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Some "unexpected" differences between Australians and Americans
Commentary
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Some "unexpected" differences between Australians and Americans, and their relevance to project management

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INTRODUCTION

The Editor recently called for papers on leading diverse and multi-cultural teams. He said, "The need for more cultural awareness, knowledge and intelligence is growing for project managers and team leaders everywhere".

With regard to obvious cultural differences, Renwick 1980:2 has pointed out that

> ….when two peoples <u>expect</u> to encounter differences in one another (as, for example, do Americans and Japanese), their discovery of a point on which they are similar is exciting and reassuring.

However, we have a somewhat different situation when there are strong similarities in the cultures of two peoples, as for example with Australians and Americans (i.e. US citizens). Renwick 1980:9 observed that

> Australians and Americans usually assume more similarity between them, more understanding and agreement, than actually exist. Despite their common origins and their resemblance to one another now, there are important differences between their societies and cultures, and therefore between their values, priorities, attitudes, motivations, and modes of interaction.

As an Australian who has had extensive interactions with Americans for over sixty years, I have been exposed to many such "unexpected" differences, and ensuing complications, many of which are relevant to teamwork in project environments. This article discusses some of these "unexpected" differences, to which I have added extensively from analyses by an American sociologist, Dr George W. Renwick, who has researched these types of Australian – American differences in substantial detail. His consolidated findings were published in Renwick 1980. I presented a paper on this topic many years ago (Stretton 1990), but have expanded very substantially on that work in the following.

It should first be made clear that the following descriptions of Australians and Americans are not intended to stereotype either peoples. As Renwick 1980:5 expresses it,

> …. the descriptions of Australians and Americans are generalizations. The basic characteristics described, of course, are not found in every Australian or every American. Certainly, they are not found to the same degree in each person. What is described are the backgrounds and some of the basic qualities which many Australians share to some extent with other Australians, and some of the basic qualities which many Americans share to some extent with other Americans.

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TWO EXAMPLES OF PROBLEMS IN AUSTRALIAN-AMERICAN CONTEXTS

A Renwick example

Haupt 1979, an Australian journalist living in the USA, who had access to some of Renwick's earlier findings, gave the following example from Renwick's experience .

> The Houston office of the multinational oil company had a problem. Two groups of executives were not getting on.
> Wives, the barometer of personnel relations in an American firm, were cutting each other dead at cocktail parties. Executives were in warring camps. The whole thing wasn't working. The groups? … They were Australians and Americans.

That particular company was only one of several to whom Renwick consulted on cross-cultural matters. As noted by Haupt 1977,

> His findings are based on wide research, including "cross-cultural training" sessions in inter-cultural communications. [He] has been retained by a number of prestige multi-national companies, the US State Department, universities and various other groups.

Renwick's paper to the above company evidently contained many of the findings which he later consolidated in Renwick 1980.

A Lend Lease example

In the early 1980s I was asked to help sort out what were described as "communications" problems between Australian managers and American employees in a Civil & Civic-type project operation based in Dallas, Texas. At a meeting of six of the Americans with the Australian CEO and myself, the Americans expanded on how they saw the problems.

Their two main complaints were that the Australians were unprofessional in their organizational arrangements; and they were unfeeling and crude in the way they handled conflict-related situations. The Australians simply did not understand the Americans' complaints, as they were operating in the same way as they had done in Australia.

My presence may have helped the Americans express their grievances a little more specifically, and we did make some progress on the issue of organizational arrangements. However, we did not achieve anything approaching a mutual understanding of underlying differences in expectations on this issue. With regard to conflict-related issues, we made virtually no progress at all.

Unfortunately, at that time I was unaware of Renwick's work, which I came across long after the Dallas meetings. The following analysis is therefore substantially retrospective, but hopefully may have some relevance for both Australian and American readers.

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ORGANIZATIONAL ISSUES

Our Dallas operations were organized along the same lines as Civil & Civic's project-based Australian operations. Organizational arrangements were substantially informal, generally with no organization charts or position descriptions (as discussed more fully in Stretton 2009g).

As noted above, our American people regarded this as unprofessional. Indeed, they virtually told me it was impossible that we could run our Australian operations the way we did. (They said much the same to another Civil & Civic executive who had described the latter to them some six months earlier). They were emphatic that they needed to know, in writing, precisely where they stood organizationally in an hierarchical sense, and particularly where their authority started and ended.

Two differences between Australians and Americans on this context were identified by Renwick 1980:42. These have to do with differences in acceptance of hierarchical structures on the one hand, and differences in associated authority issues on the other, as follows.

> …an Australian does not easily accept a hierarchy, a particular station, or defined duties associated with that station. ….. Americans are more comfortable within a hierarchy.

> An American likes his role and status to be more clearly defined, and is usually willing to give a higher position the respect deemed appropriate to it. ….
> …. Australians …. are not by nature respectful of superiors ….

The subject of status is introduced here, and Renwick expands on this a little elsewhere (p 20), where he says

> Americans are quite conscious of their own status and the status of others with whom they are interacting. They define status primarily in terms of one's occupation, income, and professional position. They work at achieving status, …

> So highly do they [Australians] value egalitarianism, even more highly than do Americans, they have a strong distaste for any sign of ambition to set oneself up as superior to one's fellows.

The issues of hierarchy, role definition and status were all discussed in our Dallas meetings, but rather superficially in retrospect. There was little recognition at the time of the underlying basic social/cultural differences between the Australian and American approaches in these contexts. Perhaps the above insights of Renwick could have helped uncover some of these, and possibly increased mutual understanding of the underlying differences. However, this was not to be.

In more recent interactions with American organizations, I must say that I saw little evidence of such concerns with role definition and status in the computer company Digital, with whom we were closely involved in a substantial expert system project undertaken in the Boston area in the late 1980s.

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Similar observations also apply to rather more limited contacts with computer start-up people in California's Silicon Valley around this time. Perhaps these differences are attributable to construction being an old industry, and rather set in its ways, whilst computing was a new industry, without any substantial inherited procedures or expectations. Or perhaps they are due to regional cultural differences. I do not know. Whatever the reason(s), these differences remind one of the dangers of stereotyping Americans (or Australians, as discussed at the end of the Introduction to this article).

ISSUES RELATED TO ACTUAL AND POTENTIAL CONFLICT

As noted above, we made very little progress in our Dallas meetings on conflict-related issues, which had caused substantial and unresolved friction, and continued to do so.

In the early 1950s I worked for a year on construction projects in the USA, and soon found out that direct Australian-style person-to-person conflict resolution was simply "not on" with Americans. Now, Australians normally make a clear distinction between the subject of an argument and the relevant interpersonal relationships. However the Americans I interacted with did not appear to make such a distinction. It appeared to me that a direct criticism of Americans' arguments on a subject was taken as a criticism of themselves, personally. At the time I felt it prudent simply to keep quiet in situations of potential conflict.

Renwick 1980:23 gives some sense of this in the following.

> ….. Americans assume that if someone agrees with them, that person likes them; disagreement implies rejection. Australians assume that someone's disagreement with them has little to do with that person's attitude towards them. Disagreement, in fact, can indicate real interest and respect.

I mentioned these early personal experiences at the Dallas meetings, but they did not appear to ring any bells with those present, so I did not push them. However, if I had had the above and following insights from Renwick to hand at the time, I would almost certainly have pursued this further. Renwick 1980:48-49 has this to say:

> Americans do not like conflict, especially interpersonal conflict. They are uncomfortable in the midst of it and concerned about others' opinions of them after having engaged in it. Americans are, therefore, inclined and even determined to avoid being involved in direct conflict themselves and they have a variety of means (personal, legal, and organizational) for doing so.
>
> Australians, however, tend not to mind conflict and, in fact, sometimes enjoy it, intentionally engage in it, and even respect others who carry it off with style and results. Australians are more accustomed to conflict and more resilient in the midst of it. They are also less concerned about negative reactions from those with whom they come into conflict.
>
> Differing attitudes towards conflict become additional sources for contrasting expectations, negative feelings, and further difficulties between Australians and Americans.

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This seems to me to summarize the position rather well. Renwick gave a further relevant insight in discussing different usages of negative expressions (pp 28-29)

> Americans sometimes make negative statements about situations, conditions and institutions. They seldom make directly negative statements about people, especially people they are with, and they are uncomfortable when others do. Australians express negative feelings and opinions about both situations and people, sometimes about people they are with.

As I have experienced in practice, and Renwick 1980 confirms and expands on from his studies and findings, these types of sometimes unexpected cultural differences are much more important than are generally realized. They can be very significant factors indeed underlying instances of mistrust and confusion that often occur between Australians and Americans. In the context of this publication, they are often particularly relevant to projects and their management, for rather obvious reasons.

I have to add that in more recent interactions with American organizations and people, I have not encountered conflict problems to quite the same extent, but do not know if this is a general trend, or a personal accident of history.

POTENTIAL EDUCATIONAL CONSEQUENCES

There are potential educational consequences relevant to project management in relation to the above topics.

We first look at conflict issues. American project management literature typically places considerable emphasis on conflict and its resolution. For example, Kerzner's classic book on project management has a whole chapter on the subject (Kerzner 1979: Chapter 7). However, the above discussions indicate that American approaches for handling conflict are unlikely to be appropriate for projects undertaken by Australians in Australia – and indeed may be quite inappropriate.

Turning to organizational issues, the above discussions also indicate that the very considerable American literature on organizational structures and relationships may need to be closely scrutinised to determine the extent to which the basic propositions set down, and proposed solutions, are appropriate for Australian project conditions.

My particular concern with educational consequences is that inexperienced Australian academics, teachers and practitioners, and other project-related people who are unaware of the kinds of unexpected cultural differences discussed above, may recommend or follow American procedures and/or practices indiscriminately, with potentially unfortunate consequences.

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SUMMARY/CONCLUSIONS

This article has been primarily concerned with intercultural situations where there are many strong commonalities between two peoples, which tend to obscure recognition of certain important cultural differences. If these differences are in areas which are important to either side, they can cause unexpected and hard-to-handle confusion and misunderstandings.

The example used in this article has been relations between Australians and Americans. The author has drawn on his own experiences in this area in relation to problems with an Australian-led operation in Dallas with American employees.

These observations were supplemented by research findings from an American sociologist, Dr. George Renwick, who has studied Australian-American relationships in many contexts, including the two broad areas identified above.

The first of these broad areas appeared under the heading "Organizational issues", which discussed unexpected differences in relation to comfort within organizational hierarchies; precision of role definitions, and status recognition. Collectively, these differences were very substantial. The second broad area was headed "Issues related to actual and potential conflict", and the unexpected differences here were even more profound in terms of diversity of custom and behaviour.

Even if we had had Renwick's rather penetrating insights in hand at that time – which we did not – my judgement is that there was virtually no chance we could have resolved these differences satisfactorily. We were an Australian organization operating in the USA. Many critical aspects of the ways we operated were directly contrary to some very important cultural values of our American employees. It goes without saying that we could not, and would not attempt to, change their cultural values.

So we, the Australians, had to change. We could not undertake our project management business in the USA in Australian mode, so we changed the business. The Dallas operation moved its focus to financial and entrepreneurial activities, which required relatively few people, and different types of people – particularly Americans who were already experienced in these kinds of operations, and who had substantial say in the way they were undertaken. The environment and working conditions were such that the Americans' cultural norms were not significantly competing with the Australians' cultural values on issues which were important to both.

As already noted, this article has confined itself to two broad areas in which unexpected cultural differences between Australians and Americans have had negative impacts on their ability to work together harmoniously. Renwick 1980 has many other examples of significant unexpected differences in both personal and work-based interactions. Some of these which may impact on teamwork in cross-cultural situations are summarised in the following.

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…. Americans are reluctant to accept contradictions …
…. Australians are usually not bothered by contradictions.   (p 30)

…. Americans expect conformity from others, including Australians.
Australians, however, are inclined to resist these expectations.   (p 39)

Australians …. tend to be rather indifferent to standards ….
Americans …. are very conscious of standards.   (p 40)

Australians are quite collaborative in their orientation. …..
Americans, however, are somewhat less collaborative   (p 45)

These are a few examples from some twenty five different headings under which Renwick discusses unexpected differences in the Australian – American context.
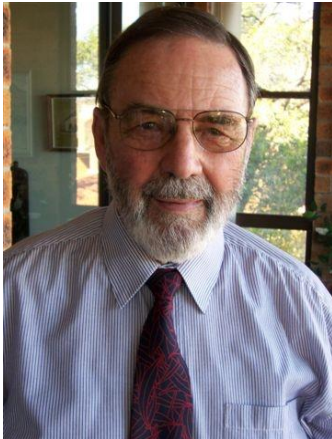
Now, it appears most likely that similar unexpected differences apply between other cultures that have strong similarities – for example, the USA and the UK. Does any reader know of research similar to Renwick's work in the Australian – American context which discusses these sorts of issues in other similar intercultural contexts?

Finally, the above section on "Potential educational consequences" pointed out that there were potential dangers for Australian educators and practitioners who are unaware of the "unexpected" cultural differences between Australians and Americans. This is because most of the published materials on project management used in this country are American-sourced, so that adoption of some of these materials in educational programs and practice here may not only be inappropriate in some contexts, but may indeed be counterproductive. I would be interested in knowing if these circumstances have been recognised in other similar cross-cultural situations.

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Alan Stretton is one of the pioneers of modern project management. He is currently a member of the Faculty Corps for the University of Management & Technology (UMT), USA. In 2006 he retired from a position as Adjunct Professor of Project Management in the Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), Australia, which he joined in 1988 to develop and deliver a Master of Project Management program.   Prior to joining UTS, Mr. Stretton worked in the building and construction industries in Australia, New Zealand and the USA for some 38 years, which included the project management of construction, R&D, introduction of information and control systems, internal management education programs and organizational change projects. He has degrees in Civil Engineering (BE, Tasmania) and Mathematics (MA, Oxford), and an honorary PhD in strategy, programme and project management (ESC, Lille, France). Alan was Chairman of the Standards (PMBOK) Committee of the Project Management Institute (PMI®) from late 1989 to early 1992. He held a similar position with the Australian Institute of Project Management (AIPM), and was elected a Life Fellow of AIPM in 1996. He was a member of the Core Working Group in the development of the Australian National Competency Standards for Project Management. He has published over 150 professional articles and papers. Alan can be contacted at alanailene@bigpond.com.au.

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