

## Pakeha reactions to Pakeha privilege: invitation to a discussion

Belinda Borell (on behalf of the Privilege Project team, Whariki Research Group)



Belinda Borell (Ngati Ranginui, Ngai Te Rangi, Whakatohea) is a Māori researcher with a particular interest in rangatahi Māori, identity, racism, social justice, whiteness and critical race theory. In 2005 she has completed her Masters thesis - *Living in the City Ain't So Bad: Cultural Diversity of South Auckland Rangatahi*. She is currently completing a study that explores how societal privilege impacts on population health.

This year marks the twentieth anniversary of the establishment of the New Zealand Psychological Society's National Standing Committee on Bicultural Issues. Apart from the symbolic importance of this anniversary, the practical benefits the NSCBI brings to the Society are crucial to the ongoing effectiveness of research uptake and professional practice amongst its members. The Bicultural Symposium at this year's conference included many innovative papers and research findings. "Pakeha reactions to Pakeha privilege: invitation to a discussion" was this author's offering on behalf of the Privilege Project team of Whariki Research Group, Massey University.

In this paper we sought to create a conversation about an under-researched area of social importance - societal privilege. We particularly wanted to engage audience members in discussing responses to our privilege workshops that we have found both surprising and encouraging. These are reactions we have encountered from Pakeha participants at various workshops and lectures on this issue we have conducted in the last year. It was a topic that was very fresh for

me as I had only just returned from presenting on this topic in the USA where I had experienced very different responses. The workshop is described below.

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### Workshop context

First we outlined some of the workshop activities used to enable participants to understand the 'privilege' angle on the social order. The privilege approach is in marked contrast to popular contemporary explanations of social and health disparities as these often only scrutinise the disadvantaged and the adverse outcomes they experience. Because of that focus on persons it is easy for those explanations to prioritise perceived personal and collective failings. Obviously such explanations mask or ignore wider systemic processes and societal influences that

impact on the disadvantaged and, because those structural elements are ignored, the privileged are allowed to attribute their advantageous outcomes primarily to personal merit and hard work. Thereby, apparently confirming a deficit framing of the disadvantaged.

Central to the workshops is an activity that has each participant create an individual "privilege score-sheet". We use 20 statements taken from the wider list of 50 items in "The Invisible Knapsack" (McIntosh, 1990). We have had to adapt the language in some of the items to eliminate the Americanisms and to accommodate New Zealand terminology and usage (e.g. change 'race' to ethnic group). Examples of the items are:

- I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my ethnic group most of the time.
- I have never been asked to speak for all members of my ethnic group.
- I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
- I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to the 'person in charge',

I will be facing a person of my ethnic group.

- I can choose blemish or bandages in "flesh" colour and have them more or less match my skin.

Participants score a point for each statement that applies to them, tallying their score over the 20 items. Then those who have scored between 0-5 are invited to stand. This group usually contains a high proportion of non-white participants. Subsequent groups, 6-10, 11-15, are invited to stand and, last of all, those who scoring 16-20. This last group usually includes most of white-skinned participants many of whom identify as Pakeha. A similar process using 10 questions explores gender privilege and there is one question relating to heterosexual privilege. These activities, especially having the different groups stand up, makes an important visual statement to participants about the non-random accumulation of seemingly banal advantages to which members of different groups have inequitable access. The activity is intended to pose questions of the "taken-for-granted" nature of societal advantage and, in our experience it does so very successfully.

Next, participants are invited to explore commonly held racial and ethnic group stereotypes. We find that the stereotypes of ethnic minorities are numerous and overwhelmingly negative. In contrast, stereotypes of the dominant ethnic group are not only much more difficult for participants to name but the stereotypic characteristics that are named are generally positive in orientation. Again this helps participants understand the numerous language patterns minority group members have to struggle with on a daily basis while the same language patterns leave most dominant group members free from scrutiny both personally and collectively.

The final activity sets the context for understanding how societal privilege revolves around notions of culture. It is well documented that dominant group members often comment that they have 'no culture': that culture is what 'others' have. One common result of this invisibility of the dominant culture is that the cultural products of the dominant group are routinely not identified as a product of that group. Such cultural products and processes, because they are not marked as specific to the dominant group are commonly perceived as part of the culture of all New Zealanders and therefore as reflecting the national identity or 'kiwi' culture. For this activity participants are shown a small collection of 20 photographs. See Figure 1 below for an example of the pictures and how they are presented. The pictures were gathered using the photo link of the Google search engine using search terms: 'kiwiana', 'kiwi culture', 'New Zealand' and 'New Zealand culture'. The group is invited to discuss, for each picture whether it illustrates the culture of: 'kiwis', 'Māori', 'Pakeha' or another group. The decisions raise important points for all participants about the readily accepted notions of culture and national life, in particular it highlights just who may take their inclusion as a given and whose culture is marginalised in the national conversation.

Fig 1



### Pakeha reactions

The second part of this presentation focused on some of the reactions the workshops have generated among Pakeha participants. Much of the international literature suggests that, in general, the reaction of dominant group members towards a societal privilege analysis is likely to involve much denial and defensiveness. However, in our New Zealand workshops such reactions have been the exception.

Numerous different forms of verbal and written feedback show that, in

this country, there is much more acceptance than denial about the privileged societal position of the dominant group. This has been particularly so for Pakeha participants, many of whom acknowledge that the analysis of societal privilege and the position of Pakeha people is an accurate reflection of their experiences at work, school, and in numerous other sites of public life. For others, illuminating the unearned nature of privilege that accrues in other contexts (by men vis a vis women, or the able-bodied vis a vis disabled) generated understandings about societal position and reflections on privilege that an analysis focused only on ethnicity or culture had not. This offers important lessons about the need to discuss the many complex and nuanced aspects of privilege while concurrently maintaining rigour around the

deconstruction of racism and ethnic group discrimination.

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For a smaller group of Pakeha participants their feedback on the workshops rather than highlighting denial or defensiveness was that the experience had been extremely affirming of their identity as Pakeha and as agents for positive change to the social order. In expanding on this, some workshop participants have said very clearly, that an analysis of privilege locates them, as members of

the dominant group, squarely within the discussion of social inequities quite unlike the way they experienced being located in other professional development training such as Treaty of Waitangi or cultural competency. It appears that a privilege analysis, rather than inviting participants to understand the social, ethnic, and cultural parameters and experience of 'others', places dominant group identity at the centre, making it the starting point. Doing that provides a place where dominant group/Pakeha identity and culture is rendered visible so it can be examined and discussed. And, because this is, for participants from the dominant group, an examination and discussion of their own group, they are able to see and question some of the assumptions they had previously taken for granted.

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