

# YOUTH AND ETHNICITY

## The Second Generation



Picture: Rhonda Milner

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**The 1950s and 1960s saw a dramatic increase in the number of migrant school-aged children in Australia. *ELLIE VASTA* reports on their experience and the construction of youth 'ethnic' identities in the assimilation phase and later under multiculturalism.**

**I**n analysing the position of young migrant people in Australian society, we come across familiar terms which defy fixed categorisation — terms such as 'ethnic', 'non-English-speaking background' and 'second generation' youth.

This article looks at problems of definition, with particular focus on the way the identities of young people from non-English-speaking backgrounds were constructed during the period of assimilation and later under multiculturalism. The article includes an analysis of models used to explain the construction of youth ethnic identities, in particular the notion of cultural conflict and its role in that construction.

### **Some Definitions**

With the mass migration program of the 1950s and 1960s, there occurred a dramatic and unprecedented increase in the number of school-aged migrant children. These children became known as second generation or migrant youth (and more recently, ethnic minority youth), irrespective of whether they were born in Australia or not.

In Australia, concern with the second generation is a relatively recent phenomenon which has emerged with increased numbers of children of migrant backgrounds in the school system. It is an important sociological concept in understanding the relationship between ethnicity, gender, class and inter-generational mobility, as well as ethnic and national identities in the process of cultural change.

'Second generation' is one of those terms which everyone understands but which is difficult to define. There are, however, two broad definitions. The first is a statistical definition and refers to the Australian-born children of overseas-born parents. Such data

is provided through mechanisms such as the population census.

The second is a socio-political definition and includes those people born in Australia whose parents were born overseas, as well as those who arrived in Australia during infancy or early childhood. Some definitions include children aged up to about ten years, while others suggest it applies only to those children who arrived in Australia in their preschool years.

This latter definition has more to do with the political and subjective construction of identity. For example, among those of second generation Italian background, there are those who strongly consider themselves to be *either* Italian or Australian (but not both) and others who consider themselves to be both Italian and Australian (thus Italo-Australian).

The term 'second generation migrant' is a self-contradictory notion and is better explained in terms of ethnicity, although that too has its problems. For example, we can refer to those born in Australia as Italo-Australians but their migrant parents can also be Italo-Australians. For that reason, I think it is probably easier to refer to the second generation as 'second generation Italo-Australians'. This still does not give us a shorthand term for 'youth of migrant background' or for 'adults of migrant background' which includes those born overseas and their children.

For the purposes of this article, adult second generation is referred to as 'the second generation' and non-English-speaking youth includes youth of ethnic background—be that first or second generation. Also, the focus is on Southern Europeans (predominantly Italo-Australians) rather than recently arrived teenagers and refugees whose socio-economic and socio-cultural experiences need to be examined separately. Discussion of the 'older second generation' includes the migrant intake of the first three post-war decades, namely the experiences of Greek, Maltese and 'former Yugoslav' migrants as well as Baltic and Eastern European refugees.

In the early post-war decades there was more homogeneity among young people from non-English-speaking backgrounds (who were primarily from blue-collar families). Today, there is a definite heterogeneity which needs to be taken into account in terms of class, gender and ethnic specificities.

For example, these days, the classroom experience of young people from non-English-speaking backgrounds includes different identity constructions for those from long standing migrant communities, than for recent arrivals. Further, in some geographic locations, children of non-English-speaking backgrounds and Anglo-Australian children relate to a far broader range of ethnicities than they did in the 1950s and 1960s, and there are now broader concentrations of refugee children and migrant children without parents. Class differences within and between migrant groups need closer analysis as do gender specificities in ethnic identity formation among these young people and the second generation.

Before discussing the construction of migrant youth and the second generation, it

is necessary to clarify the terms 'ethnicity' and 'ethnic identity'. I have used the terms interchangeably, and suggest they have both subjective and objective characteristics.

There are two basic definitions which can contribute to our understanding of the concept, and much debate about the formal and substantive meanings of these terms (see Cohen and Bains 1988; De Lepervanche 1980; McCall et al. 1985; Vasta 1993).

The first is based on self-definition constructed on the basis of characteristics such as 'being an immigrant' or 'being of immigrant background' and sharing a minority language as well as a range of cultural traditions and histories. This is usually a political construct since it is often defined in relation to a dominant national identity.

The second definition of ethnicity can be constructed by a dominant group to draw boundaries and to marginalise people of minority ethnic cultures. Thus, ethnicity generally becomes an issue either when a dominant identity is imposed upon a group or when a group is excluded from a national identity through different forms of racism. Ethnicity represents the relationship between objective societal economic and political structures and subjective group consciousness.

## **The maintenance of the Italian language was seen as a link both between first and second generations, and between Italian and Australian cultures.**

In Australia, 'ethnicity' generally refers to non-English-speaking background migrants. An example of how ethnicity is constructed within particular historical and political contexts is clearly illustrated by the fact that 'ethnicity' is rejected by many Aboriginal people as a term which refers to them. Their identity is referred to as 'aboriginality'; not 'ethnicity', which is seen to refer to people of immigrant background. In other words, they reject the political connotations which the term 'ethnicity' has taken on since they claim it refers specifically to migrants.

It is useful, then, to take a look at the position of non-English-speaking background youth during the period of assimilationism in order to understand how they were constructed within a dominant and contradictory discourse of inclusion/exclusion, and to examine some of the analytical models which have been used to understand problems experienced by them.

### **Assimilation Policy**

The ideology of assimilation policies in the 1950s and 1960s was based on absorbing much needed migrant labour into the unskilled labour market, thereby absorbing the second generation into institutional structures. It was also based on the idea of cultural assimilation. From a pedagogical and cultural perspective, the school experiences of non-English-speaking background children during the first three postwar decades were mostly ignored (see Martin 1978), and many of those who arrived in their early teens

dropped out within a few years (Cahill 1986).

But according to official rhetoric, assimilation policy was proceeding satisfactorily. This led to the myth that migrants were assimilating, and without too much difficulty. In fact, the discriminatory practices of official policy and community racism created an environment of migrant resistance and non-assimilation. For the school children concerned, the ideology of assimilation frequently caused confusion and conflict at home and at school (Vasta 1980).

Officially, school children of non-English-speaking backgrounds fell within the contradictions of the ideology of assimilationism. One example of this was clearly evident when, at the 1963 Citizenship Convention, the Director-General of Education NSW, Dr H. S. Wyndham, stated that his department deliberately refrained from collecting statistics about overseas-born school pupils because 'once they are enrolled in school they are, from our point of view, Australian children' (Wyndham 1963:21).

The implication was that these children were assimilating well and that it would be discriminatory to single them out statistically. On the other hand, by ignoring the specific disadvantages experienced by such children in the Australian education system,

the ideology of assimilation in fact reproduced a particular form of structural racism. Furthermore, Wyndham claimed that it was the Australian school which was caught between two cultures (Wyndham, 1963:22).

While the children's language and traditions were mostly ignored, the importance of teaching non-English-speaking background children English drew some attention from authorities. As Martin states (1978:92), 'The school returns consistently revealed the assumptions that migrant education meant teaching English, that assimilation was the ultimate goal, and that 'national groups' in community or school hindered assimilation and were therefore to be discouraged.'

The concern of the immigration authorities and assimilation ideologues was that although it would take adult migrants longer to assimilate, all efforts had to be made to assimilate the second generation as that would be a sure way of maintaining dominant Anglo-Australian structural and cultural forms. Young people received this message through a variety of discourses, and were discouraged by teachers from speaking a language other than English at home or at school.

Migrant Italian parents, however, were doing all within their powers to ensure that their children continued to speak Italian or their dialect at home. The maintenance of the Italian language was seen as a link both between first and second generations, and between Italian and Australian cultures. Despite the availability of classes, many sec-

ond generation children resisted their parents' demands to speak their mother tongue because of negative reactions at school and in public. This three-way tug-of-war between the ideologues of assimilation, Italian parents and their children resulted in the children, as adults, being proficient in both written and spoken English and, at least, orally in their parents' dialect.

In 1970, in response to reports in the late 1960s that migrant children were having problems at school, the Federal Government established the Child Migrant Education Program (CMEP). This program was based on the premise that the problems experienced by migrant children were fundamentally 'problem[s] of communication located in the individual child' that could be addressed through English language classes (Martin, 1978:113).

In fact, the problems were broader and related to a lack of awareness by authorities and teachers that many children were learning English as a second language. In some

Rocco's turned into a family barbecue and watching a soccer game became an afternoon at the footy.' (Lombardo 1985:49)

There were a number of reactions to the racism experienced by the second generation. It was not unusual for scuffles to break out when young Italians were called names such as 'wog' or 'dago'. A group of Italo-Australian boys interviewed in a Brisbane boys' high school in 1979, made the point that the worst kind of name calling which they could offer back to their Anglo-Australian peers, words such as 'convict' or 'skippy', did not have the same derogatory value as 'wog' and 'dago'. Clearly, the power to define cultural symbols lay in the hands of the Anglo-Australians, even when the majority of boys including the dux of the college, happened to be Italo-Australians.

Many adult first generation migrants resisted the direct racism and ethnocentrism of assimilation by distancing themselves from the Anglo-Australian community. However, many second generation migrants were

freedom and independence. As one woman put it, 'the only way she could get out of this place [her parents' house] was in a wedding dress or a coffin (Hampel, 1984:173).

Nevertheless, migrant women as cultural custodians have resisted certain forms of sexism which pass as cultural practices, and the results have benefited their daughters (Vasta 1990). In other words, while many migrant women have been party to the restrictions placed on their daughters, they have also helped their daughters in their struggle for freedom. This struggle has been fought by Italian mothers in different ways: in the workplace, as unskilled factory workers struggling to give their daughters a better education; and in the home, where their daughters' lack of independence within the family has been slowly chipped away (see also Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1989).

### Assimilationism: Theory and Ideology

The foundations of the assimilationist approach are found in the urban sociology of the Chicago School developed in the United States early this century in the work of Robert E. Park, W. I. Thomas and others. Their research was concerned with understanding how to maintain social order and cohesiveness in rapidly expanding cities with large scale settlements of people from different cultural backgrounds, like Chicago.

Park's analysis sees cultures of immigrant sending and receiving countries as fairly homogenous and static. Values and norms of both groups are seen as the result of the socialisation process. Since migrants have been socialised in different societies, they bring with them cultures and traditions which are seen as inappropriate and incongruous to the host society. Any group hostilities which may arise are not seen as racism on the part of the host or majority population, but rather as maladaptation of the newcomers. A principle issue in this process is re-socialisation through which the minority groups are expected to adapt to the so-called prevailing norms of the society (Castles 1990).

This is summed up in Park's theory of the 'race relation cycle' in which groups pass through four stages: contact, conflict, accommodation and assimilation (Lal 1988). The 'race relations' approach is based on the false premise that cultures are homogenous and static, and that diversity, conflict and social change are illegitimate.

The 'commonsense' idea which emerges from this position is that migrants must adapt to the dominant culture's way of life by discarding their own cultural practices and traditions. It was believed that the maintenance of ethnic cultures would lead to separatism and ghettos and threaten 'social cohesion'.

The rejection of language and other cultural symbols and practices created much conflict between parents and children and, with regard to schooling during the assimilation phase, many Anglo-Australian teachers and their students (young people of Anglo and non-English-speaking backgrounds) brought discrimination into assimilationism in the most subtle of ways.

These conflicts were more than the usual intergenerational conflicts of adolescents, and



Picture: Rhonda Milner

cases this resulted in children with English language difficulties being placed in remedial classes, which undermined the child's confidence.

For many Italo-Australian children in the 1950s and 1960s, their sense of identity and culture was confused by their experiences at school. Schools and teachers were ill-prepared for classes with a high migrant density and the curriculum was geared towards the needs of Anglo-Australian students. Italian surnames, broken English and different dress set Italo-Australian children apart in the eyes of school teachers and peers:

'The way I looked to others was another surprise. I had never realised that I was classified as different because I didn't know that blonde hair and blue eyes was seen as normal...As I noticed these differences, and I was hurt, I tried to change myself in order to be accepted. The first thing I learnt was no salami sandwiches for lunch, and instead I wanted to order a meat pie or a vegemite sandwich. I also realised that my mum didn't use Kraft cheese in my sandwiches but the smelly one. In the classroom situation, when it came time to tell the class 'news' I'd find myself changing the stories so that mine wouldn't sound so different from the others. The day we spent making salami at Zio

more vulnerable because of their adolescence and, in rejecting their parents' culture, often found themselves caught between the two (see Vasta 1979, 1980).

'My Italianess stood out in me as if I were wearing a constant sign. I even started believing the images they [Australians] had of my culture, and if they made fun of it, I'd find myself laughing with them rather than defending myself. To be accepted, I was agreeing with their comments and ideas about my culture and family: my Grandmother wore black; my parents had an accent; I had garlic breath; I only washed once a week; I had spaghetti for breakfast; my father was a mafia godfather; my Uncle owned a fruitshop...' (Lombardo 1985:50)

Another area for conflict lay in Italian and Australian gender relations. This had particular relevance for Italo-Australian second-generation women who, like many in the period of assimilation, were not encouraged to complete secondary schooling or pursue a professional career (see Taft 1975:58).

Italo-Australian girls were also faced with restrictions related to Italian family honour and female chastity (see Huber 1985), and their experience of family life was often quite different from that of their brothers. Even today, conflict centres around questions of

within the assimilationist model were often explained in terms of the 'culture conflict' model or 'culture clash model'. These models were based on the idea that conflict between two cultures could be overcome if migrant parents and their children discarded their language and cultural practices and assimilated into the Anglo-Australian way of life.

In Australia, these ideas guided settlement policy through to the 1970s and are still part of commonsense discourse among some sectors of the community (see, for example, Blainey 1984). In fact, discriminatory practices experienced by migrants during assimilationism often compelled ethnic groups to resist many dominant cultural forms (see Vasta 1993). Although adults resisted assimilation, their children were far more vulnerable to the dominant cultural and ideological practices of the day.

The consequence of assimilationist ideology is that the problem is seen to lie in the deficiency of minority individuals and their cultures rather than in the racism arising out of the interests, attitudes and practices of the dominant majority. For children, 'shame' was implicit in this ideology and caused the most destructive responses from second-generation immigrants who interpreted their parents' demands for adherence to native cultural traditions and practices as authoritarian behaviour.

It was also clear that teenagers were using a similar model to the 'culture conflict' model used in earlier research to explain the problems experienced by the second generation, to explain their own problems with their parents:

I'm still uncertain about the two ways and probably will always be. In a way, I've had to force myself to accept my parents' principles to make them sound right to me. It's like being in a totalitarian regime where people have to make themselves believe that what they are being subjected to is right, otherwise they couldn't face the conflict.' (Vasta 1978:196–197)

But non-English background children generally assimilated fairly quickly. Indeed, some feared the second generation would lose their sense of Italian identity and culture altogether, a general tendency which some observers believed had occurred in the United States.

The American experience followed two broad analogies. The first of these (Hansen 1938) suggests that while the second generation lost familiarity with Italian language and culture, there was a resurgence of interest among the third generation. The second (Child 1943) suggests a typology of three categories of reactions of second generation Italo-American males to American society: the rebel; the in-group; and the apathetic.

Neither of these theories appear to apply to the second generation in Australia where a rejection of, and return to, Italian culture and heritage is evident *within* the one generation. For while many second-generation adolescents rejected their parents' language and culture, it would appear that, as adults, they are highly involved with their Italian heritage and operate comfortably with a bi-cultural ethnic identity. In providing links between the Italian and Anglo-Australian communities, these second-generation Italians operate

as 'cultural brokers', directly and indirectly breaking down the many barriers which exist within and between the two communities.

This shift to a bi-cultural identity within the one generation is, I suggest, due to migrant resistance of assimilation, the emergence of multiculturalism and the effects of the women's movement. The early post-war youth of non-English-speaking background reached adulthood at a time when multiculturalism was becoming established in both policy and popular consciousness. The social movements of the seventies in Australia became important in posing new issues, shaping consciousness and opening up new areas for political discourse. These movements emerged from the 'crisis of industrial culture' (Touraine 1981) and became divisive agents of historical change.

### **Multiculturalism: Youth and Identity**

Under different policies, the states have managed the problem of migrant children's identity in contradictory ways. Under assimilation, their identity was managed by devaluing the children's cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Under multiculturalism, migrant children can take pride in their cultural backgrounds.

However, because of the concentration on cultural issues (which ignores the socioeconomic and gender position of migrants),

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ethnic minority children have not achieved the same occupational status as their Anglo-Australian peers (see Collins 1988; Castles et al. 1992). Many migrant students have been disadvantaged because of their location in poorer areas where schools tend to be understaffed and under-resourced.

So, despite some positive changes in educational outcomes, serious problems remain for young people whose first language is not English: a non-English-speaking background frequently leads to educational disadvantage; higher rates of school retention among such students does not necessarily imply educational success (for statistical detail and discussion on upward mobility for the second generation, see Collins 1988; Bertelli 1984; Vasta 1992); students are underrepresented in technical and trades qualifications and have higher levels of youth unemployment; and racism continues to be a serious problem in schools (Kalantzis and Cope 1987).

Nonetheless, rather than abandon multicultural education as some would have it (see, for example, Birrell and Seitz 1986), Kalantzis and Cope suggest that 'multicultural education needs to be strengthened to include a more powerful equity component with participation and access for all students: '[e]quitable multiculturalism would require both the mainstreaming of multiculturalism through all traditional curriculum areas and differential educational strategies

to singular social ends;...[t]his multiculturalism should: (1) aim at social equity through multicultural curriculum strategies and (2) tackle the pressing problem of racism directly.' (Kalantzis and Cope 1987:19–20)

Certainly, multicultural policy and programs require better resourcing, planning and delivery. But young people of non-English-speaking backgrounds today have grown up within a multicultural ambience. Their ethnic and gender identities have been constructed within multiculturalism and the liberalisation of gender relations, often leading to resistance and reinterpretations of the problems experienced by youth of the fifties and sixties.

The openness to cultural diversity and the opening up of socio-political spaces for women (even though racism and sexism are problems which continue to be challenged) has led to identities structured with far more agency than was available to others under assimilationism. Their strengths and needs are now far more comprehensively recognised and represented (see for example, Cahill and Ewen 1988; Bottomley 1991; Inglis et al. 1992).

Girls in a study by Tsolidis (1986) felt comfortable with their bi-cultural identities and saw themselves as 'Australians with a difference'. One contributing factor was the experience of returning to their mother countries, which emphasised to them the importance of language and the experience of sep-

aration from loved ones (1986:19). For many of the early post-war second generation, this phenomenon did not begin until they had left school and reached adulthood.

The experience of visiting the mother country has also had a significant effect on the interpretation of intergenerational relationships. Whereas girls in an earlier study (Vasta 1978) often saw their parents' child-rearing practices as 'authoritarian', those in Tsolidis' study (1986) explained their lack of freedom in Australia as their parents' reaction to an unfamiliar environment. Typically, these girls could see that their parents lacked confidence in Anglo-Australian child-rearing practices.

#### ***The Illawarra experience***

In the Illawarra region of NSW a multicultural awareness program called *Let's Talk About Ourselves* was developed in 1982 for 15–17 year old girls of non-English-speaking backgrounds. The program was initiated by a group of women called MAG (Multicultural Awareness Group) as a reaction against the assimilation model which they had, themselves, experienced.

Rather than focusing on the negative stereotypes often constructed about their ethnic-specific identities, the group sought to identify the many positive aspects of the girls' life experiences and cultural backgrounds. So they began by questioning

Anglo-Australian norms and, in trying to develop non-traditional ideas for job prospects, drew attention to the advantage of having a second language.

The MAG women also focussed on how to negotiate with parents about things the girls wanted. For while the women were attempting to facilitate change with regard to educational knowledge and resources, they were attempting to empower the girls in terms of coming to grips with their ethnic and gender identities.

Reactions to the program from colleagues were mixed. Some saw the concentration on girls' issues as discrimination against boys; one ethnic male colleague thought the issues covered by the program were not real 'access' issues; and a number of Anglo-Australian colleagues devalued the importance of the work because they could not understand the reasons for such an ethno-specific program.

The women described these responses as a devaluing of women's issues and work, and a failure to recognise that something which dealt with cultural diversity was different (Interview, October 1993). Despite these reactions, participant response to the program has been positive, and the number of schools in the Illawarra region incorporating the program has grown considerably since its inception in 1982.

In that time, the program has been revised in a number of ways as the socio-cultural position of its participants changed. For instance, the women found that the 'culture conflict' model they initially employed was not entirely appropriate because, on the whole, the girls were juggling both cultures quite competently. They did not have many of the problems experienced by the older second generation; for example, these girls had more personal freedom.

## Conclusion

It is clear that the 'culture conflict' model has empirically lost its explanatory value within the current version of Australian multiculturalism because it implies that culture is static and denies the ability of non-English-speaking background youth to evaluate the cultures which are most relevant to them.

Today, youth of non-English-speaking backgrounds interpret and construct their ethnicity from a different set of historical and political circumstances based on a notion of cultural diversity which intersects very clearly with their gendered and socio-economic positions so that the effects of that positioning and their needs are likely to construct not only different identities, but also different programs from the past.

Throughout the 1980s, social science research has been concerned to empower the subject. Although the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s contributed to ideological changes which made this possible, three major issues do not have such positive outcomes for young people of non-English-speaking backgrounds. These are: socio-economic disadvantage (especially in education for girls); special needs of refugees, recent arrivals and young people of Asian background; and racism.

Much of the research on these young

people has concerned youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds. We need also to tap into the experiences of youth from less disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, carrying out direct gender comparisons as well as comparisons with Anglo-Australian youth.

And we need to consider the socio-economic, cultural and policy experiences of refugee youth and other recent arrivals — in particular, the experiences of young people from Asian countries — and their effects on the construction of class, gender and ethnic identities.

As Cahill and Ewen suggest (1988:37): 'The issues here cannot be attacked within a mainstream approach. Moreover, we must realistically face up to community racism against Asian persons which is embedded in Australia's historical legacy of the "yellow peril" and "white Australia".'

These are some of the issues for the 1990s which require our collective action.

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