

**Australian National Identity: Adolescents' Conceptions of What it Means to be  
Australian**

**Nola Purdie  
Queensland University of Technology, Australia**

**Paper presented at NZARE AARE, Auckland, New Zealand November 2003**

**PUR03795**

# **Australian National Identity: Adolescents' Conceptions of What it Means to be Australian**

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Just as membership of a social group, such as a sporting club, can foster a sense of belonging and identity for individuals, membership of a national group, too, can foster a sense of belonging and identity, and influence certain aspects of an individual's behaviour. This paper reports the results of a study of Australian national identity among a group of 1242 school students. Seven underlying factors of being Australian were identified: Democracy, Diversity, Security and Wellbeing, Agreeableness, Rules of Citizenship, Sporting Prowess, and Outdoor Lifestyle. More than half of the students had only moderate to low identification with being Australian. Males strongly endorsed Sporting Prowess and Outdoor Lifestyle factors, whereas females were more likely to endorse Diversity. Rural students had more traditional views of being Australia (Sporting Prowess and Outdoor Lifestyle), and were more conservative in their views (higher Rules of Citizenship and lower Diversity) than their urban counterparts. First, second, and third generation Australians differed in their identity constructions, and level of affiliation. Indigenous students had the highest ratings on all factors.

What does it mean to be Australian? This is an important question because the ways in which people identify themselves influence how they think and behave. Historically, national identity has been seen as fundamental to issues as diverse as civil stability, defending the nation, strengthening social cohesion; formulating economic, social and political policies; and stimulating social action and reform in areas of national interest (Mattes, 1999).

The study of national identity frequently draws from group attachment or social identity theory (SIT; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), which 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 identity and behaviour, (c) intergroup comparisons are important, and (d) multiple identities can exist. SIT focuses on the portions of our total identity that derive from our social group memberships; it proposes that social identities influence behaviour through group norms. That is, people are more likely to perform a particular 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. Thus, one corollary of this proposition is that people will only strongly attach to a nation if they perceive national norms as being consistent with their own values, beliefs, and self-conceptions.

## **Australian National Identity**

The genesis of an Australian national identity dates back to the time of early European settlement. Influences on the developing culture at that time comprised a composite of British or Anglo-Saxon heritage, and prevailing harsh conditions. Thus, physical toughness, mateship, and the ability to withstand hardship were foundational in the development of an Australian identity. These qualities have been proposed as engendering a sporting spirit that has endured (Feather, 1994; Phillips, 1998). Over time, other factors of historical significance have influenced the development of a national identity—for instance, factors related to the gold rush days; Federation; the Depression; the World Wars and the development of an ANZAC tradition; immigration, and the internationalist era of today (Patterson, 1998). Trends that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s that provided an impetus for change in national

identity included multiculturalism, Aboriginal nationalism, and republicanism (Phillips, 1998).

In Australian national identity research, one issue of constant concern is just whose interpretation of Australia is the focus of interest. Phillips and Smith (2000) argued that material on national identity in Australia generally come from three major sources — records of parliamentary debates and other official forums; media records; and scholarly publications. In recent years, such official discourses, media representations and ‘expert’ interpretations have promoted egalitarianism and individualism as the two core Australian values. This is in contrast to the broader range of themes, promoted nearly four decades ago in *The Lucky Country* (Horne, 1964), that characterised what it meant to be an Australian as being mediocrity; ‘fair go, mate’; suburbanism; having a good time; and giving it a go.

The physical aspect of a national identity is a common theme in the literature, particularly as it relates to sporting involvement and prowess (e.g., Bairner, 1994; Duda & Allison, 1990). This theme was explored by Taylor and Toohey (1995) in the context of a multicultural Australia. These researchers concluded that ethnic groups in Australia have used sport both to maintain their non-Australian cultural identity, and as a means of acculturating into the Australian society. In contrast to the physical aspects of Australian identity, reference to intellectual, economic, scientific, or cultural aspects is not common, despite the push for a ‘clever country’ over the last decade.

Studies of Australian national identity have mostly focussed on the understandings of adults. Studies with younger people have been rare but include a study by Howard and Gill (2001) with 21 Anglo-Australian school children, aged 11 to 12 years. Results suggested that the children were adopting a national identity influenced by global as well as local issues. Thus, knowledge of what it meant to be Australian derived from knowledge gained through interaction with the Australian environment as well as through interaction with the global citizenry they were exposed to via mass media, mass communications, and the Internet.

There were two main questions that guided the current study:

1. What do young Australians think it means to be Australian? (What is the *content* of an Australian identity?) Does identity vary according to gender, location, and cultural background?
2. How strongly do young Australians identify with Australia? (What is the *strength* of Australian identity?) Does strength of identification with Australia vary according to gender, location, and cultural background?

## **Method**

### **Background to the Study**

Not reported in this paper are the results of an earlier study that were used to develop the survey used in the current study. In the first study, nine aspects of what it means to be Australian were identified from analysis of essays written by 242 school students. Students’ essays were on the topic “What I think it means to be Australian.”

### **Participants**

One thousand, two hundred and forty-two students from 36 schools in Queensland participated in the current study. Schools were selected to provide variability in student

demography (e.g., rural/urban location, socio-cultural indicators). Six hundred and thirty-one students were from primary schools, and 611 were from high schools. There were 595 males and 617 females. Students were classified as first, second, or third generation Australians according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics classification system. First generation Australians ( $n = 117$ , were those students who neither themselves nor their parents were born in Australia; second generation Australians ( $n = 320$ ) were those who were born here but had at least one parent born overseas; and third generation Australians ( $n = 784$ ) were those who both themselves and both parents were born in Australia. Ninety-four students identified themselves as Indigenous Australians. Twenty-one students did not indicate country of birth for themselves or their parents. Six hundred and two students were from rural areas, and 640 were from urban areas. Ages ranged from 10 to 18 years ( $M = 13.09$  years).

## **Instrumentation**

### *Content of Australian Identity*

There were 45 statement around the nine themes identified in the first study described above. The nine themes were: (a) National well-being (security, prosperity); (b) Personal well-being (safety, health, education); (c) Democracy; (d) Agreeableness of personal characteristics (e.g., friendly, kind, fair) (e) Uniqueness and diversity of environment (landscape, animals, weather, conservation) (f) Sporting prowess (g) Rules of citizenship (birth, living here, citizenship, pride, language); (h) Diversity (mostly cultural, but also in beliefs, backgrounds, behaviours); and (i) Lifestyle (relaxed, outdoor).

Students rated on a 6-point scale (from 1 = strongly disagree, to 6 = strongly agree) how much they agreed with each statement (item).

### *Strength of Identification*

This was assessed as low, moderate, or total.

## **Data Analysis**

Factor analysis (maximum likelihood with oblimin rotation) resulted in the elimination of three items. Forty-two items, representing seven factors were retained. The factors were: Sport, Diversity, Citizenship, Wellbeing, Agreeableness, Democracy, and Outdoors. These seven factors represent a reduction in the originally hypothesised set of nine factors. The Wellbeing factor was a combination of the original National Wellbeing, and Personal Wellbeing factors, and items in the original Uniqueness and Diversity of Environment factor were incorporated into the Outdoors, and Agreeableness factors.

Means were calculated for each student on the seven factors by summing the relevant items and dividing by the number of items in that factor. Separate ANOVAs were conducted on the seven identity dimensions with the independent factors being gender, location (rural or urban), and generational status (first, second, third generation, or Indigenous)<sup>1</sup>. The traditional approach would have been to perform a MANOVA using all grouping factors and the seven identity dimensions. However, we followed the advice of Rosnow and Rosenthal (1989) who argued that the traditional approach can be inappropriately conservative because statistical power is reduced. Additionally, they argued that researchers should perform focused tests based on theory-driven predictions concerning the nature of the relations among variables. In this instance, we were most interested in main effects, and had no predictions about how the variables might interact with each other.

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<sup>1</sup> Although Indigenous students were all second or third generation Australians, we did not include them in these groupings because we wanted to explore whether there was an Indigenous response that could be differentiated from the responses of non-Indigenous students.

Means and frequencies were computed for the strength of identification with Australia measure. ANOVAs were conducted on the strength of identification measure and the school level, gender, location, time, and generational status factors.

## Results

### Content of Australian Identity

Table 1 shows descriptive information for the reduced set of seven national identity dimensions. The most important aspects of being Australian related to Democracy, and Diversity, whereas the least important aspects related to Sport, and an Outdoor Lifestyle. Means ranged from 4.00 to 5.04, indicating generally high agreement with the items.

**Table 1: Descriptive Information for Seven Australian Identity Factors**

Factor	Mean	SD	Reliability
Democracy	5.04	0.84	.91
Diversity	4.72	0.99	.86
Agreeableness	4.67	0.91	.79
Wellbeing	4.48	0.94	.79
Rules of Citizenship	4.43	1.29	.83
Sport	4.09	1.35	.73
Outdoor Lifestyle	4.00	1.36	.75

Six of the seven mean scores differed significantly according to Generational Status. The result for Democracy was not significant,  $F(3, 1224) = 1.01$ ,  $p = .39$ , but there were significant differences on Sport,  $F(3, 1223) = 8.58$ ,  $p < .05$ , Wellbeing,  $F(3, 1223) = 6.23$ ,  $p < .05$ , and Agreeableness,  $F(3, 1218) = 7.73$ ,  $p < .05$ . Post hoc comparisons (Scheffé) revealed that Indigenous students scored higher than first, second, and third generation students on both of these factors. The generations differed also on Outdoors,  $F(3, 1214) = 8.11$ ,  $p < .05$ , with first and second generation students having lower ratings than Indigenous students, and first generation students having lower ratings than third generation students. The Diversity mean score also differed according to Generational Status,  $F(3, 1222) = 9.99$ ,  $p < .05$ . First and second generation students gave significantly higher ratings than third generation students. First and second generation students did not differ from each other, and Indigenous students did not differ from the other groups on their Diversity rating. The final significant effect of generational status was on Citizenship,  $F(3, 1222) = 38.68$ ,  $p < .05$ . First generation students had a significantly lower mean score than all other groups. Second generation students gave lower ratings than Indigenous students, but were not significantly different from third generation students. Indigenous students had a significantly higher means score than third generation students.

Males and females did not differ significantly on Democracy,  $F(1, 1211) = .51$ ,  $p = .48$ . Males scored significantly higher than females on Sport,  $F(1, 1210) = 82.24$ ,  $p < .05$ , Citizenship,  $F(1, 1209) = 10.19$ ,  $p < .05$ , Wellbeing,  $F(1, 1210) = 5.21$ ,  $p < .05$ , Agreeableness,  $F(1, 1207) = 8.25$ ,  $p < .05$ , and Outdoors,  $F(1, 1202) = 58.09$ ,  $p < .05$ . Females had a higher rating than males on Diversity,  $F(1, 1209) = 23.69$ ,  $p < .05$ .

Rural and urban students did not differ significantly on Democracy,  $F(1, 1241) = .02$ ,  $p = .90$ , or Wellbeing,  $F(1, 1240) = 1.35$ ,  $p = .25$ . Rural students had a higher rating than urban students on Sport,  $F(1, 1240) = 9.43$ ,  $p < .05$ , Citizenship,  $F(1, 1239) = 68.04$ ,  $p < .05$ , Agreeableness,  $F(1, 1233) = 15.82$ ,  $p < .05$ , and Outdoors,  $F(1, 1231) = 10.29$ ,  $p < .05$ .

However, urban students had a higher rating than rural students on Diversity,  $F(1, 1239) = 30.02, p < .05$ .

### **Strength of Identification with Australia**

The overall level of identification with being Australian was 4.97 (on a scale of 1 to 6). There were 527 students (42.4%) who totally identified as Australian, 546 (44%) who moderately identified, and 139 (11.2%) who had low or no identification.

There was no effect of Gender,  $F(1, 1173) = .11, p = .74$ . There was, however, a significant effect of Location,  $F(1, 1173) = 8.85, p < .01$ , with students from rural areas ( $M = 5.25$ ) rating their identification higher than students from urban areas ( $M = 4.71$ ). There also was an effect of Generational Status on strength of identification,  $F(3, 1173) = 59.05, p < .001$ . Post-hoc comparisons revealed that first generation Australians ( $M = 3.74$ ) rated their identification with Australia as significantly lower than second generation Australians ( $M = 4.65$ ), third generation Australians ( $M = 5.26$ ), and Indigenous Australians ( $M = 5.44$ ). Second generation Australians also rated their identification significantly lower than third Generation and Indigenous Australians. Third generation and Indigenous Australians did not differ significantly on strength of identification.

Table 2 shows the percentage of each generation with low, moderate, and total identification with being Australian. A majority of third Generation Australians totally identified with being Australian, although almost half of this group had only moderate to low levels of identification. There was a clear pattern of increasing identification with Australia, with first generation students having the lowest identification levels and Indigenous Australians having the highest identification levels.

**Table 2: Percentage of Students from Each Generation with Low, Moderate, and Total Levels of Identification**

Generation	Level of Australian Identity		
	Low	Moderate	Total
First	36.2	57.8	6.0
Second	13.9	57.7	28.4
Third	6.8	39.8	53.4
Indigenous	9.0	21.3	69.7

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The initial hypothesis of the existence of nine identity dimensions was not completely upheld, although the seven dimensions that were identified via factor analysis were remarkably close to original theoretical suppositions. Differences related primarily to the coalescing of the Personal and National Wellbeing items, and the amalgamation of the Uniqueness and Diversity of Environment items with either the Outdoors or the Agreeableness items.

Of particular interest is that students did not differentiate between personal and national wellbeing, which may have been an artefact of questionnaire items. Originally, national wellbeing was conceptualised as being mostly associated with national security (freedom from war and terrorist attacks), and national economic prosperity. Personal wellbeing was conceptualised as relating to having one's personal needs met in relation to such issues as health, food, water, education, housing, and employment. On reflection, national economic

prosperity is probably encompassed in the personal application of prosperity to one's health and welfare needs.

On the other hand, it may be possible to differentiate between personal and national wellbeing in a questionnaire that incorporates the notion of authenticity (Gecas, 1991; Trew & Benson, 1996) or discrepancy (see Marsh & Craven, 1997 for an overview). In effect, this means that it is possible for people to have both a stereotypical view of what it means to be Australian (i.e., what they believe most people think it means, such as "being prosperous"), and a personal view (i.e., how well they think the stereotype applies to themselves, for instance "not being prosperous"). Further, to apply discrepancy theory to national identity research, it should be possible to predict one's strength of identification with Australia from the discrepancy between personal and stereotypical national identity conceptions. The application of discrepancy theory to national identity research has the potential to increase our understanding in this area, as discussed further presently

Several of the identity dimensions are similar to those reported by Howard and Gill (2001) who found that young Australian children emphasised themes of multiculturalism, diversity, and peacefulness. The Diversity, and Wellbeing dimensions were in the top three most strongly rated dimensions. However, the most strongly rated dimension was Democracy, which differed markedly from the findings of two other recent qualitative studies on Australian identity (Mewett, 1999; Phillips & Smith, 2000). In their study of Australian adults' national identity constructions, Phillips and Smith (2000) found strong reference to traditional themes and little mention of what they referred to as 'modern political' themes such as democratic values and citizenship rights. Mewett (1999) also found more traditional themes, such as athleticism and the bush, being endorsed as essential to an Australian identity. Our two themes of Sport and Outdoor Lifestyle are similar to Mewett's two themes. However, these were the two *least* important aspects of being Australian. When calculated as effect size differences, the differences between Democracy and Outdoor Lifestyle, and Democracy and Sport were .69 and .67, respectively.

Gender differences were not unexpected on several of the identity dimensions. Males endorsed factors such as Sport, and Outdoor Lifestyle, whereas females were more likely to endorse Diversity. Rural students had more traditional views of being Australia (Sport, and Outdoor Lifestyle), and were more conservative in their views (higher Rules of Citizenship and lower Diversity) than their urban counterparts. Generational status differences in the content of Australian identity also were not unexpected. The generational status variable captured the diverse cultural mix that exists in Australia. However, in future studies an important question to ask is whether students respond from a personal perspective or as they think other people expected them to respond; that is, do the students exclude themselves or do they feel excluded by other people because of their cultural background?

Several sub group differences found in the current study are not unlike results found in studies on national identity in other countries. For example, studies of South African identity have found national identity differences based on gender, and geographical location, (Finchilescu & Dawes, 1999; Harris, 1997; Mattes, Taylor, & Poore, 1997). Findings from a Canadian identity study (Mahtani, 2002) indicated that multiculturalism resulted in a great deal of diversity in the conceptions of a Canadian identity. In a review of national identity studies in South Africa, Eaton (2002) concluded that "sub-national ethnic, racial or linguistic identities are compatible with an overarching sense of national identity" (p. 46). In a predominantly multicultural society such as exists in Australia this is an important, but yet

untested finding. In a context of reconciliation, of particular note is the absence of exploration of Indigenous people's construction of an Indigenous identity that is different from but compatible with an overall Australian national identity.

With respect to strength of identification with Australia, it should be of concern that more than half of the students surveyed had only moderate to low identification with being Australian. Only 42% of students indicated that they felt totally Australian. This low percentage is similar to the results found by Purdie, Neill, and Richards (2002) in a study of the effects of an outdoor education program. Low identifying students in that study responded less positively to the program, an artefact perhaps of a stereotypical view that being Australian involves pursuits in the bush and physical prowess. This highlights the importance of the discrepancy between stereotypical and personal constructions of national identity, and the link with the social identity theoretical perspective that self-esteem motivates most social processes, including one's choice of groups to which one attaches. 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).

Discrepancy theorists (e.g., Marsh & Roche, 1996; Marsh, 1999) suggest that self-concept is a function of the difference between a person's perceived actual accomplishments and ideal standards. If the discrepancy is large, the self-concept will be viewed negatively, and this in turn will contribute to lower self-esteem. Thus, in the current study, although not tested, it is proposed that a person's self-concept and self-esteem are related to identification with the national group. For example, Democracy and Diversity had the highest levels of agreement among the students. If these factors were representing the students' ideals (personal identity constructions), instead of what they believed to be true for most people (stereotypical identity constructions), then there would be a large personal-stereotypical discrepancy. This could lead students to have a less than positive view of being Australian. If this was the case, then identifying with being Australian would not contribute to high self-esteem, and hence students' identification would be low.

First generation Australians generally had lower levels of identification than second and third generation Australians. This may have been because these students still had a strong attachment to their country of origin. Similarly, a majority of second generation Australians had moderate to low identification, which could be explained by affiliation with parents' country of origin. We need further research to tease out the relationship between attachment to country of origin or parent's country of origin, and attachment to one's adopted country. For instance, is cultural similarity an important factor in the extent to which people identify with an adopted country (e.g., New Zealanders in Australia)? Or are there other more important factors such as the political, economic, and social structures that either encourage or discourage people to develop a strong sense of belonging to a nation?

This study provides new and empirically derived knowledge about what it means to be Australian. Scholars in the area (e.g., Jones, 1997; Phillips, 1998; Taylor & Toohey, 1995) have noted enduring methodological weaknesses of studies of Australian national identity that the current study addresses to some extent. For instance, much of the extant research is inductive rather than deductive in approach. Much of it has emerged from "either popular or impressionistic accounts, textual analysis, or social and political shifts" (Phillips, 1998, p. 282). Small sample sizes, lack of cross-sectional data, and absence of robust measures, have prevented previous studies from rigorous investigation of generational, ethnic, geographic, and gender differences in constructions of national identity. More quantitative studies that

include both young and older adults, and that explore State and ethnic differences could further our understanding of the development of an Australian identity.

In hindsight, it is unclear whether students were indicating their ideal or actual view of what it means to be Australian. This currently is being addressed in a study in which items have been reworded to allow students to indicate stereotypical identity constructions as well as personal identity constructions. This will enable exploration of the hypothesis that strength of identification with Australia is associated with the discrepancy between stereotypical and personal constructions. We need also to explore further the influence on Australian national identity of country of origin of first and second generation Australians.

From both psychological and social perspectives, knowledge about what it means to be Australian is important because the ways in which people identify themselves as Australian are hypothesised to influence thoughts and actions. "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).

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