



GUEST EDITORIAL

Tackling Whiteness in organizations and management

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to offer a theoretical and methodological framework to overcome knowledge gaps on Whiteness in organizational and management studies.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper draws on a brief review of literature on ethnic privileges.

Findings – The authors propose a relational approach to tackling ethnic privileges in organizations and management research.

Research limitations/implications – The framework contributes to a better understanding and deconstruction of ethnic privileges at work.

Originality/value – The paper proposes a theoretical and a methodological framework for tackling Whiteness in organizational and management studies. By doing so, it elucidates the topic of Whiteness, bringing new insights from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Keywords Diversity, Discrimination in employment, Whiteness, Relational framework, Ethnic privileges

Paper type Conceptual paper

Understanding Whiteness

Understanding Whiteness entails addressing the issue of privileges and looking toward achieving social justice. Social sciences have witnessed a growing field of cross-disciplinary studies on unearned ethnic privilege, usually held by dominant ethnic groups. Origins of ethnic privilege scholarship can be traced back to black feminist scholars and critical race theorists such as Baldwin, Goldberg, Du Bois, Elson, Hooks, Fanon and Morrison (Garner, 2006). Rather than focussing solely on ethnic minorities, this special issue questions taken for granted privileges invested in ethnicity at work and in societies. One such unearned privilege is Whiteness in societies which are tarnished by colonialism and racism. Ethnic privilege and, as a variant of it, Whiteness, remain uncontested and under-researched in studies of work, organization and management (Grimes, 2001).

There is no one definition of Whiteness. At least two lines of thoughts can be mentioned here as frameworks to understanding Whiteness in organizations: First, research interested in deconstructing privileges; second, research focussing on tackling discrimination and exclusion issues. Green *et al.* (2007) defines Whiteness as



the production and reproduction of dominance, as well as socially constructed normativity and privilege. The same authors recognize that Whiteness has different elements depending on the context in which it occurs. For example, it could be framed by skin color in the USA and South Africa, or by educational status and class privilege in India. Grimes (2001) defines “Whiteness” as a state of being notably linked to power and privilege, assumptions about which need to be challenged and questioned, primarily its invisibility, or assumed neutrality. Borrowing a definition from critical race literature, Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2006) conceives Whiteness as being the neutral and invisible norm against which other identities are measured and by which they are defined historically in socially and legally. Other scholars like Neely and Samura (2011) understand Whiteness with reference to exclusion and subjugation. Chrobot-Mason (2004) conceives Whiteness, as a racial identity that is a matter of psychological identification, rather than purely biological.

This paper answers the following questions: What are the limits to the theoretical and methodological assumptions that are currently offered in literature in regards to Whiteness? What other theoretical forms might these possibilities for analysis and critique take? More broadly, in this special issue, we present five papers that explain the way ethnic privilege shapes relations, processes, contexts and outcomes of work. Ethnic privilege is of key relevance to our increasingly diverse societies that are characterized by a flow of international human resources across countries through migration and expatriation (Al Ariss *et al.*, 2013; Bell *et al.*, 2010; Carr, 2010). These ethnic privileges are encountered in the leadership and management of people in the workplace, in the structuring of organizations and institutions, and numerous other situations. Such privileges involve historical and contemporary processes of capitalism, colonialism, racism and politics all of which influence work, organization and management (Grimes, 2001).

Our aim in understanding ethnic privileges in the context of work, organization and management is to contribute to deconstructing much of the oppression and discrimination that ethnic minorities face at work (Nkomo, 1992; Hunter *et al.*, 2007/2009). Therefore, this special issue stimulates an academic debate regarding Whiteness in the management of people at work.

Through the various contributions we have, our special issue provides an intellectual space to review and extend existing theories on ethnic privileges, therefore informing the research and practice in management, psychology and other related fields. Papers in this special issue open up a critical debate on the meaning and outcomes of ethnic privileges such as Whiteness by bringing a cross-disciplinary understanding of ethnic mechanisms, practices, discourses, desires and relations of power in work-related relations and processes.

Theorizing Whiteness: a relational framework

There is a significant scarcity in the frameworks applicable across the social sciences for the study of ethnic privileges, a topic which however remains one of large importance in the field of employment. We hereby present a relational framework by which to achieve a more thorough, detailed understanding of Whiteness, and using the work of Al Ariss *et al.* (2012) as a base. There are two fundamental intentions to the work:

- (1) reconceiving Whiteness as a relational construct to be considered at the juncture between the individual and institutions, and according to its various layers and aspects; and
- (2) developing the methodologies used in the study of Whiteness.

This work acknowledges the need to examine and address ethnic privilege in both temporal and spatial contexts – to examine Whiteness in its past, present and potential future forms, and the relevance of place on the manifestation, value and significance of Whiteness, be that in organizational, institutional/national settings (Table I).

There are scholars who attempted to conceive Whiteness as contextual and intersectional. For example, Neely and Samura (2011) suggest linking the concepts of race and space, with the aim of thereby providing a useful tool to explain the persistence of racial inequality. They address Whiteness by questioning the role of power at an individual and structural level, as well as the social relations within spatial contexts. Whiteness is also intersectional as privileges can have various forms. For example, Vassenden and Andersson (2011) examine Whiteness by tackling privileges in terms of ethnicity, race and religion. They consider how these issues can be perceived positively, as privileges, or negatively as stigma within various ethnic groups. More of such approaches remain needed in management and organizational studies.

Our framework puts forward a study approach to Whiteness at three levels: micro-individual, meso-organizational and macro contextual. The first accounts for individual subjective experience; the second, for intermediate forms of social organizations, like the workplace, and their role in the production and reproduction of Whiteness; and the third takes into account those events, for example, of an institutional nature, which can define social settings and thereby either facilitate or limit ethnic privileges.

We expound the need for research methods that address Whiteness at the various levels at which it exists as presented in Table I, and that acknowledge the interdependence of the contextual settings in which it manifests. Such an understanding serves helpfully

Key levels	Specific themes
History	Colonialist past, history of migration and anti-migration, of racism and diversity, past and present state of the production and reproduction of ethnic privileges
Space (geographical and social where intersectionalities occur)	Whiteness analyzed with respect to its context; recognition of how ethnic privileges do not remain confined in space, be it physical or symbolic, but rather transcend across borders between different industries, networks and organizations Understanding how ethnic privileges are transposed between intersectional determinants including gender and sex, ethnicity, disabilities, age, social status. For examples, refer to the work on intersectionality and work-life issues by Özbilgin <i>et al.</i> (2011)
Macro-context	Legislative, political, legal frameworks at regional, national and international levels that institutionalize and spread ethnic privileges in employment, education and other fields both formally and informally; policies relating to discrimination and diversity
Organizational level	Practices – both conscious and unconscious – and strategies in human resources management that serve to maintain ethnic privileges, discrimination and the power of Whiteness
Individual level	Individual or personal agency, strategy and experience such as work-life, of emigration/immigration, of the interplay between gender, ethnicity, religion, physical ability, age factors, of the connections between life in home and host countries

Table I.
Key levels and themes in tackling Whiteness

Source: Adapted from Al Ariss *et al.* (2012)

in the analysis of careers, within their respective historical and institutional settings (Özbilgin, 2005).

Our model also promotes interdisciplinary research and the utilization of reflexive methodologies, encouraging those engaged in research to remain aware and critical of the intentions, prejudices, prejudgements by the research questions are posed, and the research itself planned and undertaken (Table II). For example, Ospina and Foldy (2009) invite scholars to bring together interdisciplinary insights from research in education, communications and black studies into the experience of leadership among people of color. Their work looks specifically at the how race-ethnicity effects the perception of leadership, how it is played out and an individual's attitude toward race-ethnicity as it manifests in a social context. It asks two specific questions: first, regarding how the literature on leadership has so far dealt with the topic of race; and second, what are the areas in the intersection of the two topics that should be further explored. Their findings indicate that the way leaders are perceived and accepted, is affected by the power inequalities present in their organizations and in society in general, with Whiteness always holding the privileged status. They show how the leadership literature has tended to ignore the importance of race-ethnicity, thereby remaining outside the complexities of context, as it assumes itself to be "identity-neutral" (p. 889).

The importance of reflexive research lies in the awareness of and accounting for the inevitable nuance of any researcher's approach to study, dependent on his or her personal situation and thus position. This awareness avoids blindness to the true nature of objective or subjective data, especially in relation to such a topic as ethnic privilege, and allows for the open identification and also the challenging of assumptions and prejudices. Such an approach to research makes for a more thorough, clear-sighted study. For instance, Emirbayer and Desmond (2012) attempt to clarify understanding and practice of reflexive thinking especially in the academic context, relevant to all fields of social science, so as to identify and challenge preconceived ideas. The authors stress the importance of reflexive analysis in knowledge production, making it more possible to address privileges and related injustices. For example, they suggest that the subject responsible for any study on such a topic as racism should also be placed under analysis, but besides the individual, also the structure and context within which they work and write, and those which have shaped/continue to shape their presuppositions need to be considered and challenged.

Over-hierarchical themes	Specific themes
Cross-disciplinary	Studies in management and organization, sociology, psychology, international business, migration and other relevant disciplines
Reflexivity	Researcher as subject – position taken in respect of the topic of study, personal background, reasoning followed in conducting the research from design to conclusions – and the effects of all such factors on the creation and/or perpetuation of ethnic privileges
Data sources	Interviews with individual participants and focus groups, case studies, surveys, observation, policy documents, gray literature, organizational guidelines, photographs, images, videos, regional, national and international press and web social networks

Source: Adapted from Al Ariss *et al.* (2012)

Table II.
Methodological
approaches in
tackling Whiteness

In the context of organizational studies, Grimes (2001) acknowledge a need to take a self-reflexive approach in organizational practice, beginning with a questioning of Whiteness that goes beyond the essential first step of making Whiteness visible. Research epistemology is put forward as an important beginning in the questioning of the assumed neutrality and objectivity of Whiteness. Grimes (2001) discusses certain paradigms for understanding race, highlighting their shortcomings and effects. Such paradigms include (but are not limited to): the biological inferiority paradigm and studies in white contexts assumed to be generalizable without historical, political, social contexts being examined. Such paradigms do not mention race explicitly, not taking into account the existence and significance of white privilege. Grimes (2001) suggests considering various perspectives from non-white authors, and to consider the relevance of race (including white) to the author, to other individuals.

The work of Green *et al.* (2007) in South Africa and Australia illustrates the importance of our model. These authors identify the role of knowledge and history construction in reproducing the power privileges associated with Whiteness. The authors propose that the traditional rejection of research and academic investigations on the topics of history and society by non-white authors, along with the indicative exclusivity of using English (or other European languages) as the language of academia is noted as an obstruction to achieving justice, and as a way of maintaining and reproducing white superiority. Furthermore, in anti-racist discourses, it remains that racism is considered a problem for non-white people; while the issue of white supremacy is not challenged. The assumption is that tolerance is asked of white people, again as a kindness to the less powerful rather than challenging their privileges. Those benefitting from the privileges do not have their position of authority questioned. The authors suggest the need to encourage “articulation of Indigenous knowledges and epistemologies” (p. 409). In Australia, the need is identified to look closer at the “everyday practices” of white people in Indigenous organizations, and the subtler and also institutionalized practices, and questioning them.

Papers in this special issue

Samaluk’s “Whiteness, ethnic privilege and migration: a Bourdieuan framework” is the first paper and serves two important functions:

- (1) providing a conceptual framework by which to examine ways in which Whiteness influences ethnic privilege and disadvantage in the context of employment; and
- (2) drawing on research into the experiences of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) migrant workers in the UK, presenting empirical evidence to demonstrate how complex are the phenomena of ethnic privilege and disadvantage.

In total, 35 Polish and Slovenian migrant workers in the UK were interviewed. Through these semi-structured, in-depth interviews, Whiteness and ethnic privilege at work are studied, initially through the Bourdieuan conceptual framework, in the macro socio-economic and historical context of the EU’s expansion toward the East. The racial divisions in the UK labor market are clearly exposed and nature of Whiteness is explained. This Bourdieuan conceptual framework is a significant contribution to management and organization literature for the study of Whiteness and ethnic privilege, notably its complexity, in the workplace. This first paper highlights the intersectional, transnational and relational ways in which Whiteness can influence and

define ethnic privilege and disadvantage in the work environment as well as how modern-day capitalism perpetuates the processes of colonization and racialization.

The second paper, "The Historical Origins of Ethnic (White) Privilege in U.S. Organization" (Nkomo and Al Ariss) makes a historical review of ethnic privileges within organizations in the USA, up until and including the present day. The study is based largely on a review of the historical labor history and sociology literature, focussing on the topics of work, culture and society, but it does also reference more recent works from organization studies and sociological literature. From their findings emerges the undeniable connection between European growth and colonization, industrialization and the racialization or ethnicization of US organizations since the 19th century. The study emphasizes the importance of understanding ethnic (white) privilege as it appears today within the context of its history, and argues that account must be carefully taken of how the significance of Whiteness within the workplace has changed. In seeking to establish inclusivity in the working environment, these realizations are essential to both researchers and practitioners. This second paper represents an important aid toward several means of unseating inequality and ethnic or racial privilege in organizations in favor of inclusivity.

"Whiteness of a Name: Is 'White' the Baseline?" by Cotton, O'Neill and Griffin is an empirical study of the normalization of Whiteness in the comparison of first names, especially within virtual teams. The participants were asked to evaluate names in the categories "common," "African-American," "Russian" and "unusual." From the findings it appears that "common" names are generally associated with being both white and more American than names of the remaining categories be it "African-American," "Russian" or "unusual," along with qualities of a more positive nature. The authors argue for the acknowledgement within organizations of the Whiteness standard by which any variants are expected to be judged, and the fact that a color-blind approach only supports this expectation-come-norm. Particularly with the increasing use of virtual teams, this reality becomes ever more problematic within the organizational setting. The authors therefore suggest further managerial strategies to identify bias.

The fourth paper, by Atewologun and Sealy, is entitled "Experiencing privilege at ethnic, gender and senior intersections." It challenges those assumptions pertaining to male, ethnic and other privileges being invariable, categorical and binary. The authors shed light on the agency exercised by individuals traditionally perceived as not being beneficiary to ethnic privileges. From the diary entries and interviews with four senior men and women of ethnic minority in the UK, 20 micro-episodes of intersecting ethnic, gender and senior identities were analyzed. It is observed how privilege manifests between advantage (male gender, position in hierarchy) and disadvantage (female gender, ethnic minority origin). The findings of the study show that it is through contextual, dimensions that privileges become explicit. Atewologun and Sealy's study questions the common assumptions that privilege remains invisible.

"Analyzing promotions of racial/ethnic minority CEOs," authored by Cook and Glass is the final paper in this special issue. It explores the context in which individuals of ethnic minority achieve promotion to top leadership positions in US corporations. Focussing on a period of 15 years, the authors evaluate every CEO changeover in Fortune 500 companies. They also test the glass cliff thesis, which reckons on the promotion of ethnic minority group members to companies in difficulty. The bold moves and the savior effect theories are also tested. The bold moves thesis predicting that minority members be promoted to high performance companies, while the savior

effect theory expects that in the case of poor firm performance under a minority CEO, a white male leader will be chosen as a replacement. The findings indicate that race and ethnicity do have a significant effect on promotion to and replacement into top leadership positions. In high performance firms, it is more likely that ethnic minority members are promoted to CEO, yet when performance drops it will be a white leader who replaces the old. The authors suggest that companies should aim to eradicate bias completely first, by giving enough time and resources to minority leaders that enable them to prove their capacity as leaders, and second, by improving the transparency of the decision-making process involved in company promotions.

Conclusions and future research

To conclude, this special issue explores ethnic privileges in the context of work, organization and management from varied methodological and theoretical traditions, and across different international contexts and disparate fields. They all have strong theoretical and practical implications, developing therefore new perspectives and insights into understanding power privileges held by the ethnic majority in the management of people in organizations. We hope that readers will enjoy this special issue. While we attempted to tackle some important issues regarding ethnic privilege at work, future research can look more in depth into questions like:

- What are the remaining key issues that pertain to ethnic privileges (i.e. Whiteness) in studies of work, organization and management across micro-individual, meso-organizational and/or macro-contextual levels?
- How can we understand Whiteness in organizations – as property, identity, discursive position, privilege, relations, embodied practices, emotions, imaginaries, temporalities?
- How do ethnic privileges in the workplace intersect with other forms of privilege and disadvantage that are rooted in social identity groups such as class, gender, age, sexualities and migration?
- What are the processes of Whiteness that affect the nature, structure and conditions of work and human resource management within different national contexts, specifically in emerging and under-researched markets?
- What are the dangers in making Whiteness an object of human resource management analysis given its power to attach itself to a range of political and social agendas including “progressive” postures?

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Further reading

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