



UNIVERSITY
OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA

2012

Race and education: Hidden links between media and Indigenous academic self-concept

Kelsey Wall

University of Wollongong, ksw983@uow.edu.au

Megan Baker

University of Wollongong, meb993@uow.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/jseem>

Recommended Citation

Wall, Kelsey and Baker, Megan, Race and education: Hidden links between media and Indigenous academic self-concept, *Journal of Student Engagement: Education Matters*, 2(1), 2012, 54-63.

Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/jseem/vol2/iss1/10>

Race and education: Hidden links between media and Indigenous academic self-concept

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to locate ideological constructions of racism in relation to the Australian education system that are imbricated within the structure of newspaper reporting. The study focuses on reports concerning the poor and rapidly declining Aboriginal student academic standards as presented in *The Australian* and the resultant socio-psychological implications held and enforced by, firstly, Australian society, and then, more significantly, adopted by the students themselves. The analysis of these reports follows the analytic paradigm of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and is undertaken in two stages. Firstly, giving a general depiction of media techniques and structures, which highlight discursive practices of 'othering' of ethnic minority, and secondly, the effects of these stereotypes upon indigenous students' academic self-concept.



Race and education: Hidden links between media and Indigenous academic self-concept

Kelsey Wall

Bachelor of Primary Education (fourth year), Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, Australia

Megan Baker

Bachelor of Creative Arts/Bachelor of Communication and Media Studies, Faculty of Creative Arts/Faculty of Arts, University of Wollongong, Australia

The aim of this paper is to locate ideological constructions of racism in relation to the Australian education system that are imbricated within the structure of newspaper reporting. The study focuses on reports concerning the poor and rapidly declining Aboriginal student academic standards as presented in *The Australian* and the resultant socio-psychological implications held and enforced by, firstly, Australian society, and then, more significantly, adopted by the students themselves. The analysis of these reports follows the analytic paradigm of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and is undertaken in two stages. Firstly, giving a general depiction of media techniques and structures, which highlight discursive practices of ‘othering’ of ethnic minority, and secondly, the effects of these stereotypes upon indigenous students’ academic self-concept.

Keywords: academic self-concept; education; Indigenous students; othering; CDA; discourse; Australian media

Introduction

Contemporary Australian society has a tendency to label or just assume Aboriginal students will be underachievers at school. Such attitudes, we will argue, are resultant from Australian mainstream media stories that present Indigenous people as an ‘other’. Through the analysis of media formats and their linguistic techniques it becomes evident that negative ‘othering’ attitudes are developed and sustained through rigid hegemonic discursive systems, and serve to delineate Indigenous students as being at fault for ‘lagging’ academic success in the school arena. Such stances reinforce and reproduce past paternalistic models that place white majority as ethically superior within social discourses. Forms of racial discourse therefore sit in a contextual and historical framework, and once analysed can express hidden ideological constructs pertaining the way we picture Aboriginal student identities.



Indigenous persons are treated as an ‘issue’ by the media, so it is easy to see how the subject of ‘race’ may prevent Indigenous people from being seen as ordinary (King, 2009). This is demonstrated by Danalis (2009) during a personal reflection:

I suppose I was nervous about stepping through the door of an Aboriginal home for the first time in my life. Would it be a rundown place with broken windows and a yard full of car bodies and yapping dogs, the classic media cliché that’s rolled out every night on television? (Danalis, 2009, p.110)

When our Indigenous students are exposed to daily reminders, subtle or blatant, that the Indigenous culture is associated with low academic standards, it serves to diminish their ability to construct a high academic self-concept. The society that we live in will imply to Indigenous students that they are somehow inferior and many of the children will accept that (Sarra, 2007).

Theoretical Background

Our conceptual focus is social psychology and critical linguistic theory. A model of social-self interaction with media platforms and wider ideological perspectives is examined in relation to power constructs. First, however, a notion of new racism (Barker, 1981) in accordance to hegemonic structures and critical discursive analysis (Foucault, 1964; Mills, 1997), on which the model is based, is discussed. Critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1995; Rhee & Sagaria 2004) with the example of ‘othering’ (Said, 1978) is examined as an effective deconstructive tool for examining language and ways new racist sentiments are translated into the Australian context.

New Racism

Racism in contemporary communicative systems (such as, media and social networking) is no longer overt and explicit, where formerly racism was evident in both social (such as, education and employment restrictions) and institutionalised legislative contexts (such as, White Australia policy). Rather, what we experience now is racism in a far more subtle, and potentially sinister, means. To describe this ideology Barker (1981) first coined the term ‘new racism’ – the changing nature of racism whereby social distance is created between groups, entailing a superior façade of blame. According to Van Dijk (2009), language plays a vital role in constructing forms of new racism. This is apparent in his concept of ‘disclaimers’ describing an inverted or hedged racism that exclaims prejudice opinions about an out-group by setting them in a false disclaimer of apparent denials: “I am not a racist, but ...” (Van Dijk, 2009, p.202). These disclaimers firstly serve to protect and validate the interests of self or the in-group by placing themselves in a positive frame and secondly contrast this against the negative belief or opinion expressed in the second part of the disclaimer (Van Dijk, 2009). In this way language has developed a functional role in constructing new racism sentiments by maintaining and reproducing the interests of the dominant majority.



Discourse and CDA

The media is a key element in the maintenance and reproduction of this form of new racism. Media platforms, such as print, television film, radio and the Internet, allow for the capacity to use coercion against other social groups via means of derogative discursive practices (Van Dijk, 2009). In order to analyse the patterns of language that these media platforms employ, we will be referring to the term ‘discourse’, a term which covers a vast branch of socio-linguistic theory, examining naturalised units of language in texts (either verbal or written), in relation to wider socio-cultural structures (Mills, 1999). For Gramsci (1968) naturalised discourse conventions are the most effective mechanism for sustaining and reproducing cultural and ideological dimensions of hegemony. He claimed that the hegemonic domination of a class or group over a society was in part determined by their capacity to shape these discursive practices and orders of discourse. Discourse therefore involves a socially constructed reality, which describes both the real and the symbolic and further the distinction between them (Mills, 1999). In light of this, new racism conceptions formulate their own discursive systems via means of representation and are enacted through media formats that are reproduced and enforced by elitist models.

There is a considerable body of theory to support the link between discourse and hegemony, with a specific focus on media practices and represented ideology (Foucault, 1964; Rhee & Sagaria, 2004). We construct our self-identities in opposition to others and their conative characteristics, that is, we define ourselves by what we are not (Foucault, 1964). From this perspective a philosophical branch of theory has been developed, ‘Critical Discourse Analysis’ (CDA) in order to analyse group habits and attributes in relation to social power as represented through text (Fairclough, 1995). It is a means of decoding patterns of language in texts in order to understand the semiotic categories used to define our external realities and ourselves, or more simply; “the analysis of relationships between language use and the wider social and cultural structures” (Rhee & Sagaria, 2004, p.82). Thus CDA can be seen as a methodological linguistic technique that reveals hidden or cloaked meanings, which are naturalised within socio-cultural dialogue, and further identifies the hegemonic functions that grammatical choices and textual formats embody.

Othering

Said (1978) employed CDA while investigating the concept of ‘othering’. The term othering was first introduced in Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), which analysed the work of learned scholars, travel writers, poets and novelists, in all of which processes of marginalisation are identified. Collectively these works effectively produced the Orient as a repository of western knowledge (Mills, 1999). In applying CDA, Said identified three typological practices that were continuously repeated in Western canonical structures: objectification, generalisation and negativity. In recognising these processes, CDA enabled Said to uncover hegemonic structures and naturalised discursive forms that were implicit in colonial dialogues, and deconstruct the social purposes they fulfilled. Thus, Said’s concept of othering displays how the dominant elite enforces an authority over subordinate groups.

In support of this model, we believe that images of the Aboriginal other are continually replicated in contemporary Australian media platforms. Following this



branch in postcolonial theory, these images or stereotypes serve to shadow past colonial elitist ideologies. An onslaught of sweeping generalisations and negative objectifications of Indigenous peoples are, often, implicitly inferred as seemingly familiar discursive formats in Australian media, and one would argue that these statements have accrued truth-value through usage and familiarity (Mills, 1999). Each new text that appears in the Australian media paradigm informs the way that knowledge is produced, in that seemingly ‘objective’ statements are, rather, sitting in a discursive framework that reinforces Indigenous stereotypes. The discussion of Indigenous academic performance has become a recurrent generalisation, assisting to naturalise negative academic achievement with Aboriginality, and in this way disempower them. Naturalised discourse conventions are thus an effective mechanism for the reproduction of cultural hegemonic structures.

Deconstructed articles

The study itself will employ CDA to analyse practices of othering prevalent in newspaper discourse. The primary body of this will focus on a sequential analysis of employed analytic linguistic techniques; direct discourse (DD), indirect discourse (ID), direct discourse slipping (DDS), quotation patterns and over-lexicalisation (Fairclough, 1995; Teo, 2000). Each topic technique will be discussed individually with simultaneous reference to chosen newspaper examples. This strategy however, has two primary flaws that need to be acknowledged. Firstly, being limited to only four sources could potentially handicap the legitimacy of our results, and secondly we do not acknowledge the active role that readers play in engaging with media stories and events. In the case of the first, a more expansive analysis covering a larger time frame, and thus a greater number of articles, could not be adequately discussed in the duration of this paper. We have instead addressed this absence by instigating a recent timeframe between the months of October 2011 through to November 2011 in order to avoid biased ‘nit-picking’ or ‘tailoring’ of articles to suit our own agenda. Concerning the latter, we would note that no audience is a passive vacuum, but for the purpose of this essay we do not believe that further examining public opinion and response was relevant to the content and messages inherent in newspaper articles.

Even though, as stated above, discourse can be perceived as any text, verbal or written, we have chosen to deconstruct newspaper articles, as they encapsulate modern democratic principles through which we come to perceive the sociocultural and political powers in motion. In this instance we will be drawing excerpts from *The Australian*, from the month of mid-October to mid-November of 2011 (Anon. 2011; Ferrari, 2011; Karvelas, 2011; Mitchell, 2011) collected through a topical search of keywords ‘Indigenous’ OR ‘aboriginal’ AND ‘education’. As a national newspaper marketing itself to the key stakeholders of society, i.e. an educated, middle-class demographic, *The Australian* has a particularly wide point of access and therefore influences the largest possible scope, or the right scope. Discursive constructs reveal that newspapers are written for, as well as to, majority groups and using the four resultant articles of the search as primary evidence, racist tendencies inherent in news events are thus exposed.

A basic language-learning principle is that newspaper articles follow a strict format that employs specific techniques, allowing the author or publication to remain



aloof. But rather than transparent reportings that state factual accounts of what was said or written, news can be decisively interpreted and represented in one way rather than another (Fairclough, 1995). In other words, newspaper articles within our society carry a certain perceived authority and reputation that claims to portray a mirrored reality. Entman's framing theory is relevant in this regard, however, due to practical constraints, will not be discussed in this article (Entman, 2007). In a similar vein, whilst we acknowledge the media's capacity and propensity to set an agenda, with consequent influence on the reasoning agendas of individual thought, such a topic is worthy of an article in its own right, so will not directly discussed here.

We are not disputing the information concerning poor Indigenous academic achievement, rather, what is under dispute are the ways in which facts are categorised and formatted, which may serve to reinforce patterns of blame. Journalistic parlance refers to this practice as the inverted pyramid; presenting the most important information at the top and least important at the bottom (Teo, 2009). For instance, Karvelas (2011) structures his information sources beginning with government intervention, a government minister (Jenny Macklin) and the 'problem parents' before finally acknowledging the parents opinion in solving the problem posed. This presents a hierarchical structure of voices, which explicitly distorts the way we perceive an item or individuals importance in the scheme of the overall subject.

Following this, the CDA we employed aimed to locate the 'voice' or apparent ideological intent that was present. For instance, the enrolment of Fairclough's direct discourse (DD), and indirect discourse (ID), which analysed the distinction between the writers voice and their subject's voice (Fairclough, 1995). DD, more plainly, refers to the use of primary or source material in the articles, such as quotes, facts and other basic new accounts (who, what, where etc.), or the subject's voice. We found that this occurred most frequently in the beginning of the article. In contrast, ID contains linguistic approaches that assert the ideational meanings inherent in the article (the writer's voice). Thus, DD was used when the information presented was important, dramatic, witty etc. and usually used when it came from an authoritative source, whereas ID was used to prescribe an article with specific connotations and in this way construct and manipulate meaning (Fairclough, 1995). The ideational meaning or secondary discourses may thus be interpreted according to the way in which it is presented in the primary or DD (Fairclough, 1995). From this we begin to understand that newspaper discourse is not as unbiased as it purports. We recognise that Anon. (2011) is published as personal opinion, but, by the newspaper choosing to publish this piece of comment over another, they are choosing to tacitly support the comment's standpoint, regardless of any caveat of individual views being expressed. By thus holding the gatekeeper role, the newspaper's role in 'setting an agenda' is reinforced.

Evident in Ferrari (2011) is this sense of ID, as the phrase 'lagging behind', used to describe a learning gap between groups in society, implies a hidden connotation of differentiation - that Indigenous people have achieved only a limited degree of progress on the evolutionary scale, and this is reflected in their academic results. This sentiment is also evident in ID phrases in Karvelas (2011), whereby the phrase "explain to parents their responsibilities and ensure they understood" denigrates the parenting skills of the other, and places the dominant culture (white Australian) in a position of moral superiority. Furthermore, examples of patronage



(Anon., 2011) are evident through phrases such as “careful guidance”, “brighter future”, “chronic problems” and “emergency response” (Anon., 2011). Whilst, in the context of *The Intervention*, ‘emergency response’ was utilised for initiating the process, this term still implies that ‘we need to step in and help the helpless’. These phrases form a discourse that reinforces the role of white educators as saviours in Indigenous lives. This can also be gathered through the face-saving disclaimers used when describing the comparative authoritative sources – “She has not been afraid to put onus on parents” and “yet so far the minister has managed to maintain a sense of strength and urgency” (Anon., 2011).

As a means to measure and maintain the boundaries, or lack of, between DD and ID, Fairclough introduces the term direct discourse slipping (DD slipping) describing a common technique that distorts the voice in the article (Fairclough, 1995). This is done by the confusion of tense as well as the distortion between the reporter’s voice and the source voice, usually through quotations. For instance, ‘Ms Macklin has homed in on the heart of the matter – only education can break the cycle’ (Anon., 2011), demonstrates that a first-hand quote and an opinion presented from the point of the newspaper can be intentionally misconstrued. ‘Only education can break the cycle’ is the opinion expressed, but is stated in a way in which the reader assumes Ms Macklin has stated this herself. A technique similar to and often reinforced DD(s) is quotation patterns, which involves the analysis of quote sources and frequency that appear in the articles. We found that the majority of quotes came from authoritative sources, being government ministers, local members and council leaders, corporate business representative and teachers, in comparison to Indigenous family members and students themselves. These two techniques were prevalent among all four of our deconstructed articles.

The final technique, over-lexicalisation, occurs when a plethora of repetitious, quasi-synonymous language is interlaced into the fabric of newspaper discourse (Teo, 2000). Repetition of phrases and expressions such as “closing the gap”, “welfare payments”, “Centrelink,” “truants”, “lagging” and “out of bed” become synonymous with the constructed view of Indigenous education (Anon., 2011; Ferrari, 2011; Karvelas, 2011; Mitchell, 2011). One phrase/word, in particular, was used multiple times in each article. This was the unnecessary overuse of the word ‘Centrelink’, commonly associated with low socio-economic status, which resultantly becomes a stigma attached to Indigenous education. Not only does this over-lexicalisation of these terms occur in each text by itself, it is also represented as a recurrent theme across multiple media formats, thus making it a painfully apparent negative generalisation.

These five techniques are representative of a myriad of options that news writing can employ in order to control the ways in which news readers make sense of a subject. However, through their employment in the analysis of these four articles it is plain that elitist cultural discourses are still prevalent in the way that Indigenous students are distanced from normal educational models, and blamed for their own lack of achievement.



Educational Implications

The direct influence of embedded Indigenous stereotypes in media is now directly correlated to negative academic self-concept. We acknowledge an academic self-concept is not passively assumed in a vacuum, rather, poor academic stereotypes are established via the layers of social influences (Bronfenbrenner & Morris 1998) and thus internalised by Indigenous students (King, 2009; Schunk, 1999; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Learned helplessness and lack of motivation occur (Weiner, 2000).

Contextual influences on child development

Bronfenbrenner is responsible for this approach as his ecological systems theory provides an account of contextual influences on children's development. The theory views a child as developing within a complex and hierarchical system of relationships affected by multiple levels of the surrounding environment (Berk, 2006). The power of the relationships is arranged into societal levels, concerning at first the relations between a child and the immediate family and home environment (the microsystem), then expands to include the areas of the community and school (mesosystem), as well as the conditions of the social settings that affect a child's experiences, such as friends and neighbours, parents' workplaces, religious institutions and the media (exosystem) (Berk, 2006). These form our self-concept; a cognitive structure that holds together the set of attributes, abilities, attitudes and values that we use to define ourselves (Hoy & Spero, 2005). By applying Bronfenbrenner's theory of the influence of contextual frameworks, we can infer that a student's academic self-concept originates from the contextual frameworks that are established and maintained in media discourse. Indigenous academic stereotypes, such as those discussed above, are internalised throughout childhood and ultimately transformed into personal self-regulatory influences (Schunk, 1999).

It is the processes of stereotyping that foster low academic expectations and will eventually lead to Indigenous students' dis-identification with the education system (Steele & Aronson, 1995). If we form a self-concept through the opinions, beliefs and attitudes that other people perceive of us, which involve processes of stereotyping, these attitudes in turn affect the way we are able to function. Indigenous students assume these stereotypes presented, assisted by the enforcement of these societal schemas, so much so that they acknowledge and become comfortable in conforming to the 'lagging behind' stereotype. Because the media sphere treats Aboriginality as an 'issue', and often circumscribe community boundaries and values which differentiate sharply between 'us' (the in-group) and 'them' (the troubled community), the students' academic absence and poor standards becomes familiarised and naturalised (King, 2009).

Academic Performance

Feelings of reluctance or 'learned helplessness' arise from these inherent negative representations and students accrue an expectation of future failures that impact upon their motivational performance (Covington & Müeller 2001). This is a direct assumption concluded from the strong correlation that exists between academic self-concept (motivation) and negative performance at school (Hoy & Spero 2005).



Indigenous students will attribute their school failures to a learned sense of inability – a cause that is both internal (they are at fault for lack of ability) and stable (it is unlikely to change regardless of effort) (Weiner, 2000). This emphasises to the person that he or she ‘cannot’ creates personal feelings of shame and humiliation (Weiner, 2000). Academic self-concept for Indigenous students in this case is erosive, as the western education systems’ demand for high grades is charged with personal meanings of self-worth and competency (Covington & Müeller, 2001). The cyclic reinforcement and internalisation of these negative stereotypes corresponds to a lack of motivation in Indigenous students, who will adopt a ‘why bother’ attitude.

We need Indigenous students to understand that these negative images of Indigenous academic inability and disengagement, while they appear so prominently in Australian media discourse, exist because of other sociological and historical processes and not the legacy of being Aboriginal (Sarra, 2007). There are two main avenues through which these complex and multifaceted issues can be addressed. While no school operating in our current educational paradigm may be perfect, Indigenous students must recognise their own capabilities of skilfully navigating the system (Nelson & Hay, 2010). And teachers must provide platforms where Indigenous peoples can produce richer representations of themselves – freedom to Indigenous students as publishers of their own stories (Lumby, 2010). Many Indigenous young people identify their indigeneity as a source of strength and a positive aspect of their lives, and it is quite achievable, and extremely necessary, to provide a means that allows students to apply this collective cultural pride to their academic self-concept.

Conclusion

We have argued that an overwhelming stereotype exists in the media that implicates negative perceptions of Indigenous students. Through the analysis of linguistic techniques and application within media formats it has become evident that practices of othering are embedded into news structures, and therefore, are likely to be inferred into social ideological constructs. These hegemonic discursive systems serve to delineate Indigenous students and vilify them for poor academic standards. This negative stereotype is most wounding not only because it may be believed by society at large, but also accepted by students themselves. At this point we believe that we are only touching the surface of othering media representation and the negative academic self-concept that is prevalent among Indigenous students. These learnt attitudes of helplessness and ‘why bother’ need to be addressed and further studied in order to more succinctly understand links between new racist ideologies presented in the media and Indigenous student achievement.

References

- Anon. (2011). ‘Editorial: Getting kids off to school is crucial indigenous task’. *The Australian* (online), 15 November. URL: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/> (homepage) (accessed 16 February 2012).
- Barker, M. (1981). *The New Racism*. London: Junction Books.



- Berk, L. (2006). *Child Development* (7th edn). Boston: Pearson/Allyn & Bacon.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. & Morris, P.A. (1998). 'The ecology of developmental processes'. In R.M. Lerner (ed.), *Handbook of Child Psychology* (pp.535–584). New York: Wiley.
- Covington, M. & Müeller, K. (2001). 'Intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation: An approach/avoidance reformulation'. *Educational Psychology Review*, 13 (2), 157–176.
- Danalis, J. (2009). *Riding the Black Cockatoo*. Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin.
- Entman, R. (2007). 'Framing bias: Media in the distribution of power'. *Journal of Communication*, 57 (1), 163–173.
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical Discourse Analysis*. London: Longman.
- Ferrari, J. (2011). 'Poorer students doing worse in boom states'. *The Australian* (online), 10 November. URL: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/> (homepage) (accessed 16 February 2012).
- Foucault, M. (1964). *Madness and Civilization: A history of insanity in the age of reason*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Gramsci, A. (1968). *The Modern Prince and other Writings*. New York: International Publishers.
- Hoy, A.W. & Spero, R.B. (2005). 'Changes in teacher efficacy during the early years of teaching: A comparison of four measures'. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 21 (4), 343–356.
- Karvelas, P. (2011). 'Agency to force NT truant kids from bed to classroom'. *The Australian* (online), 14 November. URL: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/> (homepage) (accessed 16 February 2011).
- King, A. (2009). 'Relative justice: Indigenous families in Australian lifestyle media'. *The Journal of Communication*, 36 (2), 17–33.
- Lumby, B. (2010). 'Cyber-indigeneity: Urban indigenous identity on Facebook'. *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 39 (1), 68–75.
- Mills, S. (1999). *Discourse*. New York: Routledge.
- Mitchell, N. (2011). 'Laptop delivery closing the gap'. *The Australian* (online), 21 October. URL: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/> (homepage) (accessed 16 February 2012).
- Nelson, A. & Hay, P. (2010). "'I don't want to grow up and not be smart": Urban Indigenous young people's perceptions of school'. *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 39 (1), 54–64.
- Rhee, J. & Sagaria, M. (2004). 'International students: Constructions of imperialism in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*'. *Review of Higher Education*, 28 (1), 77–96.
- Said, E.W. (1978). *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Books.
- Sarra, C. (2007). 'True colours: Strong and smart'. *Independent Education*, 37 (3), 8–10.
- Schunk, D. (1999). 'Social-self-interaction and achievement behaviour'. *Educational Psychologist*, 34 (4), 219–227.
- Steele, C.M. & Aronson, J. (1995). 'Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African-Americans'. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69, 797–811.



- Teo, P. (2000). 'Racism in the news: A critical discourse analysis of news reporting in two Australian newspapers'. *Discourse and Society*, 13 (1), 7–49.
- Van Dijk, T.A. (2009). *Society and Discourse: How social contexts influence text and talk*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Weiner, B. (2000). 'Intrapersonal and interpersonal theories of motivation from an attributional perspective'. *Educational Psychology Review*, 12 (1), 1–14.