

Refugee and Migrant Integration:  
Examining the discourse of the dominant

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**Abstract**

Refugee and immigrant settlement is situated within a context of government policy and practice, as well as a receiving or 'host' community. Traditionally these factors have been isolated, in policy and research, such that much attention has been devoted to the study of refugee and migrant 'adjustment' with relatively less attention to how this is influenced by the attitudes and expectations of members of the host community. Moreover, governments' policies have focused on programs to assist refugees and migrants in their transition to a new community, but have neglected the needs of host community members in the acculturation process. This has served to further marginalise migrant and refugee communities within the Australian context, and has failed to recognise the reciprocal and dynamic nature of intergroup relations. In this paper I discuss these limitations in the context of an interactive acculturation framework, with particular emphasis on research that examines host community perspectives on refugee and immigrant settlement; the *discourse of the dominant*.

**Key words:** dominant culture; discourse; intergroup relations; immigrants; refugees

**Introduction**

This special issue addresses the gap between research and policy in the settlement and integration of refugees and immigrants in a new community, with particular emphasis on the need to translate narrative and discursive research approaches into government policy. In this paper I take an alternative approach by focusing on the discourse of members of the 'host' or receiving society, particularly those who might be described as the dominant group in that setting<sup>1</sup>. Despite their cultural and social hegemony, I argue that researchers and policy makers need to pay attention to this discourse. By this I do not mean they should respond to the vocal prejudiced minority by playing the 'race card'. Instead I am referring to the need to engage the large proportion of dominant group members who express ambivalent attitudes to immigrant acculturation and integration. These attitudes are characterised by positive and negative

components; there is support for some aspects of immigrants' cultural maintenance but this 'tolerance' is constructed relative to white, Anglo-Australian norms, and racism and prejudice remain. Opening a constructive dialogue with these community members is necessary, precisely *because* they have political, social and economic power, but also because perceived threats to that power are often blamed on scapegoats such as immigrants and refugees. But most importantly, the dialogue is critical because research demonstrates that the attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of this group have a significant influence on the experiences of refugees and immigrants as they settle and adapt in their new communities (Bourhis, Moïse, Perreault, & Senécal, 1997; Van Oudenhoven, Ward, & Masgoret, 2006).

Psychological research on intergroup relations in plural societies has tended to be split between two traditions: one that focuses on *acculturation research and theory*, and another that emphasizes *ethnic relations* (Berry, 2006). The former perspective has involved studies of the

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<sup>1</sup> The dominant group in Australia is white Australian with a British cultural heritage. For further discussion of this see Hage (1998) and Forrest and Dunn (2006).

experiences of non-dominant groups, particularly immigrants and refugees from non-English speaking backgrounds. Many of these studies have examined acculturation strategies, acculturative stress, and long-term adaptation (Berry, 2006; Ward & Masgoret, 2006). In contrast, the emphasis of the *ethnic relations approach* has been primarily in investigating the attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of dominant groups and has tended to fall within the frameworks of social psychology. This has resulted in studies of prejudice, discrimination, and ethnocentrism, as well as research addressing attitudes toward immigration and cultural diversity (Leong, 2008; Ward & Masgoret, 2006).

More recently researchers have attempted to bring these two fields of study together, not simply to improve our theoretical and conceptual understanding of the issues but also because refugee and immigrant adjustment occur within a context of government policy and an existing community. That is, it is now increasingly recognized that intergroup relations are *reciprocal* and *dynamic*, such that, for example, acculturation strategies adopted by immigrants are influenced by the policies and practices of the receiving society, as well as the attitudes of the dominant group members of that receiving society (Bourhis et al., 1997; Kalin & Berry, 1996; Van de Vijver, Breugelmans, & Schalk-Soekar, 2008; Van Oudenhoven, Ward, & Masgoret, 2006). Similarly, both dominant and non-dominant groups hold views on the potential benefits, problems, and consequences of immigration and cultural diversity.

### Interactive acculturation

Acculturation is usually defined as the cultural change that results when two (or more) groups “come into continuous first-hand contact” (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936, p. 149)<sup>2</sup>. Berry (1980,

2006) identified two independent but related dimensions of acculturation: the extent to which persons in cultural transition wish to maintain the values, customs and norms of their culture/s of origin (sometimes referred to as ‘heritage’ or ancestral culture), and the extent to which they desire interaction with other cultural groups, including the host or dominant culture. This, according to Berry, results in four acculturation strategies or orientations: 1) integration, in which both dimensions are endorsed, also described as biculturalism; 2) assimilation, in which the culture of origin is not maintained and individuals ‘blend in’ with the host community; 3) separation, in which the culture of origin is maintained and interaction with other groups is minimal; and 4) marginalization; in which there is little original culture maintenance as well as a distancing from other groups.

The policies and practices of the host community influence the success of these acculturation strategies (Van Oudenhoven, Ward, & Masgoret, 2006). For example, integration is likely to be difficult to pursue in a society with an official policy of assimilation since there would be little practical support for maintenance of the heritage culture (Berry, 2006). Similarly, a strategy of assimilation can be hampered by experiences of discrimination or rejection by members of the dominant culture. Such rejection can result in a forced ‘strategy’ of separation, if there is a sufficiently large community of people from the same background. Finally, marginalisation is typically exhibited among Indigenous groups that have been colonized (invaded), often as a consequence of the oppressive policies and practices of the colonizer. In Australia, for example, the practice of forcible removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families (the *Stolen Generations*) resulted in the loss of indigenous languages, customs and traditions for many Indigenous Australians

<sup>2</sup> ‘Culture’, in this context, typically refers to the practices, customs, beliefs and traditions associated

with ethnicity and/or nationality: “common descent and shared origin” (Verkuyten, 2005a, p.75).

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(Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, 1997). In many cases these experiences rendered cultural maintenance extremely difficult, and interaction with the colonizer, profoundly unattractive. Thus marginalisation is often regarded as a forced effect of policy and practice, rather than a strategy of choice (Van Oudenhoven et al., 2006).

Whilst Berry's model has been criticized as too simple to capture the multiple acculturation orientations and strategies that are possible (e.g., Rudmin, 2003), it has tended to dominate acculturation research. Much of this research has focused on immigrants to Western nations, and has demonstrated that most immigrant groups report a preference for an integration strategy (e.g., Jasinskaja-Lahti, Liebkind, Horenczyk, & Schmitz, 2003; Van Oudenhoven Prins, & Buunk, 1998). There are some notable exceptions to this, such as the Turkish *Gastarbeiter* in Germany who have indicated a preference for separation (Piontkowski, Florack, Hoelker, & Obdrzálezek, 2000). Piontkowski et al. (2000) found that this was related to a number of factors including the extent to which Turkish participants perceived group boundaries as permeable, that is, that they were able to "participate completely in German life" (p. 10). Group boundaries may be seen as impermeable when immigrants feel rejected by members of the dominant culture, both informally (e.g., in daily interaction), and formally, through institutional policies regarding immigration and citizenship. Perceiving one's group as highly dissimilar from the dominant culture can also contribute to a belief that group boundaries are fixed. Extending this to the Australian context, it is possible that some groups in Australia who are perceived as (and perceive themselves to be) very different from the dominant Australian culture will be more likely to endorse a separationist strategy. However, relatively little is known about the acculturation preferences of specific immigrant and refugee communities in Australia.

Conclusions concerning the acculturation preferences of immigrants and refugees are also limited by methodological factors, since potential confounds such as social desirability in responding are rarely examined or controlled for. For example, immigrants and refugees who regard their legal status (in terms of citizenship and/or visa status) as precarious may be more likely to report an acculturation preference that conforms to social norms or expectations. This likelihood is enhanced when the researcher is perceived as a member of the dominant culture and/or a person or organization with authority (e.g., in a government survey). Similarly, the proportion of marginalised groups and individuals identified in acculturation studies is likely to be an underestimate because, by definition, marginalized persons/groups are difficult to recruit and less likely to be involved in research. Rudmin (2003) and others have also challenged the usefulness of categories to capture the acculturation and adaptation experiences of immigrants and refugees, which are likely to vary across individuals and groups, and over time. Thus, questions remain as to the 'true' acculturation strategies of non-dominant groups in cultural contact.

The issue that is of greater interest to this paper, however, is the extent to which the acculturation strategy preferences reported by immigrants and refugees mirror the acculturation *expectations* of members of the dominant or 'host' culture. That is, how do members of the host community expect immigrants to acculturate and adapt? This has become a topic of research interest more recently, and Bourhis et al. (1997) extended on Berry's model to propose five components to capture host community's expectations: integration, segregation, assimilation, exclusion and individualism. Integration, segregation and assimilation mirror the dimensions of acculturation strategy in Berry's model, and exclusion refers to a form of marginalization (at its most extreme, it connotes a preference for a

closed-border policy with no immigration at all). Persons who endorse individualism leave the strategy open to individual choice and do not expect a single approach over another.

Research shows that there is often a mismatch between the acculturation preferences of immigrants and host community members (e.g., Piontkowski et al., 2000; Rohmann, Florack, & Piontkowski, 2006; Van Oudenhoven, Prins, & Buunk, 1998). For example, in some studies majority or dominant group members have reported a preference for immigrants to assimilate rather than integrate (e.g., Arends-Tóth & Van de Vijver, 2003; Van Oudenhoven, et al., 1998). This can depend on the immigrant group under consideration, for example, Piontkowski et al. (2000) found that whilst the native Swiss preferred integration overall, there was also strong support for separation and marginalization for Yugoslavian immigrants in particular. Relatively little is known about the reasons for such different expectations, although they may be related to perceived cultural similarity, or *cultural distance*, as noted earlier.

Not only do immigrants and dominant group members sometimes disagree on what is appropriate or desirable in terms of acculturation, they also misinterpret each other. Rohmann et al. (2006) found discordance between majority and minority members' *perceptions* of the other group's acculturation attitude among Turkish immigrants and native Germans in Germany. Whilst the majority (77%) of native Germans endorsed an integrationist strategy, only 33% of Turkish participants indicated that they thought Germans supported integration for Turkish people in Germany. Similarly, native German participants reported that, in their view, only 56% of Turks preferred integration and 36% supported separation.

### Attitudes among the dominant group in Australia

Although there is less Australian research on acculturation attitudes, studies have demonstrated that dominant group members are *ambivalent* in their attitudes to immigrant integration and the policy of multiculturalism (Ang, Brand, Noble, & Wilding, 2002; Ang, Brand, Noble, & Sternberg, 2006; Dandy, in press; Dandy & Pe-Pua, 2009; Dunn, Forrest, Burnley, & McDonald, 2004; Ho, 1990). There appears to be public support for refugees and immigrants to maintain their cultures, at least in principle and when measured as agreement with statements on a questionnaire. However, endorsement of immigrants' cultural maintenance is often coupled with concerns about threats to Australian national identity and national unity (Dandy, in press; Dunn et al., 2004). Consequently, what is commonly understood to be 'cultural maintenance' is defined narrowly - what is accepted is perhaps the 'pasta and polka' version of multiculturalism, in which cultural components such as food and dress are encouraged but other aspects such as values and norms are less likely to be accepted (Collins, 2003). Limits on cultural maintenance are called for most vigorously when minorities that are considered more *culturally distant* from Anglo-Australian norms are being considered. Historically this included immigrants and refugees who were from China and Vietnam, and more recently this has extended to people who are Muslim and/or from the Middle-East<sup>3</sup> and refugees from African countries (Dandy & Pe-Pua, 2009; Dunn et al., 2004; Pember, 2008; Poynting & Noble, 2004). Moreover, the daily experience of many immigrants and refugees in Australia is one in which racial discrimination and prejudice are common (Ang et al., 2006; Office of Multicultural

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<sup>3</sup> This reflects an inaccurate but commonly held stereotype in Australia. Contrary to the perceived association, the majority of Muslims in Australia are not from the Middle-East but from Indonesia and Malaysia.

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Interests, 2009; Poynting & Noble, 2004; Sanson et al., 1998).

In addition, recent qualitative research demonstrates that often what dominant group members refer to as 'integration' is more akin to assimilation. For example, in our interviews about multiculturalism, immigration and diversity with dominant group members, many participants expressed an expectation that immigrants become 'Australian' in their ways, although the meaning of Australian was never made explicit (Dandy & Pe-Pua, 2009). Similarly, in an ethnographic study of Anglo-Australians' perceptions of multiculturalism and immigrant integration, one of Pember's (2008) participants said "if people choose to live here, then I want them to choose to be Australian over anything else"<sup>4</sup>. Newspaper letters to the editor and calls to talkback radio echo a norm that is assimilationist and culturally exclusive, as captured in a recent Australia Day slogan: *I am Australian: I eat meat, I drink beer and I speak bloody English*. Whilst it could be argued that these are the voices of a racist minority, the research suggests that ambivalence is common; across studies only around 50% of Australians support multiculturalism and many people express both positive and negative feelings about the impacts of immigration and multiculturalism (Dandy, in press).

Ambivalence in Australian public opinion on immigrant integration and multiculturalism is not surprising given the mixed messages of Australian multicultural policy. Originally modelled on the Canadian example, the Australian policy has three main components; the right to maintain cultural heritage and identity by immigrant (and indigenous) groups; a principle of social equality; and the economic benefits of immigration and diversity (Collins, 2003; National Multicultural Advisory Council [NMAC], 1999). A further component was added under the Howard-Coalition

government; *civic duty*, introduced in 1999. In the summary statement, civic duty is referred to as obligations to Australia's "structures and principles – our Constitution, democratic institutions *and values*" (NMAC; emphasis added). This was accompanied by a re-framing of the policy as *Australian* multiculturalism. Whether these policy changes were intended to reflect or direct public opinion remains the domain of political scientists, however they are further evidence of the ambivalent and conflicted nature of the political approach to 'managing' diversity in Australia.

The trend towards emphasising immigrants' obligations to the dominant culture, at least in terms of institutions and laws, is not unique to Australia. Other western, developed nations, such as the UK, France and Italy, have witnessed an increase in anti-immigrant sentiment. In addition, and perhaps in response to these concerns, some governments have introduced policies designed to discourage 'illegal' immigrants (e.g., Italy) and/or to encourage commitment to the political institutions, laws and customs of the dominant culture, such as the introduction of a citizenship test in the UK. Public debate about integration and diversity in these nations appears to follow a similar pattern to that in Australia, although in these countries it is within the context of shared commitments to the European Union.

Attitudinal ambivalence among dominant group members may be because policies such as multiculturalism are identity-threatening; members of the dominant culture have to make room for 'other' cultures and identities and this is perceived as threatening to their cultural hegemony (Verkuyten, 2005b). Using Integrated Threat Theory (Stephan & Stephan, 2000), this is a form of symbolic threat – to the in-group's values, beliefs, customs and norms. Attitudes to 'out-groups', such as immigrants and refugees, have also been found to be associated with *realistic* threat concerns (Rick, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006).

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<sup>4</sup> Cited with the author's permission.

These include concerns about competition for resources (e.g., employment, social welfare) and perceived threats to political and economic power. Threat has been shown to influence attitudes to multiculturalism and immigration among members of the dominant culture in the Netherlands (Verkuyten, 2005b), New Zealand (Ward and Masgoret, 2006), and Australia (Dandy & Pe-Pua, 2009). Concerns about threats to jobs are given further weight when governments announce a decrease in the immigration intake in light of an economic downturn or recession, such as occurred in Australia early in 2009.

### **Australian attitudes to refugees and asylum seekers**

Whilst many dominant culture members in Australia are ambivalent about immigrant acculturation, their attitudes to refugees and asylum seekers are more clear-cut. There are refugee advocates (Every & Augoustinos, 2007; Lange, Kamalkhari, & Baldassar, 2007) but it appears that many Australians hold profoundly negative attitudes toward refugees and asylum seekers (Pedersen, Atwell, & Heveli, 2005; Pedersen, Watt, & Hansen, 2006; Schweitzer, Perkoulidis, Krome, Ludlow, & Ryan, 2005). More is known about attitudes to asylum seekers than refugees, since much of the research has focused on the highly politicised and emotive 'boat person' label rather than refugees per se. It would appear that there is a distinction, both in public opinion and political discourse, between an asylum seeker and a 'genuine refugee' (Pedersen et al., 2006; Klocker, 2004). To a large extent this debate centres around talk of the alleged Australian values of fairness and egalitarianism (Every & Augoustinos, 2007, 2008) because asylum seekers are typically constructed as 'queue jumpers'. These are represented as persons who seek protection without going through 'the proper channels' displacing 'real' refugees (Pedersen et al., 2005). This suggests that there may be different dimensions underlying the dominant group's attitudes to asylum seekers and refugees,

compared with attitudes to immigrants (Dandy & Pe-Pua, 2009).

Despite the apparent public and political differentiation among constructions of 'refugee', 'asylum seeker' and 'immigrant', research shows there is some overlap in the Australian dominant group's attitudes, particularly as they relate to realistic threat concerns. For example, studies have shown that there is disquiet about refugees receiving social welfare and being an economic burden (Klocker, 2004; Schweitzer et al., 2005). There is also evidence of symbolic threat in the form of concerns about Australian values and identity (e.g., Saxton, 2003; Schweitzer et al., 2005). Finally, the theme of cultural difference is also invoked in the discourse about asylum seekers (e.g., Every & Augoustinos, 2007). As noted earlier, this is a theme that we commonly see in the dominant discourse around immigrants and multiculturalism, and has been proposed to be a form of 'new' or modern racism (Every & Augoustinos, 2007).

### **Conclusion**

My aim in this paper was to characterise how members of the dominant culture in Australia perceive immigrants in the context of settlement and acculturation. These attitudes, which I have argued are complex and ambivalent, have the potential to affect immigrant and refugee adjustment in a variety of ways, particularly when they are discordant with the official rhetoric or immigrants' own strategies and desires. Negative attitudes toward refugees and asylum seekers, espoused in public forums such as talkback radio and letters to newspapers, on car bumper stickers and in casual conversation, create a climate in which discriminatory and hostile behaviour can seem acceptable. In turn, this can result in separation or marginalisation of minority communities.

Moreover, a host community expectation that immigrants will assimilate is clearly at odds with Australian multicultural policy.

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Even when cultural maintenance is supported by dominant group members, the research shows there is a desire to place limits on the extent and nature of that 'cultural content'. Whilst these limits are not clearly defined, it would appear that cultural difference is still constructed (or tolerated) relative to the dominant Anglo-Australian norm (Dunn et al., 2004). The *centring* of this cultural norm is also reflected in the recent re-framing of Australian multicultural policy, as well as the withdrawal of funding for specific support programs. Whether these changes to government policy and practice reflect a reaction to perceived community sentiment or are an attempt to lead public opinion is difficult to determine. However, as noted by Stratton and Ang (1994, p.127), multicultural policy in Australia has always been a "top-bottom political strategy" rather than a grass-roots community movement.

What is needed is a constructive, two-way (or multi-way) dialogue around these issues. This should include recognition of the social, political and cultural dominance of Anglo-Australians, as well as an understanding of how this dominance might be perceived as under threat. In some ways, Australian multicultural policy renders Anglo-Australian cultural hegemony invisible; it is the assumed norm (Forrest & Dunn, 2006; Hage, 1998). It needs to be made visible, challenged and debated. In short, the voices of all community members – 'dominant', 'immigrant' and 'refugee' and 'indigenous' – can and should be heard. Qualitative research in this area is particularly informative because methodologies such as discourse and narrative analysis are able to capture the complexity and ambivalence of people's attitudes as well as the nuances of modern or 'new' racism (Every & Augoustinos, 2007).

Although the local, socio-historical context is clearly important in the understanding of intergroup relations, many of these issues are not unique to the Australian context. Instead, they are a feature of many nations

that have experienced a rise in immigration and an associated increase in ethnic, cultural and religious diversity. Moreover, the successful negotiation of intergroup relations is of particular concern in western, liberal democracies that advocate social justice principles and individual rights and freedoms, such as the UK, France, Germany and the Netherlands. As researchers, our challenge is to capture and convey the many voices in the debate so that we can inform and engage political leadership in Australia, and elsewhere.

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