboriginals are more interested in when that event occurred relative to other events - before or after, concurrently, etc., not the actual time. Westerners may be mystified as to why Aboriginal people do not keep an appointment at an agreed time, but an exploration of another Aboriginal concept, that of the Dreaming, may elucidate the different cultural view about time.

Dreaming
The Dreaming is a familiar concept that anthropologists agree is integral to the Aboriginal world view. It has no parallel in the Western world but is fundamental to Aboriginal understanding. Aborigines themselves use the term when referring to the various elements of their world view. These were given to them by totemic ancestors. For instance their classifications and kinship system, the relationships and the links to land, the languages, ceremonies, stories, etc.; all of this material is referred to as Dreaming. In Pitjantatjara men told Bain that when they use that word what they mean is:

> The *tjukurpa* things is there (exists) in its own right; it is just itself; no one invented it; no one made it up, it just is (simply exists); eternal; true (Bain 2006:18)

It is used of 'things, events, actions, songs, dancing, ritual, myths, places, ceremonial decorations' (Bain 2006:19).

This term *tjurkurpa* describes therefore all the things given by the totemic ancestors, including classification of the social worlds, and provides the pattern of kinship that defines an individual's place in it. Likewise, the patterning of the natural world is Dreaming, all of it unchanging, eternal and true. This system presupposes that everything and everyone has a direct link with the concretely real.

The Aboriginal adherence to the real contributes to Aboriginal misunderstanding of probabilities, for instance, schemes that might be possible if a certain amount of money were to become available. When Westerners theorise or talk about probabilities or 'if' or 'this might happen' or ask questions such as 'what do you want to see happen in five years?', or 'what about we do such and such, do you think it will solve the problem?, they are not communicating. This occurs because the differences between the languages produced by two world views, one tied to the real, the other 'free', has not been bridged.

To sum up, in understanding the world around them and themselves in it:

> <u>Aboriginals</u> abstract totemic properties but they are specific to person, plant, animal, site, etc. These relate to each other as do kin, one to one: they are not related numerically and retain a direct link to real things.

Westerners abstract physical properties of matter which are general in nature. They relate to each other through mathematical formulae and this breaks the link to the real.

The profound differences in world view identified above are extremely complex, and are detailed in Bain's booklet. While this brief discussion treats them somewhat superficially, it emphasises their impact on inter-cultural communication. It also provides a foundation for the discussion on how different levels of abstraction shape social interactions.

Social interactions are either reciprocal or negotiated

Communication is not merely a linguistic exchange, since the cultural component powerfully influences what is delivered and received:

FIGURE 6.1. Cross-cultural communication process
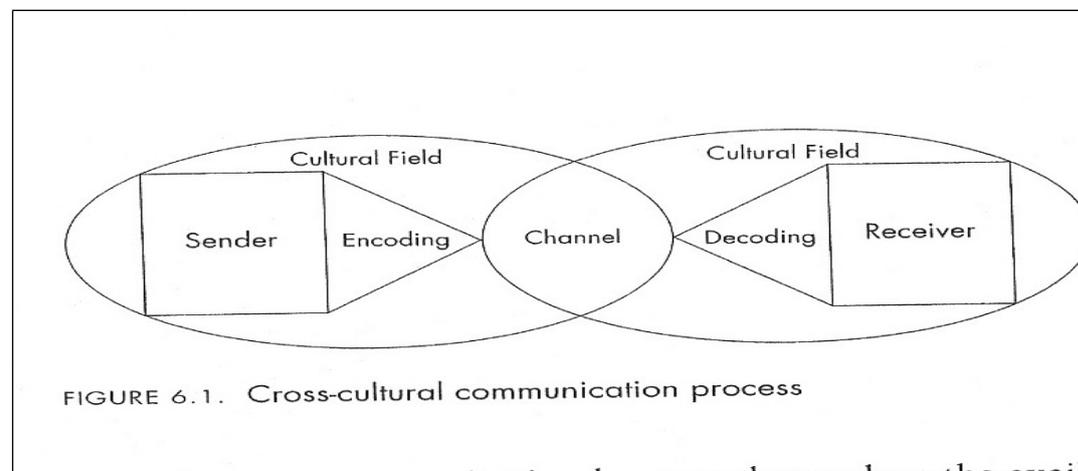
(Thomas and Inkson 2003: 104)

Another aspect of the cultural component can be discussed using Bain's categories of 'Reciprocal' or Negotiated' interactions.

Reciprocal versus negotiated interactions

As noted, Bain's third finding describes the kin based behaviour as 'reciprocal' and contrasts it with 'negotiated'. In Aboriginal society, relationships are exclusively reciprocal and kin-based, but in Western society, while some are reciprocal, most are negotiated. This difference is critical:

Negotiated relationships have no place in traditional Aboriginal society. By contrast, they are essential to a wide range of activity, indeed to most activity, in Western societies (Bain 2006: 25).

As discussed above, in a traditional community an intact kinship system is the primary form of social security. To deny one's relations, to have no relations, is to cut oneself off from all that sustains and comforts, and yet – as will be seen –

participating in Western institutions requires this kind of cultural sacrifice. The following example illustrates the point. Aboriginal community members were trained and qualified in a Western role but back in the community, expecting to practise their profession, they came under pressures from their own culture to behave in a culturally-honourable way.   In dealing with the conflict they had two choices: either leave the job, or leave the community (pers. comm. 2005). This choice is tragic and avoidable.   Traditional Aboriginal people should not have to abandon their cultural safety-net in order to use their Western training.   However, the practice of skills learned through the Western education system may well be incompatible with the Aboriginal culture, as alluded to above. Bain discusses why.

Communication with kin and with non-kin

Both Western and Aboriginal social systems rely on kin relationship, but unlike Westerners, Aborigines have taken the known relationship of known kin and have applied it as a template across the whole of society.

> How individuals are categorised in relation to one another within their kinship system establishes the basis for social behaviour, making possible the orderly operation of society. Under this system, it could be serious for an Aboriginal person if they in some way endanger their relationships, for instance by failing to honour the interaction expected. (Bain 2006: 24)

In other words, community members are expected to honour this patterned behaviour, for instance one person's obligation to give and the other person's right to receive. Bain describes this kin-based behaviour as '**reciprocal'.**   The practice has served Aboriginal society well, ensuring that everyone is properly cared for. There are no strangers, no non-kin; even non-Aboriginal people can be given a kinship classification to enable them to fit into the community.

Reciprocal interaction is found also in Western society, but contrasting with Aboriginal social practice, it is relatively unstructured, and is found only among close kin (relatives by blood or marriage) and close friends. In addition to these kin-based relationships Western culture also allows the establishment of relationships with non-kin, together with the associated interactions, thereby enabling business and bureaucracy to function. To operate Western businesses the practitioner is encouraged to be professional, that is, to serve everyone equally with no favouritism or bias. Dealings can be with relatives or with strangers face-to-face. Bain refers to these relationships established with non-kin as '**negotiated'**. She tells the story of how they affected conduct of Western institutions in a community. Two Aboriginal men had tried to manage their community store for thirteen months before it became almost bankrupt. They explained to her:

> that they could not refuse to give to their relations. Defining the position
> further, they added the significant comment 'like having no relations'.
> (Bain 2006: 28).

Such insight suggests that for an Aboriginal to be taught how to manage a store is not enough. Both the Aboriginal trainee and the community need to know the hidden values that underlie it that are in conflict with their own. When the secrets are

exposed and the choice is real between cultures – or their adaptations - it becomes possible for them to make informed choices.

Education systems
Since kinship patterns create appropriate social behaviour, they impact the traditional Aboriginal education system. Accordingly teaching is undertaken and learning occurs in the context of specific relationships, for instance, mother's brother teaches sister's son. Teaching and learning occur also among family and friends in Western society, but is not restricted to that social group. Who teaches who may well be determined solely by the requirements of the student, the qualifications of the teacher and numerical considerations to do with remuneration. As these things show, a contrast between Aboriginal and Western cultural practice can be seen, the former retaining a direct link to specific people but the latter adopting a generalised approach. This same contrast can be noted also in the content of what is taught among traditional Aboriginals; this content always retains the direct link to the real, but Western teaching commonly includes material that has broken that link.

It is evident from the above that both in context and in content, Aboriginal teaching is not generalised as it is with the Western education system. In other words, it keeps a direct link to the real, where the Western education system breaks this link. In today's culture the Western system requires Aboriginal students and graduates to mercilessly bend their cultural rules.

Unpacking the implicit cultural basis of Western training and employment systems reveals some of the differences and helps to explain why the externally-funded communities to which I referred earlier had so many difficulties operating them. By applying Bain's categories of reciprocal interactions and negotiated interactions, it can be shown that a traditional Aboriginal professional is bound by their cultural rules to favour kin, but the Western cultural business that they are operating functions by contrary rules. When such a clash occurs, the industrialised Western rules of profit and loss are dominant and the Aboriginal worker is unmercifully squeezed to conform. There are many instances where Aboriginal workers can no longer endure the conflicting pulls of two opposing systems, and prefer to give up the job. If the reasons for the life-threatening dilemma are not understood, the Aboriginal worker can be viewed by the dominant society as unreliable and by the Aboriginal society as cheated by the White training system. Perhaps even more destructively, the Aboriginal community can believe they were subject to Whites' unrepentant desire to take the jobs and control Aborigines, as they did more overtly in a previous era that is still very real to many Aboriginal adults. Such an interpretation can lead to the accusation that White men are liars, and that is now a perfectly rational statement!

International research

Bain's data were drawn from traditional Aboriginal communities and can be positioned within the matrix developed by Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner, two international researchers into cultural types. Before publishing their first

book in 1998, they conducted 15 years' field work and academic research into cultural diversity, focusing on

> … cultural differences and how they affect the process of doing business and managing. It [their book] is not about how to understand the people of different nationalities. It is our belief that you can never understand other cultures. (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1998: 1)

because

> culture is the context in which things happen; out of context, even legal matters lack significance' (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1998: 8).

Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner formed the view that:

> every culture distinguishes itself from others by the specific solutions it chooses to certain problems, which reveal themselves as dilemmas. (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1998: 8).

These problems are identified as those to do with people's relationships with each other, time, and the environment.

Bain's findings from her research in traditional Aboriginal communities have not yet been integrated into the international research by other cultural investigators. However her discoveries match precisely some of the categories outlined in Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998), as the following table shows:

Dimension		Dimension
Universalism (favours abstract rules)		Particularism (favours the obligations of relationships)
Individualism (focuses on the rights of the individual)	V	Communitarianism (focuses on the rights of the group)
Neutral (favours detached and objective interactions)	E R	Emotional (favours expression of appropriate feelings)
Specific (favours prescribing the relationship by a contract)	S U	Diffuse (favours involving the whole person)
Achievement (status ascribed by what an individual **does,** accomplishes)	S	Ascription (status ascribed by what an individual **is,** by birth, kinship, gender or age)

Trompenaars interest in culture derives from his belief that 'dilemmas are universal … while the answers are culturally determined'. To measure international cultural diversity, he put a dilemma to 65,000 managers in 65 countries. This was the well-known *Did the pedestrian die?* dilemma:

You are a passenger in a car driven by a close friend. He hits a pedestrian. You know he was going at least 35 mph in an area of the city where the maximum speed limit allowed is 20 mph. There are no witnesses. His lawyer says that if you are prepared to testify under oath that he was only driving at 20 mph it may save him from serious consequences.

What right has your friend to expect you to protect him?

(a) my friend has a *definite* right, as a friend, to expect me to testify to the lower figure

(b) he has *some* right, as a friend, to expect me to testify to the lower figure.

(c) he has *no* right, even as a friend, to expect me to testify to the lower figure.

Would you help your friend, in view of the obligations you feel towards society?

(d) I would testify to the lower figure.

(e) I would not testify to the lower figure.

The researchers found that

In Switzerland and North America more than 93 percent chose the combination (c) and (e), while in China and Venezuelan less than 35 percent showed a preference for this answer

A Korean later said to the researchers 'I knew Americans were corrupt but you gave it empirical evidence, thank you'. I asked how. 'You can't trust the Americans, they don't even help their friends, he answered.
(Trompenaars 2003: 3)

Others laughed when the researcher 'commented that in France friends are more important than pedestrians' (Trompenaars 2003: 1). These different responses are reflected in Bain's findings and, if taken seriously, invite consideration of ways to deal with the differences. One way is to become culturally intelligent and constantly mindful of our cultural type, that is, to develop

… the capability to interact effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds. Like other forms of intelligence such as social intelligence (the capability of interacting with others), and emotional intelligence (the capability of regulating and using one's emotional states), cultural intelligence is composed of many facets. Cultural intelligence enables us to recognise cultural differences through knowledge and mindfulness and gives us a propensity and ability to act appropriately across cultures. The culturally intelligent manager can make fine distinctions among subtly different behaviours that perfectly fit the situation. One manager called this ability 'a matrix in the minds of managers'. (Thomas and Inkson 2003: 62)

Instead of a matrix in the mind, Bain offers the metaphor of gears to suggest how a cross-cultural communication process can work. For examples, someone, non-kin, could receive the cash in the store, or someone who was non-kin, could take over temporarily in the hospital, if an avoidance relationship existed between the health worker and a patient. In both of these cases, the Aboriginal is able to use their skills, but the 'gears' does the one thing that is culturally unacceptable. Accordingly each system is envisaged as a cog and the cogs are brought into association by the use of a gear, a mediating element that meshes with both, resulting in a resolution of the problem. Within this metaphor is the idea that the two cultures, while differing, are complete in themselves.

Western culture

Aboriginal culture

The cultural intermediary
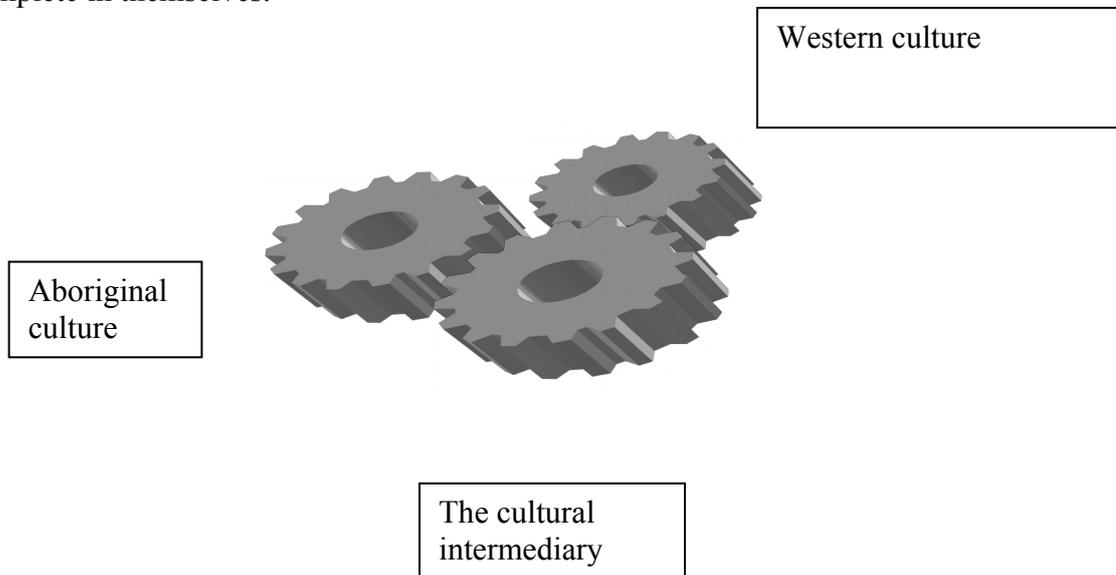
Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner's table of opposing cultural characteristics can be superimposed on Western and traditional Aboriginal systems. Choices and their possible consequences can then be easily identified:

Dimension - Western		**Dimension – traditional Aboriginal**
Universalism (favours abstract rules)		Particularism (favours the obligations of relationships)
Individualism (focuses on the rights of the individual)	V E R S U S	Communitarianism (focuses on the rights of the group)
Neutral (favours detached and objective interactions)		Emotional (favours expression of appropriate feelings)
Specific (favours prescribing the relationship by a contract)		Diffuse (favours involving the whole person)
Achievement (status ascribed by what an individual **does,** accomplishes)		Ascription (status ascribed by what an individual **is,** by birth, kinship, gender or age)

To return to the question of why the traditional Aboriginal woman, when asked if she is going to vote for women to be on the community council replied 'I don't want to be on the Council' - Bain's analytical tool draws attention to differences in the use of abstraction. It may be easier to explain that the question came from a culture that generalises and the answer came from a culture that particularises. How to bridge these differences is a challenge, but with these new tools to hand, creative responses can produce a diversity of ways to translate theory into real, concrete inter-cultural communication methods.

Summary

Obstructions to effective communication and working relationships between Westerners and traditional Aborigines have often been explained using a racialist interpretation. New evidence suggests that fundamental differences in the two cultures produce a hopeful scenario: Westerners are not liars, but they do speak in ways that are not pertinent to or meaningful in traditional Aboriginal culture. If those acculturated in either system can be mindful and culturally intelligent, communication can improve. If Aboriginal people are alerted to the implicit Western cultural underpinnings of Western social structures and industrial infrastructure, then they can make real choices. Hypothetically speaking, if we could create gears between the two opposing cultural systems, they may work together more effectively and bring real justice to the chronic dilemma of Aboriginal disadvantage.

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