

## “Working Together with Difference” in an Australian Multicultural Workplace

Tran Nguyen

To cite this article: Tran Nguyen (2019) “Working Together with Difference” in an Australian Multicultural Workplace, *International Journal of Sociology*, 49:4, 282-297, DOI: [10.1080/00207659.2019.1634827](https://doi.org/10.1080/00207659.2019.1634827)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00207659.2019.1634827>



Published online: 24 Jul 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1881



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



# “Working Together with Difference” in an Australian Multicultural Workplace

Tran Nguyen

*National Centre for Cultural Competence, the University of Sydney, NSW, Australia*

Culturally diverse workplaces are becoming commonplace. Amidst growing concerns about workplace racism and discrimination in multicultural societies like Australia, how positive relationships across difference at work are built has not been clearly understood. This article contributes to this discussion by exploring the development of cross-cultural conviviality in the Australian welfare workplace. Findings are based on thirty qualitative interviews with frontline workers in four Australian employment service providers. The article identifies three developmental factors leading to conviviality across difference at the welfare workplace: (1) relational leadership; (2) casual and extra-organizational socializing; and (3) intercultural civility. The article argues that the creation of workplace convivial relations requires commitment and “labor” on the part of both leadership and workers, which embodies the management of workplace cultural diversity from below.

**Keywords** multicultural workplace; welfare workers; workplace relations; conviviality; civility

## RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND THE CONVIVIALITY CONCEPT

It is estimated that approximately 30% of Australia’s labor force of 12.5 million people was born overseas. Many foreign-born workers are from Asia or Europe (Austrade 2016:35). In addition to its growing diversity, the workplace facilitates more examples of cross-cultural interaction mainly due to the increasing numbers of people joining the workforce. This has occurred for a few key reasons, e.g., higher participation of women in the workforce due to the availability of childcare services and/or some other forms of family support, or increasing work pressure due to globalization and structural changes that have required people to spend longer hours in their workplaces. Consequently, the workplace is often the place where individuals spend more time together compared to other more traditional settings, such as the neighborhood, and concomitantly is an important social unit (for those employed) after the immediate family context.

The current literature on workplace cross-cultural interaction mainly focuses on negative outcomes such as racism and ethnic tensions. How people at work negotiate cultural differences to establish more positive relationships across difference are still under-researched. Amidst growing concerns about workplace racism in multicultural societies like Australia

---

Dr. Tran Nguyen is Associate Lecturer at the National Centre for Cultural Competence, the University of Sydney, NSW, Australia.

Address correspondence to Tran Nguyen, National Centre for Cultural Competence, the University of Sydney, NSW, Australia. E-mail: [tran.nguyen1@sydney.edu.au](mailto:tran.nguyen1@sydney.edu.au)

(Booth et al. 2012; Dunn et al. 2011; Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2006; Dunn 2003), addressing this question is pertinent because it can provide useful insights into practices and mode of interaction that can be used to foster positive workplace relationships.

This study adopts the conviviality framework which, according to Wise and Noble (2016), is as much as legitimate research object as the reproduction of racism. Conviviality has been argued as a viable alternative concept for thinking about negotiating difference when there is heightened disaffection with public policies and projects such as multiculturalism (Nowicka and Vertovec 2014). Originating from its more traditional meaning of sociable and friendly traits, conviviality has increasingly been conceptualized as a *mode of togetherness* (Nowicka and Vertovec 2014). Not surprisingly, the concept has been interpreted and applied in different ways by various scholars. On the one hand, conviviality is conceptualized closely to its original meaning, in which fleeting friendliness is exchanged during cross-cultural encounters. Fincher describes conviviality as “interaction of a casual, superficial but friendly kind—of the type that neighbors can have—that brings a certain familiarity and conversational warmth, but not close friendships and longstanding commitment to a common project” (2003:8). Examples of such a loose but positive interaction, she argues, can be found in public places such as parks or squares where people across difference can share places to eat food or drink alongside one other. According to Laurier and Philo (2006), even low-level sociability such as holding doors open, sharing seats, and so on represents one “doing” of togetherness, one facet of mutual acknowledgement. The interaction might be minimal and banal, but its importance lies in the respectful and warm behavior exercised toward the Otherness. There may be some awareness of racial, linguistic, or religious differences during convivial interaction, but such differences are viewed as unremarkable and ordinary (Gilroy 2004).

On the other hand, some scholars have argued for a broader approach to the meaning of conviviality (Wise and Velayutham 2009; Noble 2009; Wise and Velayutham 2014). Wise and Noble (2016) contend that conviviality as a concept remains a work in progress that not simply includes “happy togetherness” but also negotiation, friction, and sometimes conflict. Apropos convivial multiculturalism in Singapore and Australia, Wise and Velayutham (2014) discuss how different practices of people from various ethnic backgrounds who live in the same apartment building or share the same workplace are useful examples of everyday conviviality. Exchanging gifts, helping each other even without being able to speak the same language, or expressing interests in others’ culturally culinary preferences are more intimate expressions that everyday conviviality conveys. Interwoven into this convivial interaction is often reciprocity and moral obligation, as well as “kindness and compassion” (Thrift 2008:219), which require both individual goodwill and effort to fulfill. To date, different venues have been explored as potential sites of everyday multicultural conviviality, such as the café (Jones et al. 2015) or the neighborhood (Noble 2009; Wessendorf 2014).

The key question asked in this article is what contributes to emergence of convivial relations in Australian multicultural workplaces. It specifically focuses on the employment service providers within the Australian welfare sector to provide more useful insights into the development of conviviality across difference in this workplace. As described below, the highly competitive working environment with significant work pressures in this workplace,

coupled with a high level of cultural diversity at work, is likely to present significant challenges for welfare workers in terms of navigating workplace relationships. Understanding how conviviality can be developed within that challenging context can offer useful lessons for the negotiation of cultural diversity.

The Australian employment service providers include nonprofit and private agencies across Australia, contracted by the federal government with the ultimate goal of supporting and moving welfare clients into employment. The provision of employment services to support unemployed people on welfare benefits was traditionally exercised by a governmental agency established in 1946, the Commonwealth Employment Services (CES). Since the mid-1990s, as part of welfare reform underpinned by new public management, the country's employment services have undergone radical transformation. In 1998, CES ceased to exist and the delivery of employment services was delegated to a plethora of more than 300 nonprofit, private, and governmental providers which competed with one another for the government's employment services contracts. Coordinating the newly established employment services system from that day on has been a federal government agency known as Centrelink, which is responsible for assessing job-seekers and processing their payments, linking unemployed welfare recipients with employment services providers. Since 1998, the employment service system in Australia has been known under different names: the Job Network (JN) contract (1998–2009), Job Services Australia (JSA; 2009–2015), and more recently Job Active (2015—current).

This investigation is pertinent given the current significant changes in working condition for staff in these providers. These include the application of new public management (Considine 2001; Carney and Ramia 2002) and an increase in the high-level cultural diversity of the workforce. New public management broadly denotes the government policies that aim to experiment with privatization, contractualism, and competition in the public sector to make it more effective. Under the growing influence of new public management in the Australian welfare sector, the new employment service system places strong focus on outcomes (Perkins 2008; Fowkes 2011) and is expected to deliver more efficient and flexible tailored services than large public bureaucracies (Considine et al. 2011). This system was primarily driven by competition among employment service providers. A star rating-system, which was established to decide the awarding of employment service tenders, gave providers a rating of between one and five stars (Davidson and Whiteford 2012).

An Australian Services Union study (2011) highlights the stressful working conditions faced by frontline staff in the employment service providers. Only 52.5% of respondents said they found their workload to be manageable and only 18.5% of respondents reported rarely being stressed at work. In terms of the workforce profile, based on responses from 1,512 frontline staff working in 33 nonprofit and private employment services in Australia, Considine et al. (2008:10) found that 18% of frontline staff speak a language other than English at home. This is a high percentage compared to that in the NSW public sector, in which 12.9% of employees identify as being from an ethnic or ethno-religious minority group (Public Service Commission 2014:12).

The following sections of the article include a review of the literature on negotiation of cultural diversity in the workplace, the research method, and the research findings.

## NEGOTIATING CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN THE WORKPLACE

The current literature on workplace cultural diversity mainly focuses on the management of diversity. In their assessment of the effectiveness of legal instruments that have been introduced into Australia to manage workplace diversity, Syed and Kramar (2010) argue that, despite the introduction of anti-discrimination legislation, the implementation of diversity management in Australia at the organizational level is still limited for a variety of reasons. They suggest that focus is usually on prioritizing women, harassment, caring responsibilities, and disability ahead of religion, nationality, and race. In addition, there is a lack of recognition of the business benefits of diversity, a lack of accountability and commitment by senior managers, a general lack of awareness of diversity issues, and a lack of resources and effective tools for implementation. Furthermore, unlike the Equal Opportunities for Women in the Workplace Act 1999, which focuses on gender, there is no legislation to monitor and systematically eradicate racial discrimination in the workplace (with the exception of the Public Service Act 1999, which is applicable to federal agencies and contractors only; Syed and Kramar 2010:107). These authors, therefore, conclude that the lack of a coherent approach toward managing cultural diversity has resulted in adverse outcomes for workers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

A number of studies have highlighted the negative impacts of cultural diversity on workplace relationships. These have mostly been viewed through the lenses of racism or racial discrimination. For instance, the results of a survey exploring racist attitudes and experiences of racism in Australia (Dunn 2003) show that 16% of respondents reported having experienced racism within their workplace. Another by Booth et al. (2012) further indicates the scale of racial discrimination in the Australian workplace. In this study, the authors conducted a large-scale correspondence discrimination experiment. By sending fake CVs to employers, the authors aim to find the correlation between job call-backs and the apparent ethnicity of the applicant's name. They reported that there is clear evidence of discrimination, with Chinese and Middle Easterners both having to submit at least 50% more applications in order to receive the same number of call-backs as Anglo candidates. The authors also found that Indigenous applicants suffer a statistically significant level of discrimination, though the effects are smaller. Similarly, Mapedzahama et al. (2012) illustrate how everyday racism is played out against migrant African nurses in the seemingly "normal" functioning of everyday interaction in a white-dominated workplace in Australia. The authors demonstrate how white staff scrutinized and monitored migrant black African nurses' working practices as an expression of their doubt about the latter's competence. Their degree of scrutiny and surveillance diminished the black nurses' self-confidence when performing their jobs.

Concurrently, research has started to explore the potential of the workplace to develop more positive forms of cross-cultural relationships. Positive social interaction in the workplace is often discussed either within the parameters of friendship between coworkers or between supervisor and subordinates (Sias and Perry 2004; Sias et al. 2012; Sias, Krone, and Jablin 2002). According to Sias (2009:33), the nature and quality of one's relationship with a supervisor or subordinate employee has important implications for both the individuals in the relationship and the organization. Employees with high-quality, trusting, open relationships with their supervisors tend to be better informed, obtain more useful feedback, and are more

likely to receive useful career guidance than those with lower quality relationships. Supervisors who develop quality relationships with subordinate employees are better informed and receive more useful feedback than supervisors with lower quality subordinate relationships. The processes by which supervisors and subordinates develop their relationships are, therefore, important issues. Similarly, Smith and Canger (2004) suggest that the more agreeable, emotionally stable, and extraverted the supervisor, the more satisfied subordinate employees were with the supervisor. This body of literature thus reflects the importance of leadership on workplace relationships. However, what remains unclear is types of workplace leadership that will be important to develop conviviality across difference.

In terms of coworkers' relationships, a study by Sias et al. (2008) on intercultural friendship development in the United States identifies key developmental factors: targeted socializing, cultural similarities, cultural differences, and prior intercultural experience. The authors find that cultural similarity among multicultural staff, e.g., Chinese and Korean participants perceiving that they were both "Asian," is one important aspect of intercultural friendships. In other words, staff's "non-Americanness" made them culturally similar to one another in a way that enhanced the initiation and development of their friendships. According to Sias et al. (2008), cultural differences can enhance intercultural friendship mainly because people find those differences interesting and exciting. People with a positive prior experience in an intercultural setting are likely to be more open toward cultural differences at work. Positive relationships in the workplace, according to Wise and Velayutham (2014), can also be produced as a result of a caring attitude toward other workplace members, i.e., through being aware of other people's different cuisine needs and responding appropriately.

Wise (2016) discusses under what circumstances humor—as a form of what she terms as "convivial labor"—can be used in the workplace to foster more meaningful interactions across difference. She highlights the ambivalent nature of humor because, when negotiated by the diverse actors at work, it can lead to either belonging or "shrouded racism." While similarly reaffirming the significance of humor in facilitating conviviality in British and Spanish workplaces, Kallman (2015) draws attention to other contributing factors, such as equal status shared between coworkers in a noncompetitive working environment, language differences among diverse coworkers, or the gender-specific nature of the workplace. This article adds to this literature by investigating some of the factors that produce convivial relations in the Australian welfare workplace.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study specifically sought to understand the development of conviviality in the Australian employment service workplace through the lens of frontline workers, given the current challenges that those workers have to face as a result of significant structural changes in the welfare sector. Frontline workers are defined as employees working directly with job seekers to either assist the job seeker to find work, help the job seeker to become job-ready, or help the client retain employment after finding a job (Considine et al. 2013). A survey

conducted by Considine et al. (2013) of frontline staff in 26 Australian employment services providers reveals that more than half of all frontline staff are employment consultants (52.5%). The other frontline positions identified in the survey are varied; they may include site managers whose work responsibilities also include direct interactions to support clients, reverse marketers, receptionists, trainers, work experience coordinators, team leaders, sales support, retention consultants, post-placement support officers/consultants, and Indigenous mentors/program coordinators.

To better understand frontline workers' perceptions about the development of conviviality across difference in their workplace, this research is guided by the interpretivist perspective which focuses on understanding individuals' interpretations of social actions and their social worlds (Baxter and Braithwaite 2008; Lindlof and Taylor 2011). As Manning and Kunkep (2014) argue, interpersonal relationships are fraught with meaning and action; for this reason, studying relationships through an interpretivist-qualitative lens can allow deeper insights into how meaning and action work together to constitute relationships.

This article's findings are based on an extensive qualitative study examining cross-cultural interactions at four Australian employment service providers in metropolitan Sydney between 2014 and 2015. Thirty frontline workers joined this study. Research respondents were recruited through contacts with the relevant providers, via personal contacts and the snowball sampling method. The majority of the interviews were conducted with frontline staff at their offices. Respondents were also given the opportunity to respond to interview questions via email because some participants requested more time to answer them while at home. In such contexts, they may feel more comfortable reflecting upon their experiences and expressing their opinions (Kennedy 2000). The majority of respondents were employment consultants ( $n = 18$ ). Others included job-search trainers ( $n = 3$ ), work experience supervisors ( $n = 3$ ), sale representatives ( $n = 2$ ), and a receptionist ( $n = 1$ ). Some site managers ( $n = 3$ ) were also identified as frontline workers (Considine et al. 2013) because they had direct interactions with welfare workers. Most participants ( $n = 21$ ) had worked in the employment services sector for 6–15 years while the rest ( $n = 9$ ) had worked for up to 5 years. Twelve participants had worked with different nonprofit and private providers. Some participants worked with a small group of seven colleagues while others might work with a larger team of approximately 12–15 staff members. The ethnic backgrounds of the respondents were more than one-third Asians ( $n = 12$ ), and the others included white Anglo ( $n = 4$ ), non-Anglo European ( $n = 9$ ), Arabic-speaking ( $n = 1$ ), South Pacific ( $n = 3$ ), and South American ( $n = 1$ ). Research data were analyzed inductively and thematically, which allowed an identification of important themes emerging within the data.

## THE LEADERSHIP FACTOR

This research indicates that workplace leadership is a critical factor contributing to the development of convivial relations in the workplace. As a senior white male consultant claimed, "The one thing that really works to create long-term positive relations among multicultural staff is good leadership and that will transcend the cultural divide."

Similarly, a female consultant from a South Pacific background acknowledged the importance of leadership in building conviviality in a multicultural workplace:

If you got a good leader who is open and fosters a collaborative relationship with all staff member and doesn't close themselves off from the team ... Also, the leader doesn't have favourites as well, as I have experienced where the manager favours certain members of the team.

The same consultant recalled that her favorite time at work was when a former manager built a respectful and family-like environment in the office:

She's very keen on team building. So she would have, for example, a one-month multicultural day where everybody will dress up in their home costumes, country's costumes and bring their own food and it was awesome, we love doing that. ... I believe she truly cares for her staff as well and she saw us as human beings as well, you know, so she wants us to have fun as well, so the workplace is not only a place to make money, it's a place to interact and you know, we're almost like a family, to put it that way, so ...

This account highlights that celebrating cultural diversity through dressing in traditional outfit and sharing of food can produce positive interactions among workers.

An Eastern European female consultant also shared how her manager was involved in building a convivial workplace:

If you get good results, she always goes and buy flowers for women, and for male (staff), some different presents. With good results, bought lunch, have lunch together ... Uhm, and we went for dinner, Christmas party, if we get five-star results we went for dinner, so we staff spend time together like this. These are things that help to build a family in the workplace.

The fact that the manager went out of the way to recognize their staff for their achievements and spending time together over lunches and dinners was received positively by workers. Importantly, workers formed close bonds with their colleagues and often described their workplace as a family unit.

In contrast, some participants recalled how the introduction of new public management practices into the Australian employment service sector, with its emphasis on privatization and the subsequent increase in job insecurity for employees, has potentially minimized leadership's capacity to build a positive environment in their workplace. This is because some leaders have been forced to focus on pressing issues such workplace efficiency, productivity, and fighting job cuts. For example, a South Pacific female consultant observed that her current workplace environment was not as convivial as it used to be. She believed that this was partly because her manager was more concerned with work priorities such as meeting work targets set by the management board. The manager was also concerned that if her site failed to secure the next employment services contract, her staff might lose their jobs. For these reasons, the manager devoted more time and energy to addressing work pressures than to organizing socializing activities for staff. This research suggests that the capacity for managers to encourage social intermingling at work is, therefore, diminishing. However, if managers make truly good efforts to successfully initiate activities to reward staff for their achievements or recognize and respect staff members for cultural differences, the outcomes for fostering social relationships at work have been very positive.



## CASUAL AND EXTRA-ORGANIZATIONAL SOCIALIZING

This research also suggests that casual socializing in the workplace is another important factor that can lead to the development of convivial relations. Workers noted that meal times and sharing of food were central to casual socializing at the work place. As a consultant pointed out:

When I first came into this team, you know they [her colleagues] are all from Filipino background and I didn't know if I was able to fit in. But I manage to find something that, I guess, interests both which is Filipino food. I love Filipino food. So, I sort of use that to build up my rapport with my team and with people I work with and that helps a lot. (South American female consultant)

At the same time, the topic of food gives rise to curiosity. The ways in which dishes are prepared or cooked prompt considerable interests: "We can try different food and that's always fun for me and everybody, although not everything we can eat or taste or some people don't even think that kind of food tastes good" (Chinese-Australian female consultant).

In some cases, casual socializing only results in *convivial moments* between diverse staff rather than leading to more intimate relationships. This is likely to be the case when staff have limited opportunities to talk to each other. However, in other cases, this type of cross-cultural interaction can contribute to shaping peer workplace friendships when staff have some opportunities to talk and discuss various subjects that are not limited to work-related issues. These subjects can often be personal, such as family issues, individual appearance, or personal life aspirations. Staff often achieve a sense of belonging through sharing things that they are concerned about, as the following accounts reveal:

Gosh, we talk about everything, you know, how our day's been, about our family, when we first came to Australia... we share migrant experience, how it was, we may talk about, you know, education, we talk about aspirations, we even talk about some of our frustrations, our challenges, yeah, and basically we become friends, pretty much, yeah [laughs happily]. (South Pacific female consultant)

I've been able to work with two different groups of culturally and diversely language backgrounds [*sic*], one of them being the Arabic speaking and the other most recently, you know, the Filipino backgrounds... If they have kids as well, like one of them has a little boy already and the other is expecting, so I'm a mum and I can relate to both of them. So, I can start "how's the pregnancy going?"... and we can start talking about that. You know we have other colleagues with child already so we get, I guess, that thing in common where all mom's going to be moms and that's how we keep positive rapport and interest as we're here for the same reason. And if someone got the client a job, then I will go "oh my God that's awesome!" We all cheer, you know, we're all happy for that colleague. (South American consultant)

It should be pointed out that the opportunities to socialize during work hours are diminishing due to the implementation of new public management practices. Welfare staff face increasing workloads, have to meet high work targets, and respond to audit requirements by the government, as well as carry out other work duties as a result of the providers' staff cuts. Subsequently, staff have little time left for building social relationships with their colleagues.

For example, an employment consultant from an Eastern European background commented: “Well, we’re surrounded by tasks and KPIs [key performance indicators], you know, and there’s not enough time to think about anything else.” When asked whether or not she had enough time for socializing at her workplace, she replied: “Very little, very little,” adding that it was difficult for her to build workplace friendships because of lack of time to carry out work-related tasks. Similarly, another employment consultant from the Arabic-speaking background responded, “You know I don’t really chat much, I’m here to do work and go home, don’t have time ...’ Cause we’re so busy with work ... There’re the targets and everything.”

A white male consultant expressed frustration about the increasingly limited opportunities for socializing in his workplace:

We used to have more tea breaks and lunches together, but this has largely dropped off the agenda, either because of lack of money or what seems to be a growing “managerialist” belief that no one is being really productive if they are enjoying themselves!

Given the above intense working environment in the Australian employment service workplace, time has become an important element to foster social relationships across difference. Frontline workers optimized their time at work to have some sort of friendly interaction with one another. This was done during coffee and meal breaks when staff relaxed and gathered in the lunchroom. Interactions also took place during work hours when staff had “corridor chats” at the printing and stationery area and across their desks in the open-plan offices. This situation can be well illustrated through the reflection a South Pacific female consultant:

I find that everyday around 3:00 onwards, clients start slowing down and we’re all doing our admin. Then, it just takes one member of the staff to start saying something then we all start playing! And I think a lot of it is to alleviate the pressure, alleviate the stress and just have a good laugh, ‘cause if we don’t, we will go nuts. So we did have time, but we found that, like when I was there, we’ve been laughing and socialising but we’re not moving from our port, so it’s an open plan area where we’re all in ports like this. So, one will say something and we can hear them, so that’s how we socialise, but still working. I’ll call it “multitasking” [laugh].

This study suggests that staff also had some opportunities to mingle with each other during extra-organizational activities. Some of participants’ responses indicated that extra-organizational activities contribute to conviviality-building in the workplace because they connect people together and this, by extension, helps to facilitate mutual understanding. An Indian female consultant said she and her colleagues often built teamwork by having Friday lunch together. Each staff member would contribute \$10 and they bought food together. They sometimes had drinks together after work. Her office also held multicultural lunch events. Staff brought homemade food to the office, then demonstrated how they had prepared the food. Similarly, the office of an Eastern European female consultant sometimes held multicultural lunch events and the Harmony Day once a year so that staff could gather together and interact with each other. This consultant said that she and her colleagues often felt happy to join in these events because they gained interesting knowledge about others’ cultures, especially food.

However, research participants’ responses also indicate that extra-organizational events do not always lead to more long-term positive relationships if relationships at the workplace are

still governed by a competitive working environment. As an Indian consultant explained, such events would only contribute to shaping genuine relationships if staff did not have to work under the pressure of competing with one another to achieve work targets. She commented as follows:

I think after office interaction, sometimes if you just have one meeting on Friday without pressure, then you end up ... if you're not working with competition in your head, then I think that's when you build genuine relationships. If you work with the thought that "I'm going to be doing better than you," or "How did they do better than me ... ?" then I don't think it works.

### INTERCULTURAL CIVILITY

This research reveals that workers adopted a number of strategies to avoid conflicts in the workplace. Most of them exercised a high degree of self-restraint so as to ensure civil relationships with their colleagues. A senior white male consultant recalled a statement made by his Serbian colleague when he was discussing the issue of Australia doing away with the monarchy and becoming a republic:

When I became an Australian citizen, I swore on the Bible to proclaim my allegiance to the Queen. My family were trying to escape from a totalitarian regime; my Orthodox church does not look kindly upon homosexuals. I do not want my children to marry non-Christians, I am very conservative!

According to this white consultant, statements like the one above potentially aggravate tension with staff from other cultural backgrounds, who may find such statements culturally insulting. He, therefore, tried to avoid making such statements when interacting with other diverse colleagues.

Other forms of civility at work include the practice of sharing and celebrating, for example sharing cultural food, presenting souvenir gifts from staff's mother country, or celebrating staff's birthdays. Sharing and celebrating are examples of civil behavior: they display generosity and courtesy toward others who are different. A white male work experience supervisor recalled: "When I returned from an overseas holiday, I usually gave my fellow staff a token gift from the country visited." Similarly, a Bangladeshi male work experience supervisor gave cultural souvenirs made in his South Asian homeland to his work colleagues following his return from visiting his family.

Civility also embraces staff's reciprocal returns of others' goodwill, for example respecting and showing gratitude to coworkers' friendly gestures such as introducing cultural food to colleagues. Social relations can emerge through this sequence of obligation. This study's findings suggest that whether gifts improve relations across difference is likely to depend on the recipients' responses. For example, a white female receptionist spoke fondly of a practice of her colleagues, especially a Chinese colleague, of sharing Chinese food with staff members in the office. Her account reveals the civil manner displayed by both her and her colleagues who bring food to share with other staff in the office. Her colleagues wanted to share part of their cultures with others, an act that showed both generosity and respect

for other staff in the office. This white consultant thus has returned this friendly behavior with enthusiasm, conveying a sense of gratitude and expression of civility.

In contrast, lack of gratitude from recipients might not only hurt the gift-giver but also discourage further positive interaction between them. As suggested earlier, the Bangladeshi male work experience supervisor loved to give gifts to family members, friends, or work colleagues because he believed it created a better relationship among them. In the workplace context, he brought gifts from his home country to give to his colleagues to help them to know more about his culture. However, he realized that not everyone responded positively to his gift-giving. Thus, in the future, he would avoid presenting gifts to these persons. His account suggests that civility is more likely to benefit cross-cultural interaction if an act of goodwill is returned with a similar gesture rather than with a lukewarm response.

Civil expression also includes caring attitudes for others. A white male consultant spoke of how he used his knowledge of Islam to help a Muslim colleague. Although he initially intended to study Islam in order to understand the pressure on Muslim clients, he found that it was also useful for building convivial interaction with his Muslim colleagues. He recalled that he once noticed a female colleague fasting during Ramadan; and, she did not seem well. This consultant found this a bit worrying; so, he pointed out to her that she did not have to fast at that time if she had to travel. His colleague followed his advice and later found some food to eat. This narrative highlighted how the white consultant displayed intercultural care for his colleague by being aware of her need to remain well despite being expected to fast.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article has, firstly, identified leadership as an important factor contributing to development of conviviality across difference in the Australian welfare workplace. This is because, from this research's findings, leaders such as managers have the capacity to bring staff from different cultural backgrounds together not only through shared activities that they organized for staff but also via producing the overall positive vibes in the workplace. The article argues that *relational* leadership (Hollander 1964 and 1978) is a specific type of leadership that is critical to develop conviviality across difference in the Australian welfare workplace. In relational leadership, the relationship between the leader and employees is the key focus (Hewinson and Holden 2011). In a multicultural workplace, this type of leadership can be expressed through leaders' care for workers and leadership efforts to create a friendly and respectful work environment.

This article also contends that relational leadership in a culturally diverse context can be carried out through detailed actions such as showing respect for workers' cultures and organizing relevant activities to demonstrate it, or recognizing workers' work efforts regardless of their ethnic backgrounds. Such recognition for staff is also significant to develop conviviality across difference at work because multicultural staff felt they were respected despite their cultural differences and encouraged to perform their jobs better. As Honneth (1992) argues, recognition for others is an important element in reducing social conflict. He claims that denial of recognition is injurious because it impairs other people's positive understanding of self, which is acquired through intersubjective means. The demonstration of relational

leadership is thus important to address problems associated in the management of diversity in Australia amidst complaints about a lack of accountability and commitment by senior managers in the process (Syed and Kramar 2010).

Casual and extra-organizational socializing at work is another important factor that contributed to positive cross-cultural interaction with colleagues. Especially in casual socializing, the topics are not limited to work-related issues but can also include things that matter to workers or topics that they feel comfortable talking about. Neutral topics like food, children, schooling, and shopping can be a good start as they can be both interesting and nonthreatening for culturally diverse workers. Shared migration experience is also an important theme that workers from migrant backgrounds can use to bring them closer to each other. Accordingly, in casual socializing among culturally diverse workers, not only cultural differences (Sias et al. 2008) but also everyday familiar circumstances can bring workers together.

The importance of using casual socializing to develop conviviality highlights the role of time and space in building workplace relationships. The role of time in influencing social relationships has often been viewed negatively. Highmore (2002) analyses how time in modernity embodies the emptiness and boredom that are often trapped in factories' assembly lines. He refers to Weber's (1991:181) description of bureaucratic offices as "iron cages," destitute of spontaneous enjoyment, urging people to spend their time in more fulfilled and beautiful ways outside of the office. Simmel (1950a, cited in Scott 2009) comments upon the fast pace of modern city life filled, as it is, with fleeting and impersonal encounters that inhibit the development of deeper social bonds. He claimed that time had come to rule everyday life: people are rushing from one appointment to another, scheduling every moment and worrying about "getting things done" on time. However, this study indicates that under the impacts of new public management practices within the employment service workplace, time or space is not likely to be bare, empty and tedious. Instead, staff's temporal and spatial constraints and subsequently their maximization of socializing opportunities offered within this framework have boosted the role of time and space in the conviviality-building process. Staff interaction within the workplace's shared places such as the lunch room, the open-plan setting, or the printer area, contributes to what I term *convivial moments* in the workplace. By choosing their time and space for interaction with staff from other ethnic backgrounds, this research's participants were able to form a sense of belonging, either by supporting each other or simply sharing a momentary laugh together. As a result of this interaction, more intimate relationships such as friendships have the potential to develop in the diverse workplace context. This is because such interaction embodies affective exchanges and close physical proximity relationships, all of which have been found to be significant elements in building workplace friendships.

This study also suggests that the development of conviviality in the multicultural workplace requires workers to display intercultural civility. It can be argued that in a multicultural workplace context, being civil when interacting with other culturally diverse colleagues is even more pertinent because cultural differences, without being appropriately addressed, can result in tensions and discomfort for people involved (Noble 2005; Wise 2005). Intercultural civility in such contexts can be demonstrated using self-restraint, such as bodily control and speech and emotional restraint, when interacting with culturally diverse colleagues. As Kingwell argues, civility requires a "willingness not to say all the true, or morally excellent things one could say" (1995:44), especially when expressing one's deeper moral convictions, is likely to

cause offense or hurt other people. This research also confirms the importance of developing conviviality characterized by affection expressed through gestures such as gift-giving and gratitude. This is the “connecting and bridging work” of difference (Wise and Velayutham 2014) that has the potential to facilitate care and respect across difference in the workplace.

In conclusion, the article argues that conviviality in the Australian welfare workplace is formed as a result of multiple factors such as relational leadership, casual and extra-organizational socializing, and intercultural civility. These factors can be viewed as various forms of the “labor of intercultural community” (Noble 2009), which can lead to “unpanicked multiculturalism” in the workplace context. This study does not offer a conclusive answer to the question of how conviviality can be built in every workplace context, as its focus is on the Australian welfare workplace. Nonetheless, the article contends that the study’s findings are both relevant and important because they provide everyday practical tools that leaders and workers across different types of workplaces can adopt to build better relationships across difference. The emphasis on *relational* leadership in this process thus entails important implications for cross-cultural leadership training. Casual and extra-organizational socializing and intercultural civility can serve as everyday practical tools for workers to build conviviality across difference in their everyday interaction with multicultural colleagues. Those findings contribute to the literature on “doing multiculturalism” in the workplace context. In particular, such findings will also contribute effectively to the development of cultural diversity training for people at the workplace to create positive relationships among them. When the effectiveness of legal instruments in Australia to manage workplace diversity is in doubt (Syed and Kramar 2010), a focus on both leadership and workers’ roles to develop conviviality across difference can thus be viewed as a critical form of management of workplace cultural diversity from below.

Expression of conviviality at the Australian welfare workplace, as reflected in this study, is varied. Conviviality can range from interaction “of a casual, superficial but friendly kind” (Fincher 2003:8) between leaders and employees, and among workers from different cultural backgrounds, to more intimate expressions such as exchanging gifts or helping culturally diverse colleagues. Conviviality contributes to reducing the stressful work environment that welfare workers are experiencing as a result of new public management. Such contribution should be viewed in the sense that through leaders’ organized activities, or workers’ casual socializing and extra-organizational activities, workers can feel recognized and comfortable being culturally different, as well as having a fun and relaxing time together. Racism can also be less likely to thrive in such a positive environment of cross-cultural interactions at work. However, questions remain regarding how conviviality can be further developed to produce better relationships across difference in a highly competitive work environment, especially when relational leadership is not present.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Selvaraj Velayutham for his valuable assistance with the manuscript. I also sincerely thank the editors and an anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments and feedback.

## REFERENCES

- Australian Services Union. 2011. *Employment Services Not Just a Job*. Australia: Victoria.
- Australian Trade and Investment Commission (Austrade). 2016. "Why Australia: Benchmark Report". Retrieved 2 April 2016. (<http://www.austrade.gov.au/International/Invest/Resources/Benchmark-Report>).
- Baxter, Leslie, and Braithwaite Dawn. 2008. *Engaging Theories in Interpersonal Communication: Multiple Perspectives*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Booth, Alison, Andrew Leigh, and Elena Varganova. 2012. "Does Ethnic Discrimination Vary across Minority Groups? Evidence from a Field Experiment." *Oxford Bulletin of Economics and Statistics* 74(4): 547–73. doi: [10.1111/j.1468-0084.2011.00664.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0084.2011.00664.x).
- Carney, Terry, and Ramia Gaby. 2002. *From Rights to Management: Contract, New Public Management and Employment Services*. The Hague/London/New York: Kluwer Law International.
- Carter, Stephen. 1998. *Civility: manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy*. New York: Basic Books.
- Colic-Peisker, Veljka, and Farida Tilbury. 2006. "Deflecting Responsibility in Employer Talk about Race Discrimination." *Discourse and Society* 17(5): 651–76. doi: [10.1177/09579265060666349](https://doi.org/10.1177/09579265060666349).
- Considine, Mark. 2001. *Enterprising States: The Public Management of Welfare-to-Work*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Considine, Mark, Jenny Lewis, and Siobhan O'Sullivan. 2011. "Quasi-Markets and Service Delivery Flexibility following a Decade of Employment Assistance Reform in Australia." *Journal of Social Policy* 40(4): 811–33. doi: [10.1017/S0047279411000213](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279411000213).
- Considine, Mark, Jenny Lewis, and Siobhan O'Sullivan. 2008. *Activating States: Transforming The Delivery Of 'Welfare To Work' Services*. Australia, the UK, and The Netherlands: Australian Report back to Industry Partners.
- Considine, Mark, O'Sullivan Siobhan, Phuc Nguyen, and Fotini Toso. 2013. *Increasing Innovation and Flexibility in Social Service Delivery*. Australia, the UK, and The Netherlands: Australian Report back to Industry Partners.
- Davidson, Peter, and Whiteford Peter. 2012. *An Overview of Australia's System of Income and Employment Assistance for the Unemployed*. OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers, No. 129, OECD Publishing.
- Dunn, Kevin. 2003. "Racism in Australia: findings of a survey on racist attitude and experiences of racism." National Europe Centre Paper No. 77. Paper presented to conference entitled The Challenges of Immigration and Integration in the European Union and Australia, 18-20 February 2003, The University of Sydney.
- Dunn, Kevin, Martin Loosemore, ; Florence Phua, and Umut Ozguc. 2011. "Everyday Ethnic Diversity and Racism on Australian Construction Sites." *International Journal of Diversity in Organisations, Communities and Nations* 10(6): 129–47. doi: [10.18848/1447-9532/CGP/v10i06/38939](https://doi.org/10.18848/1447-9532/CGP/v10i06/38939).
- Fincher, Ruth. 2003. "Planning for Cities of Diversity, Difference and Encounter." *Australian Planner* 40(1): 55–8. doi: [10.1080/07293682.2003.9995252](https://doi.org/10.1080/07293682.2003.9995252).
- Fowkes, Lisa. 2011. *Rethinking the Australia's Employment Services*. Sydney: Whitlam Institute, University of Western Sydney.
- Gilroy, Paul. 2004. *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?*. New York: Routledge.
- Goffman, Erving. 1956. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh.
- Hewison, Robert, and John Holden. 2011. *The Cultural Leadership Handbook: How to Run a Creative Organisation?*. Burlington: Ashgate.
- Highmore, Ben. 2002. *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction*. London: Routledge.
- Hollander, Edwin, and James Julian. 1969. "Contemporary Trends in the Analysis of Leadership Processes." *Psychological Bulletin* 71(5): 387–97. doi: [10.1037/h0027347](https://doi.org/10.1037/h0027347).
- Hollander, Edwin. 1964. *Leaders, Groups, and Influence*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hollander, Edwin. 1978. *Leadership Dynamics: A Practical Guide to Effective Relationships*. New York: Free Press.
- Honneth, Axel. 1992. "Integrity and Disrespect: Principles of a Conception of Morality Based on the Theory of Recognition." *Political Theory* 20(2): 187–201. doi: [10.1177/0090591792020002001](https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591792020002001).
- Jones, Hannah, Sarah Neal, Giles Mohan, Kieran Connell, Allan Cochrane, and Katy Bennett. 2015. "Urban Multiculture and Everyday Encounters in Semi-Public, Franchised Cafe Spaces." *Sociological Review* 63(3): 644–61. doi: [10.1111/1467-954X.12311](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12311).

- Kallman, Meghan. 2015. "Making the Cosmopolitan Canopy in Boston's Haymarket Square." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 38(5): 759–74. doi: [10.1080/01419870.2014.907924](https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2014.907924).
- Kingwell, Mark. 1995. *A Civil Tongue: Justice, Dialogue, and the Politics of Pluralism*. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Laurier, Eric, and Chris Philo. 2006. "Possible Geographies: A Passing Encounter in a Café." *Area* 38(4): 353–63. doi: [10.1111/j.1475-4762.2006.00712.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4762.2006.00712.x).
- Lindlof, Thomas, and Taylor Bryan. 2011. *Qualitative Communication Research Methods*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Manning, Jimmy, and Kunkel Adrienne. 2014. *Researching Interpersonal Relationships: qualitative Methods, Studies, and Analysis*. London: Sage.
- Mapedzahama, Virginia, Trudy Rudge, ; Sandra West, and Amelie Perron. 2012. "Black Nurse in White Space? Rethinking the in/Visibility of Race within the Australian Nursing Workplace." *Nursing Inquiry* 19(2): 153–64. doi: [10.1111/j.1440-1800.2011.00556.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1440-1800.2011.00556.x).
- Noble, Greg. 2005. "The Discomfort of Strangers: Racism, Incivility and Ontological Security in a Relaxed and Comfortable Nation." *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 26(1–2): 107–20. doi: [10.1080/07256860500074128](https://doi.org/10.1080/07256860500074128).
- Noble, G. 2009. "Everyday Cosmopolitanism and the Labour of Intercultural Community." In *Everyday Multiculturalism.*, edited by Wise, Amanda, and Velayutham, Selvaraj. Houndsmill, England: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 46–65.
- Nowicka, Magdalena, and Steven Vertovec. 2014. "Comparing Convivialities: Dreams and Realities of Living-with-Difference." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 17(4): 341–56. doi: [10.1177/1367549413510414](https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549413510414).
- Perkins, Daniel. 2008. "Report on the New Employment Services System." *Australian Journal of Labour Law* 3(21): 374–82. doi: [10.1002/j.1839-4655.2010.tb00178.x](https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1839-4655.2010.tb00178.x).
- Public Services Commission. 2014. "Workforce Profile Report." Retrieved on 2 July 2018. (<http://psa.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Workforce-Profile-Report-2014>).
- Rzepnikowska, Alina. 2017. "Conviviality in the Workplace: The Case of Polish Migrant Women in Manchester and Barcelona." *Central and Eastern European Migration Review* 6(2):.51–68. doi: [10.17467/ceemr.2017.11](https://doi.org/10.17467/ceemr.2017.11).
- Scott, Susie. 2009. *Making Sense of Everyday Life*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Sias, Patricia, and Tara Perry. 2004. "Disengaging from Workplace Relationships: A." *Human Communication Research .* 30(4): 589–602. doi: [10.1111/j.1468-2958.2004.tb00746.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.2004.tb00746.x).
- Sias, Patricia, and Daniel Cahill. 1998. "From co-Workers to Friends: The Development to Peer Friendships in the Workplace." *Western Journal of Communication* 62(3): 273–99. doi: [10.1080/10570319809374611](https://doi.org/10.1080/10570319809374611).
- Sias, Patricia M., Jolanta A. Drzewiecka, Mary Meares, Rhiannon Bent, Yoko Konomi, Maria Ortega, and Colene White. 2008. "Intercultural Friendship Development." *Communication Reports* 21(1): 1–13. doi: [10.1080/08934210701643750](https://doi.org/10.1080/08934210701643750).
- Sias, Patricia M., Erin B. Gallagher, Irina Kopaneva, and Hannah Pedersen. 2012. "Maintaining Workplace Friendships: Perceived Politeness and Predictors of Maintenance Tactic Choice." *Communication Research* 39(2): 239–68. doi: [10.1177/0093650210396869](https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650210396869).
- Sias, P., K. Krone, and F. Jablin. 2002. "An ecological systems perspective on workplace relationships." in *Handbook of Interpersonal Communication*. 3rd ed, edited by Knapp, Mark and Daly, John. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, pp. 615–42.
- Smith, Mark, and Jonathan Canger. 2003. "Effects of Supervisors 'Big Five' Personality on Subordinate Attitudes." *Journal of Business and Psychology* 18(4): 465–81. doi: [10.1023/B:JOBU.0000028447.00089.12](https://doi.org/10.1023/B:JOBU.0000028447.00089.12).
- Syed, Jawad, and Robin Kramar. 2010. "What Is the Australian Model of Managing Cultural Diversity?" *Personnel Review* 39(3): 96–115. doi: [10.1108/00483481011007887](https://doi.org/10.1108/00483481011007887).
- Sypher, Beverly. 2004. "Reclaiming Civil Discourse in the Workplace." *Southern Communication Journal* 69(3): 257–69. doi: [10.1080/10417940409373296](https://doi.org/10.1080/10417940409373296).
- Thrift, Nigel. 2008. *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect*. London: Routledge.
- Wessendorf, Susanne. 2014. "Being Open, but Sometimes Closed": Conviviality in a Super-Diverse London Neighbourhood." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 17(4): 392–405. doi: [10.1177/1367549413510415](https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549413510415).
- Williams, Lela, and Elizabeth Anthony. 2015. "A Model of Positive Family and Peer Relationships on Adolescent Functioning." *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 24(3): 658–67. doi: [10.1007/s10826-013-9876-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-013-9876-1).
- Wise, Amanda, and Greg Noble. 2016. "Convivialities: An Orientation." *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 37(5): 423–31. doi: [10.1080/07256868.2016.1213786](https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2016.1213786).



- Wise, Amanda, and Velayutham Selvaraj. 2009. (eds.). *Everyday Multiculturalism*. Houndsmills., England: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wise, Amanda, and Selvaraj Velayutham. 2014. "Conviviality in Everyday Multiculturalism: Some Brief Comparisons between Singapore and Sydney." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 17(4): 406–30. doi: [10.1177/1367549413510419](https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549413510419).
- Wise, Amanda. 2016. "Convivial Labour and the 'Joking Relationship': Humour and Everyday Multiculturalism at Work." *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 37(5): 481–500. doi: [10.1080/07256868.2016.1211628](https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2016.1211628).
- Wise, Amanda. 2005. "Hope and Belonging in a Multicultural Suburb." *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 26(1–2): 171–86. doi: [10.1080/07256860500074383](https://doi.org/10.1080/07256860500074383).