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Transcultural capital and emergent identities among migrant youth

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Magdalena Arias Cubas 

Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation, Australia

Taghreed Jamal Al-deen

Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation, Australia

Fethi Mansouri

Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation, Australia

Abstract

The everyday practices and socio-cultural identities of migrant youth have become a focal point of contemporary sociological research in Western countries of immigration. This article engages with the concept of transcultural capital to frame the possibilities and opportunities embodied in young migrants' multi-layered identities and cross-cultural competencies in the context of an increasingly interconnected and diverse world. By re-conceptualising diversity and difference as agentic, transformational capitals to be valued, fostered and mobilised, this transcultural approach brings to the fore the multitude of skills, networks and knowledge that migrant youth access and develop through multiple cultural repertoires. Drawing on the narratives of migrant youth in Melbourne (Australia), this article argues that access to different – and not necessarily oppositional – cultural systems opens up a space for understanding the ability of migrant youth to instigate, negotiate and maintain valuable socio-cultural connections in ways that recognise, disrupt and transform social hierarchies.

Keywords

diversity, identity, immigration, migrant youth, transcultural capital

Corresponding author:

Magdalena Arias Cubas, Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation, 221 Burwood Highway, Burwood, Victoria, 3125, Australia.

Email: magdalena.ariasubas@deakin.edu.au

The everyday practices and socio-cultural identities of migrant youth have become a focal point of contemporary sociological research in Western countries of immigration (Harris, 2013; Mansouri, 2015; Reynolds & Zontini, 2016). Traditionally, much of the migration research on youth has been dominated by a dichotomous and often reductionist emphasis on assimilation and integration based on national frames of analysis (for an overview, see Vermeulen, 2010; Zhou, 2014), although alternative conceptualisations have also emphasised the multi-faceted nature of migrant youth's identities (Levitt & Waters, 2002a; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2002; Werbner & Modood, 2015). Building on the latter, and on critical debates among youth sociologists that engage with migrant youth's everyday experiences and practices of diversity (Butcher & Thomas, 2006; Colombo, 2010, 2019; Harris, 2013; Nilan & Feixa, 2006; Robertson et al., 2018), this article revisits and critically explores the concept of transcultural capital (Meinhof & Triandafyllidou, 2006; Moskal & Sime, 2015; Triandafyllidou, 2009) as a transformative, heuristic tool, to account for the creative possibilities and relational opportunities embodied in migrant youth identities and socio-cultural competencies. Moving away from the tensions and problems that have been recently associated with migration and diversity (Abdel-Fattah, 2020; Cantele, 2012; Steiner et al., 2013), this transcultural approach highlights the capacity of migrant youth to mobilise multiple cultural repertoires at different temporal and spatial points in their everyday lives (Erel & Ryan, 2018).

Drawing on interviews with first- and second-generation migrant youth in Melbourne (Australia), this article aims to examine the agentic, transformative potential of transcultural capital in a hyper-connected, mobile world. Based on Bourdieu's conceptualisation of capital as presenting itself in various forms – namely, cultural, economic and social capital – transcultural capital is conceptualised and operationalised as 'the strategic use of knowledge, skills and networks acquired by migrants through connections with their country and cultures of origin that are made active at their new places of residence' (Triandafyllidou, 2009, p. 102). Fundamentally, this takes a critical approach vis-à-vis fixed and closed definitions of culture, identity and belonging by seeking to 're-conceptualise difference and diversity as negotiable, as inter-sectorial, as strategic, and as capital' (Hoerder et al., 2005, pp. 14–15). Such a transcultural approach opens a conceptual space for better understanding the ability of migrant youth to navigate difference and to instigate and maintain socio-cultural connections that have transformative capacities across spatial and temporal terrains. This is especially important in relation to migrant youth cross-cultural connectivity and transnational mobility in an increasingly interdependent, super-diverse world (Levitt, 2009; Robertson et al., 2018). Thus, from this transcultural perspective, the very notion of being a 'migrant' has the potential to be transformed from a disadvantage to an asset (Guerra, 2008; Triandafyllidou, 2009), as 'one of the most important practices is to be able to cross differences and identities, to be able to sail round the multifaceted and interconnected world without being shipwrecked' (Colombo, 2010, p. 467).

As such, this article seeks to contribute to critical debates that challenge 'deficit' models of cultural and ethnic difference. Theoretically, our article draws on conceptualisations that point to these complex and fluid understandings of the multi-faceted, agentic identities of migrant youth, including research on their diverse acculturation or adaptation strategies (Berry et al., 2006; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2002); studies on 'ethnic' social and cultural capital (Modood, 2004; Zhou, 2005); the

development of hybrid identities and cultures (Butcher & Thomas, 2006; Noble et al., 1999); and on the embeddedness of migrant youth in transnational networks or social fields (Levitt, 2009; Levitt & Waters, 2002a). In practice, the article also builds on empirical debates on migrant youth in Australia (Butcher & Harris, 2010; Harris & Herron, 2017; Mansouri et al., 2013), which increasingly draw attention to their everyday practices in proactively navigating encounters of difference and belonging in times of rising levels of diversity and increased social fissures.

However, the approach taken in this article goes a step further by adopting an extended notion of transcultural capital (Meinhof, 2009; Meinhof & Triandafyllidou, 2006; Triandafyllidou, 2009) to reflect the creative, multi-vocalities of belonging and identity formation (Kalra et al., 2005; see also Cassim et al., 2020) among migrant youth embedded in local as well as transnational social fields (Levitt et al., 2011; Levitt & Waters, 2002b). This extended transcultural lens not only highlights that migrant youth often foster ‘multiple ways of being and belonging’ (Moskal & Sime, 2015, p. 35) at different temporal and spatial points in their lives, but also that the transcultural capital they may therefore be able to access, develop and selectively deploy is a potential *asset* for them, and for the local, national and transnational communities and societies in which they belong. Thus, the extended notion of transcultural capital in this article not only captures this agentic mobilisation of associated knowledge and cultural repertoires, but more importantly also the capacity to selectively apply these different forms of capitals to resist social marginalisation and cultural oppression, and to realise individualised forms of agentic being that connect rather than divide across cultural, national and ethnic lines.

Difference and diversity as transcultural capital

Building on existing work on the dynamics of boundary negotiation and cultural transformations in contemporary societies (Colombo, 2019; López Rodríguez, 2018), our transcultural approach situates difference and diversity in positive terms with reference to the possibilities and opportunities embodied in migrant youth’s emerging identities and competencies. This recognises the potential ‘chameleonic disposition’ of those embedded in multiple social contexts ‘for strategically rearranging one’s sense of cultural identity by drawing from an expanded repertoire – according to the moment, context or location’ (Benessaïeh, 2010, p. 28; see also Hoerder et al., 2005). This agentic framing allows us to understand the ability of migrant youth to mobilise skills, networks and knowledge from an array of local, regional and global cultures to develop different forms of transformative transcultural capital (Meinhof & Triandafyllidou, 2006; Triandafyllidou, 2009). Notably, this framing also allows us to understand diversity and difference as potential enablers of, rather than obstacles, to productive transcultural capital (Marotta, 2014; Moskal & Sime, 2015). We argue that, in an era of increasing mobility and diversity, such capital should be understood as an asset to be nurtured and mobilised, rather than as a source of exclusion and liability, as it is has sometimes been portrayed in the migration and diversity literature (Cantle, 2012; Putnam, 2007).

As an analytical tool, transcultural capital includes all forms of capital identified by Bourdieu, which are linked to membership of transnational networks and communities

(Meinhof, 2009; Meinhof & Triandafyllidou, 2006; Triandafyllidou, 2009). In this context, our extended approach recognises and emphasises that, while transnational social relations and practices (that reflect a degree of direct involvement in the economic, political and social life of the country or community of origin) may be common among first-generation migrant youth, these relations and practices may wane and adopt different qualities among members of the second- and subsequent generations (Klok et al., 2020; Levitt & Waters, 2002b; Levitt et al., 2011). From our perspective however, this does not diminish the ‘the strong potential effect of being raised in a transnational social field’ (Levitt, 2009, p. 1126) as a source of transcultural capital. Indeed, by being actively exposed to an array of local, regional and global cultures through families and friends, migrant youth ‘master several cultural repertoires that they can selectively deploy in response to the opportunities and challenges they face’ (Levitt, 2009, p. 1126).

Fundamentally, this article does not assume that all migrant youth will be unequivocally willing or able to access and selectively deploy transcultural capital in its various manifestations. As noted by other migration scholars, Bourdieu’s notion of capital enables a rich description of how different forms of capital interact with each other in the context of broader power relations in which migration is embedded (Erel, 2010; Erel & Ryan, 2018; López Rodríguez, 2018). As such, bounded or essentialist notions of identity and culture may persist, as the ability of individuals and groups to contest, negotiate and transform boundaries may be limited by their location within the matrix of social, economic and political hierarchies (Meinhof, 2009; Meinhof & Triandafyllidou, 2006; Triandafyllidou, 2009). Existing research demonstrates that those who can successfully move between boundaries hold a degree of social, economic, or cultural capital that ‘appears a necessary even if not satisfactory condition for developing transcultural capital and aspiring towards building a transcultural community’ (Triandafyllidou, 2009, p. 95). This emphasises the salience of existing social hierarchies and power relations, and urges us to adopt an explanatory model of capital (Bourdieu, 1986), which is principally a ‘theory of privilege’ rather than a ‘deficit theory syndrome’ (Morrow, 1999, p. 760). In this context, a way forward to understand the potential of transcultural capital conceptually, contextually and analytically is to link it to Bourdieu’s formulation, where different forms of capital are related to and rooted in wider structures that, if left uncontested, can reproduce social inequalities. This views migrant youth as having the agentic capacity – however limited – to recognise, navigate and challenge existing inequalities by engaging in creative processes of ‘disadjustment and readjustment, of deacculturation and acculturation’ – to use Ortiz’s (1995 [1940], p. 98) words. Nevertheless, this also draws attention to the need for broader change among dominant social institutions and structures, whereupon diversity and difference are reconceptualised as assets or resources to be valued, fostered and mobilised for transcultural engagement (Jakubowicz et al., 2014).

Methodology

This article is based on data obtained from the first two years of an Australian Research Council Discovery project, involving migrant youth aged 18–25, from both new and old

immigrant communities in Melbourne (Australia), Toronto (Canada) and Birmingham (UK). The larger study aims to understand the agentic utility of transcultural capital for migrant youth, their communities and their wider societies. This transcultural perspective has been operationalised through a mixed-method approach. The two-pronged methodological strategy includes: (i) quantitative data collected with 1384 completed online surveys describing and measuring the nature and extent of transcultural capital among migrant youth across Australia, Canada and the UK; and (ii) a qualitative dimension, including multi-sited ethnographic analyses based on 119 semi-structured interviews with migrant youth in Melbourne, Toronto and Birmingham. The interviews explored the everyday experiences and practices of young people in these three cities, and the skills, knowledge and networks they have developed by engaging with various cultures throughout their lives.

This article is based solely on the data gathered through individual face-to-face interviews in Melbourne. This was the first site where we examined the formation of transcultural capital from the perspective of young people's lived experiences, but as we finalise data analysis from surveys and interviews in other sites, we will expand our future analyses to include this complementary data. The interviews used in this article were conducted with migrant youth across Melbourne, in collaboration with the Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY) and Melbourne Polytechnic, which facilitated the recruitment of 39 participants. It is important to acknowledge the limitation of recruiting participants through these multicultural and educational organisations, which may mean that more marginalised migrant youth were perhaps not represented in the research. While this may be the case with participants recruited through CMY, which included many second-generation migrants who are now university educated, this was to a degree counterbalanced by the fact that participants from Melbourne Polytechnic included recent arrivals (including refugees), who have had comparatively more limited opportunities in Australia.

Notably, while our sample was not fully representative, it nevertheless captured key aspects of the increasing demographic and cultural diversity of Melbourne. Through purposive sampling, our participants include 24 females and 15 males, of whom 29 were first-generation migrants and 10 were second-generation migrants. For those born overseas, the most common countries of birth were Afghanistan and Vietnam, followed by India, Indonesia and the USA. This sample group included participants from various religious backgrounds (15 Muslims, 11 Christians, 6 who followed other religions including Buddhism and Hinduism, and 7 who had no religion), who had migrated to Australia for different reasons (mostly economic or work, and political and asylum reasons). Our interviews with these participants were audio-recorded and fully transcribed, before being analysed in NVivo using hierarchically structured thematic nodes. The remaining sections of this article are structured around some of the key themes emerging from this thematic analysis.

Managing difference and diversity in specific times and places

Despite the many challenges that migrants face in contemporary Australia – including equality concerns, social exclusion, and racism (Dunn et al., 2018; Mansouri &

Vergani, 2018) – most participants spoke about their ability to successfully navigate difference while living in diversity. As we explore below, this ability stands as a transformative asset through which they are able to recognise, navigate and challenge social hierarchies by drawing from a diverse set of transcultural skills, networks and knowledges. Notably, participants explained that their ability to constructively engage with, and mobilise, different cultural repertoires was place- and time-dependent. In other words, they saw that living in a specific place at a particular time provided specific opportunities for building transcultural capital.

Almost all participants highlighted the advantage of living in a multicultural city such as Melbourne, as the entrenched demographic and cultural diversity helped reinforce a deeper sense of belonging. This positive view of Melbourne was often contrasted to other ‘less’ multicultural places in urban and rural Australia. Joanne, a 20-year-old first-generation migrant from Samoa explained how moving to Melbourne created an opportunity for interaction with her ‘ethnic’ community:

Brisbane ... wasn't as multicultural ... and then [my mother] got offered a job down in Sydney.... When the opportunity arose to come to Melbourne, because both [my parents] found quite good jobs, we came down.... I've done all three ... and I found that Melbourne has been the most multicultural and accepting. Sydney was good, but I found that I hadn't actually associated with the Pasifika community until we came down to Melbourne ... and especially down where we are, like in the south-east, there are a lot of Pacific Islander communities, not just Samoans ... and we found that we could relate to people, which was great.

Yet participants also noted the heterogeneity of Melbourne, as some areas, including certain suburbs and educational institutions, exhibit varying degrees of socio-cultural diversity. Ahmed, a 21-year-old second-generation migrant, stated:

I grew up in the west side and everyone ... was generally from a migrant or refugee background ... and so kind of that difference was normal to me ... relishing in those differences because they kind of actually made us special and we can connect to each other.... I can see how my values had been different to people who grew up in kind of ... I guess, more monocultural suburbs of Melbourne, where they didn't tend to kind of see that diversity.

This spatial dimension is of critical importance, as these specific opportunities for accumulating capital are afforded by the socio-cultural context of a specific place (Berry et al., 2006; Thrift, 2008). Exposure to different cultures by living in multicultural areas, for example, is viewed as a resource that can be converted into capital essential for developing intercultural understanding (Modood, 2004). As further explained by Sofia, a 21-year-old first-generation migrant from Ukraine, ‘the more people from different backgrounds you interact with, you get to hear all the different world views, all of their opinions and feelings on things, and that can help you grow as a person’. This type of transcultural capital, gained through building knowledge and understanding of multiple cultures, situates difference and diversity in positive terms, with reference to the possibilities and opportunities embodied in migrant youth’s competencies. From this transcultural perspective, migrant youth could be in a position of advantage (Kasinitz et al.,

2008) where there are beneficial possibilities to engage with cultures beyond those available to some of their (migrant and non-migrant) contemporaries who live in comparatively mono-cultural environments in the present, as Joanne, Ahmed and Sofia explained above.

While diversity has been perceived as a social and cultural resource to generate capital (Modood, 2004), many structural challenges continue to negatively shape participants' identity formation, sense of belonging and opportunities in Melbourne. Will, a 24-year-old second-generation migrant, explained how experiences of racism at school challenged his sense of belonging in Australia, and forced him to 'hide' from, and 'conform' to, the white-majority:

Part of it is going to a very white school in high school and feeling the shame of being from a different background or having different coloured skin and having to adjust to that environment and essentially hide it. So in that sense that experience made me feel like I had to conform just to survive.

Will's experience reflects the fact that, for many Australian teachers and schools, the ability to create a truly inclusive and multicultural environment remains limited by the persistent superficial celebration of ethnic difference that has become dominant at the expense of deeper and more meaningful action against racism and educational inequalities (Watkins & Noble, 2019). Recent studies show that racism remains rampant in schools and that experiences of racism are multiple and complex, ranging from being identified as an 'Other' to being excluded or bullied based on skin colour or other visible markers (Baak, 2019; Elias et al., 2021; Mansouri & Jenkins, 2010; Uptin et al., 2013). Will's narrative indicates that due to constant pressure to negotiate his identity and adjust to White normative cultures, he felt a need to change who he was to fit in.

Nonetheless, Will also reflected on how his identity developed and his perceptions of his parents' culture have positively changed over time:

in high school it was very much you're different, you're this chink, you're this insert racist slur. So in that sense, yes, the shame meant that I felt more Australian just because I wanted to hide from that experience. I didn't want to experience that so I engaged in self-deprecating humour and that kind of stuff, which I don't feel very comfortable with any more or I feel like it really diminishes the cause, whereas now I definitely feel very much Chinese Australian.

As explained further by Will, with time he began to realise that his difference was not a disadvantage, but rather a potential source of capital for personal growth.

I think the opportunity to actually appreciate both cultures ... whether that's through learning the language and some history ... you actually get to navigate both cultures, because if you don't ever get that opportunity you're never going to be able to appreciate it, or even understand the kind of person you could have become or the kinds of things that you've missed out on. I think a lot of second-generation migrants reject [their parents'] culture and don't give it enough weight until it's too late ...

This temporal dimension is also important for understanding the sense of agency of migrant youth. Notably, the ‘spatio-temporal complexity and fragmentation of “youth transition” and “migrancy”’ (Robertson et al., 2018, p. 206) means that agentic orientations take different forms of resistance, negotiation, valuing and choice-making. In other words, the way migrant youth utilise resources, often under cultural and structural constraints, varies within the life-course of an individual (Robertson, 2021) and between individuals of the first and second generations (Berry et al., 2006; Rumbaut, 2004). Rather than assuming a linear time, where transcultural capital is developed and accumulated routinely, we argue that our participants – such as Will – have been able to develop transcultural skills, networks and knowledge precisely because of their relatively privileged position along lines of class, race, gender and migration status. In many ways, this reflects the fact that capital ‘takes time to accumulate and ... as a potential capacity to produce profits and to reproduce itself in identical or expanded form, contains a tendency to persist in its being’ (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 15). In Will’s words:

as someone who was born here and has an Australian passport and has full working rights, I am someone that is not held back by the system whereas I know for people who have moved here more recently that that’s really not the case. It’s far more difficult to get a job. It’s far more difficult to get working rights, any kind of opportunity. It has to spring from some kind of creativity or you have to have the resources already to make it happen. So I think, given the conditions that I was brought up in ... by design I am supposed to succeed ...

As is evident in Will’s experiences, racial discrimination, among other forms of discrimination, may limit migrant youth’s sense of belonging and their opportunities for upward social mobility. Yet our participants expressed the view that they cannot simply rely on external intervention and remedies, they can themselves mobilise and self-empower to resist and limit the negative impacts on their lives.

There’s a lot of things that are actually problematic for migrants – you know, education, racism, all of those things, but those things are not going to stop. Racism, we may wish that will stop, but these things are ongoing, they’re not going to stop. But all you can do is, what can I do for myself as a person? How can I change my experience, my perspective? ... Because even if you have the supports in place ... you have to be equipped enough to be able to say, okay, you know what, that is there, but I’m going to fight and I’m going to move forward and see what I can do.

This excerpt shows the agentic capacity of Luna, a 20-year-old first-generation migrant from Ethiopia, to face challenges imposed upon her by existing societal structures, which constituted a powerful force against which she acted. These constraints are understood as ‘mutually inscribing formations’ of agency, culture and social structures (Brah, 2005, p. 129). The young people’s complex and varied experiences emphasise how ethnicity/race, class, gender, age, and other social dimensions interrelate in specific times and spaces. It is in this interrelation that the conceptualisation of these youths’ agency should be understood. As a self-empowered individual, Luna realised that access to opportunities and privileges might be limited for migrant youth, and therefore the only

way to achieve social empowerment and political agency is through enhancing her individual personhood. This reflects an awareness of structural inequalities connected to her racialised and ethnicised position, and a degree of agency to disrupt and transform these hierarchies.

Building socio-cultural competencies and interpersonal skills

A key theme that emerged from our interviews was the value that most participants placed on their ability to access and deploy different kinds of cultural repertoires, and how this allowed them to build valuable socio-cultural competencies and interpersonal skills. Participants understood the potential of transcultural capital – the narratives of these young people demonstrate that having knowledge of the beliefs, values and practices of different cultures, access to diverse networks, and language and social skills, has enabled them to build new types of capital. As further explored below, this transcultural capital – which allows them to cross differences and engage constructively with others – is an increasingly valuable asset for young people living in a multicultural society and a globalised world (Colombo, 2010).

Indeed, Ahmed indicated that engaging with various cultures has been beneficial to his life, albeit ‘indirectly’, as he put it, as it has enabled him to view the world through a ‘unique lens’ that allows him not only to navigate difference at work and on his social life, but also to engage with, and help, others:

Maybe not directly, but ... just in of itself, the fact of coming from a different background and being kind of between two cultures. That in and of itself gives me a unique lens when I come to work, or in social life ... allows that ability to empathise with other people. I think that’s always the main by-product.... I think it’s more of the perspective that it gives me, the values that it has provided me in the way I look at the world.

Ahmed spoke about positive attributes resulting from being actively exposed to multiple cultures and difference, including his ability to develop empathy and open-mindedness. As noted further by him:

I think in two fronts, one, because you can in one regard, appreciate and understand the cultural nuances or people’s problems often that people are going through.... And, secondly, by actually having that emotion with different people with different cultures, it allows you to see beyond the culture ... the more people you meet, the more you realise everyone has similar fears and insecurities and that’s what allows you to help them. Because in many regards you’re not looking at them through a cultural lens, you’re seeing what their problem is as a human problem and not as a Chilean problem, a Lebanese problem, a Christian problem ...

Overall, across our interviews with migrant youth, we found that most of these young people have developed many socio-cultural competencies and interpersonal skills, such as nuanced cultural awareness, open-mindedness, empathy towards people of different cultural backgrounds, and reflexivity. Notably, while this form of transcultural capital was more eloquently expressed by second-generation migrants such as Ahmed and

Will, first-generation migrants such as Joanne also spoke about how ‘being exposed to different things here, compared to what my parents were exposed to, or what people in the islands are sort of exposed to’ has been an opportunity to ‘just become a bit more open-minded, more culturally aware ... and especially less judgemental about the situations that maybe I compare to my own ...’. Similarly, Thu, a 24-year-old first-generation migrant from Vietnam explained:

access to different cultures gives you a lot of perspectives, and from that, you build a stronger understanding of things that people share with you, you don’t lock yourself into one way of thinking.... I think having the knowledge this is how people do things and that’s their culture and I respect that, rather than why they’re not doing it the way that I do ...

This narrative suggests that diversity and difference are not sources of exclusion and disadvantage, but rather of transcultural capital that can be cultivated and mobilised positively as migrant youth strategically rearrange their sense of cultural identity (Benessaïeh, 2010). In this sense, young migrants possess an agentic capacity to bring together elements from the different cultural repertoires they have access to, to form a distinctive way of being, and to develop an ability to understand, communicate with, and effectively interact with people across difference, to ‘challenge normative separations or dominant hegemonies’ and prepare ‘the grounds for reflexivity and for the public bridging of cultural differences’ (Werbner & Modood, 2015, p. xv).

However, we are careful not to romanticise the ability of migrant youth to develop transcultural capital. As noted earlier, in the case of Will, participants’ narratives indicate that this capital takes time to accumulate, and that it is also enabled and constrained by broader social hierarchies and power relations in which migration is embedded (Bourdieu, 1986). Among our participants, recent arrivals to Australia spoke at length about practical challenges, such as their inability to have their overseas qualifications recognised and their knowledge and skills valued by society (Kellock, 2016; Ressia et al., 2017). Similarly, participants who grew up in Australia spoke about the challenge of managing intergenerational divides within their own families and ‘ethnic’ communities (Mansouri & Johns, 2017; Renzaho et al., 2017), while many others spoke of old and new forms of racism and discrimination at work or at school, which weakens their sense of belonging and their access to opportunities (Elias et al., 2021; Wyn et al., 2018). These barriers point to the fundamental need for dominant social and political institutions and structures to value and foster diversity as an asset, and to transform accordingly, in ways that truly recognise and support migrant youth (Butcher & Thomas, 2006; Jakubowicz et al., 2014).

Mobilising of resources: networks, skills and knowledge

Having discussed aspects of the dynamics of capital formation and deployment, as well as its valuable potential in allowing migrant youth to navigate difference, in this section we turn our attention to some of the specific networks, skills and knowledges that our participants draw from in their everyday lives (Triandafyllidou, 2009). Social networks, within and outside their ‘ethnic’ communities, constituted a resource that these young

people use to overcome challenges and achieve goals in Australia. Similarly, they draw from cultural knowledge and social skills, including but not limited to the ability to translate between cultures and to speak multiple languages. It is the combination of these networks, skills and knowledge that has allowed our participants – to various degrees – to access, develop and selectively deploy transcultural capital in response to the opportunities and constraints they face in their everyday lives.

Our participants spoke about the multiple forms of support they received from family, friends, neighbours and organisations within and outside their ‘ethnic’ community (Mansouri et al., 2013). Teachers, homework clubs and migrant centres were important networks of support for migrant youth. Mahreen, a 19-year-old first-generation migrant from Pakistan, explained how the Homework Support Program (STAR Club) run by Southern Migrant and Refugee Centre (SMRC) had assisted her with her homework and language skills. For her, access to this type of program was an opportunity to overcome difficulty with the curriculum due to language barriers.

[People] who are born in Australia they know English. Then when we are here if it’s just the school we can’t learn – when you are coming in homework club and SMRC that’s so good because, like, there is more help. In class, like, there is maybe 24, 26 people.... Like, in here there is more teacher – you can get help, yeah.

Similarly, Sofia spoke about the opportunities offered by CMY in relation to study and employment and building networks by connecting with other migrant youth:

multicultural groups like the CMY have been a lot more helpful for developing employment ... study opportunities, or just being able to do more.... I think it’s just introduced [me] to a whole bunch of other people who have had similar but different stories, and all kind of push each other to grow, and point out different opportunities.

Accessing and using multiple services provided by such organisations represents resources that these young migrant women can accumulate and convert into different forms of capital. Homework support, including help to overcome language barriers offered by tutors at SMRC, exemplifies a form of social capital that can be considered ‘high volume social capital’, as it is used to maximise educational benefits (Ball, 2003, p. 83), and, in turn, can enhance the overall cultural capital of migrant youth such as Mahreen through knowledge, skills and linguistic competencies. This cultural capital could accrue potential benefits for her education, possibly contributing to her future academic achievement, career prospects, and as a means towards upward social mobility (Bourdieu, 1986). In this sense, the support CMY has provided for Sofia was not only in relation to her study and employment but also for networking and establishing relationships with other migrant youth with different cultural backgrounds. For Sofia, this type of social networking has enabled her to find commonalities and opportunities with other migrant youth.

Furthermore, first-generation migrants spoke about how having access to a network (mainly represented by family members who are already settled in Australia) has

enabled them to access the labour market and find a job easily within a short period of time. Minh, a 19-year-old first-generation migrant from Vietnam, explained:

My aunty's friend, she introduced me to the owner. When I was in Vietnam, like I learned a little bit about doing nails ... my aunty friends, she's working at the shop I'm working now, so she pulled some strings and I got the job there.

Minh could adapt the skills she gained elsewhere to take advantage of job opportunities in a new location and at a specific time. These skills, alongside access to an 'ethnic-specific network' (Ryan & Mulholland, 2014), show how migrant youth utilise cultural and social resources to build capital in Melbourne. Some studies have found that while ethnic-specific networks may provide accommodation, jobs, information and emotional support, and may eventually facilitate community formation and permanent settlement, over-reliance on these social ties may reinforce social marginalisation (Patulny, 2015). Yet this form of 'bonding' social capital does not necessarily impede the establishment of 'bridging' social capital, as migrants can develop expansive networks beyond their 'ethnic' communities (Nannestad et al., 2008).

There is the example of Mary, a 21-year-old first-generation migrant from Malaysia, who spoke about how, through the passage of time, access to networks that consisted of predominantly White Australians helped her feel a sense of belonging and overcome social exclusion:

I did the first year in college and all of the Australian kids were in their own gang.... I just remember feeling really excluded. Because even at lunch times, or whatever, you could sit anywhere but I wouldn't feel comfortable sitting with them because I wouldn't know what to talk to them about.... [*What about now? Do you feel that sense of difference?*] ... I have a few Australian friends and I have a boyfriend who is Australian.... I think that helped a lot and I guess he's taught me – what everything means. Because there is a lot of slang that I just didn't know.... Because when I met all of his friends and they were all very predominantly White and Australian.... With him helping me it was a little bit not too uncomfortable.

Given the difficulties faced by migrants in establishing relationships with 'locals' (Harris et al., 2020), having access to such networks contributed to establishing effective support strategies for Mary: she could mobilise this network to gain knowledge about the Australian cultural system, including exposure to and understanding of Australian slang, which could aid with overcoming the feeling of not belonging and create local affinities.

In addition to this array of networks, other participants talked about how engaging with aspects of their 'ethnic' culture has allowed them to succeed in their social life in Melbourne. Thu explained how she carried the 'family-centric' values of Vietnam with her, 'so you hold your family very close to your heart':

I think because having that family-centric and caring part of me, when I hang out with my friends, we've created this very family-like group of friends, that we care for each other, and treat each other as family members, and that's really awesome, because I know that in my hardship, I have somewhere to fall to ...

Possessing cultural values that were nurtured and promoted in their country of emigration, and can be invoked in Australia to help build strong interpersonal connections and relationships, is a key strategy that Thu used when facing potential challenges. This is not to suggest adopting the ‘rucksack approach’ that ‘views migrants as bringing with them a package of cultural resources that may or may not fit with the “culture” of the country of residence’ (Erel, 2010, p. 645). Rather, the argument is that, through her reflective engagement with cultural resources of her country of origin, including values, beliefs and norms, Thu was able to accumulate the necessary capital to ameliorate social advantages in the country of immigration (Meinhof & Triandafyllidou, 2006; Triandafyllidou, 2009). This reflective engagement requires exercising agency by creating a new ‘migration-specific cultural capital’ (Erel, 2010, p. 643) that can be employed strategically in the receiving society.

Similarly, the accounts of migrant youth reported in this article indicate that access to important skills, such as language skills gained from engaging with the cultures of countries of emigration and immigration, represents an asset not only for them individually but also for their families, communities, and the societies in which they live. Lucas, a 21-year-old first-generation migrant from Finland explained how growing surrounded by Finnish culture in Australia has enabled him to learn Finnish, which he could use in combination with English to help his parents overcome language barriers in everyday communication.

if [my parents] need to send a message or email to somebody, I’ll tell them in Finnish and then they’ll say it in Finnish to me and then I’ll translate that to the message. My dad will do that often, because even when he talks, he’s not too bad but sometimes he’ll use words that are of a similar meaning but not quite the sort of thing. That’s just how he speaks.

Cultural resources, such as linguistic competencies that Lucas has accumulated in his role as translator, represent a form of transcultural capital that can be drawn upon to overcome challenges (Butcher & Thomas, 2006). Multilingualism constitutes a cultural capital that allows individuals to access job opportunities and gain an edge in a globally competitive job market for this generation (Erel & Ryan, 2018). However, Lucas’s story indicates that he not only possessed a cultural capital that included linguistic capabilities, but also a linguistic and cultural capital that gave him a sense of agency and empowerment. Lucas believed that his father was able to interact in English, but he was not the legitimate user of the language: ‘he’ll use words that are of a similar meaning but not quite the sort of thing’. Linguistic capital, in this sense, is associated with the ‘right type’ of vocabulary when interacting with others, and the ability to understand and shift across the cultural codes embedded in a language (Butcher, 2008). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) suggest that it is not just proficiency in the mainstream language that is important; rather, it is the sense of empowerment and legitimacy to get the message across and gain benefits from meaningful interactions with others. Lucas perceived his involvement as necessary to give credibility and provide a powerful alternative to his father. This agentic capacity enabled him to muster cultural resources and convert them into different forms of capitals to gain the power of multiple group membership, and to mobilise this capital for the benefit of himself and his family.

Conclusion

In this article, we engage with recent academic debates that challenge fixed and closed definitions of culture, identity and belonging, and that problematise the framing of migrant youth as a potential source of cultural tensions and social problems. The implicit goal of our adopted transcultural approach is to reconceptualise difference and diversity as a transformative form of capital that migrant youth can access to challenge existing social hierarchies that would otherwise limit their agentic capacity. This transcultural approach recognises the ability of migrant youth to negotiate difference constructively and creatively as they engage with and draw upon an array of cultural systems across different settings. Furthermore, we argue that in an era of increasing mobility, diversity and interconnectedness, this ability represents an asset, that should be recognised, valued and fostered.

The detailed accounts of migrant youth in this paper emphasised an agentic notion of personhood and a creative capacity to access and develop transcultural capital through an engagement with multiple cultural systems. Furthermore, the findings show an ability among migrant youth to deploy this capital adaptively and selectively in response to the opportunities and challenges they face in specific moments and locations. In this context, we emphasise the importance of time and place in the development of transcultural capital, and that its formation is contingent on broader social hierarchies and power relations in which migration is embedded. Hence, the potential for migrant youth to develop transcultural identities and competencies is undeniably limited and undermined by structural factors, as individuals and groups face different intersecting barriers and opportunities that are bound by spatial and temporal constraints.

Nonetheless, this article's empirical findings suggest that migrant youth can be in a position of increased societal advantage where there are creative and transformative possibilities to engage with local, national and transnational elements of cultures beyond those available to others. By moving creatively and fluidly across cultures, by drawing proactively from their various networks, skills and knowledges, migrant youth in this study exhibited an improved nuanced cultural awareness, open-mindedness, reflexivity and empathy towards people of different backgrounds. They have also shown an ability to interpret meaning across different languages and cultural codes. In this context, there is an even greater need for research and policy agendas to recognise the authentic, agentic capacity of migrant youth (however constrained), without losing sight of the need for mainstream political institutions and social structures to truly recognise diversity as an asset that can engender positive transformative change for all.

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ORCID iD

Magdalena Arias Cubas  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9646-471X>

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Author Biographies

Magdalena Arias Cubas is an Associate Research Fellow at the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation (ADI) and the UNESCO Chair for Comparative Research in Cultural Diversity and Social Justice at Deakin University. Magdalena holds a PhD from the University of Sydney. Her research interests include: human migration, migrant labour, and inequality.

Taghreed Jamal Al-deen is an Associate Research Fellow at the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation (ADI) and the UNESCO Chair for Comparative Research in Cultural Diversity and Social Justice at Deakin University. Taghreed holds a PhD from Monash University. Her research interests include: inequality in education, class and migration, gender, and ethnic and religious diversity.

Alfred Deakin Professor Fethi Mansouri holds a research chair in Migration and Intercultural Studies and the UNESCO Chair for Comparative Research on Cultural Diversity and Social Justice. He is the founding Director of the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation (ADI) at Deakin University and editor of the *Journal of Intercultural Studies*.