‘Multiculturalism and Visible Migrants and Refugees: Exploring the Yawning Gap Between Rhetoric and Policy in Australia’

Dr Millsom S Henry-Waring
Lecturer in Sociology
The University of Melbourne
Parkville
Melbourne 3010

Tel: +61 3 8344 6562
Fax: +61 3 8344 7906
Email: m.henry-waring@unimelb.edu.au

Biography: Dr Millsom S Henry-Waring
Millsom Henry-Waring is a lecturer in Sociology in the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Melbourne. Her research interests include: identity, difference & Otherness, especially notions of visibility, Blackness and whiteness; questions of belonging, specifically the resettlement of migrants and refugees in the Australian context; intimacy in the 21st century and the social implications of new technologies.

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Abstract

This paper will critically examine the position of visible migrants and refugees within the socio-political context of multicultural policies and practices in Australia, specifically, but not exclusively, under the Howard government. Drawing purposely upon comments by the former Liberal Immigration Minister Kevin Andrews in 2007 about Sudanese refugees ‘not fitting’ into ‘the Australian way of life’, this paper explores how the policies of multiculturalism do not match the rhetoric of Australia as being a cohesive multicultural society. Part of this mismatch lays in the contested nature of the terms which constitute the discourse of multiculturalism. Other factors include the troubled historical, political and social legacy of ‘settled’ Australia, which is bound up within the discourses of Otherness and Whiteness. As a result, although notions of multiculturalism may have shifted over time, they have also remained stuck within what I have termed the ‘metadiscourses of Otherness’ which simultaneously normalises whiteness yet fixes and essentialises difference as negative Otherness. This has meant that multicultural life in Australia can never be fully realised or experienced - it remains at best, merely an empty symbolic signifier which veils the intrinsically racist nature of Australian society. A key aim of this paper is to begin to bridge the deep and yawning gulf between the rhetoric and practice of multiculturalism. To move beyond essentialist discourses, and argue for a closer inspection of, and a real debate about, acknowledgement and promotion of difference and diversity within Australian society.

Keywords: Multiculturalism; Visible Migrants and Refugees; Otherness; Whiteness; Social Cohesion

(270 words)
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Introduction

‘Some groups don't seem to be settling and adjusting into the Australian way of life as quickly as we would hope’ - The former Liberal Immigration Minister Kevin Andrews - The Age 3rd October 2007

In 2007 the former Liberal Immigration Minister Kevin Andrews stated that the humanitarian intake for groups from the Horn of Africa would be cut from 75% to 40%, and that no further applications would be accepted until June 2008. At the same time, he added that this was also in light of evidence suggesting some groups such as the Sudanese were not fitting in to the Australian way of life, which was in some way different to the ways other refugees/migrants had previously adjusted. It is easy to overlook now, but it is important to take note of the social and political context of Australia at the time, which Hage (1998) and others see as part of a wider context of white fear, anxiety and paranoia. It was the run up into a perceived tight Federal election; with rising Islamaphobia following terror attacks since 9/11; a backdrop of headlines of the Haneef case; and the NT intervention; and media and moral panics about Sudanese gangs and violence in Melbourne. Not surprisingly there was public outcry from the Sudanese, refugee groups and other communities.

The former Liberal Minister claimed that the specific circumstances of certain African groups, such as low levels of education and English language skills, and long duration in refugee camps after emanating from war-torn areas, mean that these particular groups face special
challenges, which make their adjustment to Australia more difficult than others. On the face of it, this may have seemed an innocuous statement to many, but as the Victorian Premier, John Brumby noted, most refugees groups have faced similar settlement issues. Brumby restated the view that all refugee and migrant groups have had varying levels of adjustment to Australian society and history shows that in the end, they all (re)settle. Kevin Andrew’s comments were also made more suspicious when he argued that there is a ‘duty to protect the Australian community’, implying that there was a danger and threat posed by this specific group of refugees. Even the Victorian Police Commissioner, Christine Nixon distanced herself from Andrews’ claims, saying the numbers did not merit such a focus. When pushed, Kevin Andrews could not point to firm evidence of his assertions. Andrews was also heavily criticised by refugee advocacy groups for racial vilification. Interestingly, Andrews’ comments placed the focus and the responsibility on the refugees themselves, and not the failure or absence of any government policies/programs.

These comments by Andrews on some migrants and refugees not fully belonging/settling in, and the media hype surrounding it, are significant as they highlight fundamental questions inherent in debates about multiculturalism. Firstly, it is important to distinguish here between the terms ‘multicultural’ and ‘multiculturalism’ as they often get conflated. ‘Multicultural’ refers to the existence of peoples from diverse cultures within a society/community. As many commentators have argued, Australia is certainly one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world, and arguably has been so since white settlement (Jupp 2001). ‘Multiculturalism’ in contrast, initially refers to a set of formal strategies and/or policies devised to acknowledge, encourage, and enhance cultural pluralism; and it also now includes strategies and/or policies devised to enhance social cohesion through the notions of civic values, rights and responsibilities (Galligan & Roberts 2003).

Further, as Forrest and Dunn (2007: p700) assert, ‘multiculturalism in Australia, as elsewhere, is also unsettled by its dynamism and development. It remains an unfinished project, with gaps in its coverage and limits to its reach in some sections and demographics’. Multiculturalism then, is complex as its currency depends on the why, the when and the who? Clearly, it means different things to individuals, communities, institutions and societies, but the problem is that multiculturalism has become, as Ommundsen (2000: p6) states, ‘an increasingly incoherent and nebulous concept’. Consequently, it has now more often than not become a way of saying something without doing anything. To this end, opponents of multiculturalism have emerged from both the political left and right wanting to throw it out. This is a premature move as multiculturalism does have an important place within any society that wants to acknowledge, celebrate and explore difference and diversity for all its citizens. As Ommundsen (2000:5) argues ‘Those who have serious doubts about the rhetoric of multiculturalism will find that it simply is not, and never was, there for them to ‘abolish’.
What recent debates demonstrate, however, is that multiculturalism, and its implications for the social construction of Australia, are in need of serious clarification and rethinking’. Ommundsen’s (2000) article, in particular, provides a very useful outline of a number of historically different models of multiculturalism in Australia, which I do not have the space to expand upon here. Instead, I would like to emphasise his ideas about multiculturalism as ‘an empty signifier’. For Ommundsen (2000: 10), this model sees multiculturalism as ‘nothing but a rhetorical gesture; like Baudrillard’s simulacrum it masks the absence of an underlying reality…it functions to cover up both indifference and lack of differentiation’… [Further] ‘it has become a convenient pretext for not dealing with the issues arising from cultural difference. For governments and individuals alike, it offers the opportunity for self-congratulation but not for self-scrutiny’. I fully concur and as a result, this paper maintains that multiculturalism will remain an unfinished project; because it is locked within a set of discourses which objectifies Otherness and ignores the privileges of whiteness, the results of which are evident in the mistreatment of visible racialised Others within Australia. What is needed is not the jettisoning of the term, but an urgent, careful and critical review of multiculturalism away from essentialist and racist discourses of Otherness.

Otherness

By drawing upon what I have defined elsewhere as a ‘critical Black British feminism’, (Henry-Waring 2004), this paper starts from the perspective that there are meta-discourses of Otherness – a highly pervasive set of ideological constructions that shape attitudes, beliefs and actions. It is within these discourses where ideas about difference and diversity are created and refuse to be dismantled.
Using Foucault’s (1981) ideas about power and knowledge, I argue that the meta-discourses of Otherness reflect an ideology that is essentially hegemonic. Power and knowledge are continually reinforced formally and informally, throughout all levels of society through a number of vehicles; individually and collectively; explicitly and implicitly. A commonly accepted expression of multiculturalism across Australian society is ‘the cultural festival’, where invariably difference as Otherness is reinforced.

I have asserted that the meta-discourses of Otherness act as hegemonic carriers of ideology and power and that for the purposes of this paper, give primacy to Whiteness, at the direct expense of those defined as ‘Other’ (Henry-Waring 2004). At the heart of these meta-discourses lay a set of pervasive ideologies that valorize whiteness as the norm, from which Others are constructed, defined, scrutinised and controlled. Also intrinsic to these discourses is white fear and anxiety about difference and diversity (Hage 2000, 2003). It is within this context that multiculturalism in Australia must be critically assessed. I assert that especially for visible migrants and refugees in Australia, the current climate is one in which the reality is based on assimilation rather than integration and despite claims to the contrary, even if we do assimilate, we remain marginalized.

Visible Migrants and Refugees

This paper is therefore particularly interested in the link between multiculturalism and visible migrants and refugees, as it highlights the significance of addressing ‘race’ within debates about multiculturalism and the process of racialisation (Small 1994). Skin colour is one of the most visible markers of difference and along with ethnicity, religion, language, and culture, forms a key part of how society includes and excludes. For migrants and refugees,
recent policies have made belonging even more conditional by requiring a formal commitment to the Australian way of life (Harris and Williams 2003). A question that deserves to be asked then, is how can we *belong* when we standout, especially when our difference is embedded in a context of Otherness? As social beings we all know it is significant to feel that we belong. It is an essential part of what it is to be human, of our very identities. Whether it’s a sense of belonging and identity to families, group(s), communities, region(s), nation-state(s) or even to sporting teams or political parties – these are all ways in which we can and do feel valued\(^7\). When a sense of belonging is questioned, it seriously destabilises our notions of Self and acts as a critical marker of our difference. The question of belonging then, is a highly complex one for all peoples, but it is particularly a constant and uneasy one for all migrants and refugees – who are conventionally configured as outsiders. In Australia, (as elsewhere) this may be further complicated for migrants and refugees who are visibly different\(^8\). Yet the rhetoric about multiculturalism overlooks these intricate realities of difference as Otherness and the policies that exist are accordingly viewed as ineffective.

Multiculturalism today has become a dirty word\(^9\) – ultimately, it is seen as a weak set of policies and practices which do little to tackle the real issues faced by all people living in culturally diverse communities/societies (Back, Keith, Khan, Shukra and Solomos 2002; Joppke 2004). As Galligan and Roberts (2003: 16) point out, ‘Multiculturalism is now used more by governments at the national and state levels as rhetoric of community relations that aims at social cohesion’. Indeed, despite claims by anti-multiculturalists\(^10\), social cohesion does exist in Australia (Jupp, Nieuwenhuysen and Dawson 2007). Important as social cohesion currently is within all levels of Australian government, there is not yet any formal multicultural strategy or policy devised or adhered to, and as a result there are critical gaps in service provision (Dunn, Thompson, Hanna, Murphy and Burnley 2001, Thomson and
Dunn 2002). Dunn et al (2001) argue for more than just the celebratory festivals but to engage all in reconfiguring a local and more diverse form of citizenry and therefore also of governance.

Everyday life in multicultural Australia is difficult for many, especially those who are socially disadvantaged due to their, ‘racial’, cultural and/or ethnic heritage. There are now increased and newer forms of racism(s) that symbolically and materially exist, both locally and globally. There are constant coded messages from governments and others about negative Otherness, despite the rhetoric of multiculturalism. As a result, commentators point to the failure of multiculturalism to tackle the real issues of exclusion, by not dealing with racism (Dunn, Forrest, Burnley and McDonald 2004, Jakubowicz 2007) nor indeed, deconstructing whiteness (Hage 1998, 2000, 2003; hooks 1992, Stratton 1999, Tascón 2008). Consequently, the focus is upon superficial forms of cultural exchange, which assume that culture is fixed and belongs primarily to the racialised Other. There is therefore no cultural dialogue, but just a focus on the exoticisation and consumption of the Other. Whiteness remains assumed, valorized and unchallenged. The host society/community merely has to tolerate external cultures. It does not have to exchange or enter into a dialogue or conversation. Therefore, it never is obliged to change or adapt, with the focus remaining on migrants and others to accept ‘our’ values and ‘commit’ to Australia.

I maintain that there is a widening gulf between the rhetoric and practice of multiculturalism. We are clearly not all equal. As illustrated in the comments by the former Immigration Minister Kevin Andrews outlined earlier, some groups are not given ‘a fair go’, but instead they have time limits imposed on their inclusion and period of settlement. As Dr Maureen H Fitzgerald, NSW stated in the 1999 Report on Multiculturalism, ‘We must also be sure that
policy is more than rhetoric. If ‘fair go’ is inherent in the policy then we must put such values into practice ... If we say we welcome and embrace cultural diversity then we have to behave in ways that show that we do. We have to be sure that this diversity is reflected in policy documents’ (pp93-4).12

This means multiculturalism must address the legacy and persistence of racism in all its forms. It must incorporate a wider notion of *cultural pluralism*, which means recognizing and acknowledging the dynamic nature of culture for all peoples and the multiple positions that this engenders.

To ensure an ongoing and open dialogue, there need to be better forms of communication, training and education for all sectors of the community, about migrants and refugees and host communities. This means working with a wider and more diverse concept of community, social capital and social cohesion. It means that what is required is a critical review and engagement of governments, media and other key institutions. This may also necessarily demand the proper resourcing of targeted and other initiatives for migrants and refugees, especially those most excluded. And finally, further research is called for, to focus on the links between policy and practice.

**Some Conclusions**

Throughout this paper, I have maintained that on one level multiculturalism has become merely a symbolic gesture towards notions of social inclusiveness and cohesion. It fails to name the real inequalities and differences around cultures and ‘race’, both of which remain essentialised, fixed and focused negatively on Otherness.
There are key flaws around the term and there remains a yawning gap between the rhetoric and practice of multiculturalism. I contend that the goals of multiculturalism are certainly worth clarifying but they must be reconfigured outside of the problematic meta-discourses of Otherness. In my view, the purpose and aspirations of multiculturalism must be to educate; to inform; and most significantly, to encourage acknowledgement of difference and diversity, rather than just toleration. Instead of retreating or being discarded, multiculturalism needs to be pushed further, to provide effective strategies and policies at all levels. It should not be viewed as a ‘one size fits all’ model, nor one that fixes culture or essentialises individuals and groups. Multiculturalism must acknowledge the real power inequities; name and deconstruct whiteness; and recognise that it is not just about visible or indeed, any migrants/refugees, but it is about all of us.

**References**


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Tascón, S M (2008), 'Narratives of race and nation: Everyday whiteness in Australia', in Social Identities, 14:2, 253—274


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**Media Reports/Commentary**
Caldwell A (2007) ‘Sudanese Refugees’ Audio report on ABC at:
http://mpegmedia.abc.net.au/news/audio/pm/200710/PM05-Sudan-refugees.mp3


Reports:


Web sites:


Endnotes

http://mpegmedia.abc.net.au/news/audio/pm/200710/PM05-Sudan-refugees.mp3

2 For example, media reports and articles by the following: Hall Toby (2007), ‘We have failed the refugees who need the most help to resettle’, in The Age, October 4, 2007 at:


3 I advance the notion of ‘meta-discourses’ to encompass Foucault’s (1981) ideas about discourses of power and ideology and Higginbotham’s (1992) concept of ‘metalanguage’ to describe a set of overriding hegemonic, largely Anglo/Eurocentric ideologies, structures and practices, which reinforce the status quo – the extent and influence of which configure Black women in Britain firmly as a negative Other. However, I also assert that the notion of meta-discourses should be not be read as so totalising to the extent that it excludes the possibility of movement outside, in between and within these meta-discourses. The term ‘meta-discourses’ provides a useful and initial first step to describing pervasive nature of ideologies and beliefs, which have consistently marginalised the position of Black women in Britain.

I am aware of the problem of referring to both migrants and refugees, visible and otherwise as they represent a diverse and complex groupings – in terms of visibility though, most of the host society would not necessarily treat migrant or refugee differently in terms of unquestioned belonging.

Clearly, gender, sexuality, age and disability are also key markers.

I am not implying here a hierarchy of belonging, rather a layering.

For example, research in Australia by Colic-Pesker (2005) on former Yugoslavian migrants and refugees or Fijac and Sonn (2004) on Pakistani-Muslim women in Western Australia, highlight some of the visibility issues. Its worth also mentioning here that this is not meant to imply that all visible migrants and refugees experience belonging in a one-dimensional way – like with other migrant and host communities, visible migrants and refugees reflect a diverse range of backgrounds and experiences. This will be further explored in a forthcoming ARC study which looks at visible migrants and refugees who live in rural and regional areas of Australia by Galligan and Henry-Waring.

This was made very evident with the change of name from the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA) to the Department of Immigration and Citizenship by the former Liberal government in January 2007. And Interestingly, the Citizenship Test resource book had no instances of the word ‘multicultural’ or ‘multiculturalism’ in it! It will be fascinating to see if either of these change under the new Rudd government.

As indicated by Wood Alan (2007), Multiculturalism becomes poison for social capital, in The Australian, September 26, available at:


According to the new Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC), Diversity in Australia refers to the fact that ‘Many cultures make up Australian society but we are united
by our commitment to Australia. Government policies and services are in place to build social cohesion’.
