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# The Language of “Race” and Prejudice

## A Discourse of Denial, Reason, and Liberal-Practical Politics

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During the past 20 years, there has been a burgeoning literature on racial discourse in Western liberal democracies that has been informed by several disciplines. This literature has analysed linguistic and discursive patterns of everyday talk and formal institutional talk that can be found in parliamentary debates, political speeches, and the media. One of the most pervasive features of contemporary race discourse is the denial of prejudice. Increasing social taboos against openly expressing racist sentiments has led to the development of discursive strategies that present negative views of out-groups as reasonable and justified while at the same time protecting the speaker from charges of racism and prejudice. This research has demonstrated the flexible and ambivalent nature of contemporary race discourse. The present article reviews these discursive patterns or ways of talking about the other and emphasises the significant contribution that this work has made to research on language and discrimination.

**Keywords:** *discourse; discursive psychology; discrimination; prejudice; race*

In the past 20 years, there has been a burgeoning literature on the contemporary language of “race” and prejudice in Western liberal democracies that has been informed by several disciplines including linguistics, critical discourse studies, sociology, and, within social psychology, the recent development of a tradition referred to as discursive psychology. This literature has analysed discursive patterns of text and talk on issues pertaining to race, multiculturalism, immigration, and refugees and asylum seekers and has included everyday talk and conversation and formal institutional talk found in parliamentary debates, political speeches, and the media. Most Western countries have witnessed a resurgence of debates around these issues, and such public debates provide a rich source of naturalistic data that is ideal for the kind of detailed qualitative analysis advocated by researchers in the field to

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understand the everyday and institutional reproduction of racial difference and discrimination.

Despite the diversity of theoretical and methodological approaches that characterises this work, there is cross-disciplinary agreement that blatant forms of prejudice, commonly referred to as “old-fashioned racism,” have been recently supplanted with a more subtle and covert variety variously known as “modern” (McConahay, 1986), “symbolic” (Kinder & Sears, 1981, 1985), or the “new racism” (Barker, 1981). Increasing social taboos during the past 50 years against openly expressing racist sentiments have led to the development of discursive strategies that present negative views of out-groups as reasonable and justified while at the same time protecting the speaker from charges of racism and prejudice. Studies in Western nations including the Netherlands (van Dijk, 1984, 1987, 1991, 1993, 1997; Verkuyten 1998, 2001), Belgium (Blommaert & Verschueren, 1993, 1998), Europe (Wodak & van Dijk, 2000), Spain (Rojo, 2000), South Africa (Seidel, 1988), the United Kingdom (Billig, 1988; Jones, 2000; Lynn & Lea, 2003; Reeves, 1983), the United States (Mehan, 1997; Santa Ana, 1999; Thiesmeyer, 1995), New Zealand (Abel, 1996; McCreanor, 1993a, 1993b, 1993c; Nairn & McCreanor, 1990, 1991; Wetherell & Potter, 1992), and Australia (Augoustinos, Tuffin, & Every, 2005; Augoustinos, Tuffin, & Rapley, 1999; Le Couteur, Rapley, & Augoustinos, 2001; O’Doherty, 2001; Rapley, 1998, 2001) have identified pervasive discursive repertoires and rhetorical devices that are combined flexibly by majority group members to justify negative evaluations of minority out-groups. Collectively, this research has demonstrated the flexible, contradictory, and ambivalent nature of contemporary race discourse, organised by common and recurring tropes used by majority group members to justify and rationalise existing social inequities between groups. This article reviews some of these discursive patterns or “ways of talking” about the “other” and concludes by emphasising the significant contribution this work has made to research on language and discrimination within social psychology.

Before embarking on this review, however, it is important to emphasise at the outset that there are heated debates within the academic literature and within Western societies as to what precisely counts as racist. Indeed, critics have argued that what is being claimed to be modern and symbolic variants of racism is not racism at all but rather political and ideological conservatism (Sniderman & Tetlock, 1986). Indeed, a common strategy for speakers is to redefine racism so that one’s own (or others’) views or actions are presented as not racist (van Dijk, 1992). As we will see below, the denial of racism and prejudice is so ubiquitous that this denial itself is sometimes treated by analysts as evidence of the existence of underlying prejudice in the speaker. Indeed, precisely how to analyse racial discourse, which is often ambiguous and contradictory, has been at the forefront of recent debates in this literature (van den Berg, Houtcoup-Steenstra, & Wetherell, 2003). Taking a lead from the methodological principles of conversation analysis, Edwards (2003) has argued that analysts should refrain from imposing their own categories of judgment as to what counts as racist but instead

examine whether speakers themselves treat the talk as such and analyse how it is managed and attended to in social interaction. Given the multiple and shifting meanings of racism that are argued over and debated both by researchers and everyday members, we attempt in this article to refrain from labelling any discourse or stretch of talk as racist or prejudiced per se, as if racism were something that could be readily diagnosed by us as analysts. Rather, what we seek to do is to overview recurring and pervasive patterns of talk that have been identified across a number of studies that nonetheless negatively position minority out-groups and rationalise their continued marginalisation and/or exclusion from mainstream society.

Our theoretical and methodological approach to the analysis of discourse is one that attempts to bring together what have sometimes been positioned as antithetical approaches: critical discourse analysis, which sees language and discourse as constituted by broad patterns of sense-making practices that shape and furnish our understandings of the world (Wetherell, 1998), and discursive psychology, which has been informed by ethnomethodology and conversation analysis and focuses primarily on the local pragmatics and action orientation of people's talk (Edwards & Potter, 1992). This "synthetic" approach, as it has been described by Wetherell and Edley (1999; Wetherell, 1998), emphasises that people's talk is shaped both by broader social and cultural repertoires of understanding and by the practical and local concerns of social interaction.

Indeed, the patterns of talk around race which we discuss below can be seen to reflect not only interpretative repertoires, that is, a set of descriptions, arguments, and accounts that are recurrently used in people's race talk to construct versions of the world (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), but also discursive resources that perform social actions such as blaming, justifying, rationalising, and constructing particular social identities for speakers and those who are positioned as other. These discursive repertoires include the following: (a) the denial of prejudice, (b) grounding one's views as reflecting the external world rather than one's psychology, (c) positive self and negative other presentation, (d) discursive deracialisation, and (e) the use of liberal arguments for "illiberal" ends. Again, we would like to reiterate that we are not arguing that the examples we provide below are instances of racist discourse per se (although, in some cases, it would be difficult arguing otherwise).<sup>1</sup> Rather, what we aim to do in this article is to point to pervasive and recurring patterns of talk around sensitive issues such as race and immigration and to demonstrate how these are articulated in ways that primarily function to "dodge the identity of prejudice" (Wetherell & Potter, 1992) precisely because of the present historical and political climate that eschews the explicit expression of such sentiments.

## **The Denial of Prejudice**

As van Dijk (1992) has clearly documented, one of the pervasive features of contemporary race discourse is the denial of prejudice. Negative representations and

evaluations of minorities are commonly preceded by ubiquitous disclaimers such as “I’m not racist but . . .” or “I have nothing against migrants but. . .” Contemporary race talk, therefore, is strategically organised to deny racism. Researchers have demonstrated how people orient to the increasing social norms against prejudice by framing their talk in such a way as to inoculate themselves from possible charges of prejudice. Those who wish to express negative views against out-groups in this historical climate take care to construct these views as justified, warranted, and rational. Such denials not only attend to the positive self-presentation of the speaker (see below) but also allow what otherwise would be “unsayable” to be said. van Dijk (1992) gives the following example from an interview with a Dutch woman:

Extract 1

Uhh . . . how they are and that is mostly just fine, people have their own religion have their own way of life, and I have *absolutely* nothing against that, *but*, it is a fact that if their way of life begins to differ from mine to an *extent* that. . . (pp. 98-99)

As van Dijk explains, in this utterance the denial of prejudice is managed by expressing tolerance toward cultural difference, but only if that difference does not exceed the dominant group’s tolerance. In this formulation, cultural tolerance is constrained by boundaries of social acceptance established by majority group members who position themselves as entitled to police out-group behaviour.

Although most empirical research on the denial and mitigation of prejudice has examined the ways in which individuals self-monitor and manage their talk, more recently Condor, Figgou, Abell, Gibson, and Stevenson (2006) have emphasised how prejudice denials can also be accomplished collaboratively in social interaction. Condor et al. present the following example of an elderly couple, in which Hilda defends her husband Jack from potential charges of xenophobia.

Extract 2

Jack: . . . let’s face it, it’s not as if they’re wanted here. We have enough low-life here already without importing other people’s.

Hilda: Jack! [to Susan] I’m sorry about that. He’s not xenophobic. It’s it’s no—

Jack: it’s not racist, no. We’ve never been racist, have we Hilda?

Hilda: No. We’ve got nothing against—

Jack: —nothing against the refugees. I have every sympathy for them. But you’d be mad not to ask, why are they all coming here? (p. 452)

Note how in this example the denial of prejudice is preceded with an apology to the interviewer (“I’m sorry about that”), which not only recognises the increasing opprobrium against the explicit expression of such views but also attends to the possible offence that Jack’s remarks may cause. Jack and Hilda collaboratively work up their moral identity as not racist or xenophobic; moreover, Jack emphasises his

sympathy for “illegal immigrants” and accounts for his views on rational grounds: “You’d be mad not to ask, why are they all coming here?” Thus, Jack presents his views as being arrived at by a rational consideration of questions that need to be asked, and not on the basis of xenophobia or racism. Indeed, not asking such questions is represented here as defying reason (“mad”). Notable in this interaction, therefore, is a speaker’s concern over being judged as prejudiced and therefore, by implication, as irrational.

### **Grounding One’s Views as Reflecting the External World: Reason and Rationality**

Indeed, as Billig (1991; Billig et al., 1988) points out, the commonsense notion of prejudice—to prejudice—has become associated with irrationality, poor reasoning, and unexamined views. As such, prejudice is recognised as violating a commonsense belief in the values of reason and rationality, which have increasingly become the very underpinnings of democratic societies. To appear not prejudiced, it is important to present one’s views as reasonable, rational, and thoughtfully arrived at. An effective way of doing this is to present one’s views as reflecting the external world rather than one’s internal (and therefore potentially racist) psychology. In the previous extract, we demonstrated how Jack was able to accomplish this by suggesting that his views were arrived at on the basis of asking reasonable questions about refugees. To justify their views, speakers often appeal to observable and thus purported “factual” claims about minority out-group behaviour that is represented as negative, antisocial, or transgressing the dominant group’s social norms. These factual claims often take the form of storytelling, which presents firsthand personal experiences of undesirable out-group behaviour (van Dijk, 1992).

Verkuyten (1998), for example, found that participants in his focus groups argued that they themselves were not responsible for their negative views of foreigners. Rather, their negative views were presented as the natural and inevitable outcome of living with foreigners. In such accounts, minority out-groups were constructed as having only themselves to blame for their negative portrayal. This type of strategy is useful for establishing oneself as reasonable and rational. The following example comes from Verkuyten.

#### Extract 3

Rob: There was this Moroccan family, they take the shed next to mine, you know, well, they steal bikes all over the place, just like that, and they bring their friends, and sometime this week I’m thinking, was it yesterday, no, Whit Monday it was, and I’m thinking, what’s this noise, you know, who’s doing all this hammering, you know, so I look outside, and one of these guys, one of these Moroccan guys like, is sitting there with a lock that’s all rusty, and the neighbours have given him this rust remover oil, and he’s

been using plenty of it, and he's just hammering away there. So there's a pool of oil right on the doorstep. So you're tracking it in, it'll be all over your carpets. So I asked him what he thought he was doing and all that, but you're turning nasty, like Trees said, you know, so he says at some point like, "Who do you think you are, I do what I like here." I was saying that "and if you don't . . . I'll kick you out of here." Well they aren't getting under your skin, no, it's worse than that. And that's why, and it's not just me who says so, you know, other people say so too.

Trees: Yeah, they really make you aggressive. (p. 157)

Rob's firsthand narrative account of his experience with his Moroccan neighbours is notable for the detail it provides, including attempts to accurately recall the day on which the event took place. Note the self-correction from the nonspecific "this week," to "yesterday," and finally "Monday." Such displays of attending to the accuracy and detail of the account rhetorically function to give the story its status as "factual." The use of reported speech also works to build the vivid description of this account of what happened between Rob and his neighbours. Rob also bolsters his account further by the use of a consensus warrant, "Its not just me who says so, other people say so too," which receives shared agreement and corroboration from Trees. As Edwards and Potter (1992) have noted, the use of rhetorical devices, such as the provision of vivid description, the use of reported speech, and the invoking of consensus warrants, is a discursive tool that helps build the facticity of an account or version of an event, grounding that account in the external world rather than in the psychology or mind of the speaker (Edwards, 2003).

Likewise, Reeves (1983), van der Valk (2000), and Jones (2000) have identified a pattern of talk that attributes racism and the rise of extremism to immigration and the presence of immigrants. Such accounts are often premised on a pervasive trope within the new racism that the coexistence of different cultural groups is not within human nature and therefore "unnatural" (Barker, 1981).

Presenting negative views of out-groups as a concern with more socially acceptable issues, such as economic parity, is also an effective way of externalising one's views and presenting them as justified and warranted. Augoustinos et al. (1999) found that participants rationalised negative or what may be heard to be racist comments about Indigenous Australians in terms of "justifiable" anger over perceived government support they received. In the extract below, S argues that negative feelings toward Aboriginals were not based on "the colour of a person's skin" but on the "social advantages they perceive them to have." A second participant reformulates this as "taxpayers are worried about where their money is going," which is followed by consensual agreement from S that this should not necessarily be attributed to racism but economic concerns over how money is being managed. As with the previous extract, note how this negative construction of a disadvantaged minority is collaboratively worked up between interactants through the use of shared agreement and consensus warrants.

## Extract 4

S: Well, everybody I heard or I speak to, they're all for Aboriginals getting a fair deal but they are sick and tired of governments handing over money. "Why do they get extra? Why do they do this?" So, I don't know whether that comes down to a racial issue or not, or it's just them seeing that they're getting a lot of gear (?) handed to them on a sort of plate. (*Ah hum*) and that causes racist comments or comments and attitudes to become umm negative (*Mmm*). So, they're not, they may not necessarily have racist attitudes, but if they see that this group of people who are being thrown money hand over fist at which it is occurring, I'm not saying that they don't deserve some of it. . . . And that's not necessarily the way to do it because they see a mismanagement by government as far as dealings with Aboriginals. They take it out and say "well this shouldn't be happening, they're getting all of this, they're getting all of that," so then they take it back and say, well, making racist comments like umm "black Aboriginals get everything just because they're black, rah rah." So what I'm saying is that it's negative but I don't think it's due to the colour of a person's skin. I think it's because of the social, umm, ADVANTAGES that they perceive them to have.

[Two turns omitted.]

G: Tax payers, they're worried about where their money is going.

J: Yeah, so I don't think it's a racist opinion.

S: No, It seems to be my perception, it's not necessarily they're racist, it's more a case of the way they see their money spent and managed (*Mmm*) and the way it's being handled that results in comments that could be considered racist (*Mmm*). (Augoustinos et al., 1999, p. 367)

## Positive Self and Negative Other Presentation

Prejudice denials may attend not only to strategic self-presentation but also to protecting the dominant in-group as a whole (van Dijk, 1992). In elite discourse, particularly that of politicians, a general pattern of positive self-presentation and negative other presentation has been identified (van Dijk, 1993). In this pattern, elites use a variety of discursive formulations such as civil rights slogans, nationalist rhetoric, and populism to present themselves as tolerant, hospitable, and rational, whereas minorities are portrayed in ways that problematise and marginalise them: as criminal, deviant, passive, and culturally alien.

Positive self-presentation in public debates on immigration is an important strategic prelude to statements that support restrictions to immigration. This is particularly so in relation to debates on refugees and asylum seekers to avoid accusations that policies that exclude and detain them are inhumane. The following extract from Sedlak (2000) comes from a politician who presents an image of the Austrian people (and, by extension, the speaker himself as an Austrian) as hospitable and generous and thereby defends the in-group as a whole from charges that the Austrian response to asylum seekers breaches principles of generosity.



Extract 5

Whenever and wherever people have encountered hard times or had to flee from war, Austria and the Austrian population have proved themselves to be willing to help, open-minded and generous, on the occasion of the Hungarian crisis in the fifties as well as the suppression of the Prague Spring through Soviet tanks in the sixties.

The Austrian women and Austrian men have continued with this tradition in the face of the chaos of war between our south eastern neighbours. I only remind of the great generosity for example for "Neighbour in Need" and similar aid programmes on the spot or of the fact that in the past years more than 80,000 Bosnian refugees in total have been taken in here in Austria. (Sedlak, 2000, p. 118)

The generosity of the Australian people is a pervasive trope also used by Prime Minister John Howard (2001) in the extract below to justify the detention of unauthorised arrivals seeking asylum in Australia. Note how the government's policy of detaining refugees, including women and children, is constructed here as Australia's "fundamental right . . . to protect its borders" and how this "right" is positioned alongside sensitive issues such as national security and terrorism.

Extract 6

National security is therefore about a proper response to terrorism. It's also about having a far sighted strong well thought out defence policy. It is also about having an uncompromising view about the fundamental right of this country to protect its borders, it's about this nation saying to the world we are a generous open hearted people taking more refugees on a per capita basis than any nation except Canada, we have a proud record of welcoming people from 140 different nations. But we will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come. (Howard, Launch of the Liberal Party Election Campaign, October 28, 2001)

Positive self-presentations are also important in defending oneself and one's country from charges of racism by presenting the nation as self-evidently tolerant and nonracist and by positioning discrimination as an aberration at the fringes of an otherwise antiracist society. The following extract from a French politician is cited by van Dijk (1993).

Extract 7

The French are not racist. But, facing this continuous increase of the foreign population in France, one has witnessed the development, in certain cities and neighbourhoods, of reactions that come close to xenophobia. (p. 81)

Although this account denies the possibility of racism in France, the speaker admits that there is some evidence of xenophobia (hedged as "reactions that come close")

and excused as a natural reaction to the “continuous increase of the foreign population”), but this is relegated to the fringes of an otherwise tolerant society (to “certain cities and neighbourhoods”), thus ensuring that everyday racism and institutionalised racism are neither acknowledged nor addressed.

Positive self-presentations are also typically accompanied by negative other presentations that are central to the construction and reproduction of an “us versus them” contrast structure. For example,

Extract 8

Our traditions of fairness and tolerance are being exploited by every terrorist, crook, screwball and scrounger who wants a free ride at our expense. (cited in van Dijk, 1992, p. 103; *The Mail*)

Extract 9

These [asylum seekers arriving by boat] had behaved abominably right from the start. The disgraceful way they treat their own children. Any civilised person would never dream of treating their own children in that way. (Australian Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer, cited in Corlett, 2002, p. 47)<sup>2</sup>

It should be emphasised, however, that minority out-groups or culturally different others are not always uniformly depicted as problematic but may also be presented in both positive and negative terms. Lynn and Lea (2003), in their analysis of letters to the editor on asylum seekers in Britain, identified the differentiation of genuine and bogus refugees as a key discursive resource for denying asylum seekers access and rights in Britain.

Extract 10

Bad feeling occurs when refugees are housed ahead of homeless British citizens. No-one begrudges genuine refugees a home, but when bogus ones are housed within weeks and UK citizens, black and white, are left to rot in hostels, it does seem unfair? (cited in Lynn & Lea, 2003, p. 433).

This discursive device of differentiating between a genuine and bogus other is useful in bringing off a criticism while simultaneously appearing “reasonable” and sympathetic toward asylum seekers. van Dijk (1997) suggests that the notion of “bogus refugees” (also identified by him as a key political strategy in his research of parliamentary debates in Britain, the Netherlands, and the United States) arose in 1985 when large numbers of Tamils fled from civil war in Sri Lanka and came to various European countries seeking asylum. He suggests that to justify severe restrictions on asylum for Tamils, a new conceptual and discursive categorisation of refugees became imperative at this time to counter the pitiful image of these refugees fleeing communism. Lynn and Lea (2003) suggest that the idea of the bogus refugee has

entered into “common sense” and has become increasingly “naturalized” as a legitimate and justifiable categorisation for asylum seekers. The categorisation of refugees as “bogus” casts them as cheats and liars, and thus their restriction and detention may be democratically legitimated by framing it in terms of clamping down on users and abusers of the dominant group’s generosity. The failure to provide asylum can be legitimated on the grounds that only “real” refugees are entitled to protection and rights.

The deployment of very specific and particular social categorisations is a powerful way of justifying oppressive practices—by defining the boundaries of a group, a speaker defines the entitlements of that group. As Le Couteur et al. (2001) argue, “The manner in which the membership categories of participants are constructed is a crucial rhetorical move in political talk” (p. 53). Categorisations are used to justify racially restrictive policies while maintaining a semblance of nonpartisanship and evenhandedness through a positive-self, negative-other categorisation strategy. In Australia, for example, the most frequently used category by the media and the government to index asylum seekers (a category to which they are legally entitled under international human rights law; Bhagwati, 2002) was that of “illegal immigrants” (Augoustinos & Quinn, 2003). Arguably, this categorisation served important rhetorical and political functions in legitimating the government’s policies of mandatory detention, a policy that received widespread public support.

The distinction and contrast between good and bad minority group members is not limited to debates over refugees and asylum seekers, however. A similar discursive device was detailed by Nairn and McCreanor (1991) in their study of Pakeha (White New Zealander) talk and text about Maori and race relations in New Zealand more generally.

#### Extract 11

Those country Maoris are lovely people! *But*—our love for Maoris is lessened when we see and hear Maoris who behave like uncouth animals. They are not only ignoring *our* culture—they are ignoring their own! Where are the lovable, kindly Maoris who used to play tennis with us—and sing for pleasure? (cited in Nairn & McCreanor, 1991, p. 252; submissions to Human Rights Commission investigation into the Haka Party Incident)

In this account, two categories of Maori are constructed—those who behave in a “socially acceptable” manner (the criteria for which are defined by the Pakeha) and those who do not. By conceding that there are good Maori, any potential accusations of racism when criticising “bad Maori” can be fended off. According to Nairn and McCreanor (1991), the primary function of this divisive pattern is to legitimate the condemnation of badly behaved Maoris by the Pakeha majority. As with its deployment in the asylum seeker debates, this “splitting” function (Nairn & McCreanor, 1991) pits Maori against Maori, sidelining any examination of the dominant group’s history and practices.

## Discursive Deracialisation

A very notable feature in some of the extracts, which we have yet to examine in detail, is the way in which speakers attempt to deracialise negative representations of minority out-groups. Reeves (1983) has referred to this phenomenon as the deracialisation of discourse, in which racial categories are attenuated, eliminated, or substituted and racial explanations are omitted or de-emphasised. For example, in Extract 4, the speaker S justifies other people's negative perceptions of Indigenous people by suggesting that such representations may appear to be racist, but they are really about economic parity (e.g., "it's not necessarily they're racist, it's more a case of the way they see their money spent and managed."). In such accounts, negative views continue to be expressed, and the institutionalisation of racial exclusion continues, but this is accomplished by downplaying race as an explanatory construct.

In particular, it has been noted that the category of nation is increasingly taking over from race in legitimating oppressive practices toward minority groups and, indeed, as a means by which to sanitize and deracialise racist discourses (Barker, 1981; Gilroy, 1993; Reeves, 1983). Critical discursive work in particular has demonstrated how the discourse of nation and national belonging has been increasingly mobilised in political debates and parliamentary discourse in Western democracies on immigration and asylum seekers, not only by right-wing political parties but also by parties of the centre (van der Valk, 2000; van Dijk, 1993, 2000; Wodak & van Dijk, 2000). Hage (1998) argues that when people in their "own nation" are concerned with where "they" (members of other races, ethnics, refugees, immigrants, etc.) are located or whether there are too many of "them" around, the relationship between the privileged position of one's in-group and national territory becomes an important issue for examination. Such concerns are clearly evident in Extracts 5, 6, and 7, where politicians draw on the discourse of nation and national identity to warrant their claims about the need to restrict immigration and to defend the national borders against refugees.

The discourses of nation, nationhood, and national identity have also been found to be prevalent features in everyday informal talk and argumentation on such topics (Augoustinos et al., 1999; Billig, 1995; Hage, 1998; Le Couteur & Augoustinos, 2001; Lynn & Lea, 2003; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Wetherell and Potter (1992), for example, have described the use of a "togetherness repertoire" in the race talk of Pakeha New Zealanders, which extols the need to minimize differences between people and instead highlight commonalities. McCreanor (1993a) refers to this as the "one people" theme, which argues that the solution to racial tensions is the adoption of a unifying, superordinate national identity. This appeal to nationalist values can be seen in the extract below that comes from a university student focus group on Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations in Australia.

### Extract 12

A: I especially think that it's going to be better for Aborigines if they do get more people like Kathy Freeman that doesn't look at the racist aspects but (*Mmm*) sets her mind to

the goal that I'm an Australian and this is where I want to be (*Yes*). And I think that's a big thing with racism that people see it as that they're Aborigines or that they're from a different ethnic group but no one seems to see that we're Australians? That's a big point that that really gets me that everyone's got their own small minority groups (*Mmm*) you're either Anglo-Saxon or you're something else and you seem to fit nicely into it (*Yep*). But the fact that we're Australians is forgotten and I think that until people start to realise it that regardless of what we are, we're Australians, it's always going to continue (*Yeah*).

The speaker in this extract refers to Olympic athlete Kathy Freeman, who is held up as a successful role model for other Indigenous Australians to emulate. Importantly, however, it is argued that the emphasis on social and cultural identities other than "Australian-ness" is divisive and undermining of national unity: that Aboriginal-Australians and other ethnic minorities must see themselves first and foremost as Australians. Although the primacy afforded to a collective national identity functions to emphasise social inclusiveness, paradoxically it can also work to undermine the legitimacy of minority groups having their varied cultural and social identities recognised and affirmed. Thus, existing differences in culture, history, language, and ethnicity are to be subsumed (even negated) by appealing to the nationalist moral imperative to collectively identify at the level of the nation state.

### **Liberal Arguments for Illiberal Ends**

As Wetherell and Potter (1992) have argued, discourse does not have to be explicitly racist to create circumstances that have discriminatory, exclusionary, and oppressive effects. In fact, discursive practices that remove overt signs of racism in favour of explanations that maintain, for example, roots in egalitarian discourse possess distinct advantages over classic biological and overt racist discourse. In particular, it is extremely difficult to pin down. To label a statement or action racist is problematic when the express purpose of that discourse is to justify discriminatory practices non-racially. In this final section, we examine the mobilisation of classic liberal tropes of freedom, individualism, equality, and progress by majority group members in their talk on racial issues and intergroup relations.

Based on interviews with White New Zealanders and an analysis of media, political, and historical texts, Wetherell and Potter (1992) identified 10 commonplace arguments that were typically deployed by majority group members to justify existing inequalities between Maori and Pakeha in New Zealand. These commonplaces functioned as "rhetorically self-sufficient" arguments that required little elaboration or explanation. Based on the liberal intellectual tradition, principles such as freedom, equality, and individualism were recurrently drawn on by speakers in their talk to account for and rationalise their views. The following taken-for-granted arguments

constituted a tool kit of “practical politics” and were used flexibly in the discourse of Pakeha New Zealanders (Wetherell & Potter, 1992, p. 177):

Resources should be used productively and in a cost-effective manner  
 Nobody should be compelled  
 Everybody should be treated equally  
 You cannot turn the clock backwards  
 Present generations cannot be blamed for the mistakes of past generations  
 Injustices should be righted  
 Everybody can succeed if they try hard enough  
 Minority opinion should not carry more weight than majority opinion  
 We have to live in the twentieth (or 21st) century  
 You have to be practical

The principle that “everyone should be treated equally” is, of course, central to Western liberal democracies. As many have pointed out, however, the liberal notion of equality has a very distinct meaning: It is a form of egalitarianism not premised on equality of outcomes (in terms of material wealth, status, and access to resources) but on the right of every citizen to political equality and participation in a democratic system. In the extracts below, we see how this particular version of equality is mobilised in ways that actually constrain political efforts at redressing social disadvantage for particular minorities, in this case, Indigenous Australians, who are by far the most economically and socially disadvantaged group in Australian society. In Extract 13, the controversial leader and founder of the One Nation Party, Pauline Hanson, admonishes the Australian parliament for the existence of a separate Ministry for Indigenous Affairs, arguing that such a portfolio that is “clearly based on race” does not treat all Australians “the same.”

Extract 13

Ms Hanson (Oxley) (5.49pm)—I make no apology for my absence from the House yesterday. Prior arrangements had been made. I am appalled that the government and the opposition moved a motion which was clearly directed at me and indirectly at the Australian people. The motion stated: “That this House reaffirms its commitment to the right of all Australians to enjoy equal rights and be treated with equal respect regardless of race, colour, creed or origin.” This is exactly what I am fighting for. How can the House possibly move this motion and still have a separate portfolio for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders which is clearly based on race? (cited in Rapley, 2001, p. 244)

Of significance too in this extract is how Hanson defends herself from implicit accusations of racism by her parliamentary colleagues, who had moved a motion in her absence the previous day reaffirming their commitment to the right of all Australians to be treated equally. This motion was moved as a response to Hanson’s controversial maiden speech in the parliament that many viewed as an attack on Indigenous Australians and Asian immigration.

“Everyone should be treated equally” is also an argument that is commonly mobilised in text and talk opposing affirmative action policies as a means of redressing the lower representation of particular minority groups in education and employment. Extract 14 comes from a student focus group in Australia, where the majority of students argued against affirmative action policies to increase the participation of Indigenous people at university. Note the speaker’s use of the ubiquitous disclaimer (“not because I’m racist or discriminating but”) to argue that such policies undermine the liberal-individualist principle of merit (“I think that merit is the most important thing”). Implicitly, the speaker also invokes the self-sufficient argument that “everybody can succeed if they try hard enough,” for in this construction, equality of opportunity in Australian society is an assumed given.

Extract 14

A: I think although too that they must ask themselves because I know I would that are they getting it because of their merits or are they getting it because of what they are (*Mmm*)? And I’m one against sort of holding places open for specific groups (*Mmm*) umm not because I’m racist or discriminating but because I think that merit is the most important thing you give a person the job because you think they are capable of doing it not because of who they are and I know that if I was put to that situation I probably would prefer not to take that job because I wouldn’t have, I’d never know whether I got the job because I might be male or because I’m white so it’s I think it’s a really difficult line to walk. (Augoustinos et al., 2005, p. 324)

These self-sufficient arguments have also been found in the analysis of the public debate in Australia on reconciliation and whether to apologise to Indigenous Australians for historical injustices (Augoustinos, Le Couteur, & Soyland, 2002; Le Couteur & Augoustinos, 2001). For example, the two related arguments, “present generations cannot be blamed for the mistakes of past generations” and “you cannot turn the clock backwards,” were commonly deployed by both the Australian government and members of the public at large to justify opposition to a national apology to Indigenous people. The following e-mailed letters to a newspaper Web site demonstrate the form that such arguments took:

Why on earth should *citizens who were not even born at the time* say “sorry” for something over which they had no influence.

No, we should not be held liable for our ancestors!!!! Nor can we judge their actions of yesterday now.

Any past mistakes should not be held against today’s generation.

History is history.

There is no reason for my children or I to feel guilty for what may have happened in the past, so long as we don't repeat the same mistakes again—you can't change history! (Le Couteur & Augoustinos, 2001, p. 54)

The self-sufficient rhetorical argument “you have to be practical” is perhaps just as ubiquitous in race talk as the denial of prejudice. Although on one hand speakers invariably espouse egalitarian principles and ideals, on the other these principles are undermined by practical considerations. Such “practical talk” is deployed in ways that, again, primarily function to justify and legitimate existing social inequities in society. Wetherell, Striven, and Potter (1987) have referred to this as the principle/practice dichotomy in which a principle is cited but then is immediately undercut by the impracticalities that the upholding of this principle would entail. The following example about the desirability of teaching the Maori language in New Zealand schools on one hand and its practical limitations in a Western world on the other comes from Wetherell and Potter (1992, pp. 188-189).

#### Extract 15

R. Kenwood: Ah well you know I hope when I retire that I will learn the Maori language, I think it. . . . I want to learn it you know because I think I have to learn it, but I'd like to, but I think it's they . . . unfortunate with these Te Kohanga Reo situations, is that, you know, they're sort of forcing Maoris and peop . . . forcing Maori children to learn Maori language, well I can see it has no value in our education system. Now they'll straight away say that our system is wrong. But um er er you know as far as the Maori language is concerned, singing and that sort of thing and on the marae, it has its place. But in a Western world it has no place at all.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have presented an overview of discursive patterns of formal and informal talk about race, ethnicity, and immigration that have been identified across a number of studies as having become increasingly pervasive in Western liberal democracies. Whether or not such talk is racist in and of itself is a moot point, but what is clear is that such discourse nonetheless functions to negatively position minority out-groups and to rationalise their continued marginalisation and/or exclusion from mainstream society. In the extracts above, minorities were referred to variously as “low-life” (Extract 2), as being responsible for the aggressiveness of majority group members (“Yeah, they really make you aggressive”; Extract 3), as behaving “abominably” and treating their children disgracefully (“These people had behaved abominably right from the start. The disgraceful way they treat their own children”; Extract 8), as “bogus” (Extract 10), and as behaving “like uncouth animals” and ignoring their culture (Extract 11). Contemporary race talk also functions



in ways that legitimate and rationalise existing social relations and inequities between groups. For example, in Extracts 4, 13, and 14, participants questioned the disadvantaged status of Indigenous people in Australia and contrastively construct them as a privileged minority who are the recipients of government handouts and tax payers' money (implicitly, Indigenous people are excluded here from the category "tax payer"; Extract 4), receive disproportionate consideration by government by having a separate portfolio to represent their collective interests (Extract 13), and are the beneficiaries of unfair structural interventions to increase their underrepresentation in education (e.g., affirmative action)—policies that are seen to contravene the principles of meritocracy and treating everyone the same (Extract 14). Although these arguments may not be racist, they nonetheless function to legitimate inequities and to preserve and maintain the status quo by opposing social change. Indeed, in these extracts, the Indigenous minority in Australia was constructed as receiving more than their fair share and, as a consequence, disadvantaging the non-Indigenous majority. van Dijk (1992) notes that this is a common reversal move in contemporary race talk in which majority group members represent themselves as the victims of discrimination and "political correctness."

The most significant contribution that discursive work has made to the field of language and discrimination, and social psychology in general, is that it has been able to explicate the precise manner by which people articulate a complex set of positions that blend egalitarian views with discriminatory ones. The detailed analysis of discourse, as it is used in naturalistic settings such as that found in everyday conversation and formal institutional talk, has been able to demonstrate how existing racial and social inequities in Western liberal democracies are rationalised and legitimated through the mobilisation of liberal individualist principles central to social democracies. Liberal principles of equality, justice, and fairness become ideological resources that can be used in the service of justifying inequities and, indeed, of giving expression to views and practices that can be seen to be discriminatory. The contribution that this research makes to our understanding of contemporary prejudice and discrimination cannot be underestimated given various claims that levels of prejudice and racism have been in a significant decline in the past 50 years (e.g., Gallup & Hugick, 1990). Such empirical claims have been based on traditional quantitative surveys and questionnaires that purportedly measure underlying and enduring levels of prejudice and racism. In contrast, discursive research has demonstrated how attitudes about race and ethnicity and cultural difference are rhetorically and flexibly organised when they are produced in their more natural context of everyday discourse. It is through everyday language practices, in both formal and informal talk, that relations of power, dominance, and exploitation become reproduced and legitimated. The analytic site for discursive psychology is how discursive resources and rhetorical arguments are put together to function in this way and to construct versions and accounts of intergroup relations that have discriminatory consequences.

## Notes

1. Throughout this article, we continuously refer to “race” discourse or talk rather than racist discourse for the same reasons. We leave it up to readers to make their own judgments and interpretations regarding such categorisations.

2. Government officials and ministers accused a boat of asylum seekers arriving on October 6, 2001, close to the election on November 9, 2001, of deliberately throwing their children overboard in an attempt to blackmail the Australian government into granting them asylum. Both the prime minister and the defence minister at the time followed up this story, producing photographs and video of children who allegedly had been thrown into the water. These were later demonstrated to have been edited photographs of asylum seekers in the sea after their boat had sunk when the ship lost engine power but before they were rescued by the Australian Navy (Marr & Wilkinson, 2003).

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