

Global youth reshape the boundaries

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Young people living in an internet-connected world are reshaping cultural boundaries, locally and globally.

Young people in culturally diverse communities are shrugging off efforts to categorise and integrate them into a homogenous national citizenship, and are simply getting on with the sometimes messy and uneasy business of living together.

Many young people's sense of identity and their affiliations are in flux, a mashup of social and political networks that stretch from the local to the global, and incorporate ethnicity, religion, gender and individual interests.

These are among the findings of Monash University sociologist Associate Professor Anita Harris, who is studying how young people deal with [cultural diversity](#) and manage conflict and change.

She says that far from being a tinderbox of potential racial violence, for many young people their communities are where they feel safest and on an equal footing with others.

Her research is part of a four-year international project that includes the Australian cities of Adelaide, Brisbane, Melbourne, Perth and Sydney, as well as Johannesburg in South Africa, Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia and Prato in Italy. All are rapidly changing areas of high cultural diversity.

"Typically, young people in those environments are seen as a problem. There is a lot of worry about ethnic youth gangs, young people fighting or failing to understand each other's backgrounds or needs," Associate Professor Harris says.

"Policy and research approaches are often about conflict resolution and conflict management. This project is looking at the other side of that: what are they doing that works?"

The Australian component of the research has drawn on interviews with more than 100 people aged 15 to 25, from a wide range of backgrounds including Indigenous and Anglo Australians and young people with Afghan, African, Asian, European, Maori, Middle Eastern and Pacific Islander heritage. The second phase of the project, in Italy, Malaysia and South Africa, is still in its infancy.

Diversity defining normality

"For this generation it is normal to be surrounded by diversity and to interact with people of different backgrounds in a way that it is not for

older people. That doesn't mean that young people in these diverse communities always get along well, or that they embrace diversity, but they accept it as normal," Associate Professor Harris says.

That acceptance includes recognising that people can mix with others within and across different cultural groups, and allowing people to choose for themselves the way they mix. It also includes the right not to mix, to be left alone.

Schools have a crucial role in helping young people negotiate diversity. "Even schools which simply acknowledged the diverse population were reported as 'kind of good places to be'. They didn't make students feel 'you're now in an Australian school, leave diversity at the door'."

Associate Professor Harris found that when there was conflict it was most commonly the result of sexual jealousy, male posturing or access to limited shared resources including territory (a place to hang out). Combatants might "play the race card" in the heat of conflict, but race was rarely the cause of the conflict.

"Young people weren't saying that they didn't fight, but talked about conflict that had been resolved, things that were in the past, but which local media or politicians would not let go of," she says. "And the people they fought with were also, at other times, friends. The popular notion that there are big ethnic groupings clashing with each other just didn't bear out."

In fact, many of those interviewed reported greater levels of conflict and racial discrimination when they began to move beyond the multicultural bubble of their own communities and their peer groups.

Global culture

Associate Professor Harris says when it comes to the question of national identity, or "being Australian", many [young people](#) resist a single allegiance. Hybrid cultural identities allow them to feel part of many different groups simultaneously. This is further enhanced by their ability to join the flow of global youth culture via the internet.

The issues of identity and belonging are also at the heart of another research project Associate Professor Harris is leading, which is focused on the participation of young Muslims in community and civic life in Australia.

Peer researchers were recruited to help, among them Youssef Youssef, a 23-year-old university student who represents the kind of "hybrid Australian identity" typical of participants in both of Associate Professor Harris's studies.

Born in Australia, his father is a Muslim of Lebanese-Brazilian descent and his mother is Maltese-Australian who converted from Christianity to Islam when she married.

Mr Youssef attended an Islamic school in suburban Melbourne and now studies sociology and law. He volunteers at community legal services, and he and his girlfriend (who is Vietnamese-Australian) are both active supporters of Oxfam and the Global Poverty Project.

Concerns about the marginalisation of young Muslims, particularly young men, who might turn to "politically problematic solutions or ideologies" have been a catalyst for the study of young Muslim civic participation. Mr Youssef says there are people in his community who seem to have accepted labels such as "thug", often with a perverse kind of pride. "But many others hold larger aspirations to contribute to their communities, and even to help internationally with issues such as poverty, although they may have few resources themselves," he says.

Media stereotyping

Another of the project's peer researchers, Ameera Karimshah, 26, points out that Islamic practice in Australia is highly diverse, much more so than in her home country of Zimbabwe. There, she says, women do not go to the mosque, but neither do they wear hijabs; while in Australia women can choose to do both, or neither.

"In Australia, religious practice is dependent on many different cultural influences. Being able to discuss that has actually made me engage much more critically with what it means to be Muslim. The media depict all Muslims as this homogenous group, but we're not," Ms Karimshah says.

Mr Youssef echoed this concern about mainstream depictions of Muslims as either "hardline extremists or as compromised in their faith. The reality is that many walk somewhere in the middle," he says. The research project has attempted to capture the diversity of civic and religious practice in Australia, seeking participants with Middle Eastern, African and Asian Islamic heritage, conducting a total of 80 interviews in Melbourne and Brisbane.

In the interviews, Associate Professor Harris says, many young Muslims said they felt they could be better represented in online forums, without being managed by Australian mainstream media, or politicians, or even their own family or community values.

"They really valued any forum that allowed them to have an unedited voice, to put their own views, but also to be more playful in articulating their interests and needs," Associate Professor Harris says.

"For instance, some young women were simply sidestepping the political debate about the wearing of hijabs and creating blogs about hijab fashion, saying 'this is what it means to us, and it is fun'."

Provided by Monash University

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