

Congregational Attitudes toward Immigrants: The Case of Australian Churches Century?"

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Abstract

The influx of refugees and immigrants into economically advanced and/or perceived “safe” countries has been a global phenomenon in recent times. While migration itself is not new, the awareness of immigrants and their impact on local communities is arguably unprecedented. Australia is a nation made up predominantly of immigrants. Some 28% of the population in 2014 was born overseas, and 46% of the population in 2011 had a least one parent born overseas. While only about 15% of Australians attend Christian church services, migrants feature heavily in churches. The National Church Life Survey (NCLS) is a local church-based survey which surveys Christian churchgoers across Australia in approximately 20 denominations every five years. In 2011, some 3,100 local churches from 23 denominations took part, which represents 25% of the estimated number of local churches in Australia (not including Orthodox, independent and house churches). This paper draws on results from two Attender Sample Surveys (N = 1,400 approximately for each survey) to engage with four research questions: 1) What are the attitudes of church attendees toward immigrants and toward refugee intake? 2) How do attitudes toward immigrants and refugees vary by age? 3) How do attitudes toward immigrants and refugees vary by level of education? 4) How does the ethnic/cultural background of the congregation affect attender views? Generally, the results reveal that younger and university educated Australians have more positive attitudes toward immigrants compared to older Australians and Australians with school or trade education. The results also show that younger Australians (15 – 19 year old) and older Australians (70 and older) have a more well-formed

opinions about immigrants compared to those in the middle of those age categories. The paper discusses the results for each of the research questions. While some findings were unsurprising, others were interestingly unexpected. Wider implications of the findings are discussed.

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Introduction

The influx of refugees and immigrants into economically advanced and/or perceived “safe” countries has been a global phenomenon in recent times. While migration itself is not a new phenomenon, the awareness of immigrants and their impact on local communities is arguably unprecedented. The current climate necessitates informed understanding of attitudes toward immigrants, the impact of cultural diversity on society, and the role of various social structures in assisting the integration of immigrants into society. One could assert that attitudes toward immigrants (and/or refugees) are closely related to attitudes toward multiculturalism in general (Richardson et.al, 2011).¹ Berry (2006) defines multicultural ideology as, “the general and fundamental view that cultural diversity is good for a society and its individual members...and that such diversity should be shared and accommodated in an equitable way” (p. 728). If we are to examine the extent to which a society subscribes to such an ideology, then the broad questions that pertain to perceptions of immigrants need to be addressed. For example, do locals think that immigrants increase crime rates? Do locals perceive that immigrants improve the society? What do locals

¹. Richardson, R., op den Buijs, T., & Van der Zee, K. Changes in multicultural, Muslim and acculturation attitudes in the Netherlands armed forces. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 35, (2011): 580-591.

think about the intake of refugees? While it is interesting to explore these questions in general, it is more helpful to contextualise them within one facet of society in order to gain a deeper understanding.

Australia: An Immigrant Nation

Australia is a nation made up predominantly of immigrants. Some 28% of the population in 2014 was born overseas ([ABS 2014](#)), and 46% of the population in 2011 had at least one parent born overseas (ABS 2011). People born in the UK form the largest group of migrants (5-6% of the population); however, the fastest growing groups are from Asia (Village, Powell and Pepper 2016). In 2012/13, half of the approximately 152,000 settlers were from Asia, which accounted for six of the top ten source countries (in descending order): China, Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, Sri Lanka (DIBP, 2015).

The study of attitudes toward cultural diversity amongst Australians has been of interest to researchers over time. From studying specifics such as attitudes toward asylum seekers (McMaster, 2002), to general patterns of attitudes toward immigrants (Pietsch & Marotta, 2009), researchers have explored Australians' response to diversity. There is evidence to suggest that most Australians have favourable attitudes toward diversity (Dunn et al., 2004).

The focus of the present study is to contextualise this exploration within a specific group of Australians, namely those who attend Christian churches. Monthly church attendance in Australia is estimated at approximately 15% of the population (Powell et al. 2012). Migrants feature heavily in churches. Overall, people born in non-English speaking countries form a greater proportion of the church-going population than they do of the larger Australian population (Mollitor et al. 2013). Churches vary in their ethnic diversity – ranging from essentially mono-ethnic congregations through to multi-ethnic or multicultural congregations where people from a range of ethnic backgrounds are present (Duncum et al. 2014). Therefore churches are an important context for the study of attitudes towards immigrants.

Attitude toward Diversity amongst Christians

Christian attitudes toward diversity has been studied in previous research. Knoll (2009), for example, demonstrates that in the United States those who attend religious services regularly are more likely support liberal immigration reform policies. Arasaratnam (2014) studied Australian Christian tertiary educators' attitudes toward multiculturalism and identified that, in addition to overall positive attitudes toward multiculturalism, the participants in this group expressed concern that Australia's immigration policies are inadequate to support the country's multicultural ethos.

One could speculate that, based on Christian theology of loving one's neighbour as one's self, for example, those who subscribe to such theology would be more likely to hold positive attitudes toward refugees and "strangers" than those who do not. Knoll's findings do support this position.

Gudykunst and Kim (2003) propose that, "Strangers represent the idea of nearness because they are physically close and the idea of remoteness because they have different values and ways of doing things" (p. 23). Immigrants and refugees are strangers amongst us. There is extensive literature on attitudes toward immigrants in culturally diverse countries such as Canada, The Netherlands, United Kingdom, and United States (see Arasaratnam, 2013). Overall, previous research shows that members of the majority group in a country prefer that minorities should adapt to the mainstream culture, while minorities prefer to maintain their own culture. There are exceptions to this, of course. As a way of expanding on findings from studies such as Knoll's (2009), we are particularly interested in exploring church-goers' attitudes toward strangers (specifically immigrants and refugees). The following five research questions are raised:

RQ1: What are the attitudes of church attendees toward immigrants and toward refugee intake?

RQ2: How do attitudes toward immigrants and refugees vary by age?

RQ3: How do attitudes toward immigrants and refugees vary by level of education?

RQ4: How does the ethnic/cultural background of the congregation affect attendee views?

Method

The NCLS is a local church-based instrument which surveys Christian churchgoers across Australia in approximately 20 denominations every five years. In 2011, some 3,100 local churches from 23 denominations took part, which represents 25% of the estimated number of local churches in Australia (not including Orthodox, independent and house churches). Approximately 260,000 individual church attenders returned an Attender Survey form. The Attender Survey consisted of a main survey (available in eight languages) which was completed by most participants and a series of smaller sample surveys (available in English only), each of which was a random sample of the total participants (Pepper, Sterland, & Powell, 2015).

This paper draws on results from two sample surveys, namely Attender Sample Survey I and Attender Sample Survey N. To address RQ1, 2 and 3, results for three questions are examined: the extent of agreement or disagreement with the statements “immigrants increase crime rates” (N = 1389), and “immigrants improve Australian society by contributing new ideas and cultures” (N = 1408), and should Australia should accept refugees “at the existing level”, “at a lower level”, or “at a greater level” (N = 1410). The participants were also given the option to respond, “unsure/neutral” for the first two questions and “don’t know” for the third question.

RQ4 was addressed through examining how respondents’ choice from three statements concerning their attitude toward migrants, namely “Migrants should adapt to fit in with current mainstream Australian culture”, “Australia should evolve to accommodate migrants so that everyone will develop a common culture”, and “Migrants should keep their own culture so Australia will

be a culturally diverse country” (N = 1345) varied by the ethnic composition of the church which they attended. Monocultural Anglo churches were defined as churches in which at least 80% of attenders were born in Australia, and multicultural churches where at least 20% were born in a country other than Australia (Emerson & Kim, 2003).

Data are weighted to account for different levels of participation among church denominations and regions (e.g. states, dioceses, synods), and bivariate results are presented for group differences. Weighted data yield the following demographics for the 2011 NCLS: 15% aged 15-29 years, 25% aged 30-49, 35% aged 50-69 and 25 % aged 70+, approximately 60% female and 40% male, 66% born in Australia, 33% having completed a university degree, 47% Catholic, 13% Pentecostal, 12% Anglican, 10% Baptist/Churches of Christ, with the remainder from a variety of smaller Protestant denominations (Pepper, Sterland, & Powell, 2015, Table 3).

Results

In response to the question of whether the participants thought that immigrants increase crime rates, 44% disagreed or strongly disagreed; 27% agreed or strongly agreed, and 29% indicated that they are neutral or unsure. In other words, 56% of the participants either thought that immigrants increase crime rates or were unsure. In response to whether immigrants improve Australian society by bringing new ideas and cultures, 73% agreed or strongly agreed, 7% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 20% said they are neutral or unsure. When asked about the level at which Australia should accept refugees, 26% said “At the existing level,” 26% said “At a greater level,” and 32% said “At a lower level.” 16% said they did “Don’t know.” In other words, 52% of participants think that Australia should accept refugees at the current level or greater level, while 48% either think that the rate of acceptance of refugees should be lowered or are unclear of their opinion on this.

RQ2 referred to the variance in attitudes by age. Of the three questions

asked as part of RQ1, older participants were more likely to agree or strongly agree with the statement that immigrants increase crime rates compared to younger participants. 40% of participants 70 years or older agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, compared to 17% of participants in the range of 15-29 years old. In response to whether immigrants improve Australian society by bringing new ideas and cultures, there was no notable differences in age. In regards to the rate at which Australia should accept refugees, 65% of 15 – 19 year olds said ‘at the existing level’ or ‘at a greater level’ compared to 48% of 70-79 year olds. Conversely, 16% of 15-19 year olds said that refugees should be accepted at a lower level compared to 41% of 70-79 year olds. Interestingly, the group with the highest percentage of ‘Don’t know’ responses were the 20-29 year olds, with 36% saying they don’t have an opinion on this, compared to 19% amongst 15-19 year olds and 11% amongst the 70-79 year olds.

RQ3 referred to the participants’ attitudes in relation to their level of education. In regards to whether immigrants increase crime rates, 36% of those with only school education and 31% of those with trade education agreed or strongly agreed with this statement compared to 13% of those with a university degree. In regards to whether immigrants improve Australian society, 85% of university-educated participants agreed or strongly agreed. While the numbers are lower for school educated and trade educated participants are lower, it must be noted that overall the level of agreement with this statement is still higher than 50% (63% for school educated and 73% for trade educated), indicating that overall there is a positive sentiment that immigrants do improve Australian society. In terms of the level of acceptance of refugees to Australia, those with university education were more likely to respond ‘at a greater level’ (41%) compared to those with school education (17%) or trade education (20%).

RQ4 referred to the extent to which the ethnic/cultural background of the congregation affected participants’ views about immigrants and refugees. In response to whether immigrants should adapt to Australian culture, 39% of participants from multicultural congregations agreed compared to 47% of participants from mono cultural (Anglo) congregations. In response

to whether Australia should evolve to develop a common culture, 41% of participants from multicultural congregations agreed, compared to 39% of mono cultural congregations. In response to whether immigrants should retain their own culture so that Australia will be diverse, 20% of multicultural congregations agreed, compared to 14% of participants from mono cultural congregations.

Discussion

Overall, the results from the present study are consistent with previous findings. However, there are a few observations that are worth noting. First, while more than 70% of the participants are of the view that immigrants improve Australia through new ideas and cultural diversity, more than 50% of the participants are also either convinced that immigrants increase crime rate or are unsure whether they do. This ambivalence is reflected in the near 50-50 divide in the responses of the rate at which Australia should accept immigrants. These finding indicate that, while in general church-going Australians are more positive toward immigrants than negative, this is not by a large margin. However, based on the results from various age groups, it is evident that distrust of immigrants is more prevalent in older Australians.

As previously observed, a noteworthy number of Australians in the 20-29 year range did not have an opinion as to whether Australia should maintain, increase, or decrease the number of immigrants accepted; while younger and older Australians had more firmly formed opinions. This apparent apathy amongst Australians in their 20s is worth further exploration.

In general, university educated church-going Australians have more positive attitudes toward immigrants compared to others, though overall positive attitudes toward immigrants prevail even amongst school and trade educated Australians especially in terms of whether immigrants improve Australian society. This is an optimistic finding and slightly different to Dandy and Pe-Pua's (2010) finding that younger, more educated, and female Australians have more positive attitudes toward multiculturalism compared to older, male, and

less educated. The difference could be due to the fact that the present study consisted of church-going participants whose worldview may be pre-disposed to being more accepting of ‘strangers.’

The results for RQ4 are consistent with previous findings in the sense that participants from multicultural congregations are more inclined to take an adaptation approach to acculturation compared to mono-cultural (Caucasian) congregations which prefer an assimilation approach. For example, Liu (2007) found that participants of Asian background in Australia were more favourable toward multiculturalism compared to Caucasian Australians. The results from a study done more than fifteen years ago by Smith and Phillips (2001) is telling of the fact that Australians’ attitudes toward ethnic diversity may not have changed significantly over the years. Participants from their study on what is “UnAustralian” also expressed that ethnic groups’ tendency to operate in ghettos (rather than learning English and assimilating) is UnAustralian. Assimilation is the preferred path of acculturation, from the perspective of the majority group; in this Australians are not unique (Arasaratnam, 2013). In terms of national identity, cohesion, and citizens’ full participation in civic processes, one has to wonder whether assimilation is indeed the means through which this is achieved. That is not to say that ethnic groups should entirely abandon their cultural identity – but rather to observe that a certain measure of assimilation (for example language mastery) is an implied part of active engagement with society. Perhaps then the question that needs to be raised is not whether immigrants should adapt or assimilate but rather to what extent do immigrants need to assimilate in order to actively contribute toward enriching society.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore church-going Australians’ attitudes toward immigrants. The majority of the results are consistent with previous findings and indicate that, in general, church-going Australians have positive attitudes toward immigrants and that Caucasian Australians prefer

immigrants to assimilate while Australians from culturally diverse congregations do not. This finding is also likely to the self-selection process whereby Australians who prefer mono-cultural Caucasian congregations would attend such churches compared to those who prefer a culturally diverse environment.

Unlike findings from other studies, we did find that, even amongst church-goers with lower levels of education, there was generally a positive attitude toward immigrants. We observe that this may be due to the participants' Christian worldview whereby they may be pre-disposed to being accepting of strangers.

While this study provides us with an overview of church-going Australians' attitudes toward immigrants, there are still questions that need further exploration. For example, to what extent do Australians actively interact with people from other cultures even if they attend the same congregation? In other words, just because someone attends a culturally diverse congregation, it does not mean that people of different cultural groups actively interact with one another. Further, does ethnocentrism play as significant a role amongst church-going Australians in debilitating intercultural communication as it has been established in previous studies (Arasaratnam & Banerjee, 2007)? In other words, does a Christian worldview which promotes acceptance of strangers override ethnocentric tendencies? Relatedly, does a Christian worldview engender cultural empathy, a variable that has been vastly associated with intercultural communication competence (Arasaratnam, 2016; Arasaratnam, Banerjee, & Dembek, 2010)? These and related questions will be explored in the data collected from the 2016 NCLS survey. It is hoped that the findings in the Australian context will shed light on issues that are prevalent in many other culturally diverse countries. Further, the specificity of the church context also presents opportunities for further exploration of the relationship between Christian worldviews and attitudes toward immigrants.

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