Tough Luck! Reflections on Respect in The Lucky Country

by

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**Abstract**

The paper highlights the dissonance between Australian myths such as mateship and a ‘fair go’ and neoliberal consumer capitalism. It is argued that a particularly pernicious form of market capitalism was able to breed and thrive in Australia as a consequence of the former Howard Government’s neoliberal reforms and policies and that this was inculcated in and continues to permeate everyday interpersonal encounters in private-commercial transactions. The paper links this to a syndrome of ‘market anomie’ under neoliberalism, arguing that the ‘disrespect’ shown individual consumer-citizens who are disadvantaged by the prevailing predominance of the market is ‘un-Australian’, since it runs counter to quintessentially Australian values such as a fair go for all and concern for underdogs. A personal narrative or ‘autoethnography’ is used to illuminate these issues via the author’s own experiences of renting accommodation in Sydney. Specifically, *analytic autoethnography* is used to draw out the disjunction between myth and reality as well as to make broader theoretical claims and propose some policy implications. The paper concludes by examining possible responses, which are limited due to the asymmetry of power relations in the interpersonal encounters that are considered, but include analytic autoethnography as social critique, public sociology, incivility and low-level crime.

**Keywords:** analytic autoethnography; Australian myths; disrespect; fairness; market anomie; neoliberalism
Introduction

In some sections of the literature ‘respect’ is discussed in terms of collective identity and the recognition of difference (Fraser 1995; Honneth 1996). In other circles, respect relates to citizens of the (welfare) state (Sennett 2004) and social struggles (Martin 2001), and in others it relates to the marginalisation of migrant groups (Bourgois 2003; Noble 2005). In all these studies, respect or mutual recognition relates to welfare and policy. My focus is on disrespect manifest in interpersonal encounters in the private-commercial sphere. Broadly speaking, I suppose disrespect occurs where there is a lack of mutuality, recognition or empathy towards the ‘other’ weaker, less powerful or ‘unequal’ party (cf. Sennett 2004: 23). Below I present one story of disrespect, taken from a bigger study about disrespectful encounters in private-commercial settings in Australia under neoliberal consumer capitalism.

Neoliberalism is characterised by the operation of free markets (Harvey 2005: 2), consumerism is regarded as being ‘the most distinctive feature of advanced Western societies’ (Haywood 2004: 3). My aim in part is to explore ways in which consumer culture and market society tend ‘to produce personalities less and less capable of relating to others except as consumer items’ (Currie 1996: 348), and to reflect upon how the rigid (rule-bound) organisation of social relations around market principles conflicts with uniquely Australia values, such as mateship and a fair go. My study chimes with research conducted by Karstedt and Farrall (2006), which identifies a syndrome of ‘market anomie’ (i.e. distrust, fear/insecurity, and cynical attitudes towards law) under neoliberalism, since disrespect constitutes a negative manifestation of neoliberalism consumerism in everyday social interactions.

I use a method of personal narrative or ‘autoethnography’, although my analysis is not like evocative autoethnography, which addresses ‘topics related to emotionally wrenching experiences, such as illness, death, victimization, and divorce’ (Anderson 2006a: 377). Rather, it resembles ‘analytic autoethnography’ (Anderson 2006a), attempting to transcend the particularities of my own experience to make broader theoretical claims.
My experience is generalisable insofar as, ‘Our lives are particular, but they also are typical and generalisable, since we all participate in a limited number of cultures and institutions’ (Ellis and Bochner 2003: 229), and because, ‘The themes are broad, my experiences of them particular but not unique’ (Sennett 2004: 23).

The notion of ‘fairness’ is a touchstone of Australian character and national identity, exemplified in phrases like ‘dinkum’ or ‘fair dinkum’ (genuine, honest, reliable, true) and the idea everyone is entitled to a ‘fair go’ typified in barracking for ‘battlers’ or underdogs (Horne 2008: 21). My story of disrespect reveals a disjunction between myth and reality in Australian culture by, for instance, critically interrogating the quintessentially Australian concepts of ‘mateship’ and a ‘fair go’ to examine whether they tally with everyday private-commercial relations.

The references to luck in the paper’s title are deliberately intended to be as ironic as Horne’s (2008: 233) original description of Australia as, ‘a lucky country run mainly by second-rate people who share its luck’. While Australia continues to fortuitously reap the rewards of the continent’s rich mineral reserves, feeding China’s insatiable appetite for natural resources and seeming immune from the global credit crunch (Potts 2008; Uren 2008), not everyone shares in that luck: it is not the case that ‘all income groups in Australia have gained, at a surprisingly similar rate, from the boom of the last decade’ (Hartcher 2007: 30). Studies and reports not only show Australian society is increasingly polarised (Irvine 2008), but that intense financial pressures now affect working-class and middle-class Australians and their families (Megalogenis 2007); hence the emergence of a new class of working poor or ‘white-collar battlers’ (Anonymous 2008); a new breed of underdog.

My story of disrespect tells of some of my recent experiences – as a middle-income earner – of renting accommodation in Sydney. The story illustrates the fundamental incompatibility of neoliberal principles and practices with core Australian values such as ‘mateship’ and a ‘fair go’. Rampant market forces under neoliberalism benefit the rich and the powerful but also give the illusion of individual freedom and consumer choice. In these circumstances, the prevailing attitude becomes not one of fairness, but tough luck! Paradoxically, John Howard’s (2003) efforts at nation-building, around the concept of
mateship and the Anzac spirit, for instance, contradicted his government’s neoliberal agenda as well as his own personal style of political leadership, which was unashamedly intransigent and unapologetic (Marr 2007: 5). My thesis is that this attitude has permeated and inculcated everyday interpersonal encounters in private-commercial transactions, and insofar as that attitude runs counter to the notion of fair goes in particular, it is ‘un-Australian’ (Dubecki 2008; Mackay 2005; Smith and Phillips 2001).

The recent change of political leadership in Australia has brought with it a refreshingly apologetic air and a genuine desire to uphold the principle of a fair go for all (Rudd 2008: 170). Hopefully, political expression of core values such as this, combined with public policy initiatives reflecting those values, will eventually have positive knock-on effects across civil society. In the meantime, at the level of daily life, responses to disrespect in private-commercial settings will be limited due to the nature of the power imbalance inherent in social relations in such settings, although they may include critique and comment, such as via analytic autoethnography and public sociology as well as ‘resistance’, such as in the forms of incivility and low-level crime. These issues are taken up in the concluding discussion.

A story of disrespect

In this story I wanted to end a 12-month residential tenancy agreement three weeks early because I had found a rental property better suited to my family’s needs. I thought this not an unreasonable request given we had been good tenants (e.g. always paying our rent on time) as well as tolerant tenants (e.g. having lived in mouldy and damp conditions throughout our tenancy). It was also not unreasonable, I thought, given the prevailing conditions in Sydney’s housing market.

The rental housing market in Sydney is presently under severe structural pressure. Demand far outstrips supply, making competition for places incredibly stiff. That, in turn, is compounded by the reality of inflated rents (50% of my salary, as a middle-income earner, currently goes on rent alone), which means people are tending to stay put, in the hope landlords will not unreasonably raise rents where there are sitting tenants. Moreover, applying for rental accommodation in Sydney nowadays is not unlike applying
for a job; references are required for pet cats and employer’s are called up and asked to
describe an applicant’s character in one word. In all respects, it is a landlords’ market.

Thus, I was amazed when, during a telephone call, our real estate agent initially expressed
his doubts over whether the owners would agree to release us from the tenancy agreement
early because, he told me, ‘the rentals market is tight at the moment’; presumably meaning
it was difficult for landlords to rent out their properties. The evidence pertaining to
Sydney’s housing market (rental or otherwise) clearly contradicts that notion, showing it is
in crisis and under great pressure, although not from a landlord’s perspective.

For instance, a recent study found house prices increased by 400% between 1986 and 2007,
while incomes rose only by 120% (Tanton 2008). In April 2008, the NSW Premier
launched a financial rescue package aimed at helping struggling families cope with the
rising cost of living (NSW Office of Fair Trading 2008), hoping this would ease ‘financial
pressure points’, including rising interest rates, rents, and grocery prices. In NSW, the
situation is set to get worse as a fall in house construction is predicted to push up rents
(Irvine 2008b). Other reports suggest a shortage of rental accommodation is a source of
stress for those on lower incomes (Marris 2008a) and that tenant families face the most
housing stress, leading in some cases to homelessness among the worst off: ‘Lower income
families that don’t qualify for public housing are being squeezed out of the private rental
market and onto the margins of society as landlords chase middle class tenants who, in turn,
can’t afford to buy their first home’ (Megalogenis 2007). The polarisation between ‘two
Australias’ (Irvine 2008a) that is now taking place is further underpinned in the housing
sector by the Australian taxation system, which provides a tax concession for owners of
investment properties (Marris 2008b). The rationale for not releasing us from our tenancy
agreement early became apparent during the following brief email exchange I had with the
real estate agent:

ME: Further to our telephone conversation this morning, we would like you to
approach the owners to ask them whether they would allow us to be
released from the lease approximately 3 weeks before its expiry. We have found a house … that is bigger and more appropriate for our needs with a growing family … We look forward to hearing from you in due course.

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REA: I have discussed your request for the early termination of the lease with your landlord, however he has instructed me to inform you that they do not wish to end the lease early.

Naturally you are welcome to move out of the property at your discretion; however you will still be obligated for the rent up to the lease expiry.

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ME: That is disappointing but hardly surprising. It is an extremely sad and sorry state-of-affairs when greed and commercial interests triumph over respect and human decency. While three weeks’ rent may seem insignificant to the landlord, having to pay it will have a significant impact upon our family. We are now faced with the financially crippling prospect of paying double rent for three weeks as well as having to come up with a new bond and one months’ rent in advance when, at the same time, we have not received our original bond back; and are unlikely to do so for several weeks!

Given that we have been good tenants as well as tolerant tenants (e.g. having put up with mouldy walls for the duration of our lease and filthy conditions on entry), I think it is particularly mean-spirited of the landlord not to let us off the last three weeks’ rent. I hope the landlord recognises that this is not a purely commercial transaction: people with real lives are involved! I hope he sleeps well at night.
I would appreciate you forwarding this response to the landlord.

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REA: Thank you for your email. I have discussed your comments with your landlord and we are sorry that you feel this way.

It should be noted, however, that you have made a decision to rent another property that is better suited to your needs. Unfortunately you have entered an agreement before the expiry of your current contract. This has been a decision that you have made for your own reasons.

Your landlord has asked you to fulfill your obligations under the lease.

We look forward to your cooperation and we will attend to the final inspection and the bond return promptly upon you returning the keys to our office.

In fact, we waited almost a month after the official termination of our lease (and nearly six weeks after we had moved out of the property) for the bond to be refunded because the landlord had been ‘unavailable’ to attend to the final inspection any earlier. Along with the real estate agent’s barefaced lie about Sydney’s ‘tight’ rentals market, this is a mark of disrespect because it shows a lack of mutual respect, recognition or empathy. To the contrary, it demonstrates indifference, disdain, even antipathy, for the Other in this transaction. Moreover, insofar as the power relations here are asymmetrical, it constitutes an abuse of power.

However, this is legitimated and justified by appeal to principles of free market individualism, which ignore broader structural influences. This is evident in the real
estate agent’s insinuation that we had decided to rent another property prior to the end of
our lease absolutely of our own volition – a decision made ‘for your own reasons’ – and
entirely unconstrained or unmotivated by the force of wider structural pressures. We were
also ‘welcome’ to vacate the property at any time (at our ‘discretion’), although we were
still bound to fulfil our contractual obligations.

Australian myths and realities

What does my story of disrespect tell us about contemporary Australia? Certainly, it is
unlike 1960s Australia when apparently ‘fair goes’ served to protect people from the
ravages of the free market (Horne 2008: 22). Under Howard’s Government, this idyll
disappeared. Howard’s pursuit of an extremist neoliberal agenda was typified by Work
Choices (Hartcher 2007: 4), which stripped employees of rights at work, even though ‘a
fair go all round’ remains enshrined in the termination of employment jurisdiction:
Workplace Relations Act 1996 (Cth), s 635(2).

Howard’s own vision of Australian character and national identity was exemplified in his
Remembrance Day speech in 2003 – a classic example of imagined community (Anderson
2006: 7) – whereby he said ‘the Australian spirit’ had at its heart, ‘the concept of mateship
– regarded as a particularly Australian virtue – a concept that encompasses unconditional
acceptance, mutual and self respect, sharing whatever is available no matter how meagre, a
concept based on trust and selflessness and absolute interdependence’ (Howard 2003).

Howard’s conception of ‘Australianness’ was peculiar and played upon the notion of ‘the
exaltation of the average’ (White, quoted in Marr 2007: 47). Politically speaking, that
meant catering for the needs of ‘the great mainstream of Australian society’, i.e. public
debt reduction, mateship, support for small business and heterosexual families, and
opposition to trade unions (Marr 2007: 47). After all, ‘Australians like people to be
ordinary’ (Horne 2008: 24), ‘ordinary Australians’, that is, of white, working-and
lower-middle class origins (Noble 2005: 109). To deviate from the mainstream – except in
sport (Horne 2008: 22) – would be ‘un-Australian’ (Dubeci 2008; Mackay 2005; Smith
and Phillips 2001). Thus, somewhat ironically, the defining mood of the Howard years was
of, ‘an uneasy fear of each other, the fear that we’re growing apart, that were not engaged in the same enterprise of being Australian’ (Marr 2007: 46). While this may be symptomatic of the prevailing mood of anxiety, insecurity and uncertainty in the West generally, it is also something specific to Australia’s history and forms of national belonging (Noble 2005: 108).

Howard’s refusal to admit error and make apologies, as noted in the introduction, and especially his obstinate refusal to apologise to the Aboriginal people of Australia for their maltreatment, is an enduring example of what Horne (2008: 22) notes as the blind side in Australian kindness to underdogs. Ironically, given Howard’s mobilisation of Australian myth in his rhetorical politics of imagined community, Rudd also invoked ‘Australian values’ in providing a reason for apologising to Indigenous Australians since, ‘reconciliation is in fact an expression of a core value of our nation – and that value is a fair go for all. There is a deep and abiding belief in the Australian community that, for the stolen generations, there was no fair go at all’ (Rudd 2008: 170).

Concluding discussion

The material I have presented so far attempts to debunk Australian myths of mateship, a fair go, and especially a fair go for underdogs. But what does it tell us about the state of Australian society today? Arvanitakis (2007) argues Australia is marked by the commodification of trust, such that, ‘rather than believing that we can trust those around us, we feel a constant sense of scarcity and competition’ (Arvanitakis 2007: 48). Indeed, reciprocal trade exchange between two individuals is a fundamental source of mutual trust across societies, which has can led to relations between the two of them being ‘relaxed rather than tense, tolerant rather than suspicious, and cordial rather than impersonal’ (Kohn 2008: 28). While the volatility of relations of trust has been connected to risk and ontological (in)security in late modernity (Giddens 1994), I want to consider how this might be interpreted in an Australian context.

Although commentators argue Australians increasingly fear (Marr 2007) and mistrust (Arvanitakis 2007) one another it has also been said that, ‘Australians trust authority’ (Marr 2007: 5). Thus, when Howard passed Work Choices, Australians reacted ‘with
characteristic passivity’ (Marr 2007: 8), that is until they ousted his administration in the next election (Martin 2006: 16). Arguably, this passivity is down to the historical fact that Australians never fought to be free (Marr 2007: 25). The flip side to this passivity is embodied in the mythic figure of the ‘larrikin’ or mischievous youth. However, as Marr (2007: 26) states, ‘We aren’t the larrikins of our imagination. Australians are an orderly people who love authority’ (cf. Horne 2008: 21).

While neoliberalism and consumer capitalism are certainly not peculiar to Australia, my argument is that the neoliberal reforms of the Howard era combined with Australian’s trust of authority (Marr 2007: 5), complacency (Hartcher 2007: 19) and laidback disposition – summed up in the phrase, ‘no worries’ (Bhattacharya 2004: 6) – to produce a most vicious and particularly pernicious form of market capitalism or ‘Howard’s Brutopia’ (Hartcher 2007: 3). This, I argue, has created the conditions for disrespect to be played out in everyday private-commercial transactions. Absent a tradition of social struggle for freedom and liberal tradition of individual rights, or bill of rights (Marr 2007: 27), free market neoliberalism has been left to run riot, unchecked and unbalanced, with only vague, bogus and empty notions of mateship and a fair go for support. This has provided the preconditions for disrespectful encounters in everyday private-commercial settings, but it has been bolstered by Howard’s regime of extreme neoliberalism. Ontological insecurity accompanies the unfettered operation of market forces with no safety net. While my tactic has been to cast guilt and/or shame upon people who have treated me with disrespect, that has been met with recourse to (free market) ‘rules’ rather than (individual consumer) ‘rights’, and thus rather than consideration for what is fair, the attitude has been, overwhelmingly in my experience, one of tough luck! That attitude is dissonant with supposedly essential ‘Australian’ traits such as mateship, fairness and a concern for underdogs.

How can a lone person respond in the face of such dominant colonising (market) forces, which are used in interpersonal commercial exchanges to legitimate and justify instances of ‘disrespect’? Given the individuated and idiosyncratic nature of these interpersonal encounters as well as the constraints these types of private-commercial transactions place upon individual agency, the practice of analytic autoethnography as social critique is one
of a limited range of responses. Insofar as the purpose of analytic autoethnography is to consider ‘how we might construct better worlds and enrich our collective lives in the process’ (Anderson 2006b: 459), then it should say something about policy and politics. While the broader purpose of my study is to uncover the contradictions between Australian culture and private-commercial relations in everyday life, the specific story of disrespect I have presented highlights the real and urgent need for government intervention and policy initiatives in devising innovative homeownership and mortgage schemes, the regulation and control of rents, and to provide more housing as well as more affordable housing. Thus, questions of respect and mutual recognition have policy and welfare implications (Martin 2001; Sennett 2004), although the ‘protest’ of the autoethnographer here is personal (Holman Jones 2005), rather than ‘actively engaged’ (Speed 2006), and is performed from the privileged vantage point of the academy. Nevertheless, by turning private troubles into public issues in this way (Mills 1959), analytic autoethnography heeds the call to ‘public sociology’ (Burawoy 2005: 266).

Others might respond to ‘market anomie’ by committing ‘crimes of everyday life’, or the types of crime that fall into a grey zone of legality and morality, e.g. jumping red lights, not paying TV licence fees, making false insurance claims (Karstedt and Farrall 2006: 1011). But crimes of everyday life are a form of white-collar crime, typically committed by the ‘respectable’ middle classes who have the social, economic and cultural capital at their disposal to instigate and get away with such transgressions.

What hope then for the ‘average’ Australian? A growing literature shows the astounding variety and frequency of ‘everyday incivility’ (i.e. rude and inconsiderate behaviour) that takes place between fleeting strangers in public; deviance rather than criminality (Phillips and Smith 2003). Although not considered in that literature, incivility may be one response to disrespectful treatment in private-commercial encounters. One experiences a loss of control in face of asymmetrical social relations mediated only by the operation of the free market. Thus, incivility is an attempt to achieve some semblance of control in an ontologically insecure social world (Haywood 2004: 165). However, while disrespect is a function or manifestation of market anomie, eliciting crimes of everyday life and other responses such as incivility, incivility is also an expression of disrespect.
References


