

## **GIL05258**

# **My place: The remaking of images of country and belonging in Australian youth**

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In recent years Australian society has been undergoing major revision in terms of a vastly expanded immigration program. Currently one in five Australians has been born overseas. For the school population the numbers of newcomers to the country is even higher and their distribution is not evenly spread throughout the population.

These developments pose significant issues for education, its form and content, not the least of which is the ways in which the school works to fulfil its traditional function of inculcating an understanding of Australian law and political systems, a respect for its leaders and a sense of belonging.

The study reported on in this paper described the responses from some 400 young South Australian schoolchildren to questions about their feelings for the country in which they live. These responses showed a ready and genuine engagement with questions of the current social mix, an acceptance and pride in being a new society, a positive response to indigenous issues along with some idiosyncratic comment about the country which provides further evidence of the ways in which young people are accurate deconstructors of the manifold media messages about place and belonging.

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For several years we have been collecting conversations with young South Australians about the ways in which they understand themselves as Australian, their attitudes to this country and the places in which they live. By this stage we have recorded conversations with over 400 young people in a range of locations across South Australia. Thus we have urban and rural, rich and poor, girls and boys, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, NESB and Anglo-Celtic. This material has been the basis of several papers in which we have variously addressed questions of place and belonging, issues of citizenship and citizenship education, semiotic readings of children's Australias and questions of national identity. While earlier publications have concentrated on reporting particular aspects of the children's understanding, this paper is offered as more of a thought piece. Using some of our data from the children we want to use this space to think about how best to theorise questions of place and belonging and how this theorisation might relate to educational practice in contemporary Australia.

Thinking about place in the context of children's views of Australia immediately calls to mind two very different Australian publications, both of which deal with questions of place and identity as constructed in space and time and both of which are entitled *My Place*. The first is Sally Morgan's *My Place*, a largely autobiographical account of a young girl growing up in Western Australia in the later decades of the twentieth century. In the story the narrator describes her state of increasing confusion as she grew to realise that the story which she had been told about her family origins was a convenient fiction and that her reality, her identity was indeed rather different. She had been told that her ancestors were from India, a story that at first successfully accounted for her shadowy memories of a darker skinned grandmother and other relatives. In fact Sally was to gradually discover that her ancestry was Aboriginal, that she derived from Indigenous stock. At the time it was seen as preferable by her immediate family, in particular her mother, to disguise this fact – hence the story that they had come from India. The book was exceedingly popular and was taken up by many schools around the country as required reading in the secondary years. Of course the story was further evidence – if any was needed – to underscore the deep prejudice and racism which had operated as a running theme throughout much of this country's history. It was unthinkable for the hundreds of late 20<sup>th</sup> century young Australian readers (if not for their parents!) to imagine that being Indigenous could be seen as shameful and therefore hidden from public knowledge.

Interestingly in terms of questions of identity and Indigeneity, there is evidence that greater numbers of Australians have become willing to claim their Indigenous heritage in that the numbers of Indigenous in recent censuses has risen far and away beyond that which could be explained by natural increases. More people are prepared to own their Aboriginality and to identify as Indigenous, an outcome which suggests that some of the racial barriers are a little less dramatically exclusive than once was the case. Certainly in our discussions with young people about issues such as the meaning of being Australian, there is a ready acceptance of the need to respect Indigenous people and acknowledge their right to the land because 'they were here first' – a claim hardly mentioned in the early history books. In general the young people's notion of Australian history was remarkably vague except for their response to Indigenous people and their issues – for instance many knew about the Stolen

Generation and the impasse over the sorry word. Undoubtedly this sea change in Australian attitudes is due to many more factors than Sally Morgan's book, but there can be no doubt that it contributed to a widespread re-evaluation of Australian studies. Sally Morgan is now professor of Indigenous studies at the University of Western Australia.

The other text that comes to mind in this connection is also entitled *My place*. However this is a children's picture book by Nadia Wheatley and Donna Rawlins, designed for pre school or early readers – rather younger than the children of our discussions. The book, itself somewhat reminiscent of Ruth Park's *Playing Beattie Bow* – another senior school classic – depicts one street in Sydney and shows how its inhabitants, their dwellings, their dress and customs changed across the years as generations of people moved into and out of the neighbourhood. In other words the book functions like a museum showing the ways in which Australian society has changed and adapted in subsequent generations, through particular historical moments, how the cities have developed, how housing styles have altered and how children play differently with different toys. Apart from responding to the book's delightful drawing and conceptualisation the reader is offered a real sense of history through the stories of a succession of children who have lived in the street. As such it is surely a worthy inclusion in young children's reading. However, like many children's picture books, it has quickly fallen from current shelves and is now declared out of print. This is a shame insofar as our investigations have shown that Australian twelve year olds appear to have little sense of history (Gill and Howard, forthcoming). What they do have is a notion of history as personalised – my history as in my life story – or else history which, like culture, only exists in other places. For example:

- Int: And where would you choose to live if you didn't live here?  
John: Egypt. Because it has history  
Int: What about you Sean?  
Sean: England. Because it has history and my parents used to live there.
- Int: If you could live anywhere else in the world, where would you like to call home? And why?  
Ian: Okay, Egypt.  
Int: Why?

Ian: Because of all the history in Egypt, Egyptians there, and all the stuff that happened.

Carey: England's green and there's lots of history there

Our informants were upper primary school students of whom the majority were 12 years old – they were from year 7 the last year of primary school in South Australia. While they all appeared happy to spontaneously identify as Australian, just what that identification meant was rather less clear. For instance, many of the children to whom we spoke were more ready to describe Australia and their place in terms of what it's not rather than what it is. Thus they recounted the atrocities of war ravaged 'other' countries and saw these conditions as particular to those places and different from here which was safe. They saw the women wearing the veil or the burka as unfairly restricted in their dress and movements whereas Australia, by comparison, was vigorously defended as fair and free. Pride in the country was more often described in terms of Australia's sporting achievements than in any deep sense of its politics, history or culture (Howard and Gill, 2005; Gill and Howard, 2005).

Who are Australians?

At a time when the influx of migrants and refugees has profoundly altered the composition of the Australian population, questions of definition or even description are not easy. And yet in conversations with our 400 12 year olds spontaneous claims of "I'm an Australian", "we are Australian" occurred frequently and were equally likely to have come from Indigenous youngsters, non-Indigenous Anglo-Celtic backgrounds, recently arrived Asian migrants or second and third generation Australians from southern Europe. Most of the children appeared to understand that a salient and in their view admirable feature of the current population was one of difference and they opted to describe or pictorially represent difference in their pastiches of Australians. For example, when asked what they would put on their collage of Australia this group offered:

Jane: I'd put faces of all the different colours that people look like.

Alison: The different countries that people come from.

Int: Okay, what else would go in this collage?

Faye: People who have come from overseas, and are now settled in Australia, and are very proud to be here.

Sally: Because we've got all different kinds of people in Australia.

Int: This is very true actually, very different.

Sally: Like heaps of Chinese people in Melbourne

James: Like, we got, yeah we got, nearly every single one, nationality in Australia.

Leanne: It's where people from other countries come.

This refrain was echoed in almost all the interviews : We've got people from everywhere - all different sorts of people in Australia!

The point here is not so much the children's recognition of the range of backgrounds from which the current generation of primary school students have come but their pride in acknowledgement of the cultural mix and their repeated claim that it is this mix which makes Australia special. A recent commentator described the Australian policy of multiculturalism as 'one of the triumphs of the post war period' (Carney, 2005), a sentiment with which the children would evidently agree. Some of them knew of the older images of 'being Australian' and commented derisively on the picture of the dishevelled bush worker with a hat from which dangled a fly net and numerous corks. They recognised that this image was long past its use-by date. Even its more recent emanation such as in the Paul Hogan or Steve Irwin type heroes is already passé in the minds of the young people , especially those born post 1990, long after the antics of Crocodile Dundee.

A continuous refrain in media discussions of Australianness in recent times has to do with multiculturalism – despite the current Prime Minister's disinclination for the term. One recent media commentator noted:

*... Australia has managed to absorb a multiplicity of nationalities and races and has done it peaceably and with relatively little social dislocation. The nation is stronger for it. (Carney, 2005)*

The above comment is all the more dramatic given it occurred amidst the recent furore about terrorist cells infiltrating our major cities, the sort of news that can easily contribute to the "othering" of any foreign presence in our midst. And multiculturalism has entered into media practices too. Now we see a routine mix of presenters on the nightly news. Women, Indigenous people and others from visibly different racial backgrounds and accents are standard commentators and appear in the range of television dramas, including the soaps. While there may be some dismissal of this practice as merely token and designed to meet quotas, there can be no doubt

that local people appear across a much broader spectrum than before. At the same time in a consideration of positions of power and influence the domination of white western males continues. National and State parliaments, senior professionals, company boards and directorships, along with the business pages of the daily press, continue to reflect an earlier version of the public Australian – white and male – and the associated attitudes and values. The interests of these power groups align with neo-liberal versions of economic rationalism and work to ensure Australia as a player on the world stage of free trade policies and globalisation. While there is more recognition of Australia as geographically positioned in Asia and thus a sharer in the interests of Pacific region countries, our ties with Europe remain such that some PacRim nations appear reluctant to include Australia within their set. And so there continues to be a degree of ambivalence about the country as a whole in terms of its partners and allegiances – and even its own key identity. Situated in Asia but still largely peopled by non-Asians, monolingual in its public practice but inclusive of a huge range of language groupings, still tied to British governance albeit less tightly so in recent years, Australia appears to be gradually metamorphosing into an as yet unknowable new form of space and place.

Politicians – and especially the current Prime Minister – have been inclined to decry certain policies and practices as un-Australian, an epithet apparently more powerful than unfair or unpopular. Certainly this practice aligns with the children’s response of telling us what Australia is not like more easily than what it is. This is not to say there are no points of convergence in popular thinking about the Australian way.

Discussions with the children lend support to the claim that issues of the ‘good life’ represent one theme running through generally shared views on what Australia has to offer. Hence the idea of holidays, of leisure, often incorporating visions of sun filled beaches and long lazy summer days have long been regarded as an intrinsic part of Australian lifestyle (Fiske, Hodge and Turner, 1987). Most recently the current conservative government’s effort to introduce new industrial relations legislation was opposed in the House as ‘doing away with the Sunday barbecue’ a phrase that encapsulates the idea of weekends being important leisure time. Certainly the children’s pictures of life in Australia practically all included reference to the beach, to the outdoors, fun in the sun – showing that they are accurate readers of the cultural messages in media representations and family living practices (Fiske, 1989). And

while these responses formed part of the ensemble of the meanings of being Australian and were described with energy and pride, we are still left with the question of how the many newcomers to this country might develop a sense of belonging.

How to theorise a sense of belonging?

Bourdieu's concept of habitus offers one way to theorise the sense of belonging to the group, the place, the country. Habitus as formulated by Bourdieu is conceived of as an ensemble of practices and dispositions – what you do and how you feel about it – whereby one is 'at one' with the environment or context in which one lives. This concept is at the core of Bourdieu's theoretical framework. It refers to the network of understanding that is acquired, often early in life, which predisposes members of a society to interact in ways consistent with the specific societal norms of their group and consequently to feel at ease and to belong. For Bourdieu, *habitus* also stands for an embodied understanding, a system of durable transposable dispositions, which refer, *inter alia*, to bodily comportment, to holding oneself or to gesturing in a certain way. A bodily disposition is a *habitus* when it encodes a certain cultural understanding which is shared by a particular group. It therefore represents the physical and spatial knowledge displayed by group members in ways of which they may or may not be consciously aware. The domain of the *habitus* is a 'practical sense which reactivates the sense objectified in institutions' – thus we as actors echo in myriad ways the conventions within which our society works, its divisions and distinctions and the particular levels in which we find ourselves. We notice that film and stage actors, and in particular mimers, display such an awareness as they seek to reproduce culturally familiar characters such as the Italian waiter who constantly gesticulates, the upper class English gentleman with his stiff demeanour and supercilious expression or the Edna Everage mode of dress as the archetypal Australian housewife. Brief encounters with such images convey whole worlds of meaning, particular to place and time and class.

Habitus is usually learned as a child when the assimilation of speech, ritual, body hexis is accomplished and normalised as child development as though it were part of the inexorable universal progression into full participatory adulthood. The *habitus*

appears to operate at the pre-conscious or unconscious level rather than as a response to a conscious recognition as with a rule of behaviour. In Bourdieu the *habitus*

*... entertains with the social world that has produced it a real ontological complicity, a source of cognition without consciousness, intentionality without intention, and a practical mastery of the world's regularities which allows one to anticipate the future without even needing to posit it as such.*

(Bourdieu,1990:11-12)

What we also know is that all such practices are profoundly influenced by culture eg the taken for granted practices of greeting, tonalities of speech, speech recognition itself are all examples of situated learnings which are specific to particular contexts. Young people internalise these learnings as they grow into being in the world.

Habitus can therefore be read as an integrated process of individual and environment, a property of neither one nor the other, but simultaneously both. This reading of *habitus* does not sit comfortably with the idea of habitus as a property of an individual – or of a particular environment – although some scholars have chosen to apply it that way. Bourdieu consistently refused the separation between person and environment that had become structured into so much of social science – little wonder then that his formulation of habitus maintains this integrated position.

The set of long lasting dispositions Bourdieu associated with *habitus* also necessarily involves values, a sense of importance and correctness associated with particular responses to the world that is even physically felt by social members. Bourdieu suggests that these dispositions are produced by a hidden or implicit pedagogy rather than being the product of conscious teaching:

*One could endlessly enumerate the values given body, **made** body, by the hidden persuasion of an implicit pedagogy which can make a whole cosmology through injunctions as insignificant as 'sit up straight' or 'don't hold your knife in your left hand'.*

(Bourdieu, 1990:69-70)

Such instances are readily observable in practices around teaching children to conform to stereotypical gender norms – big boys don't cry, young ladies always speak softly and so on. The crucial feature of Bourdieu's formulation of symbolic violence lies in its explanation of compliance in which it echoes Althusserian notion

of ideology's power of interpellation. For Bourdieu, symbolic violence is "the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with her/his complicity..." (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1996:167). And so we take on the messages hidden in daily transactional talk and for some of us this means that we do sit up straight, we do attend to our table manners and we notice and perhaps judge those who don't conform because we share in the value positions in which we have been framed. It is important to note that Bourdieu sees us all as social actors not simply as constructed by our environment but complicit in the remaking of that environment.

In an interview in 2000, in what is perhaps his most concise encapsulation of *habitus* and agency, he declares both his recognition of structural division as lived out by social actors and his refusal of the subjective/objective binary distinction:

*I developed the concept of habitus to incorporate the objective structures of society and the subjective role of agents within it. The habitus is a set of dispositions, reflexes and forms of behaviour that people acquire through acting in society. It reflects the different positions people have in society, for example, whether they are brought up in a middle class environment or in a working class suburb. It is part of how society produces itself. But there is also change. Conflict is built into society. People can find their expectations and ways of living are suddenly out of step with the new social position they find themselves in ... then the question of social agency and political intervention becomes very important.*

(Bourdieu,2000:19)

How then can the theory of habitus be usefully employed in the understanding of how one comes to belong, to feel 'at home', to function 'naturally' within a culture, language and physical context different from that within which one's earliest development took place? For this is the question at the heart of building theoretical understanding of the positioning of many of the people who make up contemporary Australia.

Bourdieu repeatedly described the work of *habitus* in reconciling person and society as follows:

*the source of historical action ... is not an active subject confronting society as if that society were an object constituted externally. This source resides neither in consciousness nor in things but in the relation between two states of*

*the social, that is, between the history objectified in things, in the form of institutions, and the history incarnated in bodies, in the form of that system of enduring dispositions that I call habitus. The body is in the social world but the social world is also in the body.*

(Bourdieu,1990:190)

In this quotation, reminiscent of the old cliché about ‘you can take the boy out of the country but you can’t take the country out of the boy’, Bourdieu has sought to explain how we become part of our social world, in the sense of taking into ourselves at a subconscious level the way our cultural location affects our being-in-the-world and the *habitus* becomes the mechanism for that transformation.

The central function of the *habitus* is to generate an ensemble of practices consonant with member positions within the total social formation, even and possibly especially when those positions are unequally located. As Bohman writes:

*Habitus is supposed to explain how it is that agents come to share a culture and its practices, even when there are asymmetrical social positions and relations of domination. Bourdieu solves the Parsonian problem of social order not through the internalization of norms, but through the ‘inculcation’ of dispositions that come not only from being socialised into a culture generally, but into a particular subordinate or dominant position within it. It operates through the agent’s own dispositions rather than coercion, through ‘generative and implicit schemata’ rather than sanctioned rules. Even if sanctions or rules were present, it would still have to be explained why it is that agents are predisposed to accept them. This is the role of the habitus.*

(Bohman, 1999:133)

It is fairly clear that the *habitus* works to maintain the status quo in terms of social structural division, but the issues for those whose conditions have changed physically, linguistically and culturally call for a more complex explanation. Critics of Bourdieu’s approach have noted that such a formulation presupposes a steady state condition and have questioned its appropriateness for describing social change. What if there is coercion and the agents are no longer predisposed to accept the rules? How to account for say, Afghanistan under the Taliban or for that matter any country beset by major internal strife and revolution? Many of the recent arrivals in Australia have escaped from their countries because of the terrible conditions imposed on them. The situation of refugees is perhaps an extreme example of the situation that all migrants

have to face as they come to a new country: how to find out how it's done here, how to find a place, how to feel comfortable, how to come to belong.

Nearly all are migrants

At one level all but the Indigenous people are recent migrants – in that they have been here less than 10 generations. Earlier generations of incoming Australians – many of them child refugees from Britain – had little opportunity to reflect on their changed circumstances and were quickly incorporated into the harsh realities of life as unskilled labour in the early Australian workforce. Most recently our newest arrivals come from cultures more different from the older Anglo-Celtic mainstream – differences in language, in religion, in values and attitudes, in everyday living practices. Schools – perhaps especially primary schools – have had primary responsibility for inducting newcomers in Australian ways of speaking, behaving, thinking and so on. With some notable exceptions this complex process has proceeded more or less smoothly (Carney 2005 see quote above) – but what is going on here?

Friedmann (2002:302) cites Bourdieu's suggestion of a 'second birth' as one way to describe the process through which migrants achieve the necessary social and cultural transformations accompany their investment in moving to a new home. He writes of the multiple challenges for migrants as having 'to learn not only the new skills but also a new work discipline, a new rhythm of life, a new sense of time' (Friedmann, 2002: 302). Ultimately Friedmann sees the challenge for the migrant as 'how to make a more or less successful transition from one habitus to another as a matter of economic survival' (ibid, p.303).

As initially conceptualised *habitus* operated below the level of consciousness, it occurred as a sort of patterned behaviour, produced out of observation and conditioning and became part of who one is. As Bourdieu carefully and repeatedly points out, *habitus* does not come down to a simple system of rules or codes of behaviour and he distinguishes *habitus* as:

*that regulated disposition to generate regulated and regular behaviour outside any reference rules; and in societies where the work of*

*codification is not particularly advanced, the habitus is the principle of most modes of practice.*

( Bourdieu,1987: 81-2)

The last point indicates a possible explanation for some of the problems teachers have experienced in attempting to interact with young people whose backgrounds are relatively free from the rule boundedness of middle class families in western capitalist society. For these children, their regulated behaviour – often disruptive, maybe antisocial - cannot be explained in terms of a set of rules about bedtimes and putting away toys and folding clothes. At the same time, some of the most successful accounts of educating young Indigenous Australians involve cases of a good deal of explicitness around the expectations of the learners and the teachers (see for eg Sara, 2002).

One intervention that education can make is to bring these features to the level of consciousness, to make explicit some of the taken for granted aspects of the contextualised practices of a particular location. There is a sense in which some teachers have always done this – it comes under the notion of ‘how it’s done here’. Such learning operates at a more micro level than formal school rules but more often it is less clearly stated. As Bourdieu wrote:

*The absence of a genuine law ... must not lead us to forget that any socially recognised formulation contains within it an intrinsic power to reinforce dispositions symbolically.*

(Bourdieu, 1977b :21)

The newcomer is in the situation of the small child, having to observe and practise whatever appears to be the correct response. The difference is that newly arrived migrants must participate in this process at a conscious level. Going to school is an induction into a school culture whereby the newcomer has to work out the unwritten rules of the place and of each situation in which s/he finds her/himself. After some time of practice and application the new practices become part of the cultural baggage which one brings, an unconscious frame for seeing the world and behaving in it and feeling entirely comfortable with self and situation. What the cultural induction process implies is a heightened self awareness on the part of the teacher, along with the capacity to be sensitive to points of difference. Also necessary in this process is

the capacity to imagine what it's like to be in the position of the newcomer and to call to consciousness those elements of *habitus* that are brought into question and to make them explicit. Such a position has long been part of the job of teaching and educating – but what is new here is that it derives from an understanding of the generative process that must attend all aspects of living in a new culture.

More specifically the question of values.

The recent spate of terrorist incidents on a global scale has provoked renewed discussions of values. The incidence of suicide bombers gives rise to considerations of the valuing of human life and so on. For Australian educators still reeling from the Prime Minister's comment about the lack of values in government schools, such questions take on some urgency. Certainly some of this thinking is seen in the government's commitment to civics and citizenship education and the requirement that all schools have a fully functioning flagpole. What we would want to argue, in conjunction with Bourdieu's formulation of *habitus*, is that the simple promulgation of rules and regulations cannot develop that sense of place and belonging that is central to social inclusivity and community cohesion. In our conversations with the children, their values shone through in terms of valuing freedoms and right to decide about lifestyles and religion, the willing recognition of Indigenous peoples and their ready delight in speaking about their sense of allegiance to sporting teams and media heroes which, while not in the same league as king and country, revealed a readiness to be involved in group activities and their absolute understanding of their right to do so. Although they may not have known the complex principles of the voting system or even the names of leading politicians they were imbued with a sense of security and freedom derived from living in this country in which they took evident pride.

Int: Okay Matt, what would you put or how would you go about building this collage?

Matt: Probably a picture of Australia and um yeah sport and yeah picture of myself

Keith: Pictures of like the Olympic Games and stuff, to show that, like, we can do just as good at the Olympic Games as everyone else, we're not just a country, you know, with the 'yee ha' cowboys.

Int: Okay, and so how would this show people what you felt?

Keith: Proud about it I suppose

## Conclusion

In this paper we have suggested that Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* has much to offer in terms of a theory of a sense of place and belonging. Given the central importance of developing these aspects in contemporary Australia and the key role of the schools in so doing, it seems that this concept of *habitus* which has been sometimes criticised as 'inherently ambiguous and overloaded' (Nash, 1990) retains singular importance in the general commitment to develop in this country a shared appreciation of the cultural mix, one which recognises and acknowledges difference at the same time as it celebrates community and cohesion.

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