

Everyday multiculturalism in the workplace: Negotiating difference in a metropolitan university

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Abstract

Australia has one of the world's most culturally diverse workforces and it is at work where 'enforced' intercultural contact and intermingling occurs daily. The quality of social relationships between different ethnic groups has ongoing implications not only for the world of work but also for the direction of multiculturalism in Australia. This paper presents findings from a pilot study which examined everyday intercultural relations in an Australian metropolitan university. The aim of the study was to gain an insight into the experiences and dynamics of cross-cultural interactions and further our understanding of everyday negotiations of cultural difference in the workplace and their wider impact on community relations in Australia. The study involved in-depth semi-structured interviews with general and academic staff from non-Anglo backgrounds from across the university. We found that while universities, as workplaces, are viewed as largely non racist, participants in this study did experience discrimination and racism that they 'felt' could be attributed to their ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Introduction

As a space of inter-ethnic encounter and engagement, the workplace provides a useful laboratory to study the workings of what Ash Amin has termed as 'micro-publics'. In Amin's view spaces of fleeting contact and encounter such as public spaces 'seem to fall short of

inculcating interethnic understanding because they are not structured as spaces of interdependence and habitual engagement' (Amin 2002: 969). He proposes the concept of micro-publics which are situations of encounter and engagement—such as sports clubs, schools, workplaces and other spaces of association—where 'prosaic' negotiations are compulsory and ongoing. For instance, it is at work where many have the opportunity to interact with those different from themselves on a regular basis. The workplace is a key site for multiculturalism and is also a site where perceptions of otherness are not just shaped by immediate workplace factors but also much wider discourses. Within the workplace, rules and codes of contemporary working cultures interplay with collegial and hierarchical relationships which in turn mediate inter-ethnic relationships. Moreover, workplace cultures and structural changes to work, media discourses and wider national discourses play a role in shaping intercultural workplace relationships and perceptions of Otherness.

In an attempt to operationalise the concept of the micro-public, we employed the *everyday multiculturalism perspective* (Wise and Velayutham 2009) to explore how cultural diversity was experienced and negotiated on the ground in the workplace, and how social relations and social actors' identities are shaped and re-shaped in the process. In particular our focus was on the production and practices of sociality; experiences of and views towards cultural difference, inter-cultural exchange; learning and transformation; and mediating factors and discourses impacting on the workplace and social relations.

This paper reports on a small pilot study focused on exploring everyday inter-ethnic contact among university staff at an Australian metropolitan university. The study involved in-depth semi-structured interviews with general and academic staff from non-Anglo backgrounds from across the university. While much has been written recently on social relationships in the workplace, scholars have paid much less attention to intercultural relationships (Sias et al. 2008), even though these relationships are becoming increasingly significant considering the increasing cultural and ethnic diversity within which most people now work.

Workplace as a context for inclusion and exclusion

The importance of the workplace as providing a sense of community or camaraderie for workers has been mentioned in a number of studies (Deyo, 1980; Cavendish, 1982; Fine, 1986; Hochschild, 1997; Vogl 2009) and many workers rate the social connections that they

make at work as one of the main reasons for the enjoyment of their work. Within many workplaces people are forced to interact with one another on a day to day basis and this interaction often goes past a superficial mixing and allows for the potential development of much stronger bonds.

Findings from this study suggest that the workplace provided a key site for the development of interethnic contact and friendships and this was particularly the case where participants were employed in sections of the university that were more culturally diverse. Some participants mentioned how their relationships with colleagues were strengthened through socialising beyond the workplace while for other their friendships were maintained within the boundaries of the workplace but nevertheless were still strong and close. Working on projects, the type of work people did in common and increased work intensification and job insecurity all impacted on the development of inter-ethnic relationships.

Hua, a general staff member who worked in a supportive role across the university who found it more difficult to develop bonds and social connections through work organised social events claimed that it was through working on projects with colleagues that she was able to develop close social bonds.

I think, again, I'm not sure whether it depends on the personality or the cultural background, but some people can make friends when...actually, I think I am that kind of person, when I work together, I make friendships. Not purely just by social gatherings, or chatting. (That's) very limited to me. I think that friendship is not that deep, but when we work together for something, fight for something, we have the same goal.

Rashad, who was also employed in a supportive role in a faculty within the university, stated that it was usually conversations around the nature of one's work that then facilitated exchanges in other areas.

In the beginning, when the discussion starts, you kind of talk about the work and everything: "What did you do?" and all these things. "Where did you study?" Then it actually – not like fact-finding, it's more pretty open in the conversation, like, "I grew up here," "Tell me about your childhood," and stuff. So when you work and you know each other for a while, you get involved in more personal (things), like family and kids and everything.

Many studies suggest that people tend to form friendships with those that are similar to them. People tend to make friends with those from similar class, religious and ethnic backgrounds (O'Connor 1992, Leonard, Mehra & Katerberg 2008). However, our findings suggest that often it was others' differences that provided a platform for conversations which led to the development of greater social bonds. While the celebration of other's foods and festivals has often been criticised as a superficial response to cultural diversity, within a context such as the workplace where people see each other on a daily basis, food and festivals are a good starting point for the establishment of closer relationships (Wise 2005). In an empirical study of a workplace lunchroom at a bus company, Linden and Nyber (2009) claim that having a space where people can eat together provided a context for obtaining knowledge and shaping opinions about people from different ethnicities and cultural background than one's own. Food choices, meal preferences and attitudes towards food became an important topic for lunchtime conversation. Conversation around food, festival and rituals was also common in this pilot study. As mentioned previously, findings from this study, suggest also that the more culturally diverse the departments were the more likelihood of developing strong social connections.

Lin recalled how working with people from diverse cultural backgrounds meant that everyone was in the same situation. People's cultural differences were often an initiator for conversation and made talking to people more interesting.

Because nobody feels that they are left out, because you are part of them, because we all come from a different cultural background but we are together in the Department. We are a team. You know? It's part of our culture that you find out what food they like...it's quite interesting to find out how they cook the food, and "How do you prepare this?" We learn from each other. Times we can learn from each other...(laughs) I'm thinking...we do talk about all sorts of things. Yeah. We talk about children, we talk about other things, so we try to, like, understand each other more, and backgrounds and families. We'll share our experience.

Though Layla worked in a largely Anglo-dominated department, the admin staff members came from cultural diverse background and she recounted similar experiences to Lin:

Oh yeah, we are actually quite interested in each other's cultures, we ask each other. When things come up, like a death in the family, it starts a conversation, so what do you do in your culture or weddings, things like that. We do have some academics that

from their names you know they are from a different ethnic background but it doesn't impact at all, in fact, we do ask questions, you know are you going home for the holidays. It is actually a reason for a conversation, it just makes more social connections rather than anything else.

Social connections were made across food and ritual. Staff celebrated festivals that were particular to the background of their colleagues and also celebrated each other birthdays. Garcia, a postdoctoral research fellow, talked about how people shared food from their cultural backgrounds with one another.

Occasionally we bring in food and that. It's an impetus to talk about our background, and what we did that's similar, and different.

With other staff in her office, Lin organised ways of celebrating each other's festivals.

Say, for example, the Chinese New Year is coming up, so we've been thinking of whether we should bring something to celebrate the Chinese New Year. Let the other people try out the special delicacies for the Chinese New Year, which is good, so they can experience the different culture.

In addition to the sharing of food, having a space where people could meet together was very conducive to the development of good workplace relationships. Lin talked about their work tea room.

Yes, we do have lunch together. We are very blessed in that we have a very nice tearoom where we can all have lunch, and we talk, we have a nice chat during lunchtime.

While for many difference was an initiator of social connections, for others, their perceptions that they did not understand particular cultural norms led to feelings of exclusion. This was particularly significant where participants worked in largely Anglo dominated departments. Hua commented on how people would sometimes make superficial conversation with her but didn't want to get to know her on a deeper level and that this resulted in her excluding herself to an extent.

I think it really depends on people, what they have in mind. But I would say some people accept different cultures more, how you say – they're more acceptable. so, when I talk to different people I will feel different – some

people who assume that you do not understand their culture... So I would actually step back a little bit, and not talk to that many people, not make friends with others. On Friday night, would maybe not ask people to go out for a drink, or something. Because when they have something fun, like going to whatever activities, I will assume I'm not in that group. It is myself more than the others.

The overall consensus from this small study was that on the whole, universities were not racist workplaces compared to other types of workplaces.

Racism, exclusion and discrimination

Discrimination and racism have been documented in Australian workplaces. In a survey conducted in 2001, Dunn et al (2003:176) found that 16% of respondents indicated having experienced racism at work. This is supported in a study that explores workplace bullying across 13 workplaces in Wales. Lewis and Gunn (2007) found that there was a higher incidence of bullying reported among 'ethnic' respondents and a big difference in the type of bullying that took place in comparison to the bullying experienced by their white counterparts. The white respondents who were bullied tended to be bullied in relation to their work roles while the ethnic respondents tended to be bullied on a more personal level. Jokes, racist remarks, humiliation and hostility were the most frequently cited bullying tactics. In their co-authored works on the labour market experiences of ex-Yugoslav, Middle-Eastern and African refugees in Western Australia, Colic-Peisker and Tilbury (2006 & 2007) found that these groups face different levels of discrimination because of their racial background and that 'visible difference' was a key determinant. They explored a number of discursive practices used by employers to talk about market issues for migrants in Australia, arguing that modern racism is played out on a cultural and symbolic platform rather than being biological or essentialist, where a hierarchy of behaviours and values are used with certain behaviours and values prized over others.

Many of the participants revealed that they had previously experienced more racism in the private sector compared to working at the university. Tham who is currently working in the financial section of the university, spoke about how in a previous position her manager had

told her that while her work was of an exemplary standard that he could not promote her because she dressed too traditionally.

...one of the workplace I worked here in Sydney, the manager actually liked me very much, because technically I'm very good, and things like that. But he frankly told me that "I cannot promote you, because you just show tradition. You have long hair, you wear long dress, I just cannot..." He said he tell me, he tells me sort of like private, so that if I can do anything about, you know, about my appearance. "If you want me to promote you to the higher, senior level, they don't want to see a long-haired, long-dressed woman." That sort of thing. And it is true in the sense that a lot of people, when they first saw me in that company, I worked very close to the manager, so I was very high. And they think that I'm just, you know, a personal assistant.

Tham said that she had not experienced any racism since she has worked at the university. Layla believed that there was less racism at universities due to the general identity of the university.

I think that it is particular to the general identity of the university. Our university is such a young and open place to be at. It has all the societies, you have the against homophobia, right next to the church of says no gay marriage. You then have the Palestinian Association next to the Israeli Association, there is this openness. Everyone feels safe to protect themselves. So the university is good but for me myself, it is my supervisor, she is the one that creates the culture of tolerance in the office. She always says it doesn't matter that someone doesn't do the work extremely well because they can be taught, as long as they are pleasant and they can get along and the environment is happy.

While a number of participants believed that as a whole the university was open to cultural diversity, others talked about negative experiences in the workplace in relation to interactions with colleagues/managers. This involved incidents of bullying, feeling excluded and barriers to promotion that they 'felt' could be attributed to racism and cultural exclusion. At the same time however, they felt that there may be other explanations for this treatment and thus it was just a 'feeling' they couldn't be definite about.

Hua, a general support staff spoke about how sometimes when she received a call or visit from a fellow staff from across the university, they seem to express displeasure or would rather deal with someone else instead of me.

Yeah. I think it's always good not taking it personally, so I'm not sure. But certainly it is a possibility that people do not like my cultural background, do not like this kind of person. Maybe they have a bad experience before with Asians. I never know. Maybe they used to have very good experiences with Asians but just do not like me, like, personally! I can never tell.

Rashad who also worked in a supportive role to general and academic staff across a faculty also expressed similar sentiments to Hua.

With most of the people, it's a good experience. Bad experiences, you try to forget them. Probably I can remember one instance, one person came in and was looking for help and when I went to help, that person kind of said, "No, OK, I'll come back later." And eventually when another person was there, another colleague, and that person was OK to express the problem. So at that time I felt like...it could be something else, but if that person knows my colleague, then I would have just thought, "OK, it's a personal relationship"... But it's very limited in the University. I think we're very culturally diverse, so it's kind of like people get used to it already, so it's not very hard for them, but sometimes you do feel like maybe this guy's treating you a bit differently in the beginning. When they get to know you, maybe they forget about that, where you're from, or whatever. But in the beginning sometimes you can see that.

Rashad also mentioned that he felt that it was more difficult to get a promotion in his field in the university if you came from a non-Anglo background. While it was possible, often "less knowledgeable people" from Anglo backgrounds were promoted to management levels and that while there were some staff in management from non-Anglo backgrounds they had to work much harder to prove themselves. He also believed that the management perceived his team to be less competent compared to other teams across the university which were largely comprised of Anglo-Australians.

Layla and Rashad commented on how people in their workplace were often influenced by wider national and media discourses about people from the Middle Eastern and Muslim backgrounds. Colleagues relayed stories to them which contained judgments about other cultures but assured Layla and Rashad that they were not referring to them. Rashad stated that:

Sometimes I do have a bit of discussion with people – not in our staff group, we've known each other for a long time, so we don't do this – but sometimes I have a conversation with people and when I say "Muslim", they just kind of, like, "OK. What is all this trouble going on all over the place?" Religion is, you know, taking everything to an extreme, and everything. And yeah, they might say, "No, I'm not telling you all this, I know that you're a good person," or whatever. ...Inside me, I feel a bit offended because...but sometimes I think that maybe they don't even know. Lack of knowledge. Maybe they're doing it without even knowing. I don't want to get really political about it, but I think the media and all these newspapers, they play a part in that. Lots of people, the only idea they have is actually from the newspapers and TV. So I strongly feel that all the time. People, when they come to know you, regardless – in a few days' time, when they see through you, they forget about where you're from, if you're from another country or you have a different religion...but in the back of their mind, the religion factor, the idea they carry is actually the wrong idea anyway. They just take you as a separate entity, when it comes to their belief about religion and stuff like that.

From the interviews, it became clear that while instances of institutional racism were limited or indeed hard to pinpoint, a number of participants felt that they had experienced some form of discrimination in the workplace. Similarly, as the above responses indicate participants had some difficulty in labelling them as racists. As Essed (1991) has eloquently demonstrated in her work on everyday racism, it is an experience that is both *direct* and *vicarious*. Everyday racism is not about extreme incidents but about cumulative mundane practices by nature so embedded in routine and everyday practice that it is experienced as amorphous and difficult to explicitly identify but is felt and experienced persistently (Essed 1991: 204-8). As a result these micro-injustices become normal and fused into familiar practices experienced.

Conclusion

The workplace provides a context for the development of meaningful interactions across ethnic and cultural differences as these differences are negotiated on a day to day basis within many workplaces. Many studies have demonstrated the importance of the workplace as a site for the development of social bonds and friendships. While studies on friendship have shown that people tend to form bonds with those that similar to themselves, this study suggests that difference can also be an important starting point for the development of conversations that can lead to greater social bonds. It is also the nature of people's work and common work situations (eg: dealing with work intensification) that allow for the establishment of intercultural relationships.

While universities, as workplaces, are viewed as largely non racist, participants in this study did experience discrimination and racism that they 'felt' could be attributed to their ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Wider national and media discourses and particular workplace practices also influence how inter-ethnic contact was mediated. This was a very small pilot study and much more research needs to be carried out to provide more in-depth and broad research with regard to how ethnic and racial differences are negotiated within the workplace.

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