Book review

‘White Men are Liars’ – another look at Aboriginal-Western interactions


Liars? Such a title is hardly designed to make ‘Whites’ read this booklet. However, those with sufficient curiosity to investigate further will find an explanation for the statement that is mind-blowing - one of those ‘ah ha’ experiences that change the way one understands the world. In this case ‘the world’ is ‘cross-cultural dealings that involve traditional Aboriginals, that is, people for whom an indigenous language is their first language and who may well live on a remote community’ (p. vii), and ‘Whites’. Bain draws on her linguistic and anthropological training to analyse the Aboriginal perception that White Men are liars. Her thesis is presented in a small, concise and inexpensive booklet that belies its academic authority and its significance to cross-cultural interactions in contemporary Australia.

The term ‘Westerners’ rather than ‘Whites’ is used throughout and becomes meaningful to the reader when Bain extends her analysis from language as linguistic exchange to language as a reflection of its cultural system. Although drawn from research in the 1960s and 1970s, the findings remain relevant to current attempts to ensure that Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians enjoy the same level of health and prosperity. In essence, the findings show that equality and rights are inaccessible if the differences in cultural systems are not addressed. Bain’s fitness for this task is exemplary: over 20 years’ working in remote area communities, practical competence in Pitjantjatjara, a Science degree, and a Master of Arts (Anthropology and Sociology) from Monash University.

The aim of the treatise is to ‘assist Aboriginals and Westerners to achieve greater mutual understanding and productive relationships’ (p. vii). Bain therefore writes for members of both cultures, and meticulously investigates the differences in terms of cultural systems. To explore the component parts of each system, she provides some examples of communication failure. These examples gain in significance as she works through her data and forms a theory that the ‘both Aboriginal people and Western people abstract, but what they abstract and to what degree they use abstraction are the points of difference’ (p. 3). Before the reader has time to disconnect from the argument by this use of the term ‘abstraction’, Bain captures interest by explaining that it shows up since Aboriginal abstractions ‘prefer to retain a link with the concretely real, while Western abstractions often break this link’ (p. 3). ‘Mother’ is a word that, while abstract because it is a kinship term and an intellectual notion, nevertheless describes a real person’s relationship to real others, and therefore has a tangible quality. Its extension by Westerners to the concept of ‘motherhood’ is, however, not tied to anyone in particular and is therefore at a different level of abstraction. This difference may seem trivial, but as the examples and analysis progress, become startlingly obvious and painfully serious.

Bain develops her argument cautiously and thoroughly, working through her research data by looking at ‘clues’. The first clue is cultural ways of thinking and the use of
language to convey that thinking. For instance, an abstract notion such as ‘poverty’ will be interpreted by a traditional Aboriginal person as talk about a specific person, a person known to them and maybe even themselves, which can be offensive. The belief that ‘White Men are liars’ can arise when Westerners put forward purely hypothetical ideas often introduced by ‘if’. These are ideas only, and not linked directly to reality, as ‘we might go to town tomorrow. If we go, we’ll …’ (p. 9) but the Aboriginal will interpret this as ‘when we go to town tomorrow….’. The absence of pure hypothesis affects also any discussion of alternatives and possibilities, which remain no more than ideas, merely possible, not real, until one is chosen. Such difference affects interactions where comprehension is vital, such as planning and discussions about funding.

The second clue is derived from examining world views, that is, the ideas undergirding notions of how the natural world works and of people’s place within it. These are represented in the more familiar paintings, singing etc. Examination shows that again, Aboriginal and Western understandings differ substantially.

Bain’s analysis of the third clue, social relationship, is original, sophisticated and deep. Traditional Aboriginal society is based on a non-negotiable kinship system where there are no strangers, whereas in Western society relationships can be with kin or can be negotiated with unknown persons. In addition, the Western social model relies heavily on the use of numerical calculation, but it is absent from the Aboriginal model. Both these features are pivotal to successful management of Western businesses. This may explain why many Aboriginal communities employ Westerners to run Councils and operate stores.

Recognising that social structure and practice, while differing in the two cultures, are complete in themselves, Bain uses the metaphor of gears to suggest how a cross-cultural operation can be successful. 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.

This booklet is too short to engage with international cross-cultural business analysts who have identified similar differences in world cultural systems but who have not included Australian Indigenous systems in their research. Bain’s scholarly contribution should excite them. For me, however, the most electrifying insight is that White Men are not liars, but certain differences between Western and traditional Aboriginal cultures frequently skew understanding, causing serious communication breakdowns. While often interpreted as individuals’ failures, they can now be understood more accurately. Educators, community and social workers and administrators – in fact, just about everybody - can learn how to work with these differences rather than ignoring them. Educationalists can incorporate system difference into courses rather than assuming that transferring knowledge and skills alone provides the keys to the kingdom and its riches. By acknowledging that the context of work and education in Australia is Western culture, inter-cultural gears can be developed to produce something concrete and thus bring reality to the notion of justice. White men don’t have to be liars.

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