

7. Engaging the Disengaged: Muslim and non-Muslim-Australians

Introduction

While important to research those already involved in activities to improve relations between Muslim and non-Muslim-Australians, it is also imperative to understand the motivations of those who are *disengaged* completely to better understand their views of the 'other side' and why they may or may not be drawn to engaging in bridge building activities at the community level.

To that end, the project interviewed 10 Muslim-Australian and 10 Anglo-Celtic Australians who we had identified as never having participated in an activity aimed at building bridges between Muslim and non-Muslim-Australians. On the Muslim side, we sought out as broad a cross section of ethnicities as possible, and aimed for a balance between age and gender. On the Anglo-Celtic non-Muslim side, we sought out 'everyday' people residing in the Sutherland Shire, an area we felt provided a good 'laboratory' as this community is one that has had little or no contact with Muslim-Australia. The Cronulla riots added an additional layer of analysis as this is a community that has been very directly exposed to negative stereotypes surrounding Muslims.

We were interested in five key themes;

- **What are their patterns of and opportunities for mixing with the 'other side'.**
- **What were the barriers to mixing with the 'other side'.**
- **Their views on the positives and negatives about mixing with the other side.**
- **What kinds of 'bridge building' activities might engage them.**
- **How to engage them in such activities and how might local government be involved?**

Muslim-Australian 'Disengaged'

Patterns of Mixing

Overall, the Muslim-Australian participants we classified as 'disengaged' tended to mix predominantly with other Muslims. Mainly this had to do with feeling more 'comfortable' with other Muslims, and the reproduction of existing kinship and friendship networks. Interviews with the Muslim 'Disengaged' were enlightening insofar as they emphasised the fact that Muslim-Australians, as a rule, would like more opportunities to get to know non-Muslim-Australians. This was a sentiment that crossed age, gender and ethnic boundaries. That said, any possibility for mixing must also fit in with people's busy lives, and not threaten sometimes quite strict cultural and religious codes. Mixing with non-Muslims tended to occur through work, school and with neighbours and typically involved more acquaintances rather than deep friendships. Further, the propensity to form close friendships with non-Muslims tended to decrease with age; and seemed to be particularly linked to an increase in religious observance.

Positives about mixing

That said, there was a general consensus among participants that there were definitely positive aspects to mixing with non-Muslims, and that it should be encouraged. The most common views on the positive aspects of mixing mentioned were:

- **Helping Australians learn more about Islam**

Participants felt that a positive outcome of mixing more with non-Muslim-Australians was that in offering an opportunity for the 'other side' to get to know Muslims, they would help reduce negative stereotypes about their community and religion. There was also interest in showing the positive side of Islam, in which they invested a great deal of pride.

Jasmina: Yeah, I had one long term friend, ... I feel comfortable around her, even though she's not a Muslim, because she's a really nice person, that's why. She's not racist, and that's a good thing. ... I tried to approach her about Islam, and she actually wanted to know about it. She was curious, and I liked that. ... Like, she wants to know. ... It's a positive thing. I want to help, I tried to get cassettes, tapes, DVD's, just to tell her more.

Iqbal's strong views below were actually fairly representative of a broader malaise whereby Muslim-Australians feel unjustly stereotyped as 'terrorists' and feel the impact of this social stigma quite deeply. Muslim-Australians we spoke to felt strongly about the need to challenge these stereotypes and felt that getting to know non-Muslims would contribute to that.

Iqbal: That's good. If you explain, and talking, and that's really good. It's not 'good' only, but it's very good. You have to – Muslims – see that other people are normal people. Not like this [rubbish] done on America, you know what I mean? Because the Muslim is a good person; it's not like something... Scary people, yeah. It's normal people. That's why you have to talk to another religion, to explain to him I am not like him, I am totally different, you know what I mean?

This stereotyping of Muslims was felt particularly strongly by Muslim working class men, who tended to have encountered negative experiences in the workplace and in other situations of intense interaction with non-Muslim men. However this was not

simply a defensive stance. Participants were mainly keen to help Anglo-Australians understand more about Muslims.

Mustafa [on the positives of mixing with non-Muslims]: Well, to understand their way of life, the way they do things. To understand how they feel about us, and also many times I've bumped into non-Muslim people, especially Anglos, who probably come from an area that doesn't have much Muslims, you know...even you can find this sort of thing in some areas, because they don't really mix, they don't interact, so they don't understand the opposite side, you know? So I've found out that a lot of things, they're confused about a lot of things...

Mustafa makes an important point, that many Anglo-Australians have little opportunity to interact with Muslim-Australians. He sees interaction as an important means of challenging stereotypes, and also as a means of learning more about 'Australian culture' and way of life.

- **Feeling more integrated**

Related to this, is a view that mixing with non-Muslims is valuable in helping Muslim-Australians feel less alienated. It appears that having friendships and positive acquaintances amongst non-Muslims provides somewhat of a bulwark or buttress against anti-Muslim moral panics and negative encounters. In this way, Muslim-Australians are able to draw on first hand friendships to counter feelings that all non-Muslims are racist and against Islam.

Dalia: For example... after the Cronulla riots incident, they [non-Muslim friends] treated me extra... with extra friendliness... it was so nice to me... and we spoke about it... and I said my point of view... and they said their point of view, and they were very understanding... like... from this incident... like.... I felt like I can be ... like they're not the enemy... you know, like... we can be friends... if there's... as you said, there's opportunity, yeah... why not...yeah.

There was also a sense that mixing provided a feeling of being more integrated in to the wider society, and provided an opportunity to learn more about others' way of life.

Mubarak: I think the good things about mixing with non-Muslims is that you'll appreciate the good values which every religion and every sect has in their beliefs, and you can actually explain how you resemble those good values. I'm sure both non-Muslims and Muslims have good values. Then you feel a kind of bond of humanity between you and a non-Muslim, and I think that's a good thing about mixing with a non-Muslim. Obviously, friendship and in time of need, actually, you can still depend on...or if you're going somewhere that is purely non-Muslim, or there's a function that's non-Muslim, you can get this advice about how you go there....so you're just finding from another person about their culture and their way of life. I think it's always good, especially when you are living in a country where you have all these different people living with you, so you should be always open and upfront with these things. I think that's always good.

Mustafa: Well [the good thing about mixing with non-Muslims is], to understand their way of life, the way they do things. To understand how they feel about us

Barriers to mixing

Despite the positive aspects of mixing identified by these disengaged Muslim-Australian participants, there were a number of negative aspects raised. These difficulties in negotiating the cultural differences appeared to create real barriers for this group to get to know non-Muslims. It must be remembered that this sub-group within the study represent a fairly typical cross-section of the Muslim-Australian community, and to some extent are more representative than those already involved in the community based 'harmony' initiatives we've identified elsewhere in this report. Interview participants identified a number of fairly significant barriers to mixing with non-Muslims. Many of these were 'everyday' cultural and religious differences. In ranked order, the most common barriers referred to were:

▪ Alcohol & Food

Surprisingly, it was not well known among non-Muslims interviewed in this study that it is forbidden in Islam to drink alcohol. Moreover, the concept of Halal was little understood. This seemed to be a key barrier to greater levels of socialisation among Muslim and non-Muslim-Australians, particularly Anglo-Australians for whom alcohol is a key part of socialising, particularly among men who tended to use alcohol as a social lubricant to bond with other males.

The issues around alcohol arose at two levels. First, women in particular were quite fearful of being in the company of men who were drinking. They tended to associate drinking with drunkenness and licentiousness, and therefore felt fearful that being around drunken men was sexually dangerous. There also seemed to be little understanding that much Anglo-Celtic drinking fits into a more responsible style of drinking behaviour such as having a couple of beers at a BBQ or a glass of wine with dinner in mixed gender company. Muslim-Australian men also felt a sense of protectiveness towards their female relatives, choosing not to accept invitations where alcohol would be involved.

Jasmina: I get scared. Especially walking around the pubs, or...not in the pubs, but when you (walk past) the pubs, it's uncomfortable. We believe in different things and we socialise differently to how you socialise, so that gives me an uncomfortable feeling and I don't want to be around that, especially with my religion. It doesn't really...yeah.

Fatima: Last time for Christmas party, my husband, his manager, his boss, had Christmas party in their house, their own house...We went to the party, but I sit around all another people, I don't like mix another people. So I go sit in the...sit alone. Because I see a couple of drink people, because I'm Muslim. The drink people maybe come and maybe do bad things... Something like that.

Karim: Yeah, it's easier to commit to go to a Muslim's place than a non-Muslim's place. Just our Muslim values and my wife, she's always eaten halal meat, she's been a non-drinker and things like that, so I've always got that in the back of my mind, that she might not be comfortable...

It also emerged during the research process that some Muslim-Australians also feel morally compelled to avoid being around alcohol, not just avoid drinking when others do. A further barrier is the social discomfort this can cause, where invitations are refused from well meaning non-Muslims.

Dalia: Even if I'm not going to drink, I can't be in a place where there is drinking, so they don't understand that... especially like... we're invited to a barbeque.

Mubarak: To be honest, with the non-Muslims, when you get to know each other there is no problem, but when you're meeting a new non-Muslim person in the beginning, I wonder how I'm going to get along with that person because whatever he drinks or whatever he or she wants to eat and what I want is probably different, and most of the time it has happened that because of the difference in eating and drinking, that can block the talking and we actually don't get along very much.

Fatima: They different culture, they different people. ... now I learn, I don't like to share with another people food or drink... because another people may eat pork or dog. Chinese eat dog, Vietnamese eat dog, or drink. I can't feel like that, I don't know. I'm share my food. I'm bringing some plate or dish or something like that, but I don't like to eat from another dish, because I don't know what's in there.

As can be seen from these interview snippets, it can create a feeling of burden and in turn perhaps a tendency to try to avoid situations where such invitations might be extended so as to avoid social embarrassment. There are occasions where the non-Muslim hosts are willing to provide Halal food, however non-Muslims may feel unreasonably constrained to have to avoid alcohol themselves at these gatherings, despite not expecting their Muslim-Australian counterparts to drink. These are vexed issues and seem to be one of the most predominant barriers (particularly alcohol) to mixing between the two groups. These differences can cause discomfort, and sometimes irritation even among the most well intended individuals, and offence can sometimes be taken when a well meaning social invitation is declined. Therefore it is imperative to foster a greater sense of awareness among non-Muslim-Australians about the dietary restrictions of Muslim-Australians so that when invitations are extended, such social embarrassment can be avoided. Further, the two groups should focus on more on social activities where alcohol is not normally present, such as sport.

▪ Gender

Different cultural practices surrounding mixed gender interaction also emerged as a key issue which sometimes hampered attempts at positive social interchange.

Mustafa: Well, in our culture, we mix mostly with our own gender. For social order, you know? Men mix with men, and women mix with women... So if someone comes and visits, for example, if me and my wife are living in a certain house and our friends are coming to visit, normally the procedure that we'll go by is that men will sit in this lounge room and the women will be in another living room. Socialising is done that way.

Dalia: It's not a problem. But the fact, like, with a man, they don't know. I don't shake hands with men, so that's a minor problem. And another problem.....Because like... sometimes they feel the other person feel embarrassed or... or... I don't like ... like ... it's still embarrassing?... For both of us... like, I get embarrassed, too... I don't know... because I feel ... I don't feel sorry for the other person, but... you know... like... he's trying to make an effort to be friendly and ... you know... to say: 'Oh, no... sorry, I don't shake hands.'

Mustafa:...if there's a picnic or a barbeque, we'll go and have a barbeque, but in a way that doesn't affect the sensitivities on each side. For example, there won't be alcohol. If I want to have a picnic, I want to bring my wife, I'll ask my non-Muslim friend if he can respect our way of..... segregation. The women sit on these chairs on this side, the men on this side...it will work, you know? So that's mostly how I interact with my non-Muslim friends.

Again, there are variations as there are many Muslim-Australian women who are comfortable in mixed company. However there are also substantial numbers who do adhere to more traditional forms of segregated gender interaction. Some of the smaller things also do make a difference. For example it is not hard to imagine the possibility of offence being taken should a Muslim-Australian refuse the offer of a handshake. The importance of the everyday rituals for smooth social interchange has long been acknowledged by 'micro-sociologists' such as Erving Goffman, whose 1967 book *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior*, is a classic in the discipline. He argues that everyday rituals such as hand shaking provide an important shared meaning framework through which self and others are interpreted. Where such codes are not mutually understood, there is great scope for social offence to be taken.

▪ **Comfort with 'those like me'**

It is for these reasons that mixing across cultural and religious difference can, at times, be uncomfortable and even exhausting as everyday codes and customs have to be consciously negotiated. Many of the interviewees acknowledged that in general they simply found it more comfortable to mix with others like themselves. Often this had to do with religious differences and the feeling that mixing with non-Muslims meant having constantly to resist and avoid 'no go' activities.

Mustafa: Like I said before, I like to socialise mostly with the Muslim community because – it's just like you'll find even with a lot of other nationalities, it doesn't really have to mean that it's religion, it's also to do with cultures. You'll find Italians, Greeks, Pacific Islanders, Asians – they choose to socialise, they're more happy to socialise with their own kind because they have a deeper connection with each other. The same as if you get to a workplace, whatever. Even the Anglo-Australians, they will value their own kind most of the time. They connect to each other. They believe a certain way, they have the same views, you know what I mean? For example, I love to socialise with my own friends because I know that we'll be doing the same thing. For example, I won't be drinking. We have the same hobbies, the same views, the same emotions, the same goals in life, so of course I socialise with my own kind, but that doesn't mean that I won't be talking to non-Muslim friends.

This sense of 'comfort' and familiarity also translated into a feeling of closeness where participants simply felt a stronger and more organic connection to their Muslim-Australian friends. This closeness mainly stems from a feeling of being understood, not just verbally, but in the whole person sense of the term; including unspoken norms, customs, and practices.

Mustafa: Yeah, yeah, of course I have non-Muslim friends, but the difference is – and this is why I socialise more with Muslim friends – is because we have a different connection. That is the way that I live. I socialise in a certain way, so I like to mix with people who live my certain way, you know? So that's why I like socialising more with them. ... I'm very friendly with anybody, you know? I have Aussie friends, I care about them, you know? But they're different to the friends that you do everything with, you know?...

Amirah: You feel closer to them, like you understand them and they understand you from where you're coming from.

▪ **Hard work when there are language barriers**

Related to the challenge of social rituals is the simple fact that language barriers can make it difficult to engage in meaningful interaction with speakers of another language.

Iqbal: I try to talk English, but that's hard. Sometimes, maybe he understands but he doesn't accept it, you know what I mean? ...: Sometimes you can explain an easy thing for him... But he doesn't accept it, especially because of the accent.

As this interview extract suggests, it can be embarrassing for someone whose English is limited or heavily accented to engage in (unsuccessful) dialogue with an English speaker. However it can be equally discomforting for the English speaker, and what tends to happen is that further, or deeper exchange and conversation is avoided.

▪ **Lack of opportunity**

It was both explicit and implicit in the interviews with 'disengaged' Muslim-Australians that lack of opportunity was an important factor in the low level of social mixing with non-Muslims. Unsurprisingly, that scarcest of resources time figured prominently in the interviews. Like most Australians, Muslim-Australians are simply caught up trying to keep pace with busy family and working lives.

Amirah: Organisations which work with the Muslim youths and they actually get Muslims and non-Muslims together. Yes, I've heard about those kinds of things but I've never been involved in any.

Dr. J. Ali: Any particular reason for that?

Amirah: I don't know, maybe I'm...I honestly don't know. Like, it's not that I'm not interested. Actually, I'm not really interested in those things, in a way. Like I like to hear about it, I like to see people doing it, but I don't really see myself doing it, that's all. Maybe because I've been too busy.

Amidst busy lives, the priority for weekend socialising tended to be to spend time with family and friends. There was a distinct sense that any longer term commitment to formal activities designed to bring Muslim and non-Muslim-Australians together would be too onerous. Nonetheless, those who were able to commit to such activities were viewed positively, and this appeared to have a 'flow on' effect in terms of positive sentiment.

Lack of opportunity also manifested geographically. As can be seen from the GIS map of top twenty Muslim communities, they tended to coincide with more culturally diverse zones anyway, therefore there was a reduced opportunity to meet Anglo-Celtic Australians in a local social setting and as neighbours.

Jasmina: To me, it's lack of opportunity, definitely. Lack of opportunity. Like, if I have an Aussie neighbour, I don't mind visiting her...but now, especially in Australia, everybody lives individually. They all have their own problems. .. Especially in Australia... But in Syria, every day you socialise.

Dalia: Um... no, not by choice...no... it's lack of opportunity. If there are more opportunities to meet other non-Muslim women, I would do so... yeah... no, it's not a choice, no.

Furthermore, almost none of our disengaged Muslim-Australians had heard of activities in their areas to bring Muslim and non-Muslims Australians together. Therefore those activities that are occurring tended to be dominated by those already engaged in the community organisations involved in the initiative.

▪ **Experiences of discrimination and racism.**

Experiences of racism also made the Muslim-Australian participants more hesitant to mix, and certainly more cautious in leaving their own suburbs to spend time in areas where there are few or no Muslims. Experiences of racism ranged from the obvious—having racist comments shouted from a passing car—to the subtle, such as being overlooked for service in a shop.

Jasmina: Well, it happened to me once, OK? But in the city, when I go to the city, I truly, truly feel different. Like, I know around Bankstown, I feel like I'm in Syria, OK? My country. But when I go to the city I just feel different. I get the sense that they look at you differently. They don't even care, but it's just that feeling. And even out of the city, we go in the car and then this group of people started pointing. They were all Aussies. It was like, 'Get off' or something. And it was just so embarrassing, and I poked my head down in the car! (laughs)

As Jasmina points out, her negative experience visiting the city contrasts sharply to her increased feeling of safety in and around the Bankstown area where there are many Muslim-Australians present.

Mubarak: When I'm travelling on public transport, for example. On a train or a bus, and the seat next to me is empty, if any Australian is coming – and you can see it's a purely Australian person, a white person, for example – they will tend not to sit next to me. They will give you a look which is probably...OK, maybe I'm wrong in my perception, but I think so far I'm right in a sense, that they don't want to sit next to me...when I have sat next to someone who is purely Australian, a white person...I have seen it, they change seats, on many occasions! As soon as I sit, they change seats! It's like, OK! Sorry! That's fine! I have to sit, anyway! ...But that's the kind of negative feeling I get. I feel like there is something going on.

These experiences tended to colour views about non-Muslims, and prejudice how victims imagine other non-Muslims feel about them as Muslim-Australians. This in turn had the effect of a slightly defensive stance, where new acquaintances would be assessed as to whether they 'liked' Muslims or not. These experiences of racism are wide spread, indeed almost universal amongst the Muslim-Australian research participants. Racism is painful to encounter and it is understandable that it can lead to a lack of inclination to want to mix with those identified as belonging to the perpetrators group.

▪ **Everyday conflicts experienced as racism**

Related to this is a tendency to sometimes over-interpret awkward or negative social encounters as always about racism or Islamophobia. It is often difficult to unravel whether a negative encounter has to do with racial or religious difference, or whether it is simply an example of the type of everyday conflicts we all encounter from time to time.

Iqbal: I've got neighbours. Some neighbours, they come to my place; very good woman, her name is Julie, she's got two sons, very good boys, and from the old house, we've got one woman, I work from ... ; I tell you true – one woman, a very old woman, I do a couple of things, electrical work for her for free. One time, I did something wrong. I tell you, it's wrong. I used the water for wash, because I was doing the renovation, but I did a couple of things for her free, you know what I mean? I worked a couple of days, couple of things, for her free, and because I help her stuff, I bring it inside the house. One day, I'm doing renovation for my home – painting stuff, change the kitchen. You know, all the house is big flood, you know what I mean? And outside, I got the hose and I started cleaning. She opened the door and she saw me using the water. She told me, 'You're not allowed to use the water.' I told her, 'It's not allowed, but you know, it's too much dust, and I've got kids, and always these things I have to clean properly ...

And in five or ten minutes, she called the ranger! That made me upset inside. I told her I didn't do it for no reason. I knew I was wrong to use the water, but she was more wrong on me, because she forgot I was her neighbour, and I did it for a reason, and she forgot what I did for her. Why call the ranger, you know what I mean?

This account of the conflict over Sydney Water restrictions is a good example. It is difficult to tell whether the Anglo elderly woman who reported him targeted him because of his race and/or religion, or whether she was simply being a 'nosey parker' as she would with other neighbours, regardless of race. However this distinction, in a sense, is unimportant. Rather, it is experienced as tied up with his religion and/or culture and taken as an offence. His previous experiences of racism have left him hyper sensitive to encounters where he feels wrongly done by.

Dalia: And, I was standing in a line... and out of nowhere the lady... the lady... in front of me, she's... she... I don't know where she was... she came, and she started shouting at me and she told me: 'you took my turn... I was here before'... and I just went... I told her, like, I didn't know what to do... I was so shocked... what's wrong with her? And I really...couldn't like.... because I'm new... I... she can tell I... I'm Muslim... and... yeah... so...like, I don't know, I'm upset about it, but then what can you do.

For Dalia, the pain associated with racism is such that subsequent encounters are read through a similar lens.

Opportunities to mix

Despite such negative encounters, there were situations where mixing was experienced as positive. The place of work or study was the most important opportunity for mixing for men, while for the women, neighbours and meeting other mothers through school and sporting contexts were important. A key theme seemed to be that the men in the study in particular needed a common goal or project to work on in order to get to know non-Muslims. This accords with research on men generally, as evidenced, for example, in the success of the 'Men's Shed' concept aimed at engaging elderly males in community activities.

▪ Work and Study

For the Muslim-Australian men interviewed, work was especially important as a context affording the opportunity to get to know non-Muslim men

Karim: In our office, I am the only Muslim. The company employs 120 people across Australia. There are a few Muslims, but in my specific office, I am the only Muslim there. And everyone's aware of my values, that I do have certain rules I have to follow. But I stay there with non-Muslim people in my day-to-day role, meetings and projects...it's working with a close relationship with people to achieve objectives. Outside of work it's more in a sports context. These days what I'm finding is, the people I used to call friends – before, I used to have plenty of friends. I used to have lots and lots of friends. Now, it's pretty limited to who I'd actually call friends. Work-wise, they're more associates... Now, I probably wouldn't say that I actually have many friends. Before, you know, I'd be out with friends...outside of work, and try to be part of the group. If they're going out to lunch, I'll go with them. That kind of thing. And at work, I suppose we all have the same common goal, although we do have different beliefs. And even within those projects there are different people. Like, you have Catholic people, probably atheists...all different people coming together...

Work not only provides the opportunity to meet non-Muslims, but the nature of work is such that interaction occurs around team based activities where the group share a common purpose, common goals. The value of having a common activity or project to work on is that familiarity can occur organically at a person to person level, rather than as an explicit activity aimed at learning about one another's 'culture' or 'faith' in the abstract. Moreover, the rules and framework for behaviour are set by the workplace and work activity itself reducing the level of social ambiguity present in less structured situations. Together, these features fit the important criteria set out in the 'contact theory' perspective, introduced in the literature review section, where positive inter-group relations require: equal status between groups, common goals, inter-group co-operation, and support or sanction of the authorities, law or custom.

Mubarak: Yes, most of my time, actually, is spent during the working hours, but during work we get a break of an hour or half an hour, and we tend to share the same table for eating and drinking, relaxing...so we do talk a lot as well. Especially when we're having a break and there is some kind of news, big news in the newspaper. It will generally come up at the table and they'll say, 'Oh, look! What's going on with you guys?' then we have to explain, 'That's not how it is!' Or, 'This is how it is!'

Of course work also provides the opportunity for unstructured socialising once collegial relations are established. A number of the interviews mentioned the 'lunch room' as an important site for, if not friendships, then good relationships to emerge. These lunchtime interactions provided the opportunity to, for example, provide a Muslim-Australian perspective on current affairs (where a colleague is reading the paper at the lunchroom table) and in turn to complicate stereotypes that emerge in media reporting.

Iqbal: I work with company, that company it's a big company, pay fair, they very good money..., I got the manager very good man, look after me, look after all the people like a father.... He's Aussie. All the people like him – all people. Not to make you upset, never. If you're sick, don't want to go to work, if you're really sick and if you're tired, he looks after you, he not put pressure on you. Everyone, he likes him – everyone. We're like family inside the company. ... always I come in, I said, 'Hello. How are you? Good' and this. I bring some staff Lebanese food or some Lebanese thing or something.

Finally, feeling valued and respected also emerged as an important aspect of involvement in a diverse workplace. The employers (the boss) was especially important, particularly so in small workplaces. Workplace superiors play a very important role in helping alienated Muslim-Australian workers feel valued and like a member of 'the family'. Small gestures of care from the employer, such as ensuring Halal meat is available at the work BBQ, or a caring attitude towards employees in times of need such as when a child is sick, have a flow-on effect in terms of attitudes to the broader Australian society. These kindnesses are then reciprocated.

Similar opportunities to get to know non-Muslim-Australians are present in the school and post-school study environment.

Mubarak: With my friends at uni, we work in groups. We do assignments together. We study together, so this is how I'm involved and how I spend my time, but sometimes as well, like on weekends, I do go out and socialise with them. For example, we go out for dinner or to have a drink – but obviously, there's always this difference of what you want, what you can drink! (laughs)

Dalia: Uh... actually... because my kids, they do lots of sports, like I make sure I take them to non-Muslim organisations so they can, like, mix... because they go to a Muslim school, so the schools... I decided that I want them to go to an Australian one. So when I go there... I meet with lots of mums... and we talk... and you know... we share experiences...

Some Muslim-Australian parents choose to send their children to public rather than religious schools for this very reason, believing that it ultimately benefits their child in terms of having opportunities to meet and form friendships with children from other faith and cultural backgrounds.

▪ **Sport**

Sport provides a similar context to the workplace in providing a mostly neutral ground upon which to interact around a shared purpose.

Karim: Also, with sports, cricket, I'm the only Muslim in the cricket team. They're a good bunch of blokes and everyone has an understanding that they're part of a team. It's a bit of exercise for everyone.... So, we have something in common, those blokes and me.

Sport is also an ideal activity in that it is a social activity which does not revolve around alcohol, and provides ongoing interaction over an extended period, providing the opportunity for relationships to grow organically.

▪ **Neighbours**

Finally, neighbours also figured prominently in terms of providing the opportunity to get to know non-Muslims in an informal setting. There were mostly positive accounts of neighbours, especially where there had been some friendly exchange and assistance, such as swapping food, or providing help to an elderly neighbour.

Jasmina: Of course. We had a non-Muslim neighbour and she was always in our house, and she was a really nice person. ... Because now we've spent time with each other, she doesn't have negative views about Muslims. She likes her Muslim neighbours and understands them. It's good.

Neighbouring also provides an ideal opportunity to get to know non-Muslims in a non-threatening situation over a long period of time. In this instance, the young Muslim-Australian woman reports that sustained interaction with her neighbour has resulted in attitudinal change on her neighbour's part, such that she now holds positive views towards Muslims.

Engagement Strategies for local government

Interviews also canvassed views of local government and how the local municipality engages the Muslim-Australian community. Muslim-Australians interviewed for this study were overwhelmingly ignorant of the activities and role of local council. The majority had had little or no contact with their local council, and had not participated in any council organised activities or consultation forums. Most understood council as being for 'roads, rates and rubbish'.

Dalia: Yeah, yeah... definitely... I feel ignored. Yeah... because... um there's, I don't know there's a gap... like... we can't reach and they (council) can't reach, I don't know why... and they don't make the effort ... like... to advertise ... like, you know...

advertise... they... uhm... if they want like... to... tell us something, they should advertise it ... like in the local newspaper.

Participants were also clearly of the view that it was important to consult a range of Muslim community opinion beyond official 'community leaders'.

Dalia: I think it's not enough to only talk to Muslim leaders... because sometimes Muslim leaders, unfortunately... um... they lack... communication within line... within their people as well...yeah. ... so...like... it should be both...like the leaders and the Muslims... like individually as well...yeah.

It was also important to the participants that not all Muslims are the same, and that consultation should encompass a range of ethnic groups and Islamic denominations.

Mubarak: I think they should take more into account, not only the community leaders, but they should actually involve the rest of the people. The group leaders, maybe, at the level below the community leader, because the community leader might be just representing one sect of the Muslim community. ...You will see Lebanese, Turkish, and all these different sects of Muslims, so they will still have these differences in their culture...

There were a number of other issues raised during the interviews and in the research process more generally. These included:

- A perception that Muslim dominated areas had been deliberately left to run down.
- Dissatisfaction that councils did not, as a general practice, offer halal food at council events.
- A view that council needed to do more to reach out to the Muslim-Australian community. Participants felt that more could be done to engage Muslim community organisations, but the Mosque was the most frequently cited base to successfully engage a large cross-section of Muslim-Australians.
- Mail-outs and flyers were also suggested as effective techniques.
- Dissatisfaction was expressed towards park and public facilities which were seen to be unwelcoming to Muslims. A small number of participants suggested that they were less likely to use public BBQs due to the fear of contamination by pork and non Halal meat. Further, there was distress at the widespread acceptance of dogs in parks, particularly off-leash parks, which Muslim-Australians felt discriminated against them. It is perhaps not well known by councils that it is 'Haram' (forbidden) for Muslims to come into contact with dogs.

Anglo-Celtic Australian 'Disengaged'

Patterns of Mixing

A striking finding was the extent to which the Anglo-Celtic participants in the study were less likely to have culturally diverse friendship networks. The patterns of mixing were much less diverse than for their Muslim-Australian counterparts interviewed for this study. This accords with research carried out for the *Living Diversity* study funded by SBS. Most mixing with those who are culturally different occurred in workplaces. The Sutherland

Shire is an extremely homogeneous area, but not unrepresentative of large tracts of suburban Australia. The cultural homogeneity of the area was obviously a key causal factor as there were relatively few opportunities for getting to know other cultural groups through sport, parents groups and so on.

There was general support for multiculturalism and tolerance, but these tended to be spoken about in the abstract. Nonetheless, there was general support for mixing across cultural difference, although this had a strongly gendered tone.

Opportunities to mix

There appeared to be far fewer opportunities for mixing among the Sutherland Shire residents than for the Muslim-Australian participants in this study. Most tended to have studied in the area, and also work locally. School and tertiary education did not figure as prominently for the Anglo-Celtic participants. In terms of school environments, the schools in the Sutherland Shire are relatively homogeneous and there are very few Muslims attending school in the area.

Pauline: We have one coloured person in our whole school, and one Asian person. They're a rarity! (laughter)

There are also two TAFE colleges in the Shire and therefore the intake is also predominantly Anglo-Celtic. None of the participants mentioned university, partly due to the fact that the majority had not attended university level education.

▪ Work

As for Muslim-Australian participants, the workplace was perhaps the main site where contact with those of other backgrounds was made possible. However only two of the participants had had contact with Muslim-Australians at work, and the experience was mixed. Those two participants held fairly strong views against Muslim-Australians.

Rebecca:...I worked for Garuda for three and a half years. During that time, I was very much subjected to a lot of the different sides of Muslim people. Some of it was great, absolutely wonderful, but some of it was also very sexist.

Mark: : I think another thing – you're saying they look different. You say to some of the teenagers or, let's say, the early to late twenties, you say, 'What are you?' 'I'm Lebanese.' They probably haven't been to Lebanon. I know there's a couple of angle grinders that I work with, 'I'm Lebanese. I'm a Lebanese Muslim.' How is Lebanon? 'I don't know. I've never been there.' Well, how can you be Lebanese if you haven't even been there?

It should also be noted that the relationships tended to be of a collegial nature, rather than friendships.

Andrew: No, not good friends, but work colleagues...they become friends.

Mark: : Yes. they would mostly be just work colleagues, but not many friends you go out with on the weekend.

Rebecca: Yeah, I suppose, a project in management...there were two guys who were of British background, and one was Muslim. I think he was Turkish. And they were just doing Ramadan. And he was very nice.

▪ Marriage

Inter-marriage, however, stood out as one way in which participants were brought into contact with those from other cultural backgrounds in a more positive way, and issues of empathy and hospitality figured prominently. This narrative by Sheree and Adam gives a sense of how such relationships have helped shaped their views towards the wider Muslim-Australian community. Here, the experience of generosity and hospitality offered by the Iraqi family of their son-in-law was reported in the context of explaining how 'Muslims are very nice people'.

Sheree: Our son-in-law is Australian-born and bred, but his parents came here as a young couple. His father is Iraqi and his mother is Palestinian... they came here as young people and were married, and they lived here and raised their children in Australia. The children have grown up, he's gone to university and all that sort of stuff...but yes, in the last two years we've actually been invited into their culture, which is very different. But they've accepted us.

Facilitator: How have you found that?

Sheree: Very, very good. They're so friendly. There's no conflicts. There's nothing whatsoever. It's like they embrace us into the family, and to them it's more of a cultural difference for their son, their only son, to marry an Australian girl.

Adam: They might visit Cronulla and they'll come and see us, or if they're having a party, a celebration at home, they'll ask us. They seem to be very sociable people.

Sheree: And up until our son-in-law got involved with Jane, they didn't have Christmas or birthdays. Now, they'll have a party. After they got married, 'You'll have to come over for a party to celebrate with all the relatives!' And I'm not talking about a few relatives. A small party is about 60 relatives. And they all invite us as a family.

Sheree: (they had the hooka pipe out) It's just normal tobacco with other stuff in it, but the thing that was funny was that they were so hospitable. They were so welcoming to us, and It's traditional. it was some herbal...it was something, you add water to it...anyway. It was so funny. But they were so nice, and so kind, and the gentlemen were nice and all the rest of the crew and all the family...we were just part of the family now. They accepted us.

This family contact and experience of hospitality also helped produce a sense of empathy for the experience of Muslim-Australians more generally. While Sheree and Adam would be one of the more moderate couples interviewed, this interchange below was interesting in that one of the more racist women in the group, having heard Sheree's story of this hospitable Iraqi family, then used that to reflect on how young Muslim-Australian males are perhaps 'angry' in their behaviour because they are often pre-judged as being 'bad' according to dominant stereotypes of Muslims.

Sheree: I think there's pockets...I don't know. I read a lot, but I think it's from my...'experience' is the wrong word, but from my understanding, I think that, like anywhere...it's just pockets of young kids. The family might be fine, but the kids get into these little gangs and groups, and peer pressure and support and...

Pauline: But I think, with your daughter's husband, another way of looking at it is, at his age – now, after living here so long, you know what? If I was a young Muslim boy, born in Australia to Muslim tradition, I think that I would get a bit uptight, and get my back up, I think I'd get pretty angry...

Sheree: He's pre-judged all the time. Exactly.

Barriers to mixing

There were, however some significant barriers to mixing with Muslim-Australians present among these groups. In fact the barriers were greater among this group than the Muslim-Australian participants. This had to do with the lack of first hand contact with Muslim-Australians, the relative homogeneity of the Sutherland Shire, the reliance on negative stereotypes to draw conclusions about Muslims, and the negative experiences encountered in and around Cronulla, both leading up to and as a consequence of the Cronulla riots. There also tended to be a view that the lack of connection between the group tended to be due as much to 'Muslims not wanting to assimilate'.

Mark:: I think the majority of Australians are willing to mix with the Muslims. It's their reluctance to mix with us seems to be the biggest issue. They leave their country, saying it's crap, and they come here for a better life, and they turn it into what they just left.

▪ Stereotypes about Muslims

Feeling threatened about 'identity claims'

Anglo-Australian's sometimes feel threatened by the need of other communities to employ ethnic labels to describe themselves. This is sometimes understood as a lack of loyalty to Australia, a rejection of Australianness as an identity.

Mark:: But the majority, they were born here, and they'll still talk about their homeland, Lebanon, or wherever they come from...look at those idiots who came out of the retaliation for the Cronulla riots, they were sitting there saying 'Lions of Lebanon', and they probably haven't even been there. They probably can't even find it on a map!

However as the 'you flew here, we grew here' sign which featured during the Cronulla riots attests, many second generation Muslim-Australian youth feel as though they are never able to fully claim a sense of Australian identity while it is associated so heavily with Anglo-Celtic Australianness. Therefore the employment of secondary ethnic descriptors is a means of marking out and claiming a sense of identity for themselves. This, however, is not understood by some Anglo-Celtic Australians.

Stereotypes about gender

Unsurprisingly, negative gender stereotypes abounded. There was a great deal of ignorance of the role of women in Islam. These views tended to come from rumour or what had been said in the mainstream media.

Rebecca: we are not overly educated in...we don't really understand what they believe and what they do, and some of us might have preconceived ideas of what they're thinking. ... I'm not sure where I've got that idea from, but I've spoken to... friends of ours, whose sister was married to – I'm not sure where he was from, but he was very strict with her. He was Australian or Kiwi, and Muslim ... He was very...he had rigid values and ideas about how she should be and how she should act. They're not together any longer. (Husband...) She had to run for her life in the end.

Sally: One of my cousin's friends, her sister's married to a Muslim, and (?) there's no respect at all.

Sometimes when these stereotypes are expressed, they can lead to outright conflict with Muslim-Australians seeking to defend themselves from insults.

Mark: I also think – like, the Australian culture, we can sit and laugh at ourselves. Now, I was at a comedy club out at Penrith. I was doing some work there. They had an open mike sort of thing. Everyone could get up and do their own sort of routine. This Muslim bloke got up and absolutely gave it to Aussies and (?) and all that sort of stuff. Sat back down. Another guy gets up out of the audience, looks at his missus and said, ‘Oh, she’s doing the washing up tonight,’ because she had the tea towel on her head. He was going to kill this bloke! It’s like...you know? And he SMS’d his mates, and there would have been 50, 60 waiting for this bloke outside.

This participant viewed jokes about a woman’s *hijab* as humour which should be tolerated, whereas the woman’s husband was obviously deeply offended judging by the intensity of the response.

However the differences in gender norms are real, and are sometimes experienced as quite threatening by Anglo-Celtic women.

Pauline: That’s OK with me that that person is wearing that. Obviously they can’t stop me walking around in a pair of shorts, but it’s the attitude. They sort of make you feel uncomfortable.

And there is a simple lack of understanding as to why Muslim women cover themselves and an assumption that veiling equates to oppression.

Rebecca: But if someone walks down the street with a full hijab or burqa or whatever you call it on, I can’t help but look at her and think, ‘Why in the hell have you covered up like that? It’s forty degree heat.’ ... And they look different, too, in the aspect of the women who cover up. People are scared of that part of it, because they look different and we don’t know why they look different.

Rebecca: I think a lot of the problems are also that – going back to the female point of view, understanding why women do subject themselves to that way of life, without thinking that...like, from a ‘normal’ person’s point of view, it looks like they’ve been downtrodden and very under the thumb and abused and whatever else, but they might be happy that way. So, without us knowing –

Fears about Sharia Law

Similar levels of misinformation gleaned from the media also permeated one of the focus groups where there was a view that Islam posed a threat to Australia’s system of democracy and law.

Sally: The other thing I think is different about Islam is that it appears to be a bit of a colonising type of religion, and the extremes of Islam, the ones that believe in Shari’a law and things like that, there’s no separation of church and state –

▪ Cronulla riots & Anti-social behaviour

Not surprisingly, the Cronulla riots figured very prominently as a point of reference for this group of participants. Often the anti-social behaviour of a few Muslim-Australian youth

(mainly Arabic-speaking Australian) in public places such as the beach and parks had a negative impact on broader perceptions of the group.

As has been well documented, there were and are negative encounters with anti-social behaviour perpetrated by 'middle-eastern youth', which cannot be discounted.

Pauline: I used to get the quarter to four train home from the city, after work... The police were always on the train. We were between Sydenham and Sutherland, these young lads, all Middle Eastern background, would search the train and intimidate people and toss bags and do all sorts of stuff. And that happened day after day, week after week, and this used to happen all the time. That's going back then. And then everybody talks about what happened down in Cronulla...now, I'm not saying that it's the Muslim community. I'm just saying that it's this cultural thing that these kids, where they grow up, Marrickville or Bankstown or wherever it might be, that they just think it's the greatest thing to do what they were doing. And it was very intimidating, even back then, on the train.

There were, however, differences in how these encounters were interpreted, and the extent to which they were racialised and used to justify, or explain away the riots.

Sheree: I've lived in the Shire for thirty years, and over the past five or six years you could see that there was trouble brewing. It was the catalyst, because I can remember going to cross a level crossing, and there was a gang of them, and they wouldn't even let us cross the street. We weren't doing anything, but they were going to try and make it difficult. So we just changed our...now, I feel very sorry for the elderly folk who live in Cronulla, and there are a lot of them, and they were being very intimidating, and so there were two sides to the story. I mean, I'm not saying what was wrong on the day, but if you lived and were down there all the time, you could see what was going to happen.

Angela: I can see that, too, Sheree. I'm not sitting here being...I don't say that to my kids, I just tell them that they shouldn't describe an ethnic gang, and...it sounds terrible, but they do come in cars, and Cronulla seems to be their destination.

Sheree: And that's what I think is sad, and they've done a lot of damage to their culture by doing that.

Angela: As you say, it's probably only 25% -

Pauline: But that's a vocal 25%...

Again, Sheree and Angela were two of the more moderate and aware participants and struggled with how to make meaning of their encounters without being racist. Interestingly, the anti-social behaviour mentioned was not simply of the violent kind, the everyday rules and codes of shared behaviour expected of beach goers also figured prominently. Cultural norms were important and when these norms differed from mainstream western ones.

Angela: The unspoken rule is that you don't play ball games while everyone's sunbaking. You play the ball games down at the park and so forth. They come and play their ball games where little kids are playing, and knock them over...whether I'm just noticing them because it's 'Them'...

Angela: They tend to socialise in large groups, whereas we might be two or three, all good friends...

It was generally felt that 'mainstream' Western norms should predominate on the beach, and that acceptance of Muslim-Australians back on the beach at Cronulla hinged on adherence to certain behavioural standards.

Sheree: I have no problems mixing with cultures in the Sutherland Shire at all, as long as they know there's a behavioural standard.

Pauline: Like the unspoken rules about the balls...it just hasn't occurred to them. They're there on the beach to have a good time....

Mark:: We're not saying 'the beach is for white people only.' It was just to say, 'If you're coming to our beach, respect it.' Everybody respect each other. That's all they want.

▪ **Lack of opportunity & Geographical Location**

Most Shire people have lived there for many years, or their whole lives. It is the most Anglo-Celtic population in urban Australia, and is geographically isolated by waterways from the rest of Sydney.

Rebecca: That's just how it is. I've also chosen to live here ... but I don't want to live in a place that looks like Hurstville, Parramatta, or any of those kind of...isn't that terrible! Suburbs that have literally been taken over by one particular nationality. I don't want to live there, because I live in Australia, and to me that's not how it should be, and that's not how it was twenty years ago. It was very much multicultural, and it's not now. I got the shock of my life when I went there just last week, at Hurstville, and every single shop had Chinese writing on it. Every single one. And so I don't think that's assimilating with Australia, and I have a real problem with that. That's why I love the Sutherland Shire.

This relative cultural homogeneity means there are much fewer opportunities to get to know not only Muslim-Australians, but culturally and linguistically diverse Australians more generally.

Roslyn: The only reason that I don't..I think I'm the only person at this table that doesn't have a multicultural friendship..., but I've been isolated to the Shire and the only people I knew at school were Italians, maybe... we didn't grow up with Asians or...when I went to school, they just weren't there. There were some Italians, and that's it. ... So that's why...but I do welcome friendships with anybody, and I'd love to..

There is little day to day experience of living with multiculturalism and this means that dominant culture perspectives are taken for granted.

▪ **Comfort with 'those like me'**

Finally, as for the Muslim-Australian participants, there was simply the fact that it was more comfortable to mix with individuals from the same background. Cultural norms and codes are shared and this eases the burden of socialising.

Pauline: I think it's what you're used to, what you grow up with, and when you live in the Shire, as I was saying to you before, we're a little bit insular in terms of what we're used to, and we've had it all our lives, and it's why a lot of people don't leave the Shire. They love it. The familiarity...I moved away for eight years and couldn't wait to get back. ... I think sometimes it's just what you know, and it's having the same values, core beliefs,

those types of things, it's just easier to relate to them, and especially if your social network...we actually don't have a lot of...I mean, we do have some, but not to the degree of other areas, like Parramatta. It is basically Anglo, the Shire.

Angela: I think it is easier, because you don't have to try as hard, perhaps, to communicate or to listen. And you just naturally slip into similar experiences.

There is also a sense that some of these participants would not know where to start in terms of getting to know a Muslim-Australian.

Pauline: I'd like to turn this situation around, in Cronulla, but even so... I know that I would find it difficult to relate to a Muslim woman. What would I talk about? So it is a huge hurdle, and how do we get there? There's no easy answer.

▪ Ideas About Tolerance

An interesting discussion occurred in one of the focus groups where the idea of tolerance was discussed. What emerged very strongly was how 'slippery' this term was, in that the general view was that it was Muslim-Australians who were straining the relationship due to their lack of tolerance for the Australian way of life.

Stephanie: They have a lot stronger culture, and they come here and... Australians from Anglo-Saxon background are very tolerant of all different races, but I feel that some of these races coming in aren't tolerant, that they'll take advantage of how tolerant we are.

This also figured strongly around the gender issue. Participants felt that Muslim views about female dress and behaviour was also implicitly a comment about the gender codes of Anglo-Celtic Australians. Anglo women mentioned an uncomfortable feeling of being judged by Muslims for wearing revealing clothes which they felt equated to a lack of tolerance on the part of Muslim-Australians for mainstream Australians more liberal views on these matters.

Rebecca: The women walk around covered. That's not how we dress over here. I think they're imposing their culture in that way. I mean, I don't know to what extent this occurs because, as I said before, I don't know much about Muslim people, I haven't had much to do with them, but from what I've seen on television and how they seem to be...from what I can gather, they seem to think Australian women are loose because of our clothes, we wear short skirts and all the rest of it. And you do see some Muslim men out shopping with the children, and the women are covered, and I think, 'Well, that seems like a non-acceptance of our culture.' I have no problem with women walking around in burqas, I wouldn't think twice about it, but there seems to be a double standard. It's just that whole issue with women.

The view was also expressed that Australians were tolerant of other cultures and races, but that the Muslim-Australian community were an exception due to their own behaviour

Sally: Islamic culture. I mean.. possibly intolerant generally, that there are so many cultures coming into Australia, that people are getting sick of that. I mean, (?) we are more tolerant of various cultures just generally, rather than just focusing on the Muslim. ...The reason it's happening in their countries because they don't have the clear, democratic system that we do. Because we're a democracy and a secular society, then acceptance and tolerance of all races, and a wider acceptance of all different races,...so, in their countries, they're the rules and you have to obey the rules. Our rules here are that we accept people of many different faiths, and you've got more freedom. We're a much more open, democratic society.

Ideas about what would work

Despite the relatively negative views encountered, the Anglo-Australian participants from the Sutherland Shire were supportive of initiatives to build bridges between Muslim and non-Australians. They were all sensitive to the damage done by the Cronulla riots and understood that better understanding needed to be developed between the two sides.

Cath: But equally, I think it's up to Cronulla to turn the situation around and say, 'OK, that did happen, but how can we make that a positive thing now? And let's use it to our advantage. Let's not always let it be the negative thing that it was.'

Getting back to the riots again, because it's so on my mind! When the riots happened, I thought, 'What can I do? How can I change this?' and I went to a meeting that the Council put on, and it was just to talk about any matter that you thought was relevant to you, so I raised that issue and the majority of opinion at the meeting – and there was probably forty people there – was: 'That's their problem.' But there was maybe a handful of about five people, and they actually applauded what I had to say, which was that I think we should use this to turn the situation around. But what could we do? No-one had any input about what we could do. Someone said, 'Oh, (?) such and such,' and that was the end of the story, but another man was quite antagonistic to me.

Suggestions on how this might be achieved were mostly quite productive and there was a firm view that the most effective means of breaking down barriers was to help Anglo-Celtic Australians to get to know Muslims personally.

Sally: We're not really the ones to talk, because none of us know anything, really, but I think our worst fears are being triggered, and I think the only way to break down the stereotypes that you have and is to know people.

A number of suggestions emerged quite strongly, including more opportunities to get to know Muslim-Australians, information campaigns to help people better understand some of the cultural and religious differences—especially around gender—and interactive activities such as fairs, sport and school based initiatives.

▪ Information

There was a very strong view expressed that the women in the group in particular would appreciate some kind of initiative which would allow them to have an opportunity to learn more about the role of Muslim women, and to help them understand better why it is that Muslim women veil.

Sally: Most people have got no idea why Muslim women wear a scarf, or what's expected of them. Most people don't know....

Interviewer: So would you like the opportunity to get to know Muslims, to find out those things? Why they wear the scarf...

Pauline: Oh, yes!

Interviewer: What things would you like to know about Muslims that would make it easier for you to mix with Muslims?

Rebecca: I think probably more information about the female's role.

- **Interactive opportunities to get to know Muslims**

The preference across the board was to provide more interactive opportunities to get to know Muslim-Australians at a personal level. This desire for more personal interaction was contrasted with the experience of an exhibition featuring photographs and stories of Muslims that had previously been held in Cronulla after the riots. This woman describes how she felt it was a helpful exercise to go examine and discuss her views in the focus group environment. She felt that a similar small scale discussion group with Muslim-Australians would be much more helpful than the kinds of events where one simply 'appreciates' the culture from a distance.

Pauline: I know that compared to the exhibition day, I could speak much easier at this [focus group] table than if there was a whole heap of us standing around [not interacting]. If we were allocated groups and put into those groups, I could talk, otherwise it is very difficult....., I just happened to be down at the beach that day and...but you know what? That didn't bring me any closer to understanding them, not one bit. But actually, if I was at a round table like this and there were some Muslims here, then I could talk... Because at that exhibition there were (Muslim) ladies ...there was nothing to really...I didn't know what to say about them. It didn't actually force me to (interact with them)

Rebecca: I do think a cross-cultural night based on a women's night would certainly be a good place to start. Something along those lines, I think, would be very beneficial.

Similar sentiments sparked suggestions for some kind of BBQ or gathering in a local park. However as this comment attests, these events would need to be planned and managed carefully to take into account the religious restrictions of the Muslim-Australian participants. There remains a great deal of ignorance about what these restrictions are. Alcohol issues in particular would need to be navigated carefully and sensitively well in advance as this has the potential to cause tensions on both sides: Muslim-australians may take offence at the presence of alcohol, where Anglo-Celtic participants may take offence at a ban on alcohol.

Mark: If it was a party...[I'd go] ...I'd like to have a beer with them. (laughter)

Rebecca: Show the culture. You could have your eskies, thongs, at a barbeque, and you could have some parts that really symbolises their culture that they could bring, and so you could learn about each other's culture...do you know what I mean?

Street fairs were another popular suggestion. Such fairs provide a space for relatively safe and festive interaction in a public space, and therefore would be suitable for attracting participants who would not be drawn to something requiring more formal involvement. However it was felt by some of the participants who were most uncomfortable with Muslim-Australians that such activities should not be overtly about 'Muslims', rather should focus on a common theme to bring people together.

Mark: Don't have a Muslim Day, or whatever. Just have a fair.

Stephanie: I went to one out the front of the church in the big town square, with traditional dishes and all these things were happening, and you just got immersed in this whole culture, and it felt fantastic!

Mark: You could have it in Cronulla Street, and you have someone in the Muslim community going out, setting up stands and stalls and everything like that. But not to advertise it as a 'big Muslim fair'. Just say, 'It's a fair.'

Stephanie: But some sort of common theme where you can just get together.

Mark: That's right (just getting people around a common thing.). And that's how you learn. Because people who have this stigma about Muslims, will just go, 'I'm not going! [if its openly a 'Muslim' thing]'

However there was a counter view that a festive Muslim event in a park may attract those who are perhaps a little less racist, and curious to learn more, so there is certainly room for events with an outwardly 'Muslim' focus.

Rebecca: But if you had a Muslim event in the Park, a lot of people in that area aren't as racist or whatever. Maybe after the Cronulla riots, maybe they'll be intrigued and go and find what it's all about, or give it a go.

Sport was also raised as a positive activity where the participants are able to work together around a common goal, rather than focusing on cultural differences.

Pauline: But how do you change anyone's opinion. Like, sporting teams, and stuff like that. That's a way of learning to work as a team, and stuff like that, and getting to know each other.

▪ Education and schools based interventions

School based activities involving both children and parents of Muslim and non-Muslim-Australians were also raised as a productive possibility. An important focus would be mutual hospitality, most likely manifest in each group bringing food.

Angela: And if I can go back to the primary school suggestion. For instance, the Middle Eastern Day or whatever you could have – I think a good way to get that to happen might be to write to the schools where you know a lot of these people are, and ask any mothers if they would feel confident in bringing a small group and having a display table set up. But ideally, I think play is...artefacts, whatever they have, are good. But I think for the children to play the games. ... it's important to include food in it, because that was my experience with [another cross-cultural event at school I was involved with]. I didn't want to do food. I thought it was too hard, but some of the other mums said, 'You've got to do the food!' and it was probably the highlight, having the Japanese food. But, again, I don't think we can just ask Muslim ladies to (just bring the food). We could say, 'Look, we'd like to do this for you. Whatever we can do for you...if we could come and visit your school and talk about the way we play games with our children, or how we use the beach, we could cook hamburgers or whatever...could we do this for you, and would you like to do something for us? To come back to our school?' I don't think we can...they're the ones who are trying to fit into this country. They've got a lot of struggles, and we're here already, and we know – yes, we know the rules, that's right.

It was also suggested that specific efforts needed to be placed on bringing the participants together in small mixed groups to ensure that true interaction takes place over the course of the activity.

Pauline: Yes. And just two of them, I think. I mean, I know you like the idea of mixing around, but I think you get to know someone better if you spend the whole day with just one person that is completely different to you, and forming a relationship with them.

Pauline: I don't know that. You know, I wouldn't be so...I don't think the older people coming into a school and showing the different cultural things...I think what would be more important and what would get the message though to a 7 or 8 year old is being with a child their age ...And not exchanging the whole class, but to halve them, so they're sitting in a class with another culture, and then they've got the other half, so they understand them. They could sit with them and play with them and eat with them....I'd love my children to be exposed to that.

▪ **Media**

It is clearly not possible to engage the entire population in small scale 'getting to know you' type activities. It was interesting to note that documentaries featuring prominent Muslim-Australians were mentioned by different individuals in the interviews. These documentaries provided a more informed view of Muslims and helped cut through negative stereotypes.

Sally: I saw this documentary on the ABC, a series. I think the woman was Australian, but she converted to Islam. She married an Islamic man, and they...I can't remember. She's really well-known. She was trying to make a school for Muslims. She's out near Bankstown Airport, (?) and they were trying to raise money to build another Muslim school, and it was a whole series about the Caucasians and this woman, this really struggling woman who challenged adversity in every way. It was this whole series about this Muslim school, and it was really, really interesting. She was really approachable...you could see she was really immersed in the Islam faith, although she was Australian. To me, that's harmony, and just projected a really healthy image of Islam and Islamic people. I found that was probably the most I've learnt about Islamic people...

Roslyn: I watched Australian Story a couple of weeks ago, and it had El Masri, and I watched that and I thought, 'If there were more shows like this, so we can understand them,' because I know absolutely nothing about them, and only hear bad things. I have heard good things, too. My husband actually works with a lot of multicultural...he should have been here! He'd be better than !! And he's got lots of stories about how they're disgusted by the way these people are behaving, and they're not like that, and they're very respectful of women.

This suggests there is great scope for tackling some of the more enduring stereotypes through such media forms such as documentary film.

▪ **Cynicism about past interventions**

Participants were asked about their views of current and past initiatives responding to the Cronulla riots. One of the more vocally anti-Muslim participants was particularly scathing of the Living in Harmony funded program to train lifesavers from Muslim-Australian backgrounds. It seemed to play into resentment of 'special treatment' for minority groups which is fairly common.

Mark:: That really gets me, because we've got our kids in the surf club, and they're on a waiting list. When you've lived in the Shire all your life, you want your kids to join the surf club, but after the Cronulla riots there was a big political thing and, 'Let's get X amount of Muslims in there.' Hang on! We've been on the list for four years! (laughs) Why should they be able to walk in? Why can't they just join the list, just like everybody else? It's preferential treatment that really gets people's back up.

No, it just made a lot of people more angry! You're sitting on a list, waiting to join the surf club that I went to, that I want the kids to go to, and they straight away jump on top of you. 'I'm a Muslim, I can go first!'

However it remains to be seen whether his view is a common one. Nonetheless, it suggests that the public perceptions of such programs do need to be managed carefully, and perhaps take into account possible side effects such as inflaming hostilities due to perceptions of 'queue jumping'.

- **Can not be too contrived or too obviously about 'harmony building'**

This participant's input was invaluable, however, in providing insight into the sensitivities of that part of the community which is, in fact, the target group for many of these 'mind changing' undertakings. Those uncomfortable with Muslim-Australians were acutely sensitive about not having these things 'pushed down their throat'.

Sally: The whole thing. I think it's artificial. I don't think anyone in the Shire would want to come to something that's set up to 'be tolerant'. I think it's an artificial kind of concept, and I think there would be a degree of resentment which would be hard to overcome. I'm not in favour of an artificial approach. Especially 'bringing Muslim culture to the Shire' – how patronising!

Rebecca: Because I've seen it before, (having a) target group, if you like, I just think (we should) let time do its thing.

Sally: You can't set up a fair with food stalls and everything else if the focus is Muslim, because it's not going to achieve things, the main problem is people aren't educated and don't understand –

Angela: And the more you try to force people to look at Muslim values and stuff, the more you force people, the more you actually scare people away.

This suggests that interactive public activities such as a fair including culturally diverse stall holders and performances would be effective, rather than focusing strictly on 'Muslims' per se. However it would be important to involve Muslims in the day quite prominently. These sentiments also suggest that such activities should coalesce around a common project theme such as raising funds for a charitable cause would be appropriate, rather than simply 'celebrating and appreciate diversity' in the abstract. However such an event would need to ensure that there were plenty of opportunities for interaction and discussion between the different groups involved.

General Conclusions

- **Gender and alcohol** were the two most significant barriers for both sides. On the Anglo-Celtic side, many of the fears around women's role in Islam were misinformed.
- **Age mattered for the Muslim-Australians.** There seemed to be more opportunity to mix with non-Muslim-Australians during high school and tertiary education years. However there was also a tendency to come back to Islam as they entered their late twenties and beyond. At this time, there was a greater expression of religious boundaries, which in turn led to fewer opportunities to interact with non-Muslims.

- **Experiences of racism** tended to discourage Muslim-Australian participants from reaching out to non-Muslim-Australians.
- On both sides, only a very small percentage of people were involved in **community organisations**, yet these were the main way that these initiatives were organised. The challenge is to reach out to those not involved at that level, for example, through sport, or public space type activities. This accords with the *Living Diversity* research which found that only 11% of Lebanese Australians were involved with Lebanese cultural and social organisations (Ang, Brand et al 2002: 35).
- The Anglo-Celtic participants in the study were the **least likely to mix** across cultural difference.
- Most participants in the study had a preference for more **interactive activities**. However these need to be carefully managed so as not to frighten off the target audience.