

PAKEHA IDENTITY AND WHITENESS:  
WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE WHITE?

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ABSTRACT

*This article is concerned with a critical examination of whiteness among those who self identify as Pakeha within a New Zealand context. Through in-depth interviews with 15 men and women we explored the proposition that the adoption of a Pakeha identity may preclude an understanding of the ways that whiteness and privilege operate. Employing thematic and discourse analysis, four major themes were identified within the data; a Pakeha relationship with Maori, the reification of whiteness, a disengagement from privilege and a separation from other white people. The functionality and organisation of language were considered in order to examine participants' detachment from dominant white culture. This article suggests that the assumption of a Pakeha self-identity may allow the bearer to discursively obscure both the cultural capital that whiteness provides and the privileges afforded by this capital. Ultimately, this research draws attention to the intersection of privilege and whiteness within New Zealand and offers an explanation for the persistence of white hegemony.*

INTRODUCTION

Whiteness emerged as a field of study during the 1990s largely in the United States and to a lesser extent in Britain and Australia. In one of the most influential pieces of scholarship on the subject, Peggy McIntosh (1988) examined the advantages available to her on account of her whiteness outlining 46 assets she believed she had accrued solely on this basis. Her writing redefined racism as a white problem highlighting the ways in which Western institutions perpetuate white privilege and the complicity of white people in this.

Following the publication of her paper academic interest in whiteness grew and a body of literature exploring the topic in different ways and across a range of disciplines began to appear. Richard Dyer (1997), for example, em-

phased the tendency for white people to distinguish non whites by race or ethnicity, while failing to identify other whites in the same way: instead, they are 'just people' (p.2). Being without race but claiming to represent the human race is one of the 'paradoxes' of whiteness that, he claimed, gives it strength. Ruth Frankenberg's (1993) research aimed to make whiteness visible through an exploration of race and racism in the lives of thirty white women. While the majority of her participants did not see themselves as being concerned with either, she concluded that both were intricately woven throughout their everyday lives.

Yet while the authors above describe whiteness as being invisible to white people, it has also been argued to be clearly visible to those who are not (Ahmed, 2007; Sue, 2004a). Whiteness, in other words, has been described as affording privilege to white people (McIntosh, 1988) but inspiring terror in those who are not (hooks, 1997). The aim of this research was to understand how whiteness was interpreted by a group of Pakeha New Zealanders and to consider the implications of this within a context of knowledge and power.

In New Zealand there is a limited amount of academic research concerning the subject of whiteness. The research that exists firmly contends that there are advantages to belonging to the dominant white majority in this country but that this privilege is both disguised and reinforced by its invisibility (Borell, et al., 2009; Colvin, 2009; Gibson, 2006). While the colonisation of New Zealand has arguably shaped a society in which white people have a number of unearned advantages enabling them to live their lives with greater ease than many non whites, such consequences are often denied by members of the white majority (Colvin, 2009). As in many Western countries, whiteness has come to dominate cultural space and its subsequent normalisation within that space is said to offer significant advantages to those who are white (Moreton-Robinson, 2004).

This research explored the meaning of whiteness with those who claim a Pakeha self-identity. It utilised a critical approach in the design and analysis of the project. In New Zealand, sociologist Avril Bell (2004, 2006, 2009) has also demonstrated this approach as she examined the motivations of the dominant majority in relation to white guilt, settler identity and biculturalism. She concluded that without critical self-reflection, the words and actions of white people can sustain the continued dominance of the majority through 'the avoidance of engagement and responsibility' (Bell, 2004: 90). In adopting this position, our intention is not to criticise Pakeha but to encourage self-criticism amongst members of the white majority. It is our contention that racism can be reinforced not only by individual acts of prejudice, but also by a lack of

engagement with issues of social power and privilege.

#### HISTORY OF THE TERM PAKEHA

Ballara (1986: 203) defines the word Pakeha as the ‘Maori name for Europeans’. This is also supported by a number of contemporary Maori sources which translate the term as white or New Zealander of European descent (Moorfield, 2011; Ngata & Ngata, 2010). Despite its origin being contested in the popular imagination, the most prevalent academic argument for its derivation is that it originated from ‘pakepakeha’ meaning fantasy creatures with pale skin (Hepi, 2008; Hiroa, 1922; King, 1991). It was often used by Maori to describe those settlers with white skin from the time of European contact. Adoption of the term Pakeha as a self-descriptor began to gain popularity in New Zealand during the 1970s and 1980s and its usage has continued to grow since that time.

The adoption of the term is not without controversy. Many New Zealanders explicitly refuse to be identified in this way. Some oppose it because they do not like to be labelled, some reject it on the basis that it is a word from the Maori language while some simply prefer to be called something else (Bell, 1996; Gibson, 2006; Liu, 2005; Pearson & Sissons, 1997; Spoonley, 1988). Influenced by what Pearson and Sissons (1997: 69) refer to as ‘a great New Zealand myth’, many New Zealand Europeans object to the term because they believe the word to be derogatory meaning ‘white pig’ or ‘white flea’.

Research suggests that in choosing to be Pakeha, members of this group may feel they are making a political statement – an expression of support for Maori and against racism – that may not be shared by other New Zealanders (Gibson, 2006; Hepi, 2008; Liu, 2005). In response to the politicisation of the term, several writers have suggested that assuming a Pakeha identity may actually reproduce racism by allowing the bearer to avoid any association with the contentious issues of whiteness and privilege (Dyson, 1996; Lawn, 1994).

This latter position suggested a way to contextualise a discussion of whiteness and privilege within New Zealand. Taking the Maori meaning of the word Pakeha (white or European) as a starting point, we were interested in its evolution over time to the point that this original meaning may now have little relevance for the people who use it to describe themselves. The research is situated within a discussion of whiteness and begins with the assumption that in order to understand the manifestations of white privilege it is first necessary to acknowledge ownership of that whiteness.

## WHITE CULTURAL CAPITAL

Critical cultural theorist, Sara Ahmed (2007:154), proposed that whiteness is 'an orientation that puts certain things within reach'. She contends that colonisation has produced societies in which white people have the capacity to attain certain advantages more easily than those who are not. Similarly a number of Maori writers have argued that institutions in this country put privilege within the dominant majority's 'reach' by positioning white culture, values and beliefs as standard while, at the same time, failing to accept cultural difference or promote opportunities for the expression of such difference (Awatere, 1984; Ministerial Advisory Committee on a Maori Perspective for the Department of Social Welfare, 1986). While dominant white culture is able to represent itself as a universal human norm, the relationship between whiteness, power and the production of cultural knowledge can be ignored.

The social asset that whiteness puts within the reach of white people has been described as cultural or symbolic capital (Clarke & Garner, 2010; Hage, 1998; Lewis, 2003). Drawing from the work of French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, Hage (1998) defines cultural capital as a shared social language that enables us to make sense of, and communicate with, the world around us. As the dominant majority, white people have the privilege of being able to live in a society that reinforces the centrality of a white subject position and rewards white cultural knowledge. In other words, whiteness provides a form of capital that can be exploited to gain access to further resources, power and privilege.

Many in the white majority are so accustomed to having access to this cultural capital, that it has become an integral, yet invisible part of life. It is, as Ahmed (2007:156) describes it, 'a habit'. On the very rare occasions when it cannot be utilised, white people may interpret this, not as putting them on an even footing with those who are not white, but instead as placing them at a significant disadvantage. In a New Zealand context, Alison Jones (1999) highlighted this imagined disadvantage when writing about the resistance she encountered from white students following her decision to stream a University course by ethnicity. The students were subsequently unable to draw upon their white cultural capital and Jones (1999:311) observed many of them resisting being 'suddenly displaced from the unproblematic centre of knowing what counts as knowledge in the university'.

## WHITENESS IN NEW ZEALAND

A number of New Zealand writers have dismissed the significance of white-

ness within a Pakeha identity. Pearson (1989:64), while engaging with an idea of Pakeha hegemony and including dominance in his definition of what it means to be Pakeha, saw whiteness as having little place in this definition. It is too vague a concept, he argued, referring to an 'outer shell' and relying on an 'often empty' rhetoric. Similarly Spoonley (1995a, 1995b) suggested that it is possible to address the principles of a Pakeha identity without engaging with whiteness. The implied connection between the two terms, he argued, is 'overwhelmed' through claiming a Pakeha identity and in the process marking oneself as part of the dominant majority. It is this marking and admission of 'the group's hegemony' that is important, he contended, rather than a focus on race (Spoonley, 1995a: 58).

Dismissing the relevance of whiteness to a discussion of New Zealand identity is problematic because it overlooks the defining factor that race has played, and continues to play, in this country's national development (Ballara, 1986; Belich, 1994, 1996; Colvin, 2009). The concept of race is inextricably linked with colonisation and the domination of indigenous people (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2007). Indeed the promotion of racial purity and superiority has featured throughout New Zealand's history in both social policy and public rhetoric (Belich, 1994, 1996). The notion of race and the science supporting this domination have been discredited. However, the enduring consequences are very real and continue to have a negative impact on the lives of many who are not white.

Within the context of identity, the dismissal of whiteness, or what Moreton-Robinson referred to as an attempt to 'deracialise' identity (2004:82), is a failure to acknowledge that skin colour is an intrinsic component of the way people within Western societies construct a sense of themselves and others. In a discussion of New Zealand identity, therefore, it seems essential to consider the role that whiteness plays in determining a sense of our own identity and the identities of others. Not doing so risks obscuring the legacy of New Zealand's colonial past: the cultural power that members of the dominant white majority enjoy within contemporary society.

#### METHODOLOGY

Data for this research project was gathered using 15 in-depth, semi-structured interviews carried out between November 2010 and June 2011. 14 interviews were conducted face-to-face and one by email. The face-to-face interviews lasted from 45 minutes to two hours with most taking around one and a half hours.

Sampling for this study was purposive in that participants were selected on the basis that they used Pakeha as a self-identity. Participants were recruited in several ways. We initially made contact with one of the organisers of Network Waitangi Otautahi, a voluntary group that aims to promote an understanding of the Treaty of Waitangi amongst non Maori in New Zealand. She emailed information regarding the research out to the Network's database. Those who agreed to participate were asked if they knew of anyone else who might be interested in participating. We also approached students at the University of Canterbury and asked if they, or anyone they knew, would be willing to be involved. The snowballing technique was used, whereby we made contact with a small number of people who met the research criteria and then used them to make further connections.

All but two of the participants lived in Christchurch at the time of the interviews. Nine participants were women and six were men. They ranged in age from their mid twenties to their late fifties, with the majority being over forty. Most were born in New Zealand, although two had emigrated from Europe as adults. All were tertiary educated and the majority could be referred to as middle class.

While being Pakeha was the only condition for participation in the study, the similarity in educational level and class status of the participants does indicate a bias that offers limitations in terms of the generalisability of the results. There are further limitations presented by the location of the research project in Christchurch. The New Zealand European population of the Canterbury region is 77.4% compared with 56.5% in the Auckland region, 69.8% in Wellington and 67.6% nationally (Statistics New Zealand, 2006).

The lack of visible cultural diversity in Christchurch may have meant that participants from the city were less aware of their whiteness than people living in other areas of New Zealand. In her analysis of the period surrounding an anti-racism march in Christchurch in 2004, Kobayshi (2009: 66) highlighted a discourse of whiteness, which she defined as 'a discourse of omission in which the status of being white is left out of the discussion' in local media. While she noted this omission does not necessarily distinguish Christchurch from other parts of New Zealand, its presence has some relevance in contextualising this study.

Following a review of the literature we identified three themes we wished to explore during the interviews: identifying as Pakeha, whiteness, and white privilege. These themes provided the framework for the interviews but the

flexible nature of semi-structured interviewing allowed us to depart from the Interview Guide and focus on different aspects of each participant's experience as appropriate (Bryman, 2004; Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). While some questions were repeated in all of the interviews, in general we allowed the participants to focus on what they felt was important in relation to these three sections. In doing so, we aimed to understand how the participants interpreted the topics being discussed.

The study used thematic analysis as the organising concept for the data. Consistent with the perspective that qualitative research is inductive (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005), categories were identified during the research process and relationships between them were explored as the research progressed. Four themes emerged over the course of the analysis: a Pakeha relationship with Maori, reification of whiteness, disengagement from privilege and separation from other white people.

The analysis was also strongly influenced by discourse theory; in particular, the way in which language was used by the participants to construct an explanation of identity, whiteness and privilege. Discourse theory is concerned with the notion of language as social action (Wetherell, 2001; Wetherell & Potter, 1992), arguing that rather than being neutral, language is actively employed in order to achieve a particular end. It proposes that in studying language in use, researchers can begin to understand the social realities of their participants. Throughout this research we were interested in the version of reality constructed by a group of self-identified Pakeha New Zealanders as they discussed identity, whiteness and privilege.

## RESULTS

The participants in this study all identified as Pakeha. Interestingly, for many of them their Pakeha identity embodied an expression of national belonging: a desire to both locate themselves geographically and to articulate their commitment to New Zealand. Indeed, this desire was apparent throughout the interviews as participants discussed why they had made the decision to self identify as Pakeha. For over half of those interviewed, acknowledging their connection to New Zealand was a significant motivation behind assuming a Pakeha identity. This was further reinforced by the rejection of the alternative label – New Zealand European – by all but two of those interviewed.

This finding corresponds with previous studies of white New Zealanders, which found that in self identifying as Pakeha, people are emphasising a con-

nection to New Zealand and a rejection of Europe (see for example: Gibson, 2006; Hepi, 2008; Pearson & Sissons, 1997). As in previous research, participants argued that identifying as New Zealand European did not represent them as New Zealanders in the same way that Pakeha does. This argument is interesting not only because it appeared with such frequency throughout the interview data, but also because of the similarities with which it was presented. Participants repeatedly stated that they were not European while often proceeding to reveal European ancestry. They argued that New Zealand European did not locate them in this country, despite the term only being appropriate for use by someone who is a New Zealand national with European heritage.<sup>1</sup>

The rejection of an association with Europe seems intrinsically related to the European settlement of this country. The British colonisation of New Zealand inarguably had dire consequences for the indigenous population. For those interviewed who claimed British heritage, finding an expression of their own identity necessitated a coming to terms with New Zealand's colonial past and the damage colonisation has inflicted upon Maori people and their culture. For some, learning about this damage was an integral part of their decision to identify as Pakeha.

*Debra:* [Seeing] a timeline of all the breaches of the Treaty ... laid out ... was just incredible ... it made me think more about who I was.

*Kurt:* What I came to was that being Pakeha is ... belonging to this place and part of that belonging is ... this respectful relationship with Maori and having cognisance of colonisation and what it's done to Maori.

#### A RELATIONSHIP WITH MAORI

By setting themselves apart from Europeans, Pakeha are implicitly associating with Maori. The narrative rejecting an association with Europe offers a geographical and cultural sense of belonging to New Zealand and implies a connection with the indigenous people of New Zealand. Elements of Maori language and culture that have found their way into mainstream New Zealand culture have become an accessible means for non Maori New Zealanders to set themselves apart from people in other countries around the world. Hepi (2008) has argued that a preference for the word Pakeha depends upon its status as part of the Maori language and consequently, its power to emphasise the bearer's claim of belonging in this country. This position was explicitly supported within the research data.

The assertion that being Pakeha conveys a connection with Maori occurred frequently in the transcripts and was articulated in a number of ways. For Eve it was 'respect to the indigenous people' and for Joy it was expressed as an 'affinity with Maori culture'. The word 'relationship' itself appeared often in the data. By implication this relationship is positive and this was highlighted by the use of language implying the term had been gifted by Maori.

*Kurt:* That's why Pakeha is such a lovely term because it's a term that ... completely breaks down that we/ they thing because the name actually has been attributed by another group. It's not self attributed, it's attributed by another group.

*Ann:* It's a term that was given to us not one that we've created.

*Debra:* They've [Maori] named US ... we've come here and we've been able to stay here and live here because of their generosity ... and I think ... being Pakeha's honouring that ... it's the title that's been given by THEM to US.

Using the imagery of a relationship with Maori has become a recognised means of describing a Pakeha identity. Michael King (1985, 1991) was one of the first writers to use the notion of a relationship to define his own Pakeha identity arguing that his Pakeha identity had emerged from interaction with Maori people and culture. The argument was subsequently adopted by a number of contributors to his edited anthology *Pakeha: The quest for identity in New Zealand* (King, 1991)

The extent to which the relationship metaphor has since come to dominate the discourse of a Pakeha identity is exemplified through various research projects with Pakeha, all concluding that in identifying in this way, participants were expressing a relationship with Maori (see for example: Liu, 2005; Pearson & Sissons, 1997). The relational conception of a Pakeha identity has furthermore been promoted in these projects as particularly positive within the context of support for Maori self-determination. Its repetition throughout the interview data indicates that, along with a rejection of Europe, the interview participants were drawing upon available discourses concerning a Pakeha identity.

#### REIFICATION OF WHITENESS

Examination of the data, in relation to whiteness, revealed a general dislike of the term white, with many associating it with supremacy and intolerance.

*Neil:* [When I think of white] I think of 1960s Mississippi, I think ... there is identifiably a discourse about superiority, control. Control of business, control of land. It is such a[n] absolutely kind of STAR-  
TLINGLY violent story.

*Joy:* It [white] makes me think of the 60s. It makes me think of Martin Luther King, it makes me think of no blacks no whites and ... apartheid in South Africa.

Not surprisingly then, there was a sense of discomfort towards the use of white as a self-label. Eve referred to the word white as making her 'skin crawl'. Suze described the shock she experienced upon hearing herself described as white. For Elinor, as for a number of the other participants, hearing herself called white by Maori would be seen as an accusation.

*Elinor:* If they were talking about me as a white woman I would assume that they were about to criticise my ... unjust power and position.

Others did not articulate such strong opposition to the term but still felt there was a 'stigma' attached to it, expressing concern that the term could be used in a 'derogatory' way.

The participants' rationalisation for rejecting the relevance of whiteness to their formation of identity displayed both similarities to, and significant differences from, that employed in the rejection of a European identity. Participants could not claim that they were not white<sup>2</sup> in the same way as they were able to argue that they were not European. Their construction of argument, in particular their utilisation of 'contrary themes', resonated with the observation that contradictions are often unproblematically ignored in everyday discourse (Billig, 2001: 218).

In response to the question, would she prefer to be labelled a white woman or a Pakeha woman, Marcie replied with the following:

*Marcie:* If someone was to describe me as a white woman they would probably be making a huge big generalised statement about my ability to be accepted on face value at something... or my chances of getting an interview at something or ... it would go along with a big general statement of probably superficial perception... because it doesn't really mean anything.

*Claire:* Yeah but then it's quite interesting because you said it doesn't mean anything but it almost sounds like it does mean something, like it does have some meaning attached to it?

*Marcie:* Yeah meaning in ... an accepted way. I guess ... it's got ... superficial meaning so it means that you might be accepted because you're white ... but it doesn't mean that they know anything else about you.

A significant contradiction is evident here with Marcie arguing that the word white is meaningless *and* that as a white person she may have a differential access to social power. This contradictory argument was repeated in a number of the interview transcripts with other participants similarly explaining their rejection of the label white on the basis that it lacked meaning but at the same time implying that there was something very significant about the word.

The employment of this argument within a discourse of the reification of whiteness further worked to increase the persuasiveness of the argument for a Pakeha identity. As Wetherell and Potter (1992) have demonstrated, accounts are constructed not only to argue a particular point (for Marcie, the unsuitability of the label white) but, to contrast with an alternative viewpoint (the suitability of the label Pakeha). Irrespective of the contradictions inherent in her reasoning, Marcie's argument – that the label white was both meaningless and loaded with meaning – was contrived in order to emphasise the appropriateness of her choice to identify as Pakeha.

#### DISENGAGEMENT FROM PRIVILEGE

Given the apparent desire to separate from whiteness, as we reviewed the data concerning privilege, we noted with some surprise the admission by all of those interviewed that, to some degree, being white in New Zealand was an asset. Indeed many of the participants spoke at length about the importance of recognising white privilege and stated that they had chosen to participate in the research because they wanted to explore this further. We initially saw this as representing a significant contradiction: participants did not recognise the extent to which whiteness influenced their lives, but did recognise the existence of white privilege. As we read and reread the data however, we realised that much of this talk about privilege was of a particular kind. While the concept of white privilege was recognised to be very important by the participants, there was little or no focus on how they as individuals were privileged by their whiteness. Thematic analysis of this talk led to the identification of the third

theme in the data – disengagement from personal privilege.

Within this theme, we identified a number of strategies used by the participants to create a sense of distance from privilege. Utilising a discourse of racism was the first of these and was evident in the majority of the transcripts as we noted conversations that began with the topic of privilege quickly changing to become dominated by talk about the disadvantage experienced by Maori.

*Claire:* And I just wondered if you thought that being white gave you any advantages?

*Joy:* Oh I do, I totally do. I feel ... like this has massively shaped my experiences teaching at XXX and ... especially XXX Primary School which was at this stage a Decile 1 school which is the ...lowest socio economic grading a school can have... I just feel like there's such a stigma attached to being brown in New Zealand.

*Claire:* How do you think being white has made your life easier?

*Kurt:* Oh well here I am sitting in a ... room with you and [you and] I are both highly educated people... there's a far greater representation of ... us at this level than there are of Maori... and there's a reason for that ... both of us are likely to have ... well paying jobs and ... we don't represent a group of people that is overrepresented in the prison system or the welfare system or all of those things.

In both of these examples the participants initially seem to engage with the question but then move the discussion away from privilege. Joy agrees that being white provides her with advantages but instead of outlining these, she chooses to focus on the educational disadvantage experienced by Maori. Kurt turns the conversation away from himself to a more general commentary about the privilege enjoyed by 'us' and then moves to a discussion of racism. The change in focus away from privilege and towards racism dominated replies to questions about white privilege in the majority of the interviews.

In addition to the very dominant discourse of racism, white privilege was frequently obscured in the data by a noticeable disinclination, or inability, to talk about personal privilege. In a sentiment echoed by a number of participants, Joy readily admitted that white people in New Zealand enjoyed advantages, but found it difficult to articulate the ways in which she personally experienced privilege. She eventually conceded that instead she was 'less discriminated

against.

Mike similarly struggled to provide concrete examples of privilege.

*Claire:* Do you believe that white privilege exists?

*Mike:* Shit yeah shit yeah

*Claire:* Can you think of any examples of how you've been privileged because you're white?

*Mike:* Ah not really in New Zealand although ah as an individual? It's hard to say having only six years of experience in New Zealand

While emphatically acknowledging the existence of white privilege, Mike became hesitant when asked how it had benefited him, and concluded that it was because he, as an immigrant to New Zealand, had not lived here long enough for it to have an impact. This pattern of struggling to express personal privilege was repeated throughout a number of the transcripts. Ann concluded that the problems she had in articulating her own privilege were because she did not 'seek [it] out'. Selena found it difficult to describe specific examples of privilege eventually conceding 'I can't think of a conscious time where I have realised that, right then in that moment ... I've been privileged because of my skin colour'. Neil, adamant that he experienced white privilege, was only able to provide examples that demonstrated class or male privilege. He, like a number of the participants, at the conclusion of the interview acknowledged the unexpected difficulties he encountered in attempting to articulate the realities of white privilege.

#### SEPARATION FROM OTHER WHITE PEOPLE

A distancing from whiteness and privilege in the data was reinforced by the fourth and most dominant theme to appear – a separation from other white people. As highlighted above, both the rejection of a European identity and the adoption of a Pakeha identity were interpreted as a means of effecting this separation.

*Marcie:* I would choose to be Pakeha because of a better understanding of indigenous issues in New Zealand.

*Rae:* [The label Pakeha] ... indicates a little bit more thoughtfulness

or intelligence possibly.

Marcie has chosen to be identified as Pakeha because of a 'better understanding', presumably than other white people, of matters concerning Maori. For her, as for Rae, the identity is used to highlight a degree of consciousness not shared by those who reject a Pakeha identity. Other participants differentiated between those identifying as Pakeha and those choosing to identify as European. In their talk they portrayed the latter label as having particularly conservative implications that are counteracted by the adoption of the more contemporary Pakeha identity. Similarly Eve described living in what she termed 'white country' and emphasised the differences between her own Pakeha family and other white families who lived in the area who were 'very white [and] very conservative'. Selena extended on this, describing a European culture which positioned Maori as outsiders, a positioning she did not see existing in 'contemporary Pakeha' culture.

#### *A political separation*

Several of those interviewed expressed surprise that friends and colleagues whom they assumed would share their Pakeha identity, did not. The assumption was based on the fact that these people shared, in the words of one of the participants, 'similar views ... and attitudes to all sorts of cultural issues'. A number of participants explained such attitudes as a specific political divergence from other white people. During the interview with Elinor, she proposed that those who did not identify as Pakeha would have very different beliefs in relation to Maori and the Treaty of Waitangi, a position echoed by a number of other participants. For Suze, a Pakeha identity allowed her to express her political views and forge connections with other Pakeha whom she assumed would similarly share her beliefs.

The assumption that those who identify as New Zealand European subscribe to a political position that is unsupportive of Maori self-determination was apparent in the comments of a number of participants as they explained why they had rejected the label in favour of the term Pakeha.

*Mark:* They [family members] would quite readily use phrases or language to the extent that they're fed up with all this Maori Treaty nonsense, let's just move on ... Along [with] that would be a resistance to... this category Pakeha because it's obviously a Maori category. ... I guess they'd ... be more comfortable with European.

*Mike:* A lot of people's reactions [are] 'NO I'm a ... European I'm a New Zealander' and I refuse to be labelled by something that is a MAORI word ... it's really reactive and it's particularly divisive as well.

New Zealand European is the most commonly assumed ethnic identity for members of the white majority in this country (Statistics New Zealand, 2006). For this reason it was the identity that was most often singled out by the participants as they constructed an argument defending their choice to identify as Pakeha. Other options, such as Caucasian and New Zealander, were similarly dismissed.

#### DISCUSSION

Overwhelmingly participants in this research defined a Pakeha identity in terms of a perceived relationship with Maori. Within a discussion of identity this is not inappropriate. All identity is relational, to a certain extent, as we seek to define who we are by comparing ourselves to other people (see for example discussions of social identity theory in: Stets & Burke, 2000; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). As Hall (1996) pointed out, the construction of identity is dependent upon the identification of difference to, and relationships with, those who are other to us. From this perspective therefore, it seems unproblematic to describe being Pakeha as representing a relationship with the indigenous people of New Zealand and, as noted above, this is a repetitive theme in the New Zealand literature concerning a Pakeha identity (see for example: King, 1991).

Within the framework of the international literature on whiteness, however, such a description begins to appear more complex. A white majority describing itself in relation to an ethnic minority is not unusual in Western societies. White people, it has been argued, frequently use the race or ethnicity of others in order to define their own because they are unaccustomed to seeing themselves as having either (Dyer, 1997; Frankenberg, 1993; Roediger, 1998). Race and ethnicity are therefore associated with ethnic minorities and consequently whiteness remains both invisible and synonymous with the human norm (Dei, Karumanchery & Karumanchery-Luik, 2004; Dyer, 1997; hooks, 1997). This begins to highlight why the prevalence of the argument for a Pakeha identity representing a relationship with Maori is problematic. Indeed it appears to be quite common for white people throughout the Western world to think of themselves specifically in terms of what they are not; 'not Black, not Asian American ... not Native American' (Dalton, 2008:15) or in New Zealand, not Maori.

While it has been argued that the creation of Pakeha as an identity functions to 'mark' the majority group in a way that ends its invisibility (Spoonley, 1995a: 55), it could also be argued that defining ourselves in terms of what we are not does not exactly illuminate who we are. While comfortable 'marking' themselves as Pakeha, participants were often unable to articulate what it was that made them uniquely Pakeha. The reliance on a relational definition demonstrates what has been referred to as the 'empty alterity' or lack of substance in the Pakeha identity (MacLean, 1996: 110), indicating that much of what it means to be Pakeha may still remain unseen by those who have adopted the term.

One attribute that is quite clearly unique to Pakeha is whiteness. A lack of engagement with whiteness in the interview transcripts, however, indicates that this is not a preoccupation in the creation of a Pakeha self-identity. Only one of those interviewed during the course of this research, answered with the seemingly obvious answer that he was white in reply to the question regarding the decision to identify as Pakeha. Indeed for the majority of participants, the term Pakeha, while *suggesting* that the bearer was white, was definitely not *synonymous* with the word. When Ann was asked, for example, if she ever identified as white she replied 'no 'cause all I can see with that is skinhead'.

The rejection of a white identity through the utilisation of a discourse reifying whiteness is not unique to the participants in this research project. Research with white people both in New Zealand and overseas has highlighted a desire for many white people to disassociate themselves from the word white (Frankenberg, 1993; Gibson, 2006; O'Brien, 2001, 2007; Sue, 2004a, 2004b). Goldstein (as cited in: McDermott & Samson, 2005) noted a preference amongst highly educated white Americans, for the label Caucasian instead of white, proposing it to be indicative of a wish to distance themselves from a word associated with racial dominance. Similarly, Bonnett (2000) noted antiracist organisations in North America and the United Kingdom reject a white identity which, he contended, is constructed in opposition to an antiracist identity.

It could be argued that a separation from a white identity is a rhetorical device which may enable a disengagement from the privileges associated with whiteness. This disengagement was reinforced in the data by a reliance upon a discourse of racism. As one of the first writers on the subject of white privilege, Peggy McIntosh, (1988:1) explained 'as a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something which puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage'. While the participants were aware of white privilege as a concept, they appeared to be accustomed to talking about racism in terms of

the deficit experienced by non whites. It seemed difficult, therefore, to switch focus and consider the benefits accruing to those in the dominant majority. Despite questions being quite specifically about privilege, the answers seemed inevitably to turn towards racism. Suze summed this up in response to the question ‘how does privilege operate?’ by joking ‘I could probably give you ways that it doesn’t operate, it’s ... MORE ways that it doesn’t operate’.

Contrary to this, bell hooks (1989) has argued that racism is less about the subjugation of people of colour and more about white supremacy. In order to contest the power created and sustained by racism, it is important to acknowledge the specific ways that white people, as individuals benefit. In New Zealand, for example, those in the dominant white majority have a higher educational status and a longer life expectancy (Ministry of Education, 2011; Ministry of Social Development, 2010; Statistics New Zealand, 2009a). They are more likely to own their own homes and less likely to be arrested or convicted of a crime. If they are convicted, however, they are considerably less likely to receive a custodial sentence (Department of Corrections, 2007; DTZ New Zealand, 2007).

The confusion perhaps arises as a result of the paradox that many white people face through ‘*being* privileged’ but not ‘*feeling* privileged’ (Johnson, 2008:118 emphasis in original). This contradiction was evident throughout the transcripts, as participants willingly spoke about racism but were seemingly unable to talk about the ways in which its corollary – white privilege – operated in their lives. Analysis of the data indicated that although the participants were aware of the existence of white privilege, their reliance upon the discourse of racism, alongside a separation from the manifestations of whiteness, made it difficult to engage with the advantages that it has to offer.

The theme of separation was apparent not only in relation to whiteness but reappeared throughout the analysis. The adoption of a Pakeha identity and subsequent rejection of other ethnic identifiers helped establish a sense of detachment from other white New Zealanders. It was reinforced by the argument that being Pakeha indicates a political separation from others in the dominant majority. An emphasis on separation is consistent with Western liberalism’s focus on individualism and individual freedoms. This belief, widespread in many Western countries including New Zealand, proposes that society is made up of autonomous, self sufficient individuals (Laungani, 2007; Lipsitz, 1998). Traits such as independence, self-reliance and autonomy are admired and intrinsically bound to an ideal in a culture where individuals claim responsibility for their own thoughts and actions.

As autonomous individuals, it is possible to draw sharp boundaries within the context of racism and privilege, isolating oneself from situations where one might otherwise be implicated (Sampson, 2000). Because each person bears responsibility for their own actions, logically, they cannot be held accountable for those of others. Within the context of privilege, however, believing oneself to be autonomous can obscure the ways in which white people may benefit – albeit unintentionally – from society’s institutions. An adherence to the philosophy of individualism can impede understanding of the collective reality of experiences. It may be possible for white people to recognise the consequences of colonisation for Maori but an emphasis on separation may preclude an engagement with how the legacy of colonisation – contemporary structural inequality – serves to favour all white New Zealanders.

In his work with white antiracists in the United States, Hughey (2009, 2010) proposed that a narrative of separation can work against the conceptualisation of white people as a group thereby limiting interpretations of white privilege. Similarly, in New Zealand, by creating this sense of separation, we contend that Pakeha risk diverting attention from the relationship that exists between all white people in this country. While not attempting to deny the differences that exist between white people, highlighting the ‘hegemonic whiteness’ that transcends these distinctions (Hughey, 2010; Lewis, 2004), emphasises the group cohesion created by whiteness; in particular, the benefits shared by living in a society founded on the basis of white supremacy.

It is the linking of whiteness with privilege that provides a justification for analysis of whiteness as social collectivism, a collectivism that is potentially overwhelmed by the separation inherent in a Pakeha identity. As has been argued ‘[w]hether all whites have self-conscious racial identities may or may not matter as much for their life chances as external readings of them as white’ (Lewis, 2004: 624). The intention of this article is to argue that consideration needs to shift to the advantages shared by members of the dominant majority rather than simply focusing on the differences between majority and minority groups.

## CONCLUSION

A number of the interview participants actively demonstrated how it is possible to challenge white privilege. Several participants, for example, deliberately sent their children to culturally diverse but low decile schools, indicating both an acknowledgement of privilege and a desire to ‘interrupt’ it (O’Brien, 2007: 431). This was not, however, a dominant theme in the data. More preva-

lent was the utilisation of a number of strategies enabling participants to disengage from the benefits associated with white privilege, despite their avowal of the importance of acknowledging it.

Analysis of the interviews often revealed the construction of a Pakeha identity as representative of a relationship with both the land originally occupied by Maori and with Maori as a people. While not intending to discredit the meaning that participants attach to their self-identity, we argue that a reliance on a relational definition may serve to perpetuate white hegemony by ignoring the power differential that exists between Maori and Pakeha in New Zealand society. Furthermore the renunciation of whiteness and the ambiguity of the term Pakeha in relation to race, potentially offers a means by which participants can separate themselves from other members of New Zealand's dominant white majority and from white privilege.

There are a number of implications arising from this research. Most obviously, we contend, there is a need to consider the consequences of uncritically proclaiming a Pakeha identity. If this identity is intended to convey a relationship with Maori then the inequity in this relationship needs also to be acknowledged. As noted above, being white in New Zealand puts a number of privileges within reach. A failure to acknowledge these privileges potentially obscures the relationship between whiteness and power and risks redefining privilege as individual status rather than structural inequities embedded within the institutions of this country. The challenge then, for Pakeha, is to communicate support for Maori in a way that does not obscure the reality of white privilege in New Zealand.

#### NOTES

- 1 In justifying their decision to retain the Census category New Zealand European, Statistics New Zealand argued it provided an 'acceptable response category for people of European ancestry who had strong generational attachments to New Zealand' (Statistics New Zealand, 2009b:10).
- 2 It is not our intention here to imply that whiteness is a biological category. We argue that whiteness is a social construction and has meaning only through the collective agreement of various social groups that there is power and privilege attached to being white.

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