

Bicultural Issues

The National Standing Committee on Bicultural Issues provides regular commentary on bicultural issues. It aims to explain their implications for the activities of psychologists, and for the practices and policies of the Society.

NSCBI Publications Facilitator: Ray Nairn

On Equality and Colourblindness

Neville Robertson¹

I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

So said Martin Luther King, Jr, just over 40 years ago, in a speech that galvanised the US civil rights movement.

King spoke of the United States but his dream is equally relevant in New Zealand. Has it been achieved?

Some people would argue that not only has it been achieved but that the tables have been turned and now white folk are the ones who are oppressed. What is needed, they argue, is a level playing field.

But how level is the playing field?

At a recent ACT-sponsored forum in Hamilton, a Maori woman spoke of how the world treats her children. Her husband is Pakeha. Like increasing numbers of young people in this country, her children have dual Maori and Pakeha heritage. But as luck would have it, two of her children look distinctly Maori while the other two could "pass" as Pakeha.

Are they judged by the colour of their skin? Too often, yes they are. While her "Pakeha" children lead lives facing no more challenges than most youngsters, her "Maori" children have a different experience of the world. They elicit fewer smiles and less encouragement from teachers. They are more likely to be viewed with suspicion. On the whole, compared to their siblings, they are playing uphill.

Coincidence? Possibly, but we do have some systematic information which suggests that racism, and the system of privilege it sustains, is alive and well. It is not always in-your-face racism – it is often more subtle. And it is not always apparent - there are white folk who, to varying degrees, manage to avoid

behaving in racist ways. But there is certainly enough of it around to make a difference.

This can be hard for white folk to swallow because to acknowledge racism is to acknowledge that white folk – folks like me – receive un-earned privilege. For that is the flip side of racism. If one group is disadvantaged, the other is privileged. That's white privilege.

Extreme? Well consider this.

I like to think that I have been moderately successful in my life. And I'd like to think I have worked pretty hard for what I have achieved. I don't feel guilty when it comes to pay day. But can I say I have done it entirely on my own effort? Was the playing field really level?

I think not. I grew up on a farm carved out of land taken in a dodgy deal from Ngai Tahu – a farm which gave me and my family a good start in life. My current home is built on land illegally confiscated from Tainui.

Being colour-blind is a privilege available only to white people

I went to schools where the teachers looked pretty much like me. And they taught me about writers, military heroes, political leaders and scientists who looked pretty much like me. I learnt about how "we" were good colonialists who treated Maori rather better than they probably deserved. The officially-sanctioned knowledge of my schooling accorded with my personal experience. Not knowing about tapu, manaakitanga or whakapapa has never been a serious disadvantage to me. Being able to speak just one language – English – has not hindered me pursuing both my cultural and economic interests.

All my working life I have been hired by people who look like me. No-one ever patronised me by telling me I was a credit to my race. When I've been late to meetings – and I have to say I've been late more often than I care to admit – no-one ever made a comment about "Pakeha time." I've never been

expected to be knowledgeable about all things Pakeha. No-one has ever turned to me and asked "What is the Pakeha perspective on this?"

From time to time, I've walked down town late at night and I've never attracted the suspicion of the police. As far as I can tell, shop keepers have never regarded me as a potential shop-lifter. I've made a few stuff ups along the way but never once did anyone say, "Well, what do you expect from a Pakeha?" Truth is, I've been cut quite a lot of slack in my time.

I don't think I'm alone in this. Research conducted by some of my colleagues has tested out this idea of white privilege by inviting people to respond to 22 items reflective of privilege. Majority group (white) participants were much more likely than minority group (Maori, Pacific Island, Asian) participants to agree with the following.

I can turn the television on or open to the front page of the newspaper and see people of my ethnic group positively and widely represented.

When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilisation", I am shown that people of my ethnic group made New Zealand what it is.

Whether I use cheques, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin colour not to work against perceptions of my financial reliability or status.

I can swear or dress in second hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, poverty, or the illiteracy of my race.

I can criticize our Government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behaviour without being seen as an ethnic outsider.

I can easily buy posters, postcards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys and children's magazines featuring people of my ethnicity.

In this country, all Pakeha benefit from white privilege, although not to same degree. On the whole, men tend to have more of it than women. Professional people tend to have more of it than manual or unemployed workers. But as a group, white privilege is something white folk all share. It is the privilege of getting to play the game according our rules.

To acknowledge racism is to acknowledge that white folk receive un-earned privilege.

Now, let me be really clear. I don't feel guilty about this. I didn't invent white privilege. It's been around a lot longer than I. And I would like to think that I don't trade on it. But white privilege is not something I get to decide whether I will have or not. It goes with me where ever I go – and it will continue to do so until racism is eliminated from our community.

What I can do is stop pretending that white privilege doesn't exist. Stop pretending that colour doesn't matter. And what I can do is support initiatives which just might help tip the balance a little towards a genuinely level playing field.

Here are some starters.

◆ Let's learn a little about what the world looks like from other's folks' perspectives. And just as importantly, let's learn to recognise that the way we view the world has been hugely shaped by the particular cultural lens through which we view it.

◆ Let's educate ourselves about our history. Don't simply accept what the politicians say about the Treaty of Waitangi – go to reputable sources such as Claudia Orange's book.

◆ Let's support Maori television – indeed, any media which will help ensure that the full diversity of experiences in this country are represented to us.

Of course, doing these things will attract criticism. We will be accused of treating people unequally. "We must be colour blind," the defenders of white privilege will say.

Unfortunately, as Robert Jensen has observed, "At this moment in history, being color-blind is a privilege available only to white people. Non-white people do not have the luxury of pretending that color can be ignored."

Our planet is blessed with a rich diversity of people. It is one of the paradoxes of life that treating everyone the same is to treat them unequally. Treating everyone the same begs the question, "By whose rules?"

As it stands at the moment, we are playing almost exclusively by Pakeha rules.

Note

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