

PSYCHOLOGY

“Social cohesion builds resilience in the community, and gives huge returns.”

The power of belonging

When you're at your local multicultural festival, wandering from the falafel stand to the noodle stall, are you undergoing a shift in your fundamental mindset? Or just filling up on ethnic cuisine?

This is the question the ANU Research School of Psychology is seeking to answer through an Australian Research Council Linkage Project with the Australian Government.

“We're working with the Department of Social Services, looking at what works in building social cohesion in Australian communities, and why,” says Professor Kate Reynolds.

“We have identified research sites—including a drama workshop in Queensland, a rugby youth program in Western Sydney, and a multicultural festival in Victoria—and are studying their impact on participants' tolerance, willingness to stand up against discrimination and interest in having contact with people of different ethnic groups.”

The research might start on the rugby field or the amateur stage, but the findings have implications for the hugely significant, hot-button issue of national security.

“A sense of alienation and lack of cohesion, and a lack of a sense of belonging, have been directly connected to something preoccupying a whole range of government minds, which is an openness to being radicalised,” Professor Reynolds says.

“Social cohesion builds resilience in the community so whatever the shocks might be—unemployment, or radicalisation, or instances where tensions within communities do rise—they will be less severe.

Photo: Bro. Jeffrey Pioquinto, SJ on flickr



“Community cohesion really does give huge returns.”

Professor Reynolds says this project is the first time anywhere in the world that social psychology, which has a long history of examining prejudice and conflict between groups, has married with a federal department to conduct joint research.

It's a marriage, she says, that makes perfect sense.

“This project translates the work we've been doing in the laboratory, and allows it to be put into practice by the government. It really has been an interface between social psychology and public policy.”

The ANU Research School of Psychology is ranked 29th in the world (QS World University Rankings by Subject 2016). We conduct world-class research into behaviour, emotions, human factors, perception, the brain and the thinking mind that impacts on applications in areas such as wellbeing, the management of chronic illness, understanding and treating mental health, forensic psychology, ageing, social cohesion, human resources and organisational performance.

We collaborate with governments, foundations and service providers, as well as leading researchers across the world.