Title: Negotiating cultural difference in everyday life: some insights for inclusionary local governance
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Negotiating cultural difference in Dandenong

Keywords: affective ambivalence, cultural diversity, white privilege, citizenship.
Abstract

With the waning of state-sponsored multiculturalism, local governments in Australia have assumed leadership and responsibility for establishing and maintaining collaborative relationships with stakeholders to promote diverse and inclusive cities. Engaging with residents often through consultation processes and interacting with key institutions, local governments aim to value local knowledge and mobilise citizen participation. This social interactive approach to building local knowledge in places officially and popularly identified as socially disadvantaged and culturally diverse, however, is fraught with interethnic tensions if cultural practices unintentionally privilege whiteness. In this paper I argue that such tensions can also give rise to moments of affective ambivalence that are productive if it leads to the acknowledgement and questioning of white privilege within the formal agencies of government. Such questioning provides the possibility to value the voices of local residents and engage in meaningful intercultural dialogue. This paper draws on in-depth interviews with planners, elected local councillors and residents in the City of Greater Dandenong, Melbourne, to illustrate the potential that the affective dimension of living with cultural diversity has in building governance capacity and inclusive understandings of citizenship.
Introduction

Policies and practices that strengthen citizen participation and demonstrate the responsive nature of local governments are recognised as essential for democratic and inclusionary local governance (Raco, Parker, & Doak, 2006). At the level of local government such practices have usually involved the implementation of policies that focus on redistributive measures and the recognition of marginalised social groups such as ethnic minority groups (Morrison, 2003). More recently, however, attention has been drawn to the need for facilitating practices that promote intercultural understanding and dialogue in the multicultural city (Amin, 2002; Fincher & Iveson, 2008). The call for this shift in local governance is essential given that current research demonstrates that the city is a political site where residents often struggle to live with cultural diversity despite the introduction and implementation of multicultural policies in several nation-states since the mid-1960s (Dunn, 2005; Leeuwen, 2008; Mavrommatis, 2006; Uitermark, Rossi, & Houtum, 2005; Valentine, 2008). Views on multiculturalism as a policy that facilitates and strengthens intercultural dialogue vary with some researchers like Turner (2006, p.613) underlining that in Britain it is seen as a policy that has ‘failed badly’ because there is little interaction between dominant and minority cultures, while others like Mitchell (2004, p.641) try to explore the causes and effects of the ‘current backlash’ within liberal nation states. A critical appraisal of such policies, however, demonstrates that it is far too simplistic to dismiss multiculturalism as a policy that has failed, but far more productive to think about how such a political ideology can be used to resist assimilation, shift the normative framework of whiteness and construct inclusive understandings of citizenship (Amin, 2002; Forrest & Dunn, 2006; Meer & Modood, 2008).
White privilege is crucial in understanding everyday practices of citizenship and exploring the role that local governments play in facilitating intercultural dialogue, particularly in neighbourhoods identified as socio-economically deprived and culturally diverse. I argue that the affective dimension of such intercultural dialogue is particularly significant for two reasons. First, ethnic minorities in such neighbourhoods are often identified within policy discourse as second class citizens who live ‘parallel lives’ with little meaningful social and cultural exchange with the wider community (Turner, 2006). Second, such ethnically diverse neighbourhoods are identified within official and popular discourses as rife with interethnic tensions, fear and anxiety that impede intercultural dialogue (Amin, 2002; Birrell & Seol, 1998; Young, 1999). This paper focuses on such a neighbourhood in suburban Melbourne, the City of Greater Dandenong to illustrate that role that affective ambivalence can play in unsettling such understandings, building governance capacity and inclusive understandings of citizenship.

Contemporary research in Australia and Europe in socially disadvantaged and culturally diverse neighbourhoods illustrate that local governments have begun to assume a greater responsibility for promoting intercultural dialogue through the implementation of a range of policies (Coaffee & Healey, 2003; Hohn & Neuer, 2006; Keil, 2006; Permezel & Duffy, 2007). Engaging with residents often through consultation processes and interacting with key institutions, the aim is to value local knowledge and mobilise citizen participation. Such research, however, demonstrates that a social interactive approach to building local knowledge is fraught with ongoing tensions and struggles, but such tension and difference is not antagonistic but necessary for an ongoing dialogue that includes a diversity of voices (McGuirk, 2001; Permezel & Duffy, 2007). Permezel and Duffy, for example, in their research on the
negotiation of cultural difference within the formal institutional space of local government in Australia, argue for everyday multiculturalism that is marked by informality, flexibility and even risk rather than a path that involves formal planning and measurable outcomes. They attribute disagreement and conflict within the democratic participatory process of local government to a normative and dominant framework of whiteness that must be shifted to produce an ‘ongoing dialogue’ (Permezel & Duffy, 2007, p.362). Although Permezel and Duffy acknowledge the awkward, confrontational and emotional nature of such intercultural dialogue within community consultations and forums, they do not explore this dimension. Forrest and Dunn (2006), on the other hand, in their analysis of community attitudes to Anglo privilege, multiculturalism and racism in New South Wales and Queensland, recognise the productive nature of ambivalence in understanding how we might end the belief in the superiority of a dominant white and Anglo culture. Since the data collected was based on telephone questionnaires, the research did not have the scope to explore the affective dimension of living with cultural diversity.

This paper builds on research on local governance and multiculturalism, by drawing attention to the affective dimension of intercultural dialogue. I argue that the emotional nature of such intercultural dialogue produces moments of discomfort as well as fascination, but it is moments of affective ambivalence that have the greatest potential to be transformative within the sphere of local governance. Ambivalent moments have the potential to contribute to enabling practices within the formal agencies of government because they acknowledge other ways of knowing and being, and welcome rather than scrutinise, stigmatise or exoticise cultural difference. These practices are driven by trust, acknowledge social and cultural biases, value the voices of local residents, and are attentive to their stories of civic engagement in voluntary
organisations that are often driven by belonging to local places (Coaffee & Healey, 2003; Kearns, 1995). Such enabling practices provide the possibility for dialogue that empowers local citizens and promotes horizontal forms of governance or partnerships with informal voluntary and community organisations in ways that deviate from a path of paternalistic governance. The paper draws on excerpts from 54 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with social and cultural planners, elected local councillors and residents in the City of Greater Dandenong that I conducted in 2003 as part of my doctoral research on the constitution and everyday negotiation of ethnicity. The following section explores the concept of white privilege that I explored in that research and builds on it by exploring affective ambivalence to understand intercultural dialogue within the institutional/civic sphere of local government.

**White privilege and affective ambivalence.**

Within the current literature there is a general understanding that whiteness is an invisible, unmarked racial norm/category, a normative position and ethnicity, and a process that provides the power and privilege to include or exclude others (Bonnett, 2000; Frankenberg, 1997; Hage, 1998; Shaw, 2007). Frankenberg (1997) and Kobayashi and Peake (2000) argue that such a normative position also involves the engagement in cultural practices that are underpinned by unconscious assumptions about racial groups/ethnic minorities that are made but rarely acknowledged. Although the contemporary literature on whiteness recognises that the power and privilege of whiteness is fragmented and variable in time and space, what is significant are the unintended outcomes. For example, if whiteness functions as a ‘socio-spatial epistemology’ (Dwyer & Jones III, 2000, p.209) that regulates ways of thinking about people and place, then participation or non-participation by ethnic
minorities within the sphere of local governance is always scrutinised. Clearly, if white privilege underpins governance cultures, it can impede intercultural dialogue that aims to be inclusive and value a multiplicity of voices. This privileging of whiteness is particularly relevant in exploring local governance practices in the City of Greater Dandenong, given Hage’s (1998) analysis of the everyday politics in Australian suburbia.

Examining the cultural politics following the increase in Asian immigration since the 1970s, Hage argues that whiteness is a position of cultural dominance that provides a privileged relationship to the nation. The outcome is that ethnic people, migrants, people of a non-English speaking background (NESBS) and Third World looking people (TWLP) are marked as ‘outsiders’, passive objects who are tolerated and whose inclusion and participation in society depends on recognition by the dominant White-Anglo culture. At the same time, however, this increasing cultural diversity has led to the emergence of a paranoid nationalism within Australian society that stems from the fear of losing the privileged relationship to the nation that comes from being European and white (Hage, 2003).

Hage’s research on whiteness is relevant in understanding embedded cultural values within local governance or what Coaffee and Healey (2003) and Hohn and Neuer (2006) identify as governance cultures. An understanding of how white privilege underpins such cultures is necessary for transformative change and shifts in prevailing practices. Such change becomes evident through ‘acts of citizenship’ (Isin & Nielsen, 2008, p.1) that resist racist ideologies, develop an ‘anti-racist political agenda’ (Dwyer & Jones III, 2000, p.219) and shift the normative framework of whiteness within the institutional/civic sphere. These acts of citizenship can be conceptualised as everyday deeds and ‘fundamental ways of being with others’ (Isin
& Nielsen, 2008, p.3) that involves openness to difference. Such acts of citizenship have less to do with rights and responsibilities that constitute formal membership in the political community of the nation-state, and is substantive citizenship that is experienced through informal understandings and ongoing everyday practices that are part of the sphere of local governance; a sphere that involves negotiations of cultural difference by elected local councillors, local council officers and organisations within civil society.

Leeuwen (2008) argues that such everyday practices that involve cultural contact have an affective dimension that must be explored if we are to learn to live with cultural diversity. This affective dimension is significant in understanding what inspires and threatens everyday multiculturalism because encounters with difference produce a flow of emotions, sensed as embodied experiences that cannot be understood merely by exploring the cognitive horizon of social reality (Leeuwen, 2008). Leeuwen draws on contemporary research to underline that communicating across cultural difference results in positive moments of fascination, wonder and surprise and negative moments of aversion, anxiety, pain and discomfort, but it is moments of affective ambivalence that put ‘commonsense’ understandings of social reality ‘to the test’ (Leeuwen, p.147) that are perhaps the most productive in understanding the potential of intercultural dialogue in bringing about social change. Such moments can be affective turning points that push ambivalence towards the positive moment when cultural difference is respected and valued rather than scrutinised or stigmatised.

Insert Figure 1
Dandenong

Dandenong is a suburban area in south eastern metropolitan Melbourne, Australia, approximately 29 km east of the City of Melbourne (Figure 1). Table 1 shows some selected characteristics of the Local Government Area of the City of Greater Dandenong, a place officially and popularly represented as one of the most socially disadvantaged and culturally diverse areas in Victoria and Australia (ABS, 2009; CGD, 2005; Hill, 2004)

Insert Table 1

Historical narratives of Dandenong usually trace the growth of the settlement with the arrival of white settlers in the 1830s and the establishment of a squatter settlement with pastoral runs and market gardens. Dandenong grew to become a thriving market town with one of the largest stock and dairy markets in Victoria (CGD, 1998; Ferguson, 1986, p. 1998). Since market gardening and dairying were important activities, factories that canned vegetables and processed butter, cheese and pork products were established in Dandenong in the early twentieth century (CGD, 1998). It was during the 1950s and 1960s, however, that Dandenong was recognised as an industrial city and a working-class suburb (Alves, 1992; Bryson & Thompson, 1972). This occurred because of the location of what was popularly referred to as the ‘Big Three’. These were three large industrial establishments namely, General Motors Holden (GMH) involved in the manufacture of motor vehicles, International Harvester involved in the manufacture of farm machinery and H J Heinz, a fruit and vegetable cannery. Workers in these factories were migrants from Britain, Poland, Germany, former Yugoslavia, Greece, Malta and Italy who arrived in Australia in the post-war period of industrial expansion, international migration and rapid suburbanisation in Australian cities (Forster, 2004). Following the abolition of the
White Australia policy in 1972, several new settlers were attracted to Dandenong because of the availability of factory jobs and cheap accommodation. These new settlers were from Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia in the 1970s and more recently from Southern Asia, the Middle East and Africa. The increasing cultural diversity of the population was accompanied by economic restructuring and several large industrial establishments relocated or shut down. The outcome has been that today Dandenong is officially and popularly identified as socially disadvantaged and culturally diverse (Figure 2).

**Insert Figure 2**

Local government initiatives within the sphere of Social, Cultural and Community Planning in Dandenong focus on redistributive measures and recognition of ethnic minority groups by providing grants, supporting training programmes and participatory activities that facilitate integration into Australian society. Engaging with residents including elected local councillors and community groups, local council officers, also prepare and implement strategic plans such as the Cultural Diversity Plan (CGD, 2005). The aim of this plan is to work with diverse communities to provide access and inclusion, support, enhance skills and celebrate cultural diversity. It is part of a broader Cultural Strategy that focuses on mentoring, support and skills development among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities and faith communities to promote continuing intercultural dialogue, peace and harmony. Implementing such a range of policies and initiatives that involves recognition and redistributive measures, however, also involves negotiations and affective engagement between social and cultural planners, elected local
councillors and diverse community groups through forums, consultations and everyday conversations.

**Exploring affective moments within local governance**

This section explores the affective dimension of living with cultural diversity that is crucial in building governance capacity. I became aware of these moments through reflecting on the emotional dimension of the research process from my position as an ethnic woman, a migrant and resident of Dandenong. Therefore, although I used the techniques of discourse and narrative analysis, a legitimate method within the social sciences that provides an understanding of the ‘ways that social life is mediated through modes of communication’ (Costello, 2005, p.51), I was also attentive to the role that emotions played in such communication.

**The negative moment**

During our conversation Mary, a social and cultural planner and an Anglo-Australian woman who engages in community consultations and forums as well as regular negotiations with elected local councillors had a strong opinion about the commitment to responsible participation among *ethnic* councillors. In the following excerpt, she draws attention to the tensions and feelings of antagonism that she experiences when engaging in a dialogue with *ethnic* councillors.

*Mary: I'd argue that the cultural, so called people from non-English speaking backgrounds on councils are more concerned with getting elected, than necessarily doing stuff that makes meaningful change.*

*They [ethnic councillors] have their own agendas, they want to get re-elected, so they tend to focus on what I call the sexy aspects of planning. And if it’s not sexy, or it’s not going to get them a big vote winner, they won’t participate. And if they think they’re going to get votes, they can be a real pain in the neck.*

*And these are people that are not necessarily themselves trained to understand issues of culture. Now they might be from a Vietnamese background, they might be from a Sri Lankan background, but just because they’re from an NESB background doesn’t mean they’re any*
Mary attributes resistance to change within the sphere of local governance to elected ethnic councillors who lack commitment, display self interest and desire political power at any cost. Mary associates these practices with particular councillors, ethnic leaders who belong to a non-English speaking background rather than those who are Anglo and white. Such councillors challenge her ‘commonsense’ understandings of what is normal or natural and create a lack of meaning and feelings of cultural strangeness (Leeuwen, 2008). Therefore although theoretically Mary aims to value a diversity of voices and engage in intercultural dialogue, in practice this negative affective moment demonstrates that she privileges whiteness in understanding commitment to political participation among elected local councillors. The outcome is that when Mary recalls these moments, she marks and stereotypes ethnic councillors who she interacts with through her work. In communicating across difference although shared cultural meanings are uncommon, the recognition of different values, meanings and perspectives enhances social knowledge (Coaffee & Healey, 2003; Sandercock, 1998; Young, 1996). As a social and cultural planner Mary recognises the importance of drawing on this knowledge to build institutional capacity within local governance, but this negative moment demonstrates that the normative framework of whiteness is difficult to shift. On the other hand, my interviews with ethnic councillors showed that political participation was stimulated by a deep commitment and emotional attachment to Dandenong. This was evident when Gina, an elected local councillor responded to my query of what motivated her to continue to participate in local council and live in Dandenong, even though most of her friends and relatives had moved to more affluent and less culturally diverse
suburbs. She said: “I love this town. I love it…it is this love for Dandy, wanting to do things”.

_Affective indifference or the positive moment?_

Amy heads the Social, Cultural and Community Planning Unit in the City of Greater Dandenong. She has been working as a council officer for thirteen years and was involved in the facilitation of several programs that involve providing support and services for recent migrants such as early settlers from Vietnam and Cambodia and more recently the Afghani and African community. Her greatest challenge, however, was to “regenerate interest and a sense of pride” among residents and promote harmony, despite the presence of socioeconomic disadvantage and diversity in language, religion and culture. Amy took pride in working in a city where there was a “terrific mix” and “brilliant diversity” evident in the varied architecture and co-existence of mosques, churches and temples in the suburbs of Springvale and Keysborough. In the following excerpt she emphasises the presence of harmony rather than inter-ethnic or inter-faith conflicts in Dandenong:

*Amy: We can, I believe, say that we are a harmonious multicultural city and that we are an example of where groups do get on with each other. There’s very, very, little example of ethnic friction (Local council officer, interview 22/05/03).*

For Amy negotiating cultural difference produces feelings of wonder, fascination and surprise rather than interethnic friction. In managing cultural difference she is less aware of the normative framework of whiteness that she draws on to understand intercultural harmony, and it would seem that the affective dimension of living with diversity produces only positive moments. On the other hand, it can be argued that in engaging in intercultural dialogue, Amy normalises meanings of ethnicity and reduces the ethnic subject to an object that she gazes upon. Hage refers to this practice of reducing the ethnic subject to a passive and exotic object within the national space to
‘spatial managers’ (1998, p.44) who privilege whiteness in understanding harmony in local spaces. In this situation the positive moment closes down the possibility of reflexive thinking and practices that shift the normative framework of whiteness and can contribute to affective indifference in intercultural encounters. Leeuwen (2008) argues that such indifference is an outcome of intense exposure or habituation that ceases to surprise because cultural otherness has become a part of daily life. For Amy, who is keen to manage ethnic difference and promote intercultural harmony it would appear that her feelings shift on a continuum from so called positive moments to affective indifference. This is in contrast to Mary the social and cultural planner introduced earlier, who spoke of negative moments and inter-ethnic tensions.

**The ambivalent moment**

The following conversation with Mary, however, demonstrates affective ambivalence rather than negative moments. Mary’s continuing intercultural dialogue with ethnic councillors and cultural and linguistically diverse groups also stimulates strong feelings and a desire to bring about social change:

> Mary: How can you provide a link between people? How can you provide some sort of common thing that helps people to come together and participate?

Earlier Mary had acknowledged that her commonsense understandings of what was normal and natural were challenged in interactions with ethnic councillors giving rise to negative affects and a lack of meaning (Leeuwen, 2008). In contrast, this moment demonstrates that Mary is passionate about facilitating meaningful intercultural dialogue. In showing this openness, she acknowledges the limits of her cognitive understanding and her desire for positive meaning. Leeuwen argues that affective ambivalence involves the experience of both meaning and lack of meaning that may not necessarily occur at the same time, but are structurally similarly because they are
moments that elude consciousness and surpass the powers of imagination and manipulation. This affective ambivalence has effects if it functions as a turning point towards a positive moment that values other ways of knowing. Perhaps this positive moment is evident when Mary talks about her work as a social and cultural planner:

Mary: There’s certainly a sense that culture relates to, when you talk about cultural planning, it’s definitely aligned to people from non-English speaking background, rather than a sense of any sort of Anglo-Australian culture.

When we talk about culture, when the discussion is had around culture, that’s seen as something outside what might be the dominant kind of white culture, yes. It’s like we don’t have, we don’t need that cultural discussion. It’s about other people’s culture, yes, or that interaction. It’s not set up in the sense that there’s a white culture included in that discussion (Local council officer interview, 10/07/03).

Mary recognises the difficulties of living with cultural diversity because whiteness is always privileged rather than named, marked and made visible within local government. The outcome is that the focus in Dandenong is to manage interaction between ethnic groups through redistributive measures and recognition, rather than intercultural dialogue that values ethnic voices and recognises that the commitment to change is a shared responsibility. Affective ambivalence, on the other hand, stimulates reflexive thinking making Mary aware of how formal white institutions often have no idea of the complex nature of community work that informal community groups are involved in:

Mary: There’s a lot of people who do work that’s totally outside the realm and understanding of council. For instance, in Dandenong you have a lot of quite big Buddhist churches, dealing with people from the various different communities. Like they might be from Laos, or Vietnamese or Thai, a lot of them are monks. And there are even workers in those churches that are doing community development work that we have no idea about. There’s actually a lot of people doing stuff that’s actually outside those formal mechanisms.

Mary contests stereotypical understandings of ethnic residents that she had constructed earlier and underlines the commitment of people within religious
organisations that can never be comprehended by council officers. In acknowledging her incompetence and recognising the value of voluntary work within religious organisations, Mary shifts the normative framework of whiteness and moves closer to the positive moment. This is a moment that does not lead to wonder and fascination as experienced by Amy, but is an act of citizenship, a deed that has the potential to shift the norms of whiteness that provide ‘ontological certainty’ (Leeuwen 2008, p.148) during intercultural encounters. Such moments provide an opportunity to become aware of locally supported projects, participation in informal community groups and gestures of neighbourly care and welcome towards new settlers that are part of everyday life in Dandenong.

**Conclusion**

This paper has drawn on recent, relevant and original empirical data to demonstrate the affective dimension of intercultural encounters. It builds on contemporary research on local governance by drawing attention to affective ambivalence and how we might better live with cultural difference. Such work is significant for building governance capacity in the multicultural city and dispelling feelings of fear, threat and anxiety. By drawing on in-depth semi-structured interviews with participants in the City of Greater Dandenong, a socially disadvantaged and culturally diverse area in suburban Melbourne, this paper has explored affective moments that give rise to antagonism or distrust, wonder and fascination, indifference and ambivalence. The paper has shown that interethnic tension can be productive if it opens up the possibility for affective ambivalence. Similarly affective ambivalence is productive if it is a turning point towards a positive moment. This is a moment that stimulates acts of citizenship that shift the framework of whiteness, defers the judgement of others, acknowledges the limits of knowledge
and welcomes the unfamiliar. Such positive moments present within intercultural encounters enable local council officers, elected leaders, community groups and residents to cooperate with trust and strengthen governance capacity. Interviews with residents demonstrated that local citizens were engaged in community groups outside the formal agencies of local government such as ethno-specific groups, faith groups, sports and charitable organisations, non-governmental organisations, mothers’ groups and neighbourhood groups. Engagement and participation in these groups produced a strong emotional attachment to Dandenong, but engagement with and local government was less common. Perhaps it is time to think of local governance in terms of a creative intercultural dialogue, one that goes beyond tokenistic community consultation, shifts the normative framework of whiteness and focuses on engendering positive affective moments through informal partnerships with community organisations.
References


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Table 1: Selected characteristics: City of Greater Dandenong, 2006

Source: (ABS, 2006, 2009)
Figure 1: Location of Dandenong within metropolitan Melbourne
Figure 2: The Local Government Area of the City of Greater Dandenong
(Adapted from maps provided by the City of Greater Dandenong)