



## Psychologists convene to discuss ways to promote social cohesion in a multicultural society

*“More often than not, people who are called ‘bigots’ or ‘racists’ are more like anyone else than would first appear. The only ‘difference’ is that the people who label them may have been exposed to inaccurate information about people from different backgrounds with little corrective feedback and, thus, make assumptions about all people from those backgrounds. Alternatively, they are simply unable to express their personal concerns in ways that minimise the negative impact on individuals and communities more broadly.*

*What we have found is that when the underlying concerns of such people are acknowledged, and the broader negative effects of their behaviour are explained, it becomes considerably easier to draw them over to social norms that say it’s not OK to alienate or hurt people from different backgrounds.”*

– Associate Professor Winnifred Louis

### The APS Social Cohesion Roundtable

On Friday 20 May 2016, 30 people from various domains of psychology and service provision attended the APS Social Cohesion Roundtable. In addition to representatives from three APS Interest Groups, the roundtable included psychologists from different cultural backgrounds, experts in multicultural issues, academics, practitioners, and specialists from education, community action, the media and national security. Of particular note was the participation of two high-school students from refugee backgrounds.

The Roundtable revolved around five catalytic speakers including academics with social psychology expertise, a community practice expert, a psychologist from an Islamic background, and a national security expert.

Across the day, Roundtable participants discussed definitions of social cohesion and the factors that have been shown to contribute to it. Also explored were the challenges facing social cohesion in Australia and the impact that social exclusion and a lack of cohesion have on individuals, communities and our nation as a whole. To capture the rich discourse of the day, participants generated a list of psychological insights relevant to promoting social cohesion, as well as a set of recommendations about how psychologists and the APS might contribute to greater social cohesion within Australia’s multicultural society.

### Relevant APS publications and resources

The APS has developed a number of evidence-based position papers and resources on matters relating to social cohesion, including on topics such as racism, media representations and responsibilities, and responding to human-made disasters. The APS has also developed guidelines for helping children deal with frightening events and media coverage.

These and other relevant resources can be accessed at  
[www.psychology.org.au/community/public\\_interest/social-cohesion](http://www.psychology.org.au/community/public_interest/social-cohesion)

### Why a social cohesion roundtable?

The APS Social Cohesion Roundtable was motivated by a number of factors linked with APS President Mike Kyrios's Presidential Initiative. Professor Kyrios has identified three of the 'big issues' that he sees facing society today where psychological evidence and practice can make a meaningful contribution. One of these 'big issues' is social cohesion (see Box 3 on page 25 for more details about the 2016 Presidential Initiative).

Key motivating factors to hosting a social cohesion roundtable were the external sociopolitical environment and the capacity of psychology and the APS to provide leadership in addressing some of its current challenges and pressure points. Externally, the prominence in the media and public discourse of matters relating to national security, extremism, radicalisation and social disunity has become entangled with instances of visible racism in the community, and with Australia's problematic treatment of asylum seekers.

Many psychologists are dismayed at the politicisation of these issues with little perceived use of an evidence base in dealing with them. With an increasing appreciation of the importance of social cohesion to community wellbeing and national security in a multicultural society, there is a clear need for psychologists to take greater community leadership in this area. And psychologists themselves need to develop their

cultural competencies in order to demonstrate more proactive leadership responses to issues such as ambiguity, uncertainty, volatility and disruption.

Further to these motivating factors was a broader awareness of social cohesion as a factor that is associated with greater individual and community wellbeing, as well as other positive outcomes (see Box 1).

#### Box 1: The impact of social cohesion on community wellbeing

There has been a longstanding interest amongst social psychologists and other researchers about the importance of social cohesion in relation to:

- Greater individual and community wellbeing
- Greater individual accomplishment and self-awareness
- Greater social engagement
- Greater personal happiness and satisfaction
- Less likelihood of being disenfranchised
- Lower risk of radicalisation
- Lower rates of racism and discrimination
- Lower rates of violence
- Greater community security.





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### Psychological insights to drive social cohesion: The Roundtable’s five catalytic speakers

**Professor Kate Reynolds**, Research School of Psychology at the Australian National University, invited the group to look closely at the evidence from social psychology. Professor Reynolds highlighted that while social cohesion is a strength of Australian society, little is known about what factors predict it. Knowing the predictors is important in designing policy and interventions to maintain and strengthen social cohesion.

General consensus was that current approaches to racism, extremism and radicalisation do not always maximise Australia’s existing strong social cohesion and may, in fact, be undermining our multicultural ethos and national identity. **Ms Shehzi Yusaf**, Clinical Psychologist and National Convener of the APS Interest Group on Psychology from an Islamic Perspective, highlighted the lack of evidence supporting the effectiveness of these approaches, which are often presented as ‘quick-fix’ solutions to perceived community problems.

**Dr Clarke Jones**, co-director of the Australian Intervention Support Hub (AISH) based at the Australian National University (ANU), emphasised the importance of collaborative community engagement and building community-led interventions, as opposed to punitive and enforcement-based approaches which tend to threaten social cohesion. This approach aligned with **Dr Diane Bretherton’s**, Adjunct Professor in Political Science and International Studies at the University of Queensland, experiences of promoting peace and social cohesion in two different settings. Dr Bretherton highlighted how different cultures and people see the world differently.

In the final address, **Associate Professor Winnifred Louis**, School of Psychology, University of Queensland, stressed the importance of providing safe ways of expressing and negotiating conflict. Conflict is not always negative. On the contrary, differences of opinion are essential to a healthy society. However, problems occur when conflict is not managed well or when violence is used. Dr Louis also clearly demonstrated how the dangerous influence of individuals and groups that promote hatred and violence can all too easily escalate when the ‘problem’ group is too widely defined by the community. ‘Anyone who disagrees with me is a bigot’; ‘If you’re not for us you’re against us’, and so on.

Psychology can therefore offer important insights about psychological factors that underpin social conflict and the most effective ways to bring people together to maximise effective relationships and productive outcomes. These insights include the application of approaches to resolve conflicts and issues, and forms of governance which prioritise co-operation over coercion. Above all, psychology can offer hope and generate optimism.

### Key learnings from the day

The five catalytic speakers and the many discussion points of the day gave rise to a number of key messages about how psychology can inform social cohesion (see Box 2). These messages are likely to inform activities going forward with the Presidential Initiative.

Participants stressed the necessity of taking a longer-term view towards developing strategies to promote social cohesion in the future – a challenging task in the context of three-year election cycles and 24/7 media hypes.

### Box 2: Psychological insights to promote social cohesion

- Any strategy to effectively promote social cohesion requires long-term vision and planning.
- Diversity and radicalism are natural and healthy aspects of any society as they allow complexity and creativity in problem-solving. Problems occur when violence is used, and as such there is a need to target promoters of hate and violence, who in turn are often a product of disengagement.
- Define the problem group (e.g. bigots, haters, violent activists) narrowly. In so doing it reduces the problem’s impact and the potential leverage of extremists.
- Avoid creating an ‘us’ and ‘them’ scenario as it decreases ‘our’ and increases ‘their’ potential influence, or conversely, can further isolate ‘them’.
- Promote understanding via creating opportunities for discussion and exchange of views. It’s fine to have differences of opinion, but expression and negotiation of conflict must be well managed.
- Challenge common stereotypes, misconceptions and myths with evidence (e.g. the unsubstantiated link between Islam, violence and extremism, or overestimating the threat of terrorism).
- Acknowledge how attentional, informational processing and response biases relate to cultural stereotyping and develop strategies that impact positively on cultural competence.
- Support ways to strengthen people’s (cultural) identities.
- Challenge the assumption that it is the responsibility of minorities to integrate into the ‘mainstream’, and promote self-reflection and cultural competence/responsiveness.
- National identity should be broad, inclusive and comprised of common themes.
- Focus on community strengths, not individual threats and punitive measures.
- Focus on changing social norms, not individuals. Individuals will follow.
- Social norms about what are acceptable ways of expressing differences of opinion need to be articulated, modelled and discussed.
- Acknowledge the influence of media, and hence the potential to work collaboratively with media practitioners (journalists and broadcasters) and media researchers to change social attitudes and public discourses.

## How can the APS contribute to more effective national initiatives?

The Roundtable identified a number of recommendations about how psychology, and the APS, can contribute to and inform more effective national initiatives relating to social cohesion and security in a multicultural society.

These recommendations included:

- Convening a psychologist-led reference group to oversee and guide ongoing work related to social cohesion
- Identifying an evidence base of the relevant psychological literature which will be used to inform the development of a number of initiatives to promote social cohesion, inclusive of informing evidence-based policy

Initiatives such as:

- Writing an APS position paper on social cohesion and how psychology can contribute
- Developing a set of multimedia resources and guidelines that can be used by psychologists as well as the public in schools, communities, and with policy makers and the media
- Developing training and workshops on the topic for psychologists and other professions and community leaders that include skill development on how to talk with others about social cohesion
- Utilising the intellectual capital and senior expertise that already exists in the Interest Groups in this multicultural space to provide positive influence/leadership to the general APS membership through training and consultation.
- Conducting advocacy work
- Generating media (APS releases and statements) which challenge misinformation and promote social cohesion and diversity
- Public interest activities (e.g. submissions, initiatives which promote social cohesion). ■

**Dr Harriet Radermacher MAPS MCCOMP, Research and Policy Officer, and Heather Gridley FAPS MCCOMP MCCOUNP, Manager Public Interest, both from APS National Office, and Professor Mike Kyrios MCCLP, APS President**



### Box 3: Background to the 2016 Presidential Initiative: The Contributions of Psychology to the Big Issues of the 21st Century

APS President Professor Mike Kyrios believes there are several 'big issues' facing the world today which impact on our wellbeing. The science of psychology can help us to understand these issues and find solutions that contribute to individual and community wellbeing across Australian society. As social complexity escalates, our community challenges also increase, and we need to find creative capabilities to work with diverse communities and confront those challenges.

To many Australians, we appear to be living in a time of multiple risks, threats, and dangers such as climate change, pandemics, widening inequality, violent extremism, and soaring rates of depression and self-harm. But how concerned are we, and are we right to be concerned about these issues? How do they affect us psychologically and socially? Are individuals and/or particular groups differentially impacted? And what can we do about them?

These are some of the questions that the 2016 APS Presidential Initiative is addressing via the development of resources relating to three such 'Big Issues': Social Cohesion, Climate Change and Community Wellbeing.

