Vietnamese Australian Police Officers: Social Judgements and Identity Constructions by Other Officers

Introduction
The paper explores the construction of identities of police officers with Vietnamese Australian heritage by three types of Anglo officers – advocates, antagonists and ambivalent officers. The idea of cultural fix-points is utilised to investigate how conflict, bias and loyalty affect group identity constructions. The paper draws on data from the four-year ARC Linkage Project: *Exploring the experience of security in the Australian Vietnamese community: practical implications for policing* which commenced in July 2008 and concluded in 2011. The paper is based on 54 interviews with Anglo police officers in three Police Service Areas in Melbourne. The paper investigates the motivations and processes that lead to the ascription of particular identities to Vietnamese Australian officers by Anglo officers. The paper concludes with some implications for practice.

Identities
Two landmark and persisting theories on identity are social identity theory (Tajfel 1978) and identity theory (Stryker & Macke 1978). Social identity theory, the socio-psychological model developed by Henri Tajfel (1978; Tajfel & Turner 1979), theorises group behaviour, but also links individual behaviours to the group identity (Deaux 2000: 9). Identity theory, grounded in sociology, explores individuals’ role-related identities. In this study, social identity theory is utilised as the research involves the categorisations and perceptions that shape how Anglo officers construct the ethnic identities of Vietnamese Australian officers.

Social identity is defined as:

That part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from the knowledge of membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership (Tajfel 1978b: 63).

Social identity theory cautions that ingroup behaviours do not necessarily align with material or other advantages as some studies show that they may lead to a forfeiting of gains (Tajfel 1978). It proposes that categorisation processes and motivational
drivers explain intergroup behaviour (Turner et al. 1987). The motivational driver is a self-categorisation process whereby individuals achieve social coherence and self-enhancement through group membership (Tajfel 1981; Tajfel & Turner 1979). Social identity theory claims that the internalisation of group ideas explains intergroup ‘prejudice, social judgements, conflict, rewards, linguistic behaviours and cooperation’ (Deaux 2000: 9).


**Categorisations and stereotypes**

It is well established that categorisation is driven by the need to simplify complex information (Tajfel 1981). Group identity arises from categorisations that distinguish members of the group from others by attributes, experiences or labels (Brewer 2000: 119). The categorising of other groups involves a parallel process of self-categorisation that is dependent on whether one acts from an individual or group stance (Stangor & Lange 1994). Perceptions of threats to the identity of ingroups from competing groups can lead to distortions in the categorisations and result in stereotypical descriptions of groups (Brewer & Gardner 1996; Haslam et al. 1999).

Stereotypes, scholars suggest, are invoked to overcome uncertainty, represent stored knowledge and anticipate behaviours from others (Stangor & Lange 1994). Different scholarship has conceptualised stereotypes as cognitive structures, mental pictures, schemas, prototypes and exemplars (Augoustinos & Innes 1990). Usually stereotypes refer to the characteristics of social groups or individual members of the groups. Stereotypes take on the particular characteristics that differentiate the groups. They are problematic because they are usually negative. Although positive stereotypes exist, they are often viewed as an over-compensatory response to negative stereotypes. The common assumption that stereotypes are inherently inaccurate is contested in some scholarship. A persisting view is that somewhere in the stereotype exists a kernel of truth. Studies suggest that stereotypes should be taken seriously as
they can become self-fulfilling prophecies when left to circulate unchecked (Stangor & Lange 1994). For instance, Jost et al. (2004) found members of stigmatised cultural groups internalised and reinforced status differences.

Motivations are integral to how outgroup members identify and categorise ingroup members. For instance, if an outgroup improves its status or position, it may become a threat to the ingroup and motivate negative categorisations (Deaux 2000: 12). Mummendey et al. (1992) link intergroup social discrimination to differential allocation of resources to groups. Self-categorisation theory suggests that groups strive to attain maximum differentiation from other groups. Improving self-esteem, uncertainty reduction, inclusion and individual identity needs are other motivations for categorising self or other groups (Deaux 2000: 11).

The methodological approach is interpretive and perspectival. The analysis of the semi-structured interviews with 54 Anglo officers is thematic and uses the constant comparative method. The data was coded and analysed in NVivo9 into the key themes in relation to Anglo officers experiences of policing Vietnamese communities and the policing role that could be played by Vietnamese officers. The dimension fix-points in Jensen’s (2003) framework was then applied to the data as an interpretative tool for the study. Four key fix-points or contentious topics that affect intergroup relations and identity constructions were identified: fast-tracking, lowering standards, betrayal and tokenism. A typology of Anglo officer types was developed based on the alignment of Anglo with two variables: valuing pluralism, and valuing Vietnamese Australian police officers. Each Anglo officer type was then analysed by cross referencing the attributes to the key fix-point themes. The categorising processes and ways in which identities were constructed, were analysed for the three types of Anglo respondents.

The paper addresses the question: How do Anglo officers construct the identities of officers with Vietnamese heritage in Victoria Police? Four points of conflict in relations between Anglo officers and Vietnamese Australian officers are analysed to reveal some identity constructions by majority group types for a minority group. The paper identifies some group processes that lead to categorisations and social judgements by the three types of Anglo officers for Vietnamese Australian officers.
Fast-tracking
Anglo officers identified fast-tracking as a major point of conflict in relations with Vietnamese officers. This was described as an unofficial process of moving newly recruited Vietnamese officers into specialist units such as the drug squad, undercover work or translation areas. Officers also referred to the practice as special treatment or favouritism. Complaints about fast-tracking were mentioned by 26% of ambivalent officers, 15% of antagonist officers and 12% of advocate officers.

Advocates described fast-tracking as a loss because it removed Vietnamese Australian officers from general duties. The process of moving Vietnamese officers into specialist roles was viewed as an ill-advised redistribution of a resource. Advocates thought it was understandable that Vietnamese officers were sought after by specialist units and assigned Vietnamese officers an identity of skilled community policing officer. Vietnamese officers specialist skills included speaking Vietnamese, understanding the culture and networking with members of the Vietnamese community. Others expected Vietnamese officers to educate Anglo officers in intercultural skills for policing Vietnamese Australian communities. This kind of strategy is not endorsed in the intercultural literature, as among other reasons, incorporating expertise from one’s cultural background into the job is not part of the job description.

They put them into a field where they’re hidden away and they’re doing other things but they’re not out on the front line helping members, which I think they’re much more beneficial because they educate the uniform members as well as being out in the public eye. IN21

While advocates were more objective in discussing fast-tracking, ambivalent officers expressed their dissatisfaction with the practice as outright favouritism or special treatment. To them, it was a case of Vietnamese officers as the outgroup, being handed affirmative action opportunities not available to the ingroup. Some officers intimated that they were very desirable positions.
So you’ve got the Vietnamese guy that’s running around with the drug squad and doing jobs that these other guys are desperately wanting to get, but they’re not Vietnamese. IN16

One officer presented a different opinion on the desirability of the jobs. Interpretation work particularly translation, the officer suggested, could be very boring.

If these members understood what this work was, that it’s actually quite boring and mundane, then perhaps they wouldn’t be so resentful. IN11

Ambivalent officers tended to generalise all minorities as members of outgroups including ethnic officers, gay officers or those identified by faith. All outgroups, they implied were granted privileges or special treatment.

We’ve got one girl who is an Arabic woman, she joined the police force and went straight to basically proactive policing, that is, going to speak to Arabic women and all that sort of stuff, as opposed to going and joining the police force to be a police person, work the van, do the jobs, go to the assaults, car accidents. IN13

Similarly to advocates, some ambivalent officers blamed fast-tracking for a loss of resources to the ingroup. Unlike advocates, for whom the loss was to community-oriented policing and hence the Vietnamese community, ambivalent officers claimed it as personal disadvantage for them in their day-to-day policing. Ambivalent officers wanted Vietnamese officers on the job as resources for interpreting and accessing information with Vietnamese offenders, suspects or victims, although this expectation defies Victoria Police protocols. One officer made it clear that using Vietnamese officers as on-site interpreters, was more important than placing them on community policing roles.

Well it’s good to engage the community, that’s excellent, but I’d much prefer Vietnamese police people to be in the field, so that I don’t have to worry about legal interpreting services, because I’ve got a policeman who can talk to these people. IN13
The perception that Victoria Police fast-tracks Vietnamese officers into specialist fields was widely held. This can be understood in social identity theory as intergroup rivalries arising out of an unequal distribution of a resource, namely promotion opportunities. A parallel process existed for advocates and ambivalent officers in viewing the Vietnamese officers themselves as a resource, who were taken away from the majority Anglo sub groups, albeit with different expectations and valuing of their roles.

Another common perception among ambivalent officers was that the removal of Vietnamese officers from general duties into specialist units meant that they did not learn the craft of policing. Ambivalent officers commented that Vietnamese Australian officers may not want to be placed in specialist units. Other studies confirm that placing minority members into positions where they can be accused of using their minority status for advancement, may lead to alienation.

My own experience with Vietnamese recruits is, if I join the police force to become a police person, I’d be pissed off if the minute I graduated I was taken away from my squad mates, taken away from the duties that my fellow graduates do, to go and be an interpreter, work in a multicultural unit, be used as a, listening to transcripts, phone taps. IN16

Ambivalent officers constructed ambivalent identities for Vietnamese officers. They were a useful resource; lacking in grass roots policing skills; and objectified as minority status officers with unfair access to privileges.

Antagonists showed outright hostility and resentfulness towards outgroups for their access to specialist positions. Antagonists used negative categorizations against the Vietnamese outgroup that were generalized to all minority outgroups. One antagonist used prejudice to undermine the worthiness of ethnic officers in accessing these privileges.

They can’t even speak the language. They can’t even communicate with people but they don’t realise that they’re probably doing a very good job where they’re at, being utilised for their skills, but that borders on resentment as well. IN11
The unequal distribution of the resources between the Anglo majority officer group and Vietnamese minority officer group was a theme across the three types of Anglo officers. While advocates did not agree with the unequal access to promotion, they maintained a positive construction of Vietnamese officers’ identities. Ambivalent officers felt personally disadvantaged and constructed narrow role identities for Vietnamese officers that diminished their expertise to that of interpreters. Antagonist officers were resentful of what they experienced as unfair favouritism and resorted to bias and prejudice not only for Vietnamese officers, but all minority officers.

**Lowering standards**

Lowering standards was the most subscribed to issue. A total of 18 Anglo officers across all types referred to the issue: 46% of antagonists, 30% of advocates and 30% of ambivalent officers. They claimed that standards were lowered by Vietnamese officers for whom the usual procedures for selection were compromised.

The lowering standards categorisations were based on inferiorisation or devaluation of Vietnamese officers by Anglo groups. The negative categorisations by all three types of Anglo sub groups were based on skill deficits or shorter physical stature. The vast majority of comments devalued Vietnamese officers for a perceived lack of spoken English language skills. Social identity theory suggests that this behaviour by the majority group is driven by threats to status and self-esteem.

Advocates were in two minds about the skills of Vietnamese officers; they valued the skills, but devalued them because of perceived deficits in English-speaking skills. These deficits, officers claimed, were overlooked by Victoria Police in its zealous drive to recruit women and members of minority groups.

I think if you earn it on your own merit, fine, I’ve got no worries. But if you’re part of a campaign, ‘No, we need more girls’. IN19

Ambivalent officers painted narrow deficit identity constructions for Vietnamese officers. They extended the devaluations beyond not just speaking English with competence, to a range of skill shortages. One officer said their marks were lower at
the Academy. Another said outright that they were not of the ‘expected calibre’. The perceived threats to Anglo officers self esteem was shown in their self-glorification of Anglo officers’ successes at the Academy: ‘they scored the highest marks’, were ‘physically fit’ and ‘at the top of the educational tree for intelligence’.

Whether the views of special treatment were fact or fiction was of no consequence, according to one officer. Perceptions are all that matter, and lowering standards is a strongly held perception.

It’s a perception from ground level troops that they get a bit of special treatment from the management on high. Whether it’s true or not is neither here nor there, it’s a perception. IN15

Antagonists were vehement and specific about the negative effects of working with Vietnamese officers who had limited English. Criticisms included that they could not write statements or communicate effectively with colleagues and the public. To remedy the situation, one antagonist recommended spelling tests in the recruitment process. ‘Us’ and ‘them’ categories were used frequently, such as when an officer complained that he could not understand ‘them’ on the radio.

The ones that I’ve encountered, they can’t even string enough English words to put a statement together that reads well. But if I had to work with that person, the frustration would drive you insane. IN11

Antagonists were most threatened by any toleration of what they perceived to be lower standards. One officer implied that these resentments arose because some Anglo officers had to struggle to be accepted into the force. This included doing extra courses such as ‘maths’ or police force preparation courses at TAFEs. Policing for some officers is a status enhancing career, particularly for officers with a working class background (Alex 1973). Through attacks on the identities of Vietnamese officers, antagonists tried to achieve maximum differentiation between themselves and the ethnically identified and inferiorly constructed outgroup.
Trophies
Tokenism or trophy-scoring approaches by senior management was another impediment to good relations, according to six officers (all types). Promotion by senior management of Victoria Police as a multicultural force reinforced an outgroup identity for Vietnamese and other ethnic minority officers. Officers’ dissatisfactions with the process, hinged on unequal distribution of publicity resources that improved the status of minorities in the public domain. One officer said that if you were ‘a Muslim, Vietnamese member or whatever’, they would find themselves on the front of the Annual Report pretty quickly. Another called it a ‘flavour of the month’ approach, mentioning that the first Somalian officer could be the next token. Officers were cynical of practices they considered to be superficial and self-promoting.

And I know the police force is very interested and wanting of different cultures and they’re some of my reasons. whatever reason the big picture has, maybe just make themselves look good on a poster. IN06

Betrayal
Betrayal was a factor that some Anglo officers (six, all types) claimed impacted on trust and relations between the Anglo officer group and the Vietnamese officer group. Anglo officers proposed Vietnamese officers could feel they had betrayed their own communities when they joined Victoria Police. The cause was the historic distrust between police and the Vietnamese community. One advocate commented that joining the force for Vietnamese Australians, particularly in the past, was difficult and a turning against kinship values.

It was like one of his own turning on his own sort of thing. IN23

Trust and loyalty, critical factors to policing colleagues, were potentially threatened if officers were uncertain whose side you were on. Vietnamese Australian officers, it was suggested, had to choose between the two sides. Other studies have shown that uncertainty reduction, an intergroup factor in social identity theory, can be a powerful influence on behaviours. The tensions raised doubt and promoted identity constructions that included subjective judgements on whether the Vietnamese officer would be traitor or loyal supporter.
Conclusion
Anglo officers of all types perceived Vietnamese Australian officers as members of a separate group to which they were assigned by a visible identity. Anglo officers claimed the position of dominant ingroup from which they viewed Vietnamese officers as members of a marginalised outgroup. An exploration of sites of conflict, prejudice or betrayal revealed how Anglo officers portrayed Vietnamese identities in relation to capabilities, symbolic identities such as trophies and subjects of favouritism.

Fast-tracking, also termed special treatment or favouritism, was the most widespread conflict that affected Anglo officers. As fast-tracking significantly affected all types of Anglo officers, this indicated that its causes were common to all types. Social identity theory suggests that unequal distribution of resources to groups, in this case, a position in a specialist policing unit, is a powerful source of intergroup conflict. Lowering standards was another source of conflict that also had strong uptake across all types of Anglo officers. Each type was driven by different motivations and consequently made different types of identity constructions for Vietnamese Australian officers.

While advocates valued Vietnamese Australian officers whom they constructed as skilful officers, they nonetheless held some nagging doubts about their English-speaking skills. On the one hand they set their sights high for Vietnamese Australian officers, but on the other, questioned their capacity. Advocates’ own self-esteem as supporters was on the line if the Vietnamese Australian officers could not deliver the expected policing outcomes. In contrast, ambivalent officers tried to achieve differentiation between themselves and Vietnamese and other minority groups who threatened their self-esteem. They appeared to be driven by motivations of uncertainty reduction. Their status and self-esteem as traditional Anglo officers was under threat from minority groups. Other studies confirm that entering the police force is perceived as an upwardly mobile move by many recruits. Antagonists, often angry and resentful, wanted to achieve maximum differentiation between themselves and Vietnamese and other minorities and senior management. They employed stereotyping and prejudice in categorising all ethnic minorities.
The study suggests that if and when the police force ‘fast tracks’ Vietnamese officers into specialist roles and away from general duties policing, or promotes Vietnamese or other minority officers in their multicultural publicity, the actions are viewed ambivalently at best and negatively by many Anglo officers. This study suggests that policies or practices that can be perceived as an unequal distribution of resources can lead to counterproductive identifications for minority ethnic members in the force.

Bibliography