

Conflicted Cosmopolitans: How Pākehā Experience Everyday Multiculture in Auckland, New Zealand

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Abstract

Over the past three decades Auckland has become a ‘super-diverse’ city. A growing corpus of quantitative studies of New Zealanders’ attitudes to immigration has found overall positive attitudes to increasing ethnic diversity but have also indicated possible caveats and tensions. Thus far, there have been no attempts to qualitatively explore these tensions in New Zealand. In this paper I will examine how the majority ethnic group of European New Zealanders (Pākehā) experience lived multiculture in Auckland. Based on biographical interviews with thirty-eight Pākehā in Auckland, I argue that they are ‘conflicted cosmopolitans’ who endorse ethnic diversity and present themselves as cosmopolitan while simultaneously employing exclusionary discourses and practices when difference is perceived as a threat to Pākehā values and the hegemonic position of Pākehā as the national people.

Keywords: cosmopolitanism, everyday multiculture, Pākehā, whiteness, Auckland, New Zealand.

Introduction

Over the past three decades Auckland has become a super-diverse city (Vertovec, 2007). According to the latest census results (Statistics New Zealand, 2013), the city's resident population comprises 213 different ethnic groups, of which nearly 40 percent are overseas-born.

The novelty and speed of this transformation has prompted much public, media and academic attention. A growing number of studies have been measuring and monitoring New Zealanders' attitudes towards immigration and ethnic minorities. These studies have invariably shown that New Zealanders endorse multiculturalism, are becoming more accepting of immigrants, and are generally more positive about immigration than people in Europe or Australia. While they have also suggested limits and caveats to these positive attitudes, there has been no attempt to qualitatively explore this topic in New Zealand.

This paper discusses attitudes to ethnic diversity amongst the majority ethnic group of European New Zealanders (Pākehā) based on biographical interviews with thirty-eight Pākehā men and women in Auckland. I argue that participants are 'conflicted cosmopolitans'. While they portrayed themselves as urbane cosmopolites who endorse ethnic diversity, they simultaneously employed exclusionary discourses and practices when difference was regarded as threatening Pākehā values and the hegemonic position of Pākehā as the national people. I will explore these contradictions through consideration of Ghassan Hage's (1998) critique of white multiculturalism, Brett and Moran's (2011) notion of "cosmopolitan nationalism," and recent literature on "everyday multiculturalism" (Wise & Velayutham, 2009).

Previous Research

The recent transformation of the ethnic landscape of New Zealand has spawned a growing academic interest in monitoring New Zealanders' attitudes to immigration. Ward and Masgoret

(2008), for example, found that 89 percent of New Zealanders endorse multiculturalism. In European nations by contrast, support ranged from a low of 36 percent in Greece to a high of 77 percent in Sweden. A large-scale survey (Spoonley, Gendall, & Trlin, 2007: 18) found that more than half of all respondents agreed that “the ‘white majority’ in New Zealand needs to get used to a more multicultural society.” Recent research by the Asia New Zealand Foundation (Gendall, Spoonley, & Butcher, 2013) suggests that attitudes towards Asian migrants have become significantly more positive over time, with favourable views climbing from 31 to 55 percent in the period from 1997 to 2011. Focusing on Auckland in particular, a *New Zealand Herald* survey (Tan, 2012) with 214 Aucklanders showed that 60 percent of respondents “felt New Zealand society today was ‘multicultural’” and the biannual Quality of Life Survey (2009, 2011, 2013) found that the majority of Aucklanders think that ethnic diversity makes their local area a ‘better’ or ‘much better’ place to live.

However, these studies also detected a number of caveats and limitations. For example, positive attitudes towards immigrants were curtailed by clear preferences for immigrants from Australia, Great Britain, and South Africa over those from India, China, Samoa, or Somalia (Ward & Masgoret, 2008). Such hierarchies were also evident in differential estimations of who contributes to society and who presents a threat: Spoonley et al. (2007) found that Pacific peoples were seen to increase the crime rate more than any other ethnic group, while contributing the least to the economy. The Quality of Life Surveys (2009, 2011, 2013) have consistently found that those respondents who thought that ethnic diversity made their neighbourhood a worse place to live felt that immigrants did not integrate, did not learn English, and were too numerous.

International research has demonstrated that individuals often hold contrasting values or

exhibit contradictions between values and practices. Skrbis and Woodward (2007: 745), for example, identified gaps between “people’s philosophical commitment to cosmopolitan openness and often parochial practices.” Specifically, they found that participants embraced “enjoyable experiences that cultivate one’s identity” but rejected threatening elements of difference (ibid.). Forrest and Dunn’s (2010) respondents accepted ethnic diversity as beneficial for Australia and felt secure amongst people from other ethnic groups but simultaneously argued that the country is weakened if people maintain their cultures. Bell and Hartmann’s (2007) American interviewees valued diversity in the abstract but not in concrete intercultural encounters. In one of the few pieces of qualitative research available in New Zealand to date, Avril Bell (2010) found that the young Pākehā she interviewed extended a ‘conditional’ welcome to immigrants which involved the imposition of certain behavioural standards and an expectation that immigrants contribute to society in return for the opportunity to live here. Researchers have thus concluded that cosmopolitanism should not be thought of as a disposition lying on a continuum from ‘not at all’ to ‘very’ but needs to be understood as a “set of practices and dispositions” that people deploy selectively (Skrbis & Woodward, 2007: 745).

This selectivity, and the power it entails, has been criticised by Ghassan Hage (1998) as an attempt by dominant majorities to preserve white normativity while presenting themselves as cosmopolitan. As such, he claimed, white multiculturalists and white nationalists both upheld white superiority. Against this, Anthony Moran (2009) defended ordinary people’s cosmopolitan attitudes as a source of social cohesion and inclusiveness and urged academics not to underestimate the positive effects of cultural shifts towards civic definitions of citizenship and national belonging. Moran (2011) further argued that especially in settler societies multiculturalism is closely linked to national identity; in fact, national values can strengthen

cosmopolitanism and, in turn, cosmopolitanism can become a constituent part of the nation, which can be described as “cosmopolitan nationalism” (Brett & Moran, 2011).

In a similar vein, a recent wave of literature has drawn attention to forms of “everyday multiculturalism” (Wise & Velayutham, 2009) in local communities. These sites are said to enable “conviviality” (Gilroy, 2004) and a “politics of connectivity” (Amin, 2006). Harris (2009) suggested that mundane intercultural interactions in local communities serve as a site in which dominant conceptions of national belonging can be negotiated and re-articulated.

In the following section I will present findings from qualitative interviews with Pākehā and discuss what they tell us about the potential of lived multiculturalism to re-negotiate national identity.

Urbane Cosmopolites

Being cosmopolitan was a central part of participants’ identities. All participants accepted growing numbers of immigrants and ethnic diversity as an inevitable result of globalisation and some, such as Caitlyn (53) below, explicitly endorsed a welcoming and non-assimilatory approach to integration, which can be interpreted as expressions of a cosmopolitan nationalism:

[ethnic diversity has] made me prouder of my country because we are tolerant of different races and we don’t really put restrictions on other cultures if you understand what I mean. We don’t say ‘you’re here, you’ve got to do what we want’. So I think we’re freer than other countries.

Narratives of being cosmopolitan often evoked the normality of proximity and routine intercultural interactions in local communities. Tom (53) succinctly described that, “everywhere I go I’ve got to deal- you know, I buy tyres from an Indian and if I go to the bank I’m dealing with an Asian. Gone are the days, they’re all English settlers, that was the 1960s.” While

invoking a sense of ubiquity of contact with people from other cultural backgrounds, Tom's choice of describing these interactions repeatedly as 'having to deal with' also implies a degree of ambiguity.¹

Without fail, respondents proclaimed to be open to other cultures. Learning about and from other cultures was presented as key to developing cosmopolitan dispositions. Andrew (28) whose "best friends at uni [were] one Kiwi, one Russian, one Chinese, and one Indian," stated that "it's a good thing that I'm going to university because it's opening me up to these other cultures." As he explained, being exposed to different viewpoints and collaborating with people who had different "skills" helped to overcome parochialism. Similarly, Karen (43) asserted that "interacting with different cultures has made me the multifaceted person I am."

Some participants stressed that ethnic diversity was an important dimension of what they particularly liked about their local community as the following quote by Amanda (46) illustrates:

The people who live in the middle part of the house [I live in] I think they are actually Filipino. And then the people next to them are Brazilian. The people who own the dairy² just at the bottom of the hill are Indian. There's an African family that lives nearby. I often see them walking past. There's an Indian guru who lives up the road. It's really, really diverse. So it actually feels like, it just feels like my kind of community, the kind of community that I am comfortable with. I go up onto Ponsonby Road³ and it's a huge mix up there always. You do have, I guess the kind of wealthy, the gentrifying ones stand out. But it's still very, very mixed. There are people who clearly have mental health issues living in the area. There are some halfway houses. There are a number of homeless people on the street. You know, ones that you know and you just see all the time. So it is really, really different and very diverse. And I love it. [...] It's very much home for me and I feel completely like I belong there.

Amanda, like many other participants, displayed a genuine enjoyment of lived multiculturalism. The discourse of enrichment Amanda uses squares with survey findings showing that people who

agree that cultural diversity makes their area a better place to live regularly list the “vibrancy and multicultural feel it adds to the city” as well as the “opportunity to interact with and learn from immigrants” amongst their top reasons (Nielsen, 2009, 2011, 2013). Most respondents employed a discourse of enrichment giving examples of a wider range of food, consumer products, and entertainment.

However, Amanda’s narrative can also be read more critically as an illustration of middle class urbane cosmopolitanism that is only appreciative of a specific mix of individual others that does not interfere with white middle class norms (Hage, 1998). The interpretation that others may be merely decorative elements gains most credence when we take into account that even homeless people are seen to be adding to the feel of the community.

The excerpts above and the data in general are suggestive of positive everyday encounters in ethnically diverse spaces and an inclusive cosmopolitan nationalism. However, the excerpts above also indicate that positive talk generally featured either ‘abstract others’ or ‘individual others’. As I will show in the following section, participants employed exclusionary discourses and practices when ethnic minorities were perceived as too numerous and too prominent, and when their behaviour was perceived as a threat to participants’ values and hegemonic position as the national people.

Regulating Others

Despite their overall favourable attitudes, participants employed a number of discourses and practices that confirm Hage’s (1998) argument that while immigrants are often not regarded as a problem per se, their presence – their numbers, location, and behaviour – is often controlled. As the quote below shows, participants experienced discomfort with ethnic diversity when numbers

exceeded certain thresholds, especially in prominent places:

Queen Street⁴ [...] should be very New Zealand oriented which always comes back to thinking you know ‘people like me’, Pākehā New Zealanders. It’s funny that it’s Asian dominated. I mean I don’t mind the Asian domination of Northcote⁵ shopping centre and little Asia here and there but it seems like the main stretch should be more- reflect New Zealand culture as it used to be. So that’s just an older, older idea. That’s not today, is it? Not today at all. (Paula, 64)

In tolerating a stronger concentration of Asian retailers in suburban areas but not in the prominent centre Auckland city centre, Paula determines the central-marginal relation of host and immigrant. Using Queen Street as a proxy for New Zealand, Asians are clearly not (yet) part of Paula’s national imaginary. Even though Paula acknowledges that this is “not today,” she positions Pākehā as ‘the national people’ and acts as a “spatial manager” (Hage, 1998: 42) who aims to protect what is “consider[ed] a privileged relationship between my race, ethnicity and so on, and a territory” (Hage, 1998: 32).

A further example of regulating ethnic minorities was evident in concern over the use of Asian languages in prominent urban spaces:

You walk down Queen Street, you walk just about everywhere and you’ll see signs in different languages, so I feel myself- I get racist. You- [sighs] I think it’s the fear of the change because the influences of people coming in do change society. [...] I just see it as cultures coming in and not- I don’t know, assimilation is not the right w-. I don’t expect people to change to a Kiwi culture because I don’t think there is one Kiwi culture. [...] It just looks like that they’re coming in and not taking part of [...] And maybe it’s not a service I need or want or require but you shouldn’t isolate, you should be inclusive but there’s all this dilemma in my head of ‘Am I being racist?’ (Karen, 43)

Karen established being Kiwi as the somewhat diffuse core culture of New Zealand. English is a

core part of that. Linguistic difference is a private matter and not acceptable in public. Like Paula, Karen acknowledged that the increasing presence of non-English speaking immigrants may necessitate a re-negotiation of national identity. However, changing neighbourhoods, ‘unrecognisable’ streetscapes, and spaces numerically dominated by visible ethnic minorities caused a sense of exclusion and dislocation and resulted in attempts to regulate the presence of others. As I will show in the following section, perceived threats to Pākehā normativity also affected participants’ own movements.

Regulating the Self

Participants regularly employed a ‘birds of a feather’ argument to normalise white self-segregation. Here, Paula (64) empathises with her friends who decided to move when their neighbourhood became ‘too Asian’:

Having Asians around has been hard on some of my friends. I’ve got two friends who live out in Northcote way and the units and flats around them gradually sold to Asians and that made my friends feel a bit lonely because they didn’t- they can’t relate terribly well to these Asian neighbours. They’re just not on the same wave length. [...] They found that the Asian neighbours are not house proud like Kiwis, so they don’t do their houses and gardens to be pretty, you know they don’t care about stuff like that and so the gardens would all get run down and all the big privet trees would grow and nothing was tended so that kind of didn’t look so nice. So, it’s just a different culture, they don’t care about stuff like that, at least the Chinese, they live more indoorsy and they’re not bothered about spending money on houses. They’re more bothered about their businesses and their children, education. Yeah. So the area’s kind of changed too much for my friends so they both moved.

In this story, Paula depicts Asian people as undesirable neighbours because inherently different values prevent her friends from forming intimate connections. While neither culture is marked as

superior or inferior to the other, Paula implies that immigrants should adopt ‘Kiwi’ (read Pākehā) values. In the absence of this, white flight is presented as a rational choice. This finding fits with Forrest and Dunn’s (2010: 85) observation that “residential patterns often speak to a desire for homogeneity” even when diversity is accepted and consumed in other spaces.

White flight was also evident in the context of avoiding schools with a large ethnic minority student body as Andrew’s story of switching schools illustrates:

The [school 1] ‘was eighty percent Samoan, ten percent Māori, ten percent whatever [laughs] and like that was one of the few times that I’ve experienced reverse racism. I was in a class with thirty-five people and there was myself and one other white person in there and yeah it was pretty toxic like. The school had a really good community spirit like a- always does well on the Polyfest⁶ and rugby and all those things because they had such a large Pacific Island base but academia and stuff like that it sucks and I wasn’t doing so well with all the bullying and stuff so I got- I went to [school 2] which I thought was an oasis being sixty percent white.

Central to Andrew’s story is a racialised discourse of innate differences in value and ability, coupled with the threat – or, conversely, safety – of numbers. Andrew later justified his image of a “white oasis” asserting that “it is easier being amongst your own kind.” Many participants who recalled a multicultural schooling gave examples that perpetuate a negative image of the other: graffiti, brawls, police involvement, teenage pregnancy and, most prominently, a perceived lack of academic rigour. This image translated into decisions that naturalise segregation. Claire (40), for example, loved the diversity of her neighbourhood, yet decided not to send her children to a local school in which “40/60 percent or something had English as a second language” because of concerns that “the quality of the education won’t be as good or that they’ll be surrounded by people who don’t speak as good English” which would “affect their education.” Claire’s expectation echoes Andrew’s perception of a lower academic standard of schools that cater to

large numbers of non-Pākehā students. Here, an ‘excessive’ proportion of non-native English speakers become a liability and a threat to the academic success of Pākehā children.

Conclusion

Participants were conflicted cosmopolitans. They frequently endorsed abstract ethnic diversity as normal and desirable and related a variety of examples of positive mundane intercultural encounters with people of other ethnicities. Many examples confirm research that emphasises the “often competent ways in which people routinely manage social interactions and relations in multicultural environments” (Neal, Bennet, Cochrane, & Mohan, 2013) and the embrace of ethnic difference as part of the national imaginary (Brett & Moran, 2011).

However, these positive discourses were limited to either abstract or individual others. As ethnic minorities were experienced as too numerous, as “dominating” spaces that are seen as representative of the nation or as an impediment to their lives, participants exercised control over the presence of the other or distanced themselves. Despite their eagerness to develop cosmopolitan identities, discourses of control counteracted a potential cosmopolitan nationalism and instead preserved ‘Pākehāness’ as core culture and norm. To use Hage’s (1998: 46) words, participants claimed “governmental belonging” – a sense of entitlement to speak on behalf of the nation and to manage “especially those who are perceived to be lesser nationals or non-nationals.”

Notes

¹ I thank the anonymous reviewer of this paper for raising this point.

² 'Dairy' is the New Zealand term for a local corner store.

³ Ponsonby Road is the high street of the affluent inner city suburb of Ponsonby.

⁴ Queen Street is the high street of the Auckland city centre.

⁵ Northcote is a suburb on the North Shore of Auckland.

⁶ Polyfest is an annual competition featuring Polynesian dance performances by secondary school students.

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