

WHEN TABLES TURN: DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF WHITES AS VICTIMS OF AFFIRMATIVE ACTION IN A POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract.

This paper considers how white people in post-apartheid South Africa manage to oppose affirmative action policies, yet still inoculate themselves from accusations of racism. Data was collected from six focus groups comprised of 40 white university students. These students were asked to discuss their perceptions of affirmative action policies in the current South African context. These students regarded affirmative action policies as unfair and unethical whilst also constructing themselves as victims of these policies. It is argued that in an effort to manage the dilemma of opposing affirmative action policies without appearing to be racist, white people use the strategy of appealing to discourses of "Othering" and fairness and justice. These discourses help nurture a construction of victimhood. This paper draws attention to how this victimhood is appropriated and how it serves as an insulating device against claims of racism that might be aimed at opponents of affirmative action policies.

"A couple of years ago, white was the colour to be. Now it's no more so. Now the colour to be is black if you want to survive" (anonymous, in Steyn, 2001).

Black South Africans suffered social and economic discrimination for many years under the apartheid regime. White South Africans occupied a position of privilege in the socio-economic arena by virtue of their colour. White privilege has been defined as the package of benefits granted to people in a society who have white skin (McIntosh, 1988). For example, the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1924 adopted a definition of the word "employee" that barred a person whose contract of service or labour was controlled by any black pass laws and regulations from holding particular jobs (Hunter, et al, 2000). The Industrial Conciliation Act of 1956 allowed for the legal reservation of particular occupations for certain race groups (Bendix, 1996, in *ibid*). In addition, black people in more skilled positions could only be employed if it did not lead to job insecurity for white workers (Schlemmer, 1972, in *ibid*). Thus, white people were in a privileged bracket that not only guaranteed them job security, but plum jobs as well. Furthermore, if certain jobs were exclusively for whites, then even training possibilities for such jobs would be closed to blacks.

The tables turned in favour of the previously marginalized and racialized group when the apartheid regime was replaced by a democratically elected black government in April of 1994. New policies were enacted in an effort to address atrocities committed by the past regime and amend the socio-economic disparities born out of partisan apartheid policies. The Employment Equity Act, the cornerstone of Affirmative Action Policies (AAPs), is an example of interest. This new race-conscious policy was predicated on the acknowledgment of past inequalities, with the aim of rectifying past discrimination and promoting employment equity. As a result, establishments have had to closely examine their recruitment procedures, compiling them in such a manner that illustrates sensitivity to the influence of culture, environment, gender, and the learning opportunities that were previously afforded to some applicants (Hunter et al, 2000).

However, the implementation of AAPs has stirred questions about equality and fairness. It has been argued that any form of affirmative action is unfair treatment and “reverse discrimination” against non-recipients of such policies (Glazer, 1975; Kinder & Sanders, 1990). A review of literature by liberal American social scientists indicates that the fear of losing white privilege can be a motivating factor for negative attitudes towards AAPs. Justifications of white privilege are premised on a conception of whiteness that is founded on ideologies of in-group superiority over out-group members (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1996; Kinders & Sears, 1981). Consequently, negative attitudes towards out-group members can inspire opposition to affirmative action. For that reason, if whites perceive blacks as illegal encroachers on previously white domains and feel that their socio-economic security is under threat, they will harbour negative feelings towards black people that may reinforce prejudices and nurture racist tendencies.

In the new South Africa, whiteness is perceived as a disadvantage since the privilege that accompanied it has been suspended (Steyn, 2001). In the affirmative action debate, whites support and engage in rhetoric that casts white non-recipients of contracts, jobs and sport placements as “innocent victims” (Franchi & Swart, 2003). In contrast, the recipients of these resources are cast as “grabbers” of something rightfully belonging to whites (Clayton, 1996; Franchi, 2003).

Other studies show that most of the arguments about affirmative action center on fairness and justice (Crosby, 1994), which are articulated in terms of the work ethic, the positive social benefits of individual selfishness, and the favourable workings of the free market (Sidanius et al., 1996). When opposition to affirmative action is expressed in terms of fairness, the spotlight normally is on procedural justice – the fairness of the procedures through which decisions are made (Kravitz, 1995). Critics of AAPs believe that job placements should be solely based on merit. Consequently, when demographic status is employed AAPs are regarded as procedurally unfair (ibid).

Whites realize that offering oppositions fuelled by racist sentiments might be viewed as breaking the social norm of tolerance or acceptance (Van Dijk, 1992). Therefore, there is a need to find a way to voice opposition without appearing to be prejudiced or racist. This is accomplished by the individual adopting two positions: one position that is aligned with the need for change and another that is opposed to AAPs. Kluegel and Smith (1986) argue that an individual can give verbal support to the principle of racial equity, express consternation with racism that they acknowledge exists, and still be

opposed to affirmative action. They state that individuals can simultaneously oppose racism and believe in the dominant ideology that (a) everyone has an opportunity to succeed economically, (b) success and failure are due to individual rather than structural factors, and (c) inequality of outcomes is appropriate because it mirrors inequality of contributions. Subsequently, belief (a) predisposes them to support affirmative action, whilst beliefs (b) and (c) to oppose it (Kravitz, 1995).

The dilemma here is that white people present themselves as aligned with the need for change, yet still oppose AAPs. This paper will aim to look at which strategies white people employ to manage this ideological dilemma. How do they position themselves in a manner that comes across as moral and intellectually justifiable?

PARTICIPANTS.

The sample consisted of 18 male and 22 female white university students. Their age ranged between 18 years and 28 years. Purposive sampling was employed in selecting these students since they present an important “futuristic indicator” of societal perspectives (Amos et al., 1996). This group of young people is preparing to enter into the job market and as such they are not passive observers of events unfolding in the marketplace that might impact on their job opportunities. As such, their perceptions of AAPs are important in understanding how they locate themselves in a post-apartheid South African job market.

Focus group interviews were employed to collect the data. The interviews were conducted at six different “digs”; and each focus group was made up of 6 or 7 individuals. The focus groups were run in the digs and were conducted in an informal, “non-threatening” and relaxed manner. The participants were asked to sign an informed consent form with the assurance that their actual names would not be used, that the transcribed scripts would only be available to the researchers involved in the project, and that the tapes/scripts would be kept in a secure place.

In the focus groups, the students were asked to discuss issues related to segregation, affirmative action and social change in the new South Africa. For each focus group there was one facilitator to moderate the discussions. White facilitators were chosen in order to reduce social desirability pressures. The interviews lasted for approximately 1 hour.

ANALYSIS.

The tapes were transcribed and the transcripts were coded using NVIVO software. The analysis reported below is based on a subset of material where the interviewees spoke about whites as the victims of AAPs.

The present investigation employs a discursive approach to look at white students’ conversations about AAPs. Discourse analysis is characterized by a meta-theoretical emphasis on anti-realism and constructionism, with a focus on how versions of the world, society, events and inner psychological worlds are produced in discourse (Gergen, 1994; Potter, 1992). There is a shift away from focusing on individuals, to focusing on how groups of people construct their world through talk, the resources they use in the construction and how the resources are themselves reconstructed. The metaphor of construction is aptly descriptive – on one hand people are constructing

their social lives through their explanations and descriptions, and on the other hand these descriptions are themselves constructed in talk (Potter, 1992). Subsequently, it is interesting and equally important to see what kind of strategies people utilize to arrive at the constructions they make.

The aim of this study is to provide an analysis of the particular constructions that white students offer with regard to AAPs. Focus is on the different constructions made through talk and how they can afford white people various avenues of positioning themselves by means of appealing to discourses of fairness and justice and employing rhetorical strategies of "Othering" and appropriating a victim status.

STRATEGY ONE: FAIRNESS AND JUSTICE.

Extract 1:

Speaker A: *All white people that did have positions in power or whatever, are retrenched, to be replaced by somebody that may be less qualified, because they're black.*

Speaker B: *The thing is, it so needs to be emphasized that everything should be done on merit*

Speaker A: *It's not about your skin colour it's about what you do.*

Speaker B: *It's your ability.*

Speaker A: *Like my uncle got retrenched but so, the black person who has taken his position had to take training to do the job properly.*

Speaker C: *And that, and that just causes the segregation. Our government, while on one side are saying they want to put us together, they're forcing the segregation because they, they're doing something that's pushing us away.*

Speaker D: *I mean, it all defies logic. Why stick someone in a top position who less qualified than another person?*

Extract 2:

Speaker A: *The white person that did lose their job harbours resentment. And they, then segregation start again. Cos they are like this black person has taken my job, or whatever the case may be it, it might be opposite.*

Speaker B: *I don't think white people would mind if things, the whole apartheid thing stopped. If things started from the beginning. If the black person is more qualified no one is going to qualm and say he doesn't deserve the job. Of course he deserves the job. But it's when someone, no matter what race they are, they are of a higher intelligence or qualification gets pushed out of the way for someone that doesn't have the qualifications that's necessary.*

Extract 3:

They complain that all the ... like everyone who's studying is leaving the country, but what else are we supposed to do? You know, there's nothing for us here now because we can't get any positions because you know, it's all being affirmative action now. And I mean if you've been trained to become say, you know a marketer, you're not really going to want a job as a cashier. I mean if that's all you can get, but I mean what's the point in going to Varsity then?

Extract 4:

My dad works in the harbour at X, and ummmm there was ummm, a position opened up for manager of the harbour, or it was a big position and ummm my dad knows people who had applied that had studied for eight or nine years, like highly qualified people and stuff like that. And then they went and the people said that they were asking too much and they were lowering their prices and lowering their prices. This black guy came from a farm, but it was the first time he had ever walked into the harbour. He came from the farm, he asked for six thousand rand and more and they gave him the job.

In the extracts above, the interviewees commence by creating a picture of whites being displaced from their jobs and even from their country. Consider Extract 1, speaker C and Extract 2, speaker B. They complain about “being pushed away”. In Extract 3, young educated people are said to be leaving the country in search for possible employment abroad. This is an appeal to sympathize with the skilled and experienced white people who are being discarded to make way for unskilled and inexperienced blacks. AAPs are deemed unfair because merit, intelligence and experience are not taken into account in job recruitment. The displaced whites possess the necessary skills and expertise to handle the various jobs, in contrast to the blacks getting the jobs.

As previously stated, when opposition to AAPs is expressed in terms of fairness, the focus usually is on procedural justice – the fairness of the procedures through which decisions are made (Kravitz, 1995). The principles of fairness and justice are premised on ethical, moral and rational promulgations that take into account issues of education and experience. Opponents to AAPs argue that job recruitment should be based on criteria that take into account expertise, merit and experience. They argue that AAPs are unfair since they place emphasis on group-based factors rather than on equal opportunity for individuals. Such an argument is made possible by de-racializing and de-historicizing issues related to expertise, merit and experience. Thus, the issues are conveyed as colourblind, individualistic and ahistorical. This ignores the fact that black South Africans were subjected to inferior Bantu Education that undermined their capacity to compete with their fellow white colleagues in areas that required expertise and merit. In addition, due to the prohibitive apartheid laws that explicitly granted privilege to whites, black people were unable to acquire experience in some key areas since such jobs were reserved for whites.

A focus on the individual level (education and experience) overlooks the past inequities that took place at the systems level (inferior education and prohibitive laws). Speakers in the above extracts can safely arrive at their conclusions without appearing prejudiced, since they have already laid out a narrative that justifies their conclusions; whereby experience, merit and expertise are presumed to be colourblind.

In Extract 3 the speaker voices her concern about the loss of expertise as a result of striving to satisfy the previously marginalized group. She bears resentment towards AAPs since they will restrict her job opportunities to fields for which she is over-qualified (cashier), ignoring the time and money spent (at university) gaining her qualifications. Nacoste (1990) states that when reactions to AAPs are conceptualized in terms of procedural justice, these reactions are propelled by perceptions of universalistic (performance relevant) decision criteria. As such, the locus of attention is at the individualistic level rather than on the systemic level (Crosby, 1994). The speakers in these extracts therefore construct AAPs as procedurally flawed since they ignore individual effort/ability.

The same strategy is used in Extract 4, when the speaker questions the rationale of employing a black person "from the farm" who "had ... walked into the harbour ... for the first time", at the expense of several white people who are armed with years of experience. The speaker poses an individualistic picture of many individuals competing for prized positions in an open market place; and in such a place, AAPs give the previously disadvantaged group members opportunities that they do not deserve. In Extract 2, speaker B feels that job recruitment should be based on intelligence and merit. According to the speaker in Extract 1, the decision criteria for job placements premised on the Employment Equity Act is unsound since the black person had to go for training in order to do the job properly. This is an implicit allusion to incompetence. An appeal to fairness and justice based on values of expertise, merit and experience constructs a dichotomy of competent whites versus incompetent blacks. This dichotomy is achieved by means of "Othering".

STRATEGY TWO: OTHERING.

"Othering" has been defined as a process in which individuals or social groups define who they are by discrediting or demeaning other individuals or groups (Eyben & Lovett, 2004). "Othering" gives us a sense that we are better than "other" groups, who we define as "less than" us. In this study "Othering" is seen as a way of defining and securing one's own self-interests, for example in job recruitment, through the stigmatization of an "Other". By labelling someone "Other," people tend to stress what makes them dissimilar from or opposite to another and this carries over into the way they represent others, especially through stereotypical images.

Opponents to AAPs primarily feel that beneficiaries of these policies are unworthy and that non-beneficiaries should be considered since they possess skills or qualities that rank them above AAP target group members. Evaluations of this nature are facilitated by a construction of the target group members as undeserving on the basis of an intrinsic fault. The stereotypical images used by young white students in this study are not explicitly stated. How could they be, when in present day society blatant forms of prejudice are frowned upon (Van Dijk, 1992)? Instead, the interviewees used stereotypical images that were implied rather than blatant. They were employed to underline the unworthiness of the AAP recipients. The constructed "Other" was located in a range of positions (unskilled and inexperienced) within a system of difference (competent whites versus incompetent blacks). Consider Extract 1 when speaker A says, "... the black person...had to take training to do the job properly." This is a case of implicit "Othering", whereby the black person is constructed as unskilled and lacking in expertise as opposed to the retrenched, skilled, and experienced white person.

Extract 5:

Like affirmative action, they are not choosing the right person for the job, they're choosing the black person for the job. It's not necessarily the right person for the job so then that person's running the business and its, if it's not the right person, then it's obviously gonna deteriorate.

Extract 6:

It seems like, like almost the whole country is divided. It's like all this affirmative action, there's black companies and there's white companies, and it seems like the white companies are doing exceptionally well and the black companies are just, you know, getting further and further into debt and you know, the more they look at it, they see difference and they think, well, why is it that the whites get what they want?

In Extract 5 the speaker offers a narrative of what would happen if merit was not taken into consideration. Rather than explicitly specifying the black individual, the speaker instead uses the terms “the right person for the job”. In this case the account is framed not as a specific witnessed episode, but as a known and expected pattern, a scripted formulation of black incompetence. The speaker formulates the events of deterioration as regular and as such makes them factually robust and partially knowable in advance without having to wait and witness any specific instance (Edwards, 2003). The speaker uses the word “obviously” to signify that the views being offered are common knowledge (blacks are incompetent) and are not the outcome of her own racial prejudices.

Such a scripted formulation is presented as if founded on a number of people's frequent experiences of such instances (Edwards, 2003). As a result, a narrated sequence of events can be offered as an expectable sequence (ibid), as witnessed in Extract 6. White companies are portrayed as “doing exceptionally well” whilst black companies “are just... getting further and further into debt”. This is another instance of stereotyping with the “Other” portrayed as incompetent and possibly intellectually challenged. When blacks see the difference in black versus white managed companies, they are unable to fathom what the real factors behind this difference are. Implicit stereotyping of the “Other” in regard to intelligence also appears in Extract 2 when the speaker talks about qualifications and intelligence being the main criteria for job selection and in the process implies that the beneficiaries of AAPs lack both.

Events in Extracts 5 and 6 are presented as falling into a standard pattern, and therefore an empirically strong one, “it's obviously gonna deteriorate”. Secondly, being a standard pattern it may be indicative of dispositional tendencies that can be attributed to the actors. These speakers are propagating the argument that in a rational world, AAPs are faulty since it is a fact (evidenced by the financial state of black businesses) that black people are not economically versed and thus handicapped in the business arena.

Implicit “Othering” is fundamental to arguments for fairness and justice. For if the recipients of AAPs are deficient, then AAPs are unfair and unjust since they deny the qualified non-recipients opportunities that fairly belong to them. As such, “Othering” underpins the case for procedural justice. In addition, it is used to portray whites as victims.

REVERSE APARTHEID: APPROPRIATION OF VICTIMHOOD.

Extract 7:

Speaker A: *I've been interested, um totally different side of things, in doing an exchange programme to varsity, and they say half of them, on the requirements say you have to be a black pupil, and that's just wrong, in my opinion.*

Speaker B: *But also if you apply for bursaries.*

Speaker A: *Bursaries, you have to be historically disadvantaged... I see the reasoning for it but it's not logical.*

Speaker C: *It's not democratic.*

Speaker A: *Ja, it's sort of reverse apartheid.*

Speaker B: *And there's many underprivileged white people as well.*

Speaker D: *And in that way you feel discriminated against. Cos what makes them better?*

Speaker B: *Or better candidates, at least for scholarships or whatever?*

One of the most controversial issues in the affirmative action debate is its perceived negative impact on a large number of whites (Pincus, 2000). The most popular term for this phenomenon is "reverse discrimination" (Gross, 1978) or, as expressed by speaker A in Extract 7 "reverse apartheid". This is a belief by white people that they are being discriminated against by policies that encourage the inclusion of traditionally marginalized groups into positions of privilege and power (Pincus, 2000). Whites now feel that they are the "victims" of unfair practices (in hiring, for example) as opposed to seeing the larger historical inequalities of power relations that have produced structural discrimination. It has been argued that white people in South Africa are increasingly appropriating the discourses of victimization (in relation to affirmative action) in order to cast whiteness as a disadvantage (Steyn, 2001).

Discourses of fairness and justice together with stereotypical depictions of blacks provide white South Africans with a flexible and strategic lexicon for constructing images of themselves as victims. This argument is focused on individuals who have been disadvantaged, not groups. This would involve a majority of blacks, but crucially, would also include some whites. Consider Extract 7, when speaker B talks about there being "many underprivileged white people as well". Here, the speaker questions the rationality of the AAPs and draws on these statements to counter the argument that black people are deserving because they are historically disadvantaged.

A discourse of "discrimination" also implies illegitimacy and illegality (Pincus, 2000). Any negative impact that affirmative action may have on whites is seen as comparable to the illegal discrimination that has been encountered by black people in the previous political era. Consider the case in Extract 4, whereby white and "highly qualified" people missed out on a managerial opportunity at the harbour that eventually was given to a black "guy...from the farm", who had never been to a harbour before and by implication was

inexperienced and unqualified. By the logic of “reverse apartheid”, a qualified white individual who did not get that position is just as harmed as the dozens or hundreds of qualified black people that had been denied employment in that outfit in the past. Hence, AAPs are unfair and unethical.

Extract 8:

Speaker A: *Ja, and then the topic of Apartheid comes up all the time every five minutes.*

Speaker B: *It's part of the past, it should be forgotten. I don't see why it always has to be brought up.*

Speaker A: *And when why it always has to be the whites' fault. It's like, there we go, push it down because it's the whites' fault, and then, there goes that.*

Speaker B: *Ja, cos I mean, it was a bad thing, and shouldn't have happened. But even before apartheid there was still segregation.*

Speaker C: *And I think, like the group of people that's like, the majority of people that are living at the moment they didn't really grow up in the thick apartheid. I mean, it's being blamed now on people in their say, twenty, thirty some things, who really weren't really part of it. I mean, I can't even remember it, because, I mean, I was just so young. I just remember all of a sudden walking into a restaurant and there were black people where there never used to be. And, but I didn't really know the, all the stuff behind it. And you know, it just keeps getting pushed at you when it wasn't your fault. And it just, it makes you angry.*

Speaker B: *Cos it like affected the older generation. It didn't affect us, so they should forget about it as well.*

Speaker D: *It's like affirmative action, I don't believe in it. Why should we suffer cos we had nothing to do with it?*

Speaker A: *And also the rainbow nation thing. Everybody keeps on saying this is the rainbow nation, but if you really look at it, it's very far from it.*

Extract 9:

Speaker A: *By doing that affirmative action you you sort of keeping the flame of racism alive. Now it reaches the stage where we resenting the fact that they getting opportunities that we aren't entitled to which okay they were disadvantaged, but we weren't part of that generation. And guys that are applying for jobs our age they were but not to the same extent as back in the day.*

Speaker B: *I mean we can turn around say now we've been discriminated against. We should start political parties, we should start bombing radio towers and stuff, it's exactly the same. I mean you have to say nothing to stop them? No, I think it's ridiculous.*

Speaker C: *Affirmative action goes on in countries around the world.*

Speaker B: *Ja, but you should choose the best person for the job that's what I say.*

Speaker D: *A lot of people in South Africa, I mean I'm sitting here I'm going to have finished with an honours degree, it doesn't matter if I finished top of my class or whatever. I'm still probably not going to get a job, so why hang around in South Africa for nothing where I could go overseas and there's a whole lot a whole world of opportunity out there.*

Extract 10:

Affirmative action is causing problems because people get resentful about that and then they take it into other areas of their life, you know, so they may ummmm, they may lose a job to another black person because of affirmative action and they'll take it to other areas like they'll see you know, they'll transfer it to other black people no matter who they are. You know what I mean, it just doesn't matter, it's just cos you're black and you're taking things away from me now.

In order to embark on the road of constructing affirmative action as “reverse apartheid”, past injustices are downplayed. This is done by undermining the impact of past policies. Speaker B in Extract 8 admits, “it was a bad thing, and shouldn't have happened,” nevertheless, she states that “even before Apartheid there was still segregation”. The argument being propagated is that, apartheid should not be blamed for the current inequalities since these inequalities were there long before the birth of apartheid. However, mitigations of this nature amount to a denial of the impact of the inegalitarian economic policies established under apartheid and how options for advancement were legally foreclosed to black South Africans (Steyn, 2001). They lend credence to the questioning of the fairness behind the AAPs in light of the “injury” it afflicts currently on “innocent whites”.

Detracting from past injustices and sufferings also weakens the historical discourses that black people might draw upon to augment their case for affirmative action. This is because blacks could argue that AAPs have been initiated, premised on the fact that there are existing injustices and inequalities created by past apartheid policies. However, in as much as these past histories are undermined, whites still manage to recruit these same histories to construct the concept of “reverse apartheid”. The term “reverse” implies acknowledged previous discrimination against black people. Nonetheless, this variability in the conceptualization of discrimination facilitates a positioning of the whites according to the outcomes they desire: a construction of “innocent whites”.

The interviewees, as evidenced by speaker B Extract 8, do not deny the injustice or reality of apartheid. They are saying that they as individuals are not to blame and hence the present suffering is unfair. They absolve themselves from any responsibility for injustices committed by blaming others and hence constructing themselves as “innocent”. This construction of “innocence” encourages pity for the displaced whites (See extracts 1-4).

Speakers B and D in Extract 8 feel that since apartheid policies “affected the older generation” and not their generation, they should not be made to suffer on account of their ancestors. In order to come across as innocent, these interviewees pass on the blame of racism/apartheid onto their forefathers and accuse the current black

government of racism, epitomized by the implementation of race-conscious policies. In Extract 9, speaker A acknowledges the past injustices meted out by the racist white regime during apartheid, but is quick to point out “we weren’t part of that generation”. In this sense, AAPs are depicted as unfair since they are making the current “innocent” generation of young whites shoulder the burden of their forefathers.

Van Dijk (1992) regards this reversal strategy as one of the strongest forms of denial of racism. By appropriating the discourse of victimhood, whites then construct the black government as the “real racists” and not them. An insidious argument against affirmative action is that it actually creates or exacerbates racial problems, as is the case in Extracts 10 and 2 where the speakers allude to a reawakening of racial tensions caused by rightfully aggrieved non-beneficiaries of AAPs. For example, in Extract 2, speaker B states that AAPs keep “the flame of racism alive.” The same is the case with speaker C in Extract 1, who categorized the current South African government as segregationist. It is labeled as “pushing [the whites] away” in the pursuit of “illogical” policies, instead of fostering national unity.

In addition to injuring “innocent whites”, it is assumed that AAPs encourage the growth of white-supremacy groups. Such is the sentiment in Extract 9. Speaker B’s statement not only underlines the argument against rationality and ethics, but also emphasizes the negative situations, such as the formation of white militant parties, that AAPs might create. Here, the speaker constructs himself as a freedom fighter. In order to understand this construction, it has to be remembered that during the struggle to emancipate South Africa from the chains of apartheid, black freedom fighters, especially Umkhonto weSizwe, targeted radio towers and railways lines for bombing and sabotage. Then it was a fight against policies that were deemed to be derived from some “irrational” biological criteria and a stipulated hierarchy of superiority that saw the blacks at the bottom of the rung and whites at the opposite end. It was a fight against racism and oppression. At that time, the white people perceived these acts as terrorism and in that sense “irrational”.

Speaker B in this case draws upon these past histories of the struggle to paint a picture of victim status that would justify him and other white people performing those same acts. It would also be a fight against racism and oppression. However, in this case it would be “rational” acts of sabotage in an effort to counter the current “irrational” policies leveled against the white minority.

Constructing government policies as “irrational”, racist, unethical and unfair, allows some white people to advocate for “white flight” – immigration to Europe. For example, in Extract 3, the speaker says that “there’s nothing for us here now because we can’t get any positions...because [of] affirmative action...” This is also the case in Extract 9 where speaker D questions the rationale of remaining in South Africa for nothing, whilst she could readily go overseas where there is plenty of opportunity for individuals like her. Presumably, skilled and qualified, but nonetheless, white individuals.

White flight is propelled by assumptions of “global whiteness” that they (South African whites) can fit into white Europe and get by, since the policies there are bound to be “rational”, ethical, and fair, focusing on the individual’s merit and expertise rather than his/her past histories. It can be argued that the appeal to a global whiteness is a call for

dis-identification with black Africa. The speakers here are suggesting a kind of mobility that is made possible by the colour of their skin. Whiteness bequeaths the individual options that are inaccessible to non-whites. Whiteness is a passport to “white lands,” an option that the black “Other” is denied. Franchi (2003:232) states that the reasons offered for wanting to leave “suggest an unwillingness to forego a position of privilege relative to the majority of South Africans, and a resistance towards aligning the self with the imperatives of the new democratic dispensation”.

CONCLUSION.

From this study, it can be argued that the white students’ victimized role is being articulated in white “liberal” and sometimes extremist rhetoric that relocates the white group members from the cultural, economic, and political centre, to its imagined margins, making it possible to claim a disenfranchised position for a previously dominant group.

It can be postulated that white students managed the ideological dilemma of presenting themselves as aligned with the need for change, yet still opposed to AAPs, by conceptualizing AAPs in terms of discourses of fairness and justice and through rhetorical processes of “Othering” and the appropriation of victimhood. These also operate as defensive strategies geared towards undermining other plausible alternative accounts in regard to AAPs, and thus legitimating a threatened historical group privilege, in the face of transformation (Franchi, 2003).

For the young white students in this study, insecurity about future employment is not put at the door of a capitalist system of structural unemployment. Instead, they implicate South Africa’s democracy in racial terms. The narratives of white victimhood they offered seemed to provide them with, and encourage an investment in a legitimate image of white victimhood. This constructed victimhood may be inspired by fear of losing out in domains that white South Africans have always regarded as their right. It allows them to manage the ideological dilemma of opposing AAPs whilst not appearing racist. By constructing themselves as victims of affirmative action, young white people manage to skirt uneasy queries of their privileged position and past injustices while maintaining a sense of personal congruence.

White students argued that current AAPs are partisan, favouring blacks on racial grounds and hence “reverse apartheid”. This is an interpretation of reality. According to Berger and Luckman (1967), when such interpretations are repeated enough, they become reified. This is what has happened with “reverse apartheid”. Whether by conscious design or not, this term exaggerates the negative impact on whites and promotes a skewed, conservative view of race issues in a post-apartheid South Africa. In fact, it can be postulated that this view is premised on a misconception that past inequalities have already been resolved and that members of previously disadvantaged groups are already on a level playing ground.

In this study we see attempts by white students to de-racialize and de-historicize issues related to experience and merit. Franchi and Swart (2003:230) note that “while based on a constructive sentiment and imperative for national unity and reconciliation, an ethos of non-racialism may seem to elide or deal inadequately with the remnants and memories of apartheid”. For those who go on benefiting from “racially constructed”

privileges, the silencing of “racial” identity accomplishes the strategic role “of self-representing as aligned with the new dispensation’s ethos of non-racialism and the ideals of national unity and reconciliation, at a time when the focus on “racial” identity would serve to expose and denounce the illegitimacy of this privilege” (ibid).

The white students appeal to this rationale is not just a philosophical issue, but is bound up with the way South African society has previously rationalized and excluded black people. Dubow (1995, in Steyn, 2001:291) observes that in South Africa, old-style racialized discourse is “in a state of retreat as the demise of apartheid and the construction of a new social order rapidly engenders a determined politics of reconciliation and a desire to efface the past”. He argues that the creation of a successful multi-racial society demands that questions of the past are not too probing. This attitude is reinforced, he continues, by a collective determination to forgive and forget. It is such an appeal to forget the past that has so effectively been employed by the white students to construct themselves as victims of AAPs.

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