Young people's perceptions of what it means to be an Australian [R]

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The question "What does it mean to be an Australian?" has significant implications for understanding factors contributing to social cohesion; explaining and promoting ourselves to others; imagining and shaping Australia's future; and shaping civics curriculum. The purpose of this study was to identify key components of Australian national identity of a sample of Australians ($N = 418$) comprised of primary ($N=71$); secondary ($N=146$), Technical and Further Education (TAFE) ($N=59$) and University ($n=142$) students. Participants completed a written response to the question "What does it mean to be Australian?" Responses were analysed and coded by two coders using content analysis to identify key themes. Key themes identified were analysed separately for each category of student and compared. Results indicated progressive and traditional notions of Australian national identity. Traditional themes include: *Citizenship and Participation*, *Patriotism and Pride, Personal Attributes, Unique Aspects and lifestyle, Mateship, and* the notion of a *Fair Go* for all. Progressive notions included themes such as *Societal Characteristics*, and *Respect for Other Cultures* suggesting that some aspects of national identity may be changing.

Background

"National cultures construct identities by creating meanings of 'the nation' with which we can identify. These are contained in stories that are told about the nation, in stories which link its present to its past, and in the perceptions of it that are constructed" (Hall, quoted in De Cillia, Reisigl, & Wodak, 1999, p. 155).

Concern for national identity is not just a matter of flapping flags, singing folk songs, inventing stereotypes or telling heroic anecdotes. A claim to national identity is a program for action (Horne, 1989).

These statements highlight the importance of understanding what it means to be Australian. The issue continues to spark passionate debate about the values we hold dear, the goals we should pursue, the loyalties we cherish, the norms of conduct we follow, the international image we project, and our hopes and dreams for the future. Historically, the issue of national identity has been fundamental to issues as diverse as: defending the nation, strengthening social cohesion; formulating economic, social and political policies; promoting Australian industry internationally; and stimulating social action and reform in areas of national interest. As Donald Horne (1989, p. 43) in his classic work "Ideas for a Nation" emphasised, debates about national identity have been attempts to take into account issues as practical as changes in Australia's: geopolitical position; position in world trade; ethnic composition; comparative strengths of urban and rural areas; class composition such as the increase in intellectuals and the decline of the blue collar worker; social mores; and the puzzles affecting capitalist societies (stagflation, post-industrial society, and new fragilities in world trade).

Our national identity is continuously evolving and is being constructed by all Australians as noted by one prominent Australian in an Australia Day address: "Our nation is not built. It is still under construction. We are all the builders" (Healey, 2002, p. 4). Australia's national history has forged our national identity, which has largely been promoted as being based on white settlement, and British rule and loyalty. This history gave birth to the tradition of the bush legend, egalitarianism, democracy and the free-spirited bronzed 'Aussie'. Australia is now a diverse, multicultural country yet little is known about whether our perceptions of national identity have changed. This study addresses the central question of what it means to be Australian, and is a component of a larger study. A fundamental premise is that in order to engage in a nation-building discourse, we need first to have an understanding of how our citizens understand the nation—how they construe an Australian national identity.

Theoretical Perspectives

Our research draws on social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which suggests that individuals shape their social identity via membership with groups. Social identity theory (SIT) posits that (a) self-esteem motivates most social processes (including one's choice of groups to which one attaches), (b) there are direct links between behaviour and identity, (c) intergroup comparisons (in-group/out-group phenomenon) are important, and (d) the multiple identities can exist. SIT focuses on the portions of our total identity that derive from our social group memberships (Abrams & Hogg, 1990) and proposes that social identities influence behaviour through group norms (Vaughan & Hogg, 1995). That is, people are more likely to perform a behaviour that fits with the values and beliefs of a group to which they belong, this being especially the case if they strongly identify with that group. SIT also posits that the self-esteem is a major motivator in most social identity processes. For example, if a person perceives himself or herself to be a member of a group, and they also see that group in a positive way, their self-esteem is enhanced

(Bennett, Sani, Lyons, & Barrett, 1998). Pride in being a member of the 'in-group' has important implications for the personal well-being of individual Australians and national well-being.

The present investigation also draws on national identity research. In this research, national identity has been described in several ways. For example, Smith and Jarkko (2001) use the following definition: "the cohesive force that both holds nation states together and shapes their relationships with the family of nations" (p. 1). Kelman (2001) described national identity as "an account of the group's origins, its history, and its relationship to the land" (p. 191). Similarly, Ashmore, Jussim, Wilder and Heppen (2001) portray a communal account as "a group-level analog to a life story and personal narrative at the individual level" (p. 236).

The genesis of an Australian national identity dates back to the time of early European settlement whereby influences on the developing culture at that time comprised a composite of British or Anglo-Saxon heritage. The harsh conditions of terrain and climate also gave rise to a foundational identity characterised by physical toughness, mateship, and the ability to withstand hardship. These qualities have also been proposed as fundamental to a sporting spirit (Feather, 1994). Over time, other factors of historical significance have influenced the development of a national identity such as: the gold rush days; Federation; the Depression; the World Wars and the development of an ANZAC tradition; immigration, and the internationalist era of today. Trends that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s that provided an impetus for change in national identity included multiculturalism, Aboriginal nationalism and the need to promote the achievements of Indigenous Australians (e.g., Craven & Wilson-Miller, 2003), and republicanism (Phillips, 1998). These events led to what Phillips' (1998) describes as the existence of two broad views of Australian national identity; the Inclusive Australian Identity and the Exclusive Australian Identity. Exclusive accounts are traditional in nature and emphasise "particular, ascribed and closed meanings of Australian identity" (p. 286). Inclusive conceptualisations of Australian identity are more progressive and emphasise cultural diversity and citizenship that accentuate "general, abstract, open and achievable meanings of Australian identity" (p. 286).

Research Evidence

Purdie and Wilss (in press) investigated young people's conceptions of Australian national identity and found that multiple social identities as well as traditional and expanded elements of national identity were present. They found that identity was focused on national well-being, security and an abundant environment. National well-being was referred to using two sub-groups; national security and national prosperity. National security suggested that Australia was a secure and safe place to live because of Australia's freedom, lack of terrorist attacks and wars. National prosperity described Australia as possessing all basic necessities for life and providing opportunity to its residents. Consistent with SIT, the individuals used events and conditions of other countries as a point of reference and through these comparisons with out-groups (other countries) the young individuals possessed a more favourable view of Australian national identity, suggesting in-group favourtism. They also found a continued affiliation with outdoor activities, sports, and a leisurely life but no reference to an intellectual, economic, scientific and cultural Australian identity. Extending this research, Purdie and Nielson (in review) conducted a study on adolescent's conceptions of Australian national identity. They found that fifty-five percent of adolescents rated identification as being Australian as moderate to low, whilst 42% stated that they felt totally Australian.

To explore the views of 'ordinary' Australians, Phillips and Smith (2000) conducted focus groups with a small sample (N = 49) of Australians aged between 19 and 95, who had been purposively selected to be representative of key social criteria: social class, age, gender, birthplace, and urban/rural locations. The purpose of their study was to investigate how similar the views of ordinary Australians were to those promoted by official discourses, media representations, and expert readings of popular texts. Phillips and Smith found that most people endorsed the older, more traditional views of what it meant to be Australian (especially 'mateship') rather than the progressive, abstract, and inclusive concepts advanced by government, media, and 'expert' personnel. Phillips (1998) also conducted a review of literature into popular views of Australian identity. He found that very few studies utilize: quantitative methods, instruments with demonstrated strong psychometric properties; longitudinal research designs, large sample sizes, and diverse samples (as predominately adult samples have been targeted). He also found that no comprehensive national study has been conducted and there is also little representative data on immigrants, Aboriginal people, elites and young individuals. Given these limitations, researchers have advocated that instruments assessing popular views of Australian identity require refinement, rigorous testing, and repeated use (Phillips 1998; Jones 1998). Hence, much remains to be done to develop reliable, and psychometric sound measurement instruments that measure a range of key factors of national identity.

The Present Investigation

Our in-progress research builds on the important advances made in the Purdie studies. In order to develop a psychometrically sound measure of national identity we are undertaking a series of qualitative research studies to identify factors of salience to diverse groups of Australians. The study reported in this paper is a component of the larger in-progress study that is funded by the Australian Research Council. The purpose of this study is to identify, and

compare and contrast key components of Australian national and social identity of a sample of Australians (N = 418) comprised of primary (N=71); secondary (N=146), Technical and Further Education (TAFE) (N=59) and University (n=142) students. Participants completed a written response to the question "What does it mean to be Australian?" The aim of the open-ended question, without external prompts, was to see how respondents perceived their Australian identity.

Responses were analysed and coded using content analysis to identify key themes. This process involved the researchers reading the responses in order to get a feel for the data and to identify major themes. Although we were not tied to themes that other researchers had identified in research on national identity, we were nevertheless cognizant of previous findings, and theme identification was guided by this literature in the early stages of coding. After initial identification of themes, responses were reread, and discrete aspects were coded according to themes that had been tentatively established. On several occasions, the researchers discussed the emerging themes and examined theme exemplars extracted from the data with three additional coders. The iterative process of close examination of responses for similarities and differences led to the modification, deletion, and addition of themes, and data were recoded accordingly. Key themes identified were analysed separately for each category of participants and compared.

Data Analysis

The interviews with Prominent Australians were transcribed and then read independently by two of the researchers. Written responses were transcribed in full for analysis. The researchers met and developed agreed upon categories using methods of analytic induction (Miles & Huberman, 1994), and domain analysis (Spradley, 1979) to identify key themes in the data. Once key themes were identified the researchers conducted inter-rater reliability checks that resulted in 94% agreement. Areas of disagreement were discussed and resolved and then a frequency count of the main themes identified was conducted.

Results

Key Themes: Total Sample

The frequency counts of the 14 themes that emerged from data analysis are presented in Table 1 in order of decreasing frequency. The most dominant theme identified was that of *Societal Characteristics* in 67% of cases examined. These included characterising Australian society as: religious, based upon democracy and being free, peaceful and secure, and providing both a "good life" and "education for all". Participants also suggested that Australian society placed an emphasis on family, being multicultural and possessing civic rights and freedom of expression. Australia was further characterised as a land of opportunity.

The second most dominant theme was *Citizenship and Participation* in 43% whereby being an Australian meant holding Australian citizenship and participating in the Australian way of life. This included residency, abiding by the laws, migration to or birth in Australia, participation as an active member of the community, participation in Australian culture and assimilation and/or adoption of the Australian way of life.

Patriotism and Pride was a dominant theme in 31% of the cases. Participants expressed a sense of pride in belonging to the Australian community and felt privileged, honoured, and lucky to be an Australian. They were also patriotic in their support of Australia as their country and their appreciation of the Australian way of life.

Respect for Other Cultures was also identified as a major theme in 30% of cases with participants emphasizing that Australians were tolerant of a range of cultures, were egalitarian in nature, and embraced diversity.

Unique Aspects of Australians' Lifestyles were identified in 27% of cases examined. These aspects included being a nation who liked to renovate homes, loved drinking beer, enjoyed going to the beach, supported and/or played sport and loved to entertain by holding a barbeque.

Personal Attributes of Australians were described in 26% of responses. Attributes included describing Australians as relaxed. For example, participants referred to Australians as free spirits who are easy going, people who like to have fun, have a sense of humour, are optimistic and enjoy life. They emphasized that Australians "do not take themselves seriously" and nor do they engage in "pomp and ceremony". Participants also described Australians as having specific personal qualities as a group. These qualities included Australians being: open-minded, optimistic, honest, decent, down to earth, and friendly. Participants also characterized Australians as having self-respect. Some of these characteristics are illustrated by the following comment:

> *Tolerance, optimism and a shared love for this country that should, for most Australians, make each day a celebration of simply being here.*

Love of Country was a key theme in 15% of the cases examined. Participants emphasised that Australians shared a genuine and intimate love of their country and many described Australia as the best country in the world. Australia was also characterised as a land of opportunity. This sentiment is encapsulated in the following statement.

It doesn't matter where you come from or your background, to be Australian is to love Australia.

In addition, a total of 11% of cases reflected the theme of *Characteristics and Appreciation of the Australian Environment*. Participants emphasised that Australia's environment was unique and that Australians are deeply concerned about caring for the environment and as such take a stand on environmental issues. Australia was also characterised as an "ancient land", "untameable continent", and a land of extraordinary beauty.

The more traditional stereotypical theme of *Mateship* was identified by 10% of respondents. Participants emphasised that Australians highly value mates and establish many and strong friendships based on loyalty to friends. This theme is illustrated by the following comments:

Look after your mates through thick and thin.

Family and mates are the most important people in your life.

Participants (8%) also characterised Australians as generous of spirit and committed to *Helping Others* by giving others a "hand-up". They also emphasised that Australians were characterised as passionately "Supporting the underdog and confronting the bully" and "being there for your mate". Helping others also included "To be sympathetic to your countrymen".

A total of 6% of participants also reported that being Australian meant a *Commitment to a Fair Go For All*. This included a sense of social equality and valuing fairness, as illustrated in the following comments:

In essence, Australia has become the most egalitarian society the world has ever seen and Australia's values are a product of our deep sense of social equality.

Australians basically value and support the concept of a fair go for everyone prepared to have a go, but Australians also value and support a fair go for those who, because of circumstances beyond their control, are not able to have a go.

It's the principle of a fair go – where any person can rise to the top.

Interestingly Characteristics of Australian Workers emerged as a theme in 5% of cases. Australian workers were described as: innovative thinkers who engaged in team work, great competitors committed to the pursuit of excellence, and hard workers who valued reward for effort. Participants also emphasised that Australian workers were culturally diverse and committed to particularly "having a go" and taking on new challenges as is illustrated by the following comments:

It doesn't matter how hard the task, we just get on with whatever we are doing.

I think we've taken the best of different cultures in our country to make a very Australian mix. They are down here making a go of it which makes the Australian melting pot all the more tasty.

Respect for Australia's Heritage was identified in 5% of the cases examined whereby participants emphasised that Australians respected their Indigenous and colonial heritage.

Finally, 5% of participants referred to the theme of *Advancing Australia's Future*. Participant characterised Australians as giving back to the community through a contribution to industry and ensuring the future of Australia. This is illustrated by the following comment.

I believe quite strongly and passionately that as an 'Australian' you have the duty to contribute to society, whether it be working as a professional, studying, working to assist others in anyway or even raising your children, preparing them to contribute to their community in the future.

An important observation was that none of the respondents considered important economic, scientific or cultural endeavour were an important aspect of national identity. This lack of reference to academic and intellectual pursuits is also evident in other Australian research (Feather, 1994). However, this result differs from findings in other nations where contributions to economic, scientific or cultural endeavours have been identified as an important part of their national identity (Smith & Jarko, 2001).

Comparison of Themes Across Groups

A dominant theme for primary students (49%) was societal characteristics (49%) with a focus on freedom (see Table 2). Another dominant theme was unique aspects of lifestyle (31%) with a focus on enjoying the beach and barbeques with friends and family. Interestingly even 25% of young students expressed pride and patriotism and 24% identified personal attributes of Australians. Some 20% of primary students emphasized how Australians respect other cultures and the multicultural nature of Australian society. Also 12% of primary students mentioned the theme of citizenship and participation. Whilst some students emphasized people had to be born in Australia to be Australian others emphasized that as long as an individual lived here and loved Australia they were Australians. Mateship was also mentioned by 16% of primary children, followed by unique characteristics of the environment (11%). Minor themes mentioned included: helping others (7%), love of country (7%), and characteristics of workers (3%). Themes not referred to by young children were a fair go, respecting heritage, and advancing Australia's future. Given these are sophisticated notions it is not surprising that they were not expressed by primary students.

Secondary students (54%) also mentioned societal characteristics as a dominant them (see Table 2)e. Other key themes to emerge were patriotism/pride (27%) and citizenship/participation (26%). Similarly to primary students, secondary students had mixed notions as to who could be classed as a citizen. More secondary students in comparison to primary students mentioned the theme of love of country (19%). A secondary group of themes to emerge was characteristics of environment (17%), respect of other cultures (16%), unique aspects of lifestyle (13%), personal attributes (11%) and mateship (11%). Minor Themes included helping others (8%) and characteristics of workers (3%). Themes not referred to by secondary children were the same as for primary students (fair go, respecting heritage, and advancing Australia's future) reflecting that these themes are perhaps more sophisticated notions.

For TAFE students in comparison to younger students there was a higher percentage of participants mentioning the dominant themes of societal characteristics (78%), citizenship and participation (48%), and patriotism and pride (36%) (see Table 2). This increased frequency suggests that perhaps conceptions of national identity vary and become more salient with age. Secondary themes mentioned by TAFE students included: personal attributes (27%), respect of other cultures (19%), love of country (17%), and advancing Australia's future (17%). The latter perhaps reflects the ability of older Australians to conceptualise preferred futures in comparison to younger Australians and progressive conceptualisations of national identity. Other minor themes included unique aspects of lifestyle (14%), a fair go (12%), characteristics of the environment (12%), helping others (10%), characteristics of workers (10%), respecting heritage (7%) and mateship (3%).

University students rated societal characteristics (84%) and citizenship/participation (73%) as dominant themes (see Table 2). Given the increased percentage of participants that quoted these themes these results suggest that perhaps university students more readily recognise and identify with societal characteristics and key features of citizenship and participation. Similarly university students in comparison to other groups also more frequently referred to the themes of respecting other cultures (56%), unique aspects of lifestyle (45%), and personal attributes (41%). Other themes were mentioned at the same rate as for other groups and for example included love of country (15%), a fair go (12%), and respecting heritage (12%).

Summary

Both traditional and progressive themes were identified. Traditional themes included: Citizenship and Participation, Patriotism and Pride, Personal Attributes, Unique Aspects and lifestyle, Mateship, and the notion of a Fair Go for all. Progressive notions included themes such as Societal Characteristics, and Respect for Other Cultures suggesting that some aspects of national identity may be changing. Most themes were salient for all groups adding further validity to the findings. The themes of a fair go, respecting heritage, and advancing Australia's future were not apparent for primary and secondary students, and it was suggested that perhaps these notions are too sophisticated for young children. University students rated societal characteristics, citizenship/participation, respecting other cultures, unique aspects of lifestyle, and personal attributes more frequently in comparison to other groups suggesting that university students may have a more complicated conception of national identity.

In an historically short period, Australia has become one of the most diverse and successful multicultural nations in the world. Based on the results of the current investigation, probable cornerstones to this success include our shared identity as Australians based on the societal characteristics we all value and in particular democracy and freedom, the importance we place on citizenship and participating in society to define being an Australian, our valuing of cultural diversity, sense of pride and patriotism, and the unique characteristics perceived as personal attributes of Australians. "What is of concern here is not the question: What is true? But the question: What do people believe to be true? It is from their beliefs about the meaning of existence that people think and act. That some, or many, of these beliefs may be refutable does not necessarily affect in any way their strength in providing a basis for thought and action" (Horne, 1989, p. 46). The present investigation makes a contribution to understanding the rich tapestry of national identity construals from the perspective of a sample of students of varying ages based on qualitative research methods. These insights also offer a foundation for beginning to develop a quantitative instrument that can be applied to a larger more diverse and representative sample of the population.

Acknowledgements

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Tables

Table 1. Key Themes Identified from Responses to the Question "What Does it Mean to Be Australian?"

Categories	N of 418 Cases	%
Societal Characteristics	279	67
Citizen / Participate	181	43
Patriotism / Pride	129	31
Respect of Other Cultures	127	30
Unique Aspects of Lifestyle	113	27
Personal Attributes	107	26
Love of Country	64	15
Characteristics of Environment	47	11
Mateship	41	10
Help Others	32	8
Fair Go	24	6
Characteristics of Workers	23	5
Advancing Australia's Future	22	5
Respect Heritage	21	5

Table 2: Frequency of Key Themes Identified by Categories of Participants

	Categories	Primary (*n*=71)	Secondary (*n*=146)	TAFE (*n*=59)	Uni (*n*=142)
1	Personal Attributes	17 (24%)	16 (11%)	16 (27%)	58 (41%)
2	Help Others	5 (7%)	8 (6%)	6 (10%)	13 (9%)
.	Respect of Other Cultures	14 (20%)	23 (16%)	11 (19%)	79 (56%)
4	Characteristics of Workers	2 (3%)	4 (3%)	6 (10%)	11 (8%)

5	Mateship	11 (16%)	16 (11%)	2 (3%)	12 (9%)
6	Fair Go	-	-	7 (12%)	17 (12%)
7	Love of Country	5 (7%)	27 (19%)	10 (17%)	22 (15%)
8	Societal Characteristics	35 (49%)	79 (54%)	46 (78%)	119 (84%)
9	Characteristics of Environment	8 (11%)	24 (17%)	7 (12%)	8 (6%)
10	Unique Aspects of Lifestyle	22 (31%)	19 (13%)	8 (14%)	64 (45%)
11	Respect Heritage	-	-	4 (7%)	17 (12%)
12	Citizen / Participate	12 (17%)	38 (26%)	28 (48%)	103 (73%)
13	Advancing Australia's Future	-	-	10 (17%)	12 (9%)
14	Patriotism / Pride	18 (25%)	40 (27%)	21 (36%)	50 (35%)