

'They try to avoid.'

**TITLE:** 'They try to avoid.' How do parents' feelings about race and class difference shape gentrifying school communities?

**ABSTRACT:**

Processes of rapid urban change reorganise the distribution of racialised disadvantage across urban geographic spaces. 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 racialised and classed difference within four school communities. Contradictory themes common to the interviews include: the positive worth accorded to contact with cultural difference; the avoidance of interpersonal contact across racialised and classed difference; and the positive worth accorded to social sameness. The cultural politics of the feelings expressed within these interviews—discomfort and comfort, desire and disdain,—point to the 'sociality of emotion', in Ahmed's (2014) terms. We seek, especially, to understand how parents' self-reported feelings of discomfort play a role in shaping everyday school communities. To realise this aim, we focus on parents' involvement in the schools' Parents and Citizens Associations (P&Cs). We argue that P&Cs constitute social spaces dominated by parents embodying a class-based disposition towards entitlement and authority. The P&Cs' atmosphere of exclusivity can provoke considerable feelings of angst among parents who join them because of a putative commitment to contribute to the whole-of-school community.

**Key words:** schooling; feelings; race; class; multiculturalism; gentrification

**Introduction**

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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 racialised disadvantage across geographic space (e.g. Jackson and Benson 2014). In the inner-city 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 racialised 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 here 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 considers the role played by parents' feelings about negotiating classed and racialised difference in shaping primary school communities in Cooper today, as 'urban renewal' proceeds apace. We highlight a set of themes common to the interviews: the positive worth accorded to contact with cultural difference; the avoidance of interpersonal contact across racialised and classed difference; and the positive worth accorded to social sameness.

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 essentially analyse parents'

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

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reflections about their experiences, as they were expressed to us. While this is not the place to review the vast literature on the humanity and social science's turn to affect, we note here 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). In this way we seek to understand emotion expressed in parents' speech acts 'in terms of its socio-spatial dynamics of movements and relations' (Zembylas 2011: 151).

Our article foregrounds a central feeling that emerged from the interviews: 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 that these interactions were felt to be uncomfortable.<sup>2</sup> 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 secondary discomfort about this experience of

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<sup>2</sup> 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).

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discomfort. These apparent 'feeling rules' (Hochschild 1983), which applied frequently to white parents' encounters with ethnicised difference, though not with class difference, highlighted schisms between what people thought they should feel, what they were trying to feel, and what they were actually feeling (Hochschild 1990) in this social setting.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, we describe how multilayered feelings of discomfort, provoked by the condition of 'anxious proximity' (Reay 2015: 19) with racialised and/or classed others, come to shape everyday school communities in practical terms. We focus on 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.

### **Interrelated phenomena: urban spaces, social spaces and feelings**

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<sup>3</sup> Hochschild long ago defined emotion work as the emotion management we do in private life, in contrast to 'emotional labour' as that which we do for a wage (Hochschild 1990).

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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 & 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 approximately 49 per cent of Cooper's residents speak a non-English language (ABS 2011). The relationship between migration, racialised identities and class status is by no means clear-cut, however Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census data clearly shows 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. When referring to gentrifiers then, we refer largely but not exclusively to white members of the middle-class. We are wary of representing middle class-ness 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 association with middle class Asian migrants (see Butler et al 2011 Authors).

Our research sought to understand recent transformations of this urban social space through the prism of public (government-funded) primary schools, themselves often described as ideal spaces of social contact and encounter (see Amin 2002). Indeed, in Australia, the school curriculum itself foregrounds learning about cultural difference, racism and multiculturalism, socialising children into a range of messages about diversity (Walton

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et al, 2014). And as social settings, schools are idealised as spaces of enforced sustained engagement with difference: the potential for schools, as well as analogous civic spaces, to foster everyday convivial relations across difference has been widely embraced (e.g. Ho 2011; Wise and Velayutham 2009; Wessendorf 2014). Others question how meaningful these limited urban encounters prove (e.g. Valentine 2008; Hewitt 2016), particularly since schools have long been structurally divided according to wealth, religion and gender (Campbell et al. 2009; Windle 2015).

While to some, 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 discourses, 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).<sup>4</sup> Such divisions are often organised along racial as well as class lines. In sum, while race, class 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' (e.g. Campbell et al. 2009).

Academic work on social class, Reay observes, 'too often strips the affective out of accounts', in the process 'overlooking the psychic experience of living class in contemporary

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<sup>4</sup> See 'White Flight: race segregation in Melbourne's schools' <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/white-flight-race-segregation-in-melbourne-state-schools-20160430-goj516.html> Last accessed October 24, 2016.

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society' (Reay 2015: 21). Like many sociologists of education, Reay's exemplary work on schooling, ethnic difference and class in the United Kingdom has made extensive use of Bourdieu's (1984) notion of *habitus*, the socialised, embodied dispositions that reflect the internalisation of one's structural location as it is constituted within a specified 'field' (see Reay 2004). Yet for Reay, Bourdieu's limitation is his relative neglect of the emotional aspects of this process of social reproduction. Reay calls for an enlarged notion of habitual dispositions so that a 'propensity to fatalism, ambivalence, resilience, resentment, certainty, entitlement or even rage' is as much captured by researchers as the kind of practical activities Bourdieu scholars have classically studied. This reflects other scholars' broadening of the concept as something capable of encompassing the experience and work of emotions, and in dialogue with gender (e.g. Lawlor 1999, Skeggs 2004). Reay herself has turned to psychoanalysis to enrich her understanding of *habitus*, arguing that a more 'psychosocial' understanding of *habitus* can bring to view the repression, splitting, defensive mechanisms etc, which might result from our openness to the world and its incorporation into our tastes, bodies *and* psyches.

We draw on social theorists of emotion from sociology, anthropology and geography to think about the complex range of feelings that 'emerge as a consequence of dwelling within and movement through places' (Conradson and Mackay 2007: 169), focusing on inner-city public primary schools. For Ahmed (2014), distinctive 'cultural politics' of emotions emerge in multicultural polities, which are especially dense fields of contact, encounters and exchanges. For Ahmed, as for our interviewees in the suburb of Cooper, this condition of contact produces hard-to-manage feelings. Ahmed analyses how intensely negative feelings such as pain, hate, fear, disgust and shame, as well as love of difference and love for the nation, circulate in the affective economies of multicultural societies more broadly. In this paper we are interested in the circulation of hard-to-manage

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feelings about classed and racialised others in these microcosms of the multicultural nation: school communities in which discomfort about others and the comfort derived from being part of a 'community' become co-constituted feelings.

Hage (1997: 131) has shown that a distinctive feature of late twentieth century cosmopolitan globalism in urban Australian places like Cooper has been the way in which inner-city elites came to appreciate ethnic 'others'. Through processes of distinction, cultural elites develop what might be called their multiculturalist capacity or cosmopolitan capital, differentiating themselves, via their regard, from suburban dwelling classed others. These 'cosmo-multiculturalists', Hage shows, deem others as 'monocultural', racist, unsophisticated and backward, and unable to 'appreciate' (that is, consume) diversity correctly. Indeed, in an earlier publication arising from this research (Ho et al, 2015), we analysed divergent modes of 'doing diversity', noting the ways in which gentrifying parents embrace the *idea* of ethnicised cultural difference and multiculturalism—terms vested with positive value for cosmopolitan liberals— while maintaining a consumptive orientation to difference. By contrast, another subset of parents in this study sought to live out an everyday experience of the 'multicultural real', although even these parents were often disappointed in their efforts to form deep friendships with cultural/ethnic others.

Ahmed and Hage's work on multicultural settings explains our specific focus: namely, white middle-class parents' difficult encounters with difference in school spaces, and the ways their experiences generated a secondary sense of discomfort within the interview space. Many of our white middle class interviewees sensed what Hochschild (1990) notes as the gap between what people thought they should feel about such encounters with difference and what they were actually feeling. We consider this process of emotion management in relation to parents' negotiation of classed and racialised difference, and the role this plays in shaping primary school communities in Cooper today.



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This has important implications for understanding how school practises, discourses and socialisation processes are entangled with emotion in relation to race and ethnicity (Zembylas 2011).

### **Cooper's Four Schools**

Our pilot study focuses on the four state-funded primary schools in Cooper: Cooper Hill, Cooper Creek, Amity and Birchgrove. We conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 34 parents from across these four schools as well as interviews with four educators, including two school principals. Interviews typically lasted 45 to 90 minutes, and covered topics such as respondents' residential history, school selection decisions, and perceptions of social relations within their school community.

Initially we envisaged a sample of interviewees at each school so that the demographic profile of our respondents would reflect the demographics of each school's community, in terms of ethnicity and class. We were quickly reminded of Bourdieu's (2000: 9-32) point about the cultural practice of doing research: we enjoy a class-based liberation from 'practical occupations and preoccupations', which enables us to make schooling one formal 'object of thought' among others (Bourdieu 2000: 13). Many white middle-class residents of Cooper, who shared our scholastic disposition, enthusiastically and generously volunteered to be interviewed, frequently declaring their interest in the study and confidently advising as to its direction.

The only school where the interviewees reflected the statistical picture of the suburb of Cooper was at Cooper Hill; here, Eve and Christina were not just university researchers but also neighbours and fellow parents, making it easier to talk with a range of parents at the school with whom we'd formed a connection through our children, or

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through tentative interactions in the schoolyard. These interviewees often made comments marking their subordinate position vis a vis our research, unambiguously relating to us as the researched. For example, Kosum, a Thai-Australian mother whose daughter attends Amity said, 'hopefully I answer your questions properly'; Susan, a Koori mother of six children who had all, at some stage, attended Cooper Hill, warned EveAuthor 1 before the interview commenced, 'I don't really know much about this area'; and Abida, a Bangladeshi-Australian mother from Cooper Hill requested that her interview not be recorded as she was embarrassed by her English and did not wish to be quoted verbatim— instead notes were taken by hand. Christina Ho conducted the interviews we did secure with non-white parents, as we intuited they would be more comfortable talking freely about questions of contact with racialised others with another non-white person. Because of our own positioning then, we have more to say in this article on the ways in which privileged white parents negotiate contact with racialised and classed others, and less about the 'psychic experience of living class' (Reay 2015: 21) as it is borne by the disadvantaged.

Below we characterise the four school communities firstly through the use of statistical data drawn from 2015 My School profiles, and then in more vernacular and descriptive terms, in order not to strip these schools of their felt attachments.

School Name	Enrolments	Language Background other than English	Indigenous	Families who fall within top quartile of national socio-	Families who fall within bottom quartile of national
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				educational advantage index	socio- educational advantage Index
Cooper Hill	280	60 %	8 %	30%	19%
Cooper Creek	430	33 %	1 %	60%	3%
Amity	250	45%	4%	37%	19%
Birchgrove	700	44%	1%	55%	7%

Source: ACARA 2015

Comments from our interviewees provide insight into how these schools are experienced by school community members. At Cooper Hill, 'they're not up themselves,' enthused Cathy, a working-class grandmother of Anglo and Aboriginal descent, who currently cares for her two primary school-aged grandchildren, one of Vietnamese-Anglo-Aboriginal descent and another of Filipino-Chinese-Anglo-Aboriginal descent. (Cathy here uses a colloquialism: to be 'up yourself' means to believe oneself superior.) Meanwhile, numerous Cooper Creek interviewees employed a witty, self-ironising mode to talk about themselves; one described a school comprised of 'the artists' children'; another interviewee said he preferred Cooper to Sydney's eastern suburbs, which were 'white and uptight'.

While Cooper as a whole offered Cooper Creek's parents 'diversity', when asked 'What are the best aspects of the school?', every respondent from Cooper Creek cited either the 'parent community' or 'community values'. In contrast to Cooper Creek's urbane reputation, Amity Primary School is described by Lisa and Jo, a white middle-class lesbian couple, as 'cute and daggy' and 'more like a country school'—rabbits played on the school's

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ample grassy spaces. ('Daggy' is slang for unfashionable, but the term is used in this context with playful self-deprecation – there is appeal in this absence of fashion.) Signs in Samoan, Vietnamese and Greek indicate Amity's past, but here too the proportion of LBOTE students is falling. Finally, Birchgrove, a large school of almost 700 pupils, is described by Turkish-Australian mother Chloe as comprised of 'a sea of blonde heads'. 'It's not the ethnic mix it probably once was', she continued. Birchgrove has Opportunity Classes (OC) in years 5 and 6, which runs an accelerated curriculum for 'gifted' students.

### **Desire, difference and discomfort: managing relations with racialised others**

Elsewhere, we have extensively detailed the positive worth accorded to contact with ethnic others among our white middle-class interviewees (see Ho et al, 2015). As Stacey summarised:

I think people who move to [Cooper] are kind of—even though we're sort of, the gentrification—... you wouldn't really move to [Cooper] if you weren't really supportive of [multiculturalism] ... I think we all moved here because we thought 'isn't it great?' With it being so multicultural.

This desire for contact with cultural difference was not always easily fulfilled. Stacey went on to note, 'it's a little bit of a disappointment, that it's not quite as integrated as we thought'. Confusion surrounding the terms of these intercultural relationships, difficulties communicating, and a heightened sense of one's more privileged circumstances could all produce intense feelings of discomfort among well-meaning white parents.

Noble (2005: 108) notes that the 'capacity to be comfortable is unevenly distributed

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amongst the population'. Noble attends to the discomfort experienced by non-white migrant Australians and their children as the white gaze comes to rest heavily on symbols like head-scarves and as social incivility became a defining aspect of their everyday lives post-911.<sup>5</sup> We flag Noble's research here so as not to exaggerate the degree of discomfort being experienced by middle-class interviewees. However, discomfort emerged as a complex and potent part of middle-class white parents' responses to our questions, or as Pugh (2015) argues, feelings regarded by our interviewees as less legitimate surfaced in their interview narratives.

We argue that white parents' feelings of discomfort in negotiating relations with non-white parents produced a secondary sense of discomfort about the fact that these interactions were experienced as uncomfortable. However, when it came to talk of contact with 'rough' elements, which seemed to indicate classed others, *their* co-presence produced discomfort without as much secondary discomfort about feeling that discomfort, a point to which we return.

Stacey, for example, whose eldest daughter attended Amity, described wrestling with feelings of 'middle-class guilt' when asked if her daughter was friends with children whose background differed from her own:

There are a lot of them from different backgrounds, both different ethnic backgrounds, different family structures, and all those sorts of things, which ... the kids are oblivious to, which is wonderful. [However...] they mostly tend to be third-generation kids. ... [T]hey grew up speaking English.

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<sup>5</sup> Our only hijab-wearing Muslim interviewee ruefully gestured to her head when asked about racism within the school community – racism, she replied, was 'everywhere', not only in the school community.

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What Stacey is admitting to the interviewer here is that while these kids might qualify in some sense as 'different', she is keenly aware of how similar they are in many respects to her own family, so that negotiating questions of difference with families from well-established migrant backgrounds poses few challenges within a similar classed context. By contrast, she continued, her daughter was friends with a girl 'who's south Asian of some sort, maybe Bangladeshi' and whom was invited to Stacey's daughter's party at the local swimming pool:

I felt really bad because it didn't even occur to me, you know, most of these kids, have been going to swimming lessons since they were two, and you don't even really think about it. And this poor girl didn't, she, it was a bit uncomfortable: she didn't really know how to swim. ... And I was really conscious, I thought that was really quite insensitive, just assuming that this group of privileged middle-class kids all know how to swim, and this poor girl didn't. And it was a bit of a thing. I felt really guilty about it.

Stacey also struggled to understand why other children she classified as 'second-generation kids' never 'reciprocated' invitations for parties and play dates deposited in school bags. She was intensely self-conscious about the confusion this lack of responsiveness produced in her.

Avril, a middle-class mother whose child had moved from Cooper Hill to Birchgrove to join the Opportunity Class (OC) shared her impression that while the larger school body was ethnically homogenous, the OC class comprised 25 per cent Asian-Australian students:

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They're all friends. She had a birthday party; they came. So an interesting observation was, we invited the whole class to come here at the start of the year, because a new teacher started, and all of the kids came but none of the Asian students—Asian-originating students'—parents came. They just dropped the kids off at the door, and all of the families were invited to come, but they didn't come. They dropped the kids off, and then they came back and picked them up. But the kids came! So...

Eve asked her 'Do you have any idea why that happened?' Avril continued:

Well, when I spoke to some of the parents, their language was...English as a second language, so I'm sure there were some language barriers. I think there might also have been communication – some misunderstanding ... And I know that one of the kid's parents runs a Thai restaurant, so they're all working. She sent Thai food! And she came back at ten o'clock to pick the kid up. So there are a few different reasons, different circumstances, but it was quite telling that none of those parents came.

There was an exception: an Asian-Australian father arrived to collect his daughter and stayed for a while, 'but he tried not to talk to anybody. Just sort of followed his daughter around':

So, you know, I tried to have a little – I had a bit of a chat with him, but I also didn't want to make him feel uncomfortable by hanging over him when he's not that comfortable. It's hard!

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Lisa also found interacting with parents who did not share her ethnic identity difficult, 'When you go and pick up the kids, like you'll talk to the Anglo parents, but it's actually ... there's a few of the Asian parents, and I try and talk to them and, I try... And they're very shy, and very stand-offish'. The slippage from shy to stand-offish involves movement from an initially empathetic response to the discomforting distance Lisa is experiencing to one that suggests Lisa's attempts to bridge that distance were subtly repelled.

In sum, the angst and effort expended in managing contact with non-white others was a common theme of conversations with white interviewees. However, non-white perspectives on the distance between white families and their own could be far less forgiving. Rashmi, for example, a Sri Lankan-Australian parent at Cooper Hill, commented tentatively on her perception that white parents avoided social contact with her:

I think maybe I notice like among the community, I think some people don't want to share their experiences with us, sometimes. I notice something like that. They don't want to talk much about their experiences and they try to avoid.

Christina probed, 'The parents? Is it because they don't speak English well?' Rashmi continued, 'There are a few who don't want to communicate and they try to keep away. ... They know English perfectly but they just – something going on and they don't want to communicate. They try to keep away from certain kinds of people.'

Rashmi's hesitation to identify here exactly who she was talking about was striking; after considerable prompting, she clarified she meant white parents. Similarly, Abida, a Bangladeshi-Australian parent stated emphatically that white parents didn't talk to migrant parents: 'We tried to invite them but they don't want to talk to us.'

A consistent theme in the international literature on schooling and gentrification



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was also occasionally present in our interviews: there is a degree of self-interest involved when middle-class families risk contact with racialised and classed others, as parents expect this will help better prepare their offspring for success in what one interviewee described as 'the real world'. Reay et al (2007) call this 'self-interested altruism': while white middle-class parents can be seen as altruistic in supporting their local public school, self-interest is also involved as their children gain cosmopolitan capital, or multiculturalist capacity, from attending diverse schools. Ben, a white parent at Amity, expressed this succinctly, 'We value that representation of ethnic backgrounds, because I think it teaches [children] a lot ... about diversity.' Elsewhere, Reay et al (2008) recognize this as being an inevitable outcome of a deeply divided, neoliberal education system which structures and shapes parents' encounters with others, and ultimately advantages middle class selves, regardless of their intent.

Importantly, white middle-class parents who explored experiences of discomfort in negotiating relations with racialised others also enthused about the comfort they derived from discovering parents with whom they felt they had a lot in common. This commonality was articulated in terms of values and community rather than classed or racialised identity. Wendy, a white teacher currently enrolled in postgraduate study, explained that the Cooper Creek community comprised 'families with a similar values-base, I would say, to ours, so we have that in common'. Stacey, the Amity mother introduced earlier, also spoke positively about the sameness she found in Cooper. 'I think we really share values with a lot of the people who live around the place.' For Stacey what she loved about Cooper was the 'sense of community'; for Lisa and Jo it was Amity more specifically that offered a 'sense of community'.

Power relations involved in perceptions about race and ethnicity produce, and are produced by, 'particular emotional practices and discourses that include/exclude others'

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(Zembylas 2011, 152). Ahmed examines the ways in which emotions such as hate work to 'secure collectivities' as subjects become aligned with 'some others and against other others' (Ahmed 2014: 42). In our study, the process of moving away from those 'other others' who are valued and desired in the abstract is much more subtle, incomplete and involves guilt and disappointment. An emotion as forceful and unidirectional as hate need not be involved in a scenario in which a 'turning away from others ... is lived as *turning towards the self*' (emphasis added) (Ahmed 2014: 51). The emphasis on shared values, commonality and community was repeated across our interviews with white middle-class parents. What was striking to us as interviewers, following Ahmed, was that this involved turning towards other white middle class people, or other selves.

While their lack of relations with racialised others was rued and thoughtfully talked about, the discourses about classed others were much less explicit. It is to these we now turn.

### **Difference and discomfort: managing relations with classed others**

Wendy, introduced earlier, relayed that she knew Cooper parents who stood at the front gates of Cooper Hill and concluded, 'I don't see anyone that I want my kids to be friends with.' When Rose asked, 'Are they talking about class or race...?' Wendy replied, 'I'd say it's class.' Wendy, laughingly, explained Cooper Hill's reputation from ten years' past: 'Rough! Rough.' In this conversation with Wendy discussion of class is made explicit through our questions; in other conversations class remained somewhat hidden.

We follow Ortnor and theorists of class culture in concluding that in Australia, as in the US at the time of her writing, class is 'displaced' or 'spoken through' other languages of social difference (1998). Specific class terms are deployed within locally-generated social

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contexts and lexicons, such as 'white trash' (Hartigan 2003), or 'ferals' and 'rough families' (Butler 2015). We came to conclude that in this scenario anxieties about classed others were displaced especially onto the term 'rough', a word with raw material and affective resonances. In Ahmed's terms, 'rough' is a 'sticky sign', which becomes attached here to 'sticky bodies' (Ahmed 2014, 91-92). 'To use a sticky sign', Ahmed writes, 'is to evoke other words, which have become intrinsic to the sign through past forms of association' (Ahmed 2014, 92). Concealment of associations is key to this process, argues Ahmed, an insight that has emboldened us to uncover 'rough's' unspoken associations.

The term 'rough' was used to mark, implicitly, sectors of both white and non-white working class families. Again, we acknowledge the imbrication of these sociological categories: classed others are of course often also racialised others, and as well as being deeply racialised class is also inscribed through gender and sexuality (Bettie 2003). We also recognise the fractions of classed identities within cohorts such as 'working class' in the new economy, where economic and cultural worlds are diverse, and where new forms of economic mobility have become possible within 'working class' livelihoods (Pini et al. 2012). In our research, the term 'working class' also includes families experiencing significant economic and cultural disadvantage and poverty, and it is towards these families that the term 'rough' appeared to be directed from white middle-class parents. When it came to talk of 'rough elements' we surmise that the child's classed identity assumed *primacy* in these moments: they were seen to embody a disruptive and contaminating potential much more than a desired diversity.

The word 'rough' is multivalent within this gentrifying setting: for Stacey, part of Cooper's appeal was its post-industrial aesthetic, its 'rough around the edges feel'. Ben, a white dad at Amity, observed that part of the gentrification process involved the 'rough side' of Cooper, as manifest in the bars on windows and doors, 'slowly going'. Lisa and Jo

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thought Amity's school grounds—a 'wilderness' distant from supervision and in the past unfenced, contributed to people's perception that Amity was 'rough'. Most commonly, however, 'rough' was used to describe the reputation of Cooper Hill and Amity's student body in the past, and Cooper High School in the present. Of Amity, Jo commented, 'Ten years ago, NO ONE would send their kid to that school. It had such a bad reputation.' Eve prompted, 'For...'. 'Being rough,' Jo replied. Historically, she continued, 'it was the roughest, roughest area'. Chloe, a parent at Birchgrove confirmed this impression of Amity's reputation in the past, it was a 'rough-as-guts school, it was an awful school and you wouldn't want your children there. It has changed so much.' John, at Cooper Hill, had neighbours who said, 'oh *that* school'; they mistakenly thought it remained as 'rough' as it had been in the past, he explained.

The term 'rough' thus references the embodied dispositions of children who are not middle class: negligible value is transferred onto their bodies and read off them, in Skeggs' terms (2004). Rough is an adjective that describes behaviour *within* a classificatory system; these are kids who lack what Watkins and Noble (2013) term the 'scholarly habitus', a disposition instilled at home and augmented at school. It is also a term used to describe visceral poverty in Australia (Butler 2015). For middle-class white interviewees, these classed others represent a disruptive potential, but which they were careful not to discuss using social categories (see e.g. Cucchiara 2013). For example, at Cooper Hill, Jen perceived, the teachers' energies were disproportionately absorbed by what she called 'certain kids' who required discipline and who were disruptive. Eve repeatedly invited her to define who those 'certain kids' are, but Jen assiduously avoided using social categories, employing general terms and sympathetic language about kids who deserved the teacher's attention. Bad behavior and working class or welfare class status are of course not isomorphic, however, concerns about 'behavior' were entirely absent from the interviews conducted at

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Cooper Creek and Birchgrove—the two schools who have very low numbers of socio-economically disadvantaged enrolments. Whereas contact and especially friendship with racialised others increases one's multicultural capital, the white working class becomes the 'residual embodiment of that which is valueless', note Reay et al (2007: 1049).

Wendy's children 'had each made friends with families that definitely do have different values to ours, which I find challenging'. When asked to elaborate, Wendy talked about her children coming into excessive and unmonitored contact with 'junk food, including lollies' at another child's houses. Food, anthropologists have long noted, marks social boundaries between groups (Counihan and Van Esterik 2013), and in a locale like Cooper, to be health conscious and enjoy health is a 'desired state, but also a prescribed state and an ideological position' (Metzl 2010: 2). The presence of unhealthy food, and insufficient parental monitoring of children's diet were indications of a class-based value system at odds with the particular middle-class parenting style practiced by many of our interviewees (see Tomlinson 2003; Warde 1997). In contrast, Cathy evinced awareness and cynicism about what she saw as a current hegemonic morality surrounding healthy eating, sharing a rumour about 'a bunch of Nazis' at a nearby middle-class school not included in this study, where allegedly they were 'checkin' the kids' lunchboxes and confiscating food'. It is thus unsurprising that the discomfort produced through contact with class difference came for Wendy to settle on the question of food, which, as Ahmed details (2014: 83), involves us 'open[ing] ourselves us up', and entails dealing with a 'fear of contamination'.

There are of course exceptions to this picture of feelings of discomfort about classed others. Lisa and Jo, for example, had found ways to sensitively manage the potential awkwardness that might arise when their daughter formed a close friendship with a much poorer classmate: Lisa recently pretended to have won free movie tickets so they could take both children to the cinemas without producing discomfort for anyone involved.

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### **'Aussie have power!' Anxious feelings and involvement in the schools' P&Cs**

The themes set out above condense around the feelings that surround involvement in the four schools' Parents and Citizens Associations (P&Cs). A discussion paper commissioned by the NSW P&C Federation in 2009 addressed both the low rates of participation in the P&C movement on the part of culturally and linguistically diverse and Indigenous parents, and that fact that 10 per cent of schools in NSW did not have an existing parent body. This figure also mapped on to areas of 'considerable social disadvantage' (Rawsthorne 2009: 2-3). Forty per cent of parents surveyed identified that 'Being welcomed by existing members of P&Cs' was deemed 'very important', which, as the author concludes, 'suggests that it is not merely a matter of time but also the culture of the P&C that influences participation' (Rawsthorne 2009:6).

At the four schools in our study, the culture of the P&Cs reflected their predominantly middle-class members' disposition towards entitlement and authority. These were subjects who were: authorised to choose schools, as reflected in the pattern of avoidance of less affluent schools, and felt authorised to shape those schools, as reflected through their committed involvement in P&Cs. Importantly, beyond the school gates, these subjects also felt authorised to shape and impact the world; indeed the principal of Cooper Hill made the pithy observation that many of the most involved P&C members were highly skilled professionals who 'go to meetings for a living'.

Chloe was heavily involved in the Birchgrove P&C. As did every one of our interviewees involved with P&Cs across the four schools, Chloe told us the 'same groups of parents were very involved'. When asked about these parents, she clarified they were 'middle-class professionals for the most part'. 'Sounds terrible doesn't it?' she added.

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However, in thinking about it more carefully Chloe noted the P&C was, to some extent, 'ethnically mixed': 'It's very middle-class, but it's certainly not WASPy [White Anglo Saxon Protestant].' Chloe provided an example of the resources available to schools with parent bodies drawn from powerful social groups: 'We are in the process of fundraising for a new renovation to our library. ... We are very lucky that one of the parents is a library architect. So we are getting her services for nothing and we are going to hopefully have a world-class library.'

Chloe believed, 'The P&C is the difference between a having a really great school and an okay school.' Tamara, who described herself as 'significantly' involved in the Birchgrove P&C, expanded on this point. 'I've always had that view that if you don't like a school and you don't like the culture within a school, you've got to go and join and be part of the change. You can't expect anything else, someone else to change it.' Tamara here was criticising white middle-class parents (her term) who sent their children out of their zoned area to Cooper Creek rather than have them attend their closer school, Cooper Hill. This belief also guided her commitment to active involvement in her school's P&C, which had also acquired a reputation for assertive interventions into the everyday life and governance of the school. In response to our question about why she had become involved, Tamara said happily, 'Oh, that's just what you do!', naturalising what we argue is a particular manifestation of 'living class' as Reay would describe it (Reay 2015: 21). Tamara described how she constantly asked herself: 'How do you engage the parents who aren't already engaged?' and acknowledged, 'I still haven't figured that out.' However, she also represented involvement as a deeply moral social question, where willingness was contrasted with recalcitrance. 'If you don't like what's happening in a P&C, if you're reading the minutes and you're not keen, come. Change the chat that we're having.'

Mary-Jane described the Cooper Creek P&C as '*extremely* active'. Wendy explained

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that it is 'big enough to have sub-committees', including an 'Education' sub-committee chaired by a parent conducting PhD research into the Australian education system. Cooper Creek's principal confirmed, 'We've always had really committed people running our P&C. They've done fabulous fundraising.' Their initiative was illustrated by sharing this metonymic example: the school had some underutilised wasteland; the P&C undertook to transform it into a rainforest.

At both Amity and Cooper Hill, the demographic shifts that have accompanied gentrification have translated into fairly recent transformation of the schools' P&Cs – from struggling, poorly attended organisations to dynamic, thriving ones. Stacey, introduced earlier, told us, 'The P&C . . . was very, very small. ... [A]s the school has grown and the demographics have changed, there's now a very involved group of parents'. However, 'it's the same old same old group a lot of the time'. Lisa clarified the composition of this 'same old group' at Amity, it was 'very much, yeah, white Anglo representation'. Lisa characterises the P&C meetings as 'very jolly. Like we do a lot of laughing, people always bring cakes and biscuits.' However, it was 'the same people, always, putting in. ... And they tend to be... Anglo.' Eve asked if this lack of diversity was 'talked about'. Lisa said, 'I don't think there's been an active steps about inclusion and involvement, so there's no active discussion around that...' Jo offered a common sympathetic analysis of why the Amity P&C did not reflect its parent body: 'A lot of those parents have limited English, and the last thing I would want to do, if I could not speak a language well, was to go on a committee and to try and understand ... I imagine it would be daunting.' Judy was also heavily involved in the Amity P&C, explaining:

For the size of the school, it's a good active group. We get 20 odd people coming to a meeting every month. But you know, when I joined the year before, they'd made



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\$150. Because most of the parents are working parents and also in the non-English speaking families there's a perception that well, I can't help, I can't speak English, or it's a political thing. Particularly we found talking to [Vietnamese parents] they think, 'it's politics, I don't want to get involved'.

Judy's involvement in the P&C helped offset what she perceived as the risks she had undertaken by electing to send her children to Amity (see Cucchiara 2013). She described, 'I'd just come from that train of thought that education starts at home and you know, if you can read and you read to your kids, the kids are going to be basically okay. It's what happens at home. And I know that in the public system you need to be more involved. ...'

Sandra describes herself as one of the first white middle-class families to enrol their children in Cooper Hill in 2005. She joined the P&C somewhat reluctantly, as she was not that interested in fundraising. However, there were only 5 or 6 people involved in the P&C and the school was struggling to encourage parent volunteers. 'So I sort of felt that they needed the help.' She continued:

The parent body is a lot more involved [now] but they're probably not as representative as they used to be. When I started the P&C was 5 people. They were all [LBOTE] people. Now it's quite different. ... I think a lot of other people don't have that culture of coming along and helping out the school, is probably the main reason. Because back when it was representative, it was still only a small amount of people.

While P&Cs took care to signal their openness to others, non-white parents spoke of being outsiders to this P&C network, making the prospect of attending a P&C meeting discomfoting. These interviewees perceived that many of those involved had in common

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more than simply their racialised and class status. Rashmi, introduced earlier, relayed: '[my daughter] brings home a note about the P&C and they say, "All are welcome." But I don't feel like going in there. Somehow it makes me, you know, not go for the meeting. ... But I don't really feel like engaging or seeing what is happening. Because of this communication—sometimes they don't want to talk. So I tend to avoid because of that.'

Galyta, an Indonesian-Australian graphic designer, had a much stronger sense of the specific moral culture of the P&C, which she felt disinclined to approach. She began by tentatively sharing 'it's my impression there are many Asian parents and Asian kids in [Birchgrove] but they are not involved in P&C. P&C always Aussie [i.e. white Australians]. Aussie have power! It's something—that's my impression.'<sup>6</sup>

What is this 'something'? Galyta thought it might be the cultural value placed on charity within Christian societies. What was noticeable to her as a migrant was that 'Australian culture is based on Christianity.' Public holidays fall on religious holidays. However, 'my husband is just Anglo, and his family is Anglo, and they think "it's natural".' This process of normalisation also occurs within the P&C. In this case, cultural difference is perceived by those who 'have power' as a question of moral norms, ('that's just what you do') rendering morally deficient those who do not adhere to this norm. This led Galyta to counter, 'But Asian people—we are good people.' Indonesian-Australian mother Yohana perceived that the white parents at Birchgrove, as in 'the people doing the P&C, those sort of people', 'they want to do their own group, like not so much mixing everybody.' Their preference was to associate with others of a 'similar lifestyle or sort of the—like the same interests.'

Research on the lower levels of participation of ethnic minority parents within

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<sup>6</sup> This quote has been reproduced verbatim.

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school communities (e.g. Lee 2005; Lopez 2001) has highlighted the structural and cultural barriers to parent participation, in particular noting that white, middle-class discursive practices shape most opportunities for participation, from attending meetings (conducted in English) to interacting with teachers.

The fact that parents like Rashmi, Galyta and Yohana are avoiding P&C meetings is the subject of concern and bewilderment among many white middle-class P&C members at Cooper Hill, in contrast to the lack of attention directed towards this issue at Amity. Avril, whose daughter attends the OC class at Birchgrove, was formerly a parent at Cooper Hill and told Eve that the non-diverse make-up of the P&C's membership, 'consumed' her when she was in a leadership role within the P&C. Furthermore, she explained that tensions sometimes arose within the P&C as the involved parents invested time fundraising for resources, which were, in effect, then diverted away from their own kids and towards the disadvantaged students in the school, whose parents were not actively involved in the P&C body. This feeling of discontent was not one she shared; Avril argued strongly that the P&C prioritise raising funds for heavily subsidised swimming lessons to target migrant and refugee parents whose children were not enrolled in private lessons. Avril was proud of the success of this project.

## **Conclusion**

This research helps to shed light on the complex layers of discomfort that arise when the feelings white middle-class gentrifiers in a diverse school setting aspire to have about contact with ethnicised others, and the feelings they find themselves having, fail to align. Less convoluted, it seems, are their responses to classed others, with whom contact is markedly less desirable.

The economy of feelings that circulate in this multicultural setting might be less

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intense that those feelings Ahmed attends to. However, the sociality of *these* quieter emotions — discomfort and comfort, desire and disdain — has significant effects. These feelings come to coalesce around the question of involvement in these four school community's P&Cs. We argue that these P&Cs have become social spaces dominated by class-based embodiments of authority and entitlement, which a range of others find discomfiting to be around. This has serious implications for non-white non-middle-class parents' and children's feeling of belonging within Australia's contemporary school communities, and provides insight into 'the insidious power and tenacity' (Zembylas 2011, 151) that persists in these parents' particular accounts of and encounters with racialised feeling states within school structures and their social settings.

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