

# INTERCULTURAL HARMONY AND UNDERSTANDING IN THE CITY OF WHITTLESEA

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## INTRODUCTION

Increase in population mobility and the arrival of migrants from a wider range of countries than ever before has produced 'ethni-cities' (Hill 2003, p. 1) in western societies. These cities become places where the visibility of cultural diversity and the co-existence of different ethnic groups can generate feelings of anxiety and fear and attitudes that range from intolerance and indifference, to more cosmopolitan virtues of care, generosity and responsibility (Poynting & Mason 2008, Valentine 2008). But terms such as social fragmentation and unrest rather than harmony and intercultural understanding are increasingly associated with the multicultural societies of today (Wiles 2007). The fluctuation of attitudes and views towards diversity and immigration cannot be taken for granted as they reflect deeper and intersecting factors most notably social policies, public discourses, individual notions of attachment and identity, as well as opportunities for creative engagements with 'lived' diversity. Indeed, multiculturalism as a philosophy and a state-led policy of governing and recognising diversity in the public sphere was first introduced in white majority western liberal societies in 1970s to integrate and settle immigrants and ethnic minorities. However, this policy is less enchanting today in an era described as 'supposedly post-multiculturalist' (Nagel and Hopkins 2010, p. 2). No doubt, the goal of nation-building, co-existence and inter-communal harmony that underpins multicultural philosophy is being challenged and needs further exploration.

Our focus in this paper is particularly on the discourse of social harmony and intercultural understanding within local governance that is central to managing ethnic and religious diversity and the tolerance of dissent in countries with white majority cultures (Valentine 2008; Chan 2010). Chan for example draws attention to the dominant narrative in Britain that associates the cause of disharmony and lack of intercultural interaction with ethnic self-segregation that is an outcome of the 'over-tolerance of multicultural diversity' (2010, p.36). On the other hand, Donnelly's (2004) research on the tolerance and respect for religious diversity in schools in Northern Ireland underlines that harmony is a high price to pay and is superficial if it does not address contentious issues, deep-rooted stereotypes and suspicions. In France, social harmony is associated with equality that is interpreted as 'cultural sameness' (Wiles 2007, p.702) and demands the assimilation of immigrants

In comparison to countries like Britain and France, Australia is constructed as a place of relative social peace and harmony where tolerance exists and religious commitment is 'a low temperature matter' (Bouma and Singleton 2004, p.18). However, global acts of terrorism, the Tampa crisis, the Cronulla riots and the continual arrival of arrival of asylum seekers from a diverse range of countries can elicit feelings of suspicion, insecurity and visions of an enemy within or one that can easily infiltrate our borders (Klocker 2004; Poynting and Mason 2008). Nation-wide surveys assessing attitudes toward diversity and several studies conducted since the 1990s are providing empirical evidence on these shifting feelings (Markus, in press). In Australia, cultural diversity has sometimes been characterised as 'inherently problematic' (Inglis 1996; Forrest and Dunn 2010, p. 82) and challenging because it involves addressing issues of conflict, violence and divisiveness. Such contentious issues have the potential to unsettle social harmony and intercultural understanding in local places.

Reviewing attitudes towards diversity in Australia, Forrest and Dunn (2010) draw attention to the co-existence of two contradictory discourses namely the pro-diversity and the assimilationist discourse. The pro-diversity discourse supports liberal values such as equality and respect and reflects the aims of the official policy of multiculturalism introduced in the early 1970s that aimed to provide greater equality of opportunity and cultural recognition of ethnic minorities through state assistance. The policy focused on affirmative-like action and had bipartisan support till the mid 1990s and was perceived as producing 'peaceful intercommunal relations' (Poynting and Mason 2008, p. 235).

The assimilationist discourse, on the other hand, supports the dominance of a 'national culture' and 'Australian values' that privilege whiteness and Anglo-ness and reflects a paranoia within Australian society of losing such privilege (Hage 2003; Forrest and Dunn 2006). This discourse was officially supported by conservative politicians most notably Pauline Hanson and her One Nation party with its focus on reverse

racism, as well as the Liberal Howard Government elected in 1996. Ethnic and religious minorities were coerced to assimilate through a withdrawal of state settlement service, and minority cultural and religious practices were constructed as the cause of disharmony, interethnic conflict and an impediment to a strong and cohesive society (Poynting and Mason 2008). An assimilationist discourse therefore legitimises intolerance of diversity and anxieties about ethnic segregation and such attitudes are evident in recent nation-wide surveys (Markus and Arunchalam 2009; Dunn 2011).

The discussion so far shows that the pro-diversity discourse and the assimilationist discourse both focus on harmony but intercultural understanding is often precluded. Moreover, both discourses differ in terms of the tolerance of ethnic diversity, understandings of ‘policies of integration’ and evaluation of the capacity of government to address such diversity through participatory engagement. Such differences impact on the emergence of potential spaces for facilitating intercultural dialogue between long-term residents, new residents, elected government leaders and council officers that welcome difference and negotiation rather than assimilation and consensus (Amin 2002). The emergence of such democratic spaces, however, can provide a deeper critical engagement with the recently introduced New Multicultural Policy agenda.

The New Multicultural Policy aims to understand ‘shared experience and composition of neighbourhoods’ (DIAC 2011, p. 2) as well as to value and celebrate cultural diversity within the broader agenda of ‘national unity, community harmony and maintenance of democratic values’ ( DIAC 2011, p. 5). Putting such principles into practice in rapidly growing municipalities on the urban fringe of Australian cities that have traditionally had a white majority culture, but now becoming ethnically diverse will be challenging. Moreover, while local governments in the cosmopolitan inner urban areas of major cities like the City of Melbourne or well established culturally diverse areas in outer suburban areas like the City of Greater Dandenong may have the experience or the resources to implement policies and programs to address what is often described as the ‘problem’ of cultural diversity, the experience is different for an outer suburban local government area like the City of Whittlesea that aims to be very innovative in a multi-ethnic social context (Figure 1) .



**Figure 1: Location of the City of Whittlesea**

**Source: City of Whittlesea**

To explore attitudes towards ethnic diversity and the government's capacity to promote intercultural harmony and understanding, we draw on recent fieldwork consisting primarily of 299 surveys among residents in the City of Whittlesea conducted during the 2008-09 period. Although this paper will focus exclusively on these community surveys, its overall arguments are also informed by 95 surveys with council staff and 11 in-depth interviews with elected local councillors, local council employees and community representatives.

## **DEEP MULTICULTURALISM**

Rather than conceptualise harmony and intercultural understanding as an ideal fantasy or a fuzzy concept, we see it in this paper as a meaningful and creative process underpinned by the philosophy of deep multiculturalism. Deep multiculturalism enables us to think of the governance of diversity and integration as a two-way interactive process rather than a simple policy vehicle that privileges 'core' values (Chan 2010). Multiculturalism, in this approach, has the potential to produce a truly open and inclusive society, one that 'turn[s] itself upside down' (Nesbitt-Larking 2008, p. 352) or allows 'oneself to be overtaken' (Chan 2010, p. 42) in thinking about accommodation and integration. This approach, therefore, has the potential to move beyond research that has traditionally examined "soft" multiculturalism or passive measures to promote tolerance to a 'deep' multiculturalism accompanied with proactive and affirmative measures that challenge the state's institutions and the way they govern diversity and intercultural relations.

Reviewing the Canadian context, Nesbitt-Larking underlines that deep critical multiculturalism involves three approaches. First, the resistance of assimilationist discourses through learning about a historical/colonial past that demonstrates the effect of racist and exclusionary practices, the questioning of 'core values' and the acknowledgment of responsibility for social inequalities. Here the focus is less on loyalty or assimilation to dominant cultural values or retreat, and more on empowerment and political voice for ethnic minorities. This paper conceptualises the potential for harmony and intercultural understanding with such a political voice for residents. Apart from arguing for a voice for well established residents (those born in Whittlesea, long-term and medium term residents), the paper also draws attention to the need to provide a voice for recent settlers who maybe disengaged with local politics and often preoccupied with looking for housing and employment, studying, working long hours, and learning to live in an unfamiliar physical and social environment.

Second, deep multiculturalism involves challenging stereotypical categorisations of ethnic minorities and the initiation of processes of institutional change by leaders in ways that politically mobilise marginalised groups. Rather than supporting the emergence of self interested 'ethnic elites' or powerful ethnic minority leaders, deep multiculturalism draws attention to the multiply constituted as well as the socially and spatially contingent nature of ethnic identity. In trying to engage with these complex issues to explore harmony and intercultural understanding, this paper will therefore disaggregate responses by period of residence rather than the familiar 'ethnic' indicators such as birthplace or language in order to understand attitudes towards ethnic diversity. Third, a deep multiculturalism involves creating opportunities for dialogue that is open and inclusive. This intercultural dialogue welcomes participatory engagement by acknowledging the 'contingency and fragility' (Nesbitt-Larking 2008, p. 357) of such encounter. But the potential for such encounter can be only understood through insights into residents' views on experiences or attitudes towards local government which we explore in this paper.

Fincher and Iveson (2008) in their discussion of urban governance argue that while the communicative turn in planning for diversity focuses on the importance of encounter, in particular the procedures and processes of negotiation, more attention needs to be drawn to defining clear goals, identifying working principles and producing more just outcomes. Reviewing the debates on redistribution and recognition by Nancy Fraser and Iris Marion Young, they argue that if the state is constructed as a value-free, impartial facilitator, then it eludes critique that is so necessary to bring about transformative change in institutional behaviours and practices. Here the state incorporates work undertaken by different levels of federal, state and local government and includes work done by employees, elected local leaders and community associations who work in partnerships with government. Such insights are important in our conceptualisation of Local government and Local Council as a set of behaviours and practices by elected local councillors, local council employees as well as associated networks, organisations and service providers. Drawing on surveys with residents in the City of Whittlesea, this paper provides unique empirical insights on diversity in outer suburbia that have the potential to contribute to social learning that is necessary for horizontal forms of governance or 'new synergies between local citizens and institutions' (Raco *et al.*, 2006, p. 475). In the next section we provide a demographic profile of the City of Whittlesea and a brief sketch of local council policies in the area of intercultural relations and multiculturalism.

## THE CITY OF WHITTLESEA: A HARMONIOUS CITY

The City of Whittlesea has a population of 124,467 and is a northern municipality in the Melbourne Metropolitan region (City of Whittlesea 2007). The population growth rate between 2001 and 2006 was 9.2 per cent which is above the average for the Metropolitan Melbourne, and population in 2009 is estimated to be 148,000 (City of Whittlesea 2010). Whittlesea is expected to grow rapidly given the focus on urban development in 'greenfield' sites in the northern growth corridor. Table 1 highlights selected demographic characteristics of the City of Whittlesea.

**Table 1: Selected characteristics of the City of Whittlesea**

<b>Total persons</b>	<b>124,647</b>
% of persons born overseas	34.6
% change in persons born in Iraq (2001-2006)	86.5
% change in persons born in India (2001-2006)	81.1
% of persons who speak English only	55.2
% change in persons speaking Arabic (2001-2006)	38.9
% of persons affiliating with Christianity	75.1
% change in persons affiliating with Hinduism (2001-2006)	48.4
% change in persons affiliating with Islam (2001-2006)	18.5
Median household weekly Income (\$)	1043

**Source: Whittlesea at the Census, City of Whittlesea 2007**

The table shows that one-third of the population of the City of Whittlesea is born overseas and almost half of the residents speak a language other than English. The Iraqi and Indian populations are the fastest growing migrant communities, but recent arrivals (including humanitarian entrants) include people from the Horn of Africa (i.e. Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan and Djibouti), Lebanon, Turkey, Macedonia, Egypt and Afghanistan. The changes in the composition of the population poses challenges for local government in interpreting federal and state policies of integration, formulating multicultural and community plans and developing programs and services to promote community harmony in a changing multi-ethnic social context.

To promote respect, intercultural understanding and harmony, Local Council has commissioned reports that focus on understanding the needs of recent settlers (humanitarian migrants/refugees), engaged in interfaith/intercultural networks, and developed plans such as the Whittlesea Multicultural Plan and the Whittlesea Strategic Community Plan (City of Whittlesea 2006, 2010). The discourse of community harmony is reflected in the mission statement of the Whittlesea 2025 - Strategic Community Plan and its strategic direction that focuses on producing an 'Inclusive and Engaged community'. Strategic outcomes will be based on measurements of attendance in arts and cultural activities, community acceptance of diversity, citizen engagement, number of volunteers, and number of nominations for Council elections. The Council aims to

respond to the concerns and needs of a diverse community through continual improvement of services and facilities in consultation with residents, particularly the most vulnerable that includes recent settlers (identified as African or Muslims in the staff survey).

More recently Whittlesea Council was selected to participate in a pilot project, Localities Embracing and Accepting Diversity (LEAD) Project, informed by a framework to reduce race-based discrimination (Paradies *et al.*, 2009). The project was officially launched in the City of Whittlesea on Harmony Day, 21<sup>st</sup> March 2010 by Federal Parliamentary Secretary for Multicultural Affairs and Settlement Services. The project funded by VicHealth focuses on developing anti-racist strategies and brings together organisations such as the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, Beyond Blue: the national depression initiative, the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, the City of Whittlesea and Greater Shepparton and the Municipal Association of Victoria. The 3-year project aims to improve acceptance of cultural diversity and reduce race-based discrimination by developing fair, welcoming and inclusive spaces, auditing policies and practices that focus on diversity planning and community engagement, training programs to increase cultural awareness, leadership training and the facilitation of opportunities for intercultural dialogue. The aim is to disseminate this knowledge to other Victorian Councils through the Municipal Association of Victoria. Given such a pro-active approach to cultural diversity, it is necessary to understand residents' attitudes towards diversity and towards local council.

## **SURVEY AND METHODOLOGY**

The paper draws on surveys with 299 residents in the City of Whittlesea conducted during the 2008-09 period. It constitutes part of a larger study that focuses on local governance and attitudes towards diversity in Melbourne, Paris and Sheffield. We conducted surveys in the township of Whittlesea and the central and southern suburbs of Epping, Bundoora, Blossom Park, Mernda Doreen, Mill Park, Lalor and Thomastown. Surveys were administered through face-to-face interactions due to the sensitive nature of the questions which also included questions about Muslims, though this part of the survey will not be explored in detail in this paper. One of the aims of the survey was to gain an insight into residents' views on multicultural policies, perceptions of ethnic/ethno-religious diversity and attitudes towards local council.

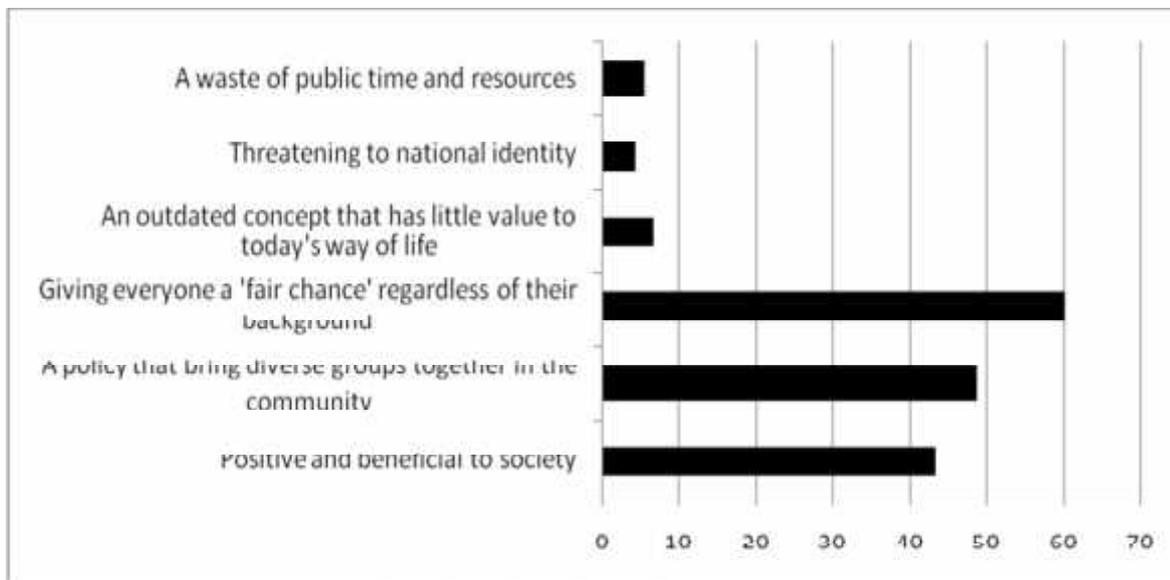
The survey consisted of a combination of scaled questions, open-ended questions and closed questions. For example, scaled questions invited responses from 0 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree) for statements such as 'Council understand the needs of the migrant community'. Although respondents treated the answer as a scale of agreement from 0-10, the results should be treated with caution and it would be over ambitious to make broad generalisations. This is because scaled questions sometimes caused confusion, particularly in relation to questions that apparently invited a yes/no answer (e.g. 'I have friends in the local community from diverse ethnic backgrounds'). Interpreting the question as having a yes/no answer meant that responses do not always provide an insight into the strength of agreement with particular statements. Therefore, rather than show responses from strongly disagree to strongly agree, we have chosen three categories of responses – "disagree", "neither agree or disagree" and "agree". Also, although the response rate was 56%, there were several questions that participants did not answer or responded with "can't say". We acknowledge that such a response can be interpreted in various ways that may indicate a lack of awareness of the issue, indifference towards the issue, desire to refrain from disclosing negative attitudes or an act of resistance at being questioned about such an issue. Given the sensitive nature of some questions, we acknowledge, however, that face-to-face interactions may also have had the effect of overstating the positive perceptions of diversity. For example, Forrest and Dunn (2010, p. 704) in their study of racism in Sydney underlined the risk of 'potential infidelity' if respondents conceal intolerant attitudes or continue to engage in everyday discriminatory acts even though their responses are positive. In analysing the survey findings we adopt a thematic analysis of the data, underpinned by social constructivism, a well established methodological approach that provides an insight into the meaning and values that are important in helping residents make sense of their world.

## **LOCAL GOVERNANCE – DIVERSITY, HARMONY AND INTERCULTURAL UNDERSTANDING**

This section focuses on responses to federal policies of integration, the experience of living with ethnic diversity and the government's capacity to promote intercultural harmony. In particular, we focus on attitudes towards 'Local Council', a term that encompasses the varied policies and practices of elected leaders as well as council employees in the City of Whittlesea. Our findings show very positive attitudes among residents despite the absence of an official multicultural agenda at the federal level in 2009 when the survey was conducted. This is in contrast to earlier research that suggests the lack of enthusiasm for multicultural policy among older Australians, and media reports that draw attention to public anxiety as a growing number of migrants arrive from countries in Africa and the Middle East (Betts 1999; Forrest and Dunn 2006; Johnson

2007). To gain a more nuanced understanding of these positive attitudes, we therefore disaggregate responses by period of residence and weave some insights gained from surveys with council staff and representatives from community groups. Such insights are necessary in building the capacity of local government to address diversity through engagement with 'ordinary' local residents and community representatives.

When residents were asked which phrases they associated with the term 'policies of integration/settlement in Australia', they responded by selecting the positive statements as shown in Figure 2.



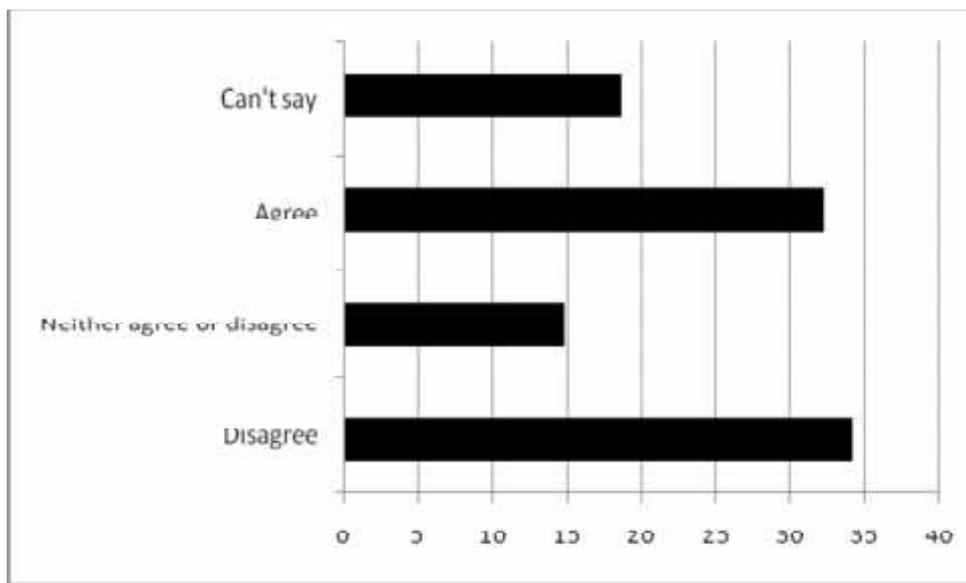
**Figure 2: Phrases associated with the “policies of integration and settlement”**

A majority of the respondents (60.1 per cent) agree that government policies provide equality of opportunity while a little less than half the respondents perceive the policy as positive and beneficial to society and one that brings diverse groups together. Only a small percentage (<10 per cent) see such policies as a waste of public time and resources, threatening to national identity and an outdated concept that has little value. However, when an open-ended question was addressed to respondents to explore what they understood by 'policies of integration and settlement', 33.3 per cent responded with “don't know”. On the other hand, 21.4 per cent associated such policies with interethnic harmony. The focus on harmony is a shift from policy discourses of equity, access and recognition observed by Poynting and Mason 2008 that were associated with multiculturalism as a federal policy when it was first introduced in the 1970s. This focus on harmony was also evident in conversations with elected leaders and council staff who drew attention to local government initiatives such as 'Harmony Day' and interfaith gatherings in promoting intercultural understanding in the City of Whittlesea. The discourse of harmony is also visible within press releases by state government bodies such as the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria and the Multicultural and Ethnic Affairs Commission (Markus, in press). But how do ordinary residents in the City of Whittlesea respond to living with ethnic diversity given that in the in the Australian context the term 'ethnic' is popularly associated with ethnic minorities/migrants of non-English speaking background (Lobo 2010). Table 2 provides an insight into attitudes to the presence of ethnic minorities and migrants in the local community and therefore important in understanding the lived experience of harmony and intercultural understanding.

**Table 2: Responses to statements on the everyday experience of living with ethnic diversity**

Statement	Agree
People from diverse ethnic backgrounds feel welcome in the local community	68.4
I have a good understanding of the cultural backgrounds and perspectives of local migrant groups	67.6
Different ethnic communities in the local area are well integrated with the general community	67.5
I have friends in the local community from a range of different ethnic backgrounds	73.0

More than 65 per cent of residents agree they have a good understanding of local migrant groups, that ethnic groups feel welcome, and are well integrated into the local community. A higher percentage of respondents (73 per cent) had friends from different ethnic backgrounds. Markus (in press) in his discussion of attitudes towards cultural diversity demonstrates that when the issue of cultural diversity is raised in positive terms agreement is always much higher than when negative descriptions are used. While this may be one of the reasons for the high rate of positive responses, it is also possible that residents demonstrate a growing cosmopolitan disposition (Calcutt *et al.*, 2009). But Calcutt *et al.* (2009, p. 183) argue that such a disposition that welcomes others is easier to foster when the Other is seen as 'benign and easily accommodated'. A closer examination of racist attitudes towards ethnic communities reveals a more complex picture of accommodation. Figure 3 shows responses to the statement 'Ethnic communities encounter racist attitudes in my local area'.



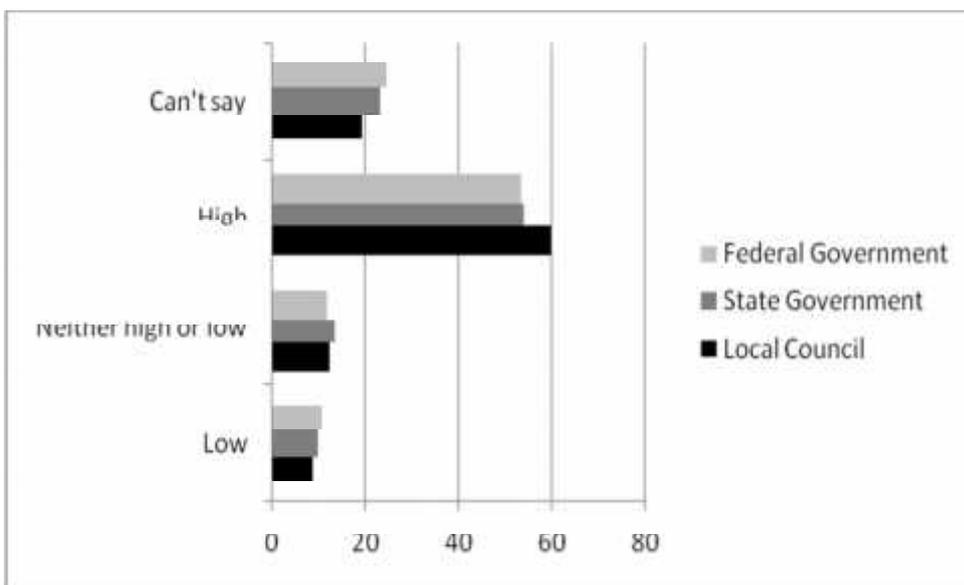
**Figure 3: Responses to the statement 'Ethnic communities encounter racist attitudes in my local area'.**

Figure 3 shows that although a relatively high percentage (34.2 per cent) disagreed with this statement, an almost equal proportion of 32.3 per cent indicated agreement, 14.8 per cent selected 'unsure' and 18.7 per cent responded with "can't say". Therefore, despite the positive attitudes towards ethnic diversity and evidence that there are positive intercultural interactions, residents are more likely to respond in different and at times conflicting ways to the issue of racism rather than ethnic diversity. Perhaps this is because the daily negotiation of Otherness is an emotive issue that either elicits negative thinking that exaggerates the problem or results in selective tolerance (Calcutt *et al.*, 2009). This is particularly pertinent in Whittlesea where Muslims and recent arrivals from Africa were identified by some but not all council staff as residents who were the least integrated into the local community. Residents were more outspoken (59.2 per cent) vis-a-vis non-Muslim residents, agreeing that Muslims rather than other ethnic communities are victims of racism, with Muslim community leaders arguing that despite the acquisition of formal citizenship they still felt 'unwelcome'. In such a situation ethno-religious diversity contributes to feelings of 'cultural uncertainty' (Calcutt *et al.*, 2009, p. 132) and alienation whilst intercultural understanding and harmony becomes a utopian ideal easily dressed in calls for an assimilationist integration into the dominant culture. Disaggregating responses by period of residence gives a more nuanced insight into this complex juxtaposition as shown in Table 3 below:

**Table 3: Response to the statement ‘Ethnic communities encounter racist attitudes in my local area’**

	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Can't say
Less than 1 year	25	25	25	25
1 to less than 2 years	30.8	30.8	23.1	15.3
2 to less than 5 years	30	7.5	35	27.5
5 to less than 10years	32	5.7	30.2	32.1
10 years or more	31.5	19.1	36.8	12.6
I was born here	66.6	8.3	12.5	12.6

Table 3 shows that 66.6 per cent of residents who were born in Whittlesea disagree with the statement in contrast to recent settlers (<5years) who show a higher level of agreement. These findings suggest that despite very positive attitudes towards ethnic diversity, the period of residence is an important variable in accounting for views on ethnicity and racism. Moreover, surveys with council staff showed that 31.4 per cent of council staff were aware of tensions between ethnic groups and 14.4 per cent had witnessed these tensions first hand. However, responses from council staff members suggested that council services/policies in place such as English language services, employment training, translation services, adult education and health care and community events/festivals (13.7% of responses) were the most significant vehicle in promoting intercultural harmony and understanding. Community consultation and the facilitation of communication between groups were seen as less significant accounting for 3.2 per cent and 1.1 per cent of total responses respectively. Moreover, the discourse of harmony was often voiced with pride by local councillors as well local council staff working in partnership with migrant, refugee and interfaith groups who aimed to “combat any potential risk for community conflict” by “nipping it in the bud” (Member, Local Council, 6/10/2008). The aim was to help residents to “override [ethnic] differences” through initiatives that focus on common bonds and basic human rights (Member, Local Council, 6/10/2008). Given the nature of these initiatives and responses, it would be helpful to gain an insight into how local residents perceive local government’s efforts to promote intercultural harmony and understanding and this is illustrated in Figure 4.



**Figure 4: The capacity of government to promote intercultural harmony and understanding**

Residents agreed that local government had the highest capacity to promote intercultural understanding and harmony, followed by state and lastly federal government. Approximately 20 per cent of respondents replied with a “can’t say” answer implying they were reluctant to answer or had not thought much about the issue of governance. Again a focus on respondents’ attitudes to the capacity of local government to promote intercultural understanding and harmony by period of residence provides a more nuanced understanding.

**Table 4: Capacity of local government to promote intercultural understanding and harmony by time of arrival**

<b>Period of residence in the City of Whittlesea</b>	<b>Low</b>	<b>Neither high low</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>Can't say</b>
Less than 1 year	0	12.5	12.5	75
1 to less than 2 years	30.8	15.4	53.8	0
2 to less than 5 years	7.3	7.3	63.4	22
5 to less than 10years	7.5	5.5	63	24
10 years or more	8.6	17.8	59.8	13.8
I was born here	8.7	0	78.3	13

Disaggregating responses by period of residence, it is observed that residents who were born in the City of Whittlesea/Australia and are more like to be Anglo-Australian or long term ‘ethnic’ residents (Italians, Macedonians and Greeks) have the highest confidence in the capacity of local government to promote intercultural harmony and understanding. They also indicate clearly that the local council represents and addresses their needs. In contrast 53.8 per cent of residents who have lived in the city less than two years feel that council has a high capacity, and 30.8 percent are less positive. On the other hand, 75 per cent of new settlers who have lived in the area less than a year respond with a “can’t say” answer suggesting lack of awareness of Council policies, programs and services or feelings that prevent them responding in a positive manner. This finding is significant given that newly settled migrants (domestic as well as overseas arrivals) are identified as the most vulnerable and are often the focus of council programs. Yet, they are somehow unable to identify with a discourse of intercultural harmony and understanding. On the other hand residents who have lived for a longer period of time reiterate the familiar ‘official’ discourse of intercultural harmony and understanding with its emphasis on binding values and the overriding common good. The following table provides an insight into attitudes towards Local Council on a range of issues related to intercultural harmony and understanding.

**Table 5: Attitudes towards Local Council**

<b>Statement</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree or disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Can't say</b>
Council understands the needs of the local migrant community	11.2	14.2	57.4	17.1
Council actively addresses the concerns of the migrant community	10.6	14.8	52.6	22.0
Council should spend more money on migrant services	8.8	17.9	67.2	6.1
Everyone is entitled to the same level of service from Council, regardless of their ethnic background	2.8	4.5	88.0	4.7
Council's policies and services promote intercultural harmony and understanding in the local community	11.9	13.6	54.1	20.5
Council has been successful in incorporating people from different ethnic backgrounds into the community	10.5	15.1	58.1	16.4
Council should always work in partnership with local organisations to address intercultural issues	3.2	8.5	71.9	16.4
I believe Council will always "do the right thing" by the local community	17.8	16.0	51.6	14.6

A high percentage of respondents (88 per cent) agreed that everyone was entitled to the same level of service from Council regardless of their ethnic background. However, only 51.6 per cent agreed that Council would “do the right thing” by the local community indicating that trust and confidence in local government needs to be further strengthened. With reference to Council's understanding of the needs and concerns of the migrant community, responses varied slightly. 57.4 per cent agreed that Council understood the needs of the migrant communities, and 52.6 per cent agreed that Council actively addresses the concerns of all migrants. Therefore, even though local council was perceived as having a higher capacity to promote intercultural harmony and understanding compared to state and federal governments, positive responses were not overwhelmingly and consistently high even though the survey statements were presented in positive terms. This is despite the fact that 71.9 per cent of respondents underlined that intercultural issues were best addressed by Council through partnerships with the local community. Table 6 shows a strong level of agreement among all residents except recent settlers – 68.7 per cent of who responded with a “can't say” answer suggesting a lack of engagement or awareness of such partnerships.

**Table 6: Responses to the statement “Council should work in partnership to address intercultural issues”**

	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree or disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Can't say</b>
Less than 1 year	0	12.5	18.8	68.7
1 to less than 2 years	0	23.1	61.5	15.4
2 to less than 5 years	2.5	2.5	90	5
5 to less than 10years	1.9	5.6	72.2	20.3
10 years or more	4	10.6	72.2	13.2
I was born here	4.3	0	82.6	13.1

While Council has been proactive in establishing partnerships, our interviews with social welfare and multicultural groups showed that access to funds varied among different community organisations. The “limitation to funding” (Member, Multicultural youth organisation, 1/10/2008 and Member, faith affiliated social welfare organisation, 24/11/2008) meant that projects and community events that had measurable outcomes were supported rather than informal social activities that would facilitate intercultural communication. Moreover, and as indicated by a member of an ethno-specific community group, the practice of ‘brainstorming’ (Interview, 12/11/2008) and community consultation needed to be more effective and inclusive in ways that could construct diversity as enriching rather than a problem. For these community organisations, harmony was not about avoiding interethnic conflict, but also support by institutions in responding to racist acts (e.g. the police), supporting ethnic minorities, respecting cultural values that are different from the norm, and the engagement in practices that are less judgemental and demonstrate care in dealings with humanitarian migrants. Similarly, a representative of an interfaith community reiterated the need to focus on respect for diverse cultures and faiths, for proactive support by institutions such as the Equal Opportunity Commission and Human Right Commission. He argued that harmony was difficult to achieve without the acknowledgement of indigenous dispossession particularly by ethnic minorities (Interview, 28/10/2008). This is an issue that this research did not address in understanding harmony and intercultural understanding but will be explored in subsequent work.

## CONCLUSION

This paper focused on residents’ experiences of living with ethnic diversity and their attitudes towards Local Council, in particular its capacity to promote intercultural harmony and understanding. We have tried to show that residents have exhibited a very positive view of ethnic diversity but tended to be less so about actual experiences of racism among ethnic communities. This picture becomes more complex when we disaggregate attitudes by period of residence with long term residents disagreeing that ethnic communities encounter racist attitudes in the City of Whittlesea. It suggests that capacity building within the field of local governance should involve building partnerships, establishing intercultural projects and place-making urban design initiatives that can engage long-term residents (in particular those born in Whittlesea/Australia) rather than focusing predominantly on recently arrived migrants correctly identified as in need of settlement support. These initiatives should aim to create optimal opportunities for meaningful interactions in public spaces so that feelings of alienation among new residents are improved and contrasting views among well established communities that ‘racism’ is not an issue are also rectified by insights from newer residents. Whilst the findings show that respondents are positive about federal government diversity policies at the legislative level, their view is that local government is the optimal conduit with the best capacity to promote intercultural harmony and understanding among all sectors of the community.

The research reported in this paper is drawn from a larger study on multiculturalism, cultural diversity and the place of religious minority groups within supposedly secular western cities. The most intriguing aspect of the findings is the seemingly contradictory outlook expressed by respondents and accounted for in terms of the variable relating to period of settlement. The period of settlement is certainly a significant factor that can explain such polarised outcomes. But, equally important is the contextual socio-political environment within which such debates are being constructed. Indeed, government officials and opinion leaders have deliberately engaged in these discussions from a narrow ‘real politick’ perspective arguing that migration policies need to be pursued from a dominant mainstream perspective where the best guarantee for social harmony and peace is the pursuit of socio-economic integration. This has resulted in relegating demands for ethical arguments about cultural rights (and by extension racism) to a secondary position that can only be discussed if it does not contradict with official policy discourses. Our research offers a unique insight into this complex situation but also a possible way forward. The fact that local council is seen by all respondents as an optimal conduit for the good governance of diversity and intercultural relations, implies that much can be achieved at the level of improved understanding and more positive attitudes towards migrants and religious groups. The key condition for this potential to be unlocked is the pursuit of inclusive grassroots partnerships that would ensure a deliberative approach to all matters pertaining to multiculturalism, cultural diversity and intercultural relations.

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