

## Setting the *Seen*: Whiteness as Unmarked Category in Psychologists' Writings on Race in Australia

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### Abstract

The present study offers a critique of white psychologists' writings on race relations in Australia. Particular attention is given to writings that focus on constructions of Indigenous peoples, and the interpretations given to such constructions by white individuals. Four dominant discursive repertoires may be identified within these writings: the construction of the binary categories of evil racists vs. good antiracists; the positioning of inter-group conflict as the outcome of cognitions that are based on naturally occurring differences; the construction of Indigenous peoples as always already subjugated; and the use of the term 'modern racism' in exploring racist practices. By examining these repertoires the intention is not to demonise particular theories or individual academics, but rather to develop an understanding of the ways in which whiteness as an unspoken category limits the potential effectiveness of psychological understandings of racism. If racism is instead conceptualised as a network of processes founded upon white understandings of subjectivity and the world around us, then we may be better situated to develop alternate ways of understanding racism that view whiteness as a part of, rather than external to 'diversity'.

### Introduction

Studies of racism in Australia often focus on the ways in which white<sup>1</sup> subjects talk about and position Indigenous peoples<sup>2</sup> and cultures (e.g. LeCouteur and Augoustinos 2001; Pederson & Walker, 1997; Reynolds

and Turner, 2001; Walker, 1994). This focus upon Indigenous peoples (particularly the problems that Indigenous peoples are faced with) often works to ignore the ways in which white advantage is predicated upon Indigenous disadvantage (Tannoch-Bland, 1998). Such a focus also works to construct Indigenous peoples as occupying racialised subject positions (with the category of 'race' being positioned as reflecting a natural distinction between groups of people), whilst the category 'white' is left unmarked – as the normative subject position (cf. Moreton-Robinson, 2000).

The aim of this paper is to outline some of the ways in which this 'masking of whiteness' is achieved in the writings of white psychologists in Australia. The intention here is not to demonise particular academics, but rather to draw attention to the institutionalised ways in which whiteness is both the normative, yet invisible, subject position of psychology<sup>3</sup>.

Similarly, we attempt to demonstrate the ways in which whiteness cannot be easily divorced from white subjects who benefit from white race privilege (cf. Nicoll, 2000). Therefore we seek to locate the work of white psychologists (ourselves included) within the broader epistemologies of psychology – epistemologies that conceptualise racialised differences in particular ways<sup>4</sup>. Thus the aim of the paper is not to conflate white psychologists with whiteness, but rather to examine the ways in which the two are interconnected, and thus inform each other.

Four dominant modes of talking about race in Australia were identified within white psychologists' writings. These were: 1) the focus upon 'evil racists', rather than looking at institutional forms of racism/race privilege, 2) the positioning of racism as resulting from cognitive processes, 3) the construction of Indigenous peoples as passive recipients of white colonisation and 4) the use of 'modern racism' as a useful distinction.

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'white' here is not used unproblematically, for we acknowledge the multiple, complex ways in which whiteness may be both experienced and embodied. Rather, we use the term to denote a culturally located set of subject positions that are founded upon histories of colonisation - histories which constitute systems of privilege.

<sup>2</sup> We use the term 'Indigenous peoples' in this paper as a small attempt at acknowledging the many cultures and nations that are subsumed by the terms 'Indigenous', 'Aboriginal' and 'Torres Strait Islanders'. The reliance upon such terms exemplifies the limits of the white ways of writing that we as white writers engage in, ways of writing that often subsume diverse groups of people within singular categories.

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<sup>3</sup> We acknowledge here that the texts that we examine can be read in multiple ways, but it is their relation to whiteness that we focus on in this paper.

<sup>4</sup> Specifically, the construction of race as a discrete category that may be separated off from other axes of oppression.

Thus by 'setting the seen' within the study of racism in Australia, it is hoped to point towards some of the ways in which we as white psychologists need to be more transparent about the epistemologies that we draw upon, and the categories that we construct.

### **The 'Evil Racist'**

The positioning of racism as being the result of the flawed intra-psychic processes of 'evil racists' achieves two outcomes: firstly, white academics are implicitly constructed as good anti-racists who can diagnose certain white subjects as being racist. Secondly, racism is constructed as being enacted only at the level of the individual white subject, which ignores (among other things) the effects of institutionalised racism (cf. Sanson et al., 1998). Thus, focusing on racism as an intra-psychic phenomenon is possible only when racism is conceived of solely as a site of oppression (Wong, 1994). What this ignores is that for an 'evil racist' to exist, they must do so within a social network that in some way reinforces their beliefs by constructing white privilege as normative.

If we are instead to understand whiteness as a formative aspect of racialised subjectivities in Western countries such as Australia (see also Seshadri-Crooks, 2002), then the oppressive practices upon which the hegemony of whiteness is founded works to construct all white people as beneficiaries of white race privilege. Thus the category 'racist' is a default, rather than pathological position. This is not intended to suggest that racism (in the form which it is normally expected to take – that of explicit acts of hatred or discrimination against groups of people) is something that we as white people do everyday, but rather to acknowledge that as subjects in a society that privileges racialised understandings of subjectivity, we stand to benefit from unearned privileges that are founded upon historically located constructions of difference (cf. Mackey, 1999).

### **The Inter-Group Conflict Problematic**

White psychologists' writings in Australia in the field of social cognition often focus on the ways in which differing social groups discriminate against one another on the basis of social identity<sup>5</sup>. This theorising accepts that cognitions such as categorisation and stereotyping are natural events (Hopkins, Reicher & Levine, 1997). The reality of the social categories that are investigated is also taken as natural (Augoustinos & Reynolds, 2001). This ignores the ways in which group differences (e.g. as for racism) are reliant upon institutional practices that position people as inhabiting

<sup>5</sup> The aim here is not to make a judgement as to the validity of such theories *per se*, but rather to explore how such theories accept racism as a normal social event, and the ways in which this masks whiteness.

specific subject positions. In other words, racialised categories are taken as reflecting natural points of difference - that subjects can be arbitrarily grouped according to bodily features is thus accepted as an *a priori* basis for racism.

Thus by accepting discrimination as a natural function of subjects' cognitions, we as white psychologists run the risk of reifying points of difference as reflecting significant social factors, rather than conceiving of social factors as being caused by constructed points of difference (Henriques, 1984). For example, one of the effects of colonisation has been that Indigenous subjects are positioned as the racialised Other. This works to locate the site of difference within Indigenous subjects. It is in this way that the construction of racism as a cognitive function may in effect position the objects of racism as to blame for racism itself. By this it is suggested that explicit acts of racial prejudice are viewed as responses to an actual difference, rather than as enactments of white race privilege (Wellman, 1993). This maintains the belief that white privilege/racism is a normal reaction to some external object of difference.

Rather than considering racism as a cognitive process, it may be more beneficial to examine the ways in which certain understandings of subjectivity are privileged over others. Thus we may view the minimal group studies upon which social cognition is based (e.g., Tajfel, 1969) as reflecting the larger framework of a white epistemology rather than processes inherent to individual subjects (Henwood, 1994; Howitt & Owusu-Bempah, 1994). In this way the focus upon racialised differences as reflecting an important social distinction is a normal white way of being in a white world. Thus the challenge is to interrogate the structural inequalities that shape and are propped up by whiteness, rather than attempting to 'change cognitions'.

### **Benevolent Whites/'Aboriginal Plight'**

Another way in which whiteness is masked in white psychologists' writings on race in Australia, is through the positioning of Indigenous peoples as 'objects of power' (Luke, 1997). This is often achieved by reference to Indigenous life quality statistics (such as health, housing, life span etc) without adequately outlining the historical contexts of such statistics.

Augoustinos, Tuffin & Rapley (1999) refer to this positioning of Indigenous peoples as passive recipients of colonisation in the terms of 'Aboriginal plight'. Augoustinos et al. found that the white participants in their research used the discourse of 'Aboriginal plight' to position the issues that Indigenous subjects face as being caused by their Indigeneity. This meaning, that the negative relationship between colonisation and poor Indigenous

life quality statistics could be glossed as the result of Indigenous subjects' inability to adapt to colonisation, rather than due to colonisation and white privilege.

This positioning of Indigenous people as passive recipients also ignores the history of Indigenous people who have challenged the hegemony of whiteness, and who have returned the gaze of whiteness (Moreton-Robinson, 2000; Oxenham et. al., 1999). Thus the construction of Indigenous peoples as always already subjugated by whiteness works to limit Indigenous agency, and to manage the unsettling that Indigenous land claims (for example) produce for the white nation (Riggs & Augoustinos).

Interestingly, these same discourses of us and them are often implicitly drawn upon in the work of white psychologists. This is done by naming the issues that Indigenous peoples face, without examining the relationship between Indigenous disadvantage and white privilege. Thus such research may list differing forms of Indigenous disadvantage, but fail to locate this disadvantage within a social/political context that often seems to perpetuate negative stereotypes about Indigenous peoples, and may also fail to outline the histories of colonisation and genocide that Indigenous disadvantage is predicated upon. What this works to achieve is that the whiteness of psychology is left unmarked, and thus the category of 'racist' is reserved for explicit acts of violence against Indigenous peoples.

### The Traditional/Modern Racism Binary

The final way identified within this paper in which whiteness is masked, is through the suggestion that racism in its contemporary ('modern') form is inherently different to more explicit forms of 'traditional' racism (Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995; Pederson & Walker, 1997). Whilst it may well be that explicit forms of racism are no longer generally socially acceptable, conceiving of modern racism as being markedly different runs the risk of masking the outcomes of *any* form of racism. The construction of the category 'modern racism' may be seen as positioning racism as a form of historical artefact – 'people *used* to be more explicitly racist'.

Furthermore, research in the Australian context seems to demonstrate that traditional and modern forms of racism are not so easily separated (Walker, 2001), and that regardless of the type, racism is still the everyday experience of Indigenous subjects.

Thus as Michelle Fine (1997) suggests, racism can be usefully conceptualised as being (at least) double faceted: as there being racism *for* and racism *against*. This meaning, that racism not only oppresses certain subjects, but that such oppression is based upon the privileging of other subjects. Thus research which focuses on differing types of racism *against* (whether

that be 'modern' or 'traditional') ignores the benefits that systemic racism endows upon all white people.

### Ways Forward<sup>6</sup> – Transparency in Research on Racism

It would seem then, that rather than focusing on different 'types' of racism, or attempting to locate racism within individual 'evil racists', the task for white psychologists who wish to challenge racism, is to examine the ways in which we ourselves are complicit with the systems of oppression that inform whiteness (cf. Ettinger, 1994). This may entail speaking out about discriminatory practices that may arise at the legal, political or cultural level (a practice that the APS has recently taken on board, see APS, 2003; Cooke, 2000). It may also necessitate a change in the pedagogy of psychology, where *all* students are encouraged to locate themselves as members of cultural groups, rather than solely seeing minority group members as 'having culture' (cf. Sonn, Garvey, Bishop & Smith, 2000). In this way the category 'white' may be made more salient, and thus allow for the challenging of the ways in which unearned white privilege is accrued.

Such challenges are also necessary at an epistemic level, where the tenets of psychology must be understood as founded upon historically and culturally located understandings of subjectivity, rather than being universal truths (Bhavnani & Haraway, 1994). Talking about whiteness thus requires a critical reflexivity, where we as white psychologists are willing to locate ourselves within networks of oppressive practices, and be willing to be transparent in the ways in which we work (Selby, 1999). For it is only through such transparency that whiteness may be revealed as a culturally contingent, rather than always already site of power.

Thus it is important that we focus on the ways in which we may develop a more 'socially accountable psychology' (Davidson, 1998), rather than continuing to search for universal truths to which psychology as a discipline can lay claim. In this way we may be better positioned to engage with some of the foundational intentions of psychology, which saw the discipline as one which is critical of oppressive social systems (Bradley, 1999; Bradley & Selby, 2001).

A final important point, is that there may well be times when white psychologists needs to work with Indigenous communities. This may be at the request of such communities, or because white psychologists are at times appointed the role of working in Indigenous communities. Whilst it would be glib to ignore the power relations that are endemic to such work, it would indeed be neglectful if we as white psychologists were to shun such work altogether (Selby, in-press). This is

<sup>6</sup> 'Ways Forward' refers also to Swan & Raphael's (1995) important attempt at addressing Indigenous mental health issues.

not the message of this paper. Rather the suggestion is that white psychologists' need to be aware of the relationship between Indigenous disadvantage and white privilege, and to continue to challenge the ways in which institutionalised racism is enacted through the discipline of psychology. For to simply withdraw from cross-cultural work would be to a) deny Indigenous communities that which at times may be their only opportunity to work with psychological professionals, and b) ignore the role that we as descendants of white settlers have in working towards reconciliation in this country.

### Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to speak about the ways in which whiteness is often left unspoken in white psychologists' writings on the relationships between Indigenous and white people in Australia. As can be seen, this is achieved in multiple, often overlapping, ways. Indeed this 'multiplicity of whiteness' may be seen as one of the ways in which whiteness maintains its normative status – it is difficult to pin down, and thus difficult to challenge (Riggs, 2002).

In order to make visible white systems of representation, we as white psychologists need to engage with a form of critical reflexivity, where we are transparent about the histories of colonisation and genocide, and where we are willing to engage with the critiques that Indigenous peoples continue to make (cf. Johnson-Riordan, Conway Herron & Johnston, 2002). For to ignore such critiques is to continue to enact whiteness as a normative category, and to perpetuate the notion of Indigenous peoples as passive recipients of colonisation.

Through a focus on the whiteness of psychological epistemologies, it has been suggested that it may be possible to develop an understanding of the ways in which whiteness as an unspoken category limits the potential effectiveness of psychological understandings of racism. If racism is instead conceptualised as a network of processes founded upon white understandings of subjectivity, then we may be better situated to develop alternate ways of challenging the edifice of racism, and the hegemony of whiteness.

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