

Exploring Cultural Identity Construction among African Migrant and Refugee Background Youth

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Introduction: Definitions


- This presentation is about an 'ethnic' group. The term 'ethnic' people have at least 2 official usages in the New Zealand context.
 - As used by Statistics New Zealand; and as used by the Office of Ethnic Communities* In this paper it is used in the context of the latter.
- It is about an African background population. According to official 2013 census, there were 13,464 Africans living in New Zealand (less than 1% of the NZ population. 75% were born overseas; and 25% were born in New Zealand. The presentation concerns the 25% born in New Zealand*.
- The presentation focuses on young people aged between 15-24 years old. This follows the definition by UNESCO.* African Youth Charter (15-35 years old)
- The word 'background' is used to refer to youth born in New Zealand to African migrants or refugee parents (from any of the 54 countries in Africa). These youth are NZ citizens or nationals

Why is this topic important?

- Young people from these background have been found (particular research based in the US, UK, Canada, and Australia*) too often get into trouble – such as truancy, poor performance in school and/or a general lack of participation or engagement in society.
- One of the reasons often given to explain such negative outcomes is do with construction of cultural identity or identities.
- In particular, these young people either experience an ‘identity crisis’; ‘identity fatigue’; and/or feel that they are unable to openly express their constructed identity or identities.
- This paper seeks to shed light on some of the reasons found to explain why cultural identity construction (forming, sustaining, or expressing) is an issue for youth people refugee and migrant background.
- First it explains why it difficult for these young people to ‘construct their identity’; and
- Two why they may feel unable to express their ‘constructed identities’
- A good understanding of these issues may inform the design and delivery of support services seeking to address issues faced by these young people – which contributes to negative outcomes for them. this is where we come in, I believe.



Immigration and Resettlement (Experiences of their families)

- Migration and resettlement are both complex processes. 
- For the most part migrant and refugee background people are often regarded as the 'other' who does not 'belong'.
- Constructions of the 'other' may be based on legal grounds, physical appearance or race, (perceived) cultural differences, class characteristics – or a combination of all these
- Constructions of the 'other' may be used politically (i.e. anti migrant and refugee movement); may express themselves in discriminatory practices, and weakening social cohesion in communities
- So the experiences of these young people must be understood against this background 'the other'

Refugee and migrant people's pre and post resettlement experience

- Social and economic dependency
- Loss of control
- Poor health
- Education interrupted
- Employment skills impaired

- Lack of family support
- Changed family relationships
- Lack of trust
- Lack of privacy
- Impaired attachment and relationships

- Loss of sense of place and belonging
- Cultural, racial, or religious integrity undermined
- Lack/loss of social and community support and connections

Immigration, Resettlement, and Identity Formation

- Moving to a new country challenges how people think about cultural identity
- The big question is always whether identity is bounded to geographical or territorial place, or to a cultural collective?
- So for the 25% of African background people born in NZ, forming, maintaining or sustaining cultural identity becomes a complex process.
- The *constructionist theory* of identity formation suggest that it is not as straightforward as imagined.

Identity construction is not an established fact, it is a 'production', "which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (Hall, 2014, p.222)

- Kadebe (2010) agrees that it is "constantly in the process of being formed and reformed by the personal and social interactions of individuals"(p.7)*

In the context of migration, Hall (2014) proposes 2 different ways of thinking about cultural identity:

The collective view:

““shared culture... which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. [Therefore]...our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared codes which provide us as ‘one people’ with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history” (p. 223)



Based on these two perspectives, for migrant and refugee background people, cultural identity can be defined as “the names we give ourselves to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past [present and the future]” (p. 225).

The individual view:

In addition to the collective view, this perspective emphasises

““critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute ‘what we really are’...or rather since history has intervened – ‘what we have become’. [Thus] cultural identity...is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past” (p. 225).

Youth and identity formation for youth of R & M Background

- For young people, this process is even more complex.
- The challenges of resettlement are compounded by the 'normal' developmental task of people at this age. Edwina Pio states that because of this they go through 'Double transition' into adulthood
- From a cultural perspective - On the one hand they are growing up with, and being socialised by caregivers who carry cultural identity based on country of origin; on the hand they being socialised the culture of their country of nationality.*
- often struggle with their identity which includes dealing with the *feelings and attitudes that accompany their sense of belonging to (and/or identifying with) either of the two cultural groups.*
- Where do I belong? And where do people think I belong?

“RESEARCH SAYS...”

- In this context:
- Young people are constructing their identity which are complex and multi-layered and cannot be classified as ‘pure’ – mostly shaped by culture of origin, visible differences (including skin colour), and new cultural contexts.
- Omar (2016) working with young Somali men (living in Australia and US) that these young people construct their identity in 2 forms: *imaginary identity*; and *realistic or practical identity*.*
- Some young people will prefer one cultural identity over the other; some construct their identities based on both
- But this is further complicated by the mainstream or dominant perceptions of them. For instance by asking the question “where are you from”?*
- Mapedzahama & Kwansah-Aidoo (2010) argue that this question is a matter of identity politics. Identifying 3 implications (conveys a strong sense of exclusion; obliterates multiple or hyphenated identities; invokes feelings of unsureness about place of belonging).*
- Identity formation vs. role confusion/isolation

Conclusions and Comments...

- Research reveals the complexity and fluidity of these young people's identities
- Their identities must be viewed as 'plural and unstable'; hyphenated identities; 'constantly shifting and open to multiple cultural trans/formations.
- These young people are capable of oscillating between their two or more cultures.
- 'identity fatigue' is also common among these young people: can result in periods of cultural confusion and exclusion from any culture'.
- The 'passing of generational cultural identities' is also important to consider when exploring the construction of cultural identities among this population*

Further research on this topic in Aotearoa/NZ

Research question: How do African youth of migrant and refugee background in Auckland navigate between the culture of their country of birth and the culture of their parents' country of origin in order to form their own cultural identities?

Research methodology: Participatory Action Research

Research methods: Dialogic workshops; and face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis – to analyse data.

Research participants: 10 young people from this background living in Auckland

References

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**Questions?
Comments?**



**ASANTE
SANA**

**HAKUNA
MATATA**