

Chapter I

Migrant youth, cultural adaptation and social policy

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Introduction

The lives of young people are representative of wider social, cultural and economic experiences. These experiences have become increasingly affected by the processes of globalisation – technological advances, economic development and demographics – as well as by natural disasters and conflicts. Contemporary societies are characterised as being high risk, requiring individuals to both have the capacity to make choices and be more resilient in the context of rapid change locally and globally.

Young people between the ages of 10 and 24 currently represent 27 per cent of the world's total population (Population Reference Bureau 2006). The lives of these young people are more complex and varied than ever before as they come face to face with sociocultural issues, economic challenges, health risks and security threats, as well as new opportunities through education, digital technologies and productive diversity. For these reasons, youth represent an optimal group for examining complex social and cultural phenomena.

This introductory chapter will attempt to locate these conceptual debates within wider intellectual and research agendas. It will also try to examine the role social policy can play in shaping the life opportunities of

young people. The roles of both government agencies and non-government organisations will be considered and discussed.

Migrant youth, hybridity and cultural adaptation

There has been growing interest in the way in which young people define themselves in relation to family, schools and other key social institutions (Molgat 2007). An increasing body of research evidence shows that young people – defined in this chapter as those between 18 and 24 years old – no longer rely on social units and political institutions for definitions of themselves, but on their own criteria and conceptions of ‘adulthood’. Of course, the issue of self-conception and subjective interpretation of societal structures and norms is closely linked to the highly fluid concept of ‘belonging’ (Skrbis, Baldassar & Poynting 2007), which in the context of intercultural identities is never static, nor is it ever easily defined.

The difficulty in understanding migrant youth in terms of identity and belonging stems from the fact that not only are we talking about ‘ethnic migrants’ settling in *émigré* societies, but more importantly, we are dealing with migrants settling in increasingly multi-ethnic cities (Vertovec 2007a). This increased diversity, or as it has been termed by Vertovec (2007b) ‘super-diversity’, is defined as a

notion intended to underline a level and kind of complexity surpassing any thing the country has previously experienced ... [and] is distinguished by a dynamic interplay of variables among an increased number of new, small and scattered, multiple-origin, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified immigrants.

(Vertovec 2007a, p.1024)

This notion of super-diversity, however, still suffers from the same methodological and conceptual ambiguity that also befell multiculturalism and cultural diversity before it. In fact, definitions of super-diverse cities such as London, Melbourne and Toronto still rely on census data that focus very much on such indicators as ‘country of origin’ and ‘ethnicity’ in an almost interchangeable way. The problem for researchers and policymakers alike is that the tendency to ignore a number of other variables when describing cultural diversity or ‘super-diversity’ within specific locales can result in reductionist and often superficial understanding of the complexities entailed in multicultural societies. Other important variables that need to be analysed in conjunction with ‘ethnicity’ and ‘country of origin’ include labour market access, housing and spatial distribution, migratory status, gender and age profiles and social and mental health outcomes, among others. Together, these variables can and would provide a more balanced description of multicultural societies in terms of migrant settlement experiences and the wider societal capacity to respond adequately to the needs of super-diversity.

In the context of migrant youth settling in multicultural societies, this notion of super-diversity poses a number of substantive questions at the

level of debates about national identity and citizenship, as well as at the level of social policy formulation, settlement support strategies and service provision. Research has shown that young people are more attuned than adults to issues of self-identity both at the individual and the collective levels. This is even more pronounced among migrant youth, where ‘hybridity’, hyphenated identities and notions of dual attachments are used to account for the complex social phenomenon of intercultural identity (Mansouri 2005; Mansouri & Kamp 2007; Mansouri & Trembath 2005).

Hybridity is often used to describe the role of culture in identity formation, especially in second-generation youth. It refers to the mixed cultural traits of individuals, the fusion of cultural elements from dissimilar sources, and also the spatial quality of borderland ‘zones of cultural overlap’ (Hastings 2001, p.1290). It is within these borderland zones that different cultures meet either to negotiate the processes of intercultural cohabitation through ‘creative cultural production’ or to compete for ‘domination and control’ (p.1290).

Of direct and immediate relevance to this notion of cultural identity are the concepts of ‘acculturation’ and ‘interculturalisation’. There is considerable confusion in the literature as to what these terms mean and imply. The concepts are sometimes used interchangeably, suggesting an equivalency between the French term ‘interculturalisation’ and the English ‘acculturation’ (Dasen & Mishra 2000, p.431). It has also been argued that ‘the reciprocal and enriching “interculturalisation”’ (Mardorossian 1999, p.1076) is normatively positive in that ‘inter’ implies an interactive relationship between individuals from different cultures (Richter Malabotta 2005, p.117). By contrast, acculturation is sometimes equated with ‘mimicry’ (Munasinghe 2006, p.589), or the acquisition by immigrants, in particular young people, of ‘behaviours, attitudes and values of a culture that are different from their own culture of origin’ (Ogden, Ogden & Schau 2004, p.1). Such processes may result in experiences of ‘acculturative stress’ and ‘cultural loss’ (Koch, Bjerregaard & Curtis 2004, p.371). Still others adopt a more neutral understanding of acculturation as ‘those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact’, leading to ‘subsequent changes in the original cultural pattern of either or both groups’ (Clement, Singh & Gaudet 2006, p.290). Acculturation could be understood as ‘alterations in the individual’s sense of self’ (Ryder, Alden & Paulhus 2000, p.49), which can result in migrant youth adopting the values and beliefs of the mainstream culture of the host society whilst still retaining cultural qualities from their country of origin (Schwartz, Montgomery & Briones 2006, p.19). How migrant youth negotiate these spaces ‘between two cultures’ (Sekhon & Szmigin, 2005, p.3) in public domains is central to their capacity to achieve a sense of belonging within the wider society and in their migrant communities (Chan & Glynn Owens 2006, p.51).

The critical nature of these cultural issues among migrant youth can be seen in the extent to which they are able to integrate into mainstream society, engage productively and meaningfully with its key institutions – in

particular schools and government agencies – and exhibit indicators of overall connectedness and wellbeing.

Migrant youth and indicators of social and economic wellbeing

The social and economic wellbeing of migrant young people is mediated by the context of their experiences of departure from their places of origin and their arrival and settlement in a new ‘home’. The challenge represented by these processes can make adolescence a difficult and uncertain time in their lives. For migrant youth, settlement in a new country means learning a new language, starting or resuming school, experiencing intergenerational conflict and sometimes, exclusion and racism. For those from refugee backgrounds, the settlement process can be made more difficult by the need to recover from experiences of torture and trauma, persecution, poor health, disrupted education, the loss of, and separation from, family and some time spent in refugee camps. While these experiences are real and can affect the everyday lived experiences of young people, this bleak representation of the challenges they face (a representation regularly reproduced by the migrant settlement service sector in advocacy mode) does not, however, explain the optimism displayed by young people, their adaptability to new situations and contexts and their positive expressions towards the future and their place in society.

In exploring the nature of belonging, therefore, it is important not to replicate two common mistakes that occur in discussions of migrant and refugee youth. First, there is a tendency towards the reproduction of a static view of migrant young people as fixed in cultural identity. Second, there is a constantly presented conception of young people as ‘unfinished’, in the ‘process of becoming’ and fixed in marginality. As a result, migrant youth often have their identities, status and roles (cultural, economic and social) conceptualised and fixed on their behalf – by adults, by the government, by service providers and by other young people.

Young people as a fixed marginalised category

Societal views are quite explicit in stating that young people are considered to be in flux – in a transitional state between childhood and adulthood that relegates them to a marginal role in society (Couch & Francis 2006; Lloyd 2002; Wyn & White 1997). As such, young people

lack status, rights and power in our society, not only by dint of their perceived vulnerability because of age but also because they fall between the two stools of protection and dependence as children and autonomy and self-determination as adults.

(Barry 2005, p.1)

As a social category, young people are sometimes regarded as a ‘relational concept’ that incorporates the many ways in which they negotiate their life

transitions and the ways these life transitions are constructed through social institutions (Wyn & White 1997, p.25). Young people have also been characterised as being apathetic and unengaged, rebellious and troublesome, a materialistic generation that is self-absorbed, disengaged and at ‘risk’ of ‘becoming’ problems (Checkoway 1998). These discourses of power lead to notions of state control, policing, governance and discipline. It is at this point that the category of young people is de-legitimised, marginalised and devalued.

This marginalisation reinforces the representation of migrant young people as ‘outsiders’ in society, a process that is reproduced and reinforced through media, policies and the labour market, and in other social and cultural processes. In the public sphere, migrant young people are seldom ‘constructed as actors’ (Couch & Francis 2006, p.280). This lack of agency and power is then reflected in public discourse that characterises migrant young people as ‘minorities’ and victims and, paradoxically, as thugs and gang members. This form of marginalisation is echoed in the policy and legislative frameworks in the nations receiving migrants and refugees that seek to deter those seeking refuge or migrating from situations of conflict and/or poverty. This tendency of the state to distinguish between illegal and legal migrants has been termed ‘external exclusion’ (Byrne 2005). Society is not truly inclusive if it does not welcome the overseas born:

... if a state effectively defines certain groups as unacceptable as migrants and/or potential settlers, this sends very clear signals both to extant minority communities and to those from majority communities who seek to bolster their hegemonic social, cultural and political identity.

(Ratcliffe 2000, p.172)

In the context of migrant youth, there is also a link in the discourse between these processes of marginalisation and the tendency for young people to be viewed primarily through the lens of culture. As Brough et al. argue,

When we talk of ‘refugee youth’ we are creating a construct, which at times can mask the diverse ways in which a young person from a refugee background experiences the world. A young refugee might experience the world primarily as a young black person, or a young woman – issues of gender, race, discrimination, inequality, poverty could provide some of the primary prisms through which the world is experienced.

(Brough et al. 2003, p.195)

The effect is to negate more diverse possibilities in the construction of identity. The political, economic and social forces that reduce the formation of young people’s identities to their places of origin have the effect of constraining attempts to ‘construct meaningful and rewarding social environments’ (O’Neil 1986, p.250). Identity formation among migrant youth is intimately affected by their sense of belonging and the balance between individual, community and societal expectations and support. Migrant young people often struggle to balance the expectations of their families and community with the expectations of their Australian peers and wider

society (Francis & Cornfoot 2007). This struggle is conceptualised by young people themselves as being 'caught between cultures'. In forging their cultural identity, young people often create and enact complex self-identities that are flexible, dynamic and contextual.

Policy context: the role of government and non-government sectors

In order to understand the social, political and economic environments within which migrant youth search for belonging and identity formulation, it is important to touch upon the social policy settings that shape their environments, in particular the government and non-government sectors. The key social policy frameworks of relevance in this context are multiculturalism and social cohesion/inclusion. While these policy frameworks show a general awareness of the needs of migrant youth, their own voices and experiences are generally absent from the discourses of professionals and policymakers. Exclusion from consideration by decision makers is not uncommon for marginalised groups, despite the popular rhetoric concerning parental choice and stakeholder involvement.

A key stated outcome of these policies is the achievement of an environment in which new arrivals are successfully 'integrated' into Australian society. Castles (quoted in Valtonen 2004) has identified three different models of integration within culturally diverse societies:

- assimilationist models that subsume settlers within mainstream society
- pluralist models that acknowledge diversity while encouraging equal participation
- differential exclusionist models in which settlers are included in some sectors of society, but remain excluded from others.

On an individual level, integration can be contrasted to (1) assimilation and its call for the abandonment of cultural identity; (2) separation which involves 'exaggerated' preservation of culture and rejection of the norms of the new society; and (3) marginalisation, where individuals lose connections to their culture of origin while failing to engage in their new society (Ager 1999).

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has provided some useful guidance to national governments and civil society in relation to the goals of settlement for new arrivals. Although focused on refugees, the 'accepted goals for the integration of resettled refugees' is equally applicable to migrant youth arrivals:

- to restore security, control, and social and economic independence
- to promote the capacity to rebuild a positive future in a receiving society
- to promote family reunification
- to promote connections with volunteers and professionals able to provide support

- to restore confidence in political systems and institutions, human rights, and the rule of law
- to promote cultural and religious integrity and restore attachments to community and culture
- to counter racism, discrimination, and xenophobia and build welcoming communities
- to support the development of strong, cohesive communities
- to foster conditions which support arrivals of different ages, family statuses, gender and past experience (UNHCR 2002).

Social inclusion agenda

The social inclusion agenda, which also incorporates the building of social capital, is now the primary social policy driver of both the government and the non-government sectors. To date, the most comprehensive outline of the meaning of social inclusion in the Australian context can be found in the election commitment made by the current government in the lead-up to the 2007 election. As Gillard and Wong note:

... to be socially included, all Australians need to be able to play a full role in Australian life, in economic, social psychological and political terms. To be socially included, all Australians must be given the opportunity to: secure a job; access services; connect with others in life through family, friends, work, personal interests and local community; deal with personal crisis such as ill health, bereavement or the loss of a job; and have their voice heard.

(Gillard & Wong 2007, p.1)

Borrowed from the social policy formation of the Blair Labour government of Britain in the 1990s, the social inclusion agenda is very much in its infancy in Australia, and the particular service approach or practical support arising from this policy is yet to be determined. Policy arising from the idea of building social capital and the development of social cohesion has been more in evidence, however. Social cohesion has long been the focus of service delivery to new settlers on the part of the non-government sector. A useful description of social cohesion can be found in the report, *Mapping Social Cohesion*, which identifies five key variables that contribute to social cohesion, namely belonging, social justice and equity, participation, acceptance, and worth (Markus & Dharmalingam 2007, p.vii). The report notes that, to date, the broad indicators point to a society that is succeeding in promoting and supporting belonging, social justice and worth. In relation to participation and acceptance, the empirical evidence shows a high level of misunderstanding and continuing experiences of discriminatory and hostile behaviour:

The challenge for policy is to foster increased participation in community life within areas of high immigrant concentration and to further understanding of the immigrant experience, of the difficulties of resettlement in unfamiliar environments and alien cultures, of the personal impact of

discriminatory acts, and of the contribution that immigrants have made and continue to make to Australian society.

(Markus & Dharmalingam 2007, p.xiv)

Social policies such as multiculturalism, social cohesion and community building are seeking to address the problem of 'social exclusion', which has been the focus of much government and non-government activity over recent years. It has been closely aligned to examinations of marginalisation and poverty. Social exclusion has been defined as the dynamic process of being locked out of 'any of the social, economic, political and cultural systems which determine the social integration of a person into a society' (Byrne 2005, p.2). Peace (2001) employs a broader definition, which designates an individual as socially excluded if they are 'geographically resident in a society and he or she does not participate in the normal activities of citizens in that society' (Peace 2001, p.28). In examining the causes of social exclusion, Wyn and White (1997, p.123) note that those who are marginalised often come from poor housing estates and outer suburbs and have particular difficulty finding employment that sufficiently supports them. This relates to lack of education and opportunities. They note it is difficult for individuals (especially young people) to find work and in turn to see themselves as worthwhile in a capitalist society, which constructs social participation through work or consumption.

The Social Exclusion Unit of the British Government reported that young people's experiences of exclusion were tied to family life characterised by: disrupted relationships, poverty and 'worklessness'; education that fails to meet their needs or motivate them; peer pressures that encourage sexual activity, drug taking or crime; low expectations and the absence of adult role models; victimisation and bullying; and an inadequate response from public services (Social Exclusion Unit 2008, p.8)

The most commonly cited impact on migrant youth as they construct their social identity is the ever-present reality of racism. In discussions about their lived experience, migrant young people often talk about the experiences of violence, verbal abuse and harassment that result in them feeling that they don't belong (WYPIN 2003). Experiences of racism profoundly affect the ability of young people to generate self-esteem, self-confidence, and a sense of connection and belonging to the broader community. The social, economic and political environment within which young people find themselves is critical in identity formation and notions of belonging, both positive and negative. In their study of social cohesion, Markus and Dharmalingam found that there were high levels of belonging in the Australian community:

With regard to indices of belonging and identification, as to be expected the Australian-born had the strongest sense of belonging, gave the greatest consideration to maintaining the Australian way of life and culture, and the greatest sense of pride; on all three indicators, the English-speaking came next, followed by those of NESB. The very high level of identification of the NESB is, however, a significant finding: thus 93.2% of the NESB group had a sense of belonging to Australia to a great or moderate extent, 89.9% took

pride in the Australian way of life and culture to a great or moderate extent, and 95.3% strongly agreed or agreed that maintaining the Australian way of life and culture was important.

(Markus & Dharmalingam 2007, p.81)

Cultural diversity as it is experienced in a multicultural society requires more scrutiny, however, particularly as it is lived through social relations within and between communities and individuals in residence, employment, marriage and kinship, religion and civil society and political activity (Shaver 2007, p.24). Too often, a focus on country of origin or on the negative impacts of settlement can result in neglect for an engagement in the important task of examining the multiplicity of influences on notions of belonging and identity construction. Growing research evidence shows that migrant youth articulate multiple ways of belonging to Australian society and often view this, not as 'fragmentation and disunity', but as 'enablement and engagement' and connection (Ang et al. 2006, p.27). As the researchers point out,

These forms of belonging are based on an array of social domains and categories beyond ethnicity and nation: generation, gender, work, school and leisure, region, town and neighbourhood, friendships and subcultures, religion and so on ... [P]eople can move between different social and cultural domains in the course of their daily lives ... enablement ... Most participants indicated that they moved happily between their various communities and locales.

(Ang et al. 2006, pp.27–8, 30)

Ang et al. (cf Turner & Rojek 2001) also discuss what they refer to as 'thin' forms of community, a positive hybridity often experienced by the government and the non-government sector as problematic, but which for migrant youth serve as positive forms of identification that enable them to create meaningful, connected lives. As they note:

This is the context in which attachments to the nation-state are articulated, because these forms of community are linked to a 'cool' sense of citizenship; an attachment to a national community that is ambivalent, wary of the dangers of excessive patriotism, and which embraces an ethic of care towards cultural differences. This coolness is born of increasing mobility and multiple networks of interconnectedness across social worlds, central to the cosmopolitanism of contemporary lifestyles.

(Ang et al. 2006, pp.32–3)

These discussions reveal that migrant youth present multiple forms and aspects to their notions of identity and belonging. As noted above, in describing their sense of identity formation and belonging, young people usually place importance on acceptance by their 'peers' and being seen as someone who contributes to society. These descriptions are not normally framed with a specific reference to ethnicity – in fact quite the reverse. There is a sense for young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds that acceptance and a feeling of belonging to one's own ethnic community is not enough. In a report produced by the Centre for Multicultural Youth

(CMY), young people described their feelings of wellbeing and successful settlement in the following terms:

According to the young people interviewed, settling well in Australia also meant feeling happy or comfortable in their new country. Someone who was 'well settled' would feel Australia was their home, that they 'fitted in' and were contributing to society as well as to their immediate community. They talked about a well-settled young person feeling able to access resources and find the things they needed at a local level to meet their goals

(CMY 2006, p.16)

In describing successful settlement, young people in the CMY study were particularly focused on their ability to formulate identity both within their community and within the broader Australian community. They noted the importance of feeling 'proud of achievements', a sense that their cultural background was, if not valued or respected, at least acknowledged and understood. They also placed importance on the ability to form a 'positive sense of self and identity' among peers defined in the broadest sense and with no reference to culture. This theme of non-specificity of culture was taken further when young people described the importance of a 'positive social life' that was based primarily on the accessibility and cultural neutrality: '... settling well in Australia means ... access to social and recreational options that are welcoming, affordable and accessible' (CMY 2006, p.16).

Young people felt that their sense of identity and wellbeing was very much enhanced where a level of competence and understanding had been developed, and in particular the ability to develop a level of knowledge of systems, roles and possibilities that enable confident navigation and self-advocacy. Further, young people saw familiarity and ease of negotiation in relation to social and communication norms as essential to good settlement.

Conclusion

This chapter attempted to situate the complex issues relating to migrant youth identity formation and social engagement within broader social and policy contexts. It has argued that youth in general, and migrant youth in particular, need to be understood in a more nuanced way that does not reproduce prejudice, disadvantage and disempowerment. Multicultural societies, where most migrant youth increasingly reside, need to restore a degree of agency to these individuals, recognising that their lives are more than just the sum of their ethnic backgrounds. The extent to which migrant youth are able to negotiate issues related to cultural identity and dual or even multiple attachments will always depend on their émigré society's capacity to nurture, support and empower them to become effective, active and confident citizens.

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