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multicultural world':
multiculturalism as a lived
ideology

ZULEYKA ZEVALLOS

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'Because we live in a multicultural world': multiculturalism as a lived ideology

ZULEYKA ZEVALLOS

School of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Swinburne University of Technology

Introduction

This paper argues that Australian multiculturalism represents an ideology that migrants can draw upon in order to make sense of their everyday social experiences, their identities and their relationship to the nation. Ideology is a widely contested concept and it has various meanings. Generally, ideology refers to a normative set of beliefs that 'tell us what we ought to do' or how things should be, they are built upon central values and they have political value (Drucker 1974: 43). A narrative of national identity which is based on multiculturalism could be seen in terms of *dominant* and *contested* ideologies. For example, constructions of an Anglo-Celtic majority identity in Australian society could be seen as a dominant ideology, because such constructions maintain Anglo-Celtic hegemony despite our policies of multiculturalism (cf. de Lepervanche 1980; Hage 1998; Stratton 1998; Vasta 1996). Alternatively, constructions of the nation based on cultural pluralism could be seen as competing, or contested, ideologies because they challenge Anglo-Celtic dominance. Ideas are constructed by those in power as well as by less powerful people going about their everyday lives and so ideology can be challenged through social interaction and social discourses.

I am not looking at multicultural ideology in terms of dominant/competing ideologies, although I do discuss some hegemonic processes related to multiculturalism, such as the concept of race. I am more interested in looking at the ideology Australian multiculturalism as a set of *normative beliefs* that argue Australian society *should be* organised around a principle of cultural plurality, and what this entails, from the point of view of the women that I interviewed for my research (for definitions of multiculturalism as an ideology see Lopez 2000: 3; Vasta 1993: 212). I will also look at the benefits and costs that the ideology of multiculturalism has for my participants. Looking at multiculturalism as ideology allows us to ask, *why do some people believe what they do about multiculturalism?*, or as Betts put it, 'what's in it for them?' (1999: 30). First, this paper describes the women's constructions of Australian multiculturalism. Second it investigates issues of identity. Third, it discusses the impact of racist constructions of the Australian identity on the women's sense of belonging to the nation. I conclude with a discussion of Australian multiculturalism as a lived ideology in relation to the data generated by my research.

Constructions of Australian multiculturalism

This paper draws on a larger study investigating the identity constructions of 50 second-generation migrant-Australian women. Contemporary studies of second-generation migrants describe a process of hybridity, where the second-generation negotiate their parental, community and Australian cultural practices and beliefs in

order to create new ways of navigating their identities and in order to achieve a sense of belonging in-between their migrant and Australian national cultures (see for example Butcher and Thomas 2001; Noble, Poynting and Tabar 1999). This literature shows that, although Australia's multicultural identity is embraced by the second-generation, second-generation migrants feel that dominant representations of Australian national culture privileges an Anglo-Celtic identity. For example, in a national survey of 3501 participants from diverse cultural backgrounds, Ang and her colleagues found that only eight percent of all the first and second-generation migrants in their sample adopted Australian identities, despite their sense that Australia was home (2002: 40). The researchers concluded that migrants, including the second-generation, still believed 'that the dominant image of the Australian is still that of the stereotypical Anglo-Celtic Aussie'. Their findings suggested that 'there is a paradox in contemporary Australia':

On the one hand Australia is obviously a plural society with an increasingly diverse population, most of whom thrive well in their lives. On the other hand, Australian *culture* is still not as open and inclusive as it could be: it is still strongly dominated by a core, Anglo-Celtic culture from which people of other cultural backgrounds are marginalised. In essence, some of these people experience themselves as *in* Australia, but not *of* Australia. Their sense of belonging is incomplete (2002: 48).

The present study will go on to investigate how ideas of identity and culture shape understandings of Australian multiculturalism as an ideology. Specifically, the following analysis will tease out some possible explanations for the discrepancies and paradoxes between an ideology of Australian multiculturalism and the participants' lived experiences of multiculturalism.

Data was collected via semi-structured interviews with 25 women from Latin American backgrounds and 25 women from Turkish backgrounds. This study was initially designed to expand on a previous study with a different group of second-generation migrant women from Latin American backgrounds (Zevallos 2003), by comparing the experiences of Latin women to another ethnic group. In the previous study, the Latin women I interviewed strongly asserted that ethnicity was not an issue when choosing friends, boyfriends or prospective marriage partners - so long as their potential spouse was not of Turkish or Muslim background. While these participants had described Latin culture as 'sexist', they perceived both Turkish and Muslim cultures as exceptionally patriarchal. My decision to focus on Turkish women came from reflecting on this earlier work, to see what Turkish women had to say about their ethnic identities and their gender practices.

In reference to the present study, the 25 Latin women came from six Spanish-speaking national backgrounds (Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Peru and Uruguay), but the 25 Turkish women share the same national background. Both groups, however, identified with both a migrant national culture and a pan-ethnic migrant culture. All the Latin women identified with their families' national group (for example, Argentina) and with pan-ethnic Latin groups (South/Central American and Latin American). All the Latin women had been raised Catholic, but for 23 of these 25 Latin women, Catholicism was not seen as a defining feature of their migrant practices nor of their identities. The Turkish women identified with their families' national group (Turkey) and with a broader Islamic pan-ethnic group.

Fourteen of the Turkish women wore the hijab (Muslim dress and headscarf) and 11 did not, but all 25 Turkish women spoke of themselves as 'Muslim-Australian' or as 'Muslim-Turks', and they spoke of Islam as both a religion and as a culture.

All the 50 women were Australian citizens. The majority of the women were Australian-born and the rest arrived in Australia on average at the age of six. All the women were well educated, and most of them were attending university at the time of their interviews. Most of the women resided in the Western and North-Western suburbs of Melbourne such as St Albans, Sunshine, Broadmeadows and Meadow Heights, although they also lived in other Melbourne suburbs such as the Preston, Brunswick and Dandenong. The women almost uniformly described their locales of residence as 'multicultural' and by this they meant that many of their neighbours came from migrant backgrounds. Their ideas of Australia as a 'multicultural world' should be therefore situated within a framework of place, specifically an urban Australian geography.

All of the 50 women interviewed described that egalitarian values, a 'laid back' personality and being accepting of diversity were key features of the Australian national character. Beyond its progressive, democratic values, the women had trouble describing Australian culture outside of its multiculturalism (for further discussion see Zevallos 2005a). They defined Australian multiculturalism as the blending of migrant cultures with Australian values of equality. Kumru, a Turkish participant said:

It's pretty hard for someone that doesn't know of an Australian [to understand] what an Australian is. I think to me there *isn't* a pure Australian. I think Australia is so unique because everyone has brought their own thing to Australia. We've made Australia such a great country because of all our little knick-knacks that we've brought and our ideas, our little cultural festive celebrations. I really can't describe it in my own words but all I can say is it's somewhere you are just free.

The women were overwhelmingly praising of Australian multiculturalism, which they saw as being about embracing cultural diversity and upholding the right for people to express their cultures. Multiculturalism was also defined through the idea of learning, such as learning to live with each other's differences and taking an interest in other cultures (for similar findings see Ang et al. 2006: 16-18). For example:

What do you mean by the word 'multicultural'?

Ingrid [*Latin*]: That we have the right to express our culture, that we have the right to live our *own* culture within another country that is not ours. Speak whatever language you want to speak. It doesn't matter if you're Australian, if you're Japanese, you're interested in learning about other cultures. Your next door neighbour might be Spanish or Norwegian and we all live in the same territory and we're all different. We learn to live with each other, even though we're different.

To the women, multiculturalism was a social fact: they saw that multiculturalism was embodied in their interactions with their neighbours who shared their culture with one another, especially through their food, and they saw it symbolised in the

Melbourne lifestyle. More broadly, they described multiculturalism as the centre of our national culture.

Describe Australian culture:

Yvonne [*Latin*]: Totally different from El Salvador, that's for sure! [Laughs] It's so free; it's unbelievable. People who come here, it's amazing, because we live in a multicultural world, we live with every culture and we accept every culture. It's amazing. It's a really nice country. I reckon it would be the [most] peaceful one out of any other countries.

Solmaz [*Turkish*]: To be Australian I think it means to be multicultural in every sense... You've got everything here and I think we're advantaged to be like this.

The women took it for granted that everyone in Australia supported multiculturalism. As Wendy [*Latin*] said, multiculturalism is 'well accepted and well embraced by a lot of people'. Migrants living in regions outside of Melbourne may have different ideas about Australia's multiculturalism. Smith and Phillips found that their Queensland participants, including NESB women, believed that ethnic diversity 'was potentially valuable, but only as long as it did not take an inward looking form or come to dominate the broader "Australian" society' (2001: 336). In context of my study, the multicultural world-view of Australia that the women collectively shared was influenced by the areas of Melbourne that they lived in, which were typified by cultural plurality.

Identity

Thirty-six of the 50 participants adopted hybrid migrant-Australian identities even though they felt that most people did not see them as Australian (see Zevallos 2005b). For example, being asked the question 'where are you from?' was a phenomenon that every woman spoke about without any prompt. A couple of the women said that they tried not to ask this because the question annoys them, but they still asked this question out of 'curiosity' and they felt that most people did so out of the same sense of curiosity. The women described feeling proud of telling people about their ethnic background, so this question was sometimes welcomed, but only if it was in the spirit of curiosity and not asked in an offensive way.

The question 'where are you from' may be asked out of curiosity, but in effect, it functions as a gate-keeping tool regarding Australian identity, even if it not intended this way. This question can be seen as a way of connecting people: it is an opportunity to learn more about another person's ethnicity and it therefore promotes multiculturalism. At the same time, this question can also be seen as problematic because it operates through notions of race (as it is mostly asked of people who look or sound 'different') and, in this way, it reproduces racist constructions of national identity. Most women were not 'bothered' or offended over this question, but they sometimes found this 'frustrating' or 'annoying' when people who were dissatisfied with the answer would badger them about their identities. In this case, being perceived as different is a negative experience because the participants recognise that

they are being excluded from the Australian identity (see also Ang 1996: 42-43; Zevallos 2003: 88-90, 94-95). As the women explained, 'many people don't see me as *Australian Australian*' [Sahiba *Turkish*].

Aylin's comments illustrate this sense of exclusion. Aylin came to Australia when she was eight years old and she saw herself as Australian as well as Chilean. Her everyday interactions with other people, however, made her feel as if her Australian identity was not accepted:

Do you think other people accept you as Australian?

Aylin [*Latin*]: I don't think so. Not everybody. When I was working in retail a lot of customers would come up and ask, 'So what nationality are you?' And sometimes I'd say, 'Australian' and they'd just laugh, like I was being funny. And I wasn't. I was trying to say, 'I'm just like you. I'm just like everybody here. I'm Australian'. And to them that's not an answer. They go, 'But what are you? What nationality are you? What background are you?' They need to know so they can, I don't know, put you into one of their little boxes. Like, 'Oh she's Latin. I'll tick that box'. Straight away, even before you've even told them about yourself, they've already formed a perception of you, of what you should be like...It shouldn't really matter what background you are. [*Latin*]

Despite feeling as if some people did not accept them as Australian, some of the women had a defiant attitude towards this lack of acceptance. They often said that identity was up to an individual to decide, and so while other people might not see them as Australian, many of the participants still took on this identity. Leyla, an Australian-born Turkish participant said:

...I always have this debate with my mum. I always say I'm an Aussie, and she goes, 'No you're not! If you ever go up to an Aussie and asked them they'd say "You're not an Australian"'. I go, 'Well mum, they can't really say that either because [whispers] they're not Australian either unless [they're] an Aboriginal' [laughs]. I think most of society would accept that 'Yeah you're an Aussie' but there's that small few that say, 'No you're not because your parents were born somewhere else'. I don't care what they think, as long as I know what I am. [*Turkish*]

Racism

About half of the women (26 participants) reported that they had experienced racism, and this ranged from yelling and teasing, to feeling discriminated against at work or at university. The rest of the women described incidents that could be construed as racist, for example feeling insulted by the term 'wog' or feeling excluded from the Australian identity on the basis of race, but such experiences did not lead these participants to think of themselves as having experienced racism. The overwhelming majority of the participants reported feeling as if Anglo-Australian people did not see them as Australian because they did not 'look Aussie', but this was based on differing criteria for the two groups: the Latin women felt that their dark skin and dark features marked them as 'not Australian' in the eyes of other people, but the Turkish women felt that their 'Arab' appearance marked them as 'not Australian'. Thirteen of the 14 Turkish women who wore the hijab had experienced

racism, whereas only seven of the 11 Turkish women who did not wear the hijab reported experiences of racism. For example, Sahiba said: 'They automatically assume you're an Arab when you've got a scarf on. It's like, [puts on a frightened tone] "Oh you Arabs, oooh" [laughs]'. In the Turkish participants' case, therefore, wearing the hijab was closely associated with experiences of racism. The most severe physical acts of racism, however, were reported by one of the Latin women who, while living in a country town for several years, had been spat on and yelled at by strangers while walking down the street and she had also been routinely harassed by the local police.

Irrespective of their personal experience (or lack of experience) with racism, all 50 women said that racism exists in Australia, whether this was in reference to their own, their friends' or family members' experiences. But what does this say about Australian society?

Social scientists have argued that racialised and racist constructions of the nation have become more prominent in Australia in recent times (Markus 2001; Stratton 1998) and that racism is institutionalised in society despite Australian multicultural policies (Vasta 1996; Hage 1998; Hollinsworth 1998). The women I interviewed would disagree about the breadth and impact of racism in Australia. Overall, the women generally gave ambivalent messages about racism. Much of this ambivalence derived from the women's understanding of multiculturalism. They made three claims about racism and national belonging that, taken together, add up to a contradictory account of multiculturalism in Australia:

1. Australia is not a racist society *because* it is a multicultural society; they said this even if they had personally experienced racism.
2. Most Anglo-Australians are not racist, but most people who are racist were characterised as being Anglo-Australian.
3. Anglo-Australians support multiculturalism, but at the same time, the women believed that Anglo-Australians did not generally accept them as being 'really' Australian.

These three beliefs about racism in Australian society tell us something very important about the women's understanding of the ideology of Australian multiculturalism. Karli, an Australian-born Turkish participant, provides a good example of the tensions in the women's accounts of multiculturalism, race and national identity.

Karli did not wear the hijab. She saw herself as Australian even though she had faced racism while growing up. When I asked Karli to define 'multiculturalism', she did so in reference to the racism she had encountered in her life:

It is a multicultural country, that's obvious. But there is a lot of racism that goes on from day to day. Growing up, in high school, it was always, 'You're a wog, and we're Aussie' or, 'You're Turkish, and I'm Greek. Turkey and Greece don't get along'. Or, 'You're a Muslim, and yous [sic] are terrorists'. With this [September 11] bombing, [there is] so much conflict that is put towards the Muslims, you know?...I don't think that we can go around and say that we're multicultural - I mean, we're not multicultural orientated because it just doesn't happen, there's too much racism going on.

Karli was unusual, in that she was one of the few women to say that Australia had a systemic problem with racism that undermined Australia's status as a 'multicultural' society. We see this in the way she says 'we can't go around and say that we're multicultural' because 'there's too much racism going on'. Yet Karli went on to contradict this view later in her interview. When I asked Karli whether she believed that Australia is a fairly tolerant or a racist society, she said that Australia was *not* a racist society:

No, I reckon it's a fairly tolerant society. It's not racist; you can't stereotype. Me saying that, I'd be contradicting myself because...saying that all Australians are racist is wrong. My best friend's Australian. I've known her since grade prep and not once did we have a wog-Australian conflict.

Despite the women's experiences of racism, they did not believe that Australia had a structural problem with racism. Although I invited the women to comment on racism at the social level, beyond the realm of their everyday experiences, they did not connect the two ideas. They described racism through the theory of 'individual racism' that sees racism as a problem located within individual (rather than group) belief systems and enacted through embodied, everyday social practices (Essed 2002). Instead of speaking of *racism* at the social level, the women spoke of *multiculturalism*, and so this suggests that the two concepts are linked for them. Next, I go on to summarise my findings and I discuss the links between racism and multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism as a lived ideology

This paper suggests that issues of identity, race and racism need to be understood within the context of multiculturalism as an ideology and as a lived experience. The findings presented should be framed within the limitations of the qualitative method and sample. The findings are not generalisable, but the data shed light on the experiences of well educated second-generation migrant women living in a cosmopolitan city. When these women speak of Australia as a 'multicultural world', the reader should bear in mind that the participants' beliefs are likely to be influenced by place, especially given that they identified Melbourne as a 'multicultural' city whose social landscape was shaped by cultural diversity.

The women believed in an ideology of Australian multiculturalism because of, or *in spite of*, their social experiences of racism and social exclusion. There are four possible explanations for this finding. These explanations can be thought of as an *ideology of acceptance*, a phrase that encompasses their ideological support for an anti-racist, multicultural Australian nationhood.

First, the women's ideology of acceptance might be seen as contextual; their support of multiculturalism prevailed despite their experiences with racism and exclusion because they differentiated their *individual experiences* from a wider social experience. In their personal experience, Anglo-Australians might be racist and sometimes make them feel 'not Australian' because the women did not 'look it', but when they thought about the nation as a whole, they saw their own experience with racial prejudice as atypical. This is consistent with their belief that *not all* Australians were

racist, *only some* Anglo-Australians were racists. Making a distinction between their individual experiences and wider social experience of racism was also contrasted with the belief that it was 'un-Australian' to be racist. They believed that Australians who were racist were deviating from a shared Australian norm of cultural tolerance.

Second, their ideology of acceptance can be seen as relative. In comparison to other nations, Australia was seen as a tolerant society that accommodates, rather than restricts, diversity. There was some support for this idea in the women's interviews, especially when they compared Australia's cultural pluralism with the (perceived) cultural uniformity in their families' countries-of-origin. In this comparison, Australian multiculturalism, 'helps broaden people's minds' [*Ursula, Latin*], and our cultural diversity means that, 'There's so much to learn from everybody' [*Asuman, Turkish*].

Third, the women's ideology of acceptance might be explained through an analysis of hegemony. The ideology of Australian multiculturalism is premised on the idea that we are a society that embraces cultural diversity; therefore multiculturalism allows the women a legitimate basis to maintain their families' migrant practices. As Betts (1999) pointed out, when we look at ideologies extrinsically we can see that they generate losers and winners, and that it is easier for people to adopt ideologies if there is something for them to gain, such as status and group membership. The ideology of multiculturalism offered the women in my study some benefits. As second-generation migrants, they could feel as if they were making a strong contribution to Australia's national culture in a way that (in their eyes) Anglo-Australians do not. They said of Australian national culture: 'we're making the culture, the immigrants' [*Ofelia, Latin*].

At the same time, the women's support of the ideology of multiculturalism seemed to drown out the oppressive elements which prevail in Australian society despite its multiculturalism, such as racism and social exclusion. It is possible that the participants might have been deflecting the social inequalities they experienced, such as feeling like they were not being accepted as Australian, in order to continue feeling like they belonged to the multicultural nation. In this sense, the women might have been defensive about multiculturalism: they may not have wanted to acknowledge that their experiences of marginalisation were linked to structural racism because this might be perceived to undermine the ideology of multiculturalism as they understood it. After all, believing that everyone supports multiculturalism was central to the ideology of multiculturalism and so institutionalised racism would seem to go against this belief.

Fourth, the ideology of acceptance may be shaped by the 'in-between' status of these women as second-generation migrants. Most of the women saw themselves as simultaneously belonging to Australia and to their migrant communities. The experiences of second-generation migrants are pivotal to broader issues of identity negotiation, community boundaries, and social exclusion. Sameness and otherness, belonging and not belonging, are ongoing processes that these second-generation migrants negotiate in their everyday lives. Given that the women occupy a 'hybrid' space, their support of the multicultural ideology potentially constructs a social space that accommodates their experiences as 'in-between' national actors.

I argue that all four explanations for the women's ideology of acceptance are legitimate, but the first explanation, that racism is contextual, probably best represents my participants' ideas. Australia operates with lower levels of civic conflict relative to other culturally diverse nations, although some commentators on the Cronulla riots might dispute this. Nevertheless, my findings are aligned with other studies in which young second-generation migrants 'described Australian culture as being multiculturalism itself', although at the same time, these same young people 'did not have a sense that their own cultural background was valued as being part of what it is to be "Australian"' (Butcher and Thomas 2001: 29; see also Ang et al. 2002: 40, 48; Ang et al. 2006: 21-23; Zevallos 2003).

The women's contradictory views point to the challenges in constructing a multicultural nationhood. On the one hand, the ideology of multiculturalism in Australia is beneficial to the women on a personal level: it gives them a legitimate basis for constructing their social identities and for continuing their family's cultural practices. On the other hand, the ideology of multiculturalism has not resulted in a truly multicultural Australian identity in these women's experiences: not all Australians accept all 'non-white', non-Christian citizens as 'Australian'. Ang and her colleagues came to similar conclusions in a recent study that concluded, 'Multicultural Australia today is a country of paradoxes' (2006: 25). Even as young Australians of diverse backgrounds embrace multiculturalism, their experiences of racism and social division reveal 'that the ideal of a harmonious multicultural Australia is not yet a reality or, at least, not completely' (Ang et al. 2006: 21).

Despite the participants' personal experiences of racism, in their view, Australian society was not constructed in terms of racism, but in terms of multiculturalism. The women's confidence in, and support of, the ideology for multiculturalism fills them with optimism that Australia is a 'great country' that is worth belonging to, even when they were not 'seen' as Australian by other people, and even when they experienced difficulty claiming their Australian-ness. The women's lived experiences show how the multicultural Australian identity was not yet fully aligned with its ideology, and yet the women still felt confident and supportive about its potential. This potential is embedded in the women's belief that Australia represents a 'multicultural world' where 'we accept every culture'.

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