

‘I just tell people that Australians are multicultural’ – how young adults understand their national identity

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Abstract

What constitutes Australia’s identity as a nation state has long been discussed. This piece provides insights into how contemporary young Australians understand Australianness. National identities can be understood as being based upon ethnicity or civic ideals. As Australia has a short history as a state and a diverse population, most of whom have disparate migrant backgrounds, it could be anticipated that a civic understanding of national identity would be embraced by young Australians. While the young adults interviewed strongly support this idea due to their recognition of Australia’s diverse multicultural population, they also recognise the powerful influence of ethnic associations. Ethnic heritage remains highly influential in shaping the respondents understanding of both themselves and others. The respondents in this research used both these concepts to forge complex hybrid understandings of their own unique national identities.

Keywords: Australian Identity, Civic, ethnic, Young Adults

A civic understanding of national identity allows new and disparate settlers to a country to be more readily accepted into the community of their new land (Birrell 1995: 1). In Australia the government in its Diverse Australia Program promoted this idea (DIAC 2009). The young Australians interviewed in my research had complex understandings of their national identities. Some aspects of their national identities had a more civic emphasis whilst others had a stronger ethno focus. I argue that despite the strong declarations of a civic perspective they also remain strong adherents to the belief in a prominent relationship between ethnicity and nationality.

Nations and states exist in the world of today. There is often an assumption that nations and states are synonymous, however Tate (2009: 98) differentiates between them. He considers ‘state’ to be a legal term referring to a territory within legally recognised boundaries while a ‘nation’ is a ‘psychological phenomenon’ whereby

people have developed a sense of 'natural' belonging together due to shared 'linguistic and cultural affinities' (Tate 2009: 99). In this piece I will refer to a state in Tate's terms as a legal entity, a nation as a community united through heritage and use the term country when referring to Australia more generally. Tate's discussion of nation and state can be considered in relation to Pakulski and Tranter's (2000: 36) proposal that Australians understand their national identity in three ways: ethno, civic and denizen. Individuals can have an attachment to a country through their ethnicity (Scholte 2000: 161, 162). In this situation Tate's ideas of nation and state are analogous. Such a notion is based on the premise that people have inhabited an area of land through generations and that the people of the land have a shared heritage, history and ancestry. In comparison a civic perspective recognises that the people of a country may not have a shared heritage, history or ancestry, yet may live together within a territory as citizens of a state. Through time a state which lacks an initial sense of nation may develop one. Birrell (1998), Cohen and Kennedy (2000) and Scholte (2000) note that due to the movement of people around the world, a movement accelerated through globalisation, that few states (if any) can be regarded as ethnically, culturally or historically pure. Thus the people of the country form a sense of shared belonging through their adherence to the values and laws of the country. Such a concept may appear more appropriate for Australia, where the majority of the population lacks long term ancestral and cultural links to the land as over half the population are first or second generation migrants (Aedy and Delaney 2009). Tate (2009: 98) argues that Australia, when it came into being in 1901 was a civic state as there existed no sense of ethno or national cohesion between the inhabitants of the various colonies. According to Jupp (1998: 223) debate about Australian identity has existed since the 1820s as the country has worked to achieve a

sense of nationhood and identity. Some citizens do not feel any strong attachment to their country, their understanding of national identity is described by Pakulski and Tranter as denizen (2000: 36).

My research examined how young adults understood their Australian identity. Thirty seven respondents, aged between 18 and 25 explained their perspectives in semi-structured interviews. Thirty-six of the respondents were Australian citizens and one was a permanent resident about to embark upon the process of gaining Australian citizenship. Respondents with an Anglo, a Southern European and a South East Asian background were recruited. All respondents, with the exception of the one who was not yet a citizen, felt that they were Australian. My respondents voiced strong civic understandings of Australian identity due to the multicultural composition of its population. However by examining the respondents' descriptions of their own national identities, the terms used when speaking about fellow Australians and their recognition of the impact of appearance and accent I conclude that their understanding of 'Australian' is not simply civic, but is also strongly influenced by ethno ideas and that they embrace the notion of individuals designing their own hybrid understanding of their national identity.

Civic identity in multicultural Australia

Respondents spoke of Australia as being a multicultural country. The following comment is indicative of most respondents' descriptions of Australians:

We are all different, like depending on background, it's not like we all have the exact same upbringing ... to all be the same. There is just not one way of thinking of life to be defined as Australian.

One respondent summed up the ideas effectively:

I don't think that you can say that an Australian looks anything in particular really, you might think white, but to be Australian is a legal

term, all you need is to be a resident and have citizenship. People come from a whole range of different backgrounds and are welcome. If they have residency or citizenship they are Australian. How you look, how you behave, we all behave differently and I think the right to behave differently is a valuable right to have.

Respondents noted that Australians have a history of migration. Some respondents were migrants, others had parents, grand-parents or great-great grandparents who had come to Australia to settle. None identified any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander ancestry. Common amongst all, except the respondent awaiting citizenship, was a belief in their Australianness; that they are Australian because they 'live here.' One respondent explained this by saying, 'some people say that you are only a part of a country if you are born there ... but it is more about what you've grown up with, what you've grown up to believe.' In fact one respondent who had only lived in Australia for a few years said she was, 'Australian, Malaysia was the past.' Their various backgrounds did not detract from their conviction that they were Australian.

Respondents were unanimous that Australia should continue to welcome new migrants and that these migrants should be able to bring with them their own culture and beliefs. There was, however, a very strong proviso attached to the importation of cultures and beliefs. The following comments reflect this:

I think for someone to want to come and live in our country, that they've got to, not live by our beliefs, but at least respect them.

They can't come here and break the law. I don't think they can also come here and disrespect our values or the person next to them's culture and values. I think being a multicultural community and country it doesn't promote one culture and they can't. If people are arriving here from any country they can't expect it to be completely their culture.

If they embrace the laws and they embrace the constitution of Australian then they should be fine.

These comments are indicative of a civic approach to nationality, that the people within the country are bound together by an adherence to the laws and responsibilities

of citizenship. Citizens are not expected to be the same or to follow the same traditions but are expected to respect each other and the laws and structures of the state. Respondents felt that Australians have starkly varied appearances, hence do not share any common ethnic heritage. Australians were also regarded as having diverse cultural backgrounds so having shared traditions and customs was not what made Australians. The existence of varied cultures and traditions in Australia was actually celebrated. One respondent noted that she thought it was 'good' that Australia was multicultural because, 'it is very variable and I think it promotes tolerance and awareness and acceptance.' Another said, 'I think it's a positive thing ... [it] allows for diversity, it broadens horizons.' Australia's short history since colonisation was noted, so some felt only Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders could claim a longstanding historical tie with the land. It would appear that these young adults have embraced a very civic understanding of nationality, yet if their responses are examined in detail there remains a strong affiliation to ethnic notions of nationhood.

The importance of 'roots'

Whilst there was acceptance of Australia's multicultural character and recognition of the respondents' Australianness, there was also strong awareness of the importance of ethnic heritage. One respondent noted:

We are still very new, you can trace everyone's heritage back to another country. So even if you were here 200 years ago I would still say that really your heritage is in Europe or England so whether you are an Australian or not is questionable.

This response clearly illustrates the existence of a disparity between the multicultural, civic notion expressed and the strength of an underlying idea that there is a link between nationality, ancestral connection with land and shared ethnic heritage. One respondent openly discussed her awareness of this.

I was this close to not being a proper Australian, I'm only Australian because of a piece of paper that says I was born in a Melbourne hospital, apart from that, my blood, my heritage is in some place I have never seen.

Whilst recognising her civic attachment to Australia through her residence and commitment to the values she recognised as being Australian, she questioned her authenticity as a real Australian due to her ethnic background. Another spoke in detail of her attachment to both Greece and Australia. She stressed that, 'even if you live in Australia, your roots are really important to who you are.' She explained that it was impossible to put aside her feelings of connection to her Greek roots. The intensity of this connection was highlighted when she said that it was important to have a 'Greek boyfriend' because 'we understand each other on a different level to other people.' Others did not express such intense attachments, yet for very many their family roots were significant. Another respondent noted, 'I'm half Chinese and half Vietnamese ... that's where my ancestors are from.' She felt that despite her legal status as an Australian that her ethnic heritage was a crucial factor in defining her nationality. The significance of heritage was highlighted when one respondent said, 'my Nonna gets very upset when I say that I am Australian.' Her Nonna felt that her Italian heritage, despite it being two generations old, was far more significant than her place of birth and residence. For these young Australians the pull of their ethnic background was significant, it compelled them to consider the complexity of their national identity. They personify the interplay that exists between civic and ethno ideas of nationhood that both have resonance in current Australia. This can be exemplified in the language that respondents used when discussing their fellow Australians.

What people say

The strong commitment to multicultural Australia where ‘Australian people are from all over the world’ is somewhat undermined when some comments made by the respondents are closely examined. Australia was a British colony, the white Australia policy restricted the intake of migrants to those who met strict criteria, hence until post World War Two Australia had a predominantly white population, most of whom had arrived from Britain. Even though white settlers have a short history in Australia and migrants from all areas of the world are now established Australians there remains a lingering impression that Australians are white and of British background. One respondent described the ‘true blue Aussie’ as ‘the white Australian that has descended from just Australians’ reflecting that the links between white British heritage and Australianness remain. While acknowledging it as very much a stereotype, the respondents described the ‘typical’ Australian as white, often supplying Steve Irwin or Crocodile Dundee as examples. Such stereotypes ignore the Australian citizens who are not ‘white’ and reinforce a link between the typical Australian and a specific ethnicity.

In response to a question about their friends’ backgrounds it was common to hear a distinction being made between the ‘Australian’ friends and the ‘others’. For example, ‘primary school was Asian and there were a few Australians’ and ‘I do have my Australian friends and my Asian friends as well.’ The Australians were those of white, British or European background, only a few referred to the Australians of Anglo background as Anglos. One respondent explained this by saying, ‘the English have been here for a really long time and we just came here.’ This is another suggestion that history and ethnicity play a role in national identity. Another respondent described her friends as, ‘Chinese, Sri Lankan, English, Dutch, Italian, Greek,’ these

descriptions referred to the friends' ethnic heritage rather than their actual nationality. It appears that these respondents are genuine in their belief that they 'don't care about culture,' however the actual words that they used can be seen as making distinctions. The manner in which respondents referred to fellow Australians illustrated the ongoing resonance of ethno nationality. When they spoke of their fellow Australian citizens as; Asians or Africans they were referring to ethnic heritages rather than current citizenships. It reflects an underlying belief that Australians are white and of Anglo background. Even Anglo background Australians with a very short family history in Australia saw their Australianness as uncontested but referred to others by their ethnic background. This reflects an underlying ethno belief that having the 'typical Australian' background and appearance provides preferential access to Australianness, an access denied to those with alternative ethnic backgrounds (as discussed in following paragraph). If a person is always described as a nationality that is not Australian it can create a sense of differentiation from the 'real' Australians. It can also create a hierarchy of Australianness where some are regarded as more authentic Australians than others.

What people look or sound like

When discussing how others saw her one respondent noted that she felt others, 'see me as being from another country ... assume I am from some Asian country.' There was a distinct division between those of British appearance and those not. This distinction was based upon appearance and had no relationship to the extent of time that the individual's predecessors had lived in the country. Those with British appearance were rarely asked whether they were Australian as it was assumed they were. Those, whose Australianness was questioned, noted that it was because of their

accent, one said, 'people really hate that I don't have an Australian accent.' Several respondents noted that they 'looked Australian' and that due to this their Australian identity had never been questioned. One respondent explained, 'we have an Anglo-Saxon background and there is still the issue that people who may have a Chinese background don't look like the traditional, in inverted commas, Australian.' Another said, 'because of the whole white, European, born here, there is nothing that really signifies me out.' These respondents acknowledged the significance of their appearance and accent to being readily accepted as Australian.

Many respondents with a non-Anglo appearance reported being asked where they came from. Some felt comfortable being asked the question, they did not find the question offensive because, 'when I meet people I like to know their background as well' or 'some people might ask just as general conversation and are genuinely interested, like I've asked when people have accents and things like that ... because I am interested in their story.' Yet this respondent also noted that, 'some people can ask it negatively.' For some this question was alienating, 'I hate it when people ask me what nationality I am and when I say Australian they sort of question it.' Another said, 'I find it annoying because I don't think they should make assumptions from the way I look to identify me.' These respondents felt that they were being differentiated from the 'real' or 'natural' Australians because they 'physically look un-Australian', an experience reflected in the writings of Zevallos (2003, 2008). Those who 'look' Australian are able to comfortably assume their Australianness because it is not questioned. Those whose appearance is not white and British are reminded of their difference through questions about their background and thus must constantly work to assert their Australianness. This differentiation according to appearance is in sharp contrast to a civic view of nationality, the underlying focus on appearance links to the

ethno idea where citizens of a nation have a distinct and recognisable ethnic appearance that separates them from the citizens of other nations.

A mixture

Respondents incorporated both civic and ethno understandings of nationality when discussing Australianness and their own national identities. They have not adopted a denizen approach, where they have very little connection to any nation. The respondents' attitudes toward their nationality were adaptable. They blended together aspects of their family heritage with their attachment to the state of Australia. They felt no need to deny their association to their families' varied heritages in order to claim Australian identity and in fact were critical of those who did not accept them as Australians due to their heritage. They were supportive of the notion of dual citizenship and many described themselves as having a hybrid identity (Nederveen Pieterse 1994: 170 – 171) where they had blended a mixture of civic and ethno influences to create their unique understanding of themselves. For those with hybrid identities their association to Australia was often more civic, it was where they lived, they were a part of the community of Australian citizens. These responses are indicative of the feelings expressed, 'I've lived here forever' and 'I was born and raised here and been brought up with Australian values.' They participated in the life of Australian citizens and felt part of the community of Australians but acknowledged they lacked a shared ethnic heritage, history or culture. Attachments to the other countries in their identity were more ethno. One respondent expressed his association with his Greek heritage as, 'everything comes from Greece ... the Olympic Games ...and things we do at school like Maths and Philosophy ... it's kind of nice knowing that.' Another said, 'both my parents are Singaporean, I guess that's why I feel

Singaporean ... that's my roots.' The importance of civic and ethno ideas varied among the participants, however it is clear that they utilised both understandings as tools to make sense of the complex factors impacting upon their lives to construct their own identities.

Conclusion

Even in a country such as Australia which has only been a recognised state since 1901 and has a history of vast and varied immigration there appears to have developed an ethno link between Australianness and British ancestry. Australia today has a diverse population and British ancestry is no longer part of the heritage of many Australians. Citizens can be united by their commitment to the civic values of the country instead of a shared heritage (Birrell 1995: 1). The young Australians in this research supported this idea and freely embraced the idea that Australia is multicultural and that Australians have mixed backgrounds. Yet they noted that the ethno link between Australia and a white, British appearance remains and can contribute to a hierarchy of Australianness where some are automatically assumed to be more Australian than others. While migrants and their descendents have embraced Australia as their home and embrace Australian citizenship for many strong ethno ties remain to the places of their family origin. For these young Australians 'hybrid self-identification *is* in fact common' (Nederveen Pieterse 2001: 227), they have utilised both ethno and civic ideas of nationality to forge an understanding of their own identity within the state and nation of Australia. They felt no tension in incorporating their past heritage into their current image of themselves as Australian citizens.

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