

Discuss how the concepts of 'race' and 'ethnicity' perpetuate inequality in austr...

[Art & Culture](#), [Multiculturalism](#)



Australia is known for its multicultural society, but race and ethnicity are a huge factor of persistent racism and inequality in this country. The driving force behind this is the strong belief that some of the population still hold against people who appear different to themselves. To gain a clear understanding of this sensitive topic one must look at the origins, forms and effects of racism. This essay will look at how the concepts of 'race' and 'ethnicity' perpetuate inequality in our society, a brief history of Australia in relation to racism and how people experience these inequalities today in a society that we call multicultural. Modern Australia was established as a 'region of recent settlement' in 1788 which was a small part of a larger process of European colonisation (Bessant & Watts, 2002, p.

219). They had a set of ideas, values and beliefs and assumed that aborigines had no system of land ownership, agriculture, animal husbandry. Indigenous people have been in Australia for more than 100, 000 years (Bessant & Watts, 2002, p. 222). The White Australia Policy in the 20th century encouraged immigration only from Britain, but didn't allow 'Asians' and 'Non-whites' (Economou N, 1998, p. 63).

By 1950's people from all countries were allowed to migrate into Australia to help post war reconstruction. The colonial immigration saw a mass migration of European people mostly from Britain to Australia. It is said that between 1788 and 1852 approximately 170, 000 people moved to Australia, and the gold rush era after 1851 made it a highly desirable country for migrating (Bessant & Watts, 2002, p.

231). By end of World War two, as war forced Australia to get closer to other countries, which resulted in the first significant weakening of the policy in 1951. Later in the 1950s and 1960s other parts of the White Australia Policy were gradually dismantled. By the 1970s the federal government had removed all racial restrictions from its immigration law (Bessant & Watts, 2002). Various writers have contradictory approaches and ways of looking at racism, making it a complex topic. It takes many different forms, ranging from physical violence to derogatory language. A person or group's belief that their race is superior or inferior, or their moral and social traits are predetermined, based on biological differences can be termed 'racism'.

A group of people sharing the same skin colour, same values, coming from the similar backgrounds may constitute as 'race'. One of the most common forms of racism found today is Institutional Racism, which stems from established corporations, and other powerful forces in society, thus making it hard to question and faces less public condemnation. Examples include housing, employment, businesses, education, religion and media (Healey, 2002). Typically, the basis of this type of discrimination is from irrational fear of people at the receiving end who belong to a different culture or 'race'. Although, there have been ongoing debates about racism all around us for centuries, it is an assault on human rights as it methodically refuses people of different caste, colour, race, sex or their country of origin basic values underlined by Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) which states that human rights are everyone's birthright and apply to all without difference (Healey, 2002).

Common perception of shared origins, culture, lifestyle and traditions amongst a group of people or society is the universal definition of ethnicity (Bessant & Watts, 2002). People can share the same nationality but have different ethnicities. A few writers have put forward fascinating explanations of ethnicity. Edward Shils in his 'primordial approach' argues that he believes everyone has a primordial attachment to their motherland, people and religion which brings out strong emotional ties by socialising, which further gives rise to the need to have a separate identity and belonging. Then the 'Mobilisationist Approach' suggests that nothing is predictable or normal about ethnicity. Rather, ethnic identities come into sight and are toughened in political contexts where groups struggle to get access to inadequate and valued resources (Van Krieken et al, 2000, p. 519). The basis of ethnocentrism is a conscious or unconscious belief that one's ethnic group, culture, religion, custom or behaviour is superior to another ethnic group.

Politicians boast that Australia is a multicultural, open and classless society. Despite the well known image of Australia's everyone have "a fair go", the country is still full of both institutional and popular racism. Education has always been very important when it comes to moving up in class and has been very liberating in Australian society. However, indigenous and ethnic groups have been somewhat disadvantaged in opportunities to acquire education. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics only five Indigenous Australians per 1, 000 obtain tertiary qualification, compared to 70-80 per 1, 000 for Anglo Australians. In the 1990s welfare, health care and

education support for Aborigines accounted only to 2% of total budget outlay (ABS 2000: 21). In order to receive an education a person requires an income, but to get an income one needs a job, and a job is challenging to find without an appropriate level of education.

Therefore an individual's chance of education is influenced by the socio-economic status of one's parents which is a cyclic social inequality hard to break. Migrants and their children often find it challenging to adjust to the Australian school system as they often come from countries that have a poor education system, and even if they have tertiary qualifications they mostly are not recognised, resulting in them taking lower paid and lower status jobs. Working class children often attend schools in working class suburbs where pupils are directed into working-class jobs. A high number of students leave school early and the expectation that they will attend university is low. In comparison, upper-class children attend private schools, and the expectation that they will attend university is high. Migrants and ethnic groups are often at a lower end of the socioeconomic scale (Aspin, 1996, p.

87) Migrants arrive with little money and few skills. Already at a disadvantage with language barriers, migrants and ethnic groups are also faced with racism and discrimination in their search for employment. In 1996, One Nation political party leader Pauline Hanson made a speech that claimed that Australia was being overwhelmed by 'Asians' and feared that Asians were taking over jobs.

The fact is that Asians at the time only accounted for 5% of total population and 'there is little evidence to support the claim that high rates of immigration 'cause' unemployment or 'cause' Australians to lose their jobs' (Bessant, 2002, p. 219). Indigenous people had a 24.3% unemployment rate according to 1996 census (ABS 2000: 23). Indigenous people are usually poorer than most non-indigenous Australians and receive a lower income on average than the total population. The household income for Aborigines in 1994 was \$158 compared to \$310 for white Australians (ABS 2000C: 23). This also reflects the fact that there is a higher reliance by the Aboriginal population on social security payments (ABS 1996b: 122-4). Socioeconomic status is a major determinant of inequality as it influences access an individual has to the economic resources of a society. L.

J. Aspin (1996) explains that white Australian-born males have a better chance of obtaining access to the resources of society. Inequality is also reflected in the differential access to housing and health services. For people who are paying rent and on a low income, it is almost impossible to save for a deposit on a house at the same time. Aborigines and migrants suffer discrimination in rental accommodation, where landlords preferring a two-parent, white, Anglo-Saxon families. Only 10% of Aborigines own housing compared to 70% of white Australia population (Aspin, 1996, p. 7).

Most Aborigines live in rural and provincial Australia (Bessant, 2002, p. 226) far from big cities where there are more jobs, higher paid jobs, better education, better housing, good water and sanitation services, hospital medical services and other community amenities. Some ethnic backgrounds

are still not accepted in our society and are treated differently and unequally. We see and hear about them on a day to day basis. In recent months the Indian community in Australia, especially students have become a vulnerable target for attacks, whether racist or not. On 31 May 2009 in Melbourne, about 5000 students marched through the streets of Melbourne protesting against these attacks on Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi students. 25-year-old Sravan Kumar Theerthala was in a serious condition in intensive care after being stabbed in the head with a screwdriver one week earlier (Bolton & Peterson, 2009).

In an article in The Age newspaper on February 19 Victorian police claimed that these attacks are not racially motivated, but opportunistic where Indian students are “ over representing themselves as victims” and can be looked upon as soft targets. The police also advised them “ not to speak in their native language loudly” or display signs of wealth. Attacks on Indians aren't the only allegation Australia has faced over the years. It seems that anyone in power, including police, politicians or the media has had the tendency to somehow flare these attacks. In the Herald Sun on 11 June 2009, 3AW's Neil Mitchell said: “ Australians are also bashed and die in India, which does not provoke parades of chanting ocker backpackers in the streets of Mumbai”. In 2007, the then immigration minister Kevin Andrews referred to the Sudanese community when he said “ Some groups don't seem to be settling and adjusting into the Australian way of life as quickly as we would hope. ” A spate of violent attacks were then unleashed against Sudanese migrants,

and one was bashed to death by a group of white men (Bolton & Peterson, 2009).

As Australia continues to argue that it is a just, tolerant, open and classless society, there is still evidence of race and inequality among us and affecting the many lives of migrants and Indigenous people. It is interesting to note that the very determinants of class – power, money, education, family background, occupation, health and general way of life are also the same factors where others experience inequalities. Race and ethnicity perpetuate inequality, and in any country including Australia, one would find that there are always some people with very strong values of racism, and media outlets which help in manipulating the views of general public. There still needs to be a massive drive by communities and governments on racism and inequality and it will be long before we will be a “ happy multicultural Australia”. Bibliography Aspin, L J 1996, ‘ Social stratification and inequality’, Focus on Australian society, 2nd edn, Longman, Melbourne. Australian Bureau of Statistics 2009, Australian Bureau of Statistics, viewed 28 November 2009, ; <http://www.abs.gov.au/> ;. Bessant, J & Watts, R 2002, ‘ Neighbours and nations: ethnic identity and multiculturalism’, Sociology Australia, 2nd edn, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW. Bolton, S & Peterson, C 2009, Indian students speak: Stop the racist attacks! , viewed 28 November 2009, ; <http://www.reenleft.org.au/2009/798/41083>;. Economou, N 1998, ‘ The Politics of Citizenship: identity, ethnicity and race’, in Alan Fenna, Introduction to Australian Public

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