**Where Are ‘Wogs’ From? Exploring Subjective Understandings of Racism**

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**Abstract:** This paper examines subjective understandings of racism expressed by fifty second generation migrant-Australian women. Twenty-five participants came from Turkish backgrounds and 25 participants came from Latin American backgrounds. The paper focuses on three examples of everyday social interaction and considers how these examples might be connected with racist practices. The three examples include the question ‘where are you from?’, the ‘wog’ identity, and the women’s ideas about racism in Australian society. The women believed that racism was a product of a minority of individuals who did not adhere to Australia’s multicultural spirit. This paper argues that the taken-for-granted assumptions informing the women’s everyday social interaction are better understood in terms of ‘everyday racism’ rather than as ‘individual racism’. The women’s subjective understanding of racism at an individual level prevented them from recognising racism as a social problem that might exist within Australian society.

My paper explores subjective understandings of racism from 50 second-generation migrant-Australian women. I use three examples to tease out the meanings associated with the concept of ‘racism’ in relation to the women’s everyday social experiences: firstly, the question ‘where are you from?’; secondly, the word ‘wog’; and thirdly, the women’s discussion of racism in Australian society. I am not suggesting that the ‘wog identity’ or the question ‘where are you from?’ are categorical or unproblematic examples of racism. Instead, I analyse these constructs because, as I will show, they have parallels with other ideas the participants understood as ‘racist’, such as a lack of support of Australian multiculturalism and the exclusion of migrants from Australian national identity, and additionally, these constructs are related to the concept of race.

The participants’ subjective understandings of racism referred to the abusive practices that individuals engaged in. The women I interviewed did not identify their personal experiences of racism as a social problem, and the fact that Australian society was
multicultural seemed to preclude this. I argue that while the women interpreted individual racist events as ‘racism’, racist practices are better understood in terms of everyday racisms that are reproduced through routine, everyday social exchanges.

**Academic understandings of racism**

Racism refers to the categorisation and social stratification of people based on social constructions of ‘race’.

There are three definitions of racism that are generally studied in sociology: individual, institutional and everyday racism. First, racism can be defined at the *individual level*, and this refers to the way individual people express racist ideals. Under this model, individuals are either racist or ‘not racist’, and racist ideas are articulated as a conscious ‘set of organised beliefs’, values or attitudes about racial difference (Jenkins 1997: 83).

Second, racism can be defined at the *institutional level*, where racial categories are based less on individual and consciously held beliefs, but more on the institutional processes that systematically discriminate against racial categories of people. In this sense, racism is more wide-ranging than deliberate individual acts of racial intolerance, and so, ‘racism involves categorisation on the basis of any set of criteria which will allow difference to be asserted’, including religious as well as cultural intolerance (Jenkins 1997: 83).

Third, Essed identified *everyday racism*, a concept that is critical of the individual and institutional theories on racism and the distinctions between them. Everyday racism examines individuals’ lived experiences and knowledge of racism, and it
connects structural forces of racism with routine situations in everyday life. It links ideological dimensions of racism with daily attitudes and interprets the reproduction of racism in terms of the experience of it in everyday life (Essed 2002: 177).

Essed saw that the power dynamics of racism were socially reproduced in taken-for-granted ways, even when people were unaware of it, through the repetitive or familiar practices of everyday situations (Essed 2002: 190). My paper takes its impetus from Essed’s work. My examination of everyday racism refers to the social experiences of second generation migrants in three ways: the question ‘where are you from?’, the ‘wog’ identity, and my participants’ understandings of racist practices in Australian society. These three constructs can be seen as examples of everyday racism because they are constructed through everyday social exchanges that reinforce exclusionary and racist constructions of Australian identity.

First, Ang argued that the ‘apparently innocent’ question of ‘where are you from?’ may not be intended to be racist, but the ubiquity of this question in everyday social interaction positions ethnically and racially marked Australians as ‘other’ (Ang, 1996: 43). In a previous study, I found that the question ‘where are you from?’ entrenched my participants’ feeling of social exclusion from Australian identity. People assumed the women I interviewed were not Australian when they asked this question, and in reaction the women would say, ‘Well I’m not going to think of myself as Australian’ (Zevallos 2003: 89).

Second, while second generation migrants have actively embraced the ‘wog’ identity in their everyday social practices, such in their construction of a ‘wog community’ (Zissiadis 2004) and their reworking of Australian English (Warren 1999), this

Third, although the second generation tend to describe Australian national identity in terms of its multiculturalism, they nevertheless experience a sense of marginalisation, especially due to cultural representations of this identity in terms of ‘Anglo-ness’ and their everyday social experiences of racism (for example see Poynting, Noble and Tabar 1998; Zevallos 2003).

Methodology

During September 2001 and April 2003, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 50 second-generation migrant women aged seventeen to 28 years. The women came from two groups: first, I interviewed 25 women of Turkish background, and second, I interviewed 25 women of Spanish-speaking South and Central American background. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim, and the participants were given pseudonyms. I asked the women three general questions regarding racism, and further probing questions about their stories: ‘Did you ever come across anything negative while you were growing up because you were of [participant’s ethnic] background?’; ‘have you ever experienced any racism or discrimination?; and, ‘when you think about Australian society as a whole, do you think Australia is a fairly tolerant or a racist society?’ My analysis considers the relationship between subjective understandings of racism and constructions of the ‘Australian identity’ using the concept of everyday racism.

‘Where are you from?’
The participants understood racism as it is defined by the concept of individual racism, rather than in terms of institutional or everyday racism. They described racism in reference to overt or explicit statements or actions of hatred, abuse and discrimination by specific individuals towards ethnic minorities due to their physical attributes, their cultural and religious practices, and their beliefs. Most commonly, the women cited incidents of verbal abuse as ‘racism’, such as being called a wog or being told to ‘go home’. In the most extreme cases, the women described being refused service by taxi drivers and shop assistants, police harassment, continuing incidents of discrimination in their workplaces, and one woman described a physical act of racism, when a man yelled obscenities at her and spat on her face while she walked down the street.

The first example of racism I consider is the question ‘where are you from?’.

Whenever I asked the women to describe their ethnic identities or when I asked them if they felt other people accepted them as Australian, they would make reference to the question, ‘Where are you from?’, without any prompt from me. A couple of the women said they tried not to ask this because the question annoys them, but all the women nevertheless asked this question out of ‘curiosity’, and they felt that most people did so out of the same sense of curiosity, rather than from a sense of racial intolerance. For example, Aylin expressed dislike of this question but she said, ‘Sometimes you can’t help it because you start talking about countries… [or] you just want to know where their features are from’ /Latin/. Most women saw the question ‘where are you from?’ as simultaneously frustrating and compelling.
What do you think about that question, “Where are you from?”

Devi: I think it always reminds people that you’re different from other people… when you ask that question to someone you’re always reminding them that they’re not from here. Obviously if you’re clearly in a place [overseas] where you clearly don’t look like you’re native, then people will always constantly ask that. But I hear that question all the time. [Latin]

This question was not seen as a manifestation of racism, even though it made them feel as if they were not seen as Australian. This is interesting, because the women felt that people who did not accept them as Australian were ‘racist’. Instead, the question ‘where are you from?’ was only read as ‘racist’ in reference to the way in which it is asked, especially if it was asked in a nasty fashion, which points to an issue of social etiquette rather than racism.

How does that [question] make you feel?

Cecilia: I don’t mind it; I don’t find it racist or anything. I just think that because I look different, they know that I must have a background in another country or whatever, that’s why they’re only interested in that aspect. I guess it’s just how they ask me. [Latin]

The question ‘where are you from?’ may not be racially motivated from the point of view of social actors who ask and respond to this question, but it nevertheless offers a challenging example of everyday racism. I have argued elsewhere that this question acts as a ‘double edged sword’ in light of multiculturalism because it promotes understanding and mutual respect between different cultures, but it also reaffirms racist constructions of national identity because it ‘reinforces that “being Australian” continues to be read as a physical ascription’ (Zevallos 2003: 94-95).

‘Wogs’
The second example of racism I consider regards the ‘wog’ identity. While all the women had all been called ‘wogs’, they did not always see this term as a racist slur. The majority of the women described feeling that Anglo-Australian people saw them as ‘wogs’ rather than as Australians:

*Do you think that other people in Australia accept you as an Australian?*
Solmaz: Uh no. No I don’t think so. I think we’re more Turks to them. We’re wogs. It gets to me when we get called wogs, right, by Australians, because when it comes to eating a kebab, they’re probably the first ones in the queues! [Laughs] You don’t mind the wog kebab, but you mind the wog himself? It’s the wog that makes that kebab! [Turkish]

It is the women’s reading of the sentiment and the appropriateness of the person using the word ‘wog’ that makes it a racist act. That is, the participants construed the term wog as racist when an Anglo-Australian person uses it, but where other people of NESB migrant backgrounds referred to migrants this way, no offence was taken. Most of the women referred to themselves as wogs, and a couple of the Turkish women jokingly referred to other Turkish people who were heavily focused on cultural traditions as ‘wog-Turks’. The appropriation of the term wog among people who are seen as wogs is an act of defiance and empowerment because it celebrates their cultural difference (Zissiadis 2004).

The Latin women sometimes referred to themselves as wogs, but at the same time, they would tell me how Latin people were not ‘really’ wogs because only migrants of European background were wogs. In several stages of her interview, Claudia referred to herself as a wog, but when I asked her how she felt about the term wog her answer reflected the ambivalence the Latin women had towards seeing themselves as wogs.
Does that word bother you?
Claudia: “Wog”?  No.  I know it bothers other people and that’s why I
know if it bothers others, that’s why I do that [draws air quotations with
her fingers].  I don’t think I am, because I’ve always thought that wogs
were European people and I always say “I’m Latin, I am Latin.  I’m not a
wog”.  I’m from the Latin side, not from the Europe side.  I don’t think it
sounds like a nice word to use for people, even if I was called that I’d be
offended, depending on how a person uses the word [my emphasis, Latin].

Claudia denied the fact that she was a wog, but her understanding of this word (in
reference to European migrants) did not match her experiences and other people’s
understanding of this word.  She was seen as a wog and this was why she sometimes
took on this identity.  She said, ‘I was seen as an Aussie over there [Uruguay], but
here I don’t think I am.  I’m always seen as [laughs and drops her voice] as a wog.  I
think that you can tell because of the dark hair’ [Latin].

Here, Claudia noted how racial markers, namely her dark hair, immediately marked
her as a wog and therefore as a ‘non-Australian’.  Although the women actively
constructed – and ambivalently embraced – the wog identity, this identity is best
understood in terms of everyday racism.  Thinking of oneself as a wog and being
thought of as a wog by others involves everyday practices that result in a reproduction
of racist constructions of national belonging.  Looking like a ‘non-Anglo’ is set up
against looking like an ‘Aussie’, and in these women’s experiences, wogs are not seen
as Aussies.

Racism in Australian society
Despite the women’s painful experiences of racism and their sense of exclusion from Australian identity, there was only a small minority of the sample who felt that Australian society had a social problem of racism. For example, rem said:

The politicians say, “Oooh we’re all Australian. Australians are this, and Australians are great”, and then they show all these multicultural people and they say, “Australians!” And then you say it [“I’m Australian”], you go out and come across all this racism, and you think, “Where the heck did all this [we’re all] Australians thing go?” [Turkish]

The majority of the participants believed that most Anglo-Australians did not see them or accept them as Australian, and they also characterised ‘racist people’ as being Anglo-Australian. At the same time, they also believed that most Anglo-Australians were not racist, and that most Anglo-Australians supported Australian multiculturalism. This was a poignant belief for the Turkish women, because they had spoken substantially about the stigmatisation of Muslims which had increased since September 11:

Amatullah: Yeah, even though there’s been a lot of negative results that came from September 11 and even prior to that, we can’t ignore the positives as well. There’s been a lot of support; we can’t downplay that. So definitely, there’s been a lot of support. I would say it is a multicultural society, there are a lot of open-minded people. It’s just the bigots the media loves to sensationalise, but generally, I think there are a lot of positive aspects. We can’t just sit here and say, “What a horrible country”. No. [Turkish]

Amatullah’s comment is typical of the sample: Australia is not a racist society because ‘it is a multicultural society’, and people who were in denial about the fact that Australia is multicultural embodied racism. Given that the women described Australian identity as multicultural, racist people were seen as social deviants.
Solmaz illustrated this idea when she told of a specific event that exemplified the sample’s understanding of ‘racism’:

I was walking down [the street] the other day, and like I said, my mother wears the scarf. It was after the September 11 attacks, and someone said, “You fucking wog! You fucking Arab wog! You dirty Arab! You fucking Turk!” I just fumed you know. I grabbed my mum’s arm in mine and I turned around and said, “How dare you! Who the hell are you? You’re in a multicultural society. Australia has no identity of its own. Australia is known as the multicultural society, a multicultural country. How dare you! You’re not Australian yourself, only the Aboriginals are Australian in that sense”. It just really got to me. It got to me a lot… [Turkish]

In the above example, we see that Solmaz felt justified in retaliating against racism because of Australia’s multiculturalism. As she saw it, the man had no right to be racist because of three interconnected beliefs regarding multiculturalism: first, living ‘in a multicultural society’ required tolerance of cultural difference; second, without the multiculturalism that migrants created, Australia would have no identity (and so here, Anglo-Australian culture was not seen as a contributor to multiculturalism); and third, the man had no more or less of a legitimate claim over the Australian identity than she did because he was not an Indigenous Australian. Racism, we can see in this example, was embodied through individual people who betrayed the multicultural spirit of Australia. The women’s understanding of Australian multiculturalism seemed to drown out their experiences of racism: in a multicultural society, there should be no racism, and so the racism they experienced must have been the product of a few deviants who had the audacity to deny our multiculturalism.

Conclusion
The women did not connect their personal experiences of racism to a pervasive problem of racism in Australian society, no matter how deeply this racism had affected them. On the whole, the women I interviewed did not define racism as institutional or as everyday racism; instead, most women defined racism through individual processes. That is, they believed racism operated through individuals who were racist, rather than through structural racism. While social exclusion from Australian identity was constructed as a form of racism, commonplace social exchanges that the women collectively shared, such as the question ‘where are you from?’, the wog identity, and their social experiences of racism, were not seen as straightforward examples of racism. In part, this was because the women I interviewed actively participated in the making of the wog identity and in asking about other people’s ethnic/cultural origin, both of which are discursive practices that relate to the construction of ‘race’. It was positive for the women to create a sense of solidarity through a shared sense of ‘woginess’ and to satisfy their curiosity about someone’s migrant background. In this sense, establishing difference was empowering. Being excluded from Australian identity due to difference, however, was not experienced positively, but unless this exclusion occurred in a context of inter-personal abuse, it was not understood as an act of racism.

The social interaction regarding the question ‘where are you from?’, the wog identity, and the women’s social encounters with racism are best understood through the concept of everyday racism. Everyday racism makes visible the ways in which racist ideas are socially reproduced in taken-for-granted ways through familiar everyday situations. Even though the women I interviewed and the people they interacted with did not always recognise or intend a connection between their everyday exchanges
and racist practices, the three examples I discussed were prolific in the interviews I conducted. I argue that these are not merely examples of racism at the individual level, and instead, that these examples indicate a pattern of societal practices that warrant critical discussion.

References


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