Affinities in multicultural neighbourhoods: shared values and their differences

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper is based on the ‘affinities’ that exist between various ethnic groups (including long-established non-migrant communities). The research is concerned with what we have in common across groups, examining and comparing the values (concepts or beliefs that guide our behaviour and actions) people define as important for themselves, as individuals and members of ethnic groups or communities. In many western democracies there is concern that some ethnic groups are not integrating because their cultures or values are ‘too different’ from the mainstream. Generally, the ‘common values’ expressed are those of the receiving society, such as in the ‘Australian Value Statement’ or ‘the importance of British values’ publicly noted by three British Prime Ministers since 9/11.

In this paper I will examine solidarity as a theoretical problem: its meaning, its contexts and foundations and will then systematically consider the relationship between affinities and difference. Based on findings from research conducted in Sydney, my analysis indicates that in everyday life in the multi-ethnic neighbourhood there are significant affinities (similarities in values and practices between ethnic and religious groups) that far outweigh differences; and that these affinities provide the basis of connectivity that sustain social, local and ethnic sense of belonging. I conclude by considering that the differences between generations might be greater than differences between ethnic groups; and that the hierarchization of values can set up unequal power relations in the process of cultural production and solidarity.

Keywords: affinities; solidarity; values; belonging; difference; social cohesion; multiculturalism.
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Introduction
Despite many decades of large-scale immigration in advanced industrial societies, public debate about ethnic and religious diversity has recently become increasingly focused on issues of social cohesion, cultural values and national security, especially in the wake of incidents of international terrorism (Kymlicka 2007). Such anxieties exist in Europe where it is alleged that different or inferior values may threaten national identity and have a damaging effect on social cohesion, leading to violence, a loss of freedom and national and personal security (Entzinger 2003, Vasta 2008). At the heart of the debate is not simply the idea that too much immigration is a problem, but that state policies have failed due to a misplaced tolerance for cultural difference on the part of the receiving society (Koopmans 2006). In the UK, it has been argued that the recognition of different values and the loss of common values, challenges Western democracies where the promotion of cultural diversity will only exacerbate the problem (Goodhart 2004).

In Australia, there have been similar debates around the consequences of diversity, especially for social cohesion, citizenship and national identity. Australian multiculturalism has also been criticised and undergone transformation since the mid-1990s, despite its centrality in social policy from the early 1970s. For many, multiculturalism remains highly contested, ambivalent and unsettling (Markus et al. 2009) or elicits contradictory reactions (Goot and Watson 2001). One of the most controversial aspects of the new Citizenship Act 2007, for example, was the introduction of a citizenship test, which questioned new migrants on their knowledge of Australian history and culture. The booklet on Life in Australia, provided by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship for people applying for visas to live in Australia, begins with an ‘Australian Value Statement’. However, as Jakubowicz (2009: 30) points out, ‘the supporting documents make no mention of multiculturalism as an Australian value or even a momentary dimension of Australian policy’. Similarly, in her analysis of the Citizenship Test, Tilbury reveals how the test focuses on homogeneity, mainly targeting Muslims ‘who are seen to have values diametrically opposite to those of “Australia”’ (Tilbury 2007). Concern with ‘social cohesion’ and ‘shared values’ remains. In some quarters, ethnic difference is still seen as a problem that needs to be overcome.

In this paper, I examine data from people’s narratives on values. Although people highlighted many values, including self-expression, tolerance, honesty, usefulness to society, I will examine a number of themes that begin to answer two of the main research questions of the project which provide the analytical focus of the paper. The first is concerned with how affinities outweigh differences, thus providing the basis for forms of connectivity and sense of belonging. The second considers how other social characteristics such as generation can create greater differences than do cultural differences among and across ethnic groups.

The Project
This project on The Affinities in Multicultural Australia is currently in pilot phase in Sydney. So far we have conducted 30 interviews with Australians of Shanghai, Indian, Lebanese, and Anglo background. We are currently interviewing Australians of Sudanese, Italian and Ghanaian backgrounds. We have recruited respondents through contacts and community
organisations. We have interviewed both Christians and Muslims in our Sudanese and Lebanese samples. In the pilot project we have asked respondents to talk about the values or ideas that guide their lives and to discuss those they think are significant to them and their ethnic communities; and to consider similarities and differences in values with other ethnic groups.

**Some Conceptual Considerations**

Theories of affinity, alliance and solidarity, especially within modern urban contexts, have a lineage to the roots of sociological theory. But some of the earlier theorists such as Wirth and Simmel, provide a legacy based on the assumption that affinity and community are undermined by diversity. One main plank of Australian multiculturalism is the recognition of difference which has meant that people of immigrant background can continue to speak their mother tongue and practice their religion freely. Indeed, multiculturalism in Australia constitutes both a set of government policies and lived experiences. Research has shown the myriad ways in which immigrant groups practice cultural and religious values and traditions. For example, the family is an important value and social institution. However, family values are diverse and can vary significantly according to class, gender, generation and numerous of other factors.

These issues constitute some of the key elements of classical sociology concerned with the question ‘how do we live together?’ Concentrating on just two classical sociological theories, one highlights the question of commonalities between people, that is, what is it that people have in common in order to act collectively. Within this tradition, Durkheim, for example, was concerned to show that shared understandings and beliefs were necessary, that common interests alone were inadequate. A second perspective is the neo-marxist dynamics of solidarity, concerned with the effects of unequal power relations among different groups. Here, the dynamics of alliances were strongly influenced by class position which endowed people with distinct interests but also reproduced systematic inequalities (Crow 2002: 24). Contemporary theorists believe that because the social world has changed, so too has solidarity in the 20th century (Beck 1999; Bauman 2001; Komter 2005; Vasta 2010). Others, like Young (1990) question the connection between solidarity and community, concentrating on various forms of exclusion. According to Parekh (2008), social solidarity needs to be negotiated and constantly re-created and expanded to incorporate new diversities and changing identities. Similarly, Sennett suggests, that ‘strong bonding between people runs far deeper than the often superficial sharing of common values…Strong bonding between people means engaging over time with their differences’ (Sennett 1999: 143).

We can define affinities as the condition of being alike, based on qualities, such as values, histories or circumstances that are comparable. This does not necessarily mean people are the same, but that they find aspects of their lives which identify a commonality: living in the same area, being migrants, having children, and so on. Examples of values include self-direction, compassion, conformity, respect for difference. Values also play an important role as guiding mechanisms for people’s behaviour and actions. The commonalities between people might be less about shared values per se than about comparable experiences, circumstances and histories.

**Shared values and their differences**

When respondents stop to consider, they believe there are more similarities across ethnic groups than differences. Family, they say, is a universal value, although it comes in ‘different shapes and sizes’. They compared and contrasted their notion of family and family practices.
with what they thought it meant to other ethnic groups. They mention various ethnic groups they think they may have more in common with. For example, Zaina, a young Lebanese Muslim woman, claims Christian Lebanese, Greeks and Italians are similar to Muslim Lebanese. Having met some Macedonian-Australians, she discovered they have similar values in child-rearing practices:

...I’ve noticed a lot of similarities in the way they were brought up and the way we were brought up... and I asked her whether she would let her kids work while they were in school coz that’s what a lot of Anglos do. And she said no, we don’t like our kids to work we just want them to study and not worry about income. And simple things like living at home until you get married which they do the same...[and] we don’t charge our kids rent while they live at home. They’re similar in that way.

When asked about differences in values, Zaina replied:

I’m probably gonna say Asians just because I don’t know that much about them and I see that they’re very different in the ways that they bring up their kids... I think it all goes back to values. You know, actually, maybe they are similar because they do value their boys a lot more than the girls.

Zaina’s child-rearing practices are positively similar to some European groups while the poor treatment and inequality of women has a negative similarity with ‘Chinese Asians’. Indeed, Norris and Inglehart (2002), using results from the World Values Survey, find that contrary to the Samuel Huntington thesis, about the core clash of values between western democratic values and Islamic religious values, the cultural fault line is concerned with gender inequality.

**Mateship**

Mateship is considered one of Australia’s most important values. It is commonly linked to Australian national identity that includes a ‘matter-of-fact egalitarianism’, ‘a tolerant ideal of ‘a fair go’ for all’, and with a ‘masculine emphasis on mateship’ (ACPEA 1982:5), and it conjures up images of Gallipoli and war. Because the characteristics of ‘Australian mateship’ are traits generally attributed to Anglo-Australians males, it works as an exclusionary notion for Aboriginals, women and migrants. Hence, mateship represents a hierarchized value, creating a sense of superiority against the values of other cultural groups.

One Anglo-Australian woman says:

The mateship thing, I think it’s definitely true...It’s definitely a boy/boy thing...But where that idea came from bothers me, too. When we were fighting a war, we stuck by each other. Well, any country, their men would do that! It’s not an Australian thing, and it drives me insane. It’s like saying the Germans or the Chinese wouldn’t stick by each other. Of course they would!

The notion of mateship rotates around a number of contradictory meanings. The ideas in this quote reflect the general understanding of ‘Australian mateship’ – it is a ‘boy-boy thing’ and it is generally linked to the mateship that develops during wars – ‘helping each other out’. But in Australia, mateship represents a hierarchized value, creating a sense of superiority against the values of other cultural groups. As noted earlier, the Australian Value Statement
and the Citizenship test is more than just informing people about Australian values. In the wake of the anti-Muslim sentiments that emerged after 9/11, western democracies felt compelled to showcase their values as superior to those of many other cultures.

Nevertheless, amongst Australians of immigrant background, ‘mateship’ has become a contested value – it is not uniquely Australian. Arjan, an Indian-Australian man, says:

I think mateship’s very important. I don’t think that’s unique to Australia. I think Australia thinks it is, but it’s not. I’ve seen it in different cultures. It might be expressed in a different way, and I think in other ways it’s expressed more openly and more to a grand extent. I think they’re important values. A fair go, mateship, they’re all important values, but I don’t like them being (thought of) as unique to Australia. I don’t think they are, and I think that’s just something that’s used in the media to try and differentiate people from other people.

Thus, mateship works as a distancing mechanism. It is a club that distances women and ethnic minorities. It is also embedded in the Anglo-Australian national identity. The idea of the superior, unique value sends out the message of inferiority to those (women, migrants) who have not had that experience. This is part of the assimilationism that is inherent in the Australian Value Statement. It sets up unequal power relations in the process of cultural production and solidarity. ‘[T]he strength of the ethical claim may be precisely its ability to divide the world into good and bad and to challenge notions of coexistence that appear unworkable’ (Bhattacharyya 2009: 3). It undermines the strong bonding that Sennett talks about by creating a distance that doesn’t exist.

Arjan continues:

So, Australian values – it’s the same values I’ve described before about myself and my community, because I’m an Australian. So, I actually get a bit annoyed... [with] an ex-Australian football player who does these commercials for lamb where he talks about how you have to eat lamb on Australia Day, and he really annoys me because I’m an Australian and I’m vegetarian... I’ll tell you how I would like to define [Australian values]. I’d like them to be defined by being a multicultural society of, you know, people being vegetarian or going to a temple or going to a mosque or going to the beach or going for a walk... that’s the sort of Australian values that I hold.

Arjan is reframing mateship as an Australian value about friendship that is universal. He is well aware that Anglo-Australian cultural traditions dominate in the media. As a result, Australians of immigrant background, particularly younger people, often highlight ‘respect for diversity’ as an important value that is sometimes lacking in multicultural Australia. One of Prime Minister Gillard’s (2011) listed Australian ‘shared values’ is ‘multiculturalism - a proud history of overcoming difference, of finding common ground’. Finding common ground and developing solidarity focuses on how social relationships can be based on cooperation and negotiation, rather than on assimilation, in order to contribute to the common good (Parekh 2008). In other words, it is concerned with the capacity of people to find ways of living together, despite their differences, in ways that are mutually beneficial.

Generations and Change
Differences between generations are another important theme. Arjan’s words highlight generational differences, and sense of security relating to belonging and change:

I think the main difference is probably the emphasis on culture, so the emphasis on maintaining your culture, on keeping it strong. The group I come from, there’s a strong emphasis on that... ‘This is how you’re supposed to be’, because they want to protect it, and they want to make sure it survives, and they want to make sure that what they know stays around, as opposed to something different coming in. And they don’t know how they’ll cope or how they’ll adapt... whereas I think in the Australian culture, broadly speaking, there’s less emphasis on that because everybody is secure in who they are and what they’re doing, and the people around them, much more than, I think, people from my ethnic background.

Arjan makes two main points here. Firstly, those born and bred in Australia have a certain sense of security inherent in that status. First generation immigrants migrate precisely to provide that sense of security and belonging, particularly for their children. Inglehart’s research supports Arjan’s claim, ‘If one grows up with a feeling that survival can be taken for granted, instead of the feeling that survival is uncertain, it influences almost every aspect of one’s worldview’ (Inglehart 2000: 223). Secondly, Arjan points to a difference between the generations in his community. His parents aim to preserve their cultural traditions, while Arjan, although respecting his cultural traditions, strongly claims his Australian identity and sense of belonging. Again, Inglehart suggests that ‘age and economic circumstances (rising economic and physical security) bring about changes to value orientations between generations due to different experiences in their formative years’ (Inglehart 2000: 221).

**Conclusion**

Two - Three concluding points: Jupp (2007) argues that those who claim that in Australia social cohesion is crumbling due to ethnic differences tend to highlight worst-case scenarios. He suggests Australia is one of the most cohesive societies but that other social divisions create a greater social divide than does ethnicity, including differences between generations, between religious and secular Australians, and those with differing levels of education and class position (Jupp 2007: 16-18). The difference between the generations is often raised. And although many younger ethnic minority Australians claim a strong respect for their parents’ cultural values, the difference is considered not as a conflictual problem but as an issue of change. The younger generation inhabit a world of cultural values that are complex and contradictory, cross-cultural and flexible.

Three - Secondly, people are keen to discover affinities among and across ethnic groups. Consideration of cultural values across ethnic groups offers an understanding that shared values are more common than absolute differences or divisions, where identity is not static, but based on a relationship that links continuity with change and difference with affinities.

One - Thirdly, there is a dominant ideology about what constitutes Australian values and they are brought to light during periods of national insecurity. In many countries of immigration, in Europe and Australia there is a lingering concern that migrants are not integrating which in turn is said to create a barrier to sense of belonging. These hierarchized and unchanging values, such as mateship, remain a part of the national imaginary yet generate distance and discrimination. But in a similar twist to the results of Hussain and Bagulley (2005) who report that second generation British Pakistanis draw upon citizenship rights to assert their
identity and sense of belonging, Arjan exemplifies how many younger and second generation Australians assert their sense of belonging and Australianness by constructing and claiming certain Australian values and identities, however different from the mainstream, as their own. This is the lived experience of multicultural Australia.
References


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i Recently, current Prime Minister Gillard (2011) instead of referring to Australian Values talks about ‘Shared Values’.

ii This research is, in the first instance, a pilot project funded by Macquarie University Safety Net fund. A proposal has been submitted for a large ARC Discovery grant. The pilot project is as much about testing methods and questions as about collecting data.

iii I use the term ‘ethnic group’ to refer to the communities who identify according to ethnicity. Anglo-Australians are one ethnic group among many.

iv Names have been changed

v She specifically refers to the Chinese one-child policy as an example of gender inequality.