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Building bridges in a divided world

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"Good people make a good country" by Addo Tetteh

As I am trying to finalize the manuscript for the second revised edition of my 2011 book [Intercultural Communication: A Critical Introduction](#), I've been finding it hard to concentrate and not to be sucked into despair at the US election outcome. 2016 has not been a good year for intercultural understanding as ever more barriers between people have been put up and fortified while bridges and connections are being torn down.

As unscrupulous media and politicians stoke ethnic and racial fear and hatred for their personal gain, it is the weakest members of society who suffer most.

[A recent survey of more than 10,000 Australians](#), for instance, found stark differences in the experiences of discrimination by various groups, as evidenced by responses to the question 'Have you experienced discrimination because of your skin colour, ethnic origin or religion over the last 12 months?'

- Third-generation Australians and overseas-born from English-speaking backgrounds (ESB) were least likely to have experienced discrimination in the last 12 months (ca. 15%)
- Overseas-born from non-English speaking-backgrounds (NESB) were more likely to have experienced discrimination (39%); but within the NESB group, there was significant variation:
 - Only 11-22% of those from Europe reported having experienced discrimination.
 - Within the Asia-born, there was a much larger range with only 15% of Afghanistan-born reporting discrimination but 55% of the South Korea-born.
 - The highest level of discrimination was reported by the Africa-born (54% on average) and particularly those from South Sudan (77%), Zimbabwe (76%) and Kenya (67%).

	3 rd gen Au	Au- NESB	United Kingdom	New Zealand	India	China & Hong Kong	South Korea	Africa (excluding South Sudan)	South Sudan
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Made to feel like don't belong	13	32	10	43	38	36	30	40	68
Verbal abuse	13	22	6	22	26	30	43	28	71
Not offered a job	3	9	1	13	12	12	11	19	55
Not treated fairly at work	3	10	2	12	17	16	13	13	32
Property damage	3	3	1	4	3	6	8	5	26
Physical attack	3	6	1	1	4	4	11	4	17
<i>Sub-total – property damage and assault</i>	6	9	2	5	7	10	19	9	43

'What form did the discrimination take?' (Markus 2016, p. 65)

Most of the experiences of discrimination occurred in interactions where people were made to feel excluded or where they were verbally abused, as the table shows. While 'made to feel like don't belong' may sound relatively mild, nothing could be further from the truth. Qualitative descriptions of what it means to be 'made to feel like don't belong' gathered in focus group interviews are harrowing, as in the excerpt where a young man from South Sudan sums up his experience as 'makes it hell.'

Respondent: If you go like north Sydney and stuff, there's all rich, white old men who'll just be like, 'Oh...,' they're going to look at you weird and stuff, especially if you go to the shopping centre, they're going to look at you weird.

Respondent: You don't belong.

Respondent: *Like you don't belong there.*

Moderator: *I mean, do you think people are frightened of you?*

Respondent: *Yeah.*

Respondent: *They're frightened by the idea of us.*

Respondent: *They think like you're going to just... snap ... Like, for example, if you're, say, at a traffic light, you're walking by, people just start locking their door. They're going to think you're just going to jump in their car, steal it....*

Respondent: *... they just see you walking by, like, minding your own business, they all click and start... And then you just look at them like, 'Are you serious? I'm not going to attack you,' something like that.*

Moderator: *And how does that make you feel?*

Respondent: *Makes it hell. (#11)*

Being made to feel 'like hell' (Markus 2016, p. 63)

The young men from South Sudan in the focus group live in Sydney's diverse western suburbs and specifically locate their experiences of exclusion in Sydney's affluent and predominantly white northern suburbs. They are no exception in the report and many immigrant participants tied their alienation to specific spaces, as in these examples:

- It's weird ... when you go to really white places.
- If I have to go to ... the city or ... somewhere that is ... white, ... like white-dominated Australia.... I would feel ... a bit off. I would feel like, 'Oh my god, they're looking at me. They're looking at me. What is she doing here?'
- They look at you like you're an alien ... Everyone was just like... 'What are you doing in this area?' (Quoted from Markus 2016, p. 58)

Conversely, spaces where diversity was the norm had the opposite effect and interviewees reported a sense of belonging to a place just because it was 'diverse':

- I used to live in ...Berala. Berala's kind of Auburn City Council. In this area ... it's like very multicultural, like I could see [the] Arab base, mostly, and then like Asians, and then even Sudanese. There's a lot of Sudanese here. So it's very multicultural. I feel like I fit in here, because it's so

multicultural.

- I've got a lot of friends who come from the affluent side of Melbourne and they come from old Australian money and to them, I am like this foreign being because I'm half Asian, I'm half European, but born here. ... When I'm in Broadmeadows I'm just normal.

These examples confirm at the level of personal experience what recent elections statistics (here in Australia and, more famously, in the Brexit referendum and yesterday's US elections) tell us: that these societies are deeply divided: the anger of rural and deindustrialized communities cut adrift by neoliberal globalization is readily harnessed against the more concrete scapegoat of minorities, particularly if people have little experience with diversity.

Against this context, opportunities for everyday mundane connections that allow people to engage beyond the stereotypes can become a crucial means to overcome division and exclusion. That this is not just a pious hope is demonstrated in [Vera W. Tetteh's research with African migrants in Australia](#). There we meet Timothy, a man in his early 30s from Sudan, who lives in rural NSW. According to census statistics, 90% of the inhabitants of the town where he lives are Australia-born and the largest groups of non-Australia-born have migrated from the UK, New Zealand and South Africa (in this order). So, the town is a 'white space' if you will and is certainly significantly less diverse than is true for the NSW average, where only 68% of the population are Australia-born.

However, in contrast to many other Africans who the researcher met in the course of her research, Timothy, who only completed primary education in Sudan and whose self-assessed English is 'not good', is gainfully employed and working happily for a car parts manufacturer. His employment success is the direct result of a mundane relationship where two people were able to connect beyond mediated stereotypes of the racial other.

As Timothy recounts it, one of his white Australian neighbours, Mark (both names are pseudonyms), accosted him one day and asked why Africans didn't work and relied on welfare. That Africans are 'dole bludgers' and 'welfare cheats' is a racist stereotype many Australians are familiar with from the media and extremist political groups. In fact, it was not only Mark who had been exposed to the stereotype but Timothy, too. However, instead of hunkering down in the face of his neighbour's racism, Timothy set about educating Mark and appealed to the 'typical Australian' sense of a fair go:

And then one day I will stay here and then he ask me, he say why you you Africa you stay at home and receive money from Centrelink [=Australia's social welfare office], you don't want the job. I tell him no because not like that, we need a job but here it's difficult for us because we are, some people put the application and then they tell me call you back, and nothing. If you apply for [Name of abattoir] they call you immediately. Why? (quoted from Tetteh 2015, p. 267)

It turned out that Mark had his heart in the right place and could learn to see beyond the racist stereotype. What Timothy tried to tell him – that Africans faced discrimination on the job market and only abattoir work was readily available to them – made sense to him. A few days later he showed up at Timothy's door

with an application form and recommended him to the car parts factory, where they have been colleagues since.

At a time when stereotypes divide us ever more deeply and the temptation to retreat into our own in-group bubbles is great, Timothy's and Mark's story reminds us of the power of ordinary people and our mundane everyday interactions as a force for good.

Related content

- [Voices of African-Australian Youths](#)
- [Language, Education and Settlement: A Sociolinguistic Ethnography on, with, and for Africans in Australia](#)
- [Cultural brokering](#)



Research Blogging References

Markus, A. (2016). [Australians Today: The Australia@2015 Scanlon Foundation Survey](#) Scanlon Foundation.

Tetteh, V. W. (2015). [Language, Education and Settlement: A Sociolinguistic Ethnography on, with, and for Africans in Australia](#) PhD, Macquarie University