'People love talking about racism': downplaying discrimination, and challenges to anti-racism among Eritrean migrants in Australia

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Abstract

Why may the supposed victims of racism and discrimination downplay these phenomena? This paper examines experiences of and responses to racism and discrimination among highly educated Eritrean migrants in Australia. Contrary to research findings on discrimination towards migrant groups as widely reported and impactful, most of my interlocutors seldom reported interpersonal experiences with discrimination, despite acknowledging that discrimination existed generally and vicariously. I discuss participants’ direct and indirect experiences with racism and discrimination, and identify five key reasons for downplaying and not reporting them, including limitations to perceiving and recognising these phenomena; undermining racism in Australia in comparison to other racisms; gratitude to Australians and to Australia as ‘the lucky country’; harbouring strong meritocratic values that contrasted with viewing discrimination as impactful; and dissociation from narratives of victimhood and powerlessness. Finally, I discuss how participants’ perspectives pose challenges for anti-racism scholarship and practice more broadly.

Keywords: Racism; discrimination; anti-racism; immigration; Eritrean migrants; Australia.

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1. Mikele's challenge to anti-racism

Mikele is a man in his 50s from Eritrea, who has lived in Australia for more than 15 years. He and I were conversing by a square wooden table at his Eritrean-Ethiopian café in a western suburb of Melbourne, at the end of a busy afternoon. Our conversation turned to news on racial discrimination laws in Australia, when at one point, Mikele took over the conversation, and to my surprise started articulating a passionate argument *against* reports of discrimination and racism by Eritreans and other migrants.

Racism, according to Mikele, exists everywhere in the world; this was a well-known problem. Everyone, he said, is equal according to the law, but reaching real equality will take much longer. He mentioned that there is a lot of racism in Australia, but that the situation is far worse in other countries where Eritreans have been. Drawing invisible lines on the table, he compared between western countries, which had democracy and freedom, and other countries, including in Africa, where freedoms were more limited. He described, for example, ethnic discrimination in Sudan, and exploitation of foreigners in Saudi Arabia, where "they only need you for your labour". He distinguished these examples from less overt forms of discrimination in Australia, where, you will not hear someone say 'I didn't give you the job because of your skin colour'; instead, they may at worst say something like 'I don't like you'.

Mikele thought that people exaggerate and 'cry' racism about things that may or may not be racist, for example, in employment, where one often could not know the real reason for not getting work. But he observed that people "love talking about racism"; he heard it around him all the time. He gave examples of migrants who "complained" about racism, while being responsible for the situation they are in, and said that workplace-related complaints are futile ('of course the boss would not want to employ him later on'). He told me that in many cases he would challenge those who complained about racism, because they preferred to do that rather than look at themselves. Instead, he thought, people must be self-confident, and should be able to adapt.

Still, as I learned over time, Mikele *was* familiar with discrimination in Australia. He thought that racism and discrimination were important challenges to employment, and disparaged limited stereotypical thinking and media representations of 'refugees' and 'Africans'. He also described his personal experiences of mistreatment due to being black and African, while driving a taxi or shopping, like being repeatedly approached by staff at an electronics store in Melbourne who just happened to 'check' he was okay, while letting others shop uninterrupted. And he felt particularly strongly about structural issues like racial segregation in neighbourhoods and schools.

An extensive scholarship describes the experiences of migrant and minority groups, including African migrants, with racism and discrimination in Australia as pervasive and painful (e.g., Dandy & Pe-Pua, 2015; Kwansah-Aidoo & Mapedzahama, 2018; Markus, 2016; Wickes et al., 2020). Yet here was Mikele, who despite his familiarity with discrimination, seemed to downplay its pervasiveness and significance, which contrasted with some of these findings. More puzzlingly, perhaps, he admonished some migrants for calling out discrimination, arguing against what he saw as widespread, undue, and ineffective 'complaints', while redirecting attention to personal shortcomings and responsibility. As my fieldwork with Eritrean migrants progressed, I encountered similar perspectives among other participants.

This paper examines the experiences of highly educated Eritreans living in Melbourne with racism and discrimination. Following a brief literature review and introduction to the project's background and methodology, I describe participants' direct and indirect experiences with discrimination, as well as their responses. I then identify five key reasons for downplaying discrimination, and discuss the challenges that participants pose to anti-racism more broadly.

2. Literature review

Racism and discrimination

Despite progress in contesting racism and discrimination, they remain prevalent and harmful worldwide, influencing arenas like health, employment

and more (e.g., Williams et al, 2019; Zschirnt & Ruedin, 2016). Racism can be defined as a system of oppression that creates hierarchies of superiority and inferiority based on perceived differences relating to origin and cultural background (e.g., Bonilla Silva, 1997; Williams, 1997). Racism manifests in structural, institutional, interpersonal and internalised forms, may be expressed through stereotypes, prejudice or discrimination, and results in maintaining or exacerbating unfair and avoidable inequalities (Berman & Paradies, 2010). This article focuses on discrimination, as differential and unfair treatment based on a person's group membership (Jary & Jary, 2006), due to interrelated characteristics such as 'race', ethnicity, skin colour, nationality, migration circumstances, and religion; characteristics that have been used throughout colonial histories as racial markers in constructing various forms of racisms (e.g., Grosfoguel et al., 2015: 636-7).

In Eritrea, racism has been historically associated with racial hatred, particularly under the brutalities and exploitation of Italian colonialism, from its apartheid policies to everyday relations between colonisers and colonised (Barrera, 2003). Racism has also been inherent in the hierarchies created between Eritrean ethno-linguistic groups (on ethnic distinctions see Tewolde, 2021), with the Tigrinya group as economically and politically dominant, while other groups were seen as 'backward' and excluded, most notably the Kunama minority (Mekonnen & Tronvoll, 2014: 128-164; Naty, 2001: 587-8). In this context, the closest word to racism in Tigrinya, *alyetnet* (literally ethnicism), relates strongly to prejudice and discrimination based on ethnicity and heritage (e.g., notions of 'bone' or ancestral purity) (Amanuel Elias, personal communication).

In Australia, racism is embedded in the country's settler colonial history, whose legacies continue to devastate the lives of Indigenous peoples today, manifesting in intergenerational traumas, non-recognition of Indigenous rights, poverty and poor education, health inequalities, over-incarceration and deaths in custody (Elias et al., 2021: 33-94; Lowitja, 2021). While historical racism towards Indigenous peoples relied on riots, murder and lynching, the exclusion of immigrants from non-white groups as 'inferior races' occurred

through state legislation (Jupp, 2007: 9). Racism was enshrined in the country's early immigration bills, and has since been faced by subsequent migrant generations (e.g., Elias et al., 2021; Hollinsworth, 2006; Jupp, 2007). Currently, 34% of Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds report experiencing discrimination due to skin colour, ethnicity or religion in the past year (Markus, 2021), with some groups that face more discrimination (e.g., Blair et al., 2017; Dandy & Pe-Pua, 2015; Kwansah-Aidoo & Mapedzahama, 2018; Markus, 2016; 2021; Wickes et al., 2020).

Eritreans may face especially high levels of discrimination in Australia, as African migrants who have often settled as refugees, and, many of them, as Muslims. During fieldwork, for example, panics about 'African gang' violence in Melbourne were fomented by media and politicians, which tapped onto pre-existing anxieties about African criminality in Australia. Meanwhile, Islamophobic and anti-refugee sentiments continued to pervade Australian society during that time (e.g., Blair, 2017; Markus, 2021). Still, research looking specifically at Eritreans in Australia found that relatively few people reported experiencing discrimination (Markus, 2016), while research with Eritrean migrants elsewhere points to complex experiences, including dismissals of racism (e.g., Habecker, 2011). The next section looks more closely at factors that may shape experiences and reporting of discrimination, and focuses on reasons for downplaying it.

(Not) reporting, and downplaying

Most studies about downplaying racism have focused on perpetrators from white, majority groups. Research with people from migrant and minority groups who may minimise or not report the racism directed towards them, has received less attention. Studies with minority groups have shown that individuals may consistently perceive less discrimination as directed towards themselves than towards their groups (e.g., Dunn & Nelson, 2011; Rojas-Sosa, 2016; Verkuyten, 2005). Such research has found that people may downplay racism directed towards them to enhance a sense of control and self-esteem (e.g., Ruggiero & Taylor, 1997); to avoid threats to health and social costs associated with perceiving racism, like retribution or being

labelled 'incompetent' (e.g., Dunn & Nelson, 2011; Kaiser & Miller, 2001); or, among African Americans and African Australians, as part of de-emphasising 'race', while emphasising a shared middle-class membership (Lacy, 2007; Zwangobani, 2008).

There are wide variations in reports of discrimination in Australia between racial, ethnic, national and religious groups (e.g., Ben et al., 2022; Markus, 2016; 2021), for numerous reasons, from historical contexts to the forms of racism experienced. In one study, people who spoke a language other than English at home, as well as South Asian and Middle Eastern migrants, were *more likely* to deny the existence of racism compared with Anglo-Australians, possibly as a self-protective mechanism, a way to reduce the social costs of being labelled as 'complainers', or the outcome of limited interaction with other groups (Dunn & Nelson, 2011: 595). In another study, limited reporting of racism by Asian Australians in the context of COVID-19 may have reflected lack of trust in statutory agencies, feelings that reporting would make little difference, or fears of retaliation (Kamp et al., 2021). Still, this is not the case for all minorities, with evidence that Indigenous Australians are more likely than non-Indigenous Australians to recognise discrimination as affecting them (Kamp et al., 2018).

Markus' (2016) findings are especially relevant to the current study, because they examine data from Eritreans separately from other African national groups in Australia. While 54% of the study's total sample of African Australian respondents experienced discrimination in the preceding year, these rates fell to only 19% among Eritreans, the lowest across all African groups (Markus, 2016: 63), and similar to the Australian national average (Markus, 2021: 64).[1] Markus suggests that such differential reports may be due to respondents' different lived experiences in Australia, cultural factors, visa statuses, and caution among some humanitarian migrants to engage in

[1] Rates of experiences of discrimination were the following among African respondents (Markus, 2016): South Sudan: 77%; Zimbabwe: 75%; Kenya: 67%; Ethiopia: 60%; Egypt: 53%; Sudan: 32%; Eritrea: 19%.

what could be seen as a critique of Australian society (ibid: 62). Small sample sizes may have influenced these results as well.

Research with Eritrean migrants elsewhere in the Global North reveals further variability in experiences of discrimination. For example, in Germany, younger people were more vulnerable to anti-immigration sentiments than their parents' generation (Conrad, 2012: 184), whereas in Italy, Eritreans encountered stereotypes about Africans as backward (Arnone, 2011: 521), but at least some attributed the everyday racism they faced to 'ignorance' rather than viewed it as 'real racism' (Andall, 2002: 398). In research with middle-class Eritreans and Ethiopians in the US, participants' dismissal of racism was in the context of resistance to their racialisation as black within local racial hierarchies (Habecker, 2011; and see Tewolde, 2021 in the South African context). They "consistently insisted that racism was not a problem for them", and at least some people "were well aware of racism in the US, but made a personal choice to take every encounter at face value, deciding not to let the possibility of discrimination affect them" (ibid: 1212). Their heavy interactions within their community and association with white people who shared their class background further minimised their exposure to racism (e.g., Lacy, 2007).

3. Background and methodology

This article is based on my research with Eritrean migrants in Melbourne (Ben, 2020). Eritrea, a small nation situated between Sudan, Ethiopia, Djibouti and the Red Sea in the Horn of Africa (HoA), became independent (de facto) in 1991 after a century of violent oppression by colonisers and occupiers; under Italian colonial rule (1889-1942), British Military Administration (BMA) (1942-1952), federation with Ethiopia (1952-1961), and Ethiopian occupation resisted through a national struggle of independence (1961-1991) (see more on Eritrean history in e.g., Bereketeab, 2002; Naty, 2001; Wrong, 2005). Tragically, Eritrea's independence was followed by brutal dictatorship at home, at the hands of Eritreans' own liberators, led by President Isaias Afwerki. Under Afwerki's repressive regime, the country became a militarised prison-state (e.g., Tronvoll & Mekonnen, 2014). Unending national service, a

ban on basic human freedoms, and the absence of viable future prospects, have propelled many Eritreans to flee their country. According to UNHCR figures, over half a million Eritreans are currently displaced abroad as refugees, one of the highest proportions of refugees for any nation worldwide relative to its population (UNHCR, 2021: 18). Traversing the world in search of a better life, Eritreans' risky journeys have often encompassed Sudan and Ethiopia, and extended outwards, typically to the Middle East, Europe, and North America. In Australia, a distant corner of an expanding Eritrean diaspora, over 4,300 persons born in Eritrea have settled in recent decades, of whom nearly 2,000 lived in Melbourne at the time of fieldwork (ABS, 2016).

Ethnographic fieldwork for this study took place over 14 months in 2016 – 2017, mostly in Melbourne's western suburbs and city centre. This article draws on data collected mostly through semi-structured and unstructured interviews (Kvale, 2008) conducted in English with 18 participants. It also draws on participant observation, particularly ongoing conversations with four key participants.[2] The project's focus on Eritreans emerged from my personal connections with Eritrean friends and their acquaintances, who made preliminary introductions that led to my contact with key participants.

The study focused on adults who identified as Eritrean, completed or were enrolled in tertiary education, had lived in Australia for at least three years before fieldwork, and were comfortable speaking in English (although not their first language). Study participants often shared middle-class backgrounds, as associated with their tertiary education, professional training and work backgrounds. Participants were 15 men and three women, mostly in their 30s-50s, and mainly Christians and Tigrinya speakers. They were all first-generation migrants, who migrated based on humanitarian and family reunion visas, and had lived in Australia between three and 30 years (14 them over five years). Nine participants held postgraduate degrees, five held undergraduate degrees, and four held diplomas or were enrolled as

[2] Participant names are pseudonyms, and other details were edited to maintain their anonymity. Qualifications and occupations were discussed broadly (e.g., 'a scientist') or replaced with similar ones.

undergraduate students. Twelve participants received their highest qualifications from Australian universities. Eight participants worked full-time in professional jobs, four of them in community or settlement related services. Three others worked part-time in such services, and five worked mainly in manual jobs (e.g., driving, security) (see Table 1).

As to methodological challenges, my focus on highly educated people, mostly men who were Tigrinya and Christians, makes this research less reflective of the experiences of people from other groups. Additionally, my foreignness and whiteness within Eritrean circles, and not using participants' first languages, may have limited our conversations. As black people, participants could have been reluctant to discuss discrimination with a white researcher; and it is possible or even likely that were I black, they would have shared their experiences more extensively (e.g., Essed, 1991; Mapedzahama & Kwansah-Aidoo, 2014). I aimed to mitigate these challenges by spending extensive time periods with participants, building relationships and trust, revisiting questions as the project developed, and collecting rich data. While I generally avoided direct questions about discrimination, to see whether participants raised it themselves (e.g., when asked about barriers to work and social connections), I did ask about discrimination where it had not come up otherwise. To comprehensively analyse discrimination and racism, I considered both the terms that participants used and the definitions discussed earlier. The study received approval from Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee (2016-180).

4. Experiencing and responding to discrimination

I. Direct and interpersonal

Participants described various direct, interpersonal experiences with unfair treatment due to being Muslim, black, African, or a former refugee. Reference to such experiences were uncommon, and the unfair treatment participants described was usually blatant and verbal. Participants rarely described these experiences using terms like 'discrimination' or 'racism', but often as 'bad' or 'negative' experiences. They usually saw these situations as uncommon and easily manageable, and often dismissed their offenders as ignorant. A

frequent response was avoiding confrontation, although some people engaged in longer conversations or even aimed to 'educate' their offenders.

Some taxi drivers narrated short, hostile encounters in their taxis. Abel, a long-term driver in his 40s, depicted hostilities as a nuisance to endure, and refrained from altercation. He described how people have said negative things to him, like told him that Australia was better than where he came from. He considered these encounters negative, but suggested that sometimes his offenders 'did not mean anything bad'. One time, several girls inquired through the taxi's window about his background, then shouted at him: "Go back where you came from!" Such people were "not in my level", Abel said, and he was adamant that they could not get under his skin. Another driver, Fikru, also in his 40s, described being verbally abused by a passenger who had mistaken him to be Muslim. Fikru dismissed this passenger as an 'idiot' who talked 'rubbish'. He said this incident was 'nothing' to him, and that he did not care about such incidents or when people said that because of their skin colour they were different to him. Such incidents were seen by Abel and Fikru as minor individual exceptions to the general friendliness they encountered in Australia. They saw responsibility for racist behaviour as individual, beginning and ending with a few 'bad apples' (Goldberg, 2015: 64).

Of the situations participants described, unfair treatment due to being Muslim was relatively common, and the four Muslim participants all described experiences with discrimination in Australia. Saleh, a man in his 40s, portrayed in one of our walks a nice conversation that he shared with a fellow passenger on a tram during a long nocturnal ride. When they were parting ways, however, as Saleh told his interlocutor his name, the man grew aggravated, and began saying "rude things" about Muslims, telling Saleh "I have a problem with you Muslims!". Seeking further confrontation, he shouted after Saleh to "Come over here!", yet Saleh walked away. Saleh let out a hearty laughter when I asked about the sudden turn of events that night. "Can you believe this?" he asked me rhetorically, "This was the funniest thing I've ever heard". He quite literally laughed off this experience, as a ridiculous encounter with a strange person.

Two Muslim women participants, Nur and Fatimah, both reported an exceptionally high number of discriminatory incidents, particularly for being visibly Muslim (both wore hijab). Their long residence in Australia and socially active orientations likely increased their awareness of racism too, while gender may have shaped their readiness to portray vulnerable moments, something Eritrean men participants barely let out. Still, both also downplayed their experiences with discrimination.

Nur, a manager in her 60s with a rich history of social and community involvement, interacted with her offenders playfully. She was hopeful about possibilities for social transformation, and aimed to educate them and break down barriers. Some of the stories she shared were about her relationship with an Australian (white, Anglo) family, who had been her neighbours, and about contesting their assumptions about Muslims and black people. She told me about confronting Rick, a member of the family with whom she had an affectionate relationship, after he said to her 'I don't like black people'. Nur responded: "I tell him 'Yeah, I know you are a racist, redneck racist, so? It's not a problem at all… But why do you talk to me? Don't talk to me Rick from now on. I'm black yeah?'. Later, she sat with him and explained why his words were unacceptable. Drawing on this example, she said that people might *seem* racially discriminatory, while the real issue could be addressed through education and exposure.

By referring to perpetrators as 'not in my level' (Abel), an 'idiot' who talked 'rubbish' (Fikru), or a 'redneck' (Nur), participants, who were themselves highly educated and aimed to join the local middle class, emphasised (and undermined) their offenders' motivations as based on ignorance and class, while de-emphasising racism. Their accounts resonated with those of Filipino migrants in Sydney, who by rationalising racism as ignorance, positioned themselves more favourably than their perpetrators, whom they cast as inferior and uneducated (Aquino, 2016: 113-114), and with those of Black people from middle-class backgrounds in the UK, who used class as a

spectacle for looking at inequalities, while de-emphasising race and racism (Meghji & Saini, 2018).

Participants also invoked the importance of education and class when they encountered assumptions that they were uneducated or not intelligent. As educated professionals, whose class backgrounds and educational achievements were often denied visibility and meaningful expression in Australia, such assumptions seemed particularly hurtful. For example, Abel and Fikru lamented disrespect they encountered in the taxi, and seemed more disturbed by class-based assumptions than racial, religious or migration-based discrimination, possibly because these assumptions challenged the class status they wished to consolidate (e.g., Lacy, 2007; Zwangobani, 2008).

II. Indirect: vicariously, institutionally and structurally

While reference to direct, interpersonal experiences with discrimination was uncommon, participants were widely familiar with discrimination vicariously, as existing broadly in society and through other people they knew (e.g., Verkuyten, 2005). Solomon, for example, mentioned during our hangouts that he has not encountered discrimination personally, but heard that some employers may have stereotypes about African migrants as 'naughty' employees, whereas some of his friends have been mistreated at work because of their blackness or country of origin. Likewise, stories about how CV name changes 'miraculously' improved employer call back rates were common knowledge.

Anticipation that discrimination may occur could inform decisions about areas such as getting employment. Solomon and Fatimah each knew people who were anxious to apply for work, for example, because of anticipating accent-based discrimination and Islamophobia. Similarly, Habte had anticipated that discrimination would limit his children's work chances, and taught them that they had to stand out to mitigate the possible impact of looking different and having migrant parents. Reflecting related concerns, Mikele once asked me to join his meeting with a potential customer, as the customer may have "ideas

about Africans" and it might help if he saw Mikele with a "European guy" (me). By associating with whiteness, Mikele aimed to enhance his credibility and pre-empt possibilities for discrimination. These examples speak to a widespread familiarity with discrimination as a *possibility*, to be circumvented in daily life. These accounts demonstrate the significance of indirect exposure to discrimination, and support studies where migrants have reported more racism generally than personally. Eritrean tight-knit social circles contributed to learning about racism vicariously too.

Some participants, such as Nur and Mikele, discussed discrimination in relation to institutions and social structures. While largely downplaying the significance of discrimination interpersonally, they expressed serious concerns about wider, less visible, mechanisms of exclusion, in areas such as housing, schooling, and employment. Those who pointed to these structures and processes tended to be longer-term Melburnians, suggesting that recognising such discrimination may evolve with lived experience. Nur and Mikele, for instance, had both lived in Melbourne more than 15 years. Nur expressed deep frustration about her experience with applying for work, which kept her away from her long-cultivated profession.

> Nur: I put more than 15 applications and the answer is the same: 'we regret dadadadadadadada'. OK, call me for an interview, call me for anything. But you haven't seen me, you haven't, and imagine you know for someone who [lists some of her achievements] what else should I do? You know so that's, it's completely discrimination. […] Otherwise, there is no reason for someone who don't… My name is [pronounces full Arabic name and surname]. So that [surname] in itself is enough [laughs] […]

Nur's frustration was seemingly augmented by the non-negotiable nature of this system, rendering her skills at navigating interpersonal situations irrelevant. Gatekeepers would not even call her. Nur described similar work discrimination as affecting younger Eritreans she knew, who could not get

work despite graduating from university with higher marks than their Anglo peers, who were all in employment.

Mikele expressed particularly grave concerns about segregation in residence and schooling. “This is the real discrimination”, he asserted. He found the concentration of migrants in public housing to be especially upsetting. He saw it as a form of racial segregation, and thought it was most problematic that young people had no good role models. “Look at how Melbourne is divided”, he urged me: east against west – the eastern part of town is white and European, while Africans and others live in the west. He mentioned his concerns about migrants’ inability to successfully integrate in the community, disadvantage and criminality, high unemployment, and self-harm. He shared the painful stories of young people whom he had known, who died from drug abuse. His voice rising with anger and pain, he told me that “the community are losing young people over there”.

While institutional and structural discrimination can be notoriously abstract, in these experiences they were also very visceral and real. Nur and Mikele have lived with their aftermaths of abandoned work aspirations and devastated young lives. Their references to ‘real’ and ‘completely’ discriminatory actions also contrasted these experiences with interpersonal discrimination, which they and others felt more comfortable navigating.

5. Reasons for downplaying and not reporting discrimination

I. ‘I can’t say’: perception, recognition and interpretation

In what follows, I discuss five key explanations for not reporting discrimination, and for downplaying it, among my interlocutors. This discussion contributes to research on why migrants may under-report discrimination, and about gaps between acknowledging discrimination generally and downplaying it as personally significant.

Discrimination in Australia can be hard to perceive and recognise: it is widely denied, largely subtle, especially compared with its historical predecessors, and may be ambiguous and complex to interpret (e.g., Dunn et al., 2011;

Walton et al., 2013). Participants found it challenging to say whether it actually occurred, particularly recent migrants such as Nahom, Zahara and Yoel, who arrived in Australia approximately 4.5-7 years before fieldwork. Their accounts, and those of longer-term migrants below, suggest that recognising racism in Australia may be more limited on arrival, and increase with experience over time.

Nahom, a 30-something year old engineer, gave this hesitant response to my question about whether he felt like discrimination or racism was ever an issue for Eritreans in Australia: “Ummm… It’s a tough question… I can’t, I don’t know. It’s really hard to answer this one. In what sense can we say… I can say, I think it’s okay, we are okay with it I think.” After another pause, he added that if a job application was unsuccessful it may be because of something that the person applying needed to understand or to follow, “and it’s very hard to say, or to quantify, or to determine it’s racism.” He continued, “For example, I applied for many jobs but I’m not successful, though I know I can do it. But, is that because of my… Racism? I can’t say, I don’t know, I can’t say.”

Participants knew that they were limited in recognising discrimination, particularly where it may have been more subtle, and were reluctant to call out discrimination unless certain. In relation to work, the motives behind decisions about hiring and promotions were hard to know. As a punishable offence, discrimination could be especially hard to identify, whereas (mis)identifying it could bear severe consequences. In this epistemic minefield, participants mostly took interactions at face value and limited their interpretations. Zahara, a nurse in her 30s, was familiar with discrimination in general, but had not experienced it personally. “You hear people say that, racism and this, [that] of course they would employ someone else before you, things like that but, I can’t say it happened to me.” When she heard employers say ‘no we can’t hire you’, she simply took it to mean that the position was not available (see likewise in Habecker, 2011: 1212).

Yoel, who has lived in Australia for almost 5 years, said about discrimination and racism: “Um... Yeah I heard people say those things, but to be honest, I can only talk from my experience, and in my experience I never saw that.” He then added, “But I’m not saying there is none”. Again, like Zahara and other participants, he alludes to a gap between being familiar with discrimination vicariously, and not having experienced it personally. Yoel thought that when some people experienced an act of discrimination, it was easy for them to see everything else as discrimination. He approached it differently, though:

> Yoel: [I]n my experience, for example when I don’t get a job, I’ll say I don’t get it because I’m not qualified for it […]. But someone would say ‘Nah, they didn’t give [it to] you because you are black’ or something like that, but I don’t see it like that. I mean, for me to call it discrimination it has to be so clearly. But, in my old country when I go for a job I might not find a job because of so many reasons it’s not just the discrimination. So, literally discrimination I cannot say I have experienced one. And the people that I met was very very friendly.

Yoel and other participants defaulted to explain adverse work outcomes in terms of personal shortcomings, while calling something discrimination only when clearly so. Yoel did, however, acknowledge his own limited ability in interpreting people’s intentions, thus not ruling discrimination out entirely. Right after his aforementioned narrative, he added an observation about his inability to ‘read’ people’s faces, and to tell sometimes whether the friendliness he encountered was genuine. Unlike in Eritrea, where he could easily tell whether people were happy with him, he found that in Australia “it’s hard to read [faces] because everyone is… Everyone have got the potential of showing a smiley face, even when they’re not happy.”

II. Other racisms

Yoel’s comparisons with Eritrea also bring us to consider how other contexts shape perspectives on racism in Australia. Racism in Australia was undermined when compared with other racisms, from elsewhere and from the

past. These other racisms, usually overt and sometimes freshly in mind, were important frames against which discrimination in Australia was perceived, defined, normalised, and dismissed. Difficulties met in Australia were usually viewed as minor and negligible – even laughable or pitiful to some – compared with the hardships and horrors of Eritreans' histories of survival.

In Eritrea, as I discussed earlier, racism referred more to blatant discrimination, while elsewhere, for example while living in Sudan, some participants described incomparable realities to Australia, and profound difficulties faced because of their background. Fikru, for example, told me about his life as a 'second-class' citizen, about difficulties Christians encountered due to religion, and explicit discrimination in relation to work. Nur and Habte, who came through Sudan more than 20 years ago, recounted universities' open discrimination against Eritrean students. There were other stories where discrimination was a normalised element of Eritreans' everyday lived circumstances: as visibly different refugees; with exploitation and violence faced in camps, on the road, or in cities (see also Mengiste, 2019; Treiber, 2014). Subtle expressions of racism in Australia, or vague forms such as 'I don't like you', as Mikele mentioned earlier, were swiftly undermined or vindicated when juxtaposed with such blatant experiences from elsewhere.

III. Gratitude in the 'lucky country'

Having fled one of the world's most oppressive regimes, many participants felt profound gratitude towards Australia and Australians for helping them survive and start anew. Australia, the 'lucky country' (Wagner & Childs, 2006), was overwhelmingly seen as peaceful, easy to live in and full of opportunities. This statement by Nur captures such wider sentiments: "I really love Australia. I respect Australia. It's a country that gave me the opportunity to rebuild my life." Such an appreciation has been discussed in other research with migrants from HoA countries (e.g., Tilbury & Rapley, 2004: 60-61).

But gratitude and a sense of being privileged by others could also have their downsides. Migrants could be widely expected to be grateful, by locals and migrants alike, while the privilege of living in Australia may be seen as a

reason why migrants should accept "whatever opportunities they were offered and not complain or be unappreciative 'because they could always go back to where they came from'" (Wagner & Childs, 2006: 56). In the case of my interlocutors, such 'complaining', which I discuss more in the next section, was doubly admonished: both in Australia, where minorities could be derided for invoking discrimination (Dunn & Nelson, 2011), but also as going against the Eritrean ethos of perseverance amid 'real' struggles, which precluded the 'negligible' ones encountered in Australia. Relatedly, participants may have also felt awkward to 'complain' about racism to me, a white person whom some of them saw as an Australian.

Solomon and his friend observed that some Eritreans were 'perpetually' grateful for being privileged by (especially white) Australians, and for being undeserving of what they have gained. Solomon suggested that after arriving as refugees, some people believed Australians were entitled to do 'whatever they liked' because it was 'their country'. Hage describes similar observations, where first generation migrants may engage in discourses that "even legitimate the racism towards them", saying things like "'well, it is their country… you know, we have to accept that'" (Hage, 2008: 503). By that logic, what sense did it make to speak against those who had so generously let them in?

IV. Meritocratic values

Another significant reason for downplaying discrimination had to do with harbouring meritocratic values. Meritocracy is the idea, advanced within neoliberalism, that hard working, skilled individuals can succeed where opportunities are equal and plentiful, and that we have reached a 'level playing field', where discrimination hardly or no longer matters, and race is not a fundamental barrier to success (e.g., Littler, 2018: 2, 8-10). Likewise in Australia, it is assumed that with skill, qualifications and lots of hard work "things will work out" for migrants (Wagner & Childs, 2006: 58-59). Meritocracy is at odds with the persistent nature of discrimination and racism, and has been widely critiqued as a myth, for proclaiming equality while in fact obscuring and sustaining inequalities (e.g., Davis, 2007; Goldberg, 2015;

Littler, 2018). Nevertheless, different migrant groups espouse meritocratic ideals in striving for upward social mobility; and some may deny discrimination as part of claiming meritocratic values, and their associated middle-class status (Fox et al, 2015: 738-739).

Participants had strong beliefs in merit, and particularly in hard work, as critical to succeeding in Australia. As professionals, who sought to resume their professions and further social mobility and status in Australia, they had especially high stakes in the possibility of meritocracy. They frequently pointed to individual shortcomings in explaining why some people were less successful than others. One common view was that raising discrimination aimed to shift attention from what was really at stake: personal weaknesses, such as incompetence, unwillingness to work hard or adjust, and possibly a poor moral character. Mikele, for example, contested the significance of discrimination by identifying Eritreans who had successfully accessed local opportunities, as proof that such opportunities were available to the right person. His point, he said, was not that racism did not exist, but that success was possible *regardless*. His examples focused on success stories that, he argued, showed that other factors mattered beyond discrimination, including hard work and ambition, taking risks, and creating collaborations.

Several participants dismissed reports of discrimination as undue 'complaints' and 'excuses'. Mikele, as mentioned earlier, saw 'complaining' as a diversion from looking at oneself and thought that people exaggerate and 'cry' racism about things that may not be racist. Mebrahtu, a driver in his 40s, told me "I don't see in [the] taxi any discrimination. Honestly, I've never seen racism. There are some people who complain, but I don't know that's racism… just general complaints". He argued that migrants incorrectly invoked racism, whereas he thought it was "prejudice more than racism…" Fikru similarly argued against 'complaints' and 'excuses', and against professionals who quickly raised discrimination once they encountered challenges to resuming their careers. "And from this issue what they say is 'this is discrimination'. That's not discrimination. That's why always I am against of this. You have to start from the scratch and show them who you are […]." As in other studies,

participants saw invoking discrimination as a convenient excuse for personal shortcomings, such as a lack of confidence or skills (e.g., Meghji & Saini, 2018; Rojas-Sosa, 2016; Verkuyten, 2005).

Merit-based arguments against discrimination as 'complaining' were sometimes taken further by people who focused on what they saw as migrants' poor moral character, in a critique that could converge with politically conservative anti-migrant discourses. This involved 'exposing' some migrants who allegedly tried to take advantage of their benevolent host society. One particularly strong critique came from Yoel. He described migrants as people who 'abused the system' and depended heavily on government benefits, while 'always speaking about discrimination', in contrast to hard working locals. Hard work, in Yoel's and others' accounts, was repeatedly construed as the means to social mobility; a proven way of carving out a rightful place in Australia. In promoting hard work and challenging claims about discrimination, participants like Yoel may have claimed for themselves such a place (e.g., Aquino, 2016; Verkuyten, 2005), as people who relied on merit to earn what they had, like other locals and without special advances. As such, scolding 'complainers' may have also been a way to limit what narratives were promulgated about Eritreans more widely, dissociating from narratives about migrants who 'complain' and have been fixed outside the white, middle-class 'mainstream' that many wished to join.

V. Victimhood and power

'Why would the supposed victims of discrimination deny discrimination?', ask Fox et al. (2015: 729) in their study of East European migrants in the UK. This question captures a wider puzzlement in research with migrant and minority groups who deny or downplay discrimination, and might have been similarly asked about Eritreans. Yet Eritreans' answers to this question bring us to confront its problematic supposition; the 'supposed victims' of discrimination hardly saw themselves as victims at all (see also Aquino, 2016). Participants distanced themselves from narratives of powerlessness and victimhood, and instead highlighted their and others' abilities and responsibilities for action and change (see also Meghji & Saini, 2018; Rojas-Sosa, 2016). They appeared

reticent to name discrimination as occurring and important in their lives, thus denying it such place and power, while keen to assert their own control instead. By unnaming racism, they may have also contested the unfavourable place accorded to them within local racial hierarchies where they were often racialised as black, African migrants, labels that could clash with commonplace identifications based on ethnicity and nation (e.g., Habecker, 2011; Tewolde, 2021; and see Ben, 2020: 12; 38-41).

Like Mikele and Fikru as discussed earlier, participants called for practical actions that seem to have worked for others, emphasising merit-based strategies such as hard work, cultivation of skill, learning, and seizing opportunities. Like Verkuyten's (2005: 81-82) participants, they located themselves within a discourse of real opportunities for social mobility in Australia, as achievable through these strategies.

6. Challenges to anti-racism

Eritreans' perspectives on racism, and their reasons for not reporting and downplaying discrimination, pose several challenges for anti-racism scholarship (e.g., Bonnett, 2000) more broadly. First, my interlocutors' narratives push anti-racism research and practice to consider how complex social contexts, cultural factors and past experiences intersect to affect our experience and response to discrimination. Researchers have engaged in similar discussions about the 'cultural repertoires' that frame responses to discrimination among different groups (e.g., Lamont & Fleming, 2005; Lamont et al., 2016), and the importance of specific, localised, temporal and group contexts in doing anti-racism (e.g., Bonnett, 2000; Nelson & Dunn, 2016). Eritreans' accounts point to how time since migration may influence the ability to perceive discrimination, and how pre-existing conceptions and experiences of discrimination can shape present views. Their difficulties in recognising and responding to subtle and structural racism, call us to prioritise explicating and addressing these forms.

Second, some of my interlocutors' practices go *against* received, institutional anti-racist practices that centre on reporting racism, including not perceiving,

unrecognising, and downplaying racism; harbouring meritocratic values that are at odds with addressing discrimination; and even discouraging others from voicing their grievances. These responses kept racism unnamed and uncontested, which may support, however indirectly, existing power structures and inequalities. Moreover, when participants did encounter racism, they were likely to under-report it, which limits assessing the prevalence and impact of racism that could inform anti-racism.

Third, participants were also, simultaneously, engaging in and calling for other effective actions that could *transcend* racism. Such individual responses to racism have been described as 'everyday anti-racism' (Aquino, 2016; 2020), and comprise already existing forms of anti-racism beyond institutional, programmatic efforts (e.g., Aquino, 2020; Elias et al., 2021: 319-351). Participants' everyday responses included quotidian practices such as conversations and confrontations, and actions to pre-empt racism. They also included the broader, pragmatic, merit-based strategies discussed earlier, where hard work, skill and education were seen as avenues around possibilities of racism. Similar strategies have been found among Filipinos in Sydney, who used class and social mobility to transcend racism (Aquino, 2016: 106), and African American elites, who saw competence, intellect and education as the most effective anti-racism strategies and as their 'ticket' out of exclusion (Lamont & Fleming, 2005: 36).

Fourth, the perspectives I discussed place contradiction and ambivalence more firmly within discussions about the nature and boundaries of anti-racism. These include the contrast between acknowledging the existence of racism generally and tending to downplay it interpersonally. Moreover, by leaving racism unnamed and uncontested while carving out individual pathways to possibly transcend it, participants helped sustaining inequalities while also working against them. Other contradictions concern the analytical relevance of anti-racism itself to thinking about participants' practices. Participants' practices could be seen as anti-racist in terms of their desired outcomes (e.g., obtaining better work), because they can contribute to creating the kind of society that racism has precluded, and work to reach "for that space *beyond*

racism" (Hamaz, 2008: 40). However, as long as such outcomes are negotiated through severely unequal processes, we may struggle to consider them anti-racist. Meanwhile, without invoking racism, or clear anti-racist intent, participants' actions can perhaps be seen more as an 'anti-racism without racism', or an 'anti-racism without anti-racism' (Paradies, 2016: 9). As a final point, describing my interlocutors as 'anti-racists', despite their reluctance to openly invoke and contest racism, raises ethical and political dilemmas as well.

7. Conclusion

Beginning with Mikele's argument against reporting discrimination and racism, this paper examined how Eritrean migrants in Melbourne experience and respond to racism and discrimination; why they may not report discrimination and may downplay its significance; and the challenges that such responses pose to anti-racism.

Participants described direct, interpersonal experiences with unfair treatment due to being black, African, a former refugee, and particularly due to being Muslim. Most participants, however, made few references to such experiences, and the discrimination they described was usually blatant and verbal. A common response to interpersonal discrimination was downplaying its significance; participants saw such situations as easily manageable, and tended to dismiss their perpetrators and undermine their motivations in terms of ignorance and class. Contra to interpersonal discrimination, participants acknowledged the significance of indirect exposure to discrimination. They showed familiarity with racism as existing generally and vicariously, and worked to pre-empt it as a possibility, whereas several longer-term Melburnians also expressed serious concerns about structural racism. My interlocutors' difficulties in recognising and responding to subtle and structural racism, mark them as significant for future anti-racism efforts.

I identified five key reasons for not reporting discrimination and racism and for downplaying them among participants. These include limitations to perceiving and recognising these phenomena; undermining racism in Australia in

comparison to other racisms; deep gratitude to Australians and to Australia as 'the lucky country'; harbouring strong meritocratic values that contrasted with views of discrimination as impactful; and dissociation from narratives of victimhood and powerlessness. These reasons add to research on why migrants may under-report discrimination, and about gaps between acknowledging discrimination generally and downplaying its significance, especially (inter)personally. Eritreans' accounts also add to scholarship on racialised minorities worldwide whose responses to racism challenge dominant approaches to anti-racism (e.g., Lamont et al., 2016), and may be put into further dialogue with this scholarship.

Lastly, I discussed how Eritreans' perspectives challenge anti-racism scholarship to expand the scope of its inquiry and practice: by pushing anti-racism to further consider intersecting contexts, cultural factors and past experiences; by opposing received institutional anti-racist practices centred on reporting racism; by engaging in effective, already existing, everyday actions that could transcend racism without confronting it; and, finally, by foregrounding contradiction and ambivalence within discussions about the nature and boundaries of anti-racism.

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Table 1: Participant demographics

Name*	Gender	Age (years)	Years in Australia	Highest education**	Profession***	Current occupation ****
Abel	Male	40s	20+	Masters/ PhD	Management / business	Driving, engineering
Daniel	Male	50s+	5–10	BA/ Diploma	Arts/ humanities	Security, driving
Dawit	Male	40s	5–10	Masters/ PhD	Science	Interpreting, maintenance
Fatimah	Female	40s	20+	BA/ Diploma	Healthcare	Education
Fikru	Male	40s	20+	BA/ Diploma	Engineering	Driving, engineering
Habte	Male	50s+	20+	BA/ Diploma	Arts/ humanities	Interpreting
Henok	Male	40s	3–5	Masters/ PhD	Management / business	Security, interpreting
Mebrahtu	Male	40s	10–20	BA/ Diploma	Management / business	Driving
Meron	Male	20s–30s	3–5	Masters/ PhD	Finance/ economics	Driving
Mikele	Male	50s+	10–20	BA/ Diploma	Management / business	Maintenance, business
Nahom	Male	20s–30s	5–10	BA/ Diploma	Science	Engineering
Nathanel	Male	20s–30s	3–5	Masters/ PhD	Engineering	Engineering
Negash	Male	50s+	20+	Masters/ PhD	Science	Community professional, education
Nur	Female	50s+	20+	Masters/ PhD	Science	Community professional
Saleh	Male	40s	5–10	Masters/ PhD	Science	Interpreting, community professional
Solomon	Male	50s+	5–10	BA/ Diploma	Finance/ economics	Community professional
Yoel	Male	20s–30s	3–5	Masters/ PhD	Finance/ economics	Finance
Zahara	Female	20s–30s	5–10	BA/ Diploma	Healthcare	Healthcare professional

* Pseudonym.

** Highest education attained (including underway or incomplete).

*** Area of training, highest qualifications and/or main work experience.

**** Main occupation at the time of the research.

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Fatimah	Female	40s	20+	BA/ Diploma	Healthcare	Education
Fikru	Male	40s	20+	BA/ Diploma	Engineering	Driving, engineering
Habte	Male	50s+	20+	BA/ Diploma	Arts/ humanities	Interpreting
Henok	Male	40s	3–5	Masters/ PhD	Management / business	Security, interpreting
Mebrahtu	Male	40s	10–20	BA/ Diploma	Management / business	Driving
Meron	Male	20s–30s	3–5	Masters/ PhD	Finance/ economics	Driving
Mikele	Male	50s+	10–20	BA/ Diploma	Management / business	Maintenance, business
Nahom	Male	20s–30s	5–10	BA/ Diploma	Science	Engineering
Nathanel	Male	20s–30s	3–5	Masters/ PhD	Engineering	Engineering
Negash	Male	50s+	20+	Masters/ PhD	Science	Community professional, education
Nur	Female	50s+	20+	Masters/ PhD	Science	Community professional
Saleh	Male	40s	5–10	Masters/ PhD	Science	Interpreting, community professional
Solomon	Male	50s+	5–10	BA/ Diploma	Finance/ economics	Community professional
Yoel	Male	20s–30s	3–5	Masters/ PhD	Finance/ economics	Finance
Zahara	Female	20s–30s	5–10	BA/ Diploma	Healthcare	Healthcare professional

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