# Cultural Dynamics of the Concept of Bogan

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"The figure of the bogan conveys the contemporary complexity of class."

(Paternoster, Warr, & Jacobs, 2018)

Cultural Dynamics of the Concept of Bogan

The concept of *bogan* is one of numerous typically Australian phenomena that a person who has recently arrived in Australia is exposed to, alongside with "mate", vegemite, "no worries" etc. The most recent evidence suggests that the term was first used in 1984 in Melbourne's Xavier College magazine (Moore, 2019); and by the beginning of the 1990s it was widespread across the country. According to Macquarie Dictionary Online (2019), *bogan* is a mildly derogatory term for "a person, generally from an outer suburb of a city or town and from a lower socio-economic background, viewed as uncultured". The word was first included in the second edition of the Macquarie Dictionary published in 1991 (Macquarie Dictionary Blog: Archives, 2012). In 2012 it was also included in Oxford English Dictionary, which defines *bogan* as "an unfashionable, uncouth, or unsophisticated person, especially regarded as being of low social status" (Oxford English Dictionary Online, 2019). The aim of this essay is to discuss the concept of *bogan* from a socio-psychological perspective: its emergence, changes in meaning over the past decades, and potential mechanisms underpinning these changes.

**Emergence of the concept**

As discussed above, the term was invented in the mid 1980s; however, as often happens, invention resulted from recombining pre-existing ideas (Simonton, 2011). The historical antecedents of *bogan* can be traced back to the 1890s, to the beginning of a working-class movement in Australia, when the legendary image of a rough Australian bushman emerged as a stereotypical representation of national identity (Paternoster, Warr, & Jacobs, 2018). The term *larrikin* was often used to refer to this character, which contained many features later associated with bogans: rough manners, disdain for education and culture, inclination to swear, gamble and drink, and disinclination to work too hard. According to Moore (2008), the term *bogan* came to replace *larrikin* as the latter assumed positive and

affectionate connotations, especially due to its popularisation by the charismatic Paul Hogan: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1_FyJug3wzU.

Paternoster et al. (2018) suggest that the emergence of the term was motivated by the need to distinguish between respectable and unrespectable working class, which is when the legendary figure of a prototypical Australian resurfaced, now deemed anti-progressive and uncultured. Early uses of *bogan* emphasised low socio-economic class as well as lack of education and taste, manifested via unrefined clothing, speech and manners (e.g., wearing moccasins or thongs, listening to hard rock music, mullet hairstyle). Bogans were also associated with petty crime, such as vandalism or shoplifting (for a typical representation of bogans of that era see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y5YTYLPwOFs). In a way, bogans were rejected by both the political left, for being anti-progressive, and by the right, for being economically unproductive (Paternoster et al., 2018). Within Fiske's model of social perception, they would likely be perceived as having low competence and low warmth (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). However, the meaning of *bogan* underwent several transformations, discussed below.

**Bogans on screen: Shift toward acceptance**

In the 1990s the term *bogan* was largely derogatory, implying someone who is "not one of us", a "loser" (Oxford Australia Word of the Month, 2008). However, in the late 1990s and early 2000s the meaning began to shift toward being more affectionate and inclusive, partly through representations on screen. A comical but loving portrayal of a working-class family fighting to save their home in the iconic movie "The Castle" (1997) won the hearts of many Australians. According to a nationwide survey conducted in 2010, the lead character Darryl Kerrigan, an archetypal bogan, was voted to be the film character that best represents Australia as a nation (Hayes, 2010). Similarly, television series "Kath and Kim" (2002–2007) depicted bogans as vulgar and farcical, but nevertheless likable

characters. Despite being intended as a satire, it became hugely popular in both bogan and non-bogan populations. This illustrates the role of cultural artefacts in social transmission of cultural information (Kashima, 2016); in this case, film and television facilitated the shift of social perception of bogans toward higher acceptance and warmth.

**Cashed-up bogans: Threat to the middle class?**

Another significant shift in the meaning of *bogan* was due to the mining and construction boom in the 2000s, which led to the emergence of so-called *cashed-up bogans* (or *Cubs*), skilled blue-collar workers who were no longer poor but preserved other features associated with bogans, such as lack of culture and "bad" taste (Pini, McDonald, & Mayes, 2012). For instance, Cubs stereotypically enjoy showing off their newly found wealth by buying flash cars and huge outer-suburban houses ("McMansions"). Having originated in Western Australia, this phenomenon quickly spread across the entire country; even "snobbish" Melbourne was not spared (Smith, 2006). Such quick diffusion of the concept may be attributed to multiple mechanisms of cultural dynamics. First, the fact that consumer behaviour of Cubs was consistent with bogan stereotypes may have facilitated the spreading of the concept, as stereotype-consistent information is more likely to be diffused (Clark & Kashima, 2007). Second, it may be attributed to an adaptive selection process (Kashima, Bain, & Perfors, 2019); more specifically, an adaptation to the new threat in the social environment embodied by Cubs, as discussed below.

Increased conspicuous consumerism of bogans was perceived as a threat to the educated middle class (Pini et al., 2012). For instance, particular suburbs that were previously middle-class territory were "swamped" by Cubs, which extended to other public domains, such as shopping centres, holiday destinations and airport lounges. This sudden "invasion" of Cubs caused a wave of antagonism and outrage, aggravated by feelings of social injustice due to perceived discrepancy between Cubs' wages and their education level. Consequently, Cubs

were deemed "undeserving" of their wealth, blamed for the "contamination" of values and norms, and even for the rise of consumerism and materialism in Australia (Adamson, 2007; Farrelly, 2009; Pini et al., 2012). Others, however, saw Cubs as a product of the politics of the Howard Government that created the emphasis on material wealth as the means of attaining social status (Campbell, 2006). In any case, *Cub* became an integral part of the Australian culture; for instance, aforementioned "Kath and Kim" display many elements of Cubs stereotype.

**Bogans today: A little bogan in everyone?**

Overall, the concept of *bogan* (and even that of *Cub*) became less derogatory and more inclusive over time. It has even been adopted by bogans themselves "as a badge of honour and pride" (Gwynn, 2015). A good illustration of that, described by Gibson (2009), is the story of Albion Park in Wollongong, which was named one of Australia's top ten "most bogan" places. This unexpected and rather dubious fame elicited polarised responses from the inhabitants: while some were outraged, the majority reacted with self-humour, embracing their bogan identity with pride. Popularisation of bogan culture even led to the phenomenon of so-called "faux bogans", such as certain politicians pretending to be bogans in order to gain more popularity (Munro, 2013).

To summarise, since its appearance in the 1980s, the concept of *bogan* has grown and evolved. Having originated as a derogatory term for outcasts, rejected by both the political left and right, it has been losing its pejorative connotation in the process of cultural transmission. The emergence of Cubs in the 2000s reshaped the concept of *bogan*; in particular, socio-economic poverty ceased to be a pre-requisite. Although initially met with outrage and antagonism, Cubs were also eventually embraced by the Australian culture. These transformations of the term *bogan* call for further investigation, for instance, using archival research techniques (Kashima, 2014). In particular, one could conduct a word

embedding analysis, similar to that of Garg, Schiebinger, Jurafsky, and Zou (2018) for gender and ethnic stereotypes, to examine how stereotypes associated with bogans have changed over time. Understanding the figure of bogan is important in order to understand the complexities of class in Australia, as well as Australian identity more generally. After all, as Campbell (2006) points out, “perhaps, there is a little bogan in everyone”.

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