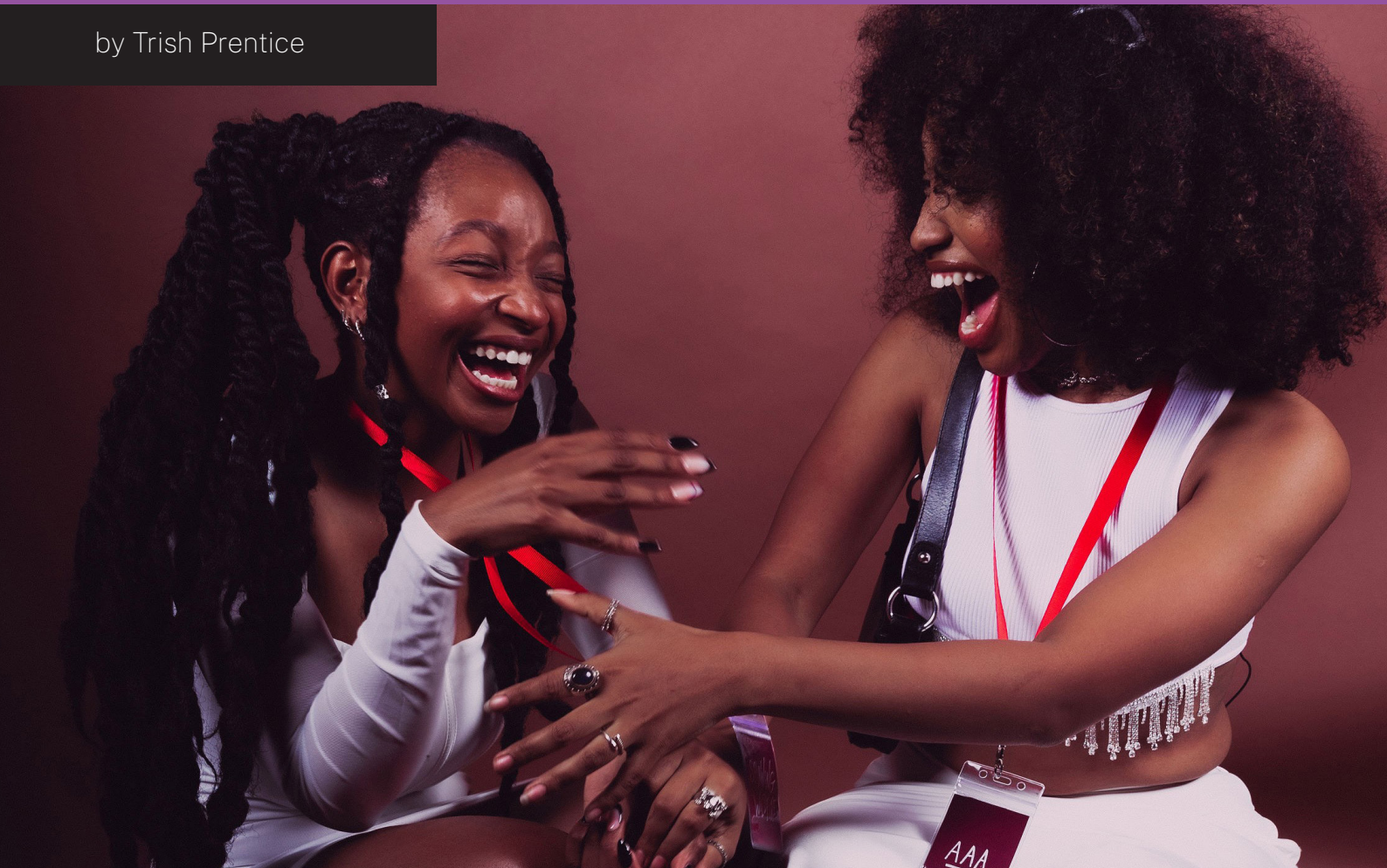SCANLON
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'Why call me that?'

Reflections on labels in a diverse nation

by Trish Prentice

The author

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We have become accustomed to packaging our past and identifying it with labels. Such labels, even where they may include a variety of activity and experience, tend to force interpretations into a single category so that the infinite shades of difference within them disappear...[i]

This essay is about labels. We all wear them and we all use them. We are friend, colleague, member, sister, uncle, mother. These terms describe elements of our identity and position our social relations with others. Labelling is part of human nature.[ii] We take on labels that we believe describe us, or at least the elements of us that we see as prominent or important. Labelling can be critical to affirming our identity, to defining our place in the world. But sometimes labels are placed on us by others, and they may not 'fit' comfortably.

This essay explores the issue of labelling in relation to cultural identity. For many Australians, their cultural background, race and migration history add layers to how they describe themselves and to how others label them. For others, the process of coming to a term or descriptor they feel comfortable with is a journey that involves a deep exploration of their own identity and all its nuances, and their place in the world. Added to this complexity are the labels that are placed on cultural communities by administrative bodies and service providers. Like other labels, these descriptors can have great utility, but also significant limitations.

As the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute describes and studies Australia's social cohesion, it needs to use labels, particularly to describe cultural communities. However, this essay was born from our realisation that the terms we choose to use have limitations, and may not always be the descriptors for those we choose to apply them to.

I write this essay as a visibly white Australian. Although I was not born here, the labels that I have had to navigate, and indeed that define me, are much less complex and fraught than they are for many other Australians.

As Australia becomes ever more diverse, this essay seeks to challenge us to think about how we use labels, and whether we need new ones. How should we describe cultural communities? Should we do it at all? If we continue to use labels, what factors should be considered to ensure they are useful and serve the purpose they are intended to serve?

Most importantly, the essay seeks to elevate the voices of individuals who are central to these discussions and will be vital for moving the conversation forward.

Why do we use labels?

Labels are terms that are used to describe objects, people and relationships. They are constructs, ideas that are used to group people together based on a perceived or held identity. As our brain's processing capacity is inherently limited, labels help us to take mental shortcuts, effectively allowing us to make an inference about something or someone without having to take every piece of information into account. By determining that a person fits into a particular category based on a quick assessment, labels can help to render a complex reality in simpler terms,[iii] enabling us to go beyond our cognitive 'limits.' This is both the strength and weakness of labels. Every time we use one, we are simplifying and reducing the richness of what we're labelling.

Labels help define our social relations. They also put us in groups based on perceived 'sameness' or difference.

For example, there would be no need to describe myself as white or female if everyone in my sphere of reference was white or female. I would look for other ways to claim or assert my sameness with or difference from others. This dynamic occurs in the way we describe our personal qualities, too. If I label myself as intelligent, punctual or hardworking I am both making a claim of what or who I am, and what or who I am not.

Labels can be incredibly powerful. They can determine our behaviour,[iv] connect us to others, and foster a sense of belonging or exclusion. Through labels we can find community [v], or feel excluded from one. They can both open up or close actions and relationships.[vi] Nowhere are labels more complex than when it comes to the issue of cultural identity.

The framing of cultural identity: stories

On the one hand, cultural identities are made up of many elements. A person's race, skin colour, traditions, ancestry, country of birth, language or religion may all form part of a cultural identity, so asserting or claiming a particular identity may mean choosing to emphasise some of these elements over others. On the other hand, cultural identity occurs in a societal context, where labels can be ascribed to a person based on the dominant characteristics of that society, its history, demographics, values or expectations. Individuals from culturally diverse backgrounds inevitably want to both claim their own cultural identity and to respond to the labels and categories that the broader society places upon them.

In Australia, cultural identity is described in a wide variety of ways by individuals, institutions, and society at large. Some labels emphasise a single element, such as ethnicity (Somali, Chinese or Lebanese), race (Black or Asian) or country of birth (Iranian or Burmese). Others emphasise multiple elements, like Asian-Australian, which asserts both ethnicity and citizenship/national identity. Still other labels claim a collective identity, like Person of Colour or migrant, which go beyond a single cultural identifier.

Even more broadly, labels such as 'person from a multicultural background' or 'culturally diverse background' refer to both an individual's cultural identity and how the larger society might place and view them. Sometimes a person's migration history also shapes how they are described.

The following stories seek to show how several individuals have come to a label they believe describes themselves, as well as those labels they have rejected along the way. Their testimonies reveal the tensions individuals have to grapple with, as well as the importance of the power of choice.

Jieh-Yung

Jieh-Yung Lo, founding Director of the Centre for Asian-Australian Leadership at the Australian National University, describes himself as Chinese-Australian. If he had to elaborate, he would say he was ethnically Chinese, has Australian citizenship and identifies as Chinese-Australian or Asian-Australian.

Jieh-Yung was born in Australia in 1985 to Indo-Chinese refugee parents from Vietnam who were proud of their Chinese ethnicity. He was taught Chinese tradition and culture from a young age. While other children were watching Sesame Street, he was encouraged to recite Tang and Song Chinese poetry. As he got older, Jieh-Yung studied Chinese history, read the four classical Chinese novels — Journey to the West, Water Margin, Romance of the Three Kingdoms and Dream of the Red Chamber — and practised the tenets of Confucianism.

He learned to speak Chinese Cantonese and Chinese Mandarin, read and write both traditional and simplified Chinese — unusual for an 'Australian Born Chinese' (ABC). In fact, he was strongly discouraged from speaking English at home, unlike a lot of his 'ABC' peers who forsook their Chinese language, culture and heritage in favour of English.

The strict and deliberate way in which Jieh-Yung's parents bought him up to know and understand his Chinese heritage meant that he always felt a strong connection to China. Yet when visiting China Jieh-Yung was never considered Chinese. In the place where his ancestors had long ago come from, which

he had always taken great pains to understand and connect to, he was considered white. But being ethnically Chinese meant that he wasn't seen as Australian either. Not really fitting anywhere was tough, says Jieh-Yung.

Jieh-Yung adopted the label Chinese-Australian when he was quite young, but as he grew up it didn't always fit comfortably with him. The intermittent pressure to assimilate meant downplaying his Asian identity. He saw others around him reject the term 'Asian,' refuse to speak Chinese, abandon their Chinese name and even dye their hair blonde.

The late 1990s was a tough period for Chinese-Australians — the Hanson era, when Australians were warned about the dangers of "being swamped by Asians,"[vii] and Jieh-Yung felt the pressure to conform by his peers and the wider Australian society. His parents were always very clear about who he was, however, so Jieh-Yung rode the waves of agitation, holding to his parents' certainty about their identity, and therefore his own.

Yet even today, Jieh-Yung sometimes struggles with the label he has chosen. Many Chinese-Australians continue to navigate a cultural divide; trying to maintain their 'Australianness' while also recognising and valuing their unique cultural heritage. Jieh-Yung has often wondered whether by emphasising being Chinese or Asian he is inadvertently downplaying being Australian. Does the hyphen he uses unite his cultural identity or pit one aspect of it against the other? He reflects:

Sometimes I stress myself out wondering whether I'm undermining Australia's multiculturalism and inclusion by doing this [adopting the label of Asian-Australian] but at the same time people are very,

very proud of being labelled as such. I'm certainly very proud of it. I wouldn't call myself any other way.

It used to be a bit controversial because, it's like — 'we're trying to assimilate, we don't want to be referred to as Asian.' Now, it's different, very different. We're not trying to segregate and separate the Asian-Australian community from everybody else. We're just trying to promote our uniqueness, what we can offer to the wider Australian community, but also shine a light on the issues that we are dealing with, because other communities might be dealing with them too.

Jieh-Yung feels great affinity with the broader Asian-Australian community. As more and more individuals adopt that label, there is a growing sense of solidarity amongst those who claim Asian-Australian heritage, centred around a sense of agency that claiming their own identifier has brought them:

"Labels help us to realise who we are. We can be proud, and we can own it."

Some people would argue that the Asian-Australian label is something that non-Asian Australians have labelled us. I disagree. I actually believe that over the last couple of years our community has begun to mobilise, to capture that term and to make it our own. Therefore, when you do that, you're able to build that consensus and that ecosystem, to be able to identify the barriers that we are facing uniquely as Asian-Australians.

Claiming this label has given Asian-Australians confidence at a personal and professional level, not only to articulate the barriers they are facing to full participation in Australian society, but to emphasise the value that a multicultural identity brings to the nation and the region. Jieh-Yung hopes that this confidence and agency will inspire other communities to similarly describe and embrace their cultural identities:

We can be Australian, and we can be Chinese or Indian or Japanese as well. Labels help us to realise who we are. We can be proud, and we can own it.

Wintana and Rahel

Wintana Kidane and Rahel Davies, co-hosts of the Bittersweet podcast, also claim labels that reflect their dual cultural identity.

Wintana describes herself as African Australian. She was born here after her family migrated from Tigray, a northern region of Ethiopia. At home they practise many traditions from their homeland. Orthodox Christmas and Easter are celebrated and family occasions are often centred around sharing

coffee from a jebena, a kind of coffee pot. The ritual involves a quiet moment to catch up, centred around the bittersweet aroma of coffee and family sharing. Wintana even speaks a little Tigrinya, although she admits she understands more than she speaks.

As a self-described black woman, Wintana has had to navigate all the complexity of describing and defining herself within a cultural majority that does not share her skin colour. For a while she adopted the label 'Person of Colour,' a moniker with a long history, both in the United States and Great Britain [viii] (although it is usually associated with the former). The term, which has its recent origins in the women's rights movement of the 1970s in the United States, [ix] has come to depict a statement of solidarity among those with a particular non-white racial or ethnic background. For a while Wintana found that solidarity within a community of different races and ethnicities. However, as she thought more deeply about her identity, just as Bittersweet led her and their audience on a journey of self-discovery, she found the label didn't sit comfortably with her:

So the more we were talking about it, the more I swayed away from using the term Person of Colour, because I feel like Person of Colour means you're either white or you are this... I just don't feel we fit into that category of Person of Colour because even when I'd compare Black people or African people to other ethnic people, we have different experiences. And I think I was using that phrase because it made me feel comfortable at the time to describe myself to a wider, more white audience.

Rahel also gravitated to the label African Australian. Unlike Wintana she was born in Ethiopia, but she was raised by a 'white' family. Though she didn't grow up amongst strong Ethiopian cultural traditions, she found affinity with others who shared a similar racial background.

It took Rahel a while before she became comfortable describing herself as African Australian. There were times when she "pushed aside" her Australian identity, rejecting the society in which she was living because she felt it was rejecting her. There was no place for her, she felt, in the Australian community or society, in Australian life. But finding her own community within the African diaspora of Australia meant that she gradually became more comfortable with her Australian identity.

Like Wintana, Rahel sometimes refers to herself as a Person of Colour, but it's often something they both do to make the person they are speaking to feel comfortable, rather than claiming the label as a reflection of their identity. Wintana explains the dilemma:

It's really interesting to me that Rahel and I both said it's a phrase we use when we're trying to describe ourselves to a wider audience. And it almost comes from a space of making them feel comfortable, of making them understand what we're trying to say.

The newer term BIPOC (Black or Indigenous Person of Colour) adds yet another option to the labels African Australians have to sort through and either claim or reject. Emerging on Twitter in 2013[x], the term foregrounded deeper divides in the United States that rose to prominence in the wake of the shooting death of Trayvon Martin and the acquittal of perpetrator George Zimmerman.[xi] BIPOC explicitly

referenced 'black' and Native American people to account for "voices that hadn't originally been heard." [xii] Those who advocate for use of the acronym argue that the two groups should be highlighted because they have been at the centre of race debates and racism in the US. Since not all 'people of colour' have suffered equally, those who have carried the greatest burden should be referenced first. [xiii]

Rahel recognises both the limitations of "pulling everyone into one category" and the political connotations the term carries, but still feels it is important to recognise the particular experiences of persons of colour:

I think skin colour has to be recognised specifically when talking about trying to label people because unfortunately the colour of your skin or the darkness of your skin tone is going to drastically affect what opportunities you get and how you are treated and function in society.

Wintana and Rahel feel the tension of having to find an appropriate way to describe themselves when interacting with the broader society. Within their family and friendship groups, there is no need to account for their skin tone, to go out of their way to make the person they are interacting with feel comfortable describing them, or to identify a difference that is evident by the colour of their skin. Within their communities they are not people of colour or members of the BIPOC community or even African Australians, only two female co-hosts of a successful podcast series that comments on race, life and society.

Michelle

Brisbane-based writer Michelle Mashuro[1] used to describe herself as an African Australian but doesn't anymore. She was born in Zimbabwe and has lived here for more than 20 years but she doesn't identify as Australian. She uses an entire sentence to describe her identity. "I'm a Black Queer woman in the creative scene in Brisbane," she says proudly. "That's me, in a nutshell."

For a long time, Michelle has reflected deeply about race and identity and the labels used to describe them. Her relationship with the term Person of Colour has been fraught. While she feels some affinity with the label, she ultimately rejected it. "It's not always encapsulating of darker shades of people," she notes.

There is even discrimination within communities of colour — "anti-blackness" — which means the term can feel exclusive, even though it's inclusive. For a while she gravitated towards the term 'Black' but she says that label has relevance only when interacting with broader Australian society. In Zimbabwe she isn't black. That's why she has moved away from using a single label to describe her identity. It's very context dependent. The words only describe the context in which she is living, not her whole experience.

Another problem with labels, Michelle says, is that the labels people wear aren't always those they would choose to describe themselves. Sometimes labels that others put on them have negative associations.

[1] Michelle is also the founder of Radical Premiers, an event curation service for BIPOC artistic spaces.

"I think our understanding of who a migrant is and what they need is very much dated."

Being African is one such label. For Michelle, it is a source of pride and a reflection of her nationality and cultural heritage, but some people assume that African means uneducated. Immigrant has similar negative connotations. While it is technically true in her case, Michelle feels that the term comes laden with a sense that such a person doesn't belong, that they have only chosen to come here. Moreover, the person is assumed to speak little English and to face a range of barriers to success in Australian society. But for Michelle, none of these things are true. She speaks English fluently; she is very familiar with Australian culture; and she has a good understanding of how people interact with each other and what it takes to make a valuable and productive life. Labels can be empowering when they are chosen and when they reflect a person's authentic identity, but damaging when they come attached with associations that simply aren't true.

For Michelle, the process of defining and becoming comfortable with her identity has been inextricably linked to finding a community of people in which she belongs. For her, it's the African diaspora in Brisbane, a group of people made up of different cultural backgrounds. She surrounds herself with young people who are similar to her, who associate with a broader cultural diaspora and are striving to make their ambitions a reality in contemporary Australian society. When she looks across the room there's a connection, a shared experience based on a shared identity.

Vicky

Vicky Arachi, from the Multicultural Communities Council of South Australia, describes herself as a first-generation Greek migrant. Although she uses the term migrant, it is clear the word doesn't sit comfortably with her. Part of her discomfort, she says, stems from the connotations people associate with it, many of which are outdated and based on assumptions.

Controversy over use of the term migrant emerged a few years ago when several media agencies declared they would no longer use it. Originally thought to be a neutral reference describing someone who had simply moved from one place or country to another,[xiv] several journalists came under fire for equating the experience of those who voluntarily leave their country with those who flee due to fear or danger. [xv] While one migrant may move for personal choice or convenience, others do so because of an "external compelling factor," the UN noted. [xvi] For Vicky, the issue is not so much that the categories of migrant and refugee are conflated but that (as Michelle also noted) when people use the word they make judgements about her that are just not true:

I think our understanding of who a migrant is and what they need is very much dated. It is very much stuck on the profile of a migrant after the Second World War. It's kind of a deficient term— like 'you're a migrant and you're in need.' So using the term, migrant, I think there are a lot of assumptions that do not resonate with me at all. When I say I'm from Greece, there are even more assumptions.

Some of these are about her English proficiency. Vicky feels she has to defend herself the minute she opens her mouth to avoid perceptions of "laziness" or "not trying hard enough," as if her accent only cements peoples' unconscious assumptions and perceptions of who a migrant is.

For Vicky, whose life journey has taken her not only to Greece but to other parts of Europe as well, migrant is a positive term that speaks of broad and rich experiences and the privileges that education and opportunity have afforded her. Instead of someone who has fled hardship for a better life, Vicky sees herself as a "citizen of the world." She is in every sense a contemporary migrant—someone who is embracing the benefits of globalisation and the advances in communication and travel that have served to bring people around the world closer together.

The problem with labels, Vicky feels, is that they place everyone "in the same bucket," despite their different needs. Although she speaks Greek fluently and often uses it in preference to English in her circles of family and friends, she doesn't feel she has the same needs as everyone who is linguistically diverse.

The key point for Vicky is to recognise that you are interacting with an incredibly complex individual, and that this complexity extends well beyond a person's spoken language or language proficiency, or even culture or migration history:

I think to myself, 'Aren't we all of a diverse background?' Diversity is not just about culture or language, it has many shapes and forms. So in a way we are all diverse, but still, we are all human beings.

Masoud and Bwe

While claiming a label can be an incredibly powerful experience, being denied one can also have a significant impact on a person's sense of identity. Both Masoud and Bwe from Victoria's Multicultural Commission came to Australia from contexts where exclusion meant they could not claim the national identities that were, perhaps, due to them. Their journeys to define their identity have flourished in Australia, where freedom has allowed them to find a new sense of belonging; yet not, in Masoud's case, without some complexity.

Bwe Thay's identity has been shaped both by his cultural heritage and experiences in his former country of residence. As a designated stateless person he craved a label, an identity, a descriptor, to define who he was and where he had come from, but it was only in Australia he found it.

His new identity—as an Australian with Burmese heritage—has empowered him to connect with

others of similar heritage. Through these connections he has enjoyed both the simple pleasure of hearing and communicating in his native language, as well as the collective power of seeking out, as a group, contributions they can make to Australian society. Statelessness disconnected him from his national, cultural and linguistic roots, but celebrating his heritage in his new Australian home has helped him to move "beyond injustices" and to find healing from the past. No longer is his cultural and ethnic identity a source of exclusion, but one with the potential to build bridges with others:

We are so proud that we come from different cultural backgrounds. We are so proud of our faith, our identity. And multiculturalism is all about that. It's not just about how you integrate into society. It's about you proudly sharing your heritage with the broader society and bringing out the best of everything and everyone.

For Masoud Navvabi, the question of his identity was also uncertain for a significant part of his life. His family fled Afghanistan after the Soviet invasion and he was born in their new — but temporary — home in Iran. Like many refugees there, their situation was precarious. They were not welcomed by the regime, nor were they given certainty in their residency or status. Very few of refugee background had ever succeeded in securing permanent residence or citizenship (although connections or money facilitated this), and at every turn they were reminded that they were not one of 'them' — that they did not belong. The question of who Masoud was, was both diminished and made more critical by a context where he had very little power to self-identify:

Because the society you grew up in tells you very clearly that you are not one of them, this question is raised early on for people who are refugees, compared to other people who are born in a country where they are not reminded that they do not belong. So I think what happens in this situation is that you are always looking for a sense of identity.

Moving to Australia helped paved the way for aspects of this question to be answered, yet not all of the challenges were resolved. While Australia gave Masoud security and opportunity and a sense of permanency that Iran had not afforded, he continued to navigate complexities around how he is labelled. He explains:

I belong to Afghanistan, and the word that they use to describe a national of Afghanistan is Afghan. But in Afghanistan, there is a very strong sentiment among a very large part of the population that we are not Afghan. And the reason is that in the past and even today, the word Afghan was the same as Pashtun. So when you say Afghanistan, it means land of the Pashtuns.

If I say, for example, I am Afghan, it is as if I have said I am Pashtun. But I am not a Pashtun, I'm a Hazara. So when people say this is Masoud from the Afghan community, I accept it because the speaker doesn't know this background. But if there is an opportunity, I would like to remind the speaker that I prefer to be called a Hazara, as in from the Hazara community. Then I came to Australia and the adjective they use is Afghan-Australian. You can see the layers of complexity in this.

Masoud's cultural identity, while resolved at some level, continues to be "controversial." Yet he wears his chosen label with pride:

Culturally I think I share a lot with the Australian community in terms of human rights and supporting opportunities for individuals and the equality of people. There are many positive things in this society. So I choose to call myself Hazara-Australian.

Administrative labels and acronyms

While each of these individuals has taken a different journey to find a label to match their cultural identity, one made up of various migration and life experiences and all the intersections of race, ethnicity, cultural heritage, tradition and language, they all share one thing. Each of these individuals falls into the administrative category of 'culturally and linguistically diverse,' usually denoted with the acronym, CALD.

Anyone who works in government or the service sectors would be familiar with this term. It is commonly used to stand in for cultural diversity, although it also plays an important role in the allocation of services and resources to organisations and in the structure and reporting of Australia's population data.

Administrative labels such as CALD are not a recent phenomenon. With the setting aside of the White Australia policy in the late 1960s, [xvii] influxes of new migrant communities and the adoption of multiculturalism, it was recognised that Australia

needed to identify those groups and communities who might need extra assistance in the process of transition. There were barriers to accessing services and to forms of participation, [xviii] especially for those coming from non-English speaking backgrounds,[xix] and new migrant populations had particular needs. [xx]

The first label adopted was the acronym NESB (or Non-English-Speaking Background), used to describe groups with "special cultural characteristics and cultural needs," focusing particularly on linguistic difference. However, it wasn't long before this term was discontinued because it was seen as "simplistic, anachronistic and potentially condescending." [xxii]

In 1996, the Ministerial Council of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (MCMIA) decided to drop the term NESB from official communications. [xxiii] Three years later, the ABS introduced the acronym CALD. [xxiv] It is unclear whether culturally diverse communities were consulted in the adoption of the new term.

CALD sought to describe individuals' diversity beyond their spoken language. [xxv] The term remains with us today, referring to all Australia's non-Indigenous ethnic groups, apart from the English-speaking Anglo-Saxon. [xxvi]

In time, CALD became an important tool for measuring Australia's diversity. In 2001, the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) launched a guide on how to implement standards for statistics on cultural diversity. [xxvii] To determine a person's "CALD status," the ABS would collect information about "a standard set of cultural and language diversity measures," including a person's country of birth, main language spoken at home, English proficiency and indigenous status. [xxviii] These metrics would provide the basis of CALD membership, although further measures, including a

person's ancestry, father or mother's country of birth, languages spoken at home, religious affiliation or year of arrival in Australia, could also be included. [xxix]

In 2019, the ABS advised that this core set of measures define CALD status for all "administrative and service provision settings where information on CALD is required." [xxx] Today, the term is commonly used for administrative and operational purposes, as well as in service provision, educational institutions and by advocacy groups. [xxxi]

While CALD is seen as an improvement on NESB because it acknowledges that diversity is more complex than simply speaking a different language, in recent years a variety of commentators have criticised the label. In 2020, Peter Mousaferiadis argued, for instance, that the term CALD had "had its day." [xxxii] To assess whether the term does have significant shortcomings, it is useful to look at these criticisms.

Where do you come from?

Our instinct to label things often means we find ourselves asking 'Where are you from?' when we meet someone new, particularly if they appear culturally distinct from us. The question provides an opportunity for some people to tell their story, but for others, particularly those who were born in Australia, it's a frustrating conversation born from an assumption that being culturally diverse means you are from somewhere else.

How should we navigate such conversations?
Vicky feels that sometimes there is so much emphasis on "getting it right" or "not causing offence" that people hesitate to connect. She always tries to remember that her interactions are with complex individuals, not simply with cultures or places.

Michelle agrees that there isn't always a right or a wrong way to have such a conversation because people's experiences are all different; for instance, "there's no monolithic experience for Black people" so there isn't going to be one right way for anyone. For her, when someone comes up and says "Where are you from?" what she believes they are really asking is "Why are you black?" Sometimes she feels

like answering that question, but other times she doesn't, so she simply tells them: "From Brisbane." For her this creates a boundary she wants the person to respect. It's not that she doesn't want to share her story, she just doesn't want to always do it. In many cases it can lead to further conversation about how long she's been in Australia, why she came, and then:

"That must have been so hard for you…"

Rahel doesn't mind having conversations about her ethnic background, especially when she can see that it comes from a place of genuine curiosity. Yet she feels it is also important to respect the fact that some people "can't be bothered" explaining their backstory. In those situations, it's important for the inquirer not to become "all fragile" about having asked the question. It is important to recognise that simply asking someone where they are from can sometimes be "re-traumatising." She advises people "to be understanding and patient if someone doesn't want to have that conversation with you."

"Lack of clarity also poses a problem for identifying and addressing the barriers communities face."

Has the term CALD had its day?

1. Insufficient clarity about who is included in the term

The first criticism is that it is unclear who falls into the category of CALD. While the ABS identified a series of measures to be used to determine a person's CALD status, it also left scope to include other variables and to omit any that "may not be appropriate or useful." [xxxiii] This has resulted in "various definitions of CALD being used interchangeably," [xxxiv] making some data difficult to compare. Pham et al illustrate this problem in their 2021 study of epidemiological research in Australia. An examination of 108 different public health studies found that no single study used all of the core data variables identified by the ABS to define the CALD status of their sample. [xxxv] Such inconsistency made it very difficult to generalise important research findings about health outcomes for CALD communities and limited these studies' applicability. [xxxvi] The Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils earlier paper on deficits in administrative and survey data and in social, health and medical research, identified similar problems, with 'country of birth' being the most common (and often the only) variable taken into account. [xxxvii]

Lack of clarity also poses a problem for identifying and addressing the barriers communities face [xxxviii] — one of the purposes of having such a term in the first place. We know that not all culturally diverse communities are treated equally in Australia. The Scanlon Foundation Research Institute's most recent report on social cohesion noted that "more than 90 per cent of Australians have very or somewhat positive feelings towards immigrants from Italy, Germany, and the United Kingdom. But this proportion drops to 70 per cent for immigrants from India, and to little more than 60 per cent or below for immigrants from India, Ethiopia, Lebanon, China, Iraq, and Sudan." [xxxix] Yet all these groups fall into the category of culturally and linguistically diverse.

2. The term CALD is very broad

In an attempt to account for the complexity of cultural diversity, the term CALD may mask differences in experiences and circumstances that specific communities face. For instance, the term conceals disparities in socio-economic status, as well as levels of "education, health and wellbeing" across culturally diverse populations. [xl] An individual from a refugee background comes to Australia with a very different set of circumstances to an individual settling in Australia on a permanent skilled visa. Yet both individuals are considered culturally and linguistically diverse. The grouping together of the relatively advantaged with those who are disadvantaged limits the term's usefulness as a tool for addressing barriers. [xli] It also conflates the situation of new and emerging migrant populations with those with longer histories in Australia, which have established networks and community institutions to support their cultural and practical needs.

Rahel expresses the concern in this way:

You can't pull everyone together into the same category because our experiences are so different. For me, it just takes away so much. So, I think it's dismissive. It bunches a whole lot of people together who have completely different experiences."

Michelle agrees:

I think I only identify with that label because I'm not a white person, a white Australian. But other than that, I wouldn't say I identify with it. What's that way of saying it's so broad its exclusive? I don't really have much in common with a white person who speaks Greek. Even though I'm sure as much as we would love to have things in common, we come from cultures that aren't Australian but we don't face the same kind of discrimination. Because we don't share an identity, the term doesn't feel like it's inclusive. But that's what labels do — labels are about shared identities.

3. Who does the term exclude?

Given the breadth of the term, it is surprising that some individuals who see themselves as culturally diverse, in particular second- and third-generation migrants from different cultural heritages, fall outside the category, CALD. While they are Australian born and fluent in English, many have an ethnic identity that makes them subject to some of the same challenges as those who were not born here or who are less proficient in English face. This raises questions about the effectiveness of this label in "dissolving inequality and 'othering' through exclusion." [xlii]

The other obvious exclusion from the label is Australia's First Peoples. While some would see this omission as justified — Indigenous Australians need to be acknowledged in their own right, not grouped together with those of other cultures and disparate migration histories — they too face similar barriers to full participation in Australian society and can be considered culturally (and often linguistically) diverse.

4. At what point do we recognise that diversity is the norm?

Another significant criticism of the term is that it segments Australia's population. By identifying some individuals as culturally or linguistically diverse, it establishes a baseline of cultural and linguistic 'normality' from which those who are considered 'diverse' deviate. Some commentators argue the term not only divides but "inferiorises"[xliii] culturally diverse communities (presenting them from a deficit framework[xliv]), creating the division of "us and them."[xlv]

It is interesting to reflect that when administrative labels like CALD emerged, Australia was much less culturally diverse than it is today. [xlvi] *After multiple decades of White Australia policy, when immigration policy deliberately favoured those of white or European background, new arrivals from other countries were seen as distinct from the cultural majority, and it was deemed necessary to put in place policies and processes to assist them to integrate.*

Today, however, almost one in three Australians was born overseas, [xlvii] and nearly half the population has at least one parent born elsewhere. [xlviii] While in the past most Australians born overseas had British heritage, this is changing: for instance, the number of Australians born in India and China is rapidly increasing. [xlix] The number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is also growing,[l] as is the number of people who use a language other than English at home. [li]

Can we continue to say all of these Australians are culturally and linguistically diverse? Or is diversity now the norm?

5. The usefulness of segmentation

It may be time to ask whether delineating Australia's population by diversity is still a useful tool to achieve the outcomes for which it was originally intended. Given the shortcomings of the term CALD— the lack of clarity in its definition, its breadth and the lumping together of individuals from very different backgrounds and experiences— perhaps there is a more useful way of labelling individuals from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Rather than separating those with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds from the rest of the Australian population, would it be more useful to look at the entire Australian population in terms of linguistic benchmarks or health outcomes or employment status, then to target programs and resources to address those challenges? These questions are worth asking.

Other countries, notably the UK, have debated getting rid of terms that lump together people from culturally diverse backgrounds and generalise their experiences, [lii] recognising that these terms bring diverse individuals together only through the common characteristic of not being white. In March 2021 the UK's Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities recommended ending use of the administrative acronym BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) for the purpose of "understanding disparities and outcomes for specific ethnic groups," [liii] arguing that aggregated terms such as BAME are "unhelpful." [liv]

Some commentators suggest, instead, that we should critically examine which issues and data are most relevant in a particular context and match our terms to the particular groups at the centre of those priorities. This may mean "aggregating groups at times and naming them separately at others." [lv]

6. The role of the labeller as an expression of power

A lot of power is carried in how things are named. [lvi] Labelling theory recognises that labels have power over individuals and communities. Some of its foundational research studies show how the label that was attached to a person had considerable influence over that person's behaviour and influenced their self-conception. [lvii] Labelling someone both requires and creates a power dynamic, [lviii] especially when labels are applied to people without their consultation or agreement.

Does the term CALD help those who fall under the label? I'm not sure that those who introduced and subsequently used the term ever asked that question. Each person interviewed for this essay had views about being described as CALD. Vicky said she certainly didn't ask to be labelled as a person of diverse background, while both Wintana and Rahel find the term "dismissive" of individuals' differences. Masoud has mixed feelings. On the one hand, he recognises that government needs a term or a category to describe communities with particular needs, but he also feels it "puts everyone in the same basket and ignores all the layers of identity issues." Bwe clearly recalls his first exposure to the term, and his reservations about it:

I remember quite vividly in my early days of arrival here there was a lot of mention of the CALD Community Forum. And I often felt, 'Okay, if this is a label that has been given to me, how do I embrace it? How can I try to fit into this box?' And I think it already sets your mindset as being the 'other.' So, I'm not saying that I am the benchmark, but as positive as I could be, if I could feel that sense of otherness, I can only imagine how many of our communities who are at the forefront of facing racism and exclusion would have felt.

How and why do we measure diversity?

Closely connected to the issue of labelling is the question of how we measure diversity. Administrative terms for describing cultural communities emerged from the measures Australia uses to understand and respond to the cultural makeup of its population. The current Australian census asks questions on ancestry, country of birth, English proficiency, languages spoken, citizenship status, year of arrival and religious affiliation. These data are then categorised using the Australian Standard Classification of Cultural and Ethnic Groups (ASCCEG), which classifies responses according to the "cultural and ethnic groups with significant numbers of persons resident in Australia."

This provides a good indication of the ethnic and cultural background of all Australians, according to the Census' general manager. At present there are 278 cultural and ethnic groups, including 24 residual ('not elsewhere classified') categories listed in the classification. [lxvii]

Are these metrics enough for understanding Australia's demographics or the complexities of ascribed cultural identities? The ABS acknowledges the classification has several shortcomings, not least of which is that cultural and ethnic groups that cannot be separately identified are subsumed into residual or "not elsewhere classified" categories. [lxviii]

Jieh-Yung argues for the introduction of a new question about ethnicity in the Census. He feels that for Australia to understand itself more deeply, it needs to delve deeper into the "essence" of its diverse makeup. For him, focusing only on country of birth and ancestry may not give a true indication of a person's cultural affiliation or identity:

For example, you have third or fourth generation Chinese-Australians who don't speak Chinese at home and their parents were born in Australia. There are some people who might have mixed ethnic heritages from mixed marriages. You can't put more than two ancestries on the census. So I think these are anomalies that we need to fix from a data standpoint. We need our data to be more authentic and clear-cut. We need to better understand Australia's contemporary ethnic profile and improve data capture relating to our nation's contemporary ethnic identity.

Jieh-Yung believes that more specific data about individuals' ethnicities will help to inform policy development, as well as to address the barriers to participation that particular communities might face. Much of his work centres on increasing Asian-Australian representation in positions of leadership and he is very aware of the shortcomings of understanding current workforce composition when there is insufficient data.

Why does Australia need to collect data about its population diversity? The nation has recorded the cultural makeup of its population for some time. Yet over time, the way to achieve this objective and the elements of diversity that should be measured in order to make decisions have evolved. The Census question on ancestry, now thought to be a key indicator of ethnic background, [lxix] was only introduced in the 1980s. Australia is one country amongst Western, culturally diverse, democratic countries that does not directly collect data on individuals' ethnicity. Canada's census, for instance, has collected data on parental ethnic/cultural background since 1961. [lxx]

In Canada's 2021 census, respondents could identify (by long form) up to eight responses for the ethnic or cultural origins of their ancestors, as well as their own indigenous or racial/ethnic identity from a list of multiple options. [lxxi]

While most governments collect data on diversity, the process of doing this is complex, constrained both by theoretical understandings of concepts such as ethnicity and the practical realities of collecting and collating information from an entire population.

Changing a census is a big undertaking and it creates challenges when it comes to comparing data from one year to the next, as Canada has found. [lxxii] Moreover, ethnic identity can be subjective: how a person describes their ethnicity can change over time or be context-dependent. [lxxiii] Current thinking on censuses seems to be that a more accurate measurement of diversity comes from asking several questions that separate a person's "primary identity" from their "descent or ancestry." [lxxiv] Yet a deeper question is whether individuals should be allowed to identify their own ethnicity and how that should be done.

" How we navigate differences, while also embracing commonalities, will help to shape our identities as individuals, as Australians and as people who share a common humanity."

Moving forward: the importance of ownership

Labels are useful, but they also present a challenge. By reducing an individual or a category of people to a simpler form, they inevitably take highly complex situations or individuals and simplify them. The loss of detail or nuance can work against the purpose of the label, even having an unintended negative effect. It is unclear, certainly in the context of this limited reflection, whether the term CALD is having that impact on cultural communities but the interviews in this essay reveal some discomfort with the term.

There is clearly a need for population data that describe Australia's cultural diversity, but when it comes to service provision or resource allocation, perhaps the label CALD no longer serves the purpose for which it was intended. A 'box' for cultural diversity still may remain necessary, [lix] but we may need a different box, especially as Australia's population makeup changes and continues to diversify.

"Language is complicated and messy and ... we'll never find the perfect acronym" [lx] *but the key to moving forward is consultation. Individuals want to be included in the process of coming up with labels or terms that are meant to represent them,* [lxi] *and there must be opportunities for communities to "navigate new terms" and to make it clear how they prefer to be identified.* [lxii]

In Bwe's words:

The more engagement we can have and the more voices we can embed will be critical. Meaningful inclusion has to be at the heart of this conversation. We cannot just have community engagement for the sake of ticking a box. We have to do it with genuine intention and an open heart.

While we may never all agree on a term, what matters is that "people explore ways to build solidarity around collective experiences, shared goals and common challenges." Terms that divide are not helpful. How we navigate differences, while also embracing commonalities, will help to shape our identities as individuals, as Australians and as people who share a common humanity. [lxiii]

Labels are necessary to our cognitive functioning and social relations, but through the process of finding the right one, individuals and communities can be empowered, finding connection and a safe place to exist. [lxiv]

As Bwe puts it:

We have something that's very magical. It's beyond acronyms and just words. The way our communities here connect and work together and live together, even though it's not a perfect scenario yet, the way we are working together towards a more inclusive society is just beautiful.

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