

AFSAAP Conference Sept/Oct 2009: Africa in a restructuring world

Ethnicity, youth and violence: Young African refugees' experiences in South Australia

Renaë Willsmore, University of South Australia

This presentation reviewed some of the Australian and international literature relating to ethnicity, youth and violence and interwove this with stories from a current research project, focusing on young African refugees' experiences of violence and non-violence in South Australia.

There is a lack of literature relating specifically to this research. Therefore, I have used Australian literature on ethnicity, youth and violence, some of which was written specifically about young African refugees and some of which was written more generally about multicultural young people. I have also utilised international literature on ethnicity, youth and violence, as well as international literature on violence in general. Therefore, the literature that I spoke about varies in terms of its specificity and applicability to young African refugees in SA, highlighting the need for more contextualised research in this area.

My research aims to understand young African refugees' experiences of both violence and non-violence, focusing on young people's experiences in South Australia, rather than prior to arrival. The primary research questions are:

- What are young African refugees' lived experiences of violence and non-violence?
- How do they explain these experiences?
- How do community leaders and practitioners working with young African refugees explain these experiences?

This research seeks to give voice to young people, African community leaders and practitioners working with young African refugees, and to include their stories in theoretical discussions of ethnicity, youth and violence, as well as debates pertaining to policy and service provision.

My research focuses on young people aged 12-25 years who arrived as refugees from African countries, within the past five years and are currently living in metropolitan Adelaide. The majority of young African refugees are Permanent Residents, some have obtained Australian citizenship and a few are Temporary Protection Visa holders.

The research is using a participatory approach and a range of methods. So far, I've established an advisory committee, started participant observation with young African refugees and conducted some interviews with African community leaders and practitioners. I will continue participant observation and conduct also interviews and focus groups with young people.

I am part way through my PhD, so the findings that I discussed are tentative. Also, I mostly drew on data from interviews with practitioners and African community leaders, as I haven't undertaken interviews with young people yet. So, there was an absence of youth voice in this presentation.

Prior to reviewing the literature on ethnicity, youth and violence, it is necessary to consider the notions of ethnicity, youth and violence.

In the literature on young people and violence; culture, ethnicity and race seem to be used interchangeably, however, I would argue that their meanings are somewhat different.

Borrowing from Hall's (1981 in Bottomley 1992) definition, I understand culture to refer to both 'meanings and values' and the 'lived traditions and practices' through which these meanings and values are expressed. Culture is about 'way of life' (Kidd 2002). Culture is shared, but is experienced differently by each individual (Avruch 1998). Culture is constantly changing (Avruch 1998) and we need to focus on how meanings and cultures are made (Le Baron 2003).

Ethnicity, on the other hand, usually refers to a 'group of people of the same descent and heritage who share a common and distinctive culture passed on through generations' (Jandt 2004, p. 16). When we talk about ethnicity, ancestry and heritage are generally emphasised more than when we talk about culture.

Jandt (2004, p. 8) says that race, on the other hand, 'refers to a large body of people characterized by similarity of descent'. The construct of race was based on the belief that 'differences between people were biological or racial' (Jandt 2004, p. 8). Thankfully, this concept has now been largely abandoned (Jandt 2004, p. 8).

There was not time to properly explore the notion of ethnicity, but I acknowledge that ethnicity is complex, constructed and cannot be taken for granted.

Similarly, 'youth' is often taken for granted and viewed as a 'transhistorical' or 'transcultural category' (Comaroff & Comaroff 2005, p. 19). However, as Bourdieu (1993, p. 94) says, 'youth is 'just a word'. He explains that 'youth and age are not self-evident data but are socially constructed, in the struggle between the young and the old' (Bourdieu 1993, p. 95). Experiences and meanings of youth are different 'across time and space' (Comaroff & Comaroff 2005, p. 19). For example, children and young people in Africa may be required to work, care for younger children and undertake household jobs (Honwana 2005, p. 34, 35); which differs from the experiences of many children and young people in Australia.

Just as the experiences of young African refugees may differ from other young Australians, it is necessary to acknowledge the diversity amongst the population I'm working with. I wish to acknowledge that young people who arrived as refugees from African countries and are living in South Australia are a highly heterogeneous population. They differ in terms of country of origin, culture, religion, gender, age, education, whether they came from rural or city areas, which countries they have sought asylum in, whether or not they lived in refugee camps, whether or not they were child soldiers and so on.

Weis & Fine (2000, p. 4) point out that much of the existing literature on violence assumes that we all understand and experience violence in the same way. Violence is complex and constructed, and experiences and meanings of violence differ depending on ethnicity, class, gender, age and other aspects of identity (Weis & Fine 2000, p. 4). Much of the existing literature is based on Western constructions of violence, and does not necessarily apply to young African refugees in SA. Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois (2004, p. 2) say that 'violence... defies easy categorization. It can be everything and nothing; legitimate or illegitimate; visible or invisible; necessary or useless; senseless and gratuitous or utterly rational and strategic. Perhaps the most one can say about violence is that like

madness, sickness, suffering, or death itself, it is a human condition. Violence is present (as a capability) in each of us, as is its opposite - the rejection of violence.' Broch-Due (2005, p. 8) agrees that violence is ever present in our lives, if, at least, only virtually. Broch-Due (2005, p. 19) also suggests that violence is often a part of identity construction.

Bourgois (2006, p. 436) discusses different kinds of violence, including 'direct political', 'structural', 'symbolic' and 'everyday' violence. The term 'structural violence' is borrowed from Galtung (1999, 1975 in Bourgois 2006, p. 426) and refers to 'chronic, historically entrenched political-economic oppression and social inequality.' Structural violence is often 'invisible because it is part of... everyday life' (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004, p. 4, 5). Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois (2004, p. 4,5) argue that 'most violence is not deviant behaviour' but is condoned by 'social, economic and political norms.' The term 'symbolic violence' comes from Bourdieu (1997 in Bourgois 2006, p. 426) and refers to 'the internalized humiliations and legitimations of inequality and hierarchy.' Bourdieu & Wacquant (2006, p. 272) say that symbolic violence occurs through 'cognition' and 'misrecognition'.

I want to acknowledge that violence is often 'productive' (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004), meaning that one kind of violence may produce another. For example, Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois (2004) argue that direct political violence may produce symbolic violence, or structural violence may produce lead to violence in the family.

For example, the African community leaders and practitioners I interviewed spoke about the complex settlement issues and changes in roles and relationships within the family experienced following arrival in South Australia. This was often described as a 'pressure' on families. As one practitioner said, these issues 'can be really complex for a family (and) can compound and result in some sort of violence, whether its physical or just being unhappy and disagreeing.' This appears to be an example of structural factors contributing to family violence.

I'm only aware of a handful of Australian studies on ethnicity, youth and violence, some of which were written specifically about young African refugees and some of which was written more generally about multicultural young people (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury 2008, Collins, Noble, Poynting & Tabar 2001, Gifford, Bakopanos, Kaplan & Correa-Velez 2007, Multicultural Youth SA 2007, Refugee Health Research Centre 2007, White & Perrone 2001, White & Wyn 2004).

Some of the common themes in these studies include 'visibility' and 'public space' (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury 2008, p. 41, MYSA 2007, p. 3), racism and discrimination (RHRC 2007, MYSA 2007) and relations with police (RHRC 2007, MYSA 2007). A few of the studies look at the manner in which ethnic identity and violence 'causally linked' (Collins et al 2001, p. 38, White & Wyn 2004).

The Australian literature suggests that multicultural young people experience racism and discrimination (MYSA 2007, RHRC 2007). Two studies identify that multicultural young people experience extensive racism and discrimination 'in public places, from police and at school' (RHRC 2007, p. 1, 2, MYSA 2007, p. 2, 3).

Practitioners and African community leaders I interviewed shared many stories of racism in public space, such as young people being egged at bus stops, being sworn at, called 'black monkeys', or 'told to go home'.

The Australian literature also focuses on relations with the police. Multicultural young people in both Victoria and South Australia reported experiencing racism and discrimination from the police (MYSA 2007, p. 4, RHRC 2007, p. 1, 2). In particular, young males in South Australia spoke about being 'subject to disproportionate and unrelenting police and security guard surveillance and interference, with many attributing this to racism' (MYSA 2007, p. 4).

Whilst those I've interviewed acknowledged that some police are making an effort to build positive working relationships with African communities, they said that many are exhausted and have not had any training in working with African communities. They also talked about young African people having little trust for the police due to negative experiences with police and authorities prior to coming to Australia. Many stories of negative experiences with police have been shared, most prevalent were being stopped when in groups and frequently being asked for ID, for example, while waiting for the bus.

Whilst those I've interviewed spoke about many young African refugees having positive educational experiences, they also shared stories of violence at school.

One practitioner described an 'underlying racism' in schools and spoke about, to quote, 'a sense of not being accepted (and) isolated, (which) comes through with put downs (and) being called names.' They said that young people may respond to such abuse with physical violence, which is generally seen as worse by schools.

As another practitioner said, 'Schools.. have a high tolerance for verbal abuse and emotional violence. The affects are not physical, they are hard to quantify (if) someone comes to a teacher and says "(another student said to me) you're too black, go back to your country", they don't take that as serious. But if it's physical it immediately triggers a response.'

Practitioners and African community leaders spoke about some teachers not intervening in situations of racism, making assumptions about young African refugees' abilities and generally having low expectations. They spoke about young African refugees not receiving the support they need.

Overall, they spoke about experiences of racism causing young people to feel excluded and unwelcome. To quote, 'Their understanding of violence (is) connected to a sense of belonging, whether or not they belong.'

A couple of practitioners spoke about young African refugees internalising such experiences of violence. One practitioner stated, 'One young person said "I've been told so many times to go home, I think maybe I should just go home." And you can see that they are taking it in on themselves.' Similarly, another practitioner stated that young people, to quote, 'feel disempowered' and 'don't have avenues for addressing their grievances', so 'keep it to themselves, internalise it, and (for) some of them you can see its like a pressure cooker.' These comments reminded me of the notion of symbolic violence.

Whilst I would argue that racism is a form of violence, Australian studies indicate that racism also contributes to further violence. Multicultural young people in Victoria said that fights are often instigated by racist comments (RHRC 2007, p. 2) whilst multicultural young people in South Australia reported 'actively resisting racism, with males more likely to act out their anger in physical fights and

“punch-ups” and females in verbal arguments’ (MYSA 2007, p. 3). It is evident that ‘peer-on-peer violence’ is often ‘racially motivated’ (MYSA 2007, p. 3).

As White & Perrone (2001, p. 161) say, ‘racism permeates the lives of ethnic minority youth in ways which foster violence as a practical solution to problems of status and identity. However, inter-group violence of this sort also reinforces... stereotypes about ethnic minority youth.’

Many discussions of ethnicity, youth and violence focus on identity. Identity is about how individuals define or see themselves, some aspects may be fixed (Sawyer 2007) but identity is generally changing and being challenged (Yon 2000). Identity is both ‘imposed’ and ‘self-made’ (Alcoff & Mendieta 2003) and often becomes important when we experience being “different” (Whelan 2006).

Guerra and Williams (2006, p. 34) state that adolescence is a time of ‘rapid biological and social changes’ during which young people establish their identities to obtain ‘purpose’ and ‘meaning.’ It is argued that this is more difficult for multicultural young people, as they must ‘negotiate multiple identities’ (French, Kim & Pillado 2003, p. 49). French et al. (2003, p. 58-59) ask whether strong ethnic identity increases or decreases the risk of multicultural young people experiencing violence.

To me, these articles are problematic, as they seem to be suggesting a causal relationship between ethnic identity and violence. Ethnic, or African, identity seems to dominate many explanations of violence (Broch-Due 2005, p. 6), leading to other aspects of identity being disregarded (Sen 2006, p. xvi).

The Australian literature suggests that the police and media sometimes ‘causally link’ violence and ethnicity, hiding other social relationships and identities that might contribute to violence. Young African refugees have been othered and constructed as “criminal”, “violent” and “unable to integrate” (Anderson 2007, Counterpoint 2005, Farouque, Petrie & Miletic 2007), with violence being directly linked to ethnicity and refugee status. However, there are no rigorous statistics to support this construction (Francis & Cornfoot 2007, p. 26).

For example, in July 2005, Andrew Fraser, a Professor of Law at Macquarie University, wrote to his local newspaper, the *Parramatta Sun*, ‘calling for a return of the White Australia policy’ and claiming that African immigration leads to ‘increases in crime, violence and a wide range of social problems’ (Counterpoint 2005, p. 1). His comments were then reproduced in both the national and international media.

Additionally, in October 2007, Kevin Andrews, the Immigration Minister at that time, reduced the intake of African refugees, stating that ‘some groups don’t seem to be settling and adjusting into the Australian way of life’ (Farouque et al 2007, p. 2). He cited an ‘increase in crime among African youth’, ‘the establishment of race-based gangs’ and suggested that African males are ‘congregating in parks at night, often to consume alcohol’ (Anderson 2007, p. 3). These statements were also widely reproduced in the media.

Rather than othering young African refugees and relying on simplistic explanations that causally link ethnic identity and violence, we need to acknowledge that violence is ‘deeply embedded in other social relationships and identities (such as) gender, generation, locality, class, religion and nationality’ (Broch-Due 2005, p. 6). Jiwani (2005), who studied multicultural young women in

Canada, found that violence occurs at the intersections of ethnicity, class, gender and age. It is also necessary to acknowledge that these various identities are not 'separate' entities (Broch-Due 2005, p. 3). As Broch-Due (2005, p. 3) says 'at particular heated moments... a chain reaction of energy within these entangled identities can be unleashed into... cycles of violent action.'

Collins et al (2001, p. 30) say that causally linking ethnic identity and violence also hides other contextual factors that contribute to violence. According to White & Wyn (2004, p. 50) These factors include 'institutional racism', 'economic marginalisation' and 'reliance upon particular notions of masculinity'. For example, one practitioner spoke about their surprise at learning that some young men who they saw as 'clever' and 'well respected' were involved in fights. When asked why they became involved, they said that when challenged to fights they felt that it was necessary to prove that they were 'strong, young men'.

In conclusion, ethnicity, youth and violence are complex and contested notions. Young African refugees in South Australia have been othered and constructed as "criminal", "violent" and "unable to integrate", with this violence being causally linked to ethnicity and refugee status. Rather than relying on these simplistic explanations, we need to acknowledge that violence is embedded in other social relationships and identities and is impacted by a range of contextual factors. It is important that we tell a more complex story, and include stories of non-violence (Ahluwalia, Bethlehem & Ginio 2007).

For more information about this research, please email renae.willsmore@unisa.edu.au

References

- Ahluwalia, P, Bethlehem, L, & Ginio, R 2007 (eds.) 'Unsettling violence' in *Violence and Non-Violence in Africa*, Routledge, Oxon.
- Alcoff, LM & Mendieta, E (eds) 2003, *Identities: Race, Class, Gender and Nationality*, Blackwell Publishing, Cornwall.
- Anderson, L 2007, 'Africans drink and fight, says Andrew' *The Advertiser*, p. 3.
- Avruch, K 1998, 'Part 1: Culture' in *Culture and conflict resolution*, United States Institute of Peace Press, Washington, DC, ch. 1, pp. 5-21.
- Bottomley, G 1992, *From another place: Migration and the politics of culture*, Cambridge University Press, Vic.
- Bourdieu, P, & Wacquant, L 2006, 'Symbolic violence' in *Violence in war and peace*, (eds) N. Scheper-Hughes & P Bourgois, Blackwell, Malden.
- Bourdieu, P 1993, *Sociology in question*, Sage, London.
- Bourgois, P 2006, 'The Continuum of Violence in War and Peace: Post-Cold War Lessons from El Salvador' in N. B. Scheper-Hughes, P (Ed.), *Violence in war & peace*, Blackwell, Malden, pp. 425.
- Broch-Due, V, 2005, 'Violence and belonging: Analytical reflections' in V. Broch-Due (Ed.), *Violence and belonging: The quest for identity in post-colonial Africa*, Routledge, Oxon, pp. 1-40.
- Colic-Peisker, V, & Tilbury, F 2008, Being black in Australia: a case study of intergroup relations, *Race & Class*, vol. 49, no. 3, pp. 38-56.
- Collins, J, Noble, G, Poynting, S, Tabar, P 2001, *Kebabs, kids, cops & crime: Youth, ethnicity & crime*, Pluto, Australia.
- Comaroff, J & Comaroff, J 2005, 'Children & youth in a global era' in *Makers & breakers: Children & youth in postcolonial Africa*, A Honwana & de Boeck (eds.), James Currey, Oxford, pp. 1-19.
- Counterpoint 2005, radio program, ABC Radio National, 1 August.
- Farouque, F, Petrie, A, & Miletic, D 2007, 'Minister speaks on Africans not adjusting to Australian life', *The Melbourne Age*, p. 2.
- French, S, Kim, T, & Pillado, O 2002, 'Ethnic identity, social group membership, and youth Violence' in *Preventing youth violence in a multicultural society*, N. Guerra & E. Phillips-Smith (eds.), American Psychological Association, Washington, DC, pp. 47-72.
- Gifford, S, Bakopanos, C, Kaplan, I, & Correa-Velez, I 2007, 'Meaning or measurement? Researching the social contexts of health and settlement among newly-arrived refugee youth in Melbourne, Australia', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 20, no. 3, pp. 414-436.

Guerra, N, & Williams, K 2006, 'Ethnicity, youth violence, and the ecology of development' in *Preventing youth violence in a multicultural society*, N. Guerra & E. Phillips-Smith (eds.), American Psychological Association, Washington, DC.

Honwana, A 2005, 'Innocent & guilty: Child-soldiers as interstitial & tactical agents' In *Makers & breakers: Children & youth in postcolonial Africa*, A Honwana & F De Boeck (eds.), James Currey, Oxford, pp. 31-52.

Jandt, F 2004, 'The dispute over defining culture' in *Introduction to intercultural communication: identities in a global community*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, California, ch. 1, pp. 3-27.

Kidd, W 2002, *Culture and identity*, Palgrave, Hampshire, England.

Le Baron, M 2003, 'Cultural fluency in conflict: an overview' in *Bridging cultural conflicts: A new approach for a changing world*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA, ch. 2, pp. 32-52.

Multicultural Youth SA 2007, *Executive Summary: Just hanging out: Young refugees & public space*, Multicultural Youth SA, Adelaide.

Refugee Health Research Centre 2007, 'Broadsheet #2: Promoting partnerships with Police', the Good Starts study for Refugee Youth.

Sawyerr, A 2007, 'Identity and Black Young People: Theoretical and Practice Considerations' in M. Sallah & C. Howson (Eds.), *Working with Black young people*, Russell Publishing, Dorset, pp. 37-63.
Sen, A. 2006, *Identity and violence: the illusion of destiny*, Norton & Company, New York.

Scheper-Hughes, N & Bourgois, P 2004, 'Introduction: Making sense of violence' in *Violence in War and Peace* In N Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, P (Eds.), Blackwell, Malden, pp. 1-31.

Sen, A 2006, *Identity and violence: the illusion of destiny*, Norton & company, New York.

Weis, L & Fine, M 2000, *Speed bumps: A student-friendly guide to qualitative research*, Teachers College Press, Columbia University, New York.

Whelan, K 2006, 'Peeling Back the Layers: A Study of the Shifting Identities of African Refugees and Migrants in Adelaide', Unpublished Anthropology Hons paper, University of Adelaide.

White, R, & Wyn, J 2004, *Youth and society: Exploring the social dynamics of youth experience*, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne.

White, R & Perrone, S 2001, 'Racism, ethnicity and hate crime', *Communal/Plural*, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 161-181.