What do you mean ‘we’, white man? On whiteness, organisational theory and being Pākehā

Submission to: Organisation, Identity and Locality IV: Exploring the local within the Aotearoa/New Zealand locality
Department of Management, University of Otago, 14th-15th February, 2008

This paper is dedicated to Ruth Frankenberg, a white woman who helped define ‘whiteness studies, and died this year aged 49
I also salute those Māori women who first asked me ‘What do you mean “we”, white girl?’, all those years ago: Ngahuia Te Awekotuku; Donna Awatere; Ripeka Evans

This submission asks: how can the concept of ‘whiteness’ help us localise organisational theory in Aotearoa New Zealand? In particular, it draws on the body of ‘whiteness’ theory to explicitly ‘racialise’ organisational theory.

The possible consequences of asking this research question include the making-visible of the invisibilised ‘whiteness’ at the core of most of what we think of as ‘organisational theory’. This visibility could potentially transform our knowledge practices as well as the topics with which we engage. It inevitably highlights how ‘whiteness’ plays out here as it will differently for every locality. It provides grounds for challenging the reading of European philosophers in to Critical Management Studies as a central and dominant practice of developing the field. It opens up power relations within ‘Critical Management Studies’ for scrutiny.

This paper has three main sections:
1. First, I pick up on Stella Nkomo’s brilliant 1992 article The Emperor Has No Clothes: Rewriting ‘Race’ in Organizations (Nkomo, 1992). Here she argues that ‘race’ is “a necessary and productive
analytical category for theorizing about organizations”. In spite of her eloquent call, ‘race’ and ethnicity are still marginalised in organisational analysis as a whole.

2. Secondly, I draw on writings about whiteness, first on Ghassan Hage’s discussions of whiteness and Australian ‘multiculturalism’, and secondly on Twine and Gallagher’ review of emerging themes in whiteness studies.

3. Finally, I want to explore bringing this all back home by rethinking Pākehā identity in relation to ‘whiteness’, especially in relation to local organisations.

The question ‘What do you mean ‘we’, white man?’, is attributed to a joke about the Lone Ranger and his Native American sidekick, Tonto. Riding together out on the range, the pair are surrounded by ‘Indian’ warriors. The Lone Ranger turns to Tonto in a panic: ‘what shall we do now?’ Tonto answers, ‘What do you mean ‘we’, white man?’. In that pivotal moment the Lone Ranger is made visible to himself - he suddenly knows what Tonto has always known – he is white. Those of us who are white may have had such a moment. But, as whiteness scholars argue, the invisibility of ‘whiteness’ is central to the ways that it operates in white-dominated worlds, and this invisibility precludes such moments of unavoidable self-identification.

The Lone Ranger and Tonto story also underlines the non-essential nature of ethnicity: it is always relational, always defined against another; and it disappears in some moments and becomes hugely salient in others. And the story demonstrates forcefully the problem of any claims to “we”: as Judith Butler has said about feminist claims to speak for ‘women’, any claim to a unified ‘we’ ‘inevitably generates multiple refusals” (Butler, 1990). At the same time, political claims require some use of ‘we’, no matter how fractured and partial that ‘we’ might be.

My writing here is structured by some of my own ‘whiteness’ moments, and some of the most important writings and presentations that have triggered them.

Earlier this year I attended a stream called White Spaces? Racialising Organisational Femininities and Masculinities at the Gender Work and Organization conference1. This stream picked up on new work being done within feminist theory on ‘intersectionality’ – relationships between gender, race, class and other analytic concepts addressing identity and power. The writers in the stream argued that we are all ‘ethnic’, and that ‘whiteness’ needs to be made visible as a central controlling principle in organisational life and identity.

This gender and whiteness work builds on long-running debates generated by reflections on race/ethnicity inside feminism, on deeply felt power struggles and painful conflict and confrontation, as well as coalitions and alliances. Ruth Frankenberg’s book, The Social Construction of Whiteness: White Women, Race Matters (1993), a study of white women in the USA, has been central to this work. Frankenberg’s interview studies drew out stories of white women’s experiences of whiteness as a felt or suppressed life dimension. She showed how both consciousness of race and of the power advantages of race can be evaded, and she showed how racial consciousness is sometimes also changed so that white individuals become ‘race-cognizant’. By focusing in the advantages of whiteness she showed how this works regardless of personal anti-racist attitudes. She showed how whiteness if developed and cultivated by white people even as they may be evading naming it. In fact her work itself countered a key aspect of whiteness: the lack of language to name it and consider how it works, so that whiteness is

1 Coordinated by Elaine Swan and Sharon Hunter, Keele, June 2007.
everywhere and yet nowhere in many white-dominated societies. It is the dominant culture and yet no culture at all.

For me this ‘whiteness’ literature opens up new ways to identify and protest the overwhelming dominance of ‘white’ bodies, voices and writings in organisational theory – a dominance that is seldom addressed in any serious way even [sic] by those white men and some women who are ‘big names’ in Critical Management Studies. This dominance is at the heart of practices of academic organising as well as the production of knowledges.

Rewriting ‘race in organizations’

Stella Nkomo’s paper addresses the ways that organisational theorist have written ‘race in organizations’ (Nkomo, 1992). The term ‘race’ is one we don’t tend to use much in this country, except when speaking of ‘racism’. I will copy her in using this term when speaking of her paper. Nkomo uses the ‘allegory’ of ‘The emperor’s new clothes’ to address the visible/invisible nature of ‘race’. Just as the people pretended that they could see the emperor’s new clothes in the old fairy tale, so power relations dictate the non-recognition of race in organisational theory. Organisational theory seems ‘race neutral’, but only because race is invisibilised – it is ignored or treated as irrelevant.

Pointing out that race profoundly determines all rights, including rights to work and at work, Nkomo argues that ‘race has been present all along in organisations’ (p. 488), and that ‘Organizations are made up of race relations played out in power struggles’ [her italics] (p. 507). She asks ‘What does it mean to use race as an analytical category?’ (ibid.) To ‘rewrite’ race in organisations would be to make race an analytical category for a wide range of inquiries in organisational theory, not only using it when we are talking about a specialised topic called ‘race’. Nkomo generates some excellent questions which give us a sense of what this might involve, for instance:

- ‘To what extent is race built into the definition of a ‘manager’?
- ‘What are the implications of racial identity for organisation theories based on individual identity?’ (p. 506).

Nkomo’s paper was published in The Academy of Management Review in 1992: there is little sign of her proposal making an impact on organisational theory in that or other mainstream journals that would be highly regarded by the PBRF ranking process. While her paper has been very widely cited, it is by other scholars who take race as their topic, not by organisational theorist who are persuade that race is an analytical category for a range of management topics.

By naming race relations as central to all organisational phenomena, Nkomo points by implication to whiteness as well as to that ‘diversity’ which nowadays identifies white’s ‘others’ in management literature.

‘Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society’

I first heard the anthropologist Ghassan Hage speak at a conference on anti-racism in Australia about ten years ago. The object of his critique is Australian versions of ‘multiculturalism’. I was very struck by his metaphor of multiculturalism as an ‘ethnic food court’. The ethnic food court exists for the benefit of the white subject who can pick and choose from what is offered. White supremacy remains at the centre: ‘diversity’ is those others over whose presence the white subject retains control. Hage has elaborated his argument in the book White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society (1998), creating an Australian inflection for critiques of liberal 'multiculturalism'. Linking whiteness

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2 Nkomo in fact has a well-developed argument in terms of talking about ‘race’ vs. ethnicity’, but I won’t engage with that here.
to Australian nationalism, he points out the continuities in two apparently diametrically opposed positions - White Racism and White Multiculturalism. White Racism is intolerant of those others who interrupt the fantasy of an idealised white Australian nation. White Multiculturalism is tolerant of those others who add cultural diversity to enrich the nation – i.e. whites. But Hage argues that both white subject positions assume the right for whites to choose and control the fantasy of Australian nationalism. In Aotearoa New Zealand the language of ‘multiculturalism’ is much less apparent than in Australia, both in government and in popular culture. It is sometimes used as a kind of quick code to say ‘there are now many cultures in New Zealand’. It is sometimes used in attempts to upstage or render obsolete a Treaty-based conversation about race and ethnicity here. Hage’s challenge created a white moment for me by showing me that a white subject is (inevitably) at the centre of all my fantasies of nationalism. This must include the ways that I draw on Aotearoa New Zealand as ‘nation’ to counter the ‘NATO’ stream in organisational theory.

**Trends in studying whiteness**

I go on now to discuss two key trends in the critical study of ‘whiteness’, a vein now running across social sciences and humanities, and tracing its genealogy back to the writings of African American writer W. E. B. DuBois. For this overview I am indebted to Twine and Gallagher’s review this year in a special ‘whiteness’ issue of Ethnic and racial studies (Twine and Gallagher, 2007). First, they point to the increasing use of innovative research methodologies including analyses of ‘racial consciousness biographies’, music and visual media. This trend refers to anti-essentialist accounts of race which find the counting of racial categories problematic, arguing instead for a performative account of race which shows how it is constituted in daily life and in ‘institutional arrangements’ (Twine and Gallagher, 2007, p. 5) – and which, as Frankenberg and Nkomo argue, is always being worked on, made and remade in power relations.

A second trend is an analysis of the recuperation and reworking of white identities and white supremacy, located in ‘neo-apartheid’, ‘post-imperial’ and ‘post-Civil Rights contexts’. In Aotearoa New Zealand we might say ‘post-Treaty of Waitangi contexts’. We have various generational, class and gender differences in the ways that the term ‘Pākehā’ is used and refused by ‘whites’ here. We have new versions of whiteness in the form, for instance, of post-apartheid white South Africans. We have forms of what Frankenberg calls ‘resistant whiteness’, Pākehā anti-racist identities based on the Treaty of Waitangi and the potential partnership that it invokes. A particularly interesting aspect of this critical work for us here is the proposition that anti-racist identity is part of such recuperation, and that there are continuities as well as discontinuities across racist and anti-racist post-Treaty white identities. To take an easy example, historian Michael Kings’ recently reissued Being Pākehā? (King, 2007) reinstates the white man as a powerful member of the white intelligentsia, knowledgeable about things Māori and, in effect, authorised both by powerful Māori and by European intellectual heritage to speak for and about whiteness in Aotearoa New Zealand. All of us who write as Pākehā share some of this rather shaky ground. The claim to Pākehā identity both responds to claims of Māori sovereignty and contests continuity with Europe.

**‘Whiteness’ and ‘rewriting’ organisations in Aotearoa**

My research question for this paper is: how can the concept of ‘whiteness’ help us localise organisational theory in Aotearoa New Zealand? I hope that we can discuss this question when we meet at OIL. Twine and Gallagher point out that, ‘as whiteness travels the globe it reinvents itself

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3 Hage himself explicitly excludes a discussion of Aboriginals from the scope of his book.
locally upon arrival’ (Twine and Gallagher, 2007, p. 10). In this section I will briefly review the kinds of work that have already been done here, and point to some possible directions ahead.

**THE DIFFERENCES THAT DIFFERENCE MAKES**

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<td>Tangata Whenua</td>
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<td>Māori and Pākehā</td>
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It is quite easy to play with the various binarisations that could or do characterise some of the ways that we think about difference. These have been used to frame the kinds of work that has already been done here that we could reframe as writing about ‘whiteness’ and organisations in Aotearoa New Zealand. In approximately chronological order we have:

○ Institutional racism analysis: (DSW, 1986): this work was begun by Pakeha feminists within the Department of Social Welfare, responding to Māori claims of racism in the ways the Department operated. This was the first systematic analysis of a New Zealand organisation from an anti-racist perspective.

○ The Treaty and ‘Biculturalism’ – 1980s-1990s. This work mainly addressed the idea of biculturalism within the context of government policy, and focused on a government-endorsed idea of ‘biculturalism’ as it might be applied in government organisations (e.g., Hague, 1989; Henare and Douglas, 1988).

○ ‘Equal Opportunities’ - 1980s The concept of ‘Equal Employment Opportunities’ (EEO) came in to Aotearoa New Zealand from the United Kingdom, and stretches uneasily to accommodate race and ethnicity in a Treaty framework, but nonetheless has provided a space to discuss ‘race in organisations’ that can, more or less directly, address issues of race and rights (e.g., Jones, 1994; Spoonley, 1994). Again, because EEO has a much stronger mandate in government organisations, much of the empirical work is based in the state sector (O’Reilly and Wood, 1991).

○ ‘Managing diversity’ 1990s: this concept imported from the USA generally forsakes the concept of rights, rather presenting ‘diversity’ as a human resource management issue justified within a ‘business case’. Again, it has no space for any specific claims for indigeneity (Jones, 2004; Jones, Pringle and Shepherd, 2000).

○ Māori business and organising: While the writing about race in organisations I have summarised above puts white dominated organisations at its centre, and addresses how Māori and ‘other ethnic minorities’ are made visible within them, writing by Māori organisational theorists most often puts Māori business and organising at the centre (e.g., Henry, 1999; Ruwhiu and Wolfgramm, 2005; Wolfgramm, 2005). By distinguishing Māori organising they are inevitably – as a kind of downstream effect - distinguishing non-Māori organising, both as a form of white supremacy within white-dominated organisations, but as a form of organising in itself, which we can call Pākehā organising.

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4 Term used in the State Services Act ‘good employer’ equal opportunities section.
Whiteness studies look at the process which ‘work to constantly cloak whiteness as a normative identity’ (Twine and Gallagher, 2007, p. 12). Māori scholars of Māori organising present us with a series of white moments – or in this case we could say, Pākehā moments. This shift will not happen though if we treat Māori scholarship as providing interesting and even exotic but nonetheless basically marginal examples of organisational theory. If we recognise Māori organisational theory, what is Pakeha organisational theory? How could we write it?

References


