Racism in the APS examined in award winning thesis

Dr Debbie Bargallie’s thesis, *Maintaining the racial contract: Everyday racism and the impact of racial microaggressions on "Indigenous employees" in the Australian Public Service*, has been named as the 2019 Stanner Award winner.

Held biennially, the Stanner Award is a unique prize presented by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) for the best academic manuscript written by an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander author, and provides an important avenue for Indigenous scholars to contribute to national debates.

Speaking at the award ceremony AIATSIS Chairperson Jodie Sizer commended the number of high quality entries vying for the 2019 award.

“The number and quality of entries is a great reflection of the research that’s being carried out by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars which AIATSIS is proud to support. From history, to anthropology, cultural studies, health and education, all of these academic manuscripts are highly original and sophisticated contributions to their respective fields,” Ms Sizer said.

“Dr Bargallie’s work stood out in a very impressive field. Building on her own experience, and that of other public service staff, Dr Bargallie shines a light on the structural racism that is present in workplaces across Australia. The resulting publication through our publishing arm, Aboriginal Studies Press, will be a timely addition to our thought leading catalogue.”

Dr Bargallie said despite the Australian Public Service being imagined as a space of fairness, inclusion, opportunity, respect and racial equality, this research shows that it is complicit in maintaining and perpetuating the racialised conditions that impede Indigenous employment, engagement, promotion and general occupational interests.

“Racism is vehemently denied by those who claim to be committed to Indigenous employee career progression yet racial microaggression and everyday racism mark their daily experience in the workplace. The voices of Indigenous employees in this research provide a counter-narrative to the destructive and pervasive myth of meritocracy and reveal the ways in which white supremacy is perpetuated in the APS,” said Dr Bargallie.

“I am very proud to be publishing my work with Aboriginal Studies Press and to contribute to ASP's esteemed list of Australian Indigenous scholarship and voice.”

The Stanner Award acknowledges the significant contribution of the late Emeritus Professor William Edward Hanley (Bill) Stanner to the establishment and development of AIATSIS. Winners of the Stanner Award receive a glass sculpture by award-winning artist Jenni Kemarre Martiniello, $5,000 in prize money, mentoring and editorial support to bring the manuscript to a publishable standard, and publication of the manuscript by Aboriginal Studies Press.

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Maintaining the racial contract: Everyday racism and the impact of racial microaggressions on "Indigenous employees" in the Australian Public Service

Summary

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have struggled to maintain a dignified presence as employees of the Australian Public Service (APS), partly represented by the long-term trend of decline in numbers. Extending the work of Aboriginal scholar Steven Larkin (2014), who in examining how race matters in the APS identified a racial division of labour, my doctoral research addressed the question: How do racial microaggressions manifest experientially for "Indigenous employees" in the Australian Public Service? Drawing from Charles Mills (1997) theory of the Racial Contract, I examined the experiences of racial microaggressions which function as an aspect of this racial division of labour, and how Indigenous employees navigate this in the everyday. Furthermore, with a view to interrogating organisational claims that the APS is a colour-blind meritocracy, the study is supplemented by a critical race analysis of APS employment reports and data.

Yarning sessions were held with current and former Indigenous employees of the APS. Through their voices, I demonstrate the prevalence of covert and overt racisms manifested in the perpetration of racial microaggressions and how everyday forms of racisms commonly mark the experiences for Indigenous employees. I posit that racial microaggressions, in both covert and overt forms, can be understood as a manifestation of the permanence of racism in the APS. Indigenous employment, engagement, promotion and general occupational interests are impeded by particular kinds of racisms that are barely acknowledged by those who claim to have Indigenous career progression at heart. Having a better understanding of the APS workplace as a site of racial microaggressions informs not only critical race scholarship in Australia in general, it also illuminates the salience of structural racism in the Australian workplace as a whole. This work allows us to observe how racist ideas about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continue to shape policy and practice in the area of Indigenous affairs. The significance of this thesis is its potential to have a wider impact than the assessment of the culture of the APS; it allows us to think more deeply about the workings of the racial contract in the Australian postcolonising context.

Ultimately, this thesis extends the notion of a racial division of labour in the APS and the analogue, racial microaggressions, to illuminate the invisible presence of a racial contract which underpins the 'absent presence' of racisms. Making this racial contract visible exposes structural White supremacy in the APS; a contract that is "still unbroken after all these years" (Mills, 2015).

About Dr Bargallie

Dr Debbie Bargallie is a descendent of the Kamilaroi and Wonnarua peoples of the North-West and Upper Hunter Valley regions of New South Wales. Debbie was born and raised on Dharawal country in Wollongong, New South Wales, where she continues to have strong connections. Debbie completed her PhD in 2018 from Queensland University of Technology (QUT) where she was awarded the QUT/NIRAKN postgraduate scholarship. Debbie holds a Master of Social Policy and Planning from Charles Sturt University and a Bachelor of Social Science from Southern Cross University. She is currently a Postdoctoral Senior Research Fellow with the Griffith Institute of Educational Research at Griffith University. Her research project is titled Breaking the Racial Silence: Fostering critical racial literacy in Australian universities for understanding race and racism. Debbie's work is multidisciplinary and covers areas of sociology, social and political science, law, critical Indigenous studies and education.
with a focus on race and racism. Debbie is a committee member of the Australian Critical Race and Whiteness Studies Association (ACRAWSA).