

“We’re multicultural mate!”: regional Australian discourses of multiculturalism and the reproduction of ‘white Australia’ as a national identity.

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Abstract

This paper considers the complexities of ‘everyday understandings’ of multiculturalism as a discourse to deal with racialised difference. The paper is based on one of the author’s doctoral research¹ which analyses the complexities of how whiteness and race are socially produced and lived in regional Australia. Drawing on a set of qualitative interviews conducted in South Australia with 29 people who self-identity as ‘white Australian’ we consider the social and political history of a ‘white Australia’ continues to inform the terms of multiculturalism for these people. We argue that this reflects the ways that state multiculturalism manages diversity and obscures the language of race. As a consequence the white national identity remains raced without an everyday vocabulary to deal with it.

Keywords: national identity, multiculturalism, difference, everyday whiteness.

Introduction

Research by Schech and Haggis (2001: 143) into migrancy and national identity in Australia found that some of their migrant respondents had difficulty with bringing their awareness of difference to a “vision of national community” and argued that this is due to the way in which the national community is “constructed in terms of whiteness” while

“claiming to be non-racial” (ibid). In this paper we draw on a set of interviews conducted by Koerner as part of her doctoral research, with people living in rural Australia who are Australian-born and identify as ‘white Australian’. Focusing on how they talk about multiculturalism, we revisit the earlier study to ask if, and how, these rural Australians articulate a “vision of national community” through the discourse of multiculturalism.

The central argument made in the paper is that the social and political history of a ‘white Australia’ continues to inform the terms of multiculturalism. We suggest that state multiculturalism, with its emphasis on culture as the mechanism for ‘fitting in’ and measuring the boundaries of acceptable difference, obscures the language of race but does not dislodge it from defining the nation. This discursive move, as Sonya Tascon convincingly argues, limits the critical use of race “as a lens for analysis in the everyday” (Tascon 2008: 255) replacing it with discourses of culture. It is culture that frames identity and links it to the nation, not ‘race’. The discursive effect is that white national identity remains in position in conventional white Australian lives, but without the words to deal with it in conventional white Australian lives.

The Study

The data this paper is based on is drawn from a doctoral study conducted by one of the authors, Catherine Koerner titled *Beyond a white Australia? Race, multiculturalism, Indigenous sovereignty and Australian identities* which seeks to understand how whiteness, as the hegemonic norm, prevents post-colonisingⁱⁱ Indigenous-non-Indigenous relations in the everyday lives of white Australians. The fieldwork for the study was conducted in 2003 in three regional locations in South Australia, all with minority migrant and Indigenous populations. Respondent confidentiality is preserved by the use of aliases for locations and respondents. Both women and men were interviewed with no discernable difference between genders. Women and men covered a spectrum of discursive locations. This paper draws upon the interviews of five women but not to reflect a gender factor emerging from the study as a whole.

Using a combination of purposeful sampling strategies (Patton 1990) and the snowball

method of extending the number of participants in the study, 29 interviews were conducted in each location. Drawing on Frankenberg (1993) the interviews were semi-structured, focusing on biography, social geography and a range of thematic topics to structure respondent narratives of multiculturalism. The interview questions seek to draw out how participants understand ‘whiteness’, ‘difference’ and ‘multiculturalism’, as well as to explore their lived experiences and awareness of difference. What are the national tropes of multiculturalism and do they reveal how white Australians live with difference? What are the inconsistencies? The following section analyses the key discourses of multiculturalism that participants draw upon in their narratives.

The meaning of multiculturalism

In this section we focus on five respondents who spoke at length about their understanding of multiculturalism. Three people, Jewlizard, Optus and Louise, described themselves as multi-generational Anglo-Australians; Dominicoⁱⁱⁱ and Alex as children of migrants from continental Europe. All five self identified as ‘white Australian’. Their age varies with Dominico and Alex the youngest, in their 30 and 40s; Louise in her 40s and Optus and Jewlizard in their 60s and 70s.

Dominico is from Rivertown, is married with children and is a community worker.

Dominico, along with several other participants talked about multiculturalism in terms of difference.

Interviewer: We hear a lot about the term multiculturalism. What does it mean to you?

Dominico: It means becoming aware of what makes each of us who we are, becoming aware that we all have different practices, to me multiculturalism is becoming aware of our differences. It’s about understanding differences and respecting differences. It’s not to be like each other. I think of it usually as a soup. Can you imagine if we just put carrots in that soup? If we put a whole range of different vegetables it becomes an exciting flavour, each vegetable is unique. I think multiculturalism enhances the humanity of a certain region, like our people here. So it’s about

understanding that these differences can complement and we need not feel threatened by them just because they are different to us

Domenico's metaphor of the soup is similar to the stew pot trope Hage (1998) identifies in Australian multiculturalism and concern over getting the 'mix' right. Importantly though, Domenico makes no mention of the 'right mix' or a need to control what or how many ingredients go into the soup. Rather, 'difference' is the key word that links her 'soup' to the unity-in-difference idea of multiculturalism. She talks about awareness, understanding and being respectful of differences rather than to be like each other. Later in the interview Domenico contrasts her own viewpoint with what she identifies as Anglo practices of multiculturalism which she sees as a practice of looking for what is similar. To focus on what is the same, renders difference invisible.

For Domenico, difference can be complementary; it does not need to be oppositional or threatening. Her analogy of a soup, while a familiar concept in discourses of multiculturalism in settler societies (FECCA 2009; Fleras and Elliot 1993) focuses on the different flavours rather than a blended sameness. She does not use the term 'blend' or 'blended', instead she emphasizes the individual distinctive flavours that gives more of a sense of Ang's (2001) 'coming together in difference' refiguring of multiculturalism. The need for a singular nation is present (it is one – tasty – soup: a coherent unity) but it does not require an overarching Australian identity. Rather many distinctive cultural identities form her idea of Australian national identity.

Domenico's response to the next interview question on sameness and equality extends our understanding of how she thinks about sameness and difference.

Interviewer: You hear people saying that we are all the same and we are all equal.

Domenico: But we are not. I think we should respect that we aren't all exactly the same and that different cultures are different and to me multiculturalism is about keeping that identity. My son's Godparents are Greek and their customs are completely different to mine and yet it's been interesting

seeing another culture completely different to ours, regardless of our similarities, and I think if people can focus on the basic essential similarities.

There are echoes here of the humanism present in liberal multiculturalism (Gilroy 2000) in how she acknowledges that some human needs are fundamentally the same. Her emphasis, though, is upon the differences between cultural groups, and within cultural groups, so that the differences are centred rather than similarities. She gives the case of her son's Greek Godparents, who may well identify in some way with the Greek Orthodox Church, (although Dominico did not specify which religious practices they follow). Dominico and her family is Roman Catholic. While both are Christian, Dominico opts to acknowledge and build upon their differences as the material for constructing committed relationships rather than making the differences hidden by focusing only on the similarities. For Dominico, her lived experiences include applying difference as the building block of relationships and community rather than focusing only on a foundation of similarities that grounds the discourse of liberal multiculturalism. In a liberal approach, difference is something that must be 'overcome' or ignored in the quest for sameness.

Alex is the daughter of Greek migrants. She and her husband have teenage children and she teaches Greek language, cooking and dance at the local Greek school in Rivertown. Like other participants who are the children of post-war migrants, Alex spoke only Greek at home and did not learn English until she started school, even though she was born in Australia. While Alex's community participation clearly indicates a strong identification as Greek, Alex pointed out that she does not have the physical signifiers that are stereotypical of a Greek person and hence her Greek identity is sometimes challenged by other Greek Australians. Alex's experience of having to prove her 'Greek-ness' to both Greek and other Australians may inflect her views on multiculturalism as she was the only interviewee to speak directly against the narrative of tolerance in multiculturalism: "I do not want to be tolerated by anyone". The experience of 'being tolerated' is a distasteful and humiliating experience for Alex. Underneath the narrative of tolerance is

the ever-present threat of intolerance. Further, it places ‘the tolerant one’ in a position of power as to whether they will be tolerant or not (Hage 1998).

Jewlizard is a 73 year old multigenerational Australian woman, who lives in Red Ocean. She has a large and diverse family. She has travelled overseas and spent three months in Africa. This cosmopolitan background is made clear in her comments on multiculturalism and what it means to her:

Interviewer: What does the term multiculturalism mean to you?

Jewlizard: Different food that I eat now to what I did when I was a child. Accepting people’s different cultures. There’s different crafts, different looks – we don’t all look the same now. And we have mixed marriages... We say we have the League of Nations in our family.

Jewlizard centres on food, customs, mixed marriages and sexual relations, she does not talk about multiculturalism as an identity, or as a means to nationhood. Is this because for her multiculturalism is about different food and different customs, or is it because the language of multiculturalism provides an inadequate vocabulary from which to articulate her understandings of race, power and privilege, which she could give words to when directly asked about race as evidenced in the following extract. When asked if she thinks if Australia is a white country, Jewlizard responded:

Interviewer: Do you think Australia is a white country?

Jewlizard: I think it is – I think Australia is more tolerant now, but I think deep down it still is.

Interviewer: What do you think that means?

Jewlizard: Well, you would class a majority as white, even though there is difference with some of the European countries and South Africa. I think the things would be a bit easier for white people here and the others, I guess, would be a minority and so then they have to struggle more for things.

Jewlizard says that Australia is still a white country underneath the tolerance of multiculturalism, albeit more tolerant than in the past. It is not clear whether she refers to white peoples experience in other European countries or South Africa, or, whether she talks about white migrants from those countries living in Australia. In the first instance, Jewlizard may refer to the difference with some of the European countries and South Africa, and that there are still benefits that white people experience that are not accessible to those who are not white. In the second instance, Jewlizard may be identifying the different levels of power and benefit to which differently categorised groups have access in Australia. She recognises that the way that groups of people are racialised will privilege some and oppress others. Thus, race has been used to rationalise the social arrangements of power and exploitation (Goldberg 2009: 4).

Louise is an Anglo Australian in her mid-50s who grew up on a fruit farm, completed teaching college, returned to the Rivertown district and married a fruit grower. They have young adult children who attend university in the capital city. They lease the land for their orchard, and Louise teaches in the local primary school.

Interviewer: what does the term ‘multiculturalism’ mean to you?

Louise: it means to me that there are people who have come from other countries who have brought, their culture from where they’ve come from. So they bring their traditions and their religions and their food and their clothing and their – anything else that goes with being a culture and they continue to sort of you know... introduce that to the people who are already in Australia so that you can sort of share it. I don’t see it as being forced upon us really. I know that’s one thing my mum talks about. She talks about Australians, you know, should want to be Australians first but they can bring their Chinese culture. I guess I sort of believe that but perhaps not as strongly as she does (Louise).

Louise talks about ‘sharing difference’ as a multicultural practice. The trope of ‘bringing what you have to offer to Australia’ is a strong theme in Australian multiculturalism

(Hage 1998: 200). Louise names many different aspects of culture that migrants bring and share with people living in Australia, on the condition, however, that they are not forced upon 'us', as Australians. This trope links multiculturalism to national identity. Louise and her mother expect the cultural Chinese Other to 'be Australian first, and then Chinese'. There is no mention of white Australian identities having a 'multicultural identity' because they are Australian already and outside of multiculturalism. Multicultural identity is for the migrant Other, in order for 'them' to be an Australian first, and secondly retain some of 'their' cultural heritage.

Optus identifies as an Anglo Australian and is in her late 60s. She grew up on a farm in New South Wales. At the time of the interview, Optus worked full time in the library at Red Ocean.

Interviewer: We hear a lot about the term multiculturalism. What does this term mean to you?

Optus: that we are surrounded by a mix of people and we are living side by side or certainly close to them. We are not segregated from them anymore, so it's very much in our faces... it has been good for us. It won't be a bad thing.

To differentiate herself as a white Australian from the 'other Australians' who are referred to as the 'mix of people', Optus uses the language of 'them' and 'us'. The segregation that Optus refers to may be the racial social geography of the town with the closer proximity to the migrant other being right in front of Anglo Australians faces after the effects of integration and assimilation policy approaches to migration settlement. She is saying that 'we are' surrounded by a mix of people, and the 'we' centralised the white Australian subject position, which is her experience. An intriguing trope that is evident in Optus's final comment is about multiculturalism 'being good for us' (Hage 1998; Ang 2001). She may be drawing upon the discourse that promotes multiculturalism as being 'good for Australia'. This discourse promotes the benefits of Multiculturalism or that it adds value to the dominant group, as indicated by the word 'us'.

Later in the interview Optus extends the trope of multiculturalism being ‘good for us’ to migrants also being ‘good for the country’’: “I cannot see why there can’t be conditions” infer that there are no conditions attached for migrant entry to Australia, which is incorrect (Ahmed 2000: 96). She also states that migrants should abide by ‘our’ laws and ‘our’ ways of life. This conflates white Australian cultural ‘ways’ with the Australian nation. For Optus the question remains, how much difference, and what manner of difference is OK?

Conclusion

This paper considers the complexities of ‘everyday understandings’ of multiculturalism as a discourse to deal with racialised difference. The analysis of the interview material shows the contention between the suppression of race and the reproduction of white Australia. The excerpts from five regional south Australians in the discussion express the range of positions within multicultural discourses and indicate the complexity of how whiteness and race are socially produced and lived in regional Australia. We argued the social and political history of a ‘white Australia’ continues to inform the terms of multiculturalism for the participants in this study. This reflects the ways that state multiculturalism manages diversity and obscures the language of race. As a consequence the white national identity remains raced without an everyday vocabulary to deal with it.

Jewlizard has developed a critique of race and racialised difference that is not present in national tropes of multiculturalism. The dominant trope of sameness that permeates state-based multiculturalism lacks a critique of difference through race, class and gender with its focus on ‘accepting and tolerating difference’ and focusing on sameness that does not reflect Jewlizard’s lived experiences of difference. A space that promotes being together-in-difference (Haggis 2007) could develop from a multiculturalism based on difference, proposed by the interviewee Dominico (see p,8) as the point from which to build relationships and identity, rather than sameness. The analysis of Jewlizard and Dominico’s excerpts shows how a spectrum of positions begins to move towards the possibility of a post-colonising practice and location.

Acknowledgements

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ⁱ Koerner, C. (submitted 2010) Beyond a white Australia? Race, Multiculturalism, Indigenous Sovereignty and Australian Identities. Centre for Development Studies, Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Flinders University of South Australia.

ⁱⁱ 'Postcolonising' is a term used by Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2003) to distinguish between the post-colonial: a condition in which colonialism no longer pertains as an immediate relation of dominance, and the contemporary Australian circumstance in which, she argues, non-Indigenous Australians remain in a colonizing relationship to Indigenous Australians because of the refusal of the nation-state to recognize Indigenous sovereignty.

ⁱⁱⁱ 'Dominico' is Italian for 'Sunday' and is the code name nominated by this participant who is a woman.