



# 'They try to avoid.' How do parents' feelings about ethnicised and classed differences shape gentrifying school communities?



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## ABSTRACT

This article reports on interview-based research into the everyday consequences of gentrification as seen through the prism of local public primary schools in inner Sydney, Australia. We explore the *feelings* involved in negotiating relations across ethnicised and classed differences within four school communities. Common though contradictory themes across the interviews include: the positive worth accorded to contact with ethnicised difference among white parents; the avoidance of interpersonal contact across ethnicised and classed differences; and the positive worth accorded to classed sameness. Our research finds that the feelings that attend to these themes—discomfort and comfort, desire and disdain—play a significant role in shaping everyday school communities and relationships between parents. We examine the ways in which white parents' desires for social contact with ethnicised others are frequently disappointed and note the disdain and discomfort involved in negotiating contact with classed others. We conclude with a case study involving a complex mix of the themes and feelings listed above: parental engagement with the schools' Parents and Citizens Associations (P&Cs). We argue that P&Cs constitute social spaces dominated by parents with a class-based disposition towards entitlement and authority, from which ethnicised and classed others frequently feel excluded.

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## 1. Introduction

This article reports on interview-based research conducted into the everyday consequences of gentrification in inner Sydney, seen through the prism of local public primary schools. Critical perspectives on gentrification emphasise the reorganisation of the distribution of ethnicised and classed disadvantage across space (e.g. Jackson and Benson, 2014). In the suburb we call Cooper, gentrification has involved middle-class professionals moving into a historically working-class suburb.<sup>1</sup> In Cooper today, a range of residents negotiate still-unfolding social transformations and the possibilities of relations with classed and ethnicised others to which they give rise. Our research contributes to a growing body of literature dealing with the intersection of urban change, social mixing and decisions around schooling in post-industrial cities in the global north (e.g. Butler and Robson,

2003; DeSena, 2006; Gulson, 2007).

We build on earlier publications arising from this research (Ho et al., 2015; Butler et al., 2017) by following sociologist Diane Reay's lead, bringing our attention more fully to the 'affective dimensions of both privilege and disadvantage' (Reay, 2015: 21). This article thus considers the role played by parents' feelings about negotiating classed and ethnicised differences in shaping primary school communities in Cooper today, as gentrification proceeds apace.

We depart from Reay in using the more precise term 'feeling' to capture the diffuse and mild emotions (Hochschild, 1990) that surfaced in our interviews with parents. We are compelled to deploy 'feeling' rather than 'affect' as we analyse parents' reflections about their experiences, as they were expressed to us. While this is not the place to review the vast literature on the turn to affect in the humanities and social sciences, we note here

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms are used for the locality under study, all four schools and all interviewees.

the affective turn's emphasis on feelings that 'slip, evade, and overflow capture' in language (White, 2017: 175; see Thrift, 2008). Of course, affective pre-conscious embodied 'intensities', as Brian Massumi termed them (2002), circulate in the scenarios discussed by our interviewees. However, we were not privy to these interactions as ethnographers. In analysing a highly ethnicised school environment, Zembylas notes that affects such as resentment and disgust involve 'corporeal intensities' as well as 'discourses' (2011: 156). In this article we largely confine ourselves to analysing the latter—discourses evident in speech acts. We attend to feelings that speakers were aware of having and which were articulated within the interview space. As well as paying attention to our interviewees' feelings we are interested in their feelings about those feelings (Hochschild, 1983). The terms feelings and emotions are used interchangeably throughout.

A set of themes emerged as common to the interviews: the positive worth accorded to contact with ethnicised difference; the avoidance of interpersonal contact across ethnicised and classed differences; and the positive worth accorded to social sameness. Our article foregrounds a central feeling linked to these themes: discomfort. We argue that white middle-class parents, who spoke of experiencing discomfort as they negotiated relations with non-white parents, also spoke of experiencing a secondary sense of discomfort about the fact they experienced these interactions as uncomfortable. We use the term 'white' throughout this article, following whiteness studies scholars who reveal the way whiteness functions as an 'invisible norm', through which it maintains its dominance in multicultural societies (see Moreton-Robinson, 2004).

Their discomfort at feeling these feelings (Hochschild, 1983) contrasted with the absence of similar emotional negotiations when encountering classed difference. The co-presence of classed others in these school spaces, while also producing discomfort, was discussed by parents with far less sense of secondary discomfort. These apparent 'feeling rules' (Hochschild, 1983), which applied frequently to white parents' encounters with ethnicised difference, though not with classed difference, highlighted schisms between what people thought they should feel, what they were trying to feel, and what they were actually feeling (Hochschild, 1990).

Our research finds that multifaceted feelings of discomfort, provoked by the condition of 'anxious proximity' (Reay, 2015: 19) with ethnicised and/or classed others, come to shape everyday school communities in practical terms. In this article we examine, first, the ways in which desires for social contact with ethnicised others are frequently disappointed. Second, we note the disdain and discomfort involved in negotiating contact with classed others. Finally, we turn to a concrete example of a social space structured by these dynamics, and around which a range of research participants' feelings coalesced: the schools' Parents and Citizens organisations, colloquially known in Australia as P&Cs. We argue that in P&Cs class-based dispositions towards entitlement and authority are embodied and find their clearest expression, making them uncomfortable spaces for a range of others. Our research suggests that P&Cs are perceived by *both* those involved in them and those wary of becoming involved in them as social spaces dominated by confident white middle-class professionals. This atmosphere of exclusivity is evident to both P&C members who embody middle-class entitlement as well as those who don't, and it can provoke considerable feelings of angst and bewilderment among those white middle-class parents who join them because of their principled and democratic

commitment to contribute to the whole-of-school community. That is, these parents feel uneasy at the thought that they might be part of a process of excluding other ethnicised members of the school community. Before proceeding to this discussion we introduce the setting and focus on feelings more fully.

## 2. Interrelated phenomena: urban spaces, social spaces and feelings

Like other areas in inner Sydney that were formerly working class and ethnically diverse, gentrification in Cooper was initially stimulated by a wave of 'diversity-seekers' (Blokland and van Eijk, 2010)—artists, musicians, students and public sector workers, who were attracted to the suburb's post-industrial aesthetic, cheap housing and food, and its cultural mix (Tonkiss, 2005; Bounds and Morris, 2006). Middle-class businesses—cafes, restaurants, bars—followed. As property prices climbed, professional classes and developers 'discovered' Cooper. Conforming to a nation-wide pattern then (Birch, 2003), Cooper became increasingly expensive and desirable.

Today 49 per cent of Cooper's residents speak a language other than English (ABS, 2011). The relationship between migration, ethnicised identities and class status is by no means clear-cut, however Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census data clearly show that Cooper residents born in non-English speaking countries tend to have lower incomes than its Australian-born residents: in 2011, 46 per cent of Australian-born residents had a weekly personal income of less than \$800, but the average figure was 75 per cent for migrants from the main non-English speaking source countries (including Vietnam, Greece and Lebanon). When referring to gentrifiers then, we refer largely but not exclusively to white members of the middle class. We are wary of representing 'the middle class' in singular terms: elsewhere, we document middle-class segmentation, arguing that many of our interviewees self-position themselves as 'community-minded' as they distinguish themselves from parenting and pedagogical practices associated with middle-class Asian migrants (see Butler et al., 2017).

Our research sought to understand this gentrifying space through the prism of public (government-funded) primary schools, themselves often described as ideal micro-publics, which foster social contact and encounters across difference (see Amin, 2002). Indeed, in Australia, the school curriculum foregrounds learning about cultural difference, racism and multiculturalism, socialising children into a range of messages about diversity (Walton et al., 2014). While schools might seem exemplary shared social spaces, placed 'at the centre of communities' (Gulson, 2007: 1382), the marketisation of education in Australia since the 1980s has seen policies encourage 'school choice'. This enables parents to act as consumers who might compare school performance and demographic data, as well as local gossip, and elect to send their children to non-local schools (Campbell et al., 2009; Windle, 2015). In 1988 the New South Wales state government began to partially dismantle the zoning system, enabling parents to apply to enrol their children in non-local public schools. These policies have given rise to new divisions and inequalities between geographically proximate local schools (Campbell et al., 2009), a phenomenon that has recently attracted media attention (e.g. Neill, 2016; Jacks, 2016). Such divisions are often organised along racial as well as class lines. In sum, while race and class (as well as religion and gender) have long shaped Australia's divided education system, public (comprehensive) schooling in Australia is currently becoming markedly more polarised along race and class lines in the era of 'school choice'

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