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Problematising the Discourses of the Dominant: Whiteness and Reconciliation

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Abstract

This article investigates how underlying forms of power can affect the political actions of those in the dominant group, in this case white Australians. To do this we identify connections between the discourses used by white Australians involved in Reconciliation, the power and privilege of whiteness in Australia, and participants' understandings and actions towards Reconciliation. Using Parker's (1992) approach to discourse analysis, four discourses were identified from interviews and focus groups with white Australians involved in Reconciliation. These were labelled 'indigenous project', 'institutional change', 'challenging racism', and 'bringing them together'. We argue that understanding the power relations that underlie the political actions of those in dominant positions is critical to ensuring the goals of anti-racism are achieved. Discourse analysis may allow us to gain a deeper understanding of the power and the potential impacts that may flow from particular positions and how power may be made more visible to the dominant group.

Problematising the Discourses of the Dominant: Whiteness and Reconciliation

There is a strong body of work that addresses the challenges of colonisation and oppression in different parts of the world within a broader framework of reconciliation. Wessels and Bretherton (2000) wrote that; “Reconciliation constitutes one of the main challenges to humankind as it crosses the threshold into the new millennium.” (p. 100). In Australia, a formal process of Reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians began in 1991. This article draws on the findings from a research project that explored whiteness, that is the dominance and privilege that comes with being white, and its relationship to white Australians’ participation in Reconciliation.

Reconciliation was a key recommendation of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC) aimed at addressing the systematic discrimination Indigenous Australians were experiencing (Johnson, 1991). It was planned as a 10 year process and its mission statements was to achieve “a united Australia which respects this land of ours, values the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage, and provides justice and equity for all.” (Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, 1993, p.3). Reconciliation is about the symbolic recognition of the important place of Indigenous Australians; education of the non-Indigenous community about Indigenous people’s history and the disadvantage they have endured; improving relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people; and local community-based initiatives to address Indigenous disadvantage (Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, 1999, 2000).

Reconciliation in Australia stands apart from other reconciliatory policies and actions in other countries. It is difficult to compare Australia’s process with South

Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission because of the different social, cultural, political and historical factors and motivations for pursuing transformation via truth commissions (Short, 2005). For example, South Africa was in a process of transitional justice, in which democracy needed to be restored after violations of human rights. On the other hand, Australia has a liberal democracy in place; but it was the foundation upon which this democracy was built, colonial dispossession, that is the issue. A comparison can be made between Australia and countries like New Zealand/Aotearoa, Canada and the United States that have taken some of necessary steps towards reconciliation, such as recognising prior ownership of country, legislating policies aimed at self-determination, and addressing political representation of indigenous peoples. Unlike these countries, the colonisation of Australia did not involve any formal settlement processes, that is, treaty between the non-Indigenous invaders and the indigenous people (Short, 2003).

In recent years, there has also been some debate on the degree to which reconciliation was really focused on achieving justice. Tickner (2003) wrote that a treaty was originally influential in establishing reconciliation, however, the less political goals of education and attitudinal change became the focus. Short (2003) suggests that the focus on 'social' justice separated the process of addressing social inequality from the need for reparation of the past injustices of dispossession and oppression and the need for recognition of Indigenous political rights.

Despite the shift in focus, the Reconciliation movement engaged people across Australia and provided Australians with the opportunity and information to reject explanations of disadvantage that relied on negative stereotypes of Indigenous Australians and to understand disadvantage as a product of colonialism as well as

institutional and cultural racism (Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, 1999, 2000). The responses amongst the non-Indigenous community towards Reconciliation, however, have been complex. There was concern, embarrassment, and shame about failing to understand and solve the disadvantage facing Indigenous Australians (Newspoll, Saulwick, Muller, & Mackay, 2000). Many Australians were perplexed and confused about how issues such as these might be solved and were caught between calling for inspired leadership and compassion and the comforts of racism and cynicism. This perhaps reflects Australia's struggle between discourses from the colonial period, such as protectionism, segregation, and assimilation, which oppressed Indigenous people and the emergence of discourses in the 1970s related to racial and ethnic equality, cultural diversity, human rights, self-determination, and sovereignty (Augoustinos, Tuffin, & Rapley, 1999; Curthoys, 2000).

With this context in mind, the broad aim of the research was to explore the discourses white Australians involved in Reconciliation used to discuss their own participation in Reconciliation. These discourses operate within and reflect a broader set of racialised power relations and informed the way white Australians spoke about Reconciliation, the focus for the process, the targets for change, and the subjectivities of the white Australians involved. These power relations relate to the unfair and normative positions of dominance and privilege white people hold in Australia and other countries such as the United States and in the literature have come to be termed whiteness.

The discourses and power of whiteness

Whiteness also refers to the normativity of being white, that is, the invisibility to white people of the privilege and dominance they experience as a consequence of being white. Simply put, white skin is privileged by institutions and practices and provides

material and psychological entitlements to white people (Brodkin, 1999). A broad definition of whiteness is “...the production and reproduction of dominance rather than subordination, normativity rather than marginality, and privilege rather than disadvantage” (Frankenberg, 1993, p.236). Although white people may experience their whiteness differently depending on class, gender, sexuality, and so on, whiteness operates and is maintained and reproduced within an overarching racially stratified society, in which whiteness is afforded power and privilege (Hartigan, 1997; Thompson, 2003). The ideology of white superiority and hegemony can be viewed as the other side of the relationship leading to racial oppression (Watts, 1994; Watts & Abdul-Adil, 1994).

Challenging one’s sociopolitical position as well as that of dominant institutions, practices, and ideologies has largely remained a process oppressed groups have engaged in to create social change (e.g., Freire, 1972; Montero, 1990; Watts & Abdul-Adil, 1994). This is consistent with arguments made by both Freire (1972) and Montero (1994) that it is only those who have been oppressed, those who have deeply felt their oppression at a cognitive and emotional level and have evaluated it as negative, who will undertake actions to change the situation. However, there is optimism for and some action being taken in developing the sociopolitical awareness of dominant groups as a way of addressing racism (e.g., Nakayama & Krizek, 1999; Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992). In this article we argue that a sociopolitical awareness of whiteness by those in dominant positions is important in ensuring the goal of a particular action is achieved. We use the discourses that emerged from interviews with white Australians involved in Reconciliation to illustrate underlying and unseen (only to those in dominant positions) forms of power. We then discuss how these affected white Australians’ involvement in

Reconciliation. Towards the end of the article we explore the idea of discourse analysis being used as tool to enable us/the dominant group¹ to gain a deeper understanding of the power and the potential impacts that may flow from particular positions.

Reproducing whiteness through anti-racism

The power of whiteness can be reproduced in a number of ways, including the way we do research, produce knowledge, and create histories (see Smith, 1999) as well as through the way national identity and belonging is constructed (see Hage, 1998). This power can also be reproduced through anti-racism practice. Simply not recognising whiteness within anti-racism practice reproduces its power. Moreton-Robinson (2000) discussed how although feminists have considered the oppressive conditions faced by indigenous women, these investigations are often blind to the manifestation of white race privilege in and through the relations between white and indigenous women. As such, the subject positions and knowledges of white women remain invisible and unmarked, while Indigenous women's subjectivities are objectified. The power of whiteness also gives white women the opportunity to dismiss, ignore, or rebuff the knowledge Indigenous woman have about whiteness, thereby suppressing knowledge about whiteness and maintaining white racial domination and privilege. Thompson (2003) identified that non-white people's efforts toward anti-racism are expected and considered neutral and unmeaningful as they are viewed as 'interested parties', while the efforts by white people are counted as extras.

Related to this is anti-racism's reproduction of whiteness through its primary focus on the 'other' as the problem, rather than white domination (Moreton-Robinson, 2000). The power of whiteness means that white people are in a position to define issues for Indigenous people and represent their voices. It is this power that needs to be

¹ The first author of this article is a white Australian and the second author is a black South African.

challenged within anti-racism practice, rather than giving minority groups a voice or developing more inclusive spaces (Marcus, 1999). Indigenous Australians already have a voice and it is not necessary for non-Indigenous Australians to confer this voice (Marcus, 1999) and white people conferring Indigenous voices may result in newer forms of assimilation (Glover, Dudgeon, & Huygens, 2005).

Thompson (2003) and Lattas (1993) have both identified how white teachers and academics construct the notion of 'good politics' and take a position of knowing and deciding what authentic anti-racism is and what characteristics determine who is a 'good white'. However, not interrogating one's 'good politics' maintains the power of whiteness and perpetuates colonial power and control over Indigenous people. In Australia, Reconciliation has come to represent the values of a 'tolerant' liberal humanism through which the relations of power in everyday life are translated into benign and worthy individual sentiments (Moreton-Robinson, 2000). By making a moral choice to be involved in anti-racism, the 'good white' is able to distance themselves from extreme racism (Marcus, 1999; Moreton-Robinson, 2000).

This is not to suggest that white people's efforts towards anti-racism are wasted because they may be reproducing dominance and privilege, but to highlight how power can affect our/their commitment to political action. The empathy we feel about the oppressive treatment of marginalised groups does not exist outside the constraints of politics and culture and an individual's sense of identity and power (Moreton-Robinson, 2000). Therefore the good intentions underlying a commitment to anti-racism cannot be relied upon as independent, objective guides to decent behaviour. White people's position within anti-racism means that while our/their actions may be committed and compassionate, the power of whiteness underlying these actions may not be seen and

therefore continue to result in disempowering practices (Moreton-Robinson, 2000; Webster Brandon, 2003).

Method

Participants

Thirty one white Australians who were involved in Reconciliation volunteered to be part of the research. Participants were introduced to the research through Local Reconciliation Groups (LRGs) in metropolitan and regional areas. LRGs were community groups designed to inform non-Indigenous Australians about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, culture, and identity and the social and economic disadvantage and discrimination experienced by Indigenous Australians as part of the process of Reconciliation (Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, 1999). Each of the participants identified themselves as being white and Australian. Nineteen of the participants were women and 12 were men and their ages ranged from their mid-twenties to late sixties (see Green, 2004).

Interviews and focus groups

Participants were involved in two separate individual interviews or an initial focus group and follow-up individual interview. The interviews were conversational (Burgess-Limerick & Burgess-Limerick, 1998) and began with the researcher stating that she was interested in understanding what Reconciliation meant to them and how they came to be involved in the process. The interview questions were then organised around the topics listed below.

1. Participants' understanding of Reconciliation and the nature of their participation.
2. Participants' reasons for becoming involved in Reconciliation.
3. Challenges participants faced in becoming involved in Reconciliation.

4. Overcoming the challenges participants faced in being involved in Reconciliation.

The interviews and focus groups were transcribed and the researcher developed visual diagrams to illustrate the different goals, challenges, and successes of participants' involvement in Reconciliation. These diagrams were shown to the participants at the beginning of the second or follow-up interview, which was used to clarify and address any issues or points of interest.

Analytical framework

Discourse analysis was used to analyse the material collected from the interviews and focus groups. Discourse analysis focuses on studying how language is constructed through cultural resources to produce discourses or sets of meanings, which appear coherent, solid, and stable (Blackman & Walkerdine, 2001; E. Burman & Parker, 1993). This provides a particular account of how discourses constitute subjectivity and the social world and enables a critique of the implicit ideology that exists within discourses. For this research we adopted a discourse analytic approach that has been discussed by Henriques et al. (1998) and others, which we refer to as the 'power and subjectivity' approach. The focus of this research is to explore how whiteness is described and constituted in the context of Reconciliation and how it affects the understandings and actions of those involved in Reconciliation. What it does not do is identify the discursive strategies (i.e., jokes, exclusions) through which whiteness is protected (e.g., Billig, 1997). This difference is between describing the meaning and relevance of whiteness and investigating how it is reproduced and protected within everyday talk.

The 'power and subjectivity' approach to discourse analysis adopts a Foucauldian concept of power and power relations (E. Burman, Kottler, Levett, & Parker, 1997; Parker & Burman, 1993). Rather than viewing power as a single, static, and repressive

force emanating from a particular structure of the state and exerting itself on the individual, Foucault understood power as productive (E. Burman et al., 1997; Foucault, 1969, 1980). Relations of power are established, consolidated, and circulated through discourses that function as ‘truth’ (Foucault, 1980). Through continuous processes of power, subjects are gradually and materially constituted, always undergoing processes of power and similarly exercising this power.

Subjectivity is “...individuality and self-awareness – the condition of being a subject...” (Henriques et al., 1998, p.3). Within the ‘power and subjectivity’ approach subjectivity is considered a process of movement through various, and at times conflicting, discursive positions (Henriques et al., 1998; Mama, 1995). It is constantly produced out of social and historical knowledge and experience. The Foucauldian approach to subjectivity views the self as being positioned within a fragmented discursive space, torn between different competing discourses (E. Burman et al., 1997).

Different subjects take different positions in discourses and subjectivities change as the subject moves through different discourses (Mama, 1995). Positions in discourses are related to gaining power in a relationship; different statuses depend on the positions taken within discourses, which are determined by the availability of different meanings in understanding one’s experience (Hollway, 1989). While discourses delimit the sayable, they don’t imply closure and they provide spaces for new statements to be incorporated within a discourse (Henriques et al., 1998). They are not discrete entities that function for certain interests, but are made up of shifting networks of associations, bodies of knowledge, expertise, agencies, and problems (Blackman & Walkerdine, 2001).

Analytical process

An analysis of a discourse aims to deconstruct the relations, conditions, and mechanisms of power and identify the production, practices, and conditions through which discourses emerge (E. Burman et al., 1997; Foucault, 1969; Parker, 1992). This enables us to see discourses as historically specific, multiple, and potentially contradictory rather than as unchangeable givens (Henriques et al., 1998).

Different proponents of the 'power and subjectivity' approach have outlined a number of different methods for analysing interviews or other textual material. The analysis conducted for this research relied mainly on Parker's (1992) proposed ten criteria for discourse analysis, but was complemented by methods described by other theorists (i.e., Henriques et al., 1998; Mama, 1995). Parker's (1992) criteria particularise the conceptual work of Foucault on construction, function, and variation of analysis of discourses (see for example, Foucault, 1969, 1980). The first six criteria focus on uncovering the discourses within the material and identifying the objects and subjects that exist within a discourse (Parker, 1992). This set of criteria also considers the picture of the world a discourse presents, how discourses relate to each other, and the way a discourse reflects on its own way of speaking. The seventh criterion questions how and where the discourses have emerged from.

While Parker's (1992) first seven criteria are considered necessary for the identification of discourses, the last three consider how institutions, power, and ideology are related to discourses and add a moral/political dimension to discourse analysis. The first of these focuses on identifying the discursive practices that reproduce institutions. The second specifies power by identifying which groups are expected to gain and which are expected to lose from the employment of a particular discourse, as well as, who would want to promote the discourse and who would want to dissolve it.

The final criterion explores the ideological effects of discourses that justify oppression and prevent subjugated discourses from contributing to history.

Findings

Seven discourses were identified from discussions with white Australians involved in Reconciliation. Three of these were labelled ‘reasoning discourses’, which were about why participants became involved in Reconciliation. The remaining four discourses were categorised under ‘actioning discourses’, which are focused on in this article, and were about how racism against Indigenous Australians might be tackled. These four discourses were labelled ‘indigenous project’, ‘institutional change’, ‘challenging racism’, ‘bringing them together’. Extracts are given to illustrate the explanations of the discourses. Each of these discourses related to different issues that needed to be addressed by Reconciliation and different positions for white people involved in Reconciliation. The discourses are not independent from one another and were used interchangeably by participants in discussing their involvement in Reconciliation.

Indigenous Project

Deadrie

And, well, I heard a story recently about a guy [Indigenous] who had a job who brought himself an expensive pair of runners and his uncle came into the house and said “Oh I need a new pair of shoes” and put them on and walked off with them. And there wasn’t anything he could do, he had to give them to his uncle out of respect for his uncle and if he had made a fuss about it, it would have created a lot of bad feeling in the family. It doesn’t give them the motivation to go out and get a job when what they earn is treated in that manner.

Greg

I think they must, as part of their working out their own future, they have to come up with some sort of, particularly the isolated communities, some sort of commercial future for themselves because I don’t see welfare as any

assistance to them in the long term. Obviously, their artefacts, paintings and things like that may well be a major saving for them. That is a real money-spinner. So that they can become economically viable but still remain on their lands and still have a degree of traditional life there. But they'll have to find some form of economic viability if they want to retain their degree of independence and their degree of tradition in society.

In this discourse the disadvantage Indigenous people face was understood in terms of how Indigenous people approach things. Therefore, the main task for Reconciliation was to change this so that Indigenous people are able to enjoy way of life of white Australians. Solutions proposed by participants for these identified problems were about Indigenous people changing aspects of their lifestyles or approaches to certain things and success was to be measured according to white Australian measures, such as economic viability. These solutions remained tied to dominant and normative structures and practices and echo the protectionist and assimilationist policies which attempted to remove or control the 'bad' characteristics of Indigenous people (Anderson, 2003; Attwood, 1989; Broome, 2001; Hollinsworth, 1998).

The role for white people involved in Reconciliation is as advisors to the Indigenous community about how to address the disadvantage they experience. Solutions are defined according to dominant and normative structures and practices of white society, rather than responding to Indigenous people's needs and definitions of disadvantage. Historical, structural, and systematic forms of racism are not included in explanations of disadvantage within this discourse. The focus was on overcoming Indigenous behaviours and lifestyles that prevented Indigenous people living happily and working in Australia.

As well as identifying the different objects and subjects of a discourse, one criterion for clarifying the existence of a discourse is participants' reflection upon a discourse (Parker, 1992). An example of this reflection is illustrated in the extracts

below.

Louise

Meredith: Yeah, that's something that would stop you from getting into that trap of...

Louise: Yes, of them being a do-gooder to help these people and its like, no, that is not it, you know. We're looking at intelligent people, they don't need me to go round helping them, you know. It's us as Australians, all doing, doing for the benefit of our community.

Institutional Change

Derrick

And I think before we can move on and build any of the relationships or build the bridges with any group in society you will always have to acknowledge the past and accept responsibility. Accept ownership for that, I suppose. When there's also arguments being put forward about, you know, "that was generations ago", "it's not my fault", "why should I be blamed for that". I think people who say that miss the point really. It's not a question of blaming or accepting blame, it's a question of saying this is an awful thing and we should acknowledge that and say sorry and say how can we do things better.

Julia

Power, yes people in power not wanting to give something up and not encouraging people who are not in power to do the same. 'Cause we are going to have to give something up I think to get Reconciliation working and when I mean give something up, Aboriginal people are so attached to their land they are going to want some of the land back and some sort of compensation financially, I would imagine, when it comes to the crunch.

In the 'institutional change' discourse the disadvantage experienced by Indigenous people was identified as being caused by Australia's oppressive history and continuing institutional racism. The role of Reconciliation was understood as needing to recognise Australia's oppressive history and changing institutions that disadvantage Indigenous Australians, rather than expecting Indigenous people to change. This discourse has been illustrated as existing historically by the records of white Australians challenging Australia's oppressive history and institutions (e.g., Attwood, 1989; Hollinsworth, 1998).

Policies such as Reconciliation can provide opportunities for white Australians to begin feeling differently about their position within Australia. However, participants did find some difficulties in negotiating a different position in Australia, in terms of challenging the history and institutions that have privileged them. In another extract from Julia we see the difficulty in being positioned as a citizen for change, while also being closely tied to Australia's history and identity. This extract also illustrates a reflection on the 'Institutional Change' discourse, which support its identification as a discrete discourse.

Julia

So there is still a question mark as to... I don't want to say that settlers had just done all the bad things to Aborigines, there were a lot of improvements I think in many ways in their lifestyle but I don't hear any recognition on the side of the Aborigines who are heard talking much here.

Challenging Racism

Peter

And when I'm working with non-Aboriginal staff I spend a lot of time trying to help them understand different cultural perspectives. And in the city, in particular, most of the staff don't know much about Aboriginal culture at all. In the country more so, they deal with Aborigines a lot more, but in the city they're a long way behind. So I'm really keen to get non-Aboriginal staff to have a real good look at themselves in terms of their prejudices and their biases. And you know, everyone says "I'm not racist", and all this. But they certainly have a very biased cultural perspective and lots of stereotypes that are very hard to break.

This discourse was about challenging the racist attitudes and behaviours by other non-Indigenous Australians. Racism towards Indigenous people by non-Indigenous people has existed in Australia since colonisation, in spite of policies such as the protectionism that, in part, aimed to protect Indigenous people from violence and harassment of white Australians (Attwood, 1989; Broome, 2001; Hollinsworth, 1998; Markus, 1994). In this discourse, the participants attempted to take on challenging the racism they identified in other non-Indigenous Australians.

Metro Focus Group

Thomas: And I feel if we approach those individuals on a one to one basis they'd be fine. I'm talking about the individual white person that we know who comes out with racist remarks, but when you get down to them on a one to one basis and just chat quietly and logically, I don't think they're racist...

Carol: They just don't know.

Participants did not necessarily identify racist attitudes and behaviours of others as extreme, but saw them as unintentional and naïve; a result of being misguided about race issues or lacking the awareness, compassion, or knowledge to challenge their racism. In response to this, participants positioned themselves in the role of teacher to other non-Indigenous Australians, based on what they believed to be their more knowledgeable and empathetic understanding of Indigenous communities and cultures.

Metro Focus Group

Thomas: I admired those Noongahs who came and just talked about their lives.

Carol: I know.

Belinda: But it's like they have to expose themselves to receive some acknowledgement. I would find it difficult.

In this reflection on the discourse of 'challenging racism', the expectations upon Indigenous people needing to share their personal histories and experiences of disadvantage to non-Indigenous Australians to help with attitude and behaviour change. Asking Indigenous people to share their personal histories with non-Indigenous Australians was common in Reconciliation to help explain and illustrate the racism they have experienced.

Bringing Them Together

Gina and Mathew

Gina: Well, fundamentally to be able to incorporate umm, one section of the community, which has tended to be historically, isolated, I mean by the events of history, so that we can live together in peace and harmony.

Mathew: Mmm.

Gina: And be all a part of one integrated Australian community, rather than them and us.

Derrick

And develop an understanding of Aboriginal culture and understanding of perhaps language; maybe even make language available to learn. As they do with some foreign languages now in schools. So, kids grow up with an understanding of history, an understanding of cultural difference, understanding of kinship systems in Aboriginal systems. And then being able to; they are then able to become tolerant adults and peaceful adults.

The ‘bring them together’ discourse was also organised around changing the attitudes and behaviours of white Australians, but focused on uniting Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and cultures to create a peaceful and harmonious Australia for us all to benefit from. A key component of this was the need for non-Indigenous people to gain a greater understanding of Indigenous culture. This reflects the goals of multicultural policy in Australia, which were aimed at encouraging cultural pluralism, rather than considering change within the political and economic spheres of society (Hollinsworth, 1998). The position of the white Australian involved in Reconciliation was as a co-ordinator of cultures, similar to the role taken by white Australians in multiculturalism (Hage, 1998). In the ‘bringing them together’ discourse Indigenous people are identified as symbolising the difference that exists and the need to have Indigenous culture shared with non-Indigenous people.

Ruth

I’m hoping that white people showed a bit of compassionate, sympathy, and care and got to know the Aboriginal people. There is a certain threat, I think we’re all racists somewhere, and there’s a certain threat that other races

present to us because of the colour of their skin or their different customs and things like that. But once you get to know them that threat disappears, they are just people. They worry about the crime, they worry about paying their bills.

Central to this discourse was differences in culture, which in the view of participants could be addressed by promoting a shared and common humanity amongst all people. Therefore, the focus is on cultural differences rather than political inequities, which can be addressed through cultures coming together, rather than interrogating and addressing inequality. The concept of a shared humanity also led to the development of protectionist policies, which eventually ended because cultural differences could not be dissolved (see Attwood, 1989; Broome, 2001; Hollinsworth, 1998).

Discussion

The different discourses presented highlight different issues related to Reconciliation and different subject positions taken by participants involved in Reconciliation. These are organised around Indigenous lifestyles and approaches; the history of colonialism and current institutional racism; racist attitudes and behaviours of other white Australians; and difference and divisions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. It is through these discourses that we can begin to describe whiteness and unfair distributions of power in the context of Reconciliation in Australia. In the next section we consider how these discourses affected participants' subjectivity and involvement in Reconciliation. Following this we will highlight how discourse analysis may be useful in making the power underlying the political commitments of dominant groups explicit, which in turn may increase the effectiveness of actions towards attaining justice and equity.

Implications of discourses

The degree to which participants' own subjectivity was implicated in an

understanding of racism and whether the power of whiteness was problematised or not differed between discourses and was dependent on the different subject, object, and relations identified in these different discourses. In the 'indigenous project' discourse interrogating whiteness was avoided by focusing on the Indigenous person as the problem. Indigenous people become the scapegoats for white people's explanations of Indigenous disadvantage, which has ensured the continuation of colonisation (Doolan, Dudgeon, & Fielder, 2000; Smith, 1999). Hodgetts, Masters and Robertson (2004) have shown how because of the unequal distribution of power, media representations of health inequalities often resulted in victim blaming and shifted attention away from the social determinants of health. This often means that little focus is given to structural issues, which are required for systems change. Focusing on the individual and ignoring historical and institutional forms of racism prevents any disruption of the ideologies supporting oppressive structures and practices and limits the complex understanding of Indigenous people's experiences of disadvantage (Brah, 1992). Not examining the discourses or narratives used by the dominant group means we fail to examine the dynamics of racialised power and will be limited to interventions aimed at changing those in marginalised positions (Rappaport, 2000).

The closest participants came to acknowledging the power of whiteness was the 'institutional change' discourse. In this discourse the structures and practices that privilege white Australians and place them in dominant positions were identified as oppressing Indigenous Australians. As such, the power relations of whiteness were explored to a greater degree than in other discourses. However, the interrogation of racism and whiteness continues to be avoided by only attending to race and racism as it exists in social structures and practices and not in one's own subjectivity (see Webster

Brandon, 2003). They were able to distance themselves from their complicity with racism by focusing on institutional racism and leaving their own whiteness unchallenged. An ambivalent relationship with Australia's histories and institutions in the 'institutional change' discourse also complicated by the way participants understood racism within Australian society and their own subjectivity.

While racism may appear to be positioned closer to participants in the 'challenging racism' discourse interrogation of one's own subjectivity was avoided by focusing on the racism of other white people and presenting themselves as 'good' white person (see Thompson, 2003). This is similar to the 'institutional racism' discourse, except the focus is on other white Australians rather than social structures and practices. At times, participants accepted and empathised with other white Australians' negative stereotypes of Indigenous people. This meant participants were able to benefit from their proximity to racist views, while also being able to separate from them (Hage, 1998).

In the 'bringing them together', discourse the differences and divisions between Indigenous and white Australians were depoliticised, which meant the dominance and privilege of white people's position in Australia could be ignored (see Moreton-Robinson, 2000; Webster Brandon, 2003). Within this discourse, as with anti-racism strategies that rely on exposure to different cultures, the black person remained the object of focus and location of difference; while whiteness was not identified or problematised as one of the multiple differences (Henriques, 1998; Moreton-Robinson, 2000). As such, white people remain separate from, and have no need to address themselves as part of the problem.

Between these discourses, the degree to which participants acknowledged and

problematised whiteness and their role in racism shifted. Different subject, objects, and relations separated participants' subjectivity from racism and an awareness of whiteness. White people have the power to choose whether or not to be involved in anti-racism (Markus, 2001; Moreton-Robinson, 2000; Webster Brandon, 2003) or interrogate whiteness as part of their anti-racist efforts (Aal, 2001; Bérubé, 2001; Thompson, 2003). This research has also shown how white people can engage with processes, such as Reconciliation, so as to avoid any interrogation of dominance and privilege. This has implications for the attainment of justice and equity; hegemony is maintained by problems being defined in a way that does not threaten the position of the dominant and privileged groups in society (Prilleltensky, 1994).

Discourse analysis and awareness-raising

We suggest that getting people to problematise their whiteness through discourse analysis may be a useful form of engagement with whiteness that allows awareness-raising of dominance and privilege. This may be through those in dominant and privileged positions listening to and reflecting on analyses such as the one presented in this article; discussing, critiquing and arguing about these interpretations; and/or being involved in conducting similar analyses of texts and talk about race relations in Australia. Rather than only focus on the experiences of those in marginalised positions; there would be engagement with positions of dominance that turns the gaze inward as part of the process of explicating the dialectical nature of race relations and dynamics of power. We argue that the approach to discourse analysis we adopted and its attention to power and subjectivity provides what is necessary for a complex and more complete understanding of whiteness to develop, as has been developed with oppression (e.g., Bulhan, 1985; Fanon, 1986; Freire, 1972) and which can provide a basis from which

whiteness can be challenged (Bander Rasmussen, Klinenberg, Nexica, & Wray, 2001).

Implicit within this approach to discourse analysis is ideological critique or social and cultural criticism (E. Burman & Parker, 1993; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000; Parker, 1992). Discourse analysis attends to how discourses function to produce and reproduce power and ideological beliefs, maintain social structures, and position subjects. It makes explicit the social structures and processes that maintain oppression and that would otherwise be viewed as opaque to even the most reflexive amongst us because of unacknowledged conditions, unintended consequences, and unconscious motivation (Parker, 1992). Identifying discourses involves stepping outside a discourse and labelling it in a particular way, which functions to access the dominant cultural meanings and take a marginal or critical position. Montenegro (2002) discussed the centrality of the issue of power and privileged knowledge in community psychology practice that involves external agents and local communities. She advocated for a situated knowing that does not rely on fixed positions but that requires co-construction of issues and a critical reflection upon privileged positions. In the same way discourse analysis demands critical reflexivity that problematises the subject positions of those in dominant and privileged groups as part of the processes of change.

Discourse analysis also brings the concrete and the particular of everyday lives into focus and grounds it within an understanding of the larger and more general social forces (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). This involves dissecting the ways people connect their everyday experiences to issues of power, justice, and democracy. The connections between hegemonic and ideological forces, such as white supremacy, patriarchy and class elitism within macro-dynamics of structures and micro-dynamics of everyday life are then seen and arouse a more critical consciousness. The interpretive process is both

about becoming more fully human (ontological) and investigating conditions of existence and the generative themes that shape it (epistemological). However, to ensure it is a useful and applicable method researchers adopting discourse analysis need to be reflexive, account for how they are implicated in the research, and be conscious of their position in relation to participants and sociopolitical context of research (de la Rey, 1997). In short, discourse analysis cannot place itself away from the public gaze.

While discourses delimit the sayable, they do not imply closure and they provide spaces for new statements to be incorporated within a discourse (Henriques et al., 1998). Resistance and opposition to discourses used by a dominant group can occur through taking up outside positions or by developing alternatives (Mama, 1995) or counter stories (Harris, Carney, & Fine, 2001). Contradictory experiences motivate people to search for alternative discourses, positions and identities because of the need to retain a sense of dignity and integrity and resolve tensions and contradictions existing between oneself and one's social environment. However, not all discourses and positions are readily available to each individual; availability depends on an individual's history and experience. Social spaces need to open up in specific historical circumstances and social and cultural locations for subjectivities to be created or reinvented (Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody, 2001). Physical possibilities or spaces to develop, practice, and elaborate new discourses then need to be available if alternative discourses are to lead to alternative social forms (Parker, 1992). These processes relate to the process of consciousness-raising discussed in the introduction and once again the lessons to be learned for dominant groups come from those who have been marginalised. This raises ethical issues, such as appropriation of indigenous knowledges (see Smith, 1999), that would need to be addressed, if those in dominant groups were to

take the process of analysing discourses to the next level of changing discourses.

Conclusion

From our research with white Australians involved in Reconciliation we have been able to identify some of the different discourses used by white Australians to understand their role in and the issues of Reconciliation. These discourses, in part, describe the power of whiteness in the context of Reconciliation and we have used them to illustrate some of the implications they have for Reconciliation and actions towards justice and equity of those involved. However, as discussed in the introduction, many white Australians, including the participants in this research, were strongly committed to working towards attaining justice and equity for and with Indigenous Australians. Rather than hopelessly throwing our arms in the air and exclaiming “we are damned if we do and damned if we don’t” we have suggested that approaches to discourse analysis that focus on power and subjectivity may provide us with some tools that the dominant group can use to become more aware of the power underlying our/their actions and contribute to realising the transformative potential of political movements, like Reconciliation.

Earlier in the article we discussed how our research, which has focused on describing the meaning and relevance of whiteness in the context of Reconciliation differs to that of Billig (1997) and others, who have looked at the discursive strategies through which ideologies such as whiteness are reproduced and protected. In a project we are about to begin researching everyday interactions between Indigenous clients and non-Indigenous health service providers we will combine these two different foci of discursive work. However, we also aim to strengthen the value we believe discourse analysis holds in two ways. Firstly, by foregrounding the emotionality of whiteness both

for the respondents and researcher in our analyses, as Kessar has in this issue. Secondly, by including analyses of the embodied and spatio-temporal practices, as Durrheim and Dixon (2005) have done in their work on desegregation. They have illustrated how embodied social practices (e.g., white people moving off a beach at a particular time) and talk about (re)segregation are mutually reinforcing and continue to give racism meaning and currency.

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