Migrant responses to flag use on Australia Day

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The increasing number of Australian flags being displayed on cars for Australia Day appears to signal growing nationalism, although the ‘flavour’ of that nationalism is as yet unclear. What this display signals to migrants is the subject of this study. Qualitative interviews were conducted in Perth, the capital city in which this phenomenon is, anecdotally, most prominent. Two interlocking themes emerged from the data: identity and inclusion. Inclusion is the focus of this paper. Contrary to expectations, participants generally did not see the flag display as exclusionary. Rather, they saw it as an aspect of festivity and pride, contrasting for many with the use of the flag in their countries of origin. While recognising that the flag display in some instances symbolised an exclusionary ethno-racial identity, this was attributed to the individual displayer, rather than representing popular opinion generally. From this, conclusions are drawn to suggest that migrants created an alternative sense of inclusion from the display through a more complex representation of Australian identity. Thus the flag retains its symbolic value as a unifier through inclusive identities constructed by migrants.

Keywords: flags, Australia Day, inclusion, racism, migrants

The problem is: A lot of racist losers do wave the Australian flag and use Australia Day as an excuse to spew their own brand of hateful ignorance. It's disturbing, embarrassing and depressing that people like that exist. But if we allow the Australian flag to be appropriated by these people, if normal Australian's [sic] refuse to celebrate Australia Day or fly the flag out of fear of being associated with the bigots, then we will lose the meaning of some of our most important national symbols.

(Taylor blogger on thewest.com.au, January 22nd, 2011)

The average Australian’s relationship to the Australian flag is complex, as the blogger quoted above illustrates. On one hand it is seen as emblematic of the racism that has become more pronounced in recent years (Joppke, 2004; Noble, 2009), on the other it is a national symbol in which Australians feel they should have pride (Orr, 2010).
This complexity is reflected in specific types of flag waving, particularly the recent phenomenon of displaying small flags affixed to car windows on Australia Day (Orr 2011; Huxley 2009).

Australia Day has only been recognized as a national public holiday since 1994; but has rapidly become the day when “Australians across the nation joined together…[to celebrate] our achievements as a nation” (National Australia Day Council 2011). In Western Australia it is a time of intense celebration, culminating in an annual fireworks display over the city, attended by hundreds of thousands of people. Despite the positive rhetoric, there is a darker side to Australia Day celebrations and flag usage. Violence and racism, in the form of physical and verbal abuse (Burke 2010) have required significant police presence, and for the last few years, the banning of alcohol at most public celebration sites. Anglo-Australians have been observed demanding that “darker skinned revellers kiss the flag or suffer verbal and even physical abuse” (Huxley 2009:7). For the migrant observer, the way the flag is used in some contexts on Australia Day may be related to negative uses in other contexts, such as the Cronulla Riots of 2005 and Pauline Hanson’s maiden speech (Orr 2010; Huxley 2009); or more broadly Australia’s history of exclusionary immigration policies (Joppke 2004); or the divisive history of Australia’s colonisation (Kwan n.d.). Migrant responses are relevant both in the context of a national policy emphasis on social inclusion (Australian Social Inclusion Board 2011), as well as the demographic reality that one-quarter of Australia’s population are migrants. This includes people from over 200 countries with more than 175 different languages (Fozdar & Spittles 2010). Australians have a complex relationship with diversity and national identity. While generally positive about diversity, there is simultaneously a negativity towards migrants, and an overwhelming concern to solidify ‘national identity’, with such attitudes becoming more prevalent (Goot & Watson 2005; IPSOS 2011).

Flags are important symbols in this construction of national identity (Billig 1995; Spillman 1997; Ward 2010; Kwan 2010; Kemmelmeier & Winter 2008). Michael Billig (1995), in his compelling and comprehensive analysis of the connection between the flag and national identity, states, “The metonymic image of banal nationalism is not a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion; it is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building” (1995: 8). This banality is the ‘background noise’ that produces a taken-for-granted pride in national identity, and in the process, establishes ‘us’ and ‘them’. The use of flags on cars appears to be somewhat more active than this banal form of nationalism, but the message it is sending is as yet unclear. Whether migrants see this as representing an inclusive or exclusive form of ‘us’ is the question asked of the research reported here.

**Approach**

Research took a qualitative approach informed by Bhaskar’s theory of Critical Realism (1979, cited in Danermark et al., 2002), which combines ontological realism with epistemological relativism (Danermark et al., 2002). Ontological realism assumes the existence of an external world independent of individual human consciousness; epistemological relativism recognises that individual consciousness mediates knowledge of the external world. As such, Critical Realism sees knowledge and reality as existing beyond consciousness, but as necessarily limited and mediated by
individual understanding. The Critical Realist approach governed the selection of method and analysis.

The research question – how do migrants understand and respond to the display of the Australian flag on and around Australia Day – was selected to complement a quantitative study that found the display of flags on cars is associated with an exclusionary form of nationalism (Fozdar 2011). Qualitative reflexive interviewing was selected to allow exploration of migrants’ lived experience and begin to understand the range of responses.

After receiving ethics approval, migrants from a range of visa categories and life trajectories were recruited. No limitations were imposed concerning date of arrival, duration in Australia, country of origin or reason for migration. However, information pertaining to these and other issues was collected in the demographic data form, with the assumption that these may influence migrants’ views of Australia.

Twelve participants were recruited through advertisements placed at migrant service providers and through snowballing. Their details, including pseudonyms and self-selected ethnicity, are provided in Appendix A. No claim is made about the representativeness of the sample. Qualitative analysis seeks to understand the complexity within a social phenomenon, rather than quantify it; and to establish “what things ‘exist’ [rather] than determining how many such things there are” (Walker 1985: 489). The sample of twelve provides adequate data for an initial exploration of the issue.

The interview guide elicited information about background, knowledge, perception, experience, opinions and emotions regarding the Australian flag following Patton (1990). Interviews were conducted between June and August 2011, and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim (King & Horrocks 2010).

Thematic analysis, an approach consistent with Critical Realism, was conducted on the transcripts with themes actively selected as representing interviewees’ experiences of reality (Braun & Clarke 2006). These were identified via both deductive and inductive reasoning. Existing theory about nationalism, diversity, migration and the flag was the lens through which the data were understood; particularly question of identity and inclusion.

Results

This paper focuses primarily on themes around inclusion. Given the literature, anecdotal evidence, and Fozdar’s findings (2011), it was expected migrants might respond to the flag display with feelings of exclusion. Instead we found a variety of responses, with total exclusion seldom expressed. We explore three points along a continuum of inclusion through to exclusion.

1. Inclusion

“Oh my goodness! I just love Australia Day! I’m one of those with the flags [on my car]!” (Norma).

Some participants saw the display of the Australian flag on Australia Day as positive and inclusive. They expressed happiness, hope and gratitude on seeing the flag
displayed, and saw it as a positive expression of Australia. Underlying much of this discourse was a hope that Australia will provide for them and their families, and an acceptance of Australian culture and values, even though these were not well clarified. There was no sense in which the flag use was seen as excluding them as migrants.

While no conclusions can be drawn from the small sample, demographically these participants tended to be female and all but one were currently employed or retired from prestigious white-collar jobs. Interestingly, all humanitarian entrants interviewed had this inclusive response. While these respondents knew little about the flag’s history and symbolism, did not distinguish between patriotism and nationalism, and did not have a clear definition of Australian identity, they had a strong awareness of past and present immigration policies, and an appreciation for the Aboriginal flag. These participants expressed positivity toward the flag display and Australia as a nation, but distinguished themselves from the Australian-born population in terms of their conception of the flag, its meaning, and motivation for displaying it.

Interviewer: What does the flag symbolise to you?
Helen: Australia. Freedom.
Interviewer: Ok. So Australia symbolises freedom?
Helen: Absolutely
Interviewer: Yeah alright...umm would you understand that to be why people display the flag?
Helen: No. I think most people that display the flag are probably Australian-born and don’t really know what freedom means unless they’ve lived in a country that’s not free.

Participants saw the hardship they experienced in the process of migration as a warrant for their use of the flag. Aliyah for example, came as a refugee from Iran, where, as an Afghani woman, she had few rights. Since gaining freedom in Australia demanded the high price of leaving behind friends and family, she felt she had earned the right to display the flag and that she appreciated its value and meaning more than the Australian-born.

2. A nuanced or ambivalent perspective

“Oh look, I’m all for showing our flag, yeah…it’s the excessive display by certain groups that worries me” (Tuan, migrated to Australia from Malaysia as a student in 1960).

“It depends on those who displays the flag!...what are the motives? What are the meanings? What are the interpretations of displaying those flags?” (Faith, no demographic details).

The other clear theme was a mixed, ambivalent and politically nuanced response to the flag use. Many participants interpreted its display as dependent upon the perspective of the individual flying it, including the method of display, their perceived attitude and any associated behaviours. For example, a group of drunken Anglo-Australian young men displaying the flag was interpreted negatively as exclusionary, as opposed to its display by families, children and other migrants. Concern also existed about the inclusion of the Union Jack in the Australian flag, and what this implied. However, simultaneously high levels of satisfaction and appreciation were
expressed for the liberty, freedom, development and equality they experience in Australia.

This nuanced understanding was more common among men, those with higher levels of education, and those who were visibly different and who had experienced racism. These participants also noted the influence of what they referred to as ‘bogan’ culture. Many were highly politically aware - interviews were dominated by political discussions focused on immigration policies, refugees and asylum seekers, economic and political instability, and Australia’s relationship to the United States. Individual responsibility was also important to these respondents.

These participants recognised that the car flag display could be seen as a negative form of nationalism. Thus people might be afraid of being seen as “the ones who, where the underlying bigotry comes from. That same bogan who wears flags and...down at the Australia Day fireworks who get drunk and beat up a...a...a puppy, an Aboriginal or someone they don't like!” (Tuan). The further problematic relationship of Australia Day to Indigenous Australians was recognised, for example, by Denbe: “I think it is colonising day for Aboriginals”. Participants differentiated their sense of nationalism from these forms.

Participants’ sense of Australian-ness tended to focus on civic values of hope, respect, prosperity, and liberal ideals: “We are in Australia and we, we believe Australian law and we respect Australian law...Australia is our second country, our home and we respect [it]...” (Rasheed).

3. Exclusion
A solely exclusionary response was rare, with only one participant (Erin) feeling the flag display totally excluded her. What was surprising was that this participant is ‘white’, something that provides a range of privileges in Australia including a sense of belonging (Hage 1998). Yet she felt her exclusion strongly, despite being among the least ‘visibly different’ of participants, because her existence in Australia is at risk due to visa issues:

“When you’re not Australian you don’t feel that strongly about Australia Day because it’s not really your day because you’re not Australian. So it’s just you seeing other people celebrating a day, but you’re not actually free in the country yourself.”

This respondent was a young migrant from a Scandinavian country who was in Australia on a student visa, and had been in the country less than two years. She had failed at university and, wanting to stay, had applied for a working holiday visa. She complained about restrictive immigration laws that do not provide for people who “just want to be a good person and just work like in a retail shop, like a plain life”. She interpreted the Australia Day display as celebratory and commercialised, and symbolic of freedom that she could not participate in. She expected this to change if she gains permanent residency.

Conclusions

This paper has focused on migrant perceptions of inclusion in response to the Australia Day flag display. Rather than a sense of exclusion, most participants felt
either fully included or expressed a nuanced perspective of both inclusion and exclusion, influenced by context. While many recognised the exclusive ways in which the flag can be used, they chose to focus on the more inclusive interpretation, and, using a civic definition of national belonging, felt themselves part of the Australia Day celebrations and included in the national identity the flag portrays. Migrants constructed themselves as legitimate flag-flyers given their sacrifice in coming to and succeeding in the country, and framed themselves as those with a real appreciation of the freedom Australia affords.

Given the literature and other evidence, it was expected that migrants might interpret the display of the Australian flag on Australia Day as a sign of racism and xenophobia among the mainstream population, and feel a sense of exclusion from the day and from the flag. There is a sense in which this was confirmed: some respondents associated the flag display with ‘bogan’ Anglo-Australian identity, and a lack of awareness of, and appreciation for, the freedom, positivity and future that the flag represents. However this was an Australian identity that was both inaccessible and undesirable to participants, and one that they challenged the legitimacy of.

While merely exploratory, these results indicate the need for further research into migrants’ responses to symbols of national identity. While it may be assumed that certain types of flag waving may appear to be exclusionary, it appears migrants may choose an inclusive response, or to distinguish between the different uses depending on context. As such, the flag retains its symbolic value as a unifier; but perhaps through the inclusion sought by migrants, rather than provided by mainstream Australians.
### Appendix A

**Table of research participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender, Age</th>
<th>Nationality, Language(s), Work, Education Background</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>Female, 22 years old</td>
<td>Emigrated from Norway in 2010 on a student visa. Currently unemployed. English is her second language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rasheed</td>
<td>Male, 50-59 years old</td>
<td>Emigrated from Iran in 2007 (but had previously lived in Australia in the 1980s). Has permanent residency. Employed as a disability support worker. English is second language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith</td>
<td>No demographic details provided.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>Female, 50-59 years old</td>
<td>Emigrated from Kenya in 1985. Ethnically Caucasian. Self-employed as an investor/farmer. Permanent resident. English is first language, but also knows French.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aliah</td>
<td>Female, aged 30-39</td>
<td>Emigrated from Iran as a refugee. Born in Afghanistan, ethnically Tajik. Her primary languages are Farsi and Dari.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denbe</td>
<td>Male, aged 40-49</td>
<td>Emigrated from Ghana in 2002 on an internship visa. Currently employed as a fitness instructor and undertaking Phd studies. His first languages are Ashanti and French.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chen</td>
<td>Male, aged 18-29</td>
<td>Emigrated from China on a student visa in 2007 and now has permanent residency. Employed in sales. Primary language is Mandarin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuan</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Emigrated from Malaysia as a student in 1960. Is ethnically Chinese. Qualified as Professor of Medicine. English is his first language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saachi</td>
<td>Female, aged 30-39</td>
<td>Emigrated from India in 2001. Employed as Director of non-profit migrant health organisation. English is her first language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ishani</td>
<td>Female, aged 18-29</td>
<td>Emigrated in 2009 from Nepal. Currently on a bridging visa and employed as information officer at non-profit migrant health organisation. Primary languages are Nepali and Hindi.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ida</td>
<td>Female, 60 + years old</td>
<td>Arrived as a refugee in 1950 from Poland. Previously employed as a School Principal, she is now retired and volunteers at a Polish Community Centre. Her first language is Polish.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norma</td>
<td>Female, aged 50-59</td>
<td>Emigrated via New Zealand from South Africa in 2005. She is ethnically ‘English speaking white European’. She has permanent residency and is employed as a teacher-librarian. English is her first language, but she also speaks Afrikaans and German.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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References


