Fragmented ideologies: Accounts of educational failure and positive discrimination

JONATHAN POTTER and MARGARET WETHERELL

Abstract

This paper reports a discourse analytic study which forms part of a larger project concerned with the way white majority group members in New Zealand make sense of race and 'race relations'. Its focus is on accounts of educational inequality and criticisms of positive discrimination pro- grammes. The analysis documents (a) the way talk on these topics is produced using pre-existing resources (the 'togetherness repertoire' and the 'meritocratic model of education'); (b) the way it subtly orientates to pragmatic constraints such as issues of potential blame and justification; (c) the fragmented nature of participants' ordinary reasoning about social issues.

This paper is derived from a broader project concerned with racism and specifically with the discourses of white majority group members in New Zealand as they make sense of 'race relations' in that country (Potter and Wetherell, 1988a, 1988b; Wetherell and Potter, 1986; 1988a, 1988b, forthcoming). One of the principal aims of this project was to examine how situations of exploitation, discrimination and unequal power are legitimated. As Thompson has argued, '*to study ideology is to study the ways in which meaning (signification) serves to sustain relations of domination*' (1984: 131, emphasis in original). This research can be seen as part of a growing body of work on the nature and organization of racist discourse more generally (Barker, 1981; Billig, 1978, 1985, 1988; van Dijk, 1984, 1987; Essed, 1988; Reeves, 1983; Sykes, 1985).

The theoretical and analytic rationale underlying our research reflects an approach to the study of discourse and rhetoric recently developed in social psychology (Billig, 1987; Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell and Potter, 1988a). Within this perspective discourse is viewed as having an essential and inescapable 'action orientation' (Heritage, 1984); and as a social practice rather than a neutral transmitter of information. Our

concern is with the constructed and constructive nature of language use and our analyses attempt to explicate the discursive resources which participants draw on and the tasks those resources are used to accomplish.

Among other things our analyses have focused on the relatively internally coherent language units used in the construction of discourse known as interpretative repertoires (Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984). Put simply, these are the building blocks that are used for manufacturing versions of actions, social processes and societal structures in talk. Commonly they are made up of a restricted set of terms and organized around one or more key metaphors or tropes.

For example, one of the repertoires which was recurrent in our interview data constructed a version of 'race relations' in New Zealand premised on the familiar ideal of national harmony and unity. Examination of interview transcripts revealed a common or collective theme: the claim that there should be no barriers or divisions between people; we should all be one together; people should be treated as people - not in terms of colour or racial groups. The idea set up in this form of talk is 'community' or 'togetherness'. For instance:

Barr. I think the important thing about New Zealand is that it needs to develop a bit more of a national identity within it own ranks. ...we should ... be encouraging excellence and togetherness. ... We are one people ... despite history.

Acton. I think it should be together maybe, equal amounts of people, rather than separate, because the whole idea's to sort of come together, not really to make them different.

Andrews. Unless everybody both lower, upper class, black, white, whatever you want to call them is able to adopt a more ... caring attitude towards one another ... we are in for racial strife on a greater scale.

Dixon. I wish that we could stop thinking about Maori and European and think about New Zealanders ... and to hell with what colour people are.

This form of talk is both descriptive and evaluative; it is used for formulating actions and events and displaying judgement. The 'togetherness' repertoire has something of the status of a socially acceptable cliche. In Billig's (1987, 1988) terms, it acts as a 'commonplace', a set of taken-for-granted and commonly used value terms in a culture. Respondents reproduced togetherness talk in a number of different circumstances and, despite its liberal and caring connotations, this repertoire was frequently invoked in a fashion which maintained racist practices. Maori people pointing to grievances and inequalities were often attacked for undermining 'togetherness', further sustaining the primacy of the already

dominant white European culture typically used to define the national identity which all New Zealanders were asked to rally round (Wetherell and Potter, 1988a; forthcoming a, b). This theme of the racist and reactionary use of 'liberal' discourses will be explored further in the current paper.

The analysis that follows is concerned chiefly with two closely related topics. First, we will briefly examine one of the ways white New Zealanders accounted for putative educational inequalities between Pakehas (whites) and Maoris in schools; second, we will examine in more detail the ways in which 'positive discrimination': programmes of affirmative action to provide certain kinds of educational support for Maoris and other minority groups were criticised. The focus will be on the different interpretative procedures and resources that participants bring to bear when arguing against 'positive discrimination', looking in particular at the *resources* respondents' use to accomplish a version of 'positive discrimination' as a bad thing.

It is important to emphasise that we are not wishing to argue that simply criticising 'positive discrimination' is necessarily bad or racist. There are perfectly legitimate and thoughtful arguments to the effect that programmes of affirmative action can themselves be patronising, counterproductive or indeed racist. Likewise, we would not argue the reverse, that defending 'positive discrimination' is intrinsically good or anti racist. The crucial point for the current analysis is not the fact of accomplishing a negative version of 'positive discrimination' but the manner. Put another way, our concern is with our sample's ordinary reasoning about racial issues and the ideological resouces used in that reasoning.

Background to the study and selection of extracts

The study was conducted in New Zealand 1984 focusing on Pakeha (white) majority group members. It was deliberately designed to avoid psychologically reductive approaches to racism — cognitive biases and stereotypes, authoritarian personality — and to eschew the common tendency to study the victims rather than majority groups (for example, see Bhavnani, 1988; Condor, 1988; Wetherell and Potter, 1986 for critiques of this approach). Sixty five open ended interviews were conducted across a sample with a range of ages and political affiliations, including both sexes. The adults were mainly in professional occupations; two small groups of final year school students and some individual students were also interviewed.

For this particular study we searched through all the interview trans-

cripts for references to 'educational inequalities' and 'positive discrimination' and equivalent notions. Given the open ended nature of the interviews with the stress on maintaining their conversational nature, these topics were not raised with all respondents. Although 'educational inequality' was addressed (sometimes raised by interviewer, sometimes interviewee) in fifty-four out of sixty-five interviews only twenty eight of these also included discussion of 'positive discrimination'. Of these, ten expressed predominantly approving views of 'positive discrimination', five were both approving and disapproving, while thirteen expressed predominantly disapproving views. Our focus for the rest of this paper will be solely on the latter two groups.

Analysis

The pattern of discourse in this material is complex with considerable variation in the way respondents formulated these two issues. For this reason, we will start with a complete passage — chosen because it was brief and broadly typical — which illustrates the way different themes can be meshed together. These themes will be elaborated using passages from other interviews. The respondent, Pratt, is a female high school student aged seventeen whose father worked as a computer engineer.

Extract One: Pratt

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01    Interviewer. Yeah. Why, there's quite, there's
02    such a big gap between, er, Maori and Pakeha
03    educational attainment, although it is decreasing,
04    so you find very few Maoris at university or
05    technical colleges and so on. Why?
06    Pratt. They can't afford to go most of of the time.
07    Ha, ha.
08    Interviewer. Or say in the seventh form even, at
09    school; why do you think, what's that about, causing
10    that?
11    Pratt. Um well, they's trying to fit into
12    something that they don't (.) belong to. We find it
13    far easier because it's in us, because our our
14    people are the ones who are setting the exams to
15    their standards in the first place, but the Maori
16    people, their old Maori elders aren't the ones
17    setting the exams for them, and so I suppose
18    everything, they think about things differently and
19    it comes out. And of course they have more trouble
20    expressing English (yeah) so I suppose that must be
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21   a big disadvantage.
22   *Interviewer*. Yeah. What do you think about
23   positive discrimination, in the sense of say
24   keeping aside places at university for Maori
25   students, er, or if a Pakeha and a Maori are both
26   eligible, giving a preference to the Maori student?
27   Do you think those sorts of moves are reasonable
28   ones?
29   *Pratt*. I don't, no. Because, while it might sound
30   all very nice, it's just going to cause more um (.)
31   disharmony. I mean, that means that the Pakeha
32   people are going to get upset because, I mean, that
33   person who's missing out is going to be pretty mad.
34   And I don't know, I don't think so. I think just
35   whoever comes in the top should get in.

The interviewer's questions

It is important when approaching this material to be sensitive to how far the interviewer's questions are subject to the same contructive processes as the respondent's answers, and how far the specific nature of the questions requires different kinds of activity from the respondent (Potter and Mulkay, 1985; Mischler, 1986).

In this case we see that the first question (lines 1–5, 8–10) calls for an explanatory account. An enigma is posed — a purported difference in educational attainment — and the respondent is called upon to provide an explanation. No prompts are provided as to the nature of the answer, and indeed, across the fifty four interviewees who addressed the question a wide range of different types of responses were offered. (We should note, however, that there is an additional complexity here — the participant provides a 'joking' first answer, which the researcher treats as insufficient.)[1]

The second question (22–8) is rather different. It does not directly ask for information about the world or explanation of some kind. Instead it is expressly asking the respondent to offer an evaluation; what does she think about the policy of 'positive discrimination'? However, contentious expressions of opinion like this are accountable matters (Billig, forthcoming). Thus the question can be seen to be eliciting both a statement of opinion and some sort of support for that opinion; and that combination is indeed what the respondent provides in her answer. Our general point, is that different kinds of interview question occasion different *activities* on the part of the respondent.

The account of educational inequality

There are a number of different dimensions to the Respondent's account of educational inequality. For our current concerns, however, we will concentrate on just two: its psychological and socio-psychological nature and its avoidance of the issue of blame.

The first point to note is that the respondent answers the question about the cause of educational inequality by specifying factors which are different between Pakeha and Maoris — styles of thinking, ease in expressing English — and observing that the exams are set by Pakehas. For Pratt these things seem to be *intrinsic* to the social groups Maori and Pakeha, for she talks about them being 'in us' and uses the powerfully charged notion of 'belonging' — the problem for Maoris is that they don't belong (11–12). Thus she offers a lay psychological and socio-psychological account which explains differential attainment by way of underlying differences in ways of thinking and the differences in examinations which follow from them.

The second feature to note is that Pratt does not formulate the described situation as one of unfairness; she makes no criticism of it at all. The situation depicted could be glossed as 'unfair', where standards are biased toward the skills of one group, or even by proto-sociological ideas such as 'cultural domination'. It seems, however, that the situation is being offered by Pratt as one where the disadvantage is a consequence of *natural* differences between social groups where who belongs and who does not is pre-defined.

The response to 'positive discrimination'

(1)   *Undermining togetherness*

As with the previous passage, there are many significant features to the response to this question. However, we will concentrate on the twin themes of 'positive discrimination' undermining togetherness and subverting meritocratic ideals, starting with the former.

The respondent's negative answer to the interviewer's question about 'positive discrimination' is immediate and unhedged; and her rejection of 'positive discrimination' is quickly followed up by a warrant. The warrant has an interesting dual structure using what has been dubbed a reality/appearance (R/A) device (Potter, 1987; Eglin, 1979). As its name implies, the R/A device posits an apparent, superficial or surface version of some event, phenomenon or objective and then contrasts this with the real,

fundamental or true version. Another way of looking at this is to think of it as invoking two subject positions — the first (that of the speaker) penetrates through to the 'truth of the matter'; while the second (that of potential, but unspecified, others) is misled by appearance. In this case, 'positive discrimination' is said to:

'sound all very nice'

(the appearance) but:

'it's just going to cause more um (.) disharmony'

(the reality).

The R/A device is particularly useful for dealing with situations where some version is considered obvious, natural or right because it orientates to that obviousness and makes it accountable while at the same time subverting it in the manner of classic realist/empiricist discourse (Woolgar, 1988). In this case, the respondent's talk orientates to the apparent niceness of 'positive discrimination' and contrasts it with an undesirable consequence: disharmony.

The metaphors of harmony and disharmony are recurrent features of the 'togetherness' repertoire which we briefly overviewed in the Introduction above. In the logic of this repertoire, togetherness is a balanced or harmonious state which can be destabilized by interventions which stress conflict or difference. The 'togetherness' repertoire thus provides a resource for criticising 'positive discrimination'. This criticism has, in ethnomethodological terms what would be called a reflexive character (Garfinkel, 1967; Wieder, 1974). That is, the disharmony is depicted as caused by the 'positive discrimination' and at the same time the 'positive discrimination' is constituted as the kind of thing that would cause disharmony.

Another feature of this segment of talk (29–30) is interesting because it provides yet more evidence of the care with which the respondent orientates to issues of blame and criticism. There is delay indicating some care or possibly lack of certainty in the selection of an appropriate descriptor for the effect of 'positive discrimination':

'it's just going to cause more um (.) disharmony'

and the term chosen is not only a central term in the 'togetherness' repertoire, thus setting a frame for the accountability of the criticism, it is also a nominalized form ideal for withholding or limiting attribution of blame and causality (Kress and Hodge, 1979; Potter and Reicher, 1987). Just as 'police shoot strikers' may be transformed to 'sad loss of life' in a right-wing newspaper account to obscure problematic causal processes

(c.f. Trew, 1979) so 'Pakehas resent/threaten Maoris' may be transformed into the less blaming formulation: 'disharmony'.

The respondent goes on to specify how this disharmony will present itself in this case, namely in the Pakeha people getting upset (31–32) and this in turn is immediately accounted for:

> 'because, I mean, that person who's missing out is going to be pretty mad'.

So although the disharmony is re-formulated as unrest in a particular group, the blameworthiness of this unrest is undermined by giving it a reason (Scott and Lyman, 1968): they are 'missing out'.

One final detail of the passage (29–33) is worth noting. When the respondent was accounting for putative educational inequality she used pronouns in an inclusive manner — 'they' for Maoris; 'we', 'us' 'our people' for Pakeha. However, in formulating the response on 'positive discrimination' she uses more distanced constructions: 'the Pakeha people', 'the person who's missing out'. This seems to be the product of the speaker orientating to the potential culpability of Pakeha 'upset' and separating herself from it.

Overall in this passage, then, we see this respondent designing her talk in such a way that it provides an accountable criticism of 'positive discrimination' constructed out of the 'togetherness' repertoire. The fact that the 'togetherness' repertoire has the status in this community of a taken-for-granted common-place makes it a particularly powerful rhetorical resource. For it constructs a subject position for defenders of 'positive discrimination' as deviating from consensual values. At the same time the respondent's talk delicately orientates to certain positive associations of 'positive discrimination' and the potential culpability of negative responses to it.

While the respondent in Extract One stressed the disharmony facet of the 'togetherness' repertoire other respondents used the idea of barriers or emphasis of racial difference. One recurrent form of accounting stressed that positive discrimination was bad because of the very fact that it was discrimination. For example:

Extract Two:
Border. The very heart of that is discrimination. I mean discrimination itself has very negative terms. I mean there's also the point if you point positive and a negative together, you get a negative. (ha) I mean I think the very fact that it's discrimination cancels out the fact that it's er perhaps an advantage. [ ] ... I think the key word is discrimination really. It's a negative word.

Here the respondent builds the account on the term 'discrimination', supported by algebraic metaphors. The notion of discrimination can itself

be seen to have the status of a common-place whose badness is taken-for-granted in this culture. As such, the very terminology for describing this policy carries the resources for its own criticism; these sorts of difficulties are no doubt one of the reasons why policies of this kind are now often dubbed programmes of *affirmative action*. Other ways of deploying the 'togetherness' repertoire to construct criticisms of 'positive discrimination' involved offering redescriptions of the policy which formulated it in terms of the creation of divisions or barriers. For example:

Extract Three:
Barr. Yeah, we talk about separate development, we already have it.

Or, more pithily:

Extract Four:
St. Pauls, Pupil Z. It's apartheid.

Although it was common for criticisms of 'positive discrimination' to be warranted by reference to its role in undermining togetherness in the way illustrated by the extracts above, constructions of this kind were typically only minor elements in participants' responses. An alternative form of account was both more common and more elaborated within responses. This can be formulated as a criticism of 'positive discrimination' for undermining meritocratic ideals.

The response to 'positive discrimination'

(2)   *Undermining meritocracy*

In the course of their criticisms of 'positive discrimination' respondents recurrently used formulations involving a meritocratic repertoire. Indeed, this was true of respondents' talk on a number of other topics as well. We can best understand this repertoire as organized around three central elements or assumptions:

(1)   New Zealand society has social mobility allowing everyone to have equal opportunity;
(2)   people have natural levels of ability which the education system is able to assess by, for example, examinations;
(3)   the people who have the most ability should get the places in advanced courses and the most demanding and best paid jobs.

It is important to be clear about what is being suggested here. The justification for the existence of these as folk assumptions rather than merely an analyst's scheme is two-fold. First, they make certain utterances

understandable; and this is true for both members and analysts. Second, they are ideas that are frequently offered in explicit forms in participants' discourse. However, we are not suggesting that they carry around a static meritocratic model of New Zealand society which generates their discourse, for, as we will see, the same participants who espouse meritocratic ideals on one occasion often make them problematic in other passages of discourse.

As with the 'togetherness' repertoire, participants used this form of discourse in both a descriptive and prescriptive way. For example, it could be used to characterize New Zealand society, particularly when making evaluative contrasts to alternatives such as Russia, South Africa, Britain where meritocracy is disrupted by party privilege, race segregation and class respectively. It could also be used to criticise features of New Zealand society for failing to live up to this as a normative ideal. It is used in this latter way in criticisms of 'positive discrimination'.

Coming back to Extract One, the respondent ends her criticism of 'positive discrimination' in the following way:

'I think just whoever comes in the top should get in'.

We can see how this criticism is constructed by implying that 'positive discrimination' undermines meritocratic ideals, specifically the ideal that students with the best marks should receive places in higher education.

Two features of this criticism are notable. First of all, it has a self-sufficient character. It is taken to be an appropriate argument in itself rather than one that needs any further accounting. Indeed, this taken-for-granted quality is a characteristic feature of meritocratic discourse across the sample.

The second point of interest is the potential tension between this form of criticism and the respondent's earlier account of educational inequality. Within the limited domain of meritocratic discourse 'coming top', in exams say, is a straightforward index of ability. That is, the appropriateness of those 'coming top' being offered positions is predicated on the objectivity of the measures used to rank students. Furthermore, the meritocratic model presupposes that people are sorted only by merit and motivation rather than by essential group attributes. However, in the respondent's account of educational inequality she had questioned exactly the basis of examinations as culturally impartial arbiters of ability and laid heavy emphasis on basic (racial) differences between Pakeha and Maori ways of thinking. Indeed, we could take the 'joke' that the participant offers (lines 6–7) as embodying serious information (Drew, 1987; Mulkay, 1988); namely, that there are inequalities in resources that restrict Maori educational success. This too fits uneasily with the simple meritocratic account offered later.

It is possible to make sense of this variability in discourse by thinking about the different kinds of interpretative tasks that the respondent was engaged in. That is, variability can be used as an indicator of discursive function. The idea that Maoris do not do well at school because their ways of thinking are not suited to Pakeha exam standards is a possible way of making sense of educational inequity. However, it is not a form of reasoning suited to criticising 'positive discrimination'. On the contrary, members of our sample on occasion argued *for* 'positive discrimination' on the grounds that it increases equality by overcoming systematic cultural biases of the kind described by Pratt. Take the following for example:

Extract Five: Bloor
Interviewer. What d'you feel about ['positive discrimination']?
Bloor. Well (0.6) going along with my train of thought, it's giving them a more equal opportunity [] it means equal footing, whatever rung you've got to put them on to give them an equal footing.

We should note, however, that despite his defence of 'positive discrimination' the interviewee still makes racist assumptions concerning the existence of something in 'them' as a social category.

The meritocratic ideal is much more suitable for criticising 'positive discrimination' because of its assumption of the neutrality of qualifications and freedom of social advancement. That is, it embodies an implicit social model in which 'positive discrimination' can be depicted as unfair and discriminatory.

In line with other studies of natural discourse, then, we see Pratt flexibly varying her claims and explanations according to the details of the interpretative context (see Potter and Wetherell, 1987 for further discussion of this point).

The following, edited, extracts illustrate some further facets to meritocratic discourse:

Extract Six: Ackland, Border, Irvine, Munman, Williamson
Ackland. You know it could have a tendency to lower the standard if you (Mm.) took it in on the numbers basis rather than an ability basis.

Border. Uh, I would probably get upset if I was passed over in that position. But by the same token, a Maori would too. But, um, I, I agree that if the standards are the same it's all right, but I don't, the standards got- I mean, if the Maori's going to be in European society, he's got to live up to European standards, I mean there's no way you can lower the standards and expect him to stay in the society.

Irvine. Well, the medical professiom is probably our, is one of our, its a terribly important profession, you know. (Ha ha.) Heaven's above! [ ] You can't, you

can't have a person who gets thirty percent who, you know, becomes a doctor, you know, it just [end of tape].

Munman. Well, I don't think that they should have quotas, I think that they should get in on merit.

Williamson. They're talking about dragging the educational system down now to the standard of the Maori.

All these passages illustrate the basic meritocratic emphasis on selection according to ability or merit rather than on other social or political considerations. Unlike Extract One, they also formulate the consequences of the adoption of 'positive discrimination' policies, namely that it will 'lower standards'. Again, the notion of standards itself is neither made accountable nor decomposed; standards are here treated as unproblematic. This is exactly to be expected, for within the meritocratic model standards are neutral arbiters.

It is notable, however, that standards are on occasion not treated as abstract phenomena but are tied to the social categories Maori and Pakeha. This is true, for example, of the Border and Williamson passages quoted in Extract Six. And such accounts are of course redolent of traditional racist notions of a natural hierarchy of the races. There is a subtle irony to such accounts; for the critical force of this meritocratic thinking seems to be principally derived from the idea that ability or merit should decide furtherance rather than category membership. Yet here the standard for assessing ability seems *itself* to be tied to category membership. This is partly a consequence of the twin usage of standard as a prescriptive criterion and as an average of attainment; however, it is clear, at least in the case of Border, that the notion of standards is being used in the former sense. That is not to say that Border's discourse is necessarily contradictory; rather, it simply identifies 'European standards' with the appropriate standards for a modern society.

Conclusion

In the course of this paper we have looked in detail at the organization of one respondent's discourse concerning educational inequality and 'positive discrimination' and then looked rather more superficially at the way some of the themes present in this discourse are reiterated and developed in the discourse of other respondents. In particular we examined the deployment of the 'togetherness' repertoire and the use of meritocratic discourse.

It is worth thinking in a bit more detail about the prevalence of these themes and how they serve their purpose. Consider producing a critique of 'positive discrimination' as a practical problem which can be solved in various different ways. This is a delicate task in a culture such as New Zealand which places a high value on its strong liberal, egalitarian tradition (Howe, 1977). A simple unaccounted rejection of 'positive discrimination' would run the risk of being heard as prejudiced or racist, based on bigotry or hatred rather than reasoned argument.

There are various different solutions to this problem; the two we have concentrated on are constructed out of resources which are standardised in the sense that they recur across the body of respondents and in passages of talk on a wide variety of different topics. These resources — the 'togetherness' and meritocratic repertoires — are taken-for-granted normative ideals which 'positive discrimination' is taken to conflict with. Togetherness would be disrupted by the erection of barriers between groups and the discrimination involved in 'positive discrimination' would undermine the meritocratic organization of education by working from quotas rather than merit. In each case, the use of these repertoires constructs a subject position for upholders of 'positive discrimination' which deviates from normative ideals (Henriques, et al., 1984). The advocate rather than the critic of affirmative action has been constructed as anomic.

At a more detailed level, it is possible to speculate that the effectiveness of these approaches (at least measured by their wide deployment amongst the critics of 'positive discrimination') is partly a consequence of their meshing of practical and principled elements. Thus the meritocratic model could be supported as efficient (the best people do the most demanding work) and just (colour blind). Likewise, togetherness could be taken as something both good in the abstract and, in practice, making for a well run, harmonious society.

It is important to emphasise that we are not suggesting that these themes are mechanically reproduced as fixed templates or models. Indeed, one of the central points of introducing the concept of interpretative repertoire is to emphasise both the process of selection from the various facets of the repertoire to fit the occasion at hand and the work that goes into using those facets in context sensitive ways. It is notable that despite the fact that we have documented respondents' use of the 'togetherness' and meritocratic repertoires to manufacture criticisms of 'positive discrimination' on other occasions respondents used these same repertoires to construct warrants for it. Furthermore, it is important to stress that while we have tried to reveal the way in which respondents accomplish a critique of 'positive discrimination' we are not suggesting that this critique

will necessarily prevail. We have focused on the construction of criticisms rather than on situations where there are direct disputes between speakers. It will be important to extend this analysis to these situations, which might be found in Hansard debates on this topic, for example.

More generally, we have tried to indicate the way these respondents fashion their activities (accountings, criticisms) out of a patchwork of preexisting resources. We have no doubt that these resources are in turn parts of broader ideological systems that constitute common sense (Hall, 1986). What we have found striking in our studies of New Zealand majority group discourse is the fragmentation of these resources; the way that disparate interpretative systems are drawn on by the same respondent. In the current paper, for example, we can see Pratt moving between classical organic conservative ideas of cultures/races having a natural place and individualist liberal ideas expressed in the meritocratic and 'togetherness' repertoires.

Indeed, respondents displayed an artful and sophisticated facility for moving between arguments of principle and practice, broad social structural claims, ideas about culture and socialisation, moral and political precepts. No doubt these articulate professional people and advanced students could fill in attitude and authoritarianism scales to display their liberal values; for these things would not tap into the practical organization of their reasoning. It is, however, here in the fragmentary and argumentative arena of practical discourse that we might fruitfully start to understand the operation of ideology (Billig, 1987; Billig et al., 1988; Edwards and Mercer, 1987; Hall, 1986; Thompson, 1984, 1988; Wetherell et al. 1987).

Notes

1. There is a potential interpretative problem for the respondent with this question. A social researcher, such as the interviewer, might be expected to already know the answer to a question such as this, or at least have an opinion; after all it is part of their job. If this were the case, it would transform the question from a simple request for information

and opinion to a form of test: how well does the respondent understand the facts? With this issue in mind, the interviews were set up as being done by a researcher who had been out of the country for some time and was concerned to find out what New Zealanders were thinking about important issues and how the country was developing. That is, the preparation for the interview included a kind of disavowal of the sorts of knowledge that would turn it into a test.

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Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell are lecturers in social psychology at Loughborough University and the Open University. They have published numerous articles and are the authors (with Peter Stringer) of Social Texts and Context: Literature and Social Psychology (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul) and *Discourse and Social Psychology: Beyond Attitudes and Behaviour* (London: Sage).