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Hitting the white ceiling: Structural racism and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university graduates

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Abstract

This article reports on a study that explored what it means to be a mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university graduate in the context of age, life-stage, history, culture, socioeconomic status, race and place. Using narrative interview data and fieldwork observation, we focus on the graduates' workplace experiences and take a case study approach to amplify their voices. We argue that the data challenges the ideological construct of Australia as a 'post-racial' society and illustrates how interrelated variants of structural racism function to sanction, silence and control educated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, divide communities into quasi-hierarchies, and sustain white power and privilege. We show how these variants are expressed as low expectations, shadeism, culturism and privilege protectionism, and argue that their enactment can erect an invisible barrier to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander professional progression: a 'white ceiling' above which many graduates struggle to ascend.

Keywords

mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university graduates, structural racism, workplaces

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Terminology: In this article, we use 'Aboriginal' and 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' when referring to Australia's First Peoples. We use 'black' when referring more generally to people who experience the distinctive issues related to racism in postcolonial nations. We use 'white' when referring to people who knowingly or unknowingly participate in and benefit from the racialised social structures that position them as white. It does not necessarily follow that all people described as such have white skin.

Since the 1990s, race scholars from postcolonial nations have interrogated the ideological construct of the 'post-racial' society, arguing that it is an edifice that legitimises subtle and indirect variations of racialised practices and the persistence of racial inequality (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; DiAngelo, 2011; Hughey et al., 2015; Omi and Winant, 1994). Its legitimisation comprises powerful mitigating fictions that justify black racial inequality and absolve white people from responsibility. These fictions include discourses of equal opportunity, meritocracy, race-neutrality and objectivity (Coram and Hallinan, 2017), which are presented as a defence for racial inequality under the rhetorical guise of same-ness across racial groups (Jayakumar and Adamian, 2017). Proponents of the post-racial construct contend that racism now exists only on the aberrant fringes where the biological determinism of genetic racial superiority still has cachet (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Sussman, 2014). Yet history shows that every significant movement towards black racial justice is followed by a white backlash (Omi and Winant, 2015). Race scholars contend that each iteration comprises new, more 'civil' ways to refute or downplay the extensive sociological data that positions racism as a socially real structural phenomenon.

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (1997, 2013, 2015), describes the discourse around post-racialisation as colour-blind racism, and identifies four central mental frames in which it manifests. The first and most defining frame is *abstract liberalism*, which refers to the seemingly morally and racially just arguments of equal opportunity for all, while ignoring the breadth and depth of inequities between people who are placed in different racial categories. The second frame is *naturalisation*, which attempts to rationalise inequality as a naturally occurring phenomenon where segregation is the outcome of individual or group choice, and which sits detached from social structures and systems. The third frame is *cultural racism*, which replaces the long-standing genetic inferiority rationales for racial disparities with the justification that the inferior status of black people is the product of cultural deficiencies, such as poor work ethic or primitive belief systems. The last frame is *minimisation*, which pretends that race and racism are things of the past in societies where there are ample opportunities for all and arguing otherwise is 'playing the victim'.

Recently, a fifth mental frame of colour-blind racism, the *disconnected power-analysis* frame, has been proposed by Uma Jayakumar and Annie Adamian (2017). In brief, Jayakumar's and Adamian's research provides insight into how colour-blindness has evolved over time to accommodate a more racism-conscious context by developing nuanced ways of acknowledging racism while protecting white innocence and privilege. Users of this frame appropriate new theoretical understandings of racism to display empathy with black people and promote themselves as anti-racist. They are positioned as innocent allies, which relieves them of responsibility for sustaining white privilege and allows them to avoid actions that would result in actual changes to structural racism. Ultimately, all five frames support white people's positive self-image and personal pride in their status and protects them from feeling that their privileges are undeserved.

In Australia, many scholars, activists and commentators also argue that 'post-racialisation' is an invention that seeks to diminish race and racism as structural determinants of individual and group progress (Barrow and Judd, 2014; Bond, 2017a; Hage, 2015). According to Ghassan Hage (2015), Australia is in danger of reigniting racial conflict precisely because we no longer view racism as an important socio-political issue. He argues that racism has been 'banalised' by both the left and the right, and its banalisation heightens the potential for the 'grand Evil' of racism to be invigorated. Colin Tatz (2017), finds that Australia's long-term wilful denialism of its racist past (and present) translates into a mean-spiritedness towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and belies our claim to egalitarianism. He suggests that this sentiment is deeply embedded in the Australian psyche and propped up by the policies and practices of our bureaucracies and governments. Fiona McAllan (2011) also contends that the exclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives from the nation's historical narrative, and their obfuscation, maintains their marginalisation. She points out that when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices are introduced into our historiography, a 'defensive assertion of whiteness' (2011: 12) is the typical response.

Despite these and other efforts to expose the material foundations of structural racism and engage our polity and public in a dialogue that seeks to challenge its processes and practices, Australia's mainstream population generally remains fixed on the notion that racism is atypically mediated through the unenlightened individual (Coram and Hallinan, 2017). Blatant racist acts undoubtedly occur, and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university graduates interviewed for this study provided many examples of being racially vilified. But they also indicated that overt racial profiling is the racism they can handle. It is the larger, shape-shifting and elaborate project classified as structural racism that the graduates struggle against. In this article, we employ the graduates' stories to describe how structural racism is inscribed and reinscribed through interaction in the micro-settings of diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workplaces as low expectations, shadeism, culturism and privilege protectionism. We show how the graduates' experiences fit with the observed relationship between structural racism and racial inequality, and explain how its presence exercises inequitable effects on the graduates' professional progression.

Graduate profile

The aim of this study is to understand what having a university education means to mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university graduates in the context of age, life-stage, history, culture, socioeconomic status, race and place (Plater et al., 2015). The initial reason for recruiting mature-age graduates was familiarity and accessibility: for many years, the first author was involved in educating older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students. Our focus on this cohort singularised once we found that mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students in particular were both under-represented and misrepresented in the literature (Plater et al., 2015). The 26 graduates interviewed were aged between 30 and 60 at completion of their first university qualification (which were undergraduate or postgraduate degrees to which entry was gained via recognition-of-previous-learning pathways). All were working parents while studying, and at the time of the interviews, many were also grandparents. Some were also primary carers for their grandchildren and the children of other family members. The graduates' workplaces varied: many were employed in health-oriented settings, others in education, social work and community-controlled service settings, and some in the private sector. All were in roles where identifying as an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person was required or strongly preferred due to the nature of their work. Twenty-two graduates lived in small, discrete and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and four graduates lived in regional and urban centres. All had experience living and working in remote locations.

During the interviews, each graduate referred in different ways to the embodied legacy of trauma associated with Australia's colonial past: that is, the threefold traumatisation of killings, displacement from country, culture and clan, and blanket discrimination that characterised British settlement of Australia during the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries (Boulton, 2016b; Tatz, 2017). Ten graduates lived and worked in communities that were, within living memory, former missions. These were church-controlled settlements to which their families (and in some cases, they as children) were forcibly removed and/or detained during the protection-segregation and child removal eras of the 19th and 20th centuries (Tatz, 2017). All graduates completed their first university degree at an older age because there were no opportunities to do so at a younger age. School education was described by the graduates as basic and delivered by untrained or ill-trained teachers. Some graduates left school before the age of 12, others sporadically attended secondary school, and most had ceased formal schooling and commenced work at the age of 15 or younger. At that time, none were encouraged or enabled to seek further education beyond basic employment-specific training for low-skilled jobs. All became parents at a relatively young age (16–22 years). While it is beyond the scope of this article to historically contextualise the graduates' post-degree workplace experiences, it is important to note that as Australia's First Peoples, their relationship with white Australia and their pathways through university and into post-graduation employment are inextricably linked to Australia's colonial past (McKenna, 2018; Tatz, 2017).

Research approach

Between 2014 and 2016, narrative interviews with the graduates were conducted in the field. Our early methodology was constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). After each interview, inductive analysis commenced immediately and relied on breaking the data down into codes, systematically comparing and combining codes from previous interviews, identifying themes, and eventually raising abstract categories from which to make empirical observations. We developed memos and diagrams to help make sense of the relationship between each case study, and tested our emerging understandings using theoretical sampling, making links between the data and our analysis (Charmaz, 2014). Additionally, while in the field our methods underwent a decolonising process, which altered the scope, timeframe and direction of inquiry, and led to iterative methodological modifications (Plater et al., 2017). Sampling, data gathering, analysis, interpretation and writing-up became a collaborative process between researchers and graduates,[1] with the graduates playing a pivotal role in defining the conceptual categories.

Findings

Prior to gathering the interview data, our expectation was that attaining a postgraduate university qualification at an older age could be positively transformative for the graduate and their family and community. Certainly, the research produced many celebratory post-graduation tales: the graduates were proud of their educational achievements, admired and emulated by friends, family and colleagues, and determined to use their newfound potency to bring about change in their communities. During the interviews, however, the graduates also wove a more nuanced story from the perspective of educated and increasingly forthright black people who operate within a racialised social system (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). Accounts of put-downs, push-backs and power-plays provided an unexpected counterpoint to the broadly accepted narrative of education as its own socioeconomic development strategy (Pearson, 2009, 2011). These accounts challenged the post-racial assumption that provision of access and opportunity, combined with personal responsibility and determination, equals professional progress (Coram and Hallinan, 2017). Rather, the graduates' accounts of deeply felt disregard and disrespect for their qualification, experience, capacity, culture and community indicated a disconnection with the common-sense orthodoxy of race-neutrality inherent in this assumption. The following case studies illustrate this disconnection by showing how the subtle and not-so-subtle variants of low expectations, shadeism, culturism and privilege protectionism were experienced in the workplace by the graduates.

Low expectations

> I went to the employment office to try for a job. I seen a white lady in charge. I sat down and said, I come to ask for a job. She said to me do you have any experience? So rudely while answering the phone and using the computer. I said yes. She didn't ask if I had any qualifications. Then she said to me we have a cleaning job at the nursing home. I wanted to say to her I'm not your Jackey Jackey.[2] But this is how our people get downgraded in the community. (graduate Patti)[3]

Patti is a 51-year-old Aboriginal woman who has lived and worked her entire life on her traditional lands in a remote part of Australia. Her tertiary qualifications span three decades and include a postgraduate university degree, and she is highly regarded as a health professional by many members of her community. Yet, according to Patti, encounters similar to the one described above were part of her everyday life and acted to undermine her confidence, stifle her aspirations and control her behaviour. Thousands of kilometres away, similar anecdotes were provided by graduates Doris, Angie and Colleen:

> I had a trainee [teacher] here with me, a young white girl. We called the teachers out from [town] to have dinner here, we cooked up a three-course meal and everything. One of the white teachers from town said to the young girl, 'Hello, you must be Doris.' 'No, that's her over there', she said, pointing at me. 'She's my boss.' That teacher just went 'Oh!' Now that happens all the time with us. They don't expect us to be teachers because we're black. (Doris)

Doris is an Aboriginal woman who grew up on a remote mission and completed her first university degree in her early 40s. She and her fellow mature-age graduates and countrywomen, Angie and Colleen, spoke at length about their experiences of being 'small-timed', 'worth nothing' and 'invisible'. They told of white visitors to the school/library/clinic where they hold senior positions who either looked past them to address the white person in the room or requested to be notified when the teacher/librarian/nurse became available. According to these graduates, the bar of expectation is so low that many white people simply did not see Aboriginal capability.

Other graduates spoke of being corralled into poorly paid roles with fancy titles such as ‘Community Consultant’, despite having a university qualification that should have deemed them over-qualified for a position that required no formal training. While these roles signified their value as mediators with deep cultural and community knowledge and useful connections, the graduates resented the implication that they possessed little or no management skills and were excluded from participating in the decision-making that affects their communities. Graduate Jackie put it this way:

> They *need* us to be in contact constantly and bring the community on board but they don’t see us as having skills. Oh, indigenous people don’t have *skills*. But they’re good at all that culture stuff. It’s still out there, it’s very strong, we’re seen as unskilled even if we *are* skilled …

Graduate Etta, who had in fact won team manager positions on the strength of her university qualifications and experiences, still found that higher-level governance roles remained the unassailable domain of white professionals. Other graduates, who were employed in ostensibly decision-making roles and remunerated accordingly, also expressed frustration that their daily activities had more in common with the roles described by Jackie. This left them embarrassed by how little was required of them to draw their salary each week:

> When I got the job as [deputy director] I was like, wow. I thought I finally had the chance to change things…. But now I feel like I’m just a black face where they needed one…. I mean, [my boss] even checks my emails before I send them out! Some weeks I’m ashamed to take my pay home, I do so little. (graduate Susie)

The sense of being ‘worth nothing’ can be found throughout the graduates’ accounts. Many told of being used to backfill positions at work until a more suitable (white) candidate was identified. Graduate Loretta, who has since resigned from her public service position and started her own business because, as she said, she was treated as a ‘black step-and-fetch it’, explained:

> Those [white colleagues], they wanted the Aboriginal client profiles. So … with my background [in client profiling] I was stepped-up to do that role. But I wasn’t good enough to have that job for real. Not good enough to get paid to do what I was doing every day. They used me until they found a white person to do the job. Anyway, that was the beginning of the end for me.

Loretta and other graduates also indicated that, while some white people may unknowingly stifle Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander aspirations and attainment, others demonstrated a clear disregard and disrespect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander capability:

> Here we are, Aboriginal people successfully running our own businesses and yet the powers-that-be do not want to let you because they think they can do it better, that Aboriginal people cannot do it for themselves. (Loretta)

> A lot of them white nurses and doctors sees us as not important … they don't have any faith or trust in us … they just wanna be the big boss. It's just like how the missionaries treated people in the community. They treat the indigenous ones like they're little kids. (Patti)

Some graduates also pointed out that their dark skin and obvious Aboriginal ancestry guaranteed that expectations of their capability were low, while simultaneously acting to lend authenticity[4] to the program or service they represented:

> They think you're the right type but they don't know what type you are really. And if you turn out to be not what they expect they ditch you because you don't fit the mould. They want our blackness but we can't be too black for them, we have to act white. If you can't act like a white person you're inappropriate, they just won't tolerate it. (Loretta)

Discrimination based on skin shade and/or culture and community connections became a common theme throughout the data and appeared to be closely aligned with low expectations. In the next sections we will explore the constructs of shadeism and culturism, provide examples of their enactment in the graduates' workplaces, and explain why graduates with darker skin and/or stronger connections to culture and community may be more likely to experience the effects of low expectations.

Shadeism

'Half-castes cop it but can make it in whitefella world' (graduate John). John self-identifies as a 'pale-skinned urbanised Aboriginal man' and is married to a dark-skinned Aboriginal woman from a remote community. John is aware that the social, economic and political privileges extended to him are largely withheld from his spouse and her dark-skinned family and community members. However, in his government agency position, he has also experienced the double-whammy of being overlooked in favour of white people, whom he believes are seen as more workplace-appropriate, and pushed aside in favour of dark-skinned Aboriginal people, whom he believes are seen as more culture-appropriate. According to John and every other graduate who participated in this research, skin shade and cultural and community connections are powerful and interrelated determinants of workplace success and failure.

Shadeism, or colourism, may be regarded as the functional equivalent of racism (Schinkel, 2013), albeit with distinctions. Shadeism is a racial stratification system that privileges lighter-skinned people of colour over those with darker skin. The privilege extends to income, education, housing, employment, and even the marriage market (Hunter, 2007). Ideologically, it is predicated on the notion that dark skin represents savagery, irrationality and inferiority, while light skin is defined by civility, rationality and superiority (Hunter, 2007). In Australia, the so-called science of eugenics (Tatz, 2017) bestowed legitimacy on skin colour stratification as a way of determining the worth of an individual. It informed the policies now infamously known as 'breeding out the colour' of those deemed fit for European purpose, and 'smoothing the dying pillow' of those who were perceived as unviable to the desired outcome of a White Australia (Tatz, 2017).

Shadeism is one result of this historic legacy of colonisation. As Loretta and John suggested, in a shadeist discourse, dark-skinned people may be perceived as more racially and culturally authentic than light-skinned people and may therefore be considered desirable additions to workplaces where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander presence is a requirement. This apparently cynical approach to inclusivity was also reinforced by graduate Adam, who said:

> I don’t think my [white boss] cares about how I feel, what my life is like … I’m a means to an end for her, you know? I give her project legitimacy, the right hue …

However, darker skin may also be perceived as less compatible with the dominant workplace culture and therefore less able to successfully integrate. This attitude to difference was also confirmed by Patti, who believed her race was only one part of the compatibility (and capability) equation formulated by the employment officer who offered her the cleaning job without enquiring about her qualifications and experience. The other factor was the deep blackness of her skin and its associations with colour-stratified racial inferiority and the potential for clashing cultural values:

> Yeah, but I knew she didn’t take me seriously … probably colours, you know. I was too black for anything but that cleaning job.

Graduate Rose also contended that her dark skin indicated cultural non-conformity and was judged a liability by her white colleagues:

> Yeah, the blacker the skin, the harder it is … say with [colleague], her dad was a white man so she’s seen as able to walk in both worlds…. If we’re all in a meeting together, she would be ok but we would be ignored.

Culturism

> Ninety per cent of the time [white people] don’t listen. They say, oh but you knew it had to be done so why wasn’t it done? They already know it was a death in the community … but they treat you like you’re making excuses. (Etta)

Culturism is also regarded by race scholars as the functional equivalent of racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Schinkel, 2013). It constitutes the negative evaluation of cultures deemed different from the dominant culture and can be employed to fill the gap left behind by discredited notions of racial inferiority. A culturist discourse segregates those who reside ‘inside’ the dominant society from those who are the non-integrated ‘outsiders’ (Schinkel, 2013). In the context of this study, culturism explains inequities and acquits white colleagues and managers of responsibility by focusing on the graduates’ apparent cultural inadequacies and related ‘self-destructive’ behaviours, such as prioritising important cultural obligations over workplace deadlines. Their workplaces may strive to be ‘culturally appropriate’ but the graduates argued that, when protocol demanded they respond to a family or community situation inside work hours, workplace understanding and flexibility were rarely forthcoming. Graduate Peter suggested that Aboriginal people are expected to ‘tone down the colour’ if they aspire to progress their careers. He was not referring to skin shade but rather to connections to culture, community and clan, which were treated as counterproductive to the graduates’ successful integration into mainstream organisations:

> I guess I fear for that Aboriginal person that breaks through that white ceiling. I think it becomes harder for them to remain Aboriginal … remain Aboriginal-based, community-based, focused on the people. I know one or two that have broken through that ceiling and have become what I and others might call an Abocrat.

Graduate Jim also expressed frustration at the potential-stifling politics of colour and culture:

> If I sold my soul, I'd move up the chain. You've heard the term 'coconuts'?[5] That's what that refers to. The white managers will welcome you in if you look black but act white.

It was also evident from the graduates' narratives that some white people may self-interestedly adopt a deficit approach to the culture of others to protect their own positions of privilege. We have called this 'privilege protectionism' and suggest that, whether it is a stand-alone imperative or acting in concert with low expectations, shadeism and/or culturism, privilege protectionism may function to control access to the seats of power that assemble above the white ceiling.

Privilege protectionism

> Ok, so the director gets funding for 20 kids on the youth justice list. The organisation gets a lot of money. When we started to make a difference and kids weren't reoffending, we were pulled out of that community. Because the funding depends on the kids reoffending…. Look, it's like this. If you have half the offenders, you get half the money. The director said, you gotta remember, our funding depends on the stats. That's what he said to us, word for word. It's disgraceful. (Jim)

Jim is in his late 50s. Apart from his postgraduate university qualification, he has many years' experience working for the agencies that service remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Jim maintains that the manipulation of injustice as a means of gaining and maintaining control over the 'Aboriginal purse' is so commonplace that it has become unremarkable. When he first related this anecdote, its portrayal of bureaucratic villainy was so cartoonlike that it was tempting to downplay it as an aberration. However, similar stories of privilege protectionism were found in every graduate's narrative; for example:

> Sometimes the [remote region] is seen as a place where you can make money, yeah? You get a cushy job, you're paying cheap rent or nothing at all, you get good incentives, travel allowance and that. You got your house back in [city], you got it rented out. You come and work in [remote region] for five years, your house is gonna be paid off, and you move back. It's a sweet deal and it doesn't matter if you didn't do all that much while you were there 'cause it's made a big difference to your bank balance. (graduate George)

> They just don't want to give up that power. It's like, the money's too good. Why should I let an Aboriginal person take my job? I'm just gonna hang around and let my little black foot soldiers do the work and I'll keep collecting this good money. (graduate Hank)

Loretta, as a private business owner-operator with many years' experience negotiating with chambers of commerce, bureaucrats and politicians, was also highly critical of the ways in which white people gain and maintain control over funding while avoiding responsibility for outcomes:

> They've got their policy people, their white consultants, their NGOs [non-governmental organisation] who they say are the experts and who are getting paid a lot of money … there are so many of them and they're still failing Aboriginal people. It's really, really disappointing…. What did [Aboriginal activist] say? The day the last blackfella dies is the day a million whitefellas lose their jobs … it's not funny but you have to laugh.

Loretta contended that if blame for failure is to be attributed, it is the allegedly incapable Aboriginal person who will wear it. In fact, she and other graduates went further and claimed that that they were not simply blamed for failures, but were 'set up to fail'. They maintained that they were often unsupported in their roles, held to higher account that their white colleagues and managers, and their subsequent 'inability' to complete the allocated task was used to sideline and replace them with a white person.

Peter and Jim added that they were also treated as 'tick-the-black-box' people. By this they meant that, despite being encouraged to attend university by their employers as a means to professional progression, they were denied the promised promotions: the support they received was a pretence that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment performance indicators were being met and funding well spent:

> And that was one of my biggest disappointments, that after supporting me to do that postgraduate degree … they then wouldn't officially recognise it [and allow me to apply for a higher position]…. They used the excuse that I wasn't eligible because I didn't also have an undergraduate degree. All of a sudden, I wasn't qualified enough … and I thought, you hypocrites. (Peter)

The theme of constructed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander incapability was common throughout the graduates' narratives. It seems strategies that deflect accusations of racism while enabling white people to block Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from gaining and using power were sometimes employed. Like Peter and Jim, Rose was also encouraged to attend university. While she was successful in applying for a higher position that required leadership and decision-making skills, once she was in that position she was not supported to lead or decide:

> I stepped up into the team leader's position since I completed that degree but then I took another two steps back [into my previous role] because I found that I wasn't getting that much support from the top. They weren't really listening to what I had to say, there was always a barrier that was put in place to say that we could not do it … because of A or B or C, you know, things *they* thought were a priority. I just felt they only wanted a person, an indigenous person, in that role who would say 'yes boss' to everything. And when I started asking questions they started making it a lot harder for me. They only wanted me there because I was indigenous, not so as I could think for myself. (Rose)

Other graduates also suggested that their newfound confidence to 'speak up' was rarely welcomed in their workplaces; in fact, they believed that white people may be afraid of their advancement:

> People at work used to be able to say whatever they liked to me and I'd just sit there like a little puppy and take it. University gave me the confidence to be able to speak up, you know…. And they didn't like that one bit 'cause there's nothing scarier than an educated blackfella. (Jim)

> Sometimes you sense this fear. And you know what it is. All of a sudden, oh, it's an educated black…. In the end, you don't see yourself invited to these meetings … and if you're too much in their face, they'll find a way to get rid of you. (Jackie)

Many graduates also expressed deep concern that some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are knowingly or unknowingly complicit in undermining other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. They spoke of both their own people and 'black outsiders' (who may or may not have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage), who withhold knowledge, privileges and resources from the broader community to serve their own interests and those of their white employers. This behaviour is understandable if one considers that white privilege protectionism depends to a large extent on black agreeableness. Or, as Angie said, it relies on dividing those who will say 'yes boss' from those who will not. The graduates were careful to discriminate between black people who they perceived as striving for a better life and those who they perceived as selfish. They also appreciated that some black people who appear to be behaving selfishly were simply trying to survive structural racism by 'playing along'. According to the graduates, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are perceived as less amenable to white ambitions suffer further setbacks when black agreeableness and white privilege protectionism collude.

During our discussions with the graduates around privilege protectionism, it became difficult to separate their experiences from the divisive and damaging dynamics of lateral violence. Lateral violence is defined as the harmful behaviours that oppressed peoples inflict on each other as a response to external and unjust hegemonic forces (Freire, 1970). Such behaviours are not manifested simply as physical violence, although this certainly is a common symptom (Boulton, 2016a). They also appear as undermining, gossiping, backstabbing, bullying, ostracising, favouring, and withholding of information, resources, opportunities and assistance (Freire, 1970). While it is not within the scope of this article to explore lateral violence in more detail, such violence permeated the graduates' narratives. This is unsurprising considering the ways in which low expectations, shadeism, culturism, and privilege protectionism generate quasi-hierarchical structures that create and sustain unequal power dynamics between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and within families, workplaces and communities.

Discussion

The interrelated variants of structural racism we have described as low expectations, shadeism, culturism and privilege protectionism were experienced by graduates who live and work in diverse and unconnected workplaces and communities across Australia. Their accounts cannot be downplayed as outliers. Rather, we find that the graduates' experiences reflect the wider global phenomenon Bonilla-Silva (2013) dubbed 'racism without racists'. In Australia, this phenomenon has been probed by a number of scholars and commentators. Noel Pearson (2016: 1) argues that the 'soft bigotry' of low expectations[6] is the 'most important idea in race relations since the advent of civil rights and the rejection of racial discrimination'. Unlike the hard bigotry of observable racial discrimination, the soft variant is more difficult to see and challenge because it is enacted by white self-styled non-racists who Pearson labels ‘compassionistas’ (Ritchie, 2016). Compassionistas mobilise concepts of authentic Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander race and culture, pair this with settler-shame, and combine both with the conviction that to be Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander is to be both deserving and needy. The outcome is the exoticisation and infantilisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the reinstatement of white moral authority and therefore control (Steele, 2006).

Emma Kowal (2015) also problematises the ideology informing the non-racist stance, albeit from a slightly different perspective. Kowal explores the beliefs and behaviours of ‘white anti-racists’ who live and work in remote Aboriginal communities in Australia’s far north. She suggests that white anti-racists become ‘trapped in the gap’ between seeking to remediate ‘unsanitised’ behaviours, such as substance use, violence and gambling, and preserving ‘sanitised’ practices, such as ceremony, collectivism and sustainable living. Kowal’s professional and sympathetic treatment of white anti-racists clearly articulates the moral and practical dilemmas of ‘doing good’ in remote Aboriginal Australia. Ultimately, however, Kowal (2015: 144) concludes that ‘white anti-racists appear destined to inflict harm on Indigenous people by exerting power over them, either for blatant self-gain or out of misguided superiority’.

Pearson’s assessment of compassionistas and Kowal’s treatment of white anti-racists resonate with Jayakumar’s and Adamian’s (2017) fifth frame of colour-blind racism, *disconnected power-analysis*, where, despite gestures of goodwill, empathy and racial awareness, its proponents stifle movement towards racial equality, protect racist structures and maintain white privilege. However, when the graduates spoke of being ‘small-timed’, ‘worth nothing’ and ‘invisible’, they were also making the case for racism as deep disregard for the racial other, which has more in common with Bonilla-Silva’s (1997) four mental frames of colour-blind racism. Disregard, in this context, means the ‘withholding of respect, concern, goodwill, or care from members of a race’ (Taylor, 2004: 32). It may manifest as indifference, neglect or contempt, and works to trivialise discrimination and inequality, and do away with the need to prove intent to victimise (Coram and Hallinan, 2017). Disregard and disrespect for the graduates’ cultures was also articulated throughout their narratives, even in workplaces that made apparently genuine attempts to accommodate the graduates’ cultural values and practices. If alternative forms and expressions of culture are normatively deemed deficient, it is reasonable to assume that few white people who work in the graduates’ communities would naturally and easily value the culture of the graduates as they do their own.

Pearson (2015) and Chelsea Bond (2017b) also take aim at the mainly white government and non-government players who control the funding allocated for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Echoing the cynicism expressed by graduates Jim, Hank, George and Loretta, Pearson (2015) describes the $33 billion (SCRGSP, 2017) ‘Aboriginal Industry’[7] as ‘vast’ and ‘parasitic’, and claims that its public- and private-sector proponents are the beneficiaries of racial prejudice. According to Pearson, the alliance between the bureaucracies that supervise the tendering processes and the political lobbyists and government agencies that control the massive amount of annual funding has evolved into a neocolonial project that has flourished largely under the radar and with little critique. Bond (2017b), too, is troubled by what she calls the ‘predatory possibilities of the Aboriginal problem’. She claims that (predominantly) white people make a lot of money from problematising Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander people and managing the innumerable interventions in their communities without being held accountable for delivering meaningful outcomes. Like graduates George and Loretta, Bond is scathing about the careers that are built on (and mortgages paid off) the back of claiming to be able to fix Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suffering. We are not suggesting that good intentions will always fade when the cost is transference of power and the threat that may pose to predetermined certainties, such as a five-year contract, a house and car, and future career opportunities. We are suggesting, however, that the 'Aboriginal Industry' in Australia is geared towards privilege protectionism and its ideology may generate practices and behaviours that produce and reproduce racial inequality.

The graduates also indicated that white people's fear of their socio-political ascendency was one of the reasons they were denied access to the seats of power. We were unable to locate Australian literature that adequately addressed the 'white displacement anxiety' (Blow, 2018) we found in the data; however, the phenomenon of 'perceived dominant group status threat' (Mutz, 2018) has been explored at length in the United States. These studies argue that threat of power diminution makes hierarchical socio-political arrangements more attractive, triggers defence of the dominant ingroup, insists on conformity to group norms, and increases negativity towards the outgroup (Feldman and Stenner, 1997). Thus we argue that the graduates' increased knowledge, skills and confidence posed a threat to white people who not only believe that the current hierarchy is legitimate, but have also invested in the status quo.

Another possible and related explanation resides within what Michael Wright (2016) defines as the 'conditions for working together' (Wright, in Boulton, 2016b: 231). These conditions include trust in each person's capacity, confidence and competence, and commitment to fostering these attributes in others. Wright challenges white people to 'be teachable', meaning they must strive to be open to deeper learning from black people. This requires a significant shift towards decolonising thinking and practice that recognises, respects and celebrates the validity and efficacy of indigenous ways of being (Wright et al., 2016). John Boulton (2016b) concurs with Wright but points out that, for goal-driven professionals who work in hectic physical environments and within neoliberal systems and structures that emphasise and reward individualistic endeavour, being teachable may be challenging, if not impossible, to achieve.

Finally, perhaps the explanations we offer are more likely to exist in a nation that is at pains to convince itself of its own morality. Tatz (2017: 3) argues that Australia is uncomfortably caught up in 'double-think', meaning that it advances two mutually opposed self-images and reality constructs: the proud and benevolent democracy with the long and clean human rights record, and the settler-nation capable of 'trampling the nomad' into near extinction. Of course the former construct has validity; however, as mentioned earlier, even today Australia is essentially and interchangeably amnesiac and denialist about its history of killing, rape, dispossession, child removal, incarceration and exclusion (McKenna, 2018; Tatz, 2017). Australia's fear of confronting the past and its disavowal of its legacies provides fertile ground for racialised social structures that protect, reinforce and sustain white innocence and privilege. It is therefore unsurprising that an easier explanation for Australia's largely futile endeavour to reach parity of health and wellbeing between its original inhabitants and settler descendants is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander incapability, intransigence and primitivity (Tatz, 2017). This explanation may challenge and unsettle good-hearted people but nonetheless has traction, as evidenced by the ongoing deeply divisive debates around recognising, respecting and reconciling with Australia's First Peoples (McKenna, 2018).

Conclusion

> I like that heading, Hitting the White Ceiling. Just saying that, I pictured a little black face pressed up against the glass saying, let me in. And those ones up there saying 'Oh no, not you. You don't belong up here.' (Jackie)

The mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university graduates who shared their stories for this study enrolled in university with the reasonable expectation that attaining a degree would open the same doors to professional progression as it does for most other Australians. However, all found that their achievements and capabilities were only valorised and rewarded if they adapted and conformed to workplace cultures that are dominated by white people whose belief systems are habituated to, and protected and sustained by structural racism. When the graduates resisted inequitable assimilation and attempted to assert their intellectual and cultural capital, they 'hit the white ceiling', meaning that discourses of equal opportunity, meritocracy, neutrality and objectivity were used to rework and disguise race as a marker of inferiority and turn it into a race-less admonition of undesirable individual qualities. This had, and continues to have, the effect of marginalising educated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who evidently possess the personal agency to advocate, agitate, make decisions and lead. It also deprives Australia of their potent contribution to our prosperity. These findings provide a yardstick of how far white Australians have to go to genuinely accommodate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by according them equal status. Until that happens, the gap between the two not only separates and excludes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from full participation in Australian society but also denies us our reinvention as a mature nation that realises its imagined character and narrative of equality.

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Notes

1. The graduates preferred to retain their anonymity rather than be named as co-authors for this article.

2. Jackey was the English name given to colonialist Edmund Kennedy's Aboriginal companion, Galmarra. 'Jackey Jackey' is now used by whites as a pejorative to deny blacks their individuality and dignity, and by blacks to suggest subservience to white power and complicity in one's own dispossession (Maloney and Groz, 2008).
3. Pseudonyms have been used to protect each graduate's identity.
4. Authenticity in this context is oppressive in that it operates to include and exclude dark-skinned Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people based on what white people perceive to be desirable (Sissons, 2005).
5. 'Coconut' is a pejorative used to express the perception that a person is black on the outside and white on the inside, meaning someone who is thought to have betrayed their race and/or culture by acting like a white person.
6. The 'soft bigotry of low expectations' was coined in 2000 by former US President, George W. Bush (Pearson, 2016).
7. The 'Aboriginal Industry' is a commonly used term to describe the for-profit and not-for-profit mainstream organisations that deliver services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Marrie, 2015).

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