This installment of the Global Vision column represents a little bit of a departure from our focus on international research collaboration but not a total departure. The focus here is on “expatriation” rather than (or perhaps as well as) on collaboration; nevertheless, it continues our theme of “the international dimension” in I-O psychology. When we learned some 6 months (or so) ago that Carol Kulik had accepted an appointment at Melbourne University we thought it provided this column with the chance to get a slice of “reality” of what it means for an I-O professional to change university systems and countries. Carol is a well-known researcher and to our knowledge the “highest profile,” North American I-O scholar to relocate to Australia. Given this, it seemed like a natural opportunity to get her perspective on both the adjustment required of her as an individual and on differences between the U.S. and Australian academies. As members of the Australian system, we thought we might gain from an “outsider’s” initial impressions of our academic system and culture, which is second nature to us. Indeed we are intrigued by Carol’s rather positive assessment of the Australian PhD process in her article, even as we, in our institution at least, work on bringing our PhD practices somewhat closer to the U.S. model. On the other hand, for our non-Australian readers, particularly Carol’s North American colleagues, we thought it would offer them an “insider’s” view of a system, about which, in our experience most Americans have a generally positive, but at best very hazy understanding. We (Mark and Boris, that is!) apologize if this latter observation sounds like a classic piece of stereotyping and we won’t even bother to try and justify it, but if it is stereotyping, at least its motivation is affectionate.

So, it is with great pleasure that we bring to you the story of “Carol in Oz Land.”

Carol in Oz Land: An American Academic Moves to Australia

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About a year ago, as I was preparing to move to Melbourne, several of my North American colleagues asked me
“Why Australia?” There are many reasons why I decided to make the move. I could tell you about Australia’s incredible scenery or Melbourne’s numerous restaurants and cafes—but I’ll save the travel endorsements for a discussion over lattes at the next SIOP conference. Here, I’ll focus on the primary research-related reason.

Over the last 10 years or so, my research has focused on organizational efforts to manage diversity. We know that diversity in groups and organizations often has undesirable effects—less group cohesiveness, more tension, lower commitment. I’ve been studying how organizational interventions (e.g., diversity training, mentoring programs) can help to mitigate some of these negative outcomes and capitalize instead on the benefits that a diverse workforce can bring. In the U.S., my focus was on what I call “domestic” diversity. I was primarily interested in understanding how U.S. organizations could manage the effects of age, gender, race, and other demographic differences within their workforce.

However, these domestic diversity issues are not only a concern to U.S. organizations. Many countries are experiencing parallel challenges associated with aging workforces, increased female employment in traditionally male occupations, and greater racioethnic diversity resulting from changes in immigration patterns. I’ve become increasingly curious about how different countries manage diversity and how their particular approaches to diversity management are influenced by their history. American diversity research articles usually open with a standard compare-and-contrast between affirmative action programs as they were practiced in the U.S. during the 1960s and the 1970s and today’s broader diversity management programs. That’s a 30-year timeline that traces a movement from the passive nondiscrimination demanded by U.S. equal opportunity law to the more proactive diversity management efforts common in today’s organizations. In Australia, Commonwealth legislation outlawing racial discrimination was enacted in 1975 (a full decade after the Civil Rights Act appeared in the U.S.), and legislation outlawing discrimination based on sex was not enacted until 1984 (de Cieri & Olekalns, 2001). However, the term “diversity management” was already appearing in the Australian literature in 1991 (Teicher & Spearritt, 1996). While some authors have criticized Australian businesses for being slow to make diversity a top priority (D’Netto & Sohal, 1999; Teicher & Spearritt, 1996), what I have found most interesting is this rapid (to my observer’s eyes) transition from an equal opportunity focus to a diversity focus—with substantially less of the affirmative action debates and legal disputes so common in the U.S. news.

So, that’s one of the main reasons I moved to Australia. I wanted to see how diversity management in the here-and-now differed from diversity management in the there-and-now. I didn’t think that learning about national differences in diversity management was something I could do effectively if I
was anchored in only one national context. But this brings me to the usual subject of this column—“international collaboration.” I can bring two distinct meanings to the term “international collaboration.” It might mean “collaboration across geographic boundaries” and reflect my efforts to maintain collaborative relationships with my North American colleagues. Or it might mean “collaboration across cultural boundaries” and therefore reflect my efforts to initiate research locally and build new collaborative relationships within Australia. I’ll tell you about both.

Before I left the U.S. almost a year ago, I was very concerned about maintaining my North American network. I invested a good deal of effort in strategizing ways to maintain ties to North American academic libraries and professional associations. These concerns, in general, were unwarranted. I have found international collaboration, in the geographic sense, to be a nonissue.

I hasten to add: a nonissue, for me, in my current career stage, and at my institution. As a relatively senior academic, I’ve spent the last 15 years or so developing collaborative relationships with students, colleagues, and coauthors. I am fortunate that my department at the University of Melbourne values my international connections and encourages me to attend conferences in the U.S. and maintain my relationships with U.S.-based associations like SIOP and the Academy of Management. Much of my collaborative writing was already being conducted via e-mail—it was only a small incremental step from spanning the west and east coast of the U.S. to spanning the (virtual) distance between the U.S. and Australia. Almost all of the submissions I receive and the correspondence I send in my role as senior associate editor at the Journal of Management is by e-mail. In fact, I’ll share a dirty little secret—living in Australia has made me a more reliable colleague to my North American collaborators. Thanks to the International Date Line, promising something by 5 PM means that I really have until early the next morning! The reality is, most of these resources would be less available to a more junior person. I’m sure it is much more challenging to initiate international relationships than it is to maintain relationships that are already firmly established.

Which brings me to the second meaning of international collaboration—“collaboration across cultural boundaries.” Remember that my primary research goal is to examine diversity management as practiced by Australian organizations. What’s it like for an American born-and-bred academic to research diversity issues in Australia? There have been a few surprises along the way. Being an academic, my favorite haunt in any country is the university library, and my first priority was learning the Australian literature on managing diversity.

Great Britain and the U.S. are frequently described as two countries separated by a common language, but the same could be said of the U.S. and Australia. Most of the time, my American English (“cookie” instead of “biscuit” or “trash” instead of “rubbish”) just makes Australian listeners smile.
But there is, in fact, a language barrier that can compromise my research efforts if I’m not vigilant. In my library searches, I can miss the Australian literature on “carers” of people with disabilities if I only use the American term “caregivers.” I’ll miss the Australian literature on “induction” of diverse recruits if I only use the term “socialization” (or even socialisation!). And my search of “compensation” will bring up only articles related to workers’ compensation, and not the literature on “remuneration” that I really wanted.

Once I’ve gotten the search terms sorted out (usually by conducting an informal poll with my Australian colleagues over lunch), a second challenge is accessing the Australian literature. The University of Melbourne has a terrific library, with great electronic resources and a variety of indexing and searching tools. But when I use these tools to search the academic literature, I’m most likely to access American and European journals. For example, the Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources (a good source of human resource research focusing on Australasian contexts) doesn’t appear in these electronic indexes at all. And even if I use Lexis/Nexis and specify only Australian newspapers, the articles often describe business practices at large international companies and not the smaller Australian businesses I’m really after. It’s actually been easier for me to monitor the American literature on managing diversity (including current news events) than the Australian literature. I’m learning, but slowly, to use newsalert services (e.g., CCH Australia) and local professional organizations (e.g., the Australian Human Resources Institute) to learn more about the current diversity issues facing Australian companies. I’m also beginning to meet local academics interested in diversity issues, and their recent publications are effective portals into the broader literature.

One of my responsibilities at the University of Melbourne is mentoring doctoral students in the human resource management area, and that’s been a great way for me to learn about diversity issues in Australia. The students here are studying a range of diversity issues spanning gender, disabilities, sexual orientation, and a host of other demographic dimensions—not so different from the topics my students were addressing in the U.S., but with their own unique viewpoints. Doctoral student education operates very differently in the U.S. and Australia. At the U.S. institutions in which I’ve worked, students usually spend 2 years on coursework before moving on to develop a dissertation proposal. In Australia, doctoral students begin work on their theses almost immediately. They might take classes in statistics or content areas as needed, but there is little standard coursework required of all students. Given my American training, this system appeared to me to be rather like being thrown into the deep end of the pool to learn how to swim—and I was more than a little skeptical. But after an admittedly brief experience in the Australian system, I’m seeing the advantages it can offer. Students come into the doctoral program with a clearer sense of what they want to study. They immediately begin to satisfy that interest by getting involved in a focused
area of research. I suspect that over the long haul (and we all know that getting a PhD can be a very long haul) the Australian system may be more effective in maintaining student motivation and involvement. And it may, in some respects, produce PhD theses that have a more immediate impact. Part-time enrollment in a PhD program is much more common in Australian universities than in U.S. institutions, and many students use their current or former employer as a field site. Students, therefore, are often in a position to stimulate and direct organizational change.

I’ve also initiated a few collaborative projects with my Australian colleagues. In these research projects, I’m not yet learning about the content of diversity management in Australia—but I’m learning a whole lot about the process of studying diversity management in Australia. For example, it’s hard for me to construct a survey on diversity issues without asking participants to self-categorize in terms of race—that final survey page asking for demographics looks funny to me without the standard race question. However, respondent race is rarely asked in Australian surveys—even in the national census. In Australia, where 25% of the workforce was born outside the country (de Cieri & Olekalns, 2001), it’s considered much more informative to ask where the respondent (or the respondent’s parents) was born. That’s gotten me thinking about the classic distinctions we make in the diversity literature between primary and secondary dimensions—and the role we researchers play in establishing and maintaining those distinctions. I can’t yet report on my experiences collecting data—the projects are still in the planning stages. I can say that local organizations, in general, seem to be highly supportive of academic research. Australian employees are less frequently surveyed than their U.S. counterparts. Perhaps that makes them less cynical about the value of survey participation—local response rates tend to be higher than what I’m used to seeing in the U.S.

But probably the most critical thing to mention is the fact that I am currently living the very phenomenon I study. A standard diversity training exercise is to send trainees out to an environment where they can have first-hand experience with being different (e.g., male trainees go to an obstetrician’s office; Christian trainees visit a mosque). I’ve been living a 10-month version of that exercise. I’ve never before been so easily sorted into a single category (“Oh, she’s American!”). My numerical distinctiveness made all of the usual settling-in activities (renting a place to live, opening a bank account, getting a drivers license) take on new levels of scrutiny and self-awareness. And, just as the research indicates (e.g., Kanter, 1977), that distinctiveness comes with advantages and disadvantages. As soon as the waiter hears my American accent, I am forgiven for not knowing I was supposed to order at the counter before sitting down. But I still struggle with that awkwardness at the end of the meal about whether I should tip (following my American instincts) or not (following Australian practice)—and, whatever choice I
make, I worry about the impact it has on Australian impressions of American
diners. It has made me a better diversity teacher, since more of my in-class
examples can be drawn directly from personal experience. We’ll see if it
makes me a better diversity researcher as well.

Are there some research topics that are context-free? There must be—
although I’m hard-pressed to think of any at this moment. I know that my par-
ticular research interest (diversity management) is not context free—and I’m
looking forward to seeing what studying diversity in North American and Aus-
tralian contexts can tell us about effective diversity management across contexts.

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