

## Researching Refugee Youth

## Researching Refugees through the Arts

**Y**OUNG people from refugee backgrounds are faced with numerous challenges as they begin their lives in Australia. While it is important to research these challenges, it is equally important that the experience of participating in this research is positive and productive for the young people involved.

To this end the RHRC is conducting *Good Starts Arts*, a three-year participatory arts-based research project exploring the experiences of young people from refugee backgrounds settling in Australia.

*Good Starts Arts* has three key objectives

- To contribute to and complement the findings of the *Good Starts* longitudinal study of refugee youth currently being conducted by the RHRC
- To produce audio-visual materials that can provide the wider community with information about the life experiences of these young people
- To facilitate the development of practical and personal skills for participants and to enhance their wellbeing.

In the first year of the study two projects were carried out. A 14-week after-school project with fifteen Somali-Australian young people resulted in the creation of 'See through Me': a ten-minute documentary



*Good Starts Arts* participant.

exploring discrimination. A shorter, 6-week in-school project with six Sudanese-Australian young women led to the creation of 'Crazy': a five-minute audio-visual exploration of identity. Sessions were co-facilitated by a researcher, a theatre/writing facilitator and a filmmaker.

'See through Me' and 'Crazy' are collaborative works that explore subject matter that participants identified as being important to them. Participants assumed the roles of co-researchers and co-artists, working with facilitators to develop and implement their ideas. While facilitators necessarily took the

lead in their areas of expertise, such as editing footage, participants had many opportunities to provide input and were given final approval of the completed materials. The trust and confidence developed through collaboration between participants and facilitators led to a great depth and breadth of information being provided by participants.

While the public use of audio-visual materials in which participants are identifiable requires careful management in order to protect participants, the young people in *Good Starts Arts* generally found the experience

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of appearing in the materials to be empowering. This was particularly true for Sudanese participants, whose community in the lead up to the project had been the focus of much negative political and media attention. These young women saw the project as a way of responding to this negative attention and of rectifying perceived misconceptions.

Many participants identified the opportunity to share their ideas and experiences as an important facet of the project. On completing 'Crazy', one Sudanese participant wrote: "[I feel] more opened and I feel cooled down because I shared my feelings and that's what I needed to do". Other outcomes identified by participants included developing skills such as using cameras and conducting interviews, gaining confidence, and making new friends. Additionally, arts-based activities such as

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## Researching Refugees through the Arts CONTINUED

photography assisted participants with low levels of literacy and confidence in English in communicating their ideas and experiences.

Utilising audio-visual media to communicate research findings allowed for the creation of coherent poly-vocal texts within which the diverse and often conflicting views of participants could be conveyed. Thus in 'See through Me' participants explained how they at times respond violently to discrimination, yet warned against resorting to violence; highlighted both colour (young men) and wearing a headscarf (young women) as triggers for discrimination; and identified both negative and positive elements of living in Australia.

As is widely recognised, arts-based outcomes provide an engaging way to disseminate research findings beyond the academy. In the case of *Good Starts Arts* this has included 'See through Me' screening at the Human Rights Arts and Film Festival, and both 'Crazy' and 'See through Me' being adopted as educational resources by the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture. Such outcomes are a productive beginning to the project and we look forward to working with participants to create and disseminate further materials in 2008.

*Good Starts Arts* is funded by an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant in partnership

### RECOMMENDED READING

#### PARTICIPATORY AND ARTS-BASED RESEARCH

- MacDougall, D. (1998). *Transcultural Cinema*. Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press
- Finley, S. (2005) 'Arts-Based Inquiry: Performing Revolutionary Pedagogy' in N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (eds.) *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks CA: Sage Publications
- Lassiter, L. E. (2005). 'Collaborative Ethnography and Public Anthropology' in *Current Anthropology* 46(1):83-106.
- O'Neill, M. & Harindranath, R. (2006). 'Theorising narratives of exile and belonging: the importance of Biography and Ethno-mimesis in "understanding" asylum' in *Qualitative Sociology Review* 2(1):39-53

with the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) and the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of

Torture (Foundation House). 'See through Me' and 'Crazy' will soon be accessible through the RHRC website.

## Research dilemmas

**F**AR AND AWAY our biggest challenge with *Good Starts Arts* has been ensuring a comprehensive and ongoing process of informed consent. Given the small number of participants, the extensive use of visual and audio-visual data, and the public nature of the audio-visual project outcomes, it is impossible for

participants to be completely de-identified and therefore crucially important that they feel comfortable and safe.

To ensure that participants are comfortable with what is created and how it may be used, each stage of the project is discussed in depth with participants and they are given many opportunities to consider what and how they

want to communicate. Edited footage is shown back to participants at several stages, so that they have a chance to express concerns and share ideas. Participants are also encouraged to reflect on what they have communicated and the ways in which it may be read by various audiences.

Each audio-visual outcome is identified as being for one

of three levels of use – academic (research only), limited public (such as conferences and screenings for relevant practitioners or organisations), and public (to be widely disseminated). For each audio-visual outcome, participants sign a form giving consent for it to be used in the specified manner.

### A MESSAGE FROM THE DEPUTY DIRECTOR

**W**ELCOME to our first newsletter for 2008! The RHRC continues to grow, not only with the addition of new staff members across Melbourne and Brisbane, but also with the increasing number of collaborations with refugee service providers and the diversification of research projects and research methods. Researching the

issues faced by people from a refugee background requires creativity, innovative research methods, and active community participation.

The research projects described in this edition of our newsletter show how the



RHRC is actively engaged in developing arts-based projects within a participatory action research approach. We are aware of both the ethical and methodological challenges involved in these approaches. We are fortunate

to have resourceful and highly motivated young staff members who represent a new generation of researchers in forced displacement and refugee resettlement in Australia and around the world. To them, our most sincere gratitude!

— Dr Ignacio Correa-Velez,  
Deputy Director &  
NHMRC Postdoctoral  
Research Fellow

## PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVE

**Participants reflect on their experience of participating in the Good Starts Arts project:**

"The project's important to me cos...it's something that will benefit me and the other people out there and show 'em how it is to be black and how people get discriminated"

"I realised that my voice was heard and I shouldn't be scared to tell anyone my experience being in Australia"

"Well I've seen other people's experiences and I not only know how I feel, but how my friends feel as well"

"It leaves me a bit optimistic about how people can be open minded when they see things like this"

**Introducing... Caitlin Nunn**

## QUALIFICATIONS:

Current PhD candidate (Australian Centre,  
University of Melbourne)  
Grad Dip & MA Prelim, Development Studies  
(La Trobe University)  
BA, Theatre Production (Victorian College  
of the Arts)

**What led you to join the RHRC?**

I initially joined the RHRC in 2004 as a student and have since continued on as a staff member. When *Good Starts Arts* was awarded funding I was overjoyed at the opportunity to take on a role where I could apply my diverse learnings in community arts, development studies and refugee youth all in the one project!

**What current projects are you working on?**

I am currently the Research

Officer on *Good Starts Arts* – a role that is endlessly exciting and challenging.

I am, however, scaling back my involvement in order to concentrate on my PhD studies. My PhD research involves utilising collaborative methodologies to explore the ways in which ideas and experiences of identity and belonging in Australia change across generations in the Australian-Vietnamese community.

**What research areas are you interested in pursuing in the future?**

At present I am particularly interested in the long-term experiences of refugee and migrant communities in Australia and their changing engagement with Australia and their countries (and cultures) of origin.

I also continue to be interested in collaborative and arts-based research methodologies. I am excited by the potential to implement projects at the nexus of community development and research, and the ways in which these two agendas can be synthesised to generate complementary and mutually beneficial outcomes.

**What has been one of the highlights of working in refugee research?**

Working collaboratively with research participants, I have had the opportunity to hang out with a lot of young people from refugee backgrounds and share stories, experiences, and laughs. It has been a privilege to be accepted into their confidence and in turn to share what I have learned.

## POLICY CORNER

**'Pacific Solution' coming to an end**

**O**N FEBRUARY 8 2008, the last remaining detainees being held on the Pacific island of Nauru while awaiting decisions on their Australian migration applications were resettled in Australia. These 21 Sri Lankan men all had their refugee claims accepted. This marks the end of the Howard Government's so-called 'Pacific Solution' which was designed to deter unlawful boat arrivals to Australia.

In addition to the detention centre on Nauru, the Australian Government has been keeping open a detention centre on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea (although no detainees have been held there since 2004). The Australian Government will hold talks with both the Nauru and PNG governments to close the detention centres.

Since the inception of the Pacific Solution in 2001, over 1600 people have been sent to

Nauru or PNG to have their asylum claims assessed. According to Department of Immigration and Citizenship figures, 61% of people who were held in the Manus and Nauru detention centres were resettled in Australia after their refugee claims were found to be valid.

In future, unauthorised boat arrivals to Australia will be held and have their claims processed on Christmas Island, off Australia's west

coast, 2600 kilometres northwest of Perth. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has called on the Government to ensure that refugee applicants held on Christmas Island will be subject to the same processing as on-shore asylum seekers in Australia.

*Contributed by the Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma (www.fasstt.org.au)*

## Centre News

- ▀ TWO NEW broadsheets on refugee youth can now be accessed on the RHRC website. They are: Refugee Youth and the School Environment and Refugee Youth and Sexual Health.
- ▀ THE QUEENSLAND Program of Assistance to Survivors of Torture and Trauma (QPASST) has asked the RHRC to evaluate its NEXUS Program, which is part of the National Suicide Prevention Strategy. NEXUS

is a community based suicide prevention program for young refugees aged 12-24 living in Brisbane and Toowoomba (Queensland). The evaluation framework uses both quantitative and qualitative methods and a pre- and post-intervention approach to assess the process and impact of the NEXUS program.

- ▀ THE RHRC TEAM in Brisbane welcomes Melissa Telford who will work on the evaluation of QPASST's NEXUS Program and Gerald Onsando who will work on the longitudinal study of

refugee men's health and resettlement. Both are highly qualified professionals who will make valuable contributions to the work of the RHRC.

- ▀ THE QUEENSLAND Integrated Refugee Community Health Clinic (QIRCH) is organising the 'Refugee Primary Health Care Conference: Caring Nationally', on the 27th & 28th November 2008 in Brisbane. The RHRC Brisbane team is providing in-kind support to the conference. For more information contact QIRCH

([qirchadmin@mater.org.au](mailto:qirchadmin@mater.org.au); Ph: 07 3163 2880).

- ▀ THE RHRC and the La Trobe Centre for Dialogue held a symposium on the 14th March, 2008 entitled 'Pathways to Understanding: Somali Community, Family and Youth in Australia'. This symposium was held at La Trobe University, Bundoora campus. The aim of such a symposium is to understand the situation of the Somali community in Australia from various sources – academics, community leaders and community advocates.

## Equal Like Me



'Equal like me' is a photo project which compliments *Good Starts Arts*. Twenty students from diverse cultural backgrounds aged between 15 and 18 years, used photos and stories to explore their experiences of equality and



discrimination in Australia. The project culminated in an exhibition at Princes Hill Secondary College in October, 2007 which was received very well by a public audience.

Kathrin Schmieder (MA Journalism/Arts) was the creator and coordinator of the 'Equal like me' photo story project. She has previously worked on international

narrative photo projects such as 'Imagine', 'Imagine AIDS' and 'My life with the nature of Chaco'. "I deeply believe that with arts we are not only able to explore and document social coherences and determinants that promote mental and social well-being for refugees. We can also influence their well-being in a very positive way." She is

pictured here with participants at the opening of 'Equal like me'.

You can see 'Equal like me' and 'Imagine' in an upcoming exhibition at Yarra Theological Union. The exhibition opens on Friday May 2nd, 7pm-9pm. It concludes on Friday May 9th. For more information visit [www.ytu.edu.au](http://www.ytu.edu.au)



### Researching Refugee Health

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For more information about the Refugee Health Research Centre please visit our website:  
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