

**How useful is the term ‘Culturally and Linguistically Diverse’ (CALD) in
Australian research, practice, and policy discourse?**

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Australian research, practice, and policy discourse?**

Background

The terms ‘Culturally and Linguistically Diverse’ (CALD) and ‘Non-English Speaking Background’ (NESB) are both commonly used in the research, practice, and policy discourse to refer to all of Australia’s non-Indigenous ethnic groups other than the English-speaking Anglo-Saxon majority. Indigenous Australians are generally excluded from CALD and NESB because their experiences and needs as first nation people are seen as significantly different from other groups.

CALD was introduced to replace NESB in 1996, when the Ministerial Council of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (MCMIA) decided that the term and acronym NESB was to be dropped from official communications. They identified four main problems with NESB: (i) it is a term that has many conflicting definitions; (ii) it groups people who are relatively disadvantaged with those who are not disadvantaged; (iii) it is unable to separately identify the many cultural and linguistic groups in Australia; and (iv) it has developed negative connotations (Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, 2001).

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that CALD, like NESB, has developed negative connotations because it also has many (more) conflicting definitions, and it continues to group together people who are relatively advantaged and disadvantaged.

We also aim to propose a new, more ideal, term that:

- Refers to all of Australia’s visible minority ethnics but not be so broad as to include people who have a western European heritage;

- Acknowledges the diversity within this sub-population, but also the fact that all these minority groups share some experiences of Australian society; and
- Is positive and affirming rather than referring to people because they lack a certain attribute.

Strengths of ‘CALD’

CALD is seen as superior to NESB for a number of reasons. Firstly it does not demarcate people based on what they are *not*. NESB developed negative connotations because it distinguishes people based on their *non*-English speaking heritage. This can have the effect of ‘other-ing’ them as if they are not fully Australian. Babacan (2005) refers to this feeling of not belonging as ‘relational exclusion’. More specifically, relational exclusion refers to “relationships between communities, government, and others to address issues such as recognition of identity, racism, and ethnic social capital” (p. 10). When relational exclusion occurs, it can be said to symbolise a deviance from ‘cultural justice’, in which there is equity and equality in recognition of identity (Fraser 1999). In comparison, CALD does not fix a characteristic from which minority ethnic groups deviate, and so it can avoid the relational exclusion and divisiveness NESB may produce for minority ethnic groups.

Another benefit of CALD is that because it draws attention to both the linguistic and cultural characteristics of minority ethnic groups, it can highlight that any barriers or disadvantages they experience also relate to these two factors. This is useful for researchers, practitioners, and policy makers who are aiming to overcome racialised disadvantage in the use of services and access to opportunities; also known as ‘distributional exclusion’ (Babacan 2005). More specifically, Babacan (2005) describes distributional exclusion as “access to social resources, access to the labour

market and financial support” (p. 10). When distributional exclusion occurs it can be said to symbolise a deviation from ‘social justice’ in which there is equity and equality in the distribution of tangible resources such as *access* to goods and services, as well as intangible resources such as *opportunities to access* goods and services (Fraser 1999). For example, by identifying that language barriers occur for a CALD family, the need for interpreters and translators can be highlighted. Similarly, by identifying that a CALD family experiences cultural barriers, the need for individual and organisational training in cultural awareness, sensitivity, and competency can also be highlighted (Campinha-Bacote 2002; Korbin 2008; Purnell 2002). By providing language services and culturally competent service delivery, the distributional exclusion CALD families perceive or experience can be reduced. Importantly, CALD can show that any barriers or disadvantages that these groups experience are not simply based on language, in the way NESB implies.

Finally, because CALD does not have any explicit criterion to define membership, it is flexible and adaptive to be inclusive of any and all ethnic groups. For example, it can refer to minority ethnic Australians (its most common use), but also the Anglo-Saxon majority when describing Australia’s multicultural milieu. In this way, Australia can be described as a ‘culturally and linguistically diverse’ *society*. CALD reflects a move toward a term with non-explicit and multiple meanings, and away from essentialising terms such as ‘Black’ or ‘White’ or ‘Non-English speaking’, which fix individuals to one unchangeable category. CALD is therefore a term that is sensitive to the dynamic process of acculturation – where CALD individuals balance their conflicting needs for cultural preservation and cultural adaptation across changing contexts (Sawrikar and Hunt 2005; Berry, 1980).

In summary, CALD does not distinguish groups based on what they are not; it draws attention to the need for providing both linguistically and culturally appropriate services; it can be adapted to include any group; and it is sensitive to the fluid process of acculturation. However, in its efforts to overcome the relational exclusion that is implied by 'NESB', the term CALD has inadvertently created a number of other challenges.

Weaknesses of 'CALD'

'Relational exclusion': CALD has conflicting definitions which can lead to a sense of social exclusion

Although NESB was based on relatively easily identifiable demographic information – that is, language in country of origin – it nevertheless had conflicting definitions. For example, Vietnamese people were more likely to be included in this term than (Gaelic-speaking) Irish people. Such discrepancies highlight that language difference is but one feature of minority ethnic groups that may distinguish them from the majority, rather than being the *only* feature. Arguably, NESB developed negative connotations because it became a proxy for the 'non-Anglo Saxon other'.

On the other hand, CALD highlights that groups may differ from the majority because of both linguistic and cultural differences. By doing so, CALD can conveniently include the White majority when describing and celebrating Australia's multicultural milieu, but for the most part includes only minorities. The consequence of this 'malleability' is that the Anglo Saxon majority are either considered to not be a cultural or linguistic group, or that their cultural or linguistic diversity is not 'sufficient' to warrant being part of CALD.

We argue that the word 'diverse' in the term CALD carries an emotive valence for people which the factual 'language in country of origin' does not. This valence is

arguably detrimental to Australia's capacity to embrace itself as a multicultural nation. If the majority were able to celebrate their own linguistic and cultural diversity, there may be less need for other ethnic groups to push for an acknowledgment of their languages and cultures. Cultural diversity would become an intrinsic part of Australia's national identity as a multicultural nation, consistent with the aims of the policy of multiculturalism introduced after the White Australia Policy was abolished. This structural multiculturalism would manifest, for example, in the way organisations and institutions were structured, policies were designed, and practices were tailored, to reflect the way Australia's ethnic diversity contributes to its socio-cultural fabric.

Furthermore, CALD's acknowledgment of the uniqueness of different (minority) groups detracts from the fact that *in its common use*, the term still refers to the same groups as NESB – those who are *different* from the majority; it is simply less transparent about the fact that there is a majority from which others are seen to differ from. The mismatch between its function of celebrating diversity and its common categorical use for the non-Anglo Australian majority population, can still lead to relational exclusion among minority ethnic Australians who may feel both linguistically and culturally different from what constitutes being 'Australian'. Again, this undermines Australia's ability to embrace itself as a multicultural nation. In short, there is still a potential for the term CALD to produce relational exclusion, but now not just for minority groups, but also for the majority.

In addition, grouping all minority ethnic groups together as different from the majority implies that the cultures of all minority ethnic groups are more similar to each other than each is to the Anglo-Saxon culture. For example, Dutch-Australians

and German-Australians are on the whole culturally individualistic (Bond 2002; Hofstede 1980) and so are more similar to the Anglo-Australian culture¹ than they are to Chinese-Australians or Sudanese-Australians who are more collectivistic in their cultural orientation (Bond 2002; Hofstede 1980). The effect of simultaneously drawing attention to culture but also grouping all minority ethnic groups together, is that it homogenises their unique cultures and therefore undermines the term's ability to celebrate the cultural diversity to which it lays claim.

In short, CALD is a functional term, aiming to celebrate the diversity of languages and cultures in Australia. It is not a categorical term that explicitly describes a subgroup of Australians, but is nevertheless used to do so by implicitly distinguishing them as the culturally and linguistically *different*. We argue that CALD should only be used to describe Australia's multicultural makeup, and as such includes all its ethnic groups – majority and minority. CALD should not be used to describe any or all of Australia's minority ethnic groups.

'Distributional exclusion': 'CALD' groups those who experience disadvantages with those who do not which can mask the disparity in access to opportunities between ethnic groups in Australia

Minority ethnic Australians face a number of common issues, including language barriers, acculturative stress both post migration and over generations, intra-familial culture clashes, clashes with other ethnic groups, fear of authority and official processes, lack of recognition of qualifications obtained in their country of origin, low socio-economic status, lack of networks to access employment opportunities, and interpersonal and institutional racism and discrimination (Sawrikar, Griffiths, & Muir

¹ Culture has been 'fixed' here along the dichotomy of individualism and collectivism, as a possibly useful heuristic for making meaningful distinctions between groups. However, it is important that researchers and policy makers remain mindful that culture is, in fact, a dynamic and interpretative process that is in flux (Forehand & Kotchik 2002, 1996).

2008; Sawrikar & Katz 2008; Cortis, Sawrikar & Muir 2007; Katz, La Placa & Hunter 2007; Sawrikar & Hunt, 2005; Katz & Pinkerton 2003; Katz 1996). Thus it is important to have a term which can account for the common challenges faced by these groups.

CALD, at least in its common use, is superior to NESB in that it highlights how both the linguistic and cultural characteristics of a minority ethnic group may contribute to distributional exclusion. However, and similar to NESB, CALD still fails to acknowledge that *racial* differences may also contribute to distributional exclusion. By failing to acknowledge the occurrence of racialised disadvantage in access to services and opportunities, which occurs as a result of institutional racism, there is a risk of pathologising ethnic groups as if characteristics of their own culture were the main cause of their disadvantage.

Institutional racism occurs when there is disproportionate representation in organisations and institutions in governing bodies that do not reflect the multicultural demographic of the (local or national) community. It also occurs when the design and delivery of services are ethnocentric reflecting mainstream cultural values, norms, and practices, and are not appropriate or sensitive to the cultural needs of non-mainstream groups. For example, some organisations do not routinely collect data on ethnicity, reflecting a failure to acknowledge racialised disadvantage in access to services and opportunities.

Also, by including 'culture' in the term CALD, there is a risk that the same sensitivity to individual variation that is afforded to the White majority, such as across gender, age, class, sexuality, neighbourhood, or disability, is not afforded to minority ethnic Australians. There may now be a comparatively greater focus on how 'group'

characteristics such as culture impacts the behaviour of a minority ethnic Australian, which only serves to increase the effect of stereotyping, and overlook the complexity of individuals from minority ethnic groups.

Importantly, because CALD in its common use still refers to the same group as NESB (but expands on NESB by drawing attention to two characteristics of minority ethnic groups instead of one), it still groups those who experience more disadvantages with those who experience fewer disadvantages. For example, German-Australians generally do not experience the same kinds of barriers as Pakistani-Australians. By grouping them together in research, the overall size of difference between the majority and CALD groups is reduced, making it seem as though ethnic disparity is not that great, and the most vulnerable groups remain hard to reach because the differences in inequality among the various CALD groups is masked. In summary, NESB should not be used to refer to Australia's minority groups, and CALD should only be used to describe the diversity of Australia as a multicultural society.

The need for a new term

The population of minority ethnic Australian citizens is growing (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007), and the proportion of mixed race children in Australia is likely to increase in the future. We need a new term that encompasses these relatively established and newly emerging Australian groups.

This term should be able to maintain the advantages associated with CALD – that it does not distinguish a subgroup based on what they are not; that it draws attention to how language and culture may contribute to some of the issues they experience; and that it does not have explicit and fixed criteria (such as 'language in country of

origin’) so that it can be sensitive to the dynamic process of acculturation and does not essentialise or negatively affirm their minority ‘status’.

However, this term should also be able to overcome the issues associated with CALD – that it can produce relational exclusion for both the majority and minority, and that it fails to address how race may contribute to distributional exclusion for minority groups. To this end, we propose the term Australians Ethnically Diverse and Different from the Majority (AEDDM).

Strengths of AEDDM

One benefit of AEDDM is that it grants an Australian ‘sense of belonging’. For example, African Americans are not referred to as ‘people from Africa in America’. By bestowing minority groups with the title of ‘Australian’, relational exclusion may decrease.

Also, the term ‘ethnicity’ subsumes, and so can pertain to any aspect of, language, culture, or race. In this way, researchers, practitioners, and policy makers can now draw attention to any aspect of these three characteristics to explain why ethnic disparities in distributional equality and equity may be occurring. Importantly, this now shines a spotlight on the important issue of racism, either individual or institutional, rather than closing debate and discussion on this often common experience for AEDDM.

While AEDDM still celebrates the heterogeneity of cultures among minority ethnic groups that make up this category, it also clearly identifies that what groups them together is that they are different from the majority. As such, it is less likely to homogenise the unique cultures of minority groups and undermine the function to which it laid claim; an effect that occurred by simultaneously drawing attention to

culture, but also implicitly grouping them together as the different ‘other’. Also, the culture of each group is still highlighted since ethnicity subsumes culture, but implications about how similar these cultures may be to each other, but different from the majority, are less likely to occur.

AEDDM also highlights that Anglo-Saxons are an ethnic group that constitute but one (albeit large) part of Australia’s socio-cultural fabric. By doing so, it can overcome the relational exclusion CALD produces for the mainstream population. Importantly, by drawing attention to the language, culture and race of Anglo-Saxon Australians, these factors are less likely to be overlooked or failed to be considered in research.

In addition, while AEDDM makes reference to a majority group, it does not make reference to a minority group. Mostly in the discourse in the UK, minority groups are referred to as ‘minority ethnic groups’. While they comprise the minority only because of their lower population size, the very word ‘minority’ can carry a negative connotation and so distinctions based on this factual information (that is, population size) can still carry an emotive valence that, over the long term, may become negatively affirming because it becomes entrenched through official vernacular. We do however acknowledge that the term AEDDM implicitly denotes (linguistic, cultural, and/or racial) minority status to this sub-group of Australians, since their very membership to this category is based on the fact that they are not members of the (linguistic, cultural, and racial) majority group. Indeed, it is unlikely that there is one term that can fulfil the needs of AEDDM to be nationally considered and acknowledged as Australian without having to denounce or downplay their other ethnic heritages. The primary aim of the term AEDDM is not to celebrate diversity – as CALD is sufficient for this purpose – but to develop a term that explicitly identifies

the characteristics that define category membership, and as such be transparent about the distinctions between sub groups of Australians. As such, we have had to make a decision not use the term minority – which over the long term can have negative consequences and simply use the word ‘different’ instead; this is a decision that believes we have minimised any negative consequences because ‘different’ does not necessarily imply minor. Finally, and arguably most importantly, AEDDM actually identifies the group it intends to refer to and therefore it does not have conflicting definitions. It refers to all of Australia’s non-Indigenous ethnic groups other than the English-speaking Anglo-Saxon majority.

AEDDM requires a paradigm shift in which Anglo-Saxons are not seen as the culture-less reference point from which others deviate, but instead as one ethnic group in this culturally and linguistically diverse society who happen to form the majority only because of their population size, but not because they are more valuable than any other group. Overturning the status quo is not an easy task, but certainly worthwhile. Indeed, by analogy, the feminist movement was a revolution that put gender equality at the forefront of social policy. A similar capacity remains yet unfulfilled with ethnic equality in Australia.

Weaknesses of AEDDM

On a final note, we acknowledge that the term AEDDM is not ideal. There are two main issues we have identified. The first is that the term ‘ethnic’ has, in the past, been used to refer to Australia’s minority groups, and by association with racism against minority ethnic Australians who entered in the first waves after the abolition of the White Australia Policy, has become a negative word in some circumstances and among some ethnic and advocacy groups. However, as we cannot identify another

term that subsumes all three characteristics of language, culture, and race, we have chosen to use ‘ethnicity’ here.

In addition, ‘AEDDM’ is long term and acronym, and as such, may not be taken up in the social policy discourse, despite its attempt at being inclusive. At the very least, this paper offers a starting point for discussions and debate on the need for a new term, given that CALD has the capacity to incite and perpetuate cultural and social injustice.

Conclusion

CALD was introduced to address some of the issues associated with NESB. While it has some benefits over and above NESB, it inadvertently created a number of other issues. Many of these relate to the mismatch between its function of celebrating Australia’s cultural diversity, and its implicit categorical use for referring to groups different from the majority. It is important for social researchers, practitioners, and policy makers in Australia to have a term that helps meet their aims – increasing their social inclusion, and equity to services and opportunities. To this end, we propose that a new term and acronym be introduced into debates on the importance of language – ‘Australians Ethnically diverse and Different from the Majority’ (AEDDM).

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