

INDIAN INTERNATIONAL STUDENT SAFETY IN MELBOURNE AND THE VICTORIA POLICE – THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CRISIS AND THE PERCEPTIONS THAT PROPELLED IT

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Abstract: The international education sector is a major export earning industry for the Australian economy according to the Australian Government. It is also central to the nation's international relations ambitions. However, Australia's reputation as a safe and welcoming environment has been questioned following a series of highly publicised assaults against international students, particularly Indian nationals studying in Melbourne. This study analyses the effects of the Victoria Police public communications response in 2009 and 2010 to the assaults. In particular, did the Victoria Police Commissioner's communication response to the assaults positively influence attitudes and perceptions within the Indian international student community and the media? The tools applied in this study originate within a range of traditions in risk communication theory including heuristic and systematic information processing methods, public relations including best practice and dialogic theory, critical discourse analysis, and media content analysis. This study demonstrates that police communications failed to positively influence perceptions and can be seen to have amplified negative perceptions due to a combination of messages and messaging methods that discount theories of risk perception and information processing.

Keywords: Indian, Students, Assaults, Police, Melbourne, Media

CONTEXTUALISING INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA

The international education sector is a major export earning industry for the Australian economy and is central to the nation's international relations ambitions. However, Australia's reputation as a safe and welcoming environment was questioned following a series of assaults against international students, particularly Indian nationals studying in Mel-

bourne in 2009-2010. The communication response by the Victorian Police to the assaults is the focus of this study. Applying primarily risk communication theory and critical discourse analysis as well as a frame analysis of media coverage, this study investigates the perceptions of the Victoria police communications to the assaults.

In the 2009-10 financial year, the Australian international education services sector generated \$18.6 billion to the Australian economy. It is Australia's largest export sector according to Australian Government data, easily surpassing personal travel services and professional and management consulting services. Statistics show that international student enrolments peaked in 2009 and 2010, with more than 620,000 foreign nationals enrolled in educational institutions across Australia. International students with Indian nationality were (and continue to be) a highly significant demographic within the sector constituting approximately one sixth of the total international student enrollment numbers in 2010, second only to Chinese nationals. Data shows that just over 100,000 international students from India were enrolled in Australian educational institutions in 2010. The State of Victoria was the destination of choice for most, with close to 46,000 enrolling there. This figure is more than double the number than for New South Wales. In total, close to 91,000 international students generated almost \$6 billion in income in 2009-10 financial year for the State of Victoria. International students are also significant financial contributors to the institutions where they study (Australian Education International, 2010a, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c). A 2009 Australian Senate enquiry into international student welfare stated that, "the average proportion of total revenue in higher education derived from overseas student fees is 15 per cent" (Education Employment and Workplace Relations References Committee, 2009, p. 11).

In addition to the sector's contributions to earned export income, international education is also a strategic tool that supports Australia's diplomatic ambitions and international relations. A speech given in 2009 by the Minister for Education, Employment, Workplace Relations and Social Inclusion and the current Australian Prime Minister, the Hon. Julia Gillard, drives home the tactical importance of the international education sector to the nation:

[I]nternational students do much more than contribute to our economy and create jobs...People coming to Australia to study and Australians studying abroad promote cross cultural experiences that benefit us both now and in the future, building understanding that underpins tolerance and stability here and abroad. The relationships formed by students support long-lasting diplomatic, research and business links...Many [students] have gone on to be leaders in their own countries and the contacts and relationships they forged as young students have proved of invaluable benefit to us (2009).

Recent student satisfaction surveys show that the majority of international students are satisfied with their study experiences in Australia (Australian Education International, 2010c; Evaluations Survey, 2010). Significantly, the majority of international students who graduate find employment in an area related to their field of study and at levels similar to their domestic Australian cohort (Australian Education International, 2010b). A study conducted by Victoria University on the issue of community safety for international students in Melbourne found that while the majority of international students say they felt safe, almost half believed that international students were not as safe as their Australian counterparts. "The odds of international students having this belief were 1.8 times greater than those for domestic students" (Babacan et al., 2010, p. 3).

In response to the publicity surrounding the assaults, Victoria Police issued media releases and spoke directly with journalists to address public concerns. Their comments were frequently quoted and referred to as part of the overall media coverage of the assaults. This paper argues that those communications and in particular the statement made by the then Victoria Police Commissioner was central to heightened perceptions of risk of assault as well as claims of racism made by the Indian and international student community. Theories central to risk communications and information processing are able to demonstrate how the Indian community perceived the assaults within the Australian context and how an international diplomatic crisis developed over a relatively short period of time. In addition, applying critical discourse analysis theory techniques to the Victoria Police Commissioners statement enables issues of power and agency to be addressed.

REVIEWING RISK THEORY TRADITIONS

Theories of risk and the development of strategies to manage risk, including communication campaigns, tap into powerful traditions originating in distinct schools of thought and practice. Each approach offers different insights into a particular risk scenario and provides a set of tools that support a critical analysis of the management of a risk issue. Two concepts –systematic information processing and heuristics – stand out as potentially valuable tools for investigating the impact of the risk communication strategies employed by the Victoria Police in relation to the assaults against Indian students.

The systematic information processing approach is often viewed as ‘technico-scientific’. It relies on an evidence-based methodology where social phenomena are investigated using empirical and quantifiable practices. Data is gathered to expose probabilities and explain risk events. In this epistemology, the explanation is often delivered by an ‘expert’ and received by the non-expert general public (Slovic, 1987). For example, the assaults against Indian international students in Melbourne can be seen as a ‘hazard’ whereby people are being physically harmed by others. The assault can be analysed empirically using a systematic science-based approach. The scientific output from the analyses could then be used by experts, such as police officers, as part of a strategy to address the risk. However, risk theory informs the practitioner that the use of this strategy alone is not likely to meet with success. This is because social actors, such as students, are likely to interpret the ‘hazard’ quite differently to the expert. (See for example Fischhof, 1995; Plough & Krimsky, 1987; Slovic, 1987.) The way in which a hazard is perceived by individuals, groups, organisations and nations is dependent upon a range of complex variables that are not necessarily (or even often) associated with the technico-scientific approach (Slovic, 1987). For example, Singer and Endreny note that individuals have a selective concern with danger: “Automobile driving, for example, often inspires relatively little concern, despite its risks, while air travel tends to drop dramatically after acts of airline terrorism” (cited in Freudenburg, Coleman, Gonzales, & Helgeland, 1996, p. 32).

Key factors that influence an individual’s attitude to risk can be interpreted within risk communication theory categories of: uncertainty, likelihood, newness, catastrophic potential, dread, voluntariness, controllability and trust (Gray & Ropeik, 2002). An individual’s attitudes and beliefs are shaped not only by reflecting on empirical evidence but also on pre-existing beliefs, values and experiences (Trumbo, 1999). These attitudes and beliefs are in turn shaped by forces such as historical or economic narratives (Tierney, 1999). Thus the construction of what it means to die in a car crash rather than a plane, or in the case of this paper, to be assaulted, can be seen as a product of a dynamic socio-cultural process whereby the symbolic meaning of ‘assault’ is situated within the cultural and social world (Tierney, 1999).

FROM HAZARD TO RISK TO DISASTER – THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CRISIS 2009-2010

Applying some of the tools available in risk communications theory to the Victoria Police communication activities which addressed the assaults against Indian students sheds light on the explosive way in which the hazard event – the assaults – grew in significance from an unpleasant but common social hazard to an international political disaster for the nation, as evidenced in newspaper articles and the Indian Ministry of External Affairs travel advisories (Das, 2009; Ministry of External Affairs India, 2010a, 2010c; Wilson & Callick, 2010). As early as January 2009, the Victoria Police and the Indian community were developing divergent views on the central issues of race and hatred, and the role they play in crimes against people in the Indian community (Victoria Police, 2009a). Assessing the interplay between the opposing beliefs and attitudes of the two groups – the Victoria Police and the Indian community – is central to understanding why the Victorian Police communication strategy appeared, at times, to create as much outrage in the media as the crimes themselves. This issue is further addressed in the media content analysis section of this paper.

The first significant communication activity to be played out in the public sphere occurred on 13 May 2009 when the Victoria Police issued a press statement with the headline: “Police concerned by rise of assaults on Indian students” (2009). Then, on 2 June 2009, the media release entitled, “Chief Commissioner discusses assaults on Indian students” (Overland, 2009) was produced. When used well, the media release is a potentially powerful mechanism for establishing a dialogue and building a relationship with a specific target demographic (Kent & Taylor, 2002). An analysis of the model used by the Victoria Police media releases shows that the organisation conforms to a unidirectional, sender-to-receiver, model of communication (Fischhof, 1995; Plough & Krimsky, 1987). In this model the Victoria Police and the Chief Commissioner position themselves as ‘experts’ who inform the non-expert ‘lay person’ of the ‘facts’. Per this model, they offer the ‘right’ answers that others, by implication, lack or have misinterpreted. A disjuncture in risk perception occurs when the receiver – the Indian community – does not interpret the ‘facts’ in the way the sender (the Victoria Police and the Chief Commissioner) intends (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Plough & Krimsky, 1987; Slovic, 1987). For example, in the first statement of 13 May 2009, the Victoria Police publicly defended their organisation against accusations that they were not “adequately responding to a rise in assaults and robberies on Indian students” (Victoria Police, 2009b).

Van Dijk’s Critical Discourse Analysis provides a useful tool for analysing communications from a top-down perspective from within a defined sociopolitical relationship such as that generated by the Victoria police. According to van Dijk (1993), individuals, groups and institutions that have access to enact, legitimate or reproduce the dominant sociopolitical discourse of the elite are able to exercise social power over those who do not. The result is social inequality based on politics, culture, class, ethnicity, race or gender. This type of social inequality may be harder to identify when hidden within an accepted power relationship such as between “police officers and citizens” (van Dijk, 1993, p. 250). And that, “if immigrants, refugees and (other) minorities suffer from prejudice, discrimination and racism...such events will be called racist or sexist if knowledgeable blacks or women say so, despite white or male denials” (1993, p. 253). The denial by the Victoria Police in their 13 May media release of claims they were not responding ‘adequately’ to the assaults reproduces their socially dominant position. Their statement supports their claims to be the possessors of the ‘real knowledge’ about ‘response adequacy’, not the community, a belief reinforced by their legitimated power relationship. By contradicting the Indian community belief that the police were not responding adequately to the assaults, the Victoria Police statement can be seen to cast the Indian community ‘in error’, as less reliable and therefore

less trustworthy. The consequence of this type of communication does little to promote positive, trust-based relationships between the two groups (Kent & Taylor, 2002). In a second statement, published on 2 June 2009, Simon Overland, the most senior police officer in the state of Victoria, issued a first person media release to 'discuss' the assaults against Indian students. This statement was issued following a highly publicised and well attended street demonstration organised by the Indian community in Melbourne. The aim of the demonstration was to protest the assaults which the Indian community perceived as racist (Henderson, 2009). The intention of the Chief Commissioner's media release was less clear, as Australian journalist Greg Sheridan writes:

Brumby and his Police Commissioner Simon Overland at first were inclined to deny the problem was racial at all. Eventually they came to admit that some attacks were racial, but still cling to the idiotic defence that most of the crimes are opportunistic, as if it's impossible to be opportunistic and racist. In making these assertions, Brumby and co must be the only people who believe them. Certainly the victims of the crimes don't. (2009).

As Slovic states, "the precise manner in which risks are expressed can have a major impact on perceptions and behaviour. For example, an action increasing one's annual chances of death from 1 in 10,000 to 1.3 in 10,000 would probably be seen as much more risky if it were described as producing a 30% increase in annual mortality risk" (Slovic, Fischhoff, & Lichtenstein, 1982). In the 2 June media release the Chief Commissioner states that 1447 people of 'Indian descent' were assaulted in 2008-09 and that this figure is an increase over the previous year. Little additional context is offered by the author to manage the risk perception categories of dread and catastrophic potential. Using heuristic and systematic processing methods, the reader of the media release forms a judgment about the 'meaning' of the risk filtered through existing beliefs and attitudes (Alaszewski, 2005; Griffin, Neuwirth, Giese, & Dunwoody, 2002). The Indian community had already framed the crimes as racially motivated. The Victoria University scoping study found a notable discrepancy between the views of stakeholders interviewed (such as members of the Victoria Police) and international students. "The majority of stakeholders believed that most violence against international students was opportunistic rather than racist in motivation. In contrast [in] interviews with international students...racism was the cause most commonly identified" (Babacan, et al., 2010, p. 3). Thus, the messaging was ineffective as a positive persuasion mechanism. The police approach may have served instead to further entrench the disjuncture between the Victoria Police and international students rather than build trust between the two groups¹. The Chief Commissioner's statement goes on to call Indian students 'soft targets', with a caveat whereby the Chief Commissioner, while acknowledging the term may be offensive to some Indians, in the same sentence denies that the term is derogatory. The use of the term 'soft target' was criticised in the media both here and in India (Stewart, 2010; "UN panel slams Victorian govt, police over attacks on Indians," 2010).

The damage to the relationship of trust between police and the community can be seen in the media coverage of the issue. In India, for example, the Chief Commissioner was portrayed as a member of the Ku Klux Klan hiding behind a Victoria Police badge saying, "We are yet to ascertain the nature of the crime."

Newspaper headlines screamed messages of fear and loathing such as: "Indian Fury on Student Bashing - Delhi demands action by Australia" (Wade, Das, & Gregory, 2009), "Teen Gang Targets Student" (Healy, 2009) and "The Fear that Stalks Indian Footsteps"



Figure 1

(Stapleton, 2009). On 2 June 2009, Hindu nationalists in New Delhi burned an effigy of the then Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd MP to protest the perceived racist violence (Hodge & Karvelas, 2009). On 12 June, the Indian Central Government's Ministry for External Affairs responded with a public advisory published on an official central government website outlining actions and behaviours for Indian students travelling to Australia. The acknowledgement of "realities on the ground" included references to personal safety (Ministry of External Affairs India, 2009). By early 2010, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs had issued no less than nine travel advisories regarding assaults against Indians in Australia (Ministry of External Affairs India, 2010b).

While this paper does not explore Indian public opinion directly, newspaper coverage in Australia shows an intense concentration by the Indian media on themes of race and national pride in relation to the assaults. For example, the article *India Media Push Racism Theme* (Pearlman, Smith, & Welch, 2010) examines the so called media 'frenzy' in India generated by the racist elements and denial of racism by the Victoria police in relation to the assaults and similarly with *Indian Media in Overdrive on Racism* (Wade, 2009). By the end of 2010, the international education sector was experiencing a drop in enrolments, a decline of 1.8%, compared to an annual growth rate since 2002 of 10.7% per year. Enrolments from India experienced the largest decline of 16.4% over the previous year (Australian Education International, 2011b). An analysis of media coverage during 2009 and 2010 using media frame analysis techniques such as used by Gamson and Modigliani (1989) is a valuable tool to make explicit perceptions in the Australian media of the issue of assaults in relation to the Victoria police commissioner's statements.

PUBLIC DISCOURSE - MEDIA ANALYSIS

Media frame analysis such as used by Gamson and Modigliani (1989) enables public discourses in the media to be identified and analysed. Gamson and Modigliani (1989) argue that media discourse is an essential part of "understanding the formation of public opinion" (p. 1). Their approach is to interpret and make explicit discourse narratives in the media in order to understand the relationship between media coverage and the public's construction of meaning, that is the 'frames' of reference (mental models) applied when an individual considers an issue. They demonstrate how packages of information (elements of a discourse that are collected into meaningful clusters), have a natural advantage in the media if the

ideas and language resonate with larger cultural themes, that is, journalists show a preference for issues that display strong cultural resonances (pp. 5-8). A media content analysis on the issue of crimes against Indian international students is a useful tool to help uncover explicit and implicit attitudes and beliefs in public opinion.

To source media articles for analysis, the newspaper database, NewsBank, was queried using the search terms: Indian, students, violen* and Melbourne for the Australian newspapers *The Age*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Australian*. This search reveals that during 2009 and 2010 these newspapers published over 200 news and opinion pieces on the issue of crimes against Indian students. To refine this raw data for further analysis, all newspaper articles in the peak periods of May, June, July 2009 and January, February, March 2010 (see Table 1), were entered into an Excel spreadsheet. The spreadsheet was then sorted by name of publication and reporter. Every fifth article was selected for closer examination and content analyses. This provided a stratified, randomised pool of 31 articles out of a potential 200 (Riffe, Lacy, Nagova, & Burkum, 1996). Articles in the final sample were analysed using coding schemes recommended by social research academic, Alan Bryman (2008). His recommendations include accounting for key social actors in the coding scheme, which in the case of this paper are the Victoria Police, international students and crime motivation. The analysis uses the concept of "frames" (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Frame definitions (see Attachment A) summarise the primary narratives used by reporters when writing on an issue. For example, the Victoria Police are generally framed against three narratives, in that they are either misunderstood by the general public, are in denial about racism or are actively racist. Frame definitions were created using a constructionist approach similar to that outlined by Gamson and Modigliani (1989). 'Dispositions' of positive, descriptive or negative (Bryman, 2008) capture the 'tone' or quality of 'feeling' expressed by the article in summary. An article might be ascribed a positive disposition where the reporter writes an article that is 'upbeat' and solution focused, such as the article written by John Brumby, the former Premier of Victoria, (Brumby, 2010). Alternatively, a negative disposition would be one that is highly critical and uses words and imagery to generate feelings of anger, sorrow and frustration (Sheridan, 2009). A descriptive disposition is one that uses neutral words and phrases to account for actions, for example, a leader might 'address an issue' rather than 'face up' to consequences ("How to play an Indian bouncer," 2010). (See the Coding Manual (Attachment A) for more definitions.)

RESULTS OF MEDIA ANALYSIS

An initial analysis shows that 68% of news story headlines evidenced an over-riding negative disposition (Bryman, 2008, p. 282) in that overall, the discourse appeared unfavourable and critical toward the issue, for example, "Indians passive by nature? Don't add insult to injury" (Rundle, 2009), and "Killing reveals another race problem" (O'Malley, 2010). In total, 66% of the body content also showed a negative disposition, even when the headlines were descriptive (neutral) in disposition. Fifty-one percent of the articles demonstrated a belief that the primary motives for the crimes were race and hate, while 35% stated that they were predominantly opportunistic with some possible small element of racism involved.

In terms of how international students were perceived, the emotional frame 'innocent' and more economic-focused frame 'commodity' were equally attributed, at 48% each. One article framed international students in terms of potential 'threat' to stable society, a very low number. Also the frame 'immigration system rorter' did not appear even though it was represented in the larger raw data sample for this time period. Even so, any articles that emphasise this aspect are not likely to have significant impact given the results for 'inno-

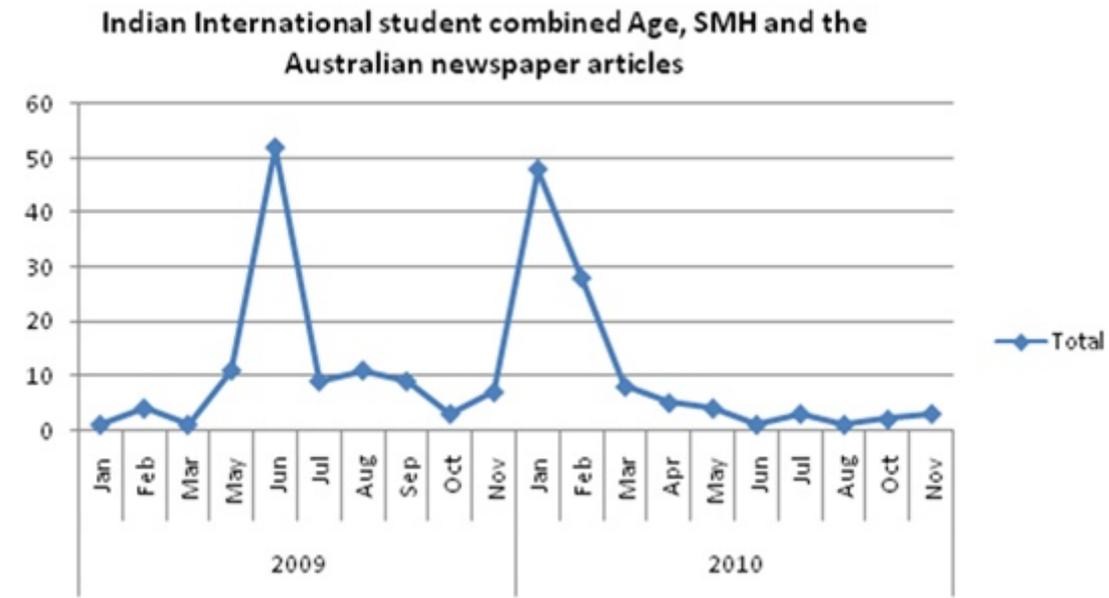


Figure 2

cent' and 'commodity'.

Finally, the Victoria Police were perceived in the majority of the new articles, 45%, to be 'in denial' regarding the significance of race and hate as motivations for the crimes reported. 25 percent framed the Victoria Police response as 'misunderstood', in that they were perceived to be managing the issue well but that the (lay) general public was misinterpreting their motivations and actions. 16 percent suggested they were actively racist, while an equal amount did not reference the Victoria Police in any demonstrative way.

CONCLUSION

What clearly emerges from this study is that Victoria Police communications in 2009 and 2010 failed to positively change perceptions of risk and is instead likely to have amplified negative perceptions. This occurred due to a combination of messages and messaging

Table 1

Headline tone Disposition	Body tone Disposition	Crime motivation Frame	Student Frame	Victoria Police Frame
68% Negative	65% Negative	52% Race and hate	48% Innocent	45% In denial
16% Positive	23% Positive	35% Mixed race & opportunism	48% Commodity	23% Misunderstood
16% Descriptive	13% Descriptive	13% Opportunism	4% threat	16% Actively racist
				16% Not in frame

methods that did not appear to consider key factors involved in the development of attitudes and judgements as they relate to perceptions of risk during a crisis. It also failed to positively address the socio-cultural construction of meaning from the perspective of the Indian community. The power imbalance inherent between a policing organisation and a minority community also acted to compound the growing disjuncture and distrust between the Victoria Police and the Indian community.

An analysis of a stratified random sampling of newspaper articles during the peak coverage periods showed that the majority of media reports also framed the crisis in negative terms. However, the failure of Victoria Police communications in this instance offers the opportunity for further study to consider different approaches when dealing with communities that exhibit strongly-held, culturally based beliefs. Policy makers and professional communicators should consider the issues raised in this paper and seek ways of addressing them using contemporary best practice communication and public relations practices. The apparent discrepancy between the reporting of high levels of feelings of safety by individual international students in student surveys, compared to high levels of fear reported at the group and societal level would be a potentially productive area for future research.

It is worth noting that there are structural issues that contribute to the crime-based 'hazard' of assault which has not been covered by this study. Future research could address these structural issues from a 'best practice' communications perspective that takes into account relevant risk theories.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Approaching this statement from the perspective of crime theory, it is relevant to note that 'hard' quantifiable data regarding race and hate motivation in crimes for Indian international students is not available. While the Victoria Police publicly state on several occasions that race and hate cannot be proven to be motivating factors for the crimes, they never publicly acknowledge that a lack of evidence can also be an indicator of a hate crime (Mason, 2010).

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APPENDIX 1: CODING MANUAL

HEADLINE AND BODY DISPOSITION

Positive = that the overriding discourse (voice) in the article is mostly favourable

Descriptive = that the overriding discourse (voice) in the article is neither favourable nor critical but is describes without disposition

Negative = that the overriding discourse (voice) in the article is mostly unfavourable and critical

CRIME MOTIVATION FRAME

Opportunism = the overriding discourse is one where crimes are committed based on random chance

Race and Hate = the overriding discourse is where crimes are committed based on xenophobia

Mix race and opportunism = the overriding discourse is where crimes are committed based on a mix of random chance but propelled by xenophobia

STATUS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENT FRAME

Innocent = discourse has an emotional quality in regard to 'innocence', may also imply naivety.

Immigration system rorter = motives for being in Australia are suspect

Commodity = discourse objectifies students, clustering them into depersonalised, non-emotional articles of trade eg to serve political or economic narratives

Threat = to Australian social cohesion

VICTORIA POLICE FRAME

Actively racist = the discourse implies that Victoria Police are participants in discrimination based on race and ethnicity

Misunderstood = Victoria Police are doing a good job but their motives and beliefs are misinterpreted

In denial = the Victoria Police are in denial about race issues in modern society