Report on the project ‘Inter-Mural Wellington’

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(Source: Image painted by project participants, 2016)

Project background

Despite having citizenship rights and a brief introduction to life in New Zealand, resettling refugees often face a myriad of barriers to belonging. In previous research on identity in New Zealand, participants from the dominant Pākehā and Māori ethnic groups claimed that New Zealand is a bicultural nation as stipulated in the Treaty of Waitangi, and that other ethnic groups do not have the same claim to belonging as themselves. This ethnic exclusion compounded with the stigma associated with refugee status, often contributes to former refugees feeling isolated from the wider host society. Thus, there exists an incongruence between New Zealand’s non-discriminatory citizenship rights in law, and refugee and ethnic marginalisation in processes of integration. This incongruence is problematic as a lack of support from dominant ethnic groups may isolate ethnic minorities, which could restrict former refugees’ access to citizenship rights and lead to social inequalities.
Definitions

Refugee: The United Nations (UN) 1951 Refugee Convention defines a refugee as someone who,

Owing to wellfounded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his [sic] nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself [sic] of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his [sic] former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.

Despite the masculine pronouns, this statement applies to all genders. Individuals who meet this definition are eligible to be selected by the UN to be resettled in a country which is signatory to the convention.

Former refugee: Refugees who resettle in New Zealand through the annual UN quota become permanent residents. The term ‘former refugee’ is used in my research to acknowledge this transition from being a refugee to being a ‘New Zealander’.

Host society: The term ‘host society’ in my research refers to the society in which former refugees are being resettled.

Aims

To explore how New Zealand society could be more inclusive towards former refugees, I decided to facilitate a community painting project in Wellington for my Masters, which explored how theories of social connection may be practically applied to ensure that citizenship rights do not remain an abstract ideology, but produce tangible equitable outcomes. The project was informed by three broad sociopolitical objectives: to bridge academia, activism, and community development; to understand and enhance processes of former refugee and host society connection and social integration; and to improve access to rights for refugee-background New Zealanders. These goals far exceeded the capacity of the project; however, they are important to acknowledge as areas of academic and social development to which my research can contribute.

Due to the small-scale nature and limited time frame available for this project, I did not expect any extreme social transformations. I considered the project to be a success if it:
• Prompted dialogue on processes of refugee integration
• Taught participants something new in terms of what it means to be a refugee or someone from a different culture
• Challenged normative assumptions of home, belonging and visibility in Wellington
• Fostered social connections between research participants

Methods

Participants

Eight participants were selected to be involved in the painting project through a process of community networking: Five from the Wellington host society and three whom identified as former refugees. Undergraduate student Nick Tapper volunteered as my research assistant.

Initial participant meeting

At the beginning of the project a half-hour long participant meeting was held at Victoria University’s Kelburn campus. The meeting aimed to introduce participants to one another and the researchers, build trust and rapport, and inform participants about the project to ensure understanding of the research and participants’ rights and responsibilities.

Pre-workshop interviews

The following week, individual interviews were conducted in pre-agreed-upon locations around Wellington city. Each interview lasted half an hour, and took place in an environment where the participant and myself both felt comfortable and which was appropriate in terms of accessibility (taking into consideration transport and childcare). Chosen locations consisted of participants’ homes, the university, cafés, an art studio, and an art school.

Painting workshops

I then facilitated five painting workshops over five consecutive weeks, for two hours each Sunday, in a private seminar room at Victoria University. In the first workshop we (the researchers and participants) started by each introducing ourselves. We then took turns speaking about individual experiences and ideas relating to themes of home, belonging, and visibility in public space. The
participants then took time to reflect upon the group discussion and consider how to symbolically represent our experiences and ideas. Once we had ideas on paper we went around in a circle each sharing our images and negotiated how our unique images and symbols could connect together as a unified work. The second workshop then built on the first, with more sketches and collaborative mural designs. Once the group had a blueprint of how ideas would flow together, we sketched up the mural on a sheet of canvas measuring 100x140cm. The following three workshops focused on painting the canvas.

(Source: Photos by research assistant Nick Tapper, 2016)

**Post-workshop interviews**

Post-workshop interviews (following the same format as the pre-workshop interviews) were conducted to explore whether participants had gained new knowledge about each other throughout the painting process; whether their understandings of home, belonging, and visibility within public space had changed; and whether they felt more ‘connected’ to the other participants and Wellington city.

**The exhibition presentation**

The exhibition opening night involved me presenting our mural to the public at a local café in Wellington city. I invited participants to speak if they wished to publically identify themselves and share their experience of the painting process; however most chose to remain anonymous. Therefore, I did a short presentation that drew upon participant quotes, and left plenty of time for participants to interact with audience members and talk about the mural in their own way. Time was available at the end to observe the mural in detail, network, and share food and drinks.
Outcomes

As predicted, the painting workshops enhanced social connections between former refugee and Wellington host society participants, though not always in ways that I had anticipated. The use of humour was particularly significant in building trust and a sense of familiarity within the group, as joking and having fun relieved the pressure of participants feeling as though they had to perform to a particular standard or agree with dominant views. This lack of pressure, or a lack of negative ‘judgement’ as several participants described, enabled more open, honest, and critical dialogue and debate.

Humour also contributed to the development of a ‘common language’ whereby ongoing jokes became a shared social reference point. Familiar symbols on our mural such as the iconic Wellington bucket fountain and the windmills also became shared reference points, which the group could orientate themselves around and connect through. Whilst the diverse experiences associated with these symbols depicted the uniqueness of each individual participant and the complexity of their interwoven histories, identities, affiliations, and beliefs, there were also striking similarities in the feelings and emotions that these experiences evoked. Recognising these emotions in one another enabled individuals from different backgrounds to connect through an empathic embodied understanding which transcended language and cultural barriers.
Such emotional connections are significant as they enable individuals to recognise themselves in one another and close the perceived distance between ‘us’ and ‘them’. It is these empathic, human connections which inspire people to reach out and support one another as equal and valued citizens and enhance a sense of belonging for those who feel ‘out-of-place’. Participants also felt more connected to one another through participating in a shared experience which they could talk about outside of the research spaces, through finding common interests, or through making future plans together. In this manner, ‘social citizenship’ (briefly defined as social support) was being practiced as participants were performing a sincere welcome that extended beyond a pretence of acceptance to actually reaching out and supporting one another and enjoying one another’s company. These social connections are significant as research shows that individuals who are more socially connected are happier, and that happier people are more trusting of others and more likely to volunteer and contribute to society.

**Research analysis**

Whilst this project was too small to create wide social change in regards to the way in which Wellingtonians and other New Zealanders welcome former refugees, I argue that the new knowledge and social connections participants developed throughout the painting process did help them to feel more appreciated, welcome, and confident in accessing their rights and reaching out to assist others. Thus, participatory painting processes have potential for enabling more equitable citizenship discourses, practices and outcomes.

However, in pursuing social justice for former refugees and other marginalised groups, it is also important for New Zealand scholars, policy-makers, resettlement practitioners, activists, and local communities to acknowledge that newcomers are not entering a space free from history and power. Rather, they are entering a postcolonial nation with existing cultures, traditions, agreements and inequalities. Therefore, acknowledging the injustice of British imperialism and indigenous struggles for sovereignty rights is vital if we are to understand our post-colonial relations, continue righting past wrongs, and retain a relatively stable and peaceful country.

A couple of the participants mentioned the need to sort the Treaty before extending our welcome to others. Yet, this is not a viable solution when the global humanitarian crisis continues to escalate.
As I type, the battle of Aleppo is in the midst of a new wave of fear and violence and people are posting their goodbyes on social media, a final desperate plea for the world to remember them, to send help, to act now. In matters of international crisis, when urgent assistance is needed, Treaty discussions should not prevent New Zealand from welcoming refugees and directing resources towards resettlement and integration. Our internal ethnic relations ought not to obscure the fact that New Zealand is also a global constitute with international obligations, and that New Zealanders also have a role to play as global citizens.

Due to the need to juggle both internal and external commitments, postcolonial and current immigration conversations should be happening simultaneously. The interweaving of these discussions could ensure that all New Zealand residents and citizens are being represented in our national identity and future development, and that diverse individuals and communities have the opportunity to collaborate. The onus should not be on former refugees to prove themselves as worthy of being New Zealanders, but for New Zealanders to work together to inspire, enable, and support all those willing to live here to be the best versions of themselves that they can be. It is up to all of us, as hosts and newcomers, to collaborate to create a nation that we are proud to be a part of and contribute our unique knowledge, skills, and passions to.

Therefore, I argue that a shift in focus is needed within integration research, policy, and praxis to prioritise the understanding and performance of emotional and social citizenship and to enhance social capital. In encouraging a focus on social capital, I am not arguing that economic capital, employability, and market citizenship are unimportant in processes of integration. Rather, I am arguing that emotional wellbeing and social networks are essential precursors to a productive economy and peaceful society. Enhancing social capital and emotional wellbeing can assist former refugees in participating in society, confidently applying for work, and engaging in politics in a society which is welcoming, confident employing people with diverse ethnic and cultural identities, and not adverse to diversity, innovation, and change. This shift in focus is necessary to provide the support and funding needed to enable more projects like the painting project, which could benefit more individuals and subtly challenge negative refugee stereotypes and discriminatory practices.
**Dissemination**

**Presentations and conferences**

- Along with other students, I presented my research during a meeting of the Victoria University’s ‘Social Theory Spatial Praxis’ (STSP) research group in August 2016.
- I also presented the theoretical focus of my research alongside three other panel group members at the ‘Third Annual Social Movements Conference’ at Victoria University in September 2016.
- The conference was followed by a Refugee Symposium in Palmerston North in October, and a Refugee Conservatory in Auckland in November. Each of these events brought together a range of academics, refugee resettlement practitioners, former refugees, and other interested community members to share ideas and pave the way for future academic, policy, and practical resettlement collaboration.

**Media coverage**

My research was also widely disseminated to the New Zealand public through various news stories celebrating my winning of the Kate Sheppard Award, or advertising the exhibition of the group mural we produced through the painting project. Links to these stories are listed below:

Future goals

- Now that I have submitted my Masters’ thesis, I plan to publish this research in two academic journals, one focusing on the painting methods used, the other focusing more on the theoretical content of the research.

- I will also continue to disseminate this research through public presentations, and the mural is available for display at different community organisations and events.

- This research is also intended to inform a PhD, dependent upon obtaining adequate funding to support my future studies and community projects.