The complexity of belonging in the migrant integration process: a mixed methods study from Australia

Introduction

Immigrants' acquisition of a sense of national identity and belonging in their host country is an important part of their social-psychological integration. The sense of belonging generally is often regarded as a fundamental human need that is rooted in human biology (Allen et al. 2021). In times of stress and adversity, humans are thought to seek out social and emotional connections for survival (Taylor, 2021) and the sense of belonging and identity has been shown to be important for mental health and personal wellbeing (Cruwys et al., 2023). For migrants, a sense of belonging and identity within adopted countries can be seen as a process that unfolds through time, enabled through upwards economic mobility, permanent legal status, language proficiency and the accumulation of social connections and ties, and held back through experiences and perceptions of social and economic disadvantage and discrimination (Saavedra et al., 2023). Indeed, a sense of identity, place and home in host countries is arguably the culmination of theorised processes of social and economic integration (Gilmartin & Migge, 2013).

The acquisition of belonging though is complex. Theory and evidence on new and segmented assimilation suggests that the wider processes of integration are non-linear and multi-directional (Karimi & Wilkes, 2023), while theories of acculturation point to the importance of social, institutional and political contexts that operate in tandem with migrant integration processes (Berry, 2005). Migrants themselves can be highly diverse depending on the composition of the host country's migrant intake, exposing them to varying experiences including of discrimination and 'othering' depending on their physical appearances, names and ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious markers (e.g. Carpusor & Loges, 2006). Experiences also vary on other social and economic domains. Indeed, while economic integration might be seen to enable a sense of belonging, theory and evidence on the 'integration paradox' suggests that education and upward economic mobility exposes migrants to – or at least heightens their perceptions of – greater discrimination (Schaeffer & Kas, 2023), and perhaps in turn, a weaker sense of belonging in the host country (Geurts et al., 2021). Structural barriers in housing and labour markets and access to services, nevertheless segment more disadvantaged migrant groups, potentially impeding integration and a growing sense of belonging (Phillips, 2006).

Identity and belonging are multidimensional and multi-layered. In social identity theory, individuals develop and manage multiple social identities, identifying simultaneously as members of nations, communities, ethnic groups, religions, professions, friendship groups and sports clubs (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). For migrants in a transnational context, the processes of acquiring a new national identity can involve a process of internal negotiation and resolution of the potential conflicts between one's current home and their social and emotional ties to their countries of origin (Gilmartin & Migge, 2015).

Research objectives

In this study, we set out to analyse how social and economic integration intersects with perceived discrimination, prejudice and racism to shape the sense of belonging for different migrant groups and at different stages of their migrant life course. We address the following research questions:

1. How do migrant groups acquire a sense of belonging in their host country?
2. How does education intersect with migrant origins and discrimination to shape the sense of belonging?

Methods

A mixed methods approach is used, combining quantitative survey data with information from in-depth qualitative interviews. The study is based in Australia, one of the largest migrant receiving countries of the last 50 years – certainly relative to size. As of 2022, 30 per cent of Australia's resident population were foreign born (ABS, 2023), the largest share of any country in the world outside the Gulf states, Singapore, Jordan, Luxembourg and several island nations (UN, 2020).

Data

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Data come from the 2023 Mapping Social Cohesion study conducted in Australia. The Mapping Social Cohesion study incorporates a large annual, nationally representative cross-sectional survey and in-depth qualitative interviews to gauge Australians' perceptions, attitudes and experiences of social cohesion, social wellbeing, immigration and a range of other topical issues (O'Donnell, 2022). The study is funded and published by the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, a philanthropic organisation based in Australia. The study is managed by the Australian National University (ANU). The ethical aspects of the study were approved by the ANU Human Research Ethics Committee under separate protocols for the quantitative (protocol number 2022/166) and qualitative components (protocol number 2023/263).

In 2023, surveys were completed by 7,705 people. The main focus of this study are the 2,430 survey respondents who were foreign born and migrated to Australia at various points in their lives. Of this migrant sample, 2,190 were recruited from a random probability online and telephone panel known as Life in Australia™. A further 240 respondents were recruited from an online non-probability panel known as Multicultural Marketing and Management (MMM). These additional 240 respondents were designed to boost the number of respondents from Indian, Middle Eastern and African backgrounds.

All surveys completed through the Life in Australia panel were conducted in English. The 240 respondents who completed a survey through the MMM panel had the choice to complete the survey in English, Punjabi, Swahili or Arabic. These languages were selected as they were estimated to provide the widest coverage of the Australian population in the three targeted groups (India, the Middle East and Africa) based on data from the 2021 Census on a) the languages that people speak at home and b) their proficiency in English (as reported by the household). Population weights are applied to ensure the respondent pool is suitably representative of the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of specific migrants groups in Australia.

In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with 55 people who have migrated to Australia. Participants were recruited through the Scanlon Foundation's extensive networks of individuals and organisations, including migrant settlement services and advocacy organisations. Participants had the choice to conduct interviews in English or Mandarin Chinese.

Measures

Key measures used in this study include:

National belonging: The sense of national belonging is measured quantitatively through a question on the survey that asks 'To what extent do you have a sense of belonging in Australia'. The response categories are 'To a great extent', 'To a moderate extent', 'Only slightly' and 'Not at all'. Binary variables are created for the quantitative analysis based on whether or not respondents report a i) great sense of belonging in Australia, and ii) a great or moderate sense of belonging.

Time: Time is split into two variables: i) the age at which migrants arrived in Australia and ii) the number of years lived in Australia.

National, ethnic and religious groups: migrants are identified by the country or region in which they or their parents were born. Sufficient sample sizes allow for examination of the specific experiences of migrants from the following backgrounds: 1) China, 2) India, 3) south east Asia (including Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam), 4) the Middle East (including Lebanon, Iran, Turkey, Iraq and Syria), 5) eastern Europe and 6) western Europe.

Discrimination: The experience of discrimination is measured quantitatively through a survey question that asks 'Have you experienced discrimination because of your skin colour, ethnic origin or religion in the last 12 months'.

Education: Respondents are identified by whether they hold a University degree or a trade certificate or diploma, and if not, whether or not they finished high school.

Preliminary results

The sense of belonging in Australia grows among migrants over time. Among all overseas born Australians, 39 per cent feel a sense of belonging in Australia to a great extent, while 81 per cent feel a sense of belonging to at least a moderate extent. Although these proportions are significantly lower than

for the Australian born population (53 per cent have a great sense of belonging and 87 per cent have a moderate or great sense), migrants are generally more likely to have a great sense of belonging if they have lived in Australia for longer. Approximately 23 per cent of people who have migrated to Australia in the last ten years have a great sense of belonging in Australia, compared with 31 per cent of those who have been here 10-19 years, 29 per cent who migrated 20-29 years ago and 58 per cent among people who migrated 30 years ago or more.

Among all migrant Australians, those from non-European backgrounds are significantly less likely to have a sense of belonging in Australia. The proportion of survey respondents with a great sense of belonging in Australia is lower among migrants from Chinese (24 per cent), south east Asian (30 per cent) and African (31 per cent) backgrounds than among all overseas (39 per cent) and Australian (53 per cent) born people. Much of the differences disappear after controlling for the number of years migrants have lived in Australia, indicating that at least part of the weaker sense of belonging among non-European migrants is due to the fact that they have lived in Australia for a shorter period of time on average.

There are a number of explanations as to why migrants who have lived in Australia for longer feel a stronger sense of belonging. From the qualitative interviews, it is clear that time is an important factor, time to grow social connections and networks and emotional ties to Australia.

> "I guess that is something that you don't really expect to happen organically. But when you start to realise that time also plays a factor in it. So it's going to be close to 20 years. Most of my adult life has been here. Most of the references that I have connected to one way or another are in Australia. So it is kind of the universe telling you formally, you're one of us now." (interview 1.03, born in Colombia)

Identity and belonging in Australia for migrants is complex and some migrants feel caught between worlds. Many interview participants retain strong connections to countries of birth, particularly through language, culture and their families and friends. For several interview participants, their growing connection and attachment to Australia has come at the expense of their connections to their countries of birth. For some, any potential identity crisis is resolved – or at least managed – by their strong connections to other social identities including religion.

> "I still struggle with my identity because I feel like people ask me 'where you're from?' -- What do I say? New Zealand Bangladesh? Oh, wait! What do they mean? But when I go back [to Bangladesh, people ask me] 'where you from?' I'm like: Australia…. So I don't know, like I still haven't really figured out how to answer that question of my identity, but I feel like Australia is the place where I've been here the longest. So I feel sort of connected and I'm invested in… I want this country to be better. So yeah, I guess I can call myself Australian. I'll always be Muslim, I think. Muslim first and Australian second. Because that's what's important to me. And I think people want you to be Australian first. But I'm like, No." (interview 2.07, born in Bangladesh)

Recent experience of discrimination was common. From the survey results, 28 per cent of migrants said they had been discriminated against in the last 12 months based on their skin colour, ethnic origin or religion. This rises to 39 per cent for people from non-English speaking backgrounds. Compared with migrants from western European backgrounds, those from Asian, African and south-central American backgrounds were all significantly more likely to experience discrimination in the past 12 months.

Even without overt racism, migrants are often made to feel different. Physical appearances, skin colours, accents and religious and cultural signifiers like headscarves mark people as 'different' and can cause them to be treated as 'others'.

> "But in [the first suburb where I lived], I was very new to the country. And I felt very much a stranger. And the people, they don't know why I'm wearing a scarf. Why I'm here. From my skin colour, it's very obvious I'm not Australian, and I don't belong here. So they are not comfortable, and they don't know even if I speak English or not. So they are not comfortable to interact with me." (interview 6.05, born in Iraq)

Bivariate associations from the survey data suggest potential support for the 'integration paradox'. Migrants with a University degree were significantly and substantially more likely to report experiencing discrimination in the past 12 months than people who hold a trade certificate or diploma and those who

did not complete high school and have no post-school qualifications. Strikingly though, people who finished high school with no further qualifications were just as likely to report discrimination. The same bivariate patterns hold with respect to the sense of national belonging: migrants with University degrees and those who have finished high school but not completed any further qualifications are significantly less likely to have a great sense of belonging in Australia than people with trade qualifications and those who did not finish high school. Initial multivariate analyses however, suggests these relationships are conditioned by factors such as the length of time in Australia, countries of origin, religion and the social connections migrants make within local communities.

Tentative conclusions and next steps

The results to date provide strong support for the view that the acquisition of a sense of national belonging can be a complex process for migrants. Emotional and psychological ties operate alongside lived realities, the accumulation of social capital, the experience of 'othering' (whether through overt discrimination or more subtle treatment of migrants) and socioeconomic and career progression. Key next steps in this research including the building and testing of structural equation models that quantitatively assess the relationships and potential pathways between discrimination and belonging for migrants on different life course and socioeconomic trajectories. The quantitative data are all cross-sectional and the measured associations will not imply causal relationships. Nevertheless, the combination of detailed survey data with the rich qualitative information will provide important insights on key aspects of migrant social wellbeing.

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