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Understanding the context of racial and cultural exclusivism:

A study of Melbourne neighbourhoods

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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1. Executive summary

The growth in Australia's population from increased immigration is changing the ethnic, socio-structural and physical landscapes of urban neighbourhoods and significantly altering relationships within these areas (Australian Government, 2013; Hugo, 2008). These changes can be enormously positive, but can also pose a challenge for the development and maintenance of neighbourhood networks and social inclusion. With a sizeable number of Australians viewing immigration as a strain on economic resources and a threat to Australian identity and values (Dunn, Forrest, Burnley, & McDonald, 2004; Kamp, Alam, Blair, & Dunn, 2017), there is an urgent need to better understand the contextual dynamics that shape interethnic relationships.

Despite a long history of largely successful multicultural policies and programs, recent surveys in Australia reveal that approximately 30 per cent of Australians do not believe that immigration from diverse countries makes us stronger and, further, they consider the current intake of immigrants as 'too high' (Markus, 2018). Negative attitudes against Muslims are also increasing (Markus, 2018) and native-born Australians are more likely to report high levels of social disorder and withdrawal from some aspects of community life in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods (Wickes, Hipp, Zahnow, & Mazerolle, 2013; Wickes, Zahnow, White, & Mazerolle, 2013). These findings suggest that although immigration brings national economic, social and cultural benefits, there is growing endorsement of exclusivist attitudes towards migrants.

Countering exclusivist discourses can only succeed if initiatives address the underlying factors that allow these narratives to resonate with individuals. Evidence from other countries suggests that socially harmful exclusivism concentrates in neighbourhoods, especially segregated neighbourhoods and those with large proportions of non-White/European residents (Ramalingam, Glennie and Feve, 2012). In Australia, and specifically Victoria, we know little about the spatial concentration of socially harmful exclusivism as no large-scale Australian study examines whether these attitudes cluster in particular neighbourhoods. Furthermore, we do not know how and under what conditions these attitudes may lead to potentially harmful actions.

This report examines the individual-level drivers of social exclusivism while also considering the role of the neighbourhood context and neighbourhood cohesion. A key goal of this research was to better understand the ways in which the local context encourages or prevents the development of exclusivist sentiments, attitudes and endorsement of actions that seek to exclude migrants, especially in areas experiencing significant changes in the ethnic composition. Linked to this goal was a focus on identifying the specific characteristics of the local context that distinguish areas with higher levels of socially harmful exclusivism from those with lower levels.

1.1   Research aims

The aims of this research were to examine:

- the relationship between the neighbourhood context and socially exclusivist sentiments, attitudes and endorsement of actions that seek to exclude migrants;

- the changing neighbourhood characteristics and their influence on socially harmful exclusivism across Melbourne neighbourhoods; and

- the association between neighbourhood social cohesion and socially exclusivist sentiments, attitudes and endorsement of actions that seek to exclude migrants.

Using multiple administrative datasets, combined with the accounts of approximately 2,500 residents across 148 neighbourhoods, this study examines both the individual-level and the neighbourhood-level drivers of social exclusivism. The analyses simultaneously explore the independent impacts of threat,

contact and anticipated rejection on social exclusivism. It advances previous work by considering the context of social exclusivism and identifying the key correlates at different levels of analysis that influence harmful sentiments, attitudes and potential actions. Further, this project makes an important contribution to policy and practice by identifying the kinds of places where socially harmful exclusivism occurs, the forms it can take, the protective factors that guard against the different dimensions of social exclusivism and the possible interventions and programs that may reduce social exclusivism in urban neighbourhoods.

1.2 Key findings

Overall this study found that the majority of people had neutral or positive sentiments towards immigrant groups. However, a sizeable number of respondents felt anger and low warmth towards Muslim, African and Middle Eastern people. Those endorsing exclusivist attitudes and actions comprised a minority of the overall sample. Exclusivist attitudes towards immigrants, as measured by our survey items, were held by approximately 23 per cent to 30 per cent of the sample. One item asking participants if they agreed immigrants should conform to Australian norms received 65 per cent support (see Figure 1). Participants who intended to undertake socially exclusivist actions were in the minority, ranging from 23 to 29 per cent of the sample.
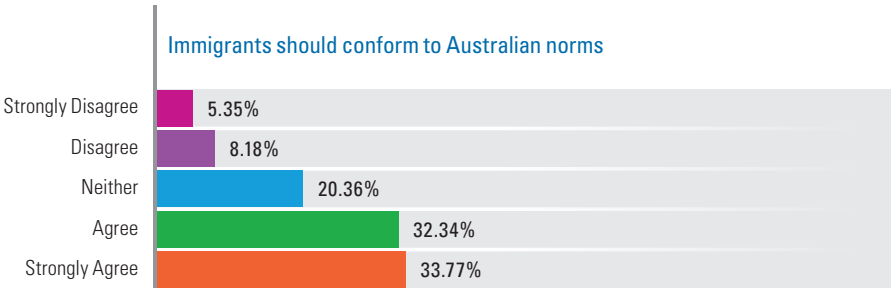
Immigrants should conform to Australian norms

Strongly Disagree	5.35%
Disagree	8.18%
Neither	20.36%
Agree	32.34%
Strongly Agree	33.77%

Figure 1. Immigrants should conform to Australian norms, Australian Community Capacity Study (ACCS) survey 2017

Several individual demographic variables were associated with socially exclusive sentiments, attitudes and intended actions. These included age, gender, education and political orientation. The influence of age is consistent with findings from the Lowy Institute Poll that found younger people were less likely to perceive immigration as threat, when compared to older populations (Kassam, 2019). Those respondents indicating a preference for the parties of the Coalition were significantly more likely to report greater anger towards non-White/European groups than those indicating a preference for the Labor Party. This was also evident in responses about socially exclusivist attitudes and actions.

Our measures of threat and contact also influenced socially exclusivist sentiments, attitudes and intended actions. Perceived future interethnic conflict was associated with anger, lower warmth, stronger endorsement for socially exclusive attitudes towards immigrants and an endorsement of socially exclusive actions towards immigrants. Having close immigrant contacts was not associated with greater warmth, but individuals stating that 'most of my friends are immigrants' reported lower anger and greater warmth towards immigrants. Immigrant friendships were also a protective factor against socially exclusive attitudes and actions. Anticipating rejection from a member of another ethnic group was strongly linked to all measures of social exclusivism across all analyses.

Notably, an individual's own sense of community belonging was a strong protective factor against social exclusivism, but prior levels of neighbourhood social cohesion were not associated with exclusionary sentiments, attitudes and intended actions. Individuals living in neighbourhoods with greater concentrations of disadvantage and neighbourhoods where disadvantage increased over time displayed greater endorsement of socially exclusivist attitudes.

The highlights from the analyses are noted below and broken down by sentiments, attitudes and actions. Fuller accounts of these relationships are provided in sections 5, 6 and 7 of this report.
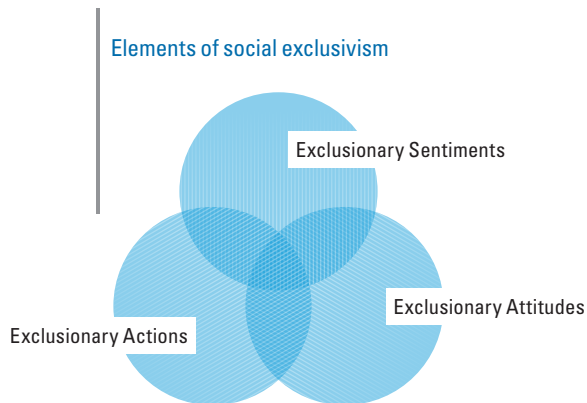
Elements of social exclusivism

Exclusionary Sentiments

Exclusionary Attitudes

Exclusionary Actions

Figure 2. Elements of social exclusivism

Exclusionary sentiments: warmth and anger towards people from a non-White/European background

- There was no evidence of neighbourhood clustering of warmth for or anger towards people who identified as White/European in this sample.

- Nearly one in four participants reported feelings of low warmth towards Muslims and people of African heritage.

- Approximately one in six participants reported anger towards Muslims and people of African heritage.

- Older people, men and those with high school education (or lower) expressed lower warmth for people of a non-White/European background when compared to younger people, women and those with a university education.

- Younger people and those with lower participation in the work force reported significantly lower anger towards people of a non-White/European background.

- Those who would vote for the Coalition expressed greater anger towards people of a non-White/European background than those who would vote for the Labor Party.

- Diversity of interethnic contacts and friendships with immigrants did not lead to greater warmth for people of a non-White/European background, nor did it lead to higher anger.

- Anticipating rejection by someone different from one's own reference group significantly predicted lower warmth for, and higher anger towards, people of a non-White/European background.

- Those who see neighbourhood interethnic relationships as improving in ten years reported greater warmth for, and lower anger towards, people of a non-White/European background compared to those who predict these relationships will decline in the future.

- Individuals with immigrant friends and those reporting high levels of community belonging had significantly lower anger towards people of a non-White/European background. While having immigrant friends did not lead to greater warmth, community belonging was positively associated with warmth towards people of a non-White/European background.

- Seeing greater neighbourhood problems was significantly associated with greater anger towards people of a non-White/European background.

Exclusionary attitudes towards immigrants

- Older people, those with lower levels of education and Coalition voters expressed stronger exclusivist attitudes towards immigrants compared to younger people, those with tertiary education and those who would vote for the Labor Party and the Greens.

- Witnessing or experiencing interethnic harassment was associated with weaker endorsement for exclusivist attitudes towards immigrants.

- Perceiving neighbourhood interethnic relationships as improving in ten years was significantly associated with weaker endorsement for exclusivist attitudes towards immigrants.

- Having immigrants as friends and reporting a sense of community belonging were significantly associated with weaker endorsement of exclusionary attitudes towards immigrants.

- Reporting greater community problems and anticipating rejection by someone different from one's own ethnic group were significantly associated with stronger exclusivist attitudes towards immigrants.

- Neighbourhood disadvantage and increases in neighbourhood disadvantage over time were significantly associated with stronger exclusivist attitudes towards immigrants.

- Neighbourhood ethnic diversity and increases in neighbourhood ethnic diversity over time were significantly associated with weaker endorsement for exclusivist attitudes towards immigrants.

Exclusionary actions towards immigrants

- Political affiliation was significantly associated with exclusionary actions towards immigrants. People who would vote for the Coalition reported stronger endorsement for exclusionary actions than those who would vote for the Labor Party or the Greens.

- Those with university qualifications reported weaker endorsement for exclusionary actions towards immigrants compared to those with high school (or lower) education.

- Perceiving neighbourhood interethnic relationships as improving in ten years was associated with weaker endorsement for exclusionary actions towards immigrants.

- Those anticipating rejection from someone different from one's own ethnic group were more likely to endorse exclusionary actions towards immigrants than those who did not.

- Community belonging was significantly associated with lower endorsement of exclusionary actions.

- Although initial models revealed significant neighbourhood variation in the endorsement of exclusivist actions towards immigrants, this clustering was entirely explained by individual-level variables. This indicates that particular kinds of people are more likely to concentrate in areas where exclusivist actions are higher, not that particular areas influence these actions.

1.3 Opportunities for policy and practice

The results indicated that increasing diversity in some areas lowered exclusivist attitudes whereas economic disadvantage significantly increased these attitudes. These findings strongly emphasise the need for careful settlement planning and the importance of developing and maintaining a welcoming social infrastructure. Below we offer several strategic considerations to assist government and non-government organisations in preparing for increases in diversity in the cities and regional areas in Australia.

Strategic considerations

1. Community and government organisations need to work explicitly through policy and programming to improve positive perceptions of, and actual relationships with, Victorians of Muslim and African heritage. Among other things, this involves an explicit focus on reducing threat perceptions and cultural stereotyping. It also involves enhancing understanding of positive community contributions by people from these heritage groups. These goals may be achieved through specific information campaigns co-designed with relevant communities and promoted by government that highlight the positive contributions made by Muslim and African heritage groups in Victoria; developing stronger op-ed profiles for key government personnel through major media outlets that 'push back' against negative stereotyping and misplaced threat perceptions; and reviewing and assessing existing and future funding opportunities for Victorian Government-supported programs in the area of sport, social cohesion, community support, the arts and recreation that explicitly bring together and highlight Victorians of Muslim and African heritage with other culturally diverse groups of Victorians in both urban and regional areas of the state.

2. The intergenerational differences in warmth and anger toward non-White/European people, reflected in less anger and more warmth among younger people than older generations, is a positive sign that should continue to be reinforced through educational pathways and community-focused messaging, including social media. It also points to the need to develop targeted approaches for older Australians that encourage greater interethnic contact. Specific attention should be given to leveraging Victorian seniors' organisations and local council events and programs: these could be funded to develop or extend seniors-focused initiatives that bring together older Victorians from diverse cultural backgrounds in activities and initiatives including volunteering, adult education, career development and mentoring, health and wellbeing and leisure and recreation.

3. To counter the anticipated rejection some members of society feel when thinking about meeting people who are different from themselves, additional resources to develop strategies and programs that promote welcome and positive engagement with people from different backgrounds should be considered. The annual Victorian Mosque Open Day is an example of such practices, as are the Welcome Dinner Project that is underway across Australia and the Islamic Museum of Australia's series of exhibitions and activities in Melbourne. The Immigration Museum in central Melbourne could be funded to develop travelling exhibits in regional and rural areas that highlight positive engagement with the state's culturally diverse communities and offer opportunities for co-designed exhibitions and learning activities that will enrich knowledge and intercultural contact.

4. The findings point to the central importance of social and community belonging as a mechanism for enhancing warmth toward people from other cultures. Strengthening, through policy and evidence based programs, a sense of belonging to communities that are inclusive of a diverse range of people, should remain a priority focus for government. We would further argue that this needs to promote a strong sense of 'we' as opposed to a sense of 'us' and 'them'. In practice, this involves extending opportunities through local councils and community organisations, as well as at state policy and program level, to identify activities and initiatives that will help enhance culturally diverse Victorians' sense of belonging and contribution to the broader Victorian community. Importantly, the onus for developing these strategies and programs should not fall only on ethnic or cultural heritage organisations, although such organisations have a vital continuing role to play. Consideration should be given to developing a policy that establishes, as a funding threshold for government consideration of community-based programming, how a given program meets social belonging and inclusion objectives that are then evaluated and benchmarked as part of the funding process. These objectives and benchmarks could be developed in collaboration with a range of existing Victorian advisory and programming bodies, and include an evaluation framework that assesses the achievement of social-belonging objectives.

5. Government may consider public messaging strategies that seek to build empathy and understanding for those experiencing interethnic harassment to reduce exclusivist attitudes towards immigrants. Such messaging could include evidence-based data drawn from VicHealth, Orygen, Beyond Blue, Department of Health and Human Services, Victoria Police and others showing the health-and-wellbeing, economic and community-cohesion costs for Victoria of having to deal with higher incidences of physical and mental health issues, social violence and un- or under-employment as a direct consequence of the impact of exclusivist attitudes. Of importance here is the need to develop strategies that do not encourage dehumanising the victims (Faulkner, 2018) alongside messaging that reduces the likelihood that the racist behaviour could be interpreted as 'okay' (Faulkner & Bliuc, 2016).

6. Given the differences in social exclusivism between those with tertiary education and those without, educational mechanisms for increasing understanding of and acceptance for cultural diversity and immigration must start in primary school and be continued throughout secondary school curricular and extra-curricular programs. Schools and government agencies responsible for educational development should be encouraged to design staged curriculum and program opportunities that help reduce exclusionary actions toward immigrants, including specific initiatives that promote positive attitudes towards difference. The Respectful Relationships program in Victorian schools is a good example of a successful initiative that helps children and young people learn to develop healthy relationships around gender equality, resilience and respect for gendered differences and identities. A similar curriculum-embedded program focusing on respectful relationships related to cultural diversity could be developed and piloted in Victorian primary and secondary schools.

7. The higher prevalence of negative attitudes and feelings toward immigrants amongst Liberal–National Coalition voters suggests the need for greater bipartisan cooperation in reducing exclusionary attitudes and actions towards immigrant members of the community. A bipartisan parliamentary working group on policy and strategy development to promote Victoria as a safe, strong and inclusive community for culturally diverse Victorians, with an explicit commitment to capitalising on the assets of cultural diversity for the state, could be established. This would require clear aims and timelines for delivering new consultation and policy mechanisms that would promote this objective. In addition, a bipartisan education and training program for both Victorian parliamentary members and local government councillors about the impacts of public communication conveying negative or exclusionary sentiments and attitudes towards diverse cultural groups of Victorians could be developed and implemented.

Strategic directions

1. Coping with significant localised socio-economic disadvantage has a negative impact on communities' ability to feel positively towards those from non-White/European backgrounds. Significant policy resources should be devoted to improving neighbourhood disadvantage both in its own right and as a means to foster greater intercultural acceptance and reduce intercultural tensions and blame.

2. The neighbourhood clustering of socio-economic differences can reinforce existing social attitudes based on other influencing variables such as political party affiliation, education level and age. Targeted messaging and programs in metropolitan, regional and rural communities should be considered by relevant local councils in areas with concentrations of older Victorians, Victorians endorsing more conservative political parties, and non-tertiary educated Victorians. In addition, programming routed through cross-community demographic-specific organisations and agencies (for example, in relation to age or education level) should be considered.