

Racist language cuts across media, politicians and public

March 26 2014, by David Ellis

Researchers at the University of Adelaide have analysed the language used by talkback radio hosts, callers and politicians to better understand how and why people construct racist comments about ethnic groups - even if they don't intend to be racist.

In the latest of a series of papers published by University of Adelaide social psychologists Dr Scott Hanson-Easey and Professor Martha Augoustinos, they use case studies from the recent past, examining public discussions about the Australian Sudanese community.

Dr Hanson-Easey analysed comments from the then Minister for Immigration and Citizenship (now Minister for Social Services), Kevin Andrews MP in 2007, and talkback calls to a popular evening radio program following the highly publicised stabbing murder of a Sudanese youth in Adelaide in 2008.

Published recently in the journal *Discourse & Society*, the paper shows instances of the Sudanese community being described as "tribal" and violent, and not fitting into Australian society - representing them as inherently troublesome.

"I was interested in the portrayal of the Sudanese community because they're humanitarian refugees who've been resettled in Australia as part of an official humanitarian refugee program. They experience a very different process to asylum seekers who've arrived here without a visa," says Dr Hanson-Easey, a research associate in the University's Discipline

of Public Health who conducted this study as part of his PhD.

"Despite their government-sanctioned resettlement, Sudanese refugees have not been immune to racial comments, just like many other migrant groups before them. There is a common way in which the Sudanese community is portrayed or constructed as 'the other' - an outside group - in the language of politicians, the public and the media. Sometimes this is people trying to make sense of a new social group, and sometimes it serves more ideological aims."

Dr Hanson-Easy says the language being used often associates the collective culture of Sudanese refugees with the poor behaviour of some individuals. For example, a radio host would draw a link between Sudanese people and the massacred Tutsi people of Rwanda, saying: "they're all tribals"; and a talkback caller saying: "they fight amongst themselves... their fights are usually tribal".

Dr Hanson-Easey says: "In the case of the former Immigration Minister, Kevin Andrews, his public comments to the media provided a kind of socio-historical narrative that pitted African culture against Western and Asian cultures. This enabled him to justify the controversial cutting of the humanitarian refugee quota from Sudan.

"The talkback callers wouldn't necessarily see themselves as being 'racist', and they may not be as strategic in their rhetoric in the same way that a politician would, but their depictions of Sudanese people can serve illiberal and racist ends.

"Of course, the night-time talkback radio demographic does not represent all Australians, but it is a very vocal audience and those racial comments are heard and felt within the refugee communities themselves," he says.

"These examples serve to highlight the need for rigorous public discussion about what does and does not constitute racism and how it affects communities, particularly in light of the proposed changes to Australia's racial vilification laws."

More information: Scott Hanson-Easey, Martha Augoustinos, and Gail Moloney. "'They're all tribals': Essentialism, context and the discursive representation of Sudanese refugees."

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