

# **Dismantling White Privilege From Within**

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## **Abstract**

Whiteness dominates Australian social, economic, legal and political culture. It is a powerful tool of oppression that has confronted the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population throughout the history of European colonisation and continues to do so on a daily basis in contemporary, neoliberal Australia. There are several challenges to addressing this racial inequality including the fact that white privilege is the dominant discourse, the 'norm' within Australia society, and therefore invisible and difficult to identify. It can also be staunchly defended by those it benefits when threatened by other discourses. I have only recently gained an awareness of my own white privilege (perhaps due to its normality within society) and its associated social injustices and endemic existence across society including the field of social work. So, what exactly is whiteness and white privilege? The objective of this essay is to explore white privilege, examine some of the obstacles it presents to Indigenous social work practice and to determine how as a non-Indigenous social worker I can most effectively participate in dismantling this dominant culture of systemic oppression of which I am a part.

## **Driving South**

On a recent road trip down the Hume Highway my eyes were drawn to the spectacular changing landscape of the Great Dividing Range. As incredible as the scenery was my mind could not stop thinking how all of the land from the highway to the horizon had been stolen. Every town along the way, many bearing Indigenous-sounding names, had been built on stolen land. Approaching Yass Junction there was a road sign welcoming me to Ngunnawal country and soon after I drove beneath the Barton Highway. Sir Edmund Barton was the first Prime Minister of Australia and one of the architects of the Restricted Immigration Act of 1901, now more widely known as the White Australia Policy (Barton, 2011). During the drafting of the Act he was recorded in Parliament as stating there "is no racial equality... Nothing we can do by cultivation, by refinement, or by anything else will make some races equal to others" (Cth. Parliamentary Debates, 1901, p. 5233). The symbolism of naming a highway that cuts through Ngunnawal country after Barton made me stop the car.

As I looked outside the vehicle, I felt guilt and shame. Not because of the past atrocities of colonialism and racism. I am not responsible for what has happened before my time. I felt guilty and shameful because I had driven this stretch of road

dozens of times and yet until now had never considered the significance of this land to its original custodians. Why had I always viewed Gundagai as the place to see the Dog on the Tuckerbox rather than as a sacred meeting place of the Wiradjuri people? Why did I often stop at Holbrook to view the submarine *HMAS Otway*, yet know nothing of the Indigenous massacre of 1836 at nearby Dora Dora? Until now I had always viewed the drive down the Hume Highway through the lens of Whiteness. In fact, I had always viewed the world this way which is unsurprising considering Whiteness is the dominant discourse, the 'norm', within mainstream Australian society.

## **White Privilege is Racism**

Whiteness is a socially constructed, ethnocentric concept in which white culture dominates other cultures, such as those of the many nations of Indigenous Australia (Purdie, et al., 2010). It is an ideology that justifies the beliefs, systems and actions of those who exist within the parameters of Whiteness at the expense and exclusion of 'others'. Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2004) defines Whiteness as "the invisible norm against which other races are judged in the construction of identity, representation, subjectivity, nationalism and the law" (as cited by Walter, Taylor & Habibis, 2011, p. 7). Participation in Whiteness does not require having white coloured skin but rather it includes anyone who benefits from the privileges of the systemic oppression that has developed from European colonialism and which continues to provide "advantages in political, social, legal, and cultural arenas" (Haviland, 2008, p. 42). Whiteness exists in many parts of the world with varying nuances. My essay is written from the context of Whiteness in Australia and its impact it on Australia's First Peoples.

It was in the *Practice with Indigenous Australians* unit of my Master of Social Work degree at the University of Sydney that I was introduced to the concept of Whiteness and how by being a beneficiary of the privileges that come with being white, I am contributing to racism in Australia. I had never considered myself racist, however, racism is the perfect crime because we can benefit from it without consciously enacting racism (Reynolds, 2012). White Privilege is racism.

The Siamese twin of Aboriginal disadvantage is white advantage. Logically we can't have one without the other. But we don't connect white advantage - unearned advantage - with racism. We don't think of racism in terms of our white race privilege (Tannoch-Bland, 1998, p. 33).

Initially I found the revelation of my own racism disturbing, however, upon reflection I feel fortunate because I am now less ignorant of the harm caused by Whiteness and am in a better position to address its impact. I am using this paper as an opportunity

to explore the nature of white privilege and discover the tools to help me operate from a position of awareness and respect. In doing so I hope to become a more effective activist in the pursuit of social justice for Indigenous Australians.

## Owning White Privilege

Anne Barton, the great granddaughter of Sir Edmund Barton, provides valuable insight on white privilege and argues that racial inequality cannot begin to be addressed until white Australia finally confronts its colonialist culture of racism (Barton, 2011). During more than a decade of working with homeless people and people with disabilities, Barton was exposed to the marginalisation of groups rendered “voiceless and invisible by the attitudes and actions” of mainstream Australia (Barton, 2011, p. 16). By witnessing discrimination against the *other*, and having studied Whiteness during her post-graduate years, she has an awareness of the damage that white privilege can do to those who are excluded.

Motivated by the moral dilemma of reconciling her “flawed inheritance” with her value system, Barton confesses to her own white privilege and seeks to find solutions that challenge the racial inequality it reinforces:

As a white Australian, I can only become part of the solution when I recognise the degree to which I am part of the problem, not because I am white, but because of my investment in white privilege (Barton, 2011).

Unfortunately, the common reaction of mainstream Australian society when exposed to its own racism is to become offended, annoyed and defensive (Walters, Taylor & Habibis, 2011). “Whiteness draws power from how bad white people feel about themselves” (Barton, 2011, p. 17), a form of behaviour termed “white fragility” (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 54) that can manifest into angry, violent and oppressive behaviour towards those who threaten the existence of whiteness (Barton, 2011).

The treatment of Indigenous Australian Rules Football star Adam Goodes illustrates the volatile way in which Australian society can react when its moral fibres are challenged. Goodes was publicly vilified in 2013 for making a “stand against racism” (Goodes, 2014, cited by AHRC, 2014) after experiencing a bigoted, verbal attack by a young football fan and again in 2015 for performing a tribal war dance after kicking a goal to celebrate his Indigenous ancestry and culture - “who I am... who I represent” (Goodes, 2015, cited by NITV News, 2015). Ironically, this celebration occurred during the Australian Football League’s (AFL) Indigenous Heritage Week which is held to celebrate the contribution that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander players, officials and fans make to football (Australian Government, 2019). Goodes’ actions sparked outrage from numerous football commentators and media professionals and he was booed by football fans nationwide until the end of his career

(Media Watch, 2015). Counterbalancing the furore were self-aware members of the public who held White Australia's racism to account. ABC journalist and Wiradjuri man, Stan Grant, described the treatment of Goodes as a "vocal lynching" that happened because he "was a blackfella with a voice talking to a country that didn't like what it heard" (Grant, 2015, para. 67). Maxine Beneba Clarke claimed the racism was a deliberate action to reinforce the dominance of Whiteness:

Even those spouting racist rhetoric across the country don't want to be identified as racists. Somewhere, deep down, they are aware how patently demeaning, illogical and unjustifiable their behaviour is. Denial is crucial in maintaining the status quo. When you are accustomed to privilege, equality feels like oppression (Clarke, 2016, para. 12).

Barton expands her argument to the macro-level of society by critiquing Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's 2008 apology to the Stolen Generations, viewing it as "another in a long line of attempts to create a national identity of one nation reconciled to its past on white terms" (Barton, 2011, p. 17). Supporting Barton's interpretation is the Government's post-apology failure to implement satisfactory restorative justice policies such as financial compensation to those who have suffered trans-generational trauma at the hands of White Australia (Menzies, 2019). Some socio-economic conditions have worsened for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders since 2008. For instance, there has been an increase in the number of Indigenous children removed from families and communities and Indigenous children are 10 times more likely than white children to be living in out of home environments (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2016). The 2018 Children's Report, published by The Australian Child Rights Taskforce (Irani, Lamolin, & Lee-Jones, 2018), exposes how the current Government contravenes several Articles of the UN's Convention of the Rights for Children (UNCRC) in relation to enforced Indigenous child removal. Article 20, for example, requires "continuity in a child's upbringing and [due regard] to the child's ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background" and yet Indigenous children who have been removed from families and communities often lose connection to their culture, land and ancestral traditions (UN General Assembly, 1989, p. 9). As expressed by one youth in The Children's Report, "they're not taking into account our cultural care, they're looking at it from a Western society lens that is just completely not for our people" (Irani, Lamolin, & Lee-Jones, 2018, p. 34). Systemic socio-economic disadvantages confronting young Indigenous people living in out of home care today are directly connected to the loss of cultural knowledge and ontological disconnection from land and spirituality (Bessarab & Crawford, 2012).

The Australian Government and the population it represents can only become part of the solution once there is a national discourse acknowledging its past and present

racism. Granted, this may be an enormous task to undertake considering the cultural humility required to accept ownership and “the ugliness of white privilege that prevents its owners from facing up to itself” (Moreton-Robinson, as cited by Barton 2011). White Australia’s privilege is founded on atrocities:

... all white Australians live here because of past actions of murder, massacres, poisoning, torture, dispossession, internment, enslavement and genocide. These acts were committed against Indigenous people on the basis of race. They were racist acts (Tannoch-Bland, 1998, p. 33).

Barton concludes that whilst courage is needed for White Australia to reflect upon and acknowledge its historic and contemporary racism, integrity is also required in order to deconstruct white privilege and take action. Only then can the healing process begin.

## **Listening with the heart**

Bindi Bennett has undertaken several qualitative research projects to both examine the white privilege underpinning non-Indigenous social work practice and find solutions to improve cultural safety in the workplace - an environment in which all participants feel invited, secure, non-threatened and where relevant Indigenous methodologies are welcomed (Terare, 2019).

Bennett applies a culturally safe Indigenous methodological framework to her research to ‘make intellectual space for Indigenous cultural knowledge systems’ (Rigney, 2001, as cited by Moreton-Robinson & Walter, 2009). This approach preferences narrative methods over the more commonly applied question/answer inquiry format that dominates Australian social work discipline (Bennett & Zubrzycki, 2003). These Indigenous methods include storytelling, deep listening and yarning, which is a “knowledge exchange that embodies the oral traditions of Indigenous cultures” (Shay, 2019, p. 2). Bennett believes that “listening with the heart” and sharing her own story and cultural identity establishes a trusting relationship and encourages genuine, open dialogue (Bennett, 2010 as cited by Connolly & Harms, 2015). Unfortunately, this valuable Indigenous cultural tradition of social workers sharing their personal stories is a breach of the confidentiality guidelines as stipulated in the AASW’s Code of Ethics (AASW, 2010) - another example of the way in which white privilege determines the framework of social work practice in Australia.

Bennett’s collaborative methodology ensures co-ownership of her research. Participants are asked to recommend any changes to her final drafts prior to publication and each has the freedom to use the completed works for their own professional needs (Bennett & Zubrzycki, 2003). These processes empower Bennett’s

research participants as “keepers or guardians of treasured cultural and personal information and worthy advisors” (Gibbs, 2001, cited by Bennett & Zubrzycki, 2003, p. 63).

The suspicion of non-Indigenous social workers within Indigenous communities is a recurring theme arising from Bennett’s studies. Several reasons pertaining to white privilege make this mistrust understandable:

- a) social workers have historically played an oppressive role in colonial Australia, including the egregious trans-generational removal of Indigenous children from parents and communities (Fejo-King & Briskman, 2007).
- b) the widespread cultural ignorance of white social workers results in culturally inappropriate and unsafe processes (Bennett, 2013).
- c) racism permeates the dominant white Australian social work culture and racist practices can be produced even within culturally safe environs (Mullaly, 1993, cited by Fejo-King & Briskman, 2007). The AASW’s Code of Ethics requires social workers to recognise “the impact their own racial cultural identities, views and biases can have on their practice and on culturally different clients” (AASW, 2010, p. 17). Shamefully this regulation is frequently overlooked or purposefully breached.

One of Bennett’s research projects, conducted in 2012, examined the reasons why the AASW had such a low number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members. She interviewed 16 Indigenous social workers about their experiences with the AASW and many responses were reminiscent of Peggy McIntosh’s thesis of the invisible knapsack (McIntosh, 2015):

Aboriginal people don’t like rocking up to their [the AASW’s] predominantly white forum.

Often when we are talking about a case study for them [non-Indigenous social workers], for me it is a reality.

I have to justify myself as human, the system acknowledges our disadvantage but [expects us to] ...not bring it to work.

What they don’t understand is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have to be uncomfortable every day...negotiate foreign spaces and uncomfortable situations daily (all quotes anonymous, as cited by Bennett, 2013).

Whilst Bennett primarily focuses on Indigenous empowerment as a solution to the problematic culture of Whiteness within the Australian social work industry, she and other social work theorists also stress the importance of white social workers

reflecting upon and challenging their own prejudices and their profession's agency in colonisation (Bennett, 2013; Connolly & Harms, 2015). The AASW provides a good opportunity for constructive reflection because the racial diversity of its workers can force its members to define, understand and confront racial identity and culture at a more complex level than in a homogenised work community (Haviland, 2008).

Another way of addressing the White dominance in social work is via transformational learning. This is a process in which new anti-oppressive knowledge can be constructed collaboratively between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cohorts, in both educational and professional situations, by critiquing oppressive past learning experiences (Terare, 2019). Mareese Terare (2019) suggests this process produces a culturally safe environment whereby "participants demonstrate the capacity to learn while letting go of historical oppressive learning experiences... [where Indigenous participants] were treated without respect as to their individual needs" (p. 27).

## **Recognition and Resistance**

Aileen Moreton-Robinson and Maggie Walter (2009) argue that Indigenous 'knowledge, perspectives and understandings' are predominantly excluded from Australian social work research and practice (pg. 1). Indigenous social workers are often not heard or listened to by non-Indigenous social workers and are more likely to be the subject of research rather than be the researcher. The dominant white Western system often culturally assimilates 'pan-Aboriginality' into a monolithic culture and thus reduces the value that can otherwise be drawn from the vast scope of wisdom across Indigenous Australia (Moreton-Robinson & Walter, 2009).

The article recognises the origins of Indigenous cultural world views and outlines the core elements that are common among the diverse philosophies of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. These include ways of knowing (epistemologies), ways of doing (axiologies) and ways of being (ontologies) (Moreton-Robinson & Walter, 2009). Several Indigenous research methodologies are analysed in detail and the authors express the importance of embracing these approaches. Of import to my research is the authors' emphasis on the strength and resilience of Indigenous Australians that has kept traditional philosophies intact throughout the multi-generational devastation of colonial invasion. This solidarity of Indigenous cultures has proven resistant to white privilege and helped enable the survival of culture (Moreton-Robinson and Walter, 2009).

Lynore Geia, Barbara Hayes and Kim Usher have identified the global emergence of Indigenous research practices into the field of medical science. Voices that have traditionally been silenced by the dominant white patriarchal culture are now beginning to be heard (Geia et al., 2013). There is increasing recognition of the value

of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research methodologies (Shay, 2019). The uptake of these practices, new to ‘white’ research, is gaining momentum in medical science and opening up alternate academic pathways by creating “a deeper understanding of the human lived experience” (Geia et al., 2013, p. 13). The authors do, however, recommend a cautious approach to collaborative partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers to prevent the appropriation of Indigenous intellectual property and the subsequent thwarting of potential self-determination in research development (Geia et al., 2013).

Geia, Hayes and Usher provide a compelling argument on the value of cultural change. They demonstrate how an industry with an historically white culture has benefitted by its acceptance and introduction of Indigenous research methodologies. Although the article’s focus is on cultural change within the field of medical science its premise provides a valuable blueprint for incorporating non-discriminatory, collaborative approaches into social work research.

## **Conclusion**

The academic sources used in my research contained several interconnecting themes that deconstruct white privilege and numerous strategies that help address it. Barton stressed the need to acknowledge one’s own Whiteness and have the integrity to take action. Bennett highlighted the importance of culturally safe environments, empowering Indigenous social workers and the use of Indigenous social work methodologies. Terare recommended creating new anti-oppressive knowledge via cultural collaboration and emancipatory transformational learning. Moreton-Robinson and Walter explored the vast richness and resilience of Indigenous culture across the country and the value of recognising and learning from Indigenous ways of knowing, doing and being. Geia, Hayes and Usher demonstrated the value of cultural change in research.

The Warawarni–gu Guma Statement, delivered by a group of Indigenous representatives on behalf of all First Peoples of this country at a 2018 conference on violence against women and children, shares several of the above-mentioned observations. It calls for inclusivity and collaboration as a means of reconciliation:

‘Nothing about our mob, without our mob’. This is not a slogan. This is critical not only for our healing, but for yours as our fellow Australians; this is the starting point for our relationship (Douglas et al., 2018, p. 1).

The speech exposes the colonialist racism of white privilege and demands that Australia respect Indigenous knowledge and culture and commit to authentic racial equality:

You enjoy a positive legacy as a result of our dispossession. You have a responsibility to ensure we have a strong voice about our realities and to support our solutions, solutions that come from our cultural knowledge bases. These are our cultural responses; not cultural adaptations, where being “inclusive” seems to mean “assimilation” in practice; or being included at the last minute, or as an after-thought (Douglas et al., 2018, p. 2).

Australia must listen.

Having acknowledged both privately and publicly my own white privileged background, the next step is clearly to take action. As a non-Indigenous social worker, it is imperative that I challenge my actions to ensure they are respectful, inclusive and effective. I am mindful of the need for regular reflection and professional supervision to maintain a committed anti-oppressive approach to my social work practice and extend my skillset beyond that of established Australian social work methods. Applying Indigenous cultural and social work methods such as yarning, storytelling and deep listening will improve my value as a social worker and therefore aid my contribution to the pursuit of social justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

### **Driving North**

The guilt and shame of my drive south are now well and truly in the rear-view mirror. I am driving home with a sense of purpose, ready for action.

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