

# **‘The fine line between compensation and taking advantage’: A discursive analysis of race privilege**

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## **Abstract**

White Australians’ acknowledgments of race privilege or complicity with colonialism continue to come under scrutiny for their ‘confessional’ role in speaking of racism only to yet again ‘move on’ from it. In a similar way, discourse analytic studies of racism continue to be criticised for their failure to produce ‘real world’ outcomes, and for their inability to ‘shift’ rather than merely ‘describe’ the existence of racism. Nonetheless, we suggest, there is considerable utility to be gained from an approach to combating racism that takes as its starting place an examination of white race privilege. In this paper we discuss how an application of discourse analysis to the examination of race privilege in the everyday talk of white Australians holds great potential for identifying the commonplace, indeed banal, ways in which race privilege is played out. The identification of such speech patterns, we suggest, has considerable utility for developing interventions into the function of race privilege, and for maintaining an explicitly political psychological focus on the actions of white Australians (towards Indigenous people in particular). This stands in opposition to the aforementioned simplistic voicing of the existence of privilege that often does very little to examine the attendant implications of privilege in very real life and practical ways.

## **Introduction**

As a matter of protocol, we begin this paper by acknowledging, as two non-indigenous Australians, that we live and work upon the land of the Kurna people, and in so doing we recognise their sovereignty as First Nations people.

Making this acknowledgment, however, must in our opinion signify more than simply protocol. It must be connected to a praxis

wherein Indigenous sovereignty is recognised not only as a fact that continues to exceed the claims to sovereignty made on the part of the Australian nation, but that there is an acknowledgment that Indigenous sovereignty is not something that non-indigenous people can speak for. As Fiona Nicoll (2000) states: “Indigenous sovereignty exists *because* I cannot know of what it consists; my epistemological artillery cannot penetrate it” (p. 370).

Yet there are certain things related to Indigenous sovereignty of which non-indigenous people *can* speak, namely the ways in which sovereignty continues to be denied by white Australia, and the ways in which such denial serves to accord considerable privilege to non-indigenous Australians. And thus it is to matters of racial privilege that we speak within this paper. In so doing our intention is not to create a protocol for confessing to racial privilege – this, we suggest, would do very little to actually engage in a praxis whereby the fact of Indigenous sovereignty is continually recognised as the ground from which non-indigenous scholars and activists write and work (Nicoll, 2004). Rather, our interest is to explore how racial privilege circulates in very concrete ways in the lives of non-indigenous Australians, with a particular focus on the experiences of those of us who identify or are identified as white Australians.

Locating ourselves firmly within the discipline of psychology, we provide one particular account of race privilege, based upon the framework of discursive psychology, which advocates for a politically engaged psychology capable of examining the actions of white Australians in non-individualising, non-internalising ways. Locating privilege in this

way, we suggest, allows for an understanding of privilege as thoroughly located within social contexts wherein oppression and privilege circulate simultaneously, and where the management of privilege may be seen as something that white Australians are very much invested in.

### **Discursive Analyses of Racism**

There now exists within the field of discursive psychology a considerable body of research focusing on racism (e.g., Augoustinos, 2002; Augoustinos & LeCouteur, 2004; Hook, 2006; Howarth, 2006; Riggs & Augoustinos, 2005; van Dijk, 1992; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). As is to be expected, the theoretical and philosophical leanings of discursive psychology, framed as they are by a critique of individualism, biologism and internalism, continue to receive a significant amount of negative attention within the mainstream of psychology (see articles in Manstead & Wetherell, 2005, for a summary of this). Such negativity dismisses discursive psychology as not sufficiently rigorous, unempirical, too subjective and thus failing to provide 'real world outcomes'.

In contrast, our claim within this paper is that discursive psychology is very much able to engage in analyses that do more than simply state that racism exists: we suggest that it can actually show us how racism functions and thus how it may be challenged. As it focuses specifically on the rhetorical functions of talk, and locates such talk within an interactional context, discursive psychology is equipped to identify the commonplace ways in which racism is enacted, and more precisely in the context of this paper, the ways in which racial privilege is both managed and legitimated. As such, discursive psychology provides ways through which to understand how particular forms of language use, particular turns of phrase, particular metaphors, and the relational nature of language function to enable racist talk as a normative, rather than exceptional, way of making oneself understood.

Yet, as we have just suggested, discursive psychology, through its focus on language, does not simply document the language of racism: it can also elicit ways of shifting language use and highlighting the ways in which inequality is structured into language. This has particular implications for the

challenging of racial privilege, as we elaborate throughout the remainder of this paper.

### **Race Privilege**

It is important to recognise, of course, that examining the ways in which race privilege is enacted in the everyday talk of white people will not necessarily alter the institutionalised nature of racism. As Dorothy Roberts (2002) has suggested in the context of the US, recognising racial discrimination and enacting laws to combat it has not significantly reduced the economic disadvantage and social hostility experienced by African American people (amongst other marginalised racial groups). Nonetheless, the endemic nature of racism requires multiple approaches in order to render visible its ongoing violence.

In Australia, the continuing forms of colonisation that take place result in dramatic disparities between the health and well-being outcomes of Indigenous and white Australians. Corollary to the disadvantages experienced by Indigenous people are the privileges accorded to white people, privileges that come as a result of the ongoing legacies of colonisation, dispossession and genocide. Understanding how racial privilege functions to legitimate colonisation, deny Indigenous sovereignties, and warrant white belonging in Australia is thus an important aspect of challenging racism, and in particular the ongoing failure on the part of white Australia to engage in respectful relationships with Indigenous people.

We can see racial privilege at work in the everyday ways in which white people benefit from living in a country that accords paramount consideration to the needs of white people (Riggs & Choi, 2006). In her work on white race privilege, Jenny Tanno-Bland's (1998) outlines 47 examples of how white people benefit from unearned privilege. Some of these include the assumption that as a white person:

- In Queensland, I can go into any public hospital and not have my recuperation hindered by my frustration that such infrastructure was funded from stolen wages from my people (perhaps my own parents, siblings or myself) who are still waiting for the balance to be released by the Queensland government.
- If I am depressed, I can go to a counselor, psychologist or psychiatrist who shares my

basic cultural assumptions and psychic world view, and who will not explain that I must change my belief and value system, forfeit my cultural identity, in order to exist in this society without a high level of pain.

- As an academic, I can, without penalty, be blissfully ignorant of any culture but mine (pp. 34-36).

Such example of white race privilege work by normalising whiteness and thus justifying colonisation. Those of us who identify as white can presume that our culture is the norm, that other people will see the world the way we do, and that our health will not be hindered (though will most likely benefit) from ongoing histories of oppression.

Some examples of racial privilege in the everyday talk of white Australians appear in discussions of race relations amongst white Australians that a) identify Indigenous people, but not white people, as belonging to a racial group b) assume that a white model of subjectivity is appropriate for understanding the experiences of all people, c) claim that Indigenous people are always already subjugated 'objects of power', and d) legitimate colonisation via particular constructions of Indigenous people and cultures. These four examples (amongst many others that could be identified) serve to normalise white hegemony through associating Indigenous people with notions of pathology. This assumed connection results in two main outcomes that we identify here as impacting negatively upon the health of Indigenous people: the justification of exclusionary practices, and the blaming of Indigenous people for poor health outcomes.

The forms of privilege we have outlined thus far function to legitimate white people's claims to belonging by reifying a particular model of subjectivity, namely the rational, autonomous individual of liberal humanism. Elizabeth Peel (2001) suggests that claims to liberalism are often used in highly variable ways to justify the status quo, and thus to legitimate oppression. Thus, as she suggests; whilst "liberal principles – such as meritocracy, freedom of the individual and so on – are often viewed as common-sense, cultural 'common places'" (p. 544), they are in actuality often deployed to condemn the rights of marginalised groups, and thus to reassert the freedom of particular individuals only. Liberalism is

therefore "the perfect tool for the oppressor's use... [as it allows dominant group members] to sit on the fence, avoid taking sides [and] denounce polarization" (Sarachild, 1974, cited in Peel, 2001, p. 545). In relation to racism, this often results in dominant group members refuting the need for affirmative action strategies, through the suggestion that everyone has access to a 'level playing field' (Augoustinos, Tuffin & Every, 2005). The ways in which marginalised racial groups are denied access to the benefits enjoyed by dominant group members is thus seen as being due to what is constructed as either inherent pathology or a failure to achieve, rather than as a result of oppressive social structures.

We thus suggest that examining racial privilege is an important facet of challenging the rhetoric of equality, and its role in legitimating the benefits that white people gain as a result of living in a colonial nation. We will now elaborate this point through a brief analysis of some extracts of talk from a focus group with Australians focusing on white/Indigenous relations.

## Analysis

### Extract 1

Andrew: [In regards to Mabo] ... You just have to be careful... a backlash ... in the sense that not too many people get very upset that 'why should they being having all these handouts' in a sense.

John: ... if they're going to abuse it, particularly if they abuse it then if it comes up again that ... well people will say 'what are you going to do with it, last time... alcohol and what ever ... you've abused your position'.

Andrew: There is a fine line between them being compensated and them taking advantage of their position as it is felt to be. A lot of Anglo-Australians would umm are sort of are concerned about, they feel they are taking advantage; they're given much more than they need....

Mark: Like I've got an uncle that lives in Kempsey in New South Wales north coast and they've got an Aboriginal, couple of Aboriginal groups up there and the government sort of got them housing and they burnt the houses to the ground so the government built them brick houses and um you saw them driving round in brand new Pajero four wheel drives or what not

and you sort of get the impression that they sort of got all this and you see what they could do to it and they just don't seem to appreciate what they are given.

In this extract constructions of 'us and them' are used to highlight the differences between groups referred to by the participants as 'Anglo-Australians' and 'Aboriginals' in ways that render Indigeneity the problematic category. Thus 'Anglo-Australians' are depicted by the participants as being 'upset [that Indigenous people are] having all these handouts', and that Indigenous people are 'taking advantage; they're given much more than they need'. Such accounts of Indigenous people serve to position Indigenous people as 'taking advantage', rather than as being justly compensated for the impact of colonisation. Thus as Andrew suggests, 'there is a fine line between them being compensated and them taking advantage of their position'. Statements such as these work to position white people as a) not to blame for Indigenous disadvantage (indeed Indigenous people are seen as having 'money thrown at them' – as being privileged) and thus b) that there are not implicit advantages to being recognised as white in Australia.

Interestingly, however, despite the participants' continued focus on Indigenous people as 'taking advantage' or 'getting all this [stuff]', we can nonetheless read these accounts for what they do not mention, namely the fact that it is a particular dominant group (i.e., white Australians) who are 'giving out' benefits to Indigenous people. Both Mark and Andrew note that Indigenous people are 'given' things, denoting at the very least a group of people who are in the position to 'give'. The implication of this is not only that there must be a reason for such giving (i.e., colonisation), but that this particular group has the power and indeed privilege through which to give. This point about those who are in the position of 'giving' is also signaled by Mark's suggestion that there is a lack of appreciation. His reference to appreciation in the context of 'giving' signals the importance of that which is given, and the privileged position from which such appreciation is expected.

In this extract we can therefore see some of the ways in which the advantages that white people hold simply by being white are ignored,

and instead Indigenous people are depicted as receiving 'all these handouts', handouts that are seen as unwarranted. The privilege held by the white participants (and the white government they refer to) is nonetheless evident in the extract in the subtle ways in which the participants orientate to notions of 'giving' and 'appreciation'.

In the second extract, participants move on from talking about 'handouts' and instead talk about land rights claims:

#### Extract 2

Mark: Something the media failed to bring out – the sort of aid – you've been given all this chunk of land and that it was sort of 'save the backyards' kind of mentality and a lot of people got scared... the truth of the matter was that unless they had continual contact with their land they didn't have a claim under that decision so I think that people failed to realise that and that scared a lot of people.

Andrew: Umm and I was surprised 'cos I guess you read about... some group that was about to make a claim on Adelaide and it really freaked me out this is bullshit.

John: They've already claimed part of Brisbane, haven't they a claim....

In this extract Mark introduces the topic of land rights by locating sovereignty rights as 'aid'. Such a depiction of Indigenous people fails to acknowledge ongoing histories of colonisation by constructing the white Australian nation as generously giving aid or assistance to Indigenous people, rather than land rights following on from the fact that title to land was never ceded by Indigenous people. Constructing land rights as 'aid' allows Mark and his fellow participants to ignore their own privileged location as white Australians and instead focus on Indigenous people as 'freaking out' or 'scaring' white Australians.

Of note in this extract is the varyingly repeated expression of surprise. If we are to accept the veracity of these claims, rather than read them as disingenuous forms of denial aimed at claiming a lack of knowledge on the part of the participants in regards to land rights, then it is possible to see the privilege of whiteness at work within the extract. In other words, the very fact that the participants can

appear so surprised by claims to native title is a result, we would suggest, of the ways in which white Australians are often able to ignore issues that we do not see as pertaining to us: being blissfully unaware (at least until we are 'surprised' and 'freaked out') is one of the privileges that results from identifying as white in Australia.

Also in relation to the hegemony of whiteness and its resultant privileges, Mark introduces a point of clarification about land rights decisions in order to disclaim the need for 'a lot of people [to get] scared'. By referencing a High Court finding that denied land rights on the finding of 'no continual contact', Mark is able to demonstrate to his fellow participants that such claims are often inherently untenable. Yet, as Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2004) suggests, this is only the case if white interpretations of land ownership are accorded priority. In contrast to Mark's privileged claim to the authority of white laws, then, it is important to emphasise that Indigenous law and relationship to country continues to exceed the claims made on behalf of the white nation, at the same time as the nation continues to deny rights to Indigenous people in very concrete ways.

As with the first extract, this second extract highlights the subtle ways in which we may see examples of race privilege being enacted in the specificities of talk. In addition to our overall claim that white Australians hold considerable privilege on a daily basis, it is thus possible to see how this privilege is played out in everyday conversations.

### **Conclusions**

As we have suggested throughout this paper, talking about racial privilege within Australia holds particular implications for how we understand the psychological relationships that exist between white and Indigenous Australians. Rather than focusing on internalised or individualised accounts of such relations, we have provided one account of the role that race privilege plays in particular constructions of Indigenous people.

This leads us to suggest that rather than only working to develop ways in which the discipline of psychology can better support or engage with Indigenous people, it is also important to look at the ways in which white

people talk about Indigenous people, and how this often reflects our privileged location. As we have suggested here, it is necessary to examine how oppression or social exclusion is produced in a relation to privilege, and how this results in health disparities between Indigenous and white Australians. Such an approach may thus engender an understanding of racialised power that refuses a simplistic notion of dominance/subordination, and which instead examines the complex ways in which all Australians are positioned in a relationship to colonisation and the ongoing denial of sovereignty. Challenging racism and race privilege is thus about much more than just pointing out offensive statements or 'including' marginalised groups within the discipline of psychology. It is also about contributing to an understanding of the mundane ways in which privilege is enacted, and developing ways of rendering language use visible to white Australians and exploring the implications of particular ways of understanding our selves and our relations to others.

Whilst such a focus on racial identities may read in places as a rather deterministic account of racism, it is thus not one that precludes social change. Rather, our suggestion is that social change can only occur once white people are able to recognise how racial subjectification works, and how it produces white identities that are always already invested in racial privilege (Riggs & Augoustinos, 2004; 2005). Being accountable for this investment is not the same as being stymied in attempting to challenge racism and race privilege. Instead, it is to understand how any challenge to racism by white people is always produced in a relation to ongoing histories of colonising violence.

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