The racialisation of African youth in Australia

Joel Windle*

Faculty of Education, Monash University, Victoria, Australia

(Received 18 February 2008; final version received 9 April 2008)

In this paper I argue that patterns of reporting on ‘African youth’ in Australia show how both the constraints under which the media operates and the wider sources of institutional racism contribute to new applications of racialising frames. I seek to establish specific patterns of racialisation through an analysis of newspaper articles appearing in Melbourne over a roughly two month period when media attention was focused on a series of violent incidents in which African refugees were identified as either victims or perpetrators. Initial reporting is determined by journalistic reliance on police accounts of incidents involving a racially defined ‘problem group’ as evidence of the predispositions of this group within a wider narrative of worsening gang crime. The racialising premises established by police are retained even in subsequent coverage framed by the problematic of ‘integration’. Despite racism being identified and named in the course of reporting, it remains subsumed under the weight of frames which assume that the problem lies essentially with the ‘problem group’.

Keywords: racism; refugees; media; youth; police; violence

We are in the grip of a violence epidemic, fuelled by four persistent factors: alcohol, groups of young males, illegal weapons and, increasingly, cultural differences involving immigrant youths. (A stab in the darkness, 2007)

This is the conclusion reached by the Melbourne tabloid Herald-Sun after two months of heavy reporting focused on groups of young men most often profiled as African or Sudanese. This thesis is purportedly demonstrated foremost by three violent incidents. On Wednesday 26 September 2007 Liep Gony, a 19-year-old student who came to Australia from Sudan in 1999, was bashed at a train station in the Melbourne suburb of Noble Park. He died 24 hours later from his injuries and two ‘white’ men were subsequently charged with his murder. On the day before his funeral, another refugee from Sudan, Ajang Gor, was bashed in the suburb of Melton, and his family sent racist text messages on his stolen mobile phone. On 29 November, in a third Melbourne suburb, police made violent arrests at a housing estate, describing the event as ‘a riot’ provoked by ‘African youths’.

From late September to early December 2007, ‘African youth’ were consequently the object of intense media attention in Australia. Reporting took on an explicitly political dimension after the Minister for Immigration commented on Liep Gony’s murder that some groups ‘don’t seem to be settling and adjusting into the Australian life as quickly as we would hope’ (Topsfield & Rood, 2007). This ‘failure to integrate’ was given as

*Email: joel.windle@education.monash.edu.au
justification for a cut in the number of humanitarian visas allocated to Africans from 70% to 30% (Topsfield, 2007, p. 2).

I argue here that the incidents involving African refugees and surrounding attention reveal the adaptation of pre-existing institutional racism and racialising narrative frames to a new target in Australia. The reception of the incidents is somewhat distinctive, coming in the context of an election campaign in which the incumbent government, struggling in the polls, had previously drawn electoral gain from ‘dog whistle’ politics in similar circumstances.

The processes of racialisation which I identify here are shaped by previous episodes of intensive racialisation. The framing of the incidents resonates strongly with that established by the ‘Tampa Crisis’ of 2001, and ‘children overboard’ affair, in which the government used the plight of refugees attempting to reach Australia to play on xenophobic fears and win that year’s Federal election (Gale, 2004). It also resonates with anti-Muslim and anti-Arab/Lebanese sentiment in its focus on young men constituted as ‘ethnic crime gangs’ identified by appearance (Anti-Discrimination Board of New South Wales, 2003; Collins, 2000). This racism is felt widely within the targeted populations (Poynting & Noble, 2004), with the relationship between vilification and persecution most visible in the Cronulla Riots of 2005 (Poynting, 2006).

The recognition of racialisation in earlier episodes has led to a heightened wariness amongst journalists of politicisation of the race, and indeed overt attempts at political mobilisation found limited resonance in the electorate. Nevertheless, the premise that it is something about the ‘problem group’ which needs to be addressed overshadows the racism evident both in the incidents themselves and in the way they characterised, even in ‘sympathetic’ accounts. The media thereby construct what has been termed a mediatised or mediated public crisis (Cottle, 2004, p. 2; McCallum, 2007, p. 1).

**Refugees in Australia**

The Australian government currently has a target of 13,000 new arrivals per year through its humanitarian program. In 2005/2006 grants to people from Africa comprised 55.65% of this intake; grants to people from the Middle East and South West Asia comprised 33.98%; and grants to people from the Asia/Pacific region comprised 9.88% (Australian Government, 2007).

Refugees from Africa began forming an important part of Australia’s humanitarian entry program from the end of the 1990s, but still make up less than 1% of the population. This intake has been drawn from linguistically and ethnically diverse populations, primarily from the Horn of Africa, but also from countries in West Africa. As the largest number come from Sudan, ‘Sudanese’ is often used to cover all ‘black’ refugees. As we shall see below, in media representations refugees from Africa are often presented as being members of a single community, with no ethnic or linguistic boundaries recognised and nation often standing for ‘race’. However Sudan, to take one example, counts over 600 ethnic groups and 400 languages (Levinson, 1998, p. 170). These groups have a complex history and encompass wide-ranging cultural and religious differences, as well as economic and social distinctions (Levinson, 1998, pp. 170–172). The projection of ‘orientalist’ fantasies (Said, 1995) on a heterogeneous African population primarily on the basis of appearance is made possible by ignorance of such distinctions.
Approach

Racialisation is understood here as ‘the cultural or political processes or situations where race is involved as an explanation or a means of understanding’ (Murji & Solomos, 2005, p. 11). The type of racism generated by the processes of racialisation examined here are an example of the ‘new’ racism predicated on cultural rather than biological attributes (Barker, 1981).

My approach has been influenced by previous work in the critical discourse analysis tradition of van Dijk (1992, 1993, 1997) and Fairclough (1995, 2001) which has shown how racist and xenophobic discourses function as tools of social power. In this paper I will discuss media portrayals in terms of ‘frames’, by which I mean the construction of narratives through the selection, ordering and manipulation of perspectives and experiences to produce a particular ideological meaning (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992; Gitlin, 2003; Iyengar, 1991; Kendall, 2005; Norris, Just, & Kern, 2003). The intense concentration of media attention on associating an ethnic minority population with violence constitutes the pursuit of a political agenda through the construction of a ‘mediatised public crisis’ (Cottle, 2004, p. 2). This concept has recently been profitably used to understand media framing associating violence with Indigenous Australians, particularly by the Fairfax press, over the period from 2000 to 2006 (McCallum, 2007).

Framing is narrowed not only by the ‘moral panic’ (Cohen, 1972; Critcher, 2003) generated by the suggestion of crisis, but by the concentration of media ownership (Bagdikian, 2000), which in the case examined here leaves only two companies producing daily newspapers (Fairfax and News Limited). Research by Deuze (2007) suggests that changing professional practices in journalism, such as frequent rotations and interlinking of news institutions (p. 151), may increase reliance on ‘professional’ sources in the development of a coherent narrative, even as ‘new’ media forms open access to a wider range of voices. Coverage by Fairfax papers in particular may be viewed as an extension of the political agenda pursued in the ‘mediated public crisis’ generated around Indigenous ‘violence’ documented by McCallum.

Articles from the Herald-Sun, The Australian (both News Limited) and The Age (Fairfax) appearing from 26 September 2007, when Gony was bashed, to 3 December 2007, when attention subsided, have been included in the analysis. A total of 222 news and opinion articles published over the period were identified using the ‘Factiva’ data-base.

The central role of the police

The work of framing is dependent not just on the formal qualities of news articles and the conditions of their reception, but on the conditions of their production. The reliance of journalists on particular ‘beats’ on regular institutional sources, such as the police, as a matter of both efficiency and routine (Gans, 2004; Sigal, 1973), has a powerful structuring effect on media frames. The ‘local talk’ (McCallum, 2005) of police, although it may be expressed in particular ways in the presence of journalists, plays a powerful double role in constituting public opinion. It is transformed from the ‘localised’ public opinion grounded in discussion of experience and media consumption into mediated public opinion, often covertly, through the offices of journalists on crime beats. The same forces of police organisational culture which influence individual police officers are relayed far beyond their originating contexts by virtue of this symbiotic relationship.
In this case, newspapers develop a commitment to racialising narratives of urban decay and violence presented by police, and then prioritise stories which appear to fit in to this narrative. Internationally, the role of the police in processes of racialisation has been well established since Stuart Hall’s seminal *Policing the Crisis* (1978). It is evident in the widespread and routine harassment and identity checks carried out on visible minorities by police (Chan & Mirchandani, 2002; Holdaway, 1996; Poynting, 2001), with institutional police racism in Australia brought to greatest focus in recent times through the inquiry into Aboriginal deaths in custody (Johnston, 1991).

Police racism towards African refugees in Australia has also begun to be documented. An internal police report leaked to the press during the events analysed here made adverse findings in relation to complaints made by young African men of harassment, assault and racial abuse (Porter, 2007, p. 5). Recent research in Melbourne on refugee youth aged 12–20 (85% of whom were born in Africa) has also reported that half of males and a fifth of females were stopped and questioned by police in the first two years of settlement (Refugee Health Research Centre, 2007). Comments from participants in the study reveal resentment of racial profiling:

> A police car pulls over and they’re like ‘are you guys a gang or something?’ ‘No we’re just friends, we’re walking’... Just a group of kids walking together doesn’t mean they’re a gang! (Ethiopian male, 15 years old, in Refugee Health Research Centre, 2007, p. 2)

As police are given the first and greatest authority to name and define the crimes they are called to, it is unsurprising that it is their labels and descriptions which are taken up and remain affixed through subsequent reporting. At the outset of media attention instigated by the bashing of Liep Gony, reports focus on the story that ‘ethnic gang violence has erupted on suburban Melbourne streets’, with extensively quoted ‘local officers’, complaining that ‘they [the Sudanese] walk around in packs’ (Kerbaj, 2007b, p. 8). Police are backed up by anonymous ‘residents’ in the characterisation of Sudanese as having a ‘gang mentality’ resulting in ‘ugly clashes with other migrant groups’. The bashing of Gony is primarily newsworthy initially due to the incorrect assumption that it is a ‘savage gang-related attack’. The implications of the labelling so freely used in this reporting, which point to the working hypothesis used by police in approaching any incidents involving ‘problem groups’, are discussed in the next section.

**Defining a problem group**

Definition of a racialised ‘problem group’ is achieved here most obviously through ‘over-lexicalisation’ (Teo, 2000): the density of epithets relating to racial, age, collective and migration attributes (see Table 1). At least one descriptor from all four categories is used in every article reviewed in relation to the ‘problem group’, in addition to the specification that it is ‘men’ who are the problem. Moral qualities more rarely appear as labels (column 6), but rather are conveyed through more elaborate means analysed further in the next section. Even when identification is suppressed in court proceedings, race may explicitly excluded, as in the case of a magistrate’s ruling that ‘I don’t think his name should be mentioned, only that he is Sudanese and he comes from the Dandenong area’ (Roberts, Anderson, & Sikora, 2007, p. 4).

While Africans may be residents of a given suburb, they are rarely described as locals. Geographically, the suburbs where migrants live are portrayed as besieged by outsiders and cut off from the city. They are ‘no-go zones’ (Mitchell, 2007, p. 25), ‘African, Asian and Polynesian strongholds’, ‘hotspots’ and ‘hotbeds’ for ‘youth violence
and ethnic tensions’ (Lloyd-McDonald, 2007, p. 3). This identification lost territory and invasion is emphasised by references to an idyllic past time. A ‘75-year-old widow’, who is a ‘local’, laments that before the invasion, ‘the area used to be “lovely”’ (Crawford, 2007, p. 4).

The descriptors in Table 1 all stand in for appearance in some way, as it is appearance which primarily forms the basis for profiling. This is recognised by those who are subjected to profiling: ‘We are black and we stand out, so we are targets’, a ‘rake-thin Sudanese youth’ is quoted as observing (Franklin, 2007a). Note in the above extract that ‘race’ is by build by the reporter. African sources are constantly objectified and racialised through such references to build (‘skinny’ and ‘tall’) and demeanour (‘defiant’, ‘swaggering’). Farouque and Cook report of Noble Park that ‘their skin tone, height and clothing and a certain defiant attitude make these Sudanese-born youths stand out’ (Farouque & Cooke, 2007, p. 3). Height in particular is frequently evoked in relation to the Sudanese, with a man appearing in court unusually described as ‘the 188cm teenager’ (Roberts et al., 2007, p. 4). In the articles reviewed, height is never used to describe any other non-African individual or group referred to.

Commonly, the ‘over-lexicalised’ ‘problem group’ is counterposed with ‘locals’ or ‘residents’, who are implicitly white (Table 2). These ‘deracialised’ individuals tend to be identified only by profession and individual age. When reports emerged of arrests made in relation to the bashing of Liep Gony (associated with at least 4 of the descriptors in Table 1 per article), those arrested are described first as ‘three people’ (Bashing arrests, 2007, p. 7). They are given exact ages (22, 19, 17), and reference is not made to their youth. They are ‘two men and a woman’, not youths or teenagers or migrants or of any particular background (Bashing arrests, 2007, p. 7). On the following day, it is revealed that ‘Mr Gony’s alleged attackers were not African’, and the suspects aged over 18 are named (Farouque, Petrie, & Miletic, 2007, p. 2). By 6 October, the ‘race’ of the attackers is finally made explicit: ‘three white people have been charged over the incident’ (Farouque & Cooke, 2007, p. 3). Even though deracialised figures by definition are bereft of racial attributes, here they are added for clarification that they are not part of the ‘problem group’.

Police are defined more simply yet by rank. Only once is a police officer racially profiled; when the ‘irony’ of a ‘Sri Lankan-born detective’ asking ‘raucous Sudanese’ to disperse is pointed out (Bolt, 2007b). The irony lies, presumably, in the fact that this officer is not white, and so does not fit the deracialised profile of the ‘normal’ police officer.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Racial attributes</th>
<th>Collective attributes</th>
<th>Age attributes</th>
<th>Migration attributes</th>
<th>Locality</th>
<th>Moral qualities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African</td>
<td>a mob</td>
<td>youth(s)</td>
<td>refugees</td>
<td>residents</td>
<td>delinquent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘North African’</td>
<td>packs</td>
<td>kids</td>
<td>immigrants</td>
<td>residents</td>
<td>lawless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of African descent</td>
<td>a gang</td>
<td>children</td>
<td>migrants</td>
<td>migrants</td>
<td>thugs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>gangs</td>
<td>under-age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>offenders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudanese</td>
<td>a group</td>
<td>teenagers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Sudanese-born’</td>
<td>community</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Articles appearing in Melbourne, September 26–December 3, 2007.
Fleshing out the portrait

A culture of violence

Over-lexicalisation is supported by more elaborate racialising strategies in the opening frame. These are in the tradition of portrayals of ‘the Oriental’ as ‘irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, “different”’, while ‘the European is rational, virtuous, mature, “normal”’ (Said, 1995, p. 40). It is more comforting in the present context to see Africans as inherently prone to conflict rather than appreciating conflicts in Africa and the Middle-East as consequences of colonial territorial division and post-colonial trade in influence and resource control. The violence seems to demonstrate that it is foreigners who cause wars, and that violent proclivities may be observed even amongst those who are displaced by them. This amounts to a denial of colonial legacies and neo-colonial relations which tie ‘civilised’ nations like Australia to the corruption, conflict and political instability which characterises the global economic system (Castles, 2003; Otunnu, 2002).

Police lead the charge with folk theories of a ‘culture of violence’, for which the labels presented in the previous section are shorthand. Assistant Commissioner Paul Evans claim that investigators are ‘dealing with refugees who had come from a culture of boy soldiers and social violence’ (Evans, 2007b, p. 3). Elsewhere the commissioner explains ‘this is a cultural thing. A lot of these people are brought up as warriors in their own country’ (Mitchell, 2007, p. 25). Police are reportedly fearful ‘of the emergence of militant street gangs of young African refugees who have served in militia groups in their war-ravaged homelands’ (Kerbaj, 2007a, p. 8). This fantasy is relayed by columnists. Andrew Bolt in the Herald-Sun claims that ‘Sudanese men come from a warlike culture and arc up more quickly than most when in a group’ (2007b, p. 34), while Neil Mitchell in the same newspaper suggests an animal quality with his evocation of ‘groups of young men hunting in packs’ (2007, p. 25).

Witnesses from this ‘culture of violence’ lack credibility in disputing police versions. Their accounts are frequently portrayed as ‘claims’ and police accounts as ‘descriptions’. Countering the police description of a riot of 100 ‘African youths, a reporter cites an African source thus: “It was 15 people”, swore a black man whose cheeks bore scars of tribal initiation’ (Franklin, 2007b, p. 5). Further in the same article, the lack of credibility of Africans is further demonstrated by failure to speak in English:

Two women, short, stout and swathed in multi-coloured robes, stepped before one of the TV crews and yelled a blue streak, fists pumping and faces contorted with fury. Trouble was, there wasn’t a word of it in English and while they generated some first rate footage, no one black,
white or blue was any the wiser. That was par for the course. Yesterday in Flemington nothing made any sense at all. (Franklin, 2007b, p. 5)

The saliency of race is emphasised through the anonymity of these incomprehensible individuals, who are legible only through the peculiarities of their physical appearance.

**Dangerous youth**

The framing of the ‘problem group’ as ‘youth gangs’ fits in with wider moral panics about juvenile delinquency (pertaining to crime, sexuality and drug use) and the decline of traditional standards and parental authority. Youth is so hyper-emphasised that one reporter describes ‘a young Sudanese youth’ (Grattan, 2007, p. 7).

The good-migrants/bad-migrants opposition identified in earlier research (van Dijk, 1992, pp. 131–132) here emerges primarily as a generational one. The first generation, with traditional culture intact, is ‘good’, while the youth run amok. A police source explains that ‘the elders in the community are very good people but they have trouble controlling some of the young kids’ (Farouque & Cooke, 2007, p. 3). The officer goes on to clarify that the problem is not with black African culture, as many others claim, but only with corrupting black American culture: ‘They’re not mimicking the traditional Sudanese culture, they’re mimicking the African-American culture, and it does cause problems down there’ (Farouque & Cooke, 2007, p. 3). Similarly, a *Herald-Sun* editorial reports concern from ‘Sudanese community leaders’ ‘over a breakdown in traditional family discipline when youths leave home at 16 and embrace American rap culture’ (A problem with settling, 2007, p. 24). The alien and corrupting influence of ‘black’ America is further emphasised in the claim, drawing on the testimony of Commissioner Evans, that ‘Noble Park is in police lockdown as Los Angeles-style gangs of young Sudanese and Pacific Islander migrants roam streets and train stations looking for trouble’ (Anderson, 2007b, p. 8).

The story of the degeneracy of Sudanese youth can also revert to the story of the degeneracy of ‘under-parented’ youth more widely. Andrew Bolt writes ‘seems the Sudanese who belted the policeman have assimilated only too well in our increasingly boozy, brawling culture – an increasingly brutalising culture, which is our real problem’ (2007b, p. 34). The ‘problem’ may be thus be explained as resulting in a breakdown of traditional social structures across generations. This generational concern ties with the centrality of the nuclear, patriarchal family, rather than simply the white race, as the core of Australian national self-definition (De Lepervanche, 1988, p. 84). A threat to the nation is understood as a disturbance to the ‘traditional’ family way of life. Often arriving alone or with their mothers only, refugee youth appear to be particularly vulnerable as members of incomplete and fractured family units already seen as morally suspect and harbouring the seeds of social destruction.

**Exposing and concealing racism**

**Accusations of racism**

The construction of the racialised ‘problem group’ outlined by police, relayed by the media and played with by politicians, is met with resistance from the outset. By 11 October, in the midst of Liep Gony’s funeral and the explicitly racist bashing of Ajang Gor, reports were full of community demands for an apology from Minister Andrews. An editorial in *The Age* asked of the Government’s decision to halt the intake of refugees from Africa ‘are its
reasons justifiable or are they designed, in the face of an election, to arouse a predictably base reaction from those sensitive to immigration on racial grounds?’ (No Africans allowed, 2007, p. 14).

Criticisms of police also became sharper after reports of a ‘riot’ between ‘north African residents of Flemington’ and police were challenged. Police accounts were quickly disputed by other witnesses, and significantly given the doubt accorded ‘African’ witnesses’ accounts, they were contradicted by a ‘white’ restaurant owner (Anderson & Dowsley, 2007, p. 5). Scrutiny was boosted by the advocacy of a local Community Legal Centre, whose lawyer named police prejudice as ‘the problem’ and complained that ‘the youth are heavily targeted and under constant police surveillance’ (Farouque, 2007, p. 6).

While accusations of racism increased across the period of the reporting analysed, admissions of racial profiling can be found even in the initial report on Liep Gony’s bashing with a police multicultural liaison officer revealing that police often mistake groups of people who appear Sudanese for gangs (Kerbaj, 2007b, p. 8). Despite persistent claims of racism from some quarters, media coverage remains framed in terms which keep focus on the ‘problem’ group.

In a climate in which overt expressions of racism are almost universally condemned, racialising discourses hide behind liberal declarations and intentions, as well as explicit denials of racism (van Dijk, 1992). One response to accusations, or potential accusations of racism is to reassert that the singling out of ‘Africans’ is not the result of any prejudice, but is merely reflective of objective reality. A second response consists of identifying the problem not with the isolated racial predispositions of African refugees, but rather with their difficult encounter with a group which possesses another set of racial dispositions: ‘Australians’. I will outline each response in turn.

The ‘objective reality’ strategy

The claim that police are not racist, merely appraised of a reality, is most obvious in the distinctions drawn between the official comments provided by force command and ‘on-the-street police’ (Mitchell, 2007, p. 25) whose often anonymous claims hold greater authority. Police on the ground are characterised as not being ‘racist rednecks’ but ‘people in the middle’, dealing with a reality of violence (Mitchell, 2007, p. 25). Supporting a ban on African immigration, Mitchell comments ‘that is not racist. It is right’ (2007, p. 25). He cites without query a transit police officer who claims that ‘Ninety-nine per cent of our assaults, robberies and armed robberies involve the Sudanese’ (2007, p. 25). Meanwhile, throwing doubt on force command, Cooke writes in The Age:

The reality for those at the coalface, however, might be slightly different, and it is believed some police have expressed frustration at having to parrot the line that there is ‘no problem’ with African youth. (Cooke, 2007, p. 4)

Here, ‘police on the ground’ act as the ‘moral license’ (Poynting, 2006, p. 88) for both political vilification and for racist abuse by self-appointed vigilantes. The Immigration Minister, for example, relied on concerns expressed to him by ‘police on the ground’ about ‘a serious Sudanese gang problem’ to defend his view that Africans are ‘not integrating’ (Kerbaj, 2007b, p. 3).

The strategy of claiming objective reality may be further reduced to claiming to be relaying genuine concerns. Minister Andrews protested at suggestions that he should apologise for racist comments saying ‘I’m not proposing to apologise for saying what people are concerned about’ (Lunn & Davis, 2007, p. 9). Expressed as genuine concerns,
racism appears to be more acceptable, to be something else. Commenting on the distribution of leaflets which claim that many Africans ‘come from child militia groups that train them to rape, kill and torture from as young as six’, Inspector Nigel Howard offers his understanding to ‘locals’: ‘People have had enough of it [“incidents involving Africans”]. Why are they (the Africans) behaving like this? What’s causing the problem? We have to get to the bottom of it’ (Swartz, 2007, p. 8). These genuine concerns are acceptable because, according to the Herald-Sun, in handling ‘complex tensions’, the first level of responsibility ‘lies with the newcomers to fit in with the society that offers them the chance of a new life’ (Multicultural undercurrents, 2007).

While denying racism, ‘police on the ground’ and journalists eagerly insist that there is a ‘race problem’, legitimating the idea of race as a real and legitimate analytical category by mistaking all social relations for ‘race relations’ (Small, 1994). Violence is described as ‘ethnic-related’ and ‘race-based’ (Anderson, 2007a). The Age header for its reporting on the day of Liep Gony’s funeral reads ‘Race Tension’. Commentator Neil Mitchell concludes that ‘It is a significant and ugly step to ban refugees on race, but that is what is being done because the problems are racially based’ (2007, p. 25).

Giroux notes that as ‘racism is rationalised and represented as simply an act of individual discrimination or prejudice . . . fear and anxiety do not translate into a vigilant concern about the existing status of democracy or the public good but are reduced to heightened demands for protection from others’ (Giroux, 2006, pp. 4–5). This type of fear is reflected in the police response to Liep Gony’s murder. Despite having ‘white’ suspects, arrested interstate, in hand, police report to journalists that they are planning wider retaliation in the form of ‘a hard response to the packs of youths who roamed the area near the crime scene’, including the use of police dogs (Evans, 2007a, p. 3). According to Anderson, they have ‘vowed to clamp down on gang activity in the area’ in order to defer violence ‘within the community of youth North Africans and Pacific islanders (Anderson, 2007a, p. 15). Police drew sympathy from the Immigration Minister when they met a hostile response while attempting to ‘disperse’ people who had been attending Liep Gony’s wake (Roberts et al., 2007, p. 4).

The discreet racism of ‘integration’

After Minister Kevin Andrews made his announcement that the quota of refugee places allocated to Africa had been cut because of their difficulties in ‘settling in’, reporting turned increasingly to the broader question of integration, drawing on quotes from politicians, public figures, and community representatives. This framing is accepted in the Labor opposition’s response, with its spokesman Tony Burke, suggesting that individual capacity to integrate rather than collective capacity to integrate should be considered in visa applications (Packham, Whinnett, & Anderson, 2007, p. 1). Identification of an ‘integration issue is also made by a police multicultural liaison officer who argues that ‘the Sudanese are going through an adjustment phase’ (Kerbaj, 2007a, p. 8).

Tilbury has shown that even positive portrayals of refugees can reinscribe a racialising us/them divide (Tilbury, 2004). According to Tilbury, writers who emphasise that ‘they’ are just ‘like us’, and making every effort to become more ‘like us’, celebrate an implied monocultural Australian ‘us’. Refugees should be accepted, according to this discourse, because they are dedicated to becoming ‘normal’ by joining the white Australian nationalist fantasy (Hage, 1998). The front page of The Age on October 4 read ‘African Refugees: While Kevin Andrews doubts their ability to integrate, happy migrants tell it differently’, over a colour
photo of Nywl Madut, quoted as saying ‘I have been here five years now, and I don’t think of myself as African’.

This framing tends to cast the dominant in-group as generous and virtuous, and the minority group as implicitly lacking in some what (van Dijk, 1993, 1997). Herald-Sun commentator Andrew Bolt defends protests at suggestions of racism with the claim that ‘we’re a generous people, really’ (2007a, p. 28). Meanwhile, the police union secretary suggests that Africans ‘really have to be educated about Australian society’s standards’ (Mitchell, 2007, p. 25). The identification of violence in Africa as cultural, and of ‘Australian culture’ as peaceful’ is evident in Mitchell’s argument that we should ‘help these people settle into a different and more peaceful culture’ (2007, p. 25). The Workforce Participation Minister indirectly celebrates the exceptional work ethic of Australia: ‘we’ve had young male Sudanese, in particular, who need help . . . understanding the work culture of Australia’ (Karvelas, 2007, p. 6).

In addition to political representatives, deracialised ‘locals’ also appear to represent Australia as a fantasy paradise when they are called upon to offer opinions on the level of integration of refugees. A Mrs Hargreaves is quoted as saying ‘I don’t mind that they’re here, as long as they learn to live like Australians’ (Crawford, 2007, p. 5) while a bottle shop owner complains that ‘they choose not to adapt to the Australian way of life and more annoying they do not like to abide by our laws’ (Mitchell, 2007, p. 25).

Just as ‘locals’ may speak for all Australians, those identified as ‘African’ or ‘Sudanese’ must make the collective defence ‘we are not violent’ (Crawford, 2007; Jean, 2007, p. 5). Community leader Martin Johnson even offers apologies for the ‘young Sudanese’, which is cast as a collective racial responsibility: ‘we are sorry for what our kids have been doing and sorry for what has been happening to the community in Australia’ (Mitchell, 2007, p. 25).

While the framing of integration often diverts attention from racism by concentrating attention on the terrain of cultural difference, a variation on this theme emphasises social integration and material difficulties. While the material circumstances of African refugees are indeed difficult, an exclusive focus on service provision and welfare needs continues to locate the ‘problems’ of refugees with the refugees themselves and as external to Australian society. An alternative explanation is proffered as to why Africans are so troublesome: ‘the Sudanese’ ‘come from a very poor and tribal culture a world away from ours’ (Bolt, 2007a, p. 28). Poverty, race and crime are caught up in Bolt’s concern that ‘gangs of all kinds have formed in our shabbier streets, filled by children from broken families, bad schools, soured cultures and homes toxic with welfare, listlessness, violence, drugs and drink’ (2007b, p. 35). Citing official reports of violence on public transport involving ‘Maoris fighting Sudanese youths’, Neil Mitchell writes in the Herald-Sun ‘This is a shameful city-wide log that reveals an under-class of disaffection, violence and a lack of respect for authority or individual rights’ (2008).

The disassociation of crime from ‘Australianness’ and its association with Africans and other ‘outgroups’ who need to ‘integrate’ is further in evidence in the selective silences of the Immigration Minister. When Ajang Gor was bashed and robbed and his family sent racist text messages on his stolen phone by ‘three white men’ (Buttler, 2007, p. 4), the Minister’s office would only comment that ‘it’s probably best to let the police conduct their investigation into what has occurred’ (Oakes & Cooke, 2007, p. 8). The next day he labelled the assault of a police officer by ‘a group of Sudanese youths’ ‘un-Australian’ (Lunn & Davis, 2007, p. 9), observing that ‘violence is not a part of the peacefulness and the tolerance which has been very much a value of the Australian way of life’ (Lunn & Davis, 2007, p. 9). Andrews is not alone in this double standard. The Victorian Premier
condemned an African ‘mob’ involved in a confrontation with police as ‘not part of the civilised way of life that we expect from our state, and Australians more generally’ (Anderson & Dowsley, 2007, p. 5). He is not reported as commenting on the ‘claims’ of police harassment and arrests based on race, nor on the bruises on those arrested in the confrontation after their release from custody.

The fantasy of two distinctive cultural and social entities requiring reconciliation has consequences for police responses beyond the intensification of racially profiling surveillance. Police ‘operation Square’ has been set up to reduce crime through discussions between police delegates and ‘African leaders’ (Anderson, 2007c), casting misunderstanding and miscommunication rather than racism as the source of problems. Through meetings with ‘leaders’, responsibility for social control may be delegated, at least symbolically, to individuals who are part of the troubled racial entity. Police may, in this framing, legitimately lay the blame on the delegates of the community for its failures, and do not hesitate to criticise the failure of community leaders to ‘address the problems in a “small group”’ (Farouque, 2007, p. 6). Such a criticism is predicated on the existence of a unified racial entity and which may be addressed through delegated individuals and establishes this entity as bearing wide-ranging collective responsibility for particular incidents and even for police suspicions.

Conclusion

Despite the incidents triggering attention being primarily attacks on African refugees, including by police, the ‘problem’ is cast with the victims. We find two main framings of ‘the problem’. The most immediate of these references ethnic-youth-gang-conflict. This conflict is held to be generated by visible minority groups, whose proclivities justify assuming that all events in which they are involved may be explained by their racial attributes. A wider framing of ‘the problem encompasses as its causes the difficulties of integration.

The various characterisations of ‘the problem’ imply differing solutions. Where the problem is one of integration and cultural misunderstanding, greater efforts at assimilation and communication are required. When material difficulties are highlighted, increased welfare support is called for.

Racialisation of African refugees in the Australian media appears to find its proximate source in the activation of race as an explanatory category amongst police, giving license to a xenophobic minority. This activation draws on the history of racism in Australia, on wider colonial narratives about primitive Africa, on the perennial discourse of dangerous youth, and even on fears about American cultural imperialism (in the form of black ‘gang culture’). As with Indigenous Australians, the dominant frame is one of underlying societal risk (McCallum, 2007).

The organisation of news production creates here a particular lens which tends to squash events into similar kinds of story. Wider social dynamics of racism prefigure these framings and the dominant perspectives of police are the prime condition of existing frames. The attitudes and perspectives of politicians, though not shaped by the same experiences and with a greater eye to the reception and resonance of their contributions, are also influential in this process. Awareness of process of racialisation amongst journalists and sources who contribute to this cycle does not appear to be able to break the pattern and suggests that the power of dominant police perspectives is relatively undiminished by subsequent anti-racist impulses in reporting.
References


Bolt, A. (2007b, October 12). It's time we got a grip. Herald-Sun, p. 34.
Franklin, R. (2007a, October 4). This was no place to die. Light at tunnel’s end snuffed out. Herald-Sun, p. 31.


