

Abstract:

**Australian Values, Immigration and Identities**  
– **Integrating or Belonging?**

Recent public debates about a migrant's right to live permanently in Australia have focused on the need to integrate into a particular way of life and adopt a particular set of national values. Although multiculturalism has been reinstated as the policy to secure social cohesion, many government and media discourses still insist that potential 'good citizens' must accept officially-defined Australian values and adopt Australia's 'unique' national identity. Yet despite a plethora of public declarations about what migrants must do, think, act, accept and adopt in order to become model Australian citizens, migrant voices are notably absent from this debate.

This paper reports on an ongoing ethnographic study that explores what it means to 'become' Australian for recently arrived migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds. In particular, the study explores how migrants and refugees negotiate, contest and interpret these discourses about Australianness, Australian values and an Australian way of life and how these discourses impact on their notions of belonging in their adopted Australian community.

Paper Presentation:

**Introduction**

In Australia today, public debates about a migrant's and refugee's rights to settle permanently in Australia have focussed on what values they are to adopt in their everyday life if they want to be included into the Australian community. According to the former Howard government and now the current Rudd government, if you want to enjoy the privileges, rights and responsibilities of a unique Australian way of life and Australian citizenship, you must prove your commitment to Australia by adopting Australian values.

Australian values, an Australian way of life and Australianness, these are all terms that refer to the same concept and they have become part of everyday, commonsense discourses. These terms are an attempt to define who Australians are and they adhere to a belief that an individual's country determines his or her 'core' characteristics and values, and that there exists unique national identities or national characteristics that communities within specific borders possess and display. Also embedded in these government discourses about 'becoming Australian' is the assumption that government authorities know why immigrants have migrated to Australia and what they want from their adopted country. In recent times, this attempt to define, promote and

maintain 'Australianness' and dictate migrants' dreams, desires and needs have culminated in not only the introduction of a formal citizenship test for immigrants and refugees but it has also led to the requirement that provisional, permanent and some temporary visa holders must sign a values statement promising that they will respect Australian values.

### **Australian Values**

The values identified in the Australian Values Statement include freedom of the individual and religion, commitment to the rule of law, equality of men and women and egalitarianism. These are not unique to Australia and are considered by many in liberal-democratic societies to be basic human rights.

When former Prime Minister John Howard introduced Australian values into Australian citizenship discourses he declared that these values were born out of the Australian nation's British heritage and European Enlightenment and he promised mainstream Australia that the adoption of these values would ensure that migrants integrate into the Australian community. Implicit in Howard's rhetoric was the notion that these values were under threat and needed protection and there was also the implication that new migrants were lacking in these values.

### **The participants**

I interviewed over 20 participants from China and Asia, Europe and Russia, Iraq and South America to discuss what the significance of becoming an Australian citizen is to them. Most of the participants were recent arrivals, having been in Australia for less than five years and from a non-English speaking background. They were migrants who had arrived on skills visas as well as some refugees. Most participants stated that they had come to Australia because they believed that Australia had freedom and democracy and that they supported these values. This paper details some of their opinions and attitudes towards the notion of an Australian national identity and Australian values.

### **Australian values from a migrant perspective**

In general, talking about 'Australian values' was not an easy concept for recently arrived migrants to do. Whilst most of the participants agreed that these defined, government-sanctioned values were good values, they were unable to discuss 'values' per se, preferring instead to talk about values in terms of defining Australian customs and culture.

Most participants agreed that Australians had unique values and a unique culture. They defined 'mainstream' Australians as easy-going, relaxed and friendly. Generally, they believed that 'Aussies' loved beer and barbecues and worshiped their leisure time. All the participants defined mainstream Australians as people born in Australia and with a white, British background.

### **Migrant Values**

Most of the participants believed that all nationalities displayed their own unique set of values. Whilst some participants were unable to or felt uneasy about discussing Australian values, they were happy to discuss their country's own values.

Wendy from China:

My country also has values. They are respect for older people and love younger people... Also be diligent and thrifty. When I was a child, my teacher and parents taught me, if people want to have a good life, they have to study hard and work hard. And if people want to be a good person that should be saving money for ourselves and for our next generation.

Many of the Chinese, Korean and Japanese participants believed that hard work and respect for elders were essential values to live by in their home nations. Participants from other countries such as Iran and Indonesia also stated that a core value of their nation's identity was to gain a high level of education so that they could improve theirs and their children's future prospects.

### **'No work' values**

Some participants also described what they perceived to be the negative aspects of the Australian character and through their descriptions implied that Australians, too, were lacking in values. The strongest criticisms were reserved for the work ethics of Australians.

Maryam from Iran:

Can I be a little bit rude? Australians are lazy...They go to the beach, gym, nobody works.

This was a repeated theme throughout the interviews. In one interview, participants roared with laughter when advised that an OECD report suggested that Australians were amongst the hardest working population in the Western world. Mustafa from Turkey stated 'that's because it's

all of the migrants doing the work'. For many of the participants, 'Aussie relaxation' is viewed in ambivalent ways and some implied that 'being relaxed' is the 'real' Australian value.

### **'No family' values**

'Children have too much freedom' was also a common theme amongst migrant women.

Anna from Macedonia:

And of course we have the difference between the values, the morality. We are not the same. But we keep something, we don't accept if we don't like it and for example, if I have a child one day, I can't tell them, "now you have 18, you go from my home'. You know I will take care of that child ... even when we have the children with drugs and alcohol the mothers, they try to make something to save their children.

Maryam from Iran continued:

But I think that it's not 100% guaranteed if you want to live in Australia, you should live like Australians. Because we don't know that Australian lifestyle is the best in the world. So it's ... a really good opportunity that a lot of immigrants from different countries come to Australia. It is a good that a government learn the best thing from each community from each country, from people.

### **The value of 'multi-culture'**

For some participants, Australia's unique character was due to its multicultural nature.

Cherry from China:

I believe that the unique Australian culture is multi-culture society. There is no other country like Australia that contains different cultures from all over the world. But I also believe that there is a main aspect of Australian culture.

Olga from Ukraine:

In my view, Australian culture is unique from the rest of the world. It is a multicultural country. Every suburb is different. There is a different lifestyle ... You can hear many languages everywhere in the street, on the train. I like Australia because I can see the whole world at the same time.

I think Australians value their independence more than others. They don't like to hurt people and I think they are very polite people as well but they are quite lazy and they are very slow. I feel respect for Australians because they love their country very much.

What these excerpts suggest is that whilst the Howard government attempted to eradicate the policy of multiculturalism from the national psyche, many recently arrived migrants view it as an essential quality that makes up Australian culture. All participants identified Australia's multicultural make-up as a positive aspect of Australian culture. They described how they were able to practice and maintain their 'original' culture and especially their native language.

Whilst many of the participants did not question the official national narratives of Australian identity as being Western, being white or being of a British background, they did however add another dimension to the Australian identity. So for many of the participants, being multicultural was also an important part of the Australian national identity.

### **Conclusion**

Most participants were happy to remain in their migrant communities whilst at the same time aspiring to be part of the wider mainstream Australian community. For them, it did not appear to be an either or case. You can become an Australian citizen, enjoy Australia's political and democratic freedom and social benefits such as good social security and cheap education whilst still practising your own unique values at home in the private sphere. So whilst most of the participants accepted and did not question the official discourses that being Australian meant acknowledging Australia's British heritage, their comments suggest that they did not feel that they were lacking in any values or that they had to adopt new customs, nor for that matter that they had to 'become' Australian in the way Howard's government had declared. For them, enjoying Australia's freedoms and benefits did not mean integration.

Whilst most of the participants hoped that with time, their sense of belonging would grow, most of the discourses suggest that migrants position themselves outside or on the 'sidelines' of the Australian national identity. Indeed, when I asked if the conferral of citizenship would mean that they would call themselves Australian, most participants hesitated before responding to my questions.

Lee from China highlighted the tensions:

I don't feel that I belong to the Australian community. This is important for me to belong in Australia because we chose to migrate to Australia. Our family still lives in my country. We can't just change our ancestry. Australia is new life for us.

For the participants, being Australian, or being an Australian citizen, was referenced in terms of the rights and responsibilities of Australian citizenship. This included obeying the law, receiving

social security benefits and gaining an Australian passport. Participants did not reject Australian values or customs nor did they feel that they were not appropriate or relevant to their lives, but what was also important for them was prioritising other values that were not recognised as values in the Australian discourses, like respect for elders, working hard and planning for the future through higher education and securing savings.

Most of the participants believed that there exists a unique Australian national identity influenced by Western, white-Anglo culture. They do not feel that they have to abandon their own customs and values and adopt Australian values exclusively to become a good Australian citizen or community member. Hence, for the participants, another aspect of Australian identity is its multicultural nature. In this way, migrants and refugees are taking new directions in promoting the multiple identities of Australia.