

CaDDANZ

Capturing the Diversity Dividend
of Aotearoa/New Zealand

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MEANINGS AND EXPERIENCES OF COMMUNITY AMONG OLDER ADULT RESIDENTS OF NORTHCOTE

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Researching home, place, and community in Northcote

This document is part of a series of four project briefs (CaDDANZ briefs 8-11) which collate distinct but interrelated sets of key findings from a research project that examined how older adults of 65 years and above create and maintain a sense of home and community in the Auckland neighbourhood of Northcote.

This study forms part of a wider suite of projects within the MBIE-funded CaDDANZ research programme which collectively investigate facets of population change and diversity in a range of different contexts. Overall, CaDDANZ aims to develop greater understanding of how diversity affects society and how, in turn, institutions and communities can better respond to diversity.

This neighbourhood-based study sits within a growing body of social science scholarship that has recognised the importance of ‘the local’ because this is where diversity is lived and negotiated in everyday interactions. While much of the academic literature and policy discourses tend to focus on ethnicity and culture, we would like to stress that diversity is complex and multiply determined by a broad range of factors, including gender, age, ability and socio-economic status.

We selected Northcote¹ as a research site for a number of reasons. Situated on Auckland’s North Shore, Northcote is typical of Auckland’s suburban landscape insofar as it largely features standalone homes in a residential area serviced by a local town centre. Its resident population of approximately 8,000 can be described as diverse with respect to socio-economic and educational backgrounds, professions, age groups and ethnic profile but the demographic profile of the suburb has shifted over time and there is significant geographic variation in the area. Northcote is a medium-income suburb but median personal incomes range from approximately \$22,000 in Akoranga and Northcote Central to \$39,000 in Northcote South and Tuff Crater. These intra-neighbourhood discrepancies largely reflect the presence of a significant public housing tract and are also evident in neighbourhood deprivation scores which are 8 and 10 respectively for Akoranga and Northcote Central but only 3 for Northcote Tuff Crater and Northcote South. As housing has become less affordable, home ownership among Northcote residents has decreased from 56 per cent to 40 per cent between 2001 and 2018. Northcote’s population is age-diverse but there is a higher-than-average presence of residents aged 65 and over. In Akoranga, home to a large retirement village, the median age is 43.9 years and 56 per cent of the resident population are not part of the labour force. With respect to migrant populations and ethno-cultural and linguistic diversity, at the time of the last available Census in 2018, more than 43 per cent of all Northcote residents were overseas-born.

¹ For the purposes of this project Northcote comprises the Statistical Areas (SA2) of Akoranga, Northcote Tuff Crater, Northcote Central and Northcote South. See Figure 2 for details.

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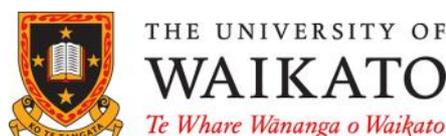
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Since the 1990s, Northcote has become home to a growing number of migrants from Asia. In 2018, 24 per cent of Northcote residents had been born in an Asian country. The share of residents who identify as 'Asian' has increased from just over 20 per cent in 2001 to 30 per cent in 2018. The largest ethnic group within the broad 'Asian' category were people identifying as Chinese, who made up 17 per cent of residents. This is also reflected in Northcote's language profile: Sinitic languages are prominent in most parts of Northcote. The suburb is also home to many Pasifika and Māori residents (nearly 10 per cent each). However, they are spread unevenly across Northcote with higher shares in those areas where public housing is situated.

Northcote is also currently undergoing a large-scale housing development programme and the revitalisation of the neighbourhood's town centre is scheduled to begin in 2021. Densification and a mixed housing approach (including public, affordable and market homes of varying sizes) will lead to significant population growth, a change in Northcote's demographic profile and a substantial transformation of the built environment.

Urban change, including population growth and the emergence of new kinds and expressions of diversity, raises important questions for policy makers, community service agencies, and local residents alike. These project briefs are designed to provide research findings related to the meanings and practices of community within neighbourhoods (CaDDANZ Brief 8), how people see difference and how diversity impacts residents' sense of home and community (CaDDANZ Brief 9), the significance of the local neighbourhood for the wellbeing of older adults (CaDDANZ Brief 10), and residents' perceptions and experiences of the Northcote Development (CaDDANZ Brief 11).



Figure 1 Northcote town centre

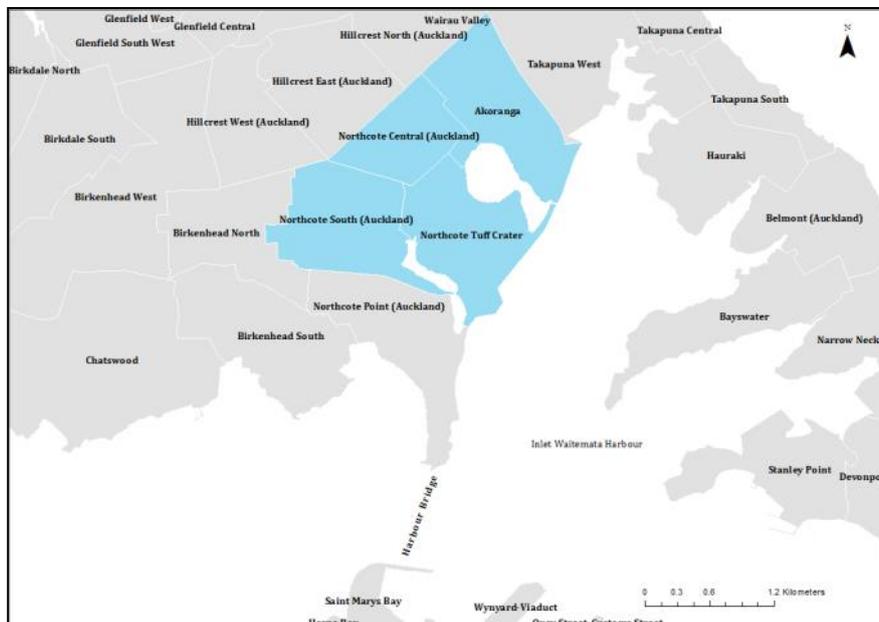


Figure 2 Northcote location



The research design

We designed a qualitative research project that employed multiple methods (semi-structured interviews, walk-along interviews, focus groups and visual methods) to better understand how older adult residents of Northcote generate and maintain a sense of home, place and community.

We engaged with each participant across five stages of the research. The first stage of individual interviews established residents' story of coming to live in Northcote, situating their life in the neighbourhood within their wider life story. The second research stage sought to better understand participants' sense and understanding of home, while the third explored their relationship to the local neighbourhood using walk-along interviews. The fourth stage of the research was a focus group with attention centred primarily on residents' ideas of what constitutes 'community'. The focus group also discussed residents' perceptions and experiences of the ongoing Northcote Development. The final research stage involved returning to participants' homes once more to talk about their experience of taking part in the project.

Sixteen people, aged between 65 and 89, took part. Out of these, 6 were between the ages of 65 and 75 and 8 were older than 75. Half the participants have a long-term history in Northcote, half are more recent arrivals in the neighbourhood, but not necessarily the country. Out of the 16 participants, 12 were women and 4 were men. Nine participants were born in New Zealand while the remaining participants arrived in New Zealand from China (4), South Korea (2) and the UK (1). Three participants identified as Māori. Five participants lived in owned family homes while 11 lived in public housing properties. Five participants lived in multigenerational family settings.

Findings

This brief summarises the meanings older residents attach to the idea of community and how this is expressed in day-to-day practices. It emphasises the role of the local neighbourhood—its public spaces, services and activities—in enabling ageing residents to remain part of community. It highlights how social change has shaped older residents' sense of community and their ability to stay connected. Changes in lifestyles and growing neighbourhood diversity have led to a sense of loss or greater difficulty of maintaining social ties for many participants, while new communication technologies are seen as both a blessing and a curse.

“It's about people”: meanings and practices of community in Northcote

Participants consistently emphasised that people and the relationships between them are at the heart of community. When reflecting on the meaning of community within the neighbourhood of Northcote, they described a range of everyday relational practices that form part of community-making. As explained in more detail below, relationships were built and maintained through routine interactions.

At its most basic, participants referred to “interaction with people” as an important way of making and maintaining community. As one participant put it: “It's communing. Because that's what community means. It means contacting and talking” (Pākehā, female). Routine interactions that were regarded as building blocks of community took place in fleeting encounters between strangers, in exchanges with local shop keepers and staff in neighbourhood institutions, and between neighbours.

Encountering people in the local neighbourhood was reportedly one of the most effective ways for participants to experience a sense of community. Although the encounters were mostly fleeting, they provided the seniors with opportunities to strengthen their connections with others on a day-to-day basis.

I have met people through there coming out the shop and I say 'oh, your hair does look nice' and then we get chatting and then I have met them in the street and we speak to each other as we pass, you know. (Pākehā, female)



A phenomenon that may best be described as “friendly recognition” (Kusenbach, 2006: 282) —that is, a sense of familiarity with and being ‘seen’ (that is, being visible and acknowledged) by people who remain relative strangers—played an important role in creating a sense of connectedness.

This lady here, I speak to her quite a lot, usually she is coming up as I go down because I used to walk more often than I am walking now and I met her the other day and she said ‘I haven’t seen you in ages’. I was quite chuffed and that was the day I was walking to the appointment so I couldn’t stop too long but you see people everywhere you go. (British migrant, female)

Indeed, simply ‘seeing people’ without necessarily interacting also imparted an experience of social connection and an antidote to the loneliness that older adults may feel when confronted with the realisation that their social circles have begun to shrink (see Irvine et al., 2020). One participant described how much she appreciates watching people at the library playing games or attending classes and public lectures: “You feel part of it, it doesn’t matter if you speak to people or not, you are in a group feeling and it is lovely.” (British migrant, female)

Importantly, accounts of relationships were permeated by examples that suggest that an ethics of care for each other is central to people’s understandings of community ties. For instance, when asked what community meant to her one resident said, “community implies care, caring for other people, doesn’t it?” Another participant stated that community means being able to rely on receiving help in a situation of need and, conversely, a third participant referred to his “social responsibility to help people” as part of building and maintaining community with fellow residents.

Such expressions of care were particularly evident in participants’ reflections on their relationships with neighbours. Accounts were replete with examples of “parochial helpfulness” (Kusenbach, 2006), such as neighbours offering a helping hand with practical tasks, exchanging knowledge and gifts, looking after one another’s properties in someone’s absence and expressing concern for each other’s wellbeing.

There are some more examples, such as when I lost my key to the laundry room door lock. I couldn’t open the door. I asked my next-door neighbour. They had more strength. They forced the door open. Then he said, the lock latch was broken, he’d ask another one to fix it. This other one was the man who helped me [previously] get rid of the rats. These neighbours are so good. On another occasion, I might have had some rotten food, and I had a serious tummy ache. I almost collapsed. My heart was not well either. The lady who remembered my birthday helped me. I had dialled the emergency number and called for a St John ambulance. She was so nice. It was 1 am in the morning, and she heard the ambulance coming. Then she opened her door, and she learned that I was sick. I was vomiting, and she said she wanted to accompany me to hospital. (Chinese migrant, female)

Caring and sharing also took place in other neighbourhood settings. Gardening, for instance, was a recurring feature of expressing care for others in the community. Many participants in the study described growing produce in their own gardens and sharing the excess with friends and even neighbours they didn’t know as a way of getting to know other people. This included a community garden which encouraged interaction between neighbours through sharing food.

Yeah and that is our pool garden which of course we need to get stuck in and do, as a community we would come in here and help yourself to veggies and that. (Māori, female)

Some participants in this study are actively involved in a local community centre and particularly concerned with making sure fellow residents, especially those in public housing, are well-connected and safe.

What I do is put on a mid-winter Christmas dinner and I invite all the people that live alone to come along and then I gave them a smoke alarm and I say I am going to come around to install that for you but I am going to come back every couple of weeks to check and see if it is working alright and for a start they weren’t very happy about it but now that I have been going there for a couple of months they look forward to it so I work my way in like that and in the end I can just go and pop in to see them. (Māori, male)

Keeping people safe also extended into timely discussions of how the large-scale housing redevelopment that is currently underway in Northcote is affecting local public housing residents (see Terruhn et al., 2020 for a detailed discussion). In this context, expressions of care were evident in the way residents with detailed knowledge of the development and the agencies involved in the process advocated for those residents who were less knowledgeable and who might be negatively impacted by the redevelopment.

They’ll say, ‘who are you?’ and I’ll say ‘I am an advocate for this person and I am an ex-community worker with so many years’ experience’ and that I used to deal with this person and I was also the one who applied to the Environment Court about the subdivision and that so they can’t push me out, just give me the chance to get in the door so that I can have a go at them, saying ‘no, you are doing this to the Tongans and it’s wrong’. (Māori, male)



Factors impacting community practices

The examples of sociality, recognition and expressions of care described above were significant for everyone we spoke with. However, people's ability to create and nurture social ties within the local neighbourhood was bound up with a wide range of factors ranging from local community infrastructures and institutions to broader social developments. In this section, we highlight three factors that impacted the residents' sense of community and the ways in which they practised community.

First, public spaces, services and amenities in Northcote are crucial for establishing and maintaining social ties. This is especially the case for older residents whose lives increasingly take place locally (see Irvine et al., 2020). Second, a number of social changes have affected residents' sense of connectedness. Most prominently, participants reflected on the impact of gradual changes in people's lifestyles on how community is practised, on the ways in which language barriers among Northcote residents impede interactions, and on the effects of anticipated demographic changes as a result of the Northcote Development—a large-scale housing and neighbourhood revitalisation programme (see Terruhn et al., 2020). Third, findings suggest that new communication technologies are a double-edged sword that may hinder interactions but also have the propensity to address issues such as language barriers.

Local neighbourhood spaces

Daily routines, from grocery shopping to doctors' appointments and participation in recreational activities, take place in Northcote's local neighbourhood. Proximity and convenience of local public spaces, services and amenities are of particular importance for older adults who are faced with declining mobility. A decline in physical mobility, for example, led some participants to reduce the number of visits they made to the local shops, which, in turn, meant fewer opportunities to interact with other people. Participants also found that they became less likely to actively engage in community activities. While many of them aimed to remain socially engaged, they found themselves unable to join or activities reduced as the ranks of attendees diminished.

Well I can't walk, I used to walk up to the bus but I can't walk very far now, and I certainly can't walk to go everywhere, not even to the letter box which is unfortunate because that is really when you get to know your neighbours when you are going up the road to get the bus or you are waiting at the bus stop and you are talking to whoever else is waiting and when you get the mail of course...because we are all getting older and some people have lost their driver's licenses, we decided to meet every three months instead of every month and we used to meet every month. (Pākehā, female)

While Northcote Central and its businesses and services offer opportunities for being in community, the local library stood out as an institution that is at the heart of community-making. Simultaneously, the library offers opportunities to while away a few hours, to observe and informally mingle with others, to chat with library staff and, especially for Mandarin speaking residents, to feel a sense of belonging through the provision of books in their home language and Mandarin-speaking staff. As the quotes below illustrate, participants describe the library as a welcoming gathering hub that enables their connections with other residents and that caters to residents' diverse needs.

I was thinking this morning we have got the best library, it is so friendly. I don't think anybody should be alone in Northcote if they use the library. It is so helpful, so friendly, the atmosphere, if you don't speak to anybody while you are in there, there is always something going on but the girls [librarians] are so helpful. (British migrant, female)

Even if I no longer babysit my grandchild, I still come here to borrow books. Not much social activities, but mainly reading books, sometimes for a whole afternoon. (Chinese migrant, female)

You see, there are a lot of Chinese book in the public library, and a Chinese librarian to serve the Chinese residents. There is dancing program for the Chinese residents. (Chinese migrant, female)

Local venues, therefore, are vital for the development of a sense of connection and community even though some encounters are only brief. However, more enduring relationships are a necessary feature of community life too. Many participants pointed out that local community organisations such as clubs, associations, and churches are essential to enjoy social encounters and practise community. Talking about her reasons for joining organised activities, one participant stated:

I go around and talk, there are about eight tables and I go around to talk to people at the tables and I am making friends because you see when you get older you don't really get the chance to replace the friends that die or become incapacitated or move out of town and it can be very lonely. (Pākehā, female)



Some places meet more specific needs. English language classes are an important example mentioned by a number of senior residents who immigrated from non-English speaking countries. Organisations such as the Northcote Chinese Association have been organising various self- or public-funded English language training classes for those who speak little English. Interestingly however, while some of the participants explained that the courses did little to improve their English language skills, they continued to go because the courses provided a valuable opportunity to socialise with others. This finding indicates that such services provide an important social function beyond their intentional educational purpose.

Other function specific venues of importance include, for instance, the Returned and Services Association. A Pākehā participant, for example, explained how significant the RSA is to him, facilitating vital social connections to people who share his life experiences:

[The RSA] is very important for veterans, yes ... unless you have served you've got no real comprehension of what it's like, so you can't really talk about it with someone that's never served. Whereas, up there, everyone can talk because they understand and it doesn't matter if you were in the army, the navy or the air force, it's all still military so you still understand the same concepts ... It makes it easy to communicate and it makes it easy to make friends because you have a common background. (Pākehā, male)

Being able to be involved with the local governance process at an institutional level is also an important aspect that can promote the community experience and wellbeing of senior residents in any given community settings (Phillipson et al., 2001). These civic participations can not only facilitate seniors' interactions with other residents within their community, but also allow them to have a say in many critical community issues that ensure their rights (Martinson & Minkler, 2006). However, this study revealed that, compared with many local-born and English speaking senior residents, the limited information and knowledge about the local governance structure and community resources have a significant impact on the civil participation of many seniors with immigrant backgrounds from non-English speaking countries. In one of the focus groups of this study, while the participants were talking about the community engagement of local residents, a Chinese migrant mentioned the following:

I have a desire to participate in the community, but I don't really know how to do this, what to do, who to speak with, no one in this community have told me what to do and how to participate. (Chinese migrant, female)

The importance of organised activities for enabling community was evident in participants' disappointment that the number of activities on offer locally had gradually declined.

One thing that I don't know if I have even mentioned is the fact that Northcote Senior Citizens group disbanded. It would be lovely if we could have something like that again. (Pākehā, female)

There were lots of programmes for elders from various churches but there aren't any more. I think this is the biggest one left. Before there were volunteers who taught us how to speak English or taught us how to use cell phones. They are not here anymore. It was so useful when they were here. (Korean migrant, female)

“Those days are gone”: social change and community disruption

The second finding of particular interest is that participants often referred to practices of interacting and looking out for each other—the building blocks of community—in the past tense and questioned how much neighbours care for each other today. A number of participants, especially locally born long-term residents, expressed a sense of loss and nostalgia as they navigate the perceived impacts of social changes that have turned a close-knit community into one where people are less likely to know each other well or participate in relationships of care. Residents articulated experiences of community disruption and fragmentation under three themes, which are discussed below. First, a gradual change in lifestyles has resulted in increasing individualisation with consequences for people's ability and/or willingness to build and maintain relationships with co-residents. This includes changes to labour market participation, housing affordability, gender roles, and new patterns of mobility. Second, growing diversity, especially linguistic difference, is perceived as a barrier to those all-important interactions with neighbours and other residents. This adds to a sense of not knowing people and not being able to get to know them. Third, while past demographic change is a concern, so is anticipated future change. Residents are concerned that rapid population growth and significant shifts in the demographic make-up of the neighbourhood as a result of the ongoing Northcote Development (see Terruhn et al., 2020) will further fragment community relations.



“Everybody’s just too busy”

Long-term residents reminisced that the Northcote neighbourhood of their young adult lives used to be a close-knit community “where everyone knew everyone else” and interacted with each other and helped each other frequently. To the disappointment of these participants, neighbourly connections had all but disappeared over time.

It is sad because it is no community anymore. Next door I know them by name but I have never been in their house and they have never been in mine and they have been there five years and I have probably only spoken to them twice in five years. (Pākehā, male)

The close neighbourly friendships of the past were underpinned by a homogeneity in age—raising young families together, with children forming the common bond—and the centrality of local life in earlier decades. Since then, transforming labour patterns have contributed to declining personal relationships among neighbours. People work longer hours and increasingly beyond the age of retirement. Dual breadwinners are now the norm in most families and people often work outside of their residential neighbourhood. Participants recognised that longer working hours are tied to increasing housing affordability and a need to earn enough money to pay off steep mortgages. Such developments mean that people are busier, spend less time in the local community, and have less time to socialise with their neighbours. The following quotes aptly summarise the transformations that have led to a perceived decline in communal activities:

I think the biggest change all around here immediately is that we used to know all our neighbours but because people are buying and selling much more often now than they used to do, people like us that stayed in one place, we’re a bit odd [laughter] and for that reason, you get to know your neighbours but it’s not quite the same as when we were younger, we were all young families with children growing up together who went to school together and played together...That sort of community vibe of blending is not the same, I don’t think, because lots of people—I mean we try to make it our business to talk to our neighbours so that we know who they are and they know who we are—but there are a lot of people that we talk to today who haven’t got a clue who the people are next door. Also, you don’t walk the same, well the younger people don’t, because they’re so busy, working probably and they have got the children in childcare if they’re little or in school and that’s when you used to see people, because you would walk and stop and chat and all that sort of thing—so you don’t have quite the same contact like that anymore. (Pākehā, female)

Because [as a woman] you were at home while your husband was working. We have neighbours on one side, he’s an engineer, she’s a doctor, they are both working flat out and I am lucky if I say two words to them in a year. The people just up the road have just bought a house, she’s an Asian lady working in the city, he’s a European guy working in the city. They’re gone first thing in the morning, they’re home late at night, they don’t want to see anybody, they don’t want to talk to anybody and it carries on further and further. I know very few people in my street now. (Pākehā male)

There was a lot more togetherness and things to do but as they’re having to work longer, they don’t sort of get out as much, it is hi, hi, talk, talk and go. They’re time poor (because they try to work as much as they can even in retirement). (Māori, male)

Some of the participants with a migrant background also felt that their commitments to childcare and family support roles impeded their ability to join communal activities. This was common among Chinese participants of this study, who function as the major caregivers in their household, especially caring for their grandchildren.

I used to live with my daughter. There were no community activities. I spent all day long looking after the kids. I did not go out often. When I did go out, I would be pulling the baby trolley, wherever I went, shopping, eating at restaurant, enjoy natural views, etc. Now I am independent, and am able to go to community activities, such as meetings, public lectures, learning English, singing, etc. (Chinese migrant, female)

Tied to diminishing leisure time were changes in home-making practices that used to be a strong basis for sociality between neighbours. Increasingly, home-making and DIY have been replaced by labour-saving technologies and commercial services. Some participants felt that these transformations meant that there were fewer opportunities for neighbourly activities and relations of exchange and care.

If a neighbour was building a fence you would go over and help him pour the concrete and everyone would sit around afterwards and have a few beers and it was very social ... Nowadays if you want a driveway you ring somebody up and say ‘pour me a driveway’. (Pākehā, male)



Finally, changes in the built environment were also seen to affect people's ability to establish and maintain social ties with co-residents. In particular, the construction of fences around local properties was noted by one participant as symbolic of changing times and the introduction of increasing isolation between neighbours.

Communities now are not communities any longer because once fences go up—when our children were here it was good because people down the road knew your children and would tell them off and things like this, and you would do the same and that was, well it didn't matter who you were or what ethnicity, you became a whole part. (Māori, female)

These changes in lifestyles affected patterns and frequencies of the senior residents' interactions with others in Northcote. Perceived generational shifts accelerated their sense of estrangement from others, particularly with younger and new residents. Compared to those younger and new residents, many older adults still tend to provide care to others within their community even as the act of caring becomes less actionable as they get older and they themselves need increasing cares. This further hinders their involvement within and attachment to the community (See Irvine et al., 2020).

Ethno-linguistic diversity

In addition to the transformations of people's lifestyles, the ethno-linguistic diversity of Northcote emerged as a theme in participants' reflections on the loss of community or of difficulties in building and maintaining relationships. Long-term Pākehā residents especially attributed their experience of no longer knowing neighbours to the greater presence of residents who spoke little English (see Cain et al., 2020). Language barriers were seen to inhibit interactions, from fleeting exchanges of greetings to more sustained communal activities.

Well, the old community was a very close community and you knew everybody and everybody spoke to you but now with the language difficulties, nobody says hello. You feel very isolated, it is an isolation thing more than anything else. And the other communities are utilising the area because they are in their own sort of groups but because you can't speak the language you can't integrate with those groups. (Pākehā, male)

At times, this experience of being unable to connect with non-English speakers was expressed in ways that are reminiscent of old anxieties that migrants 'take over' the neighbourhood and that their presence poses a threat to people's sense of belonging.

[I use the library] Quite a lot but... it is filled with Asians... I am a stranger in my own town, when you walk around you just notice how few of us [Pākehā] you will see. (Pākehā, male)

This fear did not go unnoticed by migrants who live in Northcote. As one participant told us:

I overheard them [Pākehā neighbours] talking like this: Someone was asking, 'who is going to move in?' 'A Chinese. Oh no, another Chinese!' In other words, they were not happy to have one more Chinese neighbour. They felt this was their country. (Chinese migrant, female)

Language barriers and concerns about not being able to communicate were also voiced by residents with a migrant background. Such difficulties played out between various linguistic communities as the following quotes illustrate:

When I just moved here, I felt it was not very convenient. Because of language problem, I could only greet the neighbours with simple words...When I met the Kiwis, I could only say 'hello', or 'good morning', a few words, and nothing more. If I talk to them, they would be talking a lot more to me, and I would become nervous, and would want to leave as soon as possible. (Chinese migrant, female)

We've got a Korean neighbour here. Our communication is limited to greeting words. He does not speak English either. If I speak English to him, he would not understand, and I do not understand Korean either. So, we can say nothing more than "Hello". (Chinese migrant, female)

It is a real ring around to get to talk to them [Tongan residents] and most of them can't talk English, they won't speak English, most of the older Tongans, they only speak in their own language. (Māori, male)

For some residents, a fear of creating misunderstandings in these contexts meant that they actively avoided talking to other people.

If he said some bad word about you to a Kiwi, you wouldn't understand. So, I think it is better to avoid any complications. I'd just shut my door and live my own life. This is the best thing I can do, because I know my language ability is poor. This is a big inconvenience, and I have suffered some loss for it. (Chinese migrant, female)



As much as we found that ethnic and racial boundaries were reproduced in reflections on community, there was also a strong desire for forging connections between people of different ethno-linguistic backgrounds.

From my perception, Northcote seems to offer quite a bit now to new immigrants, language classes, you know, teaching them about how to get on in the community in various ways but that doesn't involve us, it would be good if the two lots could get together because they could offer a lot to us and we probably could offer quite a bit to them. (Pākehā, female)

I like to get associated with Kiwis. I want to learn such things as flowers arrangement. The only problem is that I don't speak the language. I want to learn a lot of things from them. This is the place they have lived in for a long time, and they have a lot of knowledge. For example, they know better how to make fertilizer. The Kiwis are happy to teach you how to do it. They do not keep the knowledge to themselves. The only pity is that I don't speak the language. (Chinese migrant, female)

These reflections must also be read in the context of ageing which makes it more challenging to acquire new language skills (see Irvine et al., 2020). This challenge was experienced by both migrant and non-migrant older adult residents, as the following attests:

I think if I was younger I might be a bit more involved but now I am settled in my own way and although I accept the diversity and I am very happy to have the different cultures in my own house, I am not motivated to go out and try mix with the different communities because it is too hard, very hard. (Pākehā, male)

I do want to improve my language ability, but I feel it is beyond my strength. How to say, I can't remember it. See, the Daily English Learning is a very good program, but I can't remember the words. When I follow the speaking, I can understand, but afterward I'll forget it. My memory has lost, I think. (Chinese migrant, female)

As a result, linguistic differences can contribute to a sense of losing community. For some seniors who have lived in the Northcote area for a long time, their experience of community has shifted from knowing everyone and being able to talk to people living around them, to feeling disconnected from their new neighbours and uncertain how to proceed. And for those more recent arrivals in Northcote, it makes it more challenging to connect with others to develop a sense of community and belonging (see Cain et al., 2020). This exacerbates the feelings of isolation commonly associated with ageing, with potential negative impact on (Pot et al., 2018; See Irvine et al., 2020).

"It will fragment the community further": the Northcote Development

A number of the residents we spoke with were concerned that the redevelopment of Northcote would further fragment the community. They worried that the sheer volume of houses being built as part of the redevelopment would impinge on the sense of community that already exists among the neighbourhood:

I suppose you just have to go with it because that is what's happening, they are wanting to bring in all these people all the time... and our old Northcote is slowly changing, or rapidly changing to this new type build, particularly when you see the new build in Fraser and Richardson... it is huge! They are just flattening everything and there are going to be so many houses down there and that is only one area that they are going to work on and it is just pushing pressure on everything all the time and the schools and the medical facilities and all that sort of things, the shops. (Pākehā, male)

Well that is the word, community, the community is being lost in my opinion. (Pākehā, female)

Two reasons for their concern were articulated. First, a number of participants anticipated a shift in community dynamics as the community adjusted to changes in the configuration and prices of houses available in the area. For example, one participant expected that fewer larger (3 and 4 bedroom) homes would result in fewer families with children settling in the neighbourhood: "So you are not going to get families [and later] there will be less children" (Māori, female).

Other participants expressed concern that lower socio-economic individuals and families would be priced out of the area as house prices increased exponentially and housing availability became limited—a process described by one participant as "social engineering" (Māori, female).

What we assume is that the increase in existing homes may result in an imbalance of socio-economic makeup, you are going to get a lot more rich people here when basically this was a working class area, it is a decile 1 or 1.5 school, one of the lowest in the country and that reflects the income of the people here, mainly on benefits. (Māori, male)

Perhaps relatedly, some concerns were also explicitly raised about the relocation of public housing tenants that failed to account for residents' cultural and community-based practice, as the following attests:

The main thing that I am concerned about is how they are bullying, they are bullying families and splitting them up and that will change the whole social fabric of those families and their traditional values of them looking after. (Māori, male)

Second, participants worried that the revitalisation of the local town centre planned in the re-development may further fragment the existing local community. Currently, the shopping centre reflects the neighbourhood's ethno-cultural and socio-economic make-up in that it caters to a population with wide ranges in income levels and ethnicities, and to an Asian migrant population in particular. A number of participants felt that the gentrification of the town centre (see Terruhn et al., 2020) would result in business owners having to "move or else they close down". And this would negatively impact the sense of community they currently enjoyed: "Then you don't have that same community feel, you know?" (Maori, female).

"You don't need to speak to anyone": the impact of technology on community interactions

Among various social changes over recent decades, participants also drew attention to the ways in which communication technologies impacted community practices. Reflections were very mixed. While some participants regarded the use of devices, especially mobile phones, as detrimental for face-to-face contact, other participants emphasised the positive potential of new communication technologies to overcome barriers for interactions, especially the language barriers discussed earlier.

Some participants noted that the omnipresence of communication technology and automation increased their sense of isolation. For instance, one participant described how digitisation of the library check out system made her less likely to connect with people when she visits the library compared to the past.

Back in those days we had cards in those books and people didn't have a library card... Eventually we've gone to the digital system and now you can walk into the library and you don't need to speak to anyone, which I think is bad, I don't like that. (Pākehā, female)

Given the library is such an important site of interactions, such concerns are noteworthy. Another participant expressed frustration with people's use of mobile phones, especially in public. Focus group discussion revealed that participants felt the use of technology led to fewer opportunities to get to know the people in the community.

P1: And a lot of people don't just walk up the road anymore, they just get in the car. (Pākehā, female)

P2: And they don't talk on the bus, they are all on those phones, they are a curse. (British migrant, female)

P3: That is what I think. (Pākehā, male)

P2: They don't have conversations with those around them, I mean I don't go on the buses anymore but I know nobody speaks. I mean, I used to travel on the bus to work and that's how I used to make loads of friends, sitting on the back seat for half an hour going to work.

Collective: [agreement]

P2: But you wouldn't today.

P4: All too busy on their phones. (Pākehā, female)

P3: You see them walking down the road all on their thing. I've seen them sitting at the bus stop when I've been there and they are all sitting there [makes gestures as if texting].

Collective: [agreement and laughter]

P1: And they have all got their earbuds in their ears as well.

P3: So they are completely oblivious to anybody anywhere else.

By contrast, others articulated that technology facilitates their involvement in, and experience of, community. Online translation software, for instance, makes it possible for residents to communicate with speakers of other languages.

Now when I talk with my next door neighbour, I use a translation machine. I'd write down the translation and show it to him. (Chinese migrant, female)

Digital technology is also an important tool that enables residents with migrant background to maintain local and transnational community ties. Many Chinese seniors living in Northcote, for example, use a smartphone app that integrates multi-purpose messaging, video call, and various social networking services— WeChat—as a vital tool that facilitates their practice of online community, to connect with friends and families locally and overseas.

[I use WeChat] to keep in touch with friends. Friends from afar, we can greet each other. We have many old friends [living in Beijing]. In the evening, I'd read the WeChat messages and reply to friends' messages. In the morning, I reply to messages from Beijing friends, because they would have sent the messages the previous night and I would have already been in bed. In the afternoon, I'd read WeChat messages and send off some messages. (Chinese migrant, female)



Implications

The local neighbourhood is an important site of the everyday life of older adults living in Northcote. It plays a crucial role in shaping their social connections and wellbeing, particularly because older adults are geographically bound to their local neighbourhood spaces by shrinking life worlds and decreased physical mobility as they age. Ageing, and its associated decline in health and mobility, changes how senior residents engage with others in their local community and impedes opportunity to meet people within the neighbourhood (see Irvine et al., 2020).

The participants indicated that when it comes to community, people and relationships are paramount. The relational encounters that make community take place in local spaces that facilitate a sense of belonging to the community. Collective local spaces, such as the Northcote library and shopping centre, are thus vital for providing opportunities for the older adults to encounter and further develop relationships with others. Therefore, being able to provide older adults in a community with accessible and safe community spaces that can stimulate their interactions with others, as well as creating more social events that can facilitate collective experiences, are critical to promote a healthy, positive experience of community. Given that these services provide such important points of connection and potentially alleviate the growing social isolation faced by seniors with declining mobility in their later years, the disbanding of these services and events is concerning.

In a neighbourhood like Northcote that is currently experiencing rapid re-development and social transformation, many older adults are facing increasing challenges to maintaining their quality of life and wellbeing on a day-to-day basis. While this project brief has outlined concern from some older residents that their connectivity with other residents of Northcote has decreased over the years, they were also adamant that Northcote is still a community. Thus, they were concerned that the anticipated changes to the demographic profile of Northcote residents, stimulated by the re-development, would challenge the sense of community that already exists.

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